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CONTENTS

- [Highlight](#)
- [Born of Darkness](#)
- [Dedication](#)
- [Acknowledgements](#)

PART ONE

- [Chapter 1](#)
- [Chapter 2](#)
- [Chapter 3](#)
- [Chapter 4](#)

PART TWO

- [Chapter 5](#)
- [Chapter 6](#)
- [Chapter 7](#)
- [Chapter 8](#)
- [Chapter 9](#)
- [Chapter 10](#)
- [Chapter 11](#)
- [Chapter 12](#)
- [Chapter 13](#)
- [Chapter 14](#)
- [Chapter 15](#)
- [Chapter 16](#)
- [Chapter 17](#)
- [Chapter 18](#)
- [Chapter 19](#)
- [Chapter 20](#)
- [Chapter 21](#)
- [Chapter 22](#)
- [Chapter 23](#)
- [Chapter 24](#)
- [Chapter 25](#)
- [Chapter 26](#)
- [Chapter 27](#)

PART THREE

- [Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Rita Vetere](#)

[More from Lyrical Press](#)

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Back Cover Copy

There's no escaping black karma, even for immortals.

Meet Jasmine Fairchild, outrageously gorgeous and extremely persuasive—unnaturally so. Jasmine is a Cambion, part mortal, part succubus.

Enter Ahriman, an ancient and evil incubus. For centuries, he has exploited the secrets of reincarnation to reach his goal of immortality and the eradication of humanity. All he needs now is a portal, an opportunity ... and Jasmine.

She stands alone as the only force powerful enough to immortalize or destroy him, and her dual nature makes Ahriman's task a little tougher than he thought...

Highlight

Night again. Jasmine stared at the storm raging outside her window, mesmerized by the back-and-forth motion of the wind-whipped trees. The images skittering across her mind made no sense, not even to her. Lightning lit the sky nearby and, in the momentary flash of light, she saw them—the dark souls. They filled the room, some standing, others crawling with spider-like movements up the walls and along the ceiling. Still others hung upside-down like bats on the heavy curtains flanking the window.

Jasmine did not immediately react, feeling oddly disconnected from the sight of the hideously deformed creatures. Her debilitated mind wondered vaguely why her mother had not been able to see them. Because she wasn't a Cambion, came the answer from within. The phantasms stared, their dead eyes trained on her as they inched their way closer and closer to the bed. Sparks of anger ignited and sputtered out as Jasmine attempted in vain to summon her wrath.

"You don't scare me, you dumb, dead m'fuckers."

She did her best to keep them back, but that bastard, Stronik, had increased the dosage, and her mental push collapsed. Seconds later, they surrounded her, ready to begin their night's work.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Born of Darkness

By Rita Vetere

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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Born of Darkness

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Dedication

For my daughter, Jacqueline

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

PART ONE

The Awakening

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 1

Morocco, 1987

As she walked hand-in-hand with Charlie on the way to the train station in Casablanca, Lilli Fairchild could not help but hum the tune to the popular Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young song she'd loved as a teenager. There really was a Marrakesh Express, and they were about to board the train immortalized by the song. She turned to Charlie, who chuckled under his breath.

"That song's been going around in my head all morning too."

What a holiday this was turning out to be, and how like Charlie to select an exotic destination like Morocco when surprising her with tickets for a trip. After two years of being married to Charlie, she had come to love his penchant for the unusual, and to expect the unexpected.

Charlie held the door for her as she entered the surprisingly modern train depot. Although modestly dressed in red cotton capris, white t-shirt and tan sandals, Lilli couldn't help but notice heads turning as she entered the station, more or less the same way they did back home in Tampa. Mostly, it was her thick mane of blond hair, falling in waves to the middle of her back, people noticed first, then her creamy complexion, tall, slender build and long legs. The graceful way she moved, in spite of her height, seemed to add to the attraction. Charlie had always told her it was her dazzling smile that attracted people to her, one reaching all the way to her long-lashed, hazel eyes. When Lilli smiled, people just could not help smiling back.

The stares continued as Charlie joined her inside and took her hand. Back home, people often commented on what a striking couple they made. Charlie seemed perpetually unconscious of his own darkly handsome looks. His glossy black curls, a gift from his mother whose ancestry was Greek, were combed back, away from his face. Charlie's eyes, in contrast to his olive complexion, were sky-blue and arresting. He stood a good six inches taller than Lilli at six-foot-two, with an athletic build and muscular arms and legs. His strong features lent him an authoritative, serious look that belied his good humor and easygoing personality.

They had arrived in Casablanca the day before yesterday. The next day, they explored the maze of streets in the medina, the old, walled part of the city, and strolled along the esplanade where they watched the waves crashing onto the rocks. Then, last night, when an American couple they shared dinner with mentioned they had just returned from Marrakesh, which they said was not to be missed, he and Lilli decided to spend a few days at the popular destination. Whatever they had missed in Casablanca, they would have time to explore when they got back. So, after packing enough for two or three days and arranging for a hotel in Marrakesh through the helpful staff at their hotel, they found themselves at the station, about to board the train that would deposit them in the exotic city four hours to the south.

They did not have to leave the brilliant sunshine behind for long. After Charlie purchased their tickets, they moved onto an open platform where a red and yellow train awaited its passengers. Fifteen minutes later, Lilli and Charlie took their seats in a comfortable first-class compartment and the Marrakesh Express left the station.

The train wound its way past the slums on the outskirts of the city, where some of the homes were no more than poorly constructed huts, but soon the train moved into the plains to the south, where only the distant hills broke up the vista of endless fields for the next hour and a half. The unchanging scenery and the steady clickety-clack rhythm of the train eventually lulled them into silence. Before long, Charlie dozed off in the late morning sunshine. From her straw bag, Lilli removed the small book on Marrakesh she had purchased at the station and began to read.

Sometime later, Charlie's eyes opened and he stretched, smiling. "Are we there yet?"

"Almost, I think."

"You're beautiful, you know that?" he said, moving from his window seat to the empty one next to her. He kissed her, letting his lips linger on hers for a bit.

Lilli could barely contain her excitement. "This is going to be so much fun. Our hotel's right next to the biggest square in all of North Africa," she said, checking the

book for the name. "It's called 'Djemma el Fna' and the souks are just behind the square. We can pick up some souvenirs there to take back with us."

"Sure. The couple last night said we'd find lots of great stuff in the market."

When the train arrived in Marrakesh, they were met with chaos outside the station. Everyone scrambled for a taxi, luggage in hand. Charlie managed to get one fairly quickly and waved Lilli over. After stashing their hand luggage in the trunk, they got into the back seat and Charlie gave the driver the name of their hotel, or riad, as it was called. The taxi drove along the wide, treed boulevards of the Ville Nouvelle, the newer part of the city built by the French, to the ancient walled part of the city.

They entered the medina through a horseshoe-shaped gate called Bab Agnaou. The opening was not overly large, but managed to look impressive, carved with floral decorations and an inscription of some sort. The antiquated wall, a sun-bleached shade of ochre, gave Lilli the feeling they were entering a different era. The sensation intensified after they passed through the gate. The ancient clay and limestone walls of the structures inside the medina and the arches over the narrow alleys were tinged in hues varying from red to salmon. The local women were veiled from head to toe with only latticed fabric at the eyes. As they drove along, she could see some of the residents as they turned toward Mecca to pray, first standing, bowing in prostration then kneeling. Cars and motorized bicycles shared the roadway with donkeys pulling carts.

She looked at Charlie in surprise when the driver pulled up in front of a dark, tunnel-like alley and announced their arrival. She was even more surprised when he told them the only way to enter the riad was through the alley, on foot. Wondering if they had been misled by the hotel staff in Casablanca, Lilli exited the taxi while Charlie paid the driver for the trip, removed their luggage from the trunk, and then joined her at the dim entranceway to the alley.

"This is safe, right?" she asked, a trifle nervous.

Charlie smiled and took her hand. "Of course it's safe. C'mon. Think of it as an adventure."

They made their way along the shadowy passage, taking care not to trip on the uneven stones beneath their feet, their arms brushing against the rough walls on either side of the narrow, winding alley. The smell of unfamiliar cooking mingled with the dank odor of the alleyway, once again giving Lilli the sense of having stepped into the past. At the end of the passageway, they arrived in front of a large wooden door and entered, not sure what to expect, and found themselves on the sumptuous ground level of the riad.

"Wow, it's like a small palace," she said, looking around in awe at the luxurious place.

The three-level structure was built around an open, marble-floored courtyard. A stone lion's-head fountain, from which sun-dappled water flowed into a tiny pool, took center stage. Pink rose blossoms covered most of the surface of the cobalt water, filling the air with their scent. Several wooden tables were set up around the fountain for open air dining, and large, flowering potted plants adorned the corners, where stone pillars supported the second story.

Charlie, who appeared equally impressed by the opulent place, took her hand as they walked around the rest of the main level. The sofas arranged against the latticed walls of the main floor sat low to the ground, with plush seat and back pillows covered in silk. Side pillows of velvet were fringed, or bore silk tassels. Many interesting decorative items were on display—exotic Hookah pipes, brass teapots and lanterns, indigo blue tea glasses trimmed in silver, picture books on Morocco.

A tall, swarthy-looking fellow walked over and introduced himself. "I am Khalid, the proprietor. Welcome."

Charlie introduced himself, and they followed Khalid to the front desk. After they registered, Khalid led them up the worn stone steps of the stairway in the far corner. The decorative wrought iron rail flanking the stairs also ran along each tier of the riad. The hallway on all three stories overlooked the courtyard.

Lilli was delighted with the third floor terrace suite Khalid ushered them into. The bed, although huge, appeared cozy, nestled inside a niche shaped like a keyhole. The silk coverlet, striped in varying hues of plum, lavender and mauve, looked luxurious but inviting. In the sitting area, two silk-covered benches faced each other, adorned with throw pillows in shades of lime green, maroon and copper. A low wooden table, inlaid with ebony and mother of pearl sat between them. A thick, indigo and henna patterned carpet covered the stone floor. Lilli let out a sound of delight as she stepped into the adjoining bathroom, which was dominated by a legless oversized white tub with brass fixtures. The royal blue and cream floor tiles looked hand-chiseled, and mosaic tiles in a more intricate motif, but the same color combination, adorned the walls. Even the round sink was patterned in mosaic tiles. A lavishly carved arabesque mirror hung over it.

Back in the bedroom, Lilli stepped through the double doors on the wall opposite the bed onto a stone terrace painted in a terra cotta hue. A pergola, covered in billowing white fabric, provided shade for another sitting area. Deck chairs, also dressed in white cotton, were arranged across the terrace.

"Check out this view!" she called to Charlie, after walking to the terrace wall and looking out at the panoramic scene. Mountains stretched away to the east, capped in snow. The terrace overlooked an enormous square, the Djemma El Fna, which was filled with people milling about. She could see the snake charmers who had set up around the square, and juice vendors. Most of the throng in the square was making its way in or out of the labyrinth of streets on the north side, where the souks were, the marketplace. The stone, rectangular tower of the Koutoubia Mosque overlooked it all.

"Beautiful," she said simply.

"Yup," Charlie agreed, although when she turned to him, she found him staring at her instead of the view.

"Stay right there, don't move," he told her, returning inside and emerging a moment later with his camera and followed by Khalid, who happily snapped a picture of the two of them against the scenic background.

They were eager to explore the city, but also hungry, so they arranged for a late lunch. After freshening up, they went downstairs to the courtyard and seated themselves at a table close to the fountain. The food arrived quickly, a half-chicken entrée served over mounds of couscous and covered in a sweet sauce of golden onions, chick peas, raisins and cinnamon. Lilli's mouth watered at the delicious aroma wafting up from the plate set before her, and she made quick work of the meal, declaring it delicious. Afterward, they enjoyed a pastry which surprised them with a slightly salty taste, and mint tea, which was sweet and refreshing. Their appetites sated, they thanked Khalid and his staff and exited the riad, walking back through the tiny alleyway. A couple of minutes later, they were standing in Djemma El Fna.

They made their way across the massive square, dodging the snake-charmers who were doing their best to scare the tourists, and headed for the bustling souks.

A sea of noisy pedestrians engulfed them as soon as they entered the maze of streets. Strains of exotic music played on lutes, drums and tambourines rose above the cacophony of voices, as tourists and locals haggled with the shopkeepers, trying to strike a bargain. The pungent aroma of spices mingled with the odor of donkeys and pack-camels in the sun, and a heavy smell of sweat permeated the air.

Stalls filled with goods of every description lined the streets. Brightly colored fabrics, brocaded bedcovers and embroidered tablecloths hung in brilliant display. Brass and copper tea pots, decorative fez lanterns and candleholders glittered from every nook and cranny. Geometrically patterned tribal carpets in hues of henna red and indigo blue were draped over large rods or hung like paintings. Antiquated jewelry fashioned out of silver, gold and copper sparkled in dazzling array, as well as dangerous-looking daggers, the hilts inlaid with precious stones. Other stalls were devoted entirely to tooled leather goods, or slippers, which seemed to be a big seller. Mounds of spices—saffron, turmeric, paprika, ginger, nutmeg and cinnamon—the color of precious gems, shimmered in wicker baskets or clay pots, along with green and black olives.

At first, every street looked the same. Pedestrians crowded the passageways, kicking up dust as they walked. People on bicycles moved along no quicker than those

on foot. Every so often, a donkey pulling a cart loaded with goods would arrive, holding up traffic. The less fortunate residents, the old or disabled, sat on the dusty streets, quietly begging.

The souks were canopied, blocking the sun, and Lilli and Charlie found it difficult to get their bearings. "I hope we don't get lost in here," Lilli said after a few moments, but she was smiling as she said it. She noticed Charlie looked just as entranced by the place as she was.

After a half hour of walking around in circles, they figured out the main streets seemed to run roughly north and south, with side streets and alleys leading off them. If they reached a dead-end, they had only to head in the direction of one of the north-south streets to get back on track. When they felt sure they would be able to find their way out, they began to explore some of the smaller passageways, and Lilli was excited to discover a whole area of stalls devoted to the antique jewelry she had seen samples of earlier on one of the main arteries.

She slowed her pace and took her time browsing through the interesting pieces offered for sale, and Charlie joined her in admiring the pendants, earrings and bracelets crafted by artisans of generations past. Most of the jewelry was fashioned from silver or copper; some of the pieces were further decorated with deep blue enamel or coral.

As Lilli entered one of the stalls, she stopped in her tracks when she spotted a pendant displayed off to one side. It struck her as singular, unique from all the others, and captured her attention immediately. After walking over to the display, she picked up the necklace to study it.

The antique pendant looked very old, and the weight of it surprised her. The rounded bottom, from which two ancient coins dangled on tiny chains, opened and closed on hinges. It appeared to be a container of some sort, for perfume maybe, for the top was crafted in a scroll-like pattern with openings. She imagined herself wearing it, the heat from her body warming the pendant, releasing the scent of the perfume within. Yes, she decided, this would be the perfect keepsake by which to remember the trip.

She looked up, intending to ask the shopkeeper how much, and was startled to see the little man's weather-beaten face directly in front of hers. His dark eyes were narrowed down to slits and he stared at her with an intensity that took her by surprise.

"I, uh, was just wondering how much. For the pendant," she stammered. Even though the man was tiny in stature, she felt intimidated by him.

Charlie quickly moved next to her and put a protective arm around her shoulder.

When the shopkeeper continued to scrutinize Lilli for an uncomfortable length of time, Charlie tapped the man's arm to divert his attention. "How much for the necklace?" Charlie asked.

"I am sure you are not without knowing the rarity of such a piece, but I am obligated to point out it is extremely old, and valuable," he replied, not taking his eyes off Lilli. Then, turning to Charlie and motioning toward his other wares, he said, "May I propose you examine something else."

Lilli regarded the shopkeeper as he spoke to Charlie. Something about the intense little man made her want to leave. Suddenly, the pendant didn't seem so important.

"What's your asking price?" Charlie asked levelly.

The man considered for a moment. "The craftsmanship is unique, and therefore much sought after. There are those who believe the value of such an item cannot be measured in currency. I have not been able to determine the age of the piece, although it has assuredly passed through the hands of many generations." A tiny smile curled his lip, which did not reach his eyes. "It has even been rumored by some to be cursed."

Lilli blinked in surprise at the man's words.

"A superstitious notion, nothing more," the small man added quickly, in an apologetic tone. His smile disappeared as he continued, "I propose that seven thousand Dirhams would be the conventional payment for such a piece. However," he said, bowing slightly in Lilli's direction, "in the presence of such exceptional beauty, I might be persuaded to accept five thousand Dirhams."

That settled it. Five hundred dollars! The pieces she'd priced at other stalls were nowhere near as expensive. Lilli tugged on Charlie's sleeve when he did not immediately decline. "It's way too much," she said. "I'll look for something else."

"Regrettably, the price is not negotiable," the shopkeeper said dismissively. He gave a little bow and turned his back on them.

Lilli turned to leave, but Charlie persisted. He pulled her back, smiling. "What the heck, it'll look great on you," he said, removing the cash from his money belt.

The feeling that she no longer wanted the pendant became stronger. "Charlie, it's all right, really, I—"

"No, I want you to have it," he insisted.

Before she could stop him, Charlie tapped the shopkeeper on the back. "Excuse me."

When the man turned back to them, Charlie held out the money. The shopkeeper hesitated, looking back and forth at the two of them. Then, in one quick movement, he took the money from Charlie's hand and pocketed the cash through the opening of his djellaba, the loose-fitting white outer robe he wore over his garments.

He placed the pendant in a midnight blue velvet pouch and handed it to Lilli. "Your husband has made a wise purchase," he said. "I respect that it appears to be your fate to own it." Without another word, he turned away from them to tend to his other customers.

Now that she had the pendant out of its pouch to look at it again, Lilli's earlier misgivings disappeared. She hugged Charlie tightly as they walked away. "It really is special," she said, slipping the chain around her neck. She liked the heaviness of it and admired the way the old silver twinkled against her navy blue top.

They decided the occasion called for another photo and Charlie handed his camera to one of the tourists walking nearby, who gladly snapped a shot of them against the backdrop of the marketplace.

They walked on in silence for a moment. Lilli said, "You don't think there's anything to what he said about the necklace, do you? I mean about it being, you know..."

Charlie chuckled, "Cursed? No, sweetie, I don't. He said himself it was nothing but superstitious nonsense."

She slung her arm around his waist as they walked. "I love you, baby," she said as they moved to the next row of stalls.

"Yeah?" A mischievous glint lit up his eyes. "Good. You can show me how much later tonight."

"Don't worry," she laughed, "I intend to."

\* \* \* \*

After leaving the souks, they explored some of the medina on foot until just after sunset, when they made their way back to the square. It was dark by the time they returned to the Djemma El Fna, and the place was completely transformed now the sun had gone down. Row after row of food stalls had been set up, covering half the square and turning it into a gigantic outdoor restaurant. Smoke from the open-air cooking drifted around on the warm evening breeze, carrying the succulent scent of grilled meats with it.

They decided to have dinner here, where they could watch the action up close. The snake charmers were still there, but now they were joined by acrobats, fire-eaters, storytellers and musicians. Crowds of tourists jostled around the entertainers, moving from one attraction to the next.

After watching the entertainment for a while, they walked around the stalls to see what was available to eat. At every stall, the owner shouted out for people to come and sit down. Workers carrying menus called out the dishes and prices. Some places served only soup, others had grilled meats, salad, couscous and bread.

Suddenly, Lilli shrieked. In one of the stalls, she caught sight of a large pot of boiling animal heads. She allowed Charlie to lead her away quickly, before her appetite evaporated completely. Eventually, they settled on grilled sausage, salad and bread to satisfy their hunger.

Later, back in their suite at the riad, Lilli stripped down to her panties and flopped down onto the cushiony bed.

"That was quite a day, wasn't it?"

"The best," Charlie said, taking his time in kissing her.

"Mmmm. I'm going to try out that bathtub..." she said.

"And then?" He ran his hand up along the silky skin of her thigh. A slow round of lovemaking would be the perfect end to this day.

"Be right back," she promised, kissing him lightly.

In the bathroom, Lilli drew water for her bath and finished undressing. While waiting for the large tub to fill, she looked in the mirror to admire the pendant once more. It really is special. She removed the necklace and glanced at it again before placing it on the shelf near the sink. Her heart skipped a beat and she let go of the pendant as if it was on fire. It went clattering to the stone floor. She thought she had seen something moving inside it, through the scrollwork. Maybe a bug or something had crawled into it. She hated bugs. She picked it up cautiously by the chain, but when she opened the bottom to look inside, she saw it was empty. Laughing at herself for being so silly, she placed the necklace on the shelf before stepping into the silky bathwater.

Steam swirled and drifted around the room as she relaxed in the tub. She rolled up a towel and used it as a head rest, then wrung out a white cotton washcloth and placed it across her eyes. After six hours of walking, the water felt good, and she allowed it to soothe her tired muscles.

A couple of moments later, she heard a little rippling sound and felt Charlie's hand lightly stroking the inside of her thigh. As she was about to sit up, he gently held the washcloth in place over her eyes. He's in a playful mood. She let her head sink back down, leaving the washcloth where it was. He ran his hands up along her arms and then across her soapy breasts, gently stroking her nipples. Seconds later, his soft tongue began to travel where his hands had been, turning her nipples into hard little pebbles. Lilli stayed perfectly still, enjoying the tiny arcs of electricity coursing through her. His hand moved back to the sensitive area between her thighs and stroked her there in slow upward circles. When he reached her already swollen labia and began to gently massage her, she was too far gone to wait. She climaxed quickly and hard. As she reached out for him, the washcloth fell away from her eyes. Still in the throes of her orgasm, she was startled to find herself alone in the bathroom.

"What the..."

She looked toward the door. It was standing slightly ajar, and she tried to remember whether she had closed it or not.

Charlie. He's playing games. She stepped out of the tub, the throbbing between her legs not entirely subsided.

\* \* \* \*

Outside on the terrace, Charlie waited for Lilli to finish her bath, watching the goings-on in the square below. He lit a couple of the oil lanterns so their soft glow would carry into the bedroom. As he turned to re-enter the suite, there was Lilli, standing just inside the balcony doors and wearing nothing but the pendant.

Seeing her naked in the glow of the lamplight, standing with her legs slightly apart and her hands on her hips, the pendant sparkling between her breasts, caused him to have an immediate and rock-hard erection.

"That wasn't playing fair," she said, her voice husky.

He moved to her, encircling her with his arms, and ran his hands over the soft skin of her back, still moist from the bathwater.

"What wasn't fair?" he asked, slipping his tongue between her lips and pulling her closer.

"In the bathroom. You ran out before I could return the favor," she said, between his kisses.

"In the bathroom?" he asked, absentmindedly. God, she was beautiful. And she was making him so hot.

"Yes, the bathroom ... while I was blindfolded? You liked doing that, huh?" she teased.

He pulled away to look into her hazel eyes, and removed his clothes. He had no idea what she was talking about, but whatever it was would have to wait. Once naked, he lifted her up, and she wrapped her long legs around his waist. He carried Lilli to the bed, and began to gently massage her stomach while brushing his lips against hers, then moved down to lightly lap at her nipples. He mounted her, unable to wait, nuzzling at her neck, and found her wet and ready for him. A tiny moan of pleasure rode on her feathery breath as he entered her.

In the dimly lit room, a thin, silvery mist began to pour out of the pendant Lilli wore, drifting lazily in the air around them. Wispy tendrils of haze gathered together and settled around Charlie like a shroud, but Lilli's eyes remained closed and Charlie was too caught up in emotion to worry about it. As he entered her again, Charlie felt a sudden jolt from behind, as if he was being pushed. Something passed straight through him with rapid force, sending him crashing forward on top of Lilli.

"Charlie! Ow, what—"

In the next instant, Charlie felt himself yanked up and was sent flying backward across the room. He cried out in surprise before he went slamming into the wall next to the balcony doors. When his head connected with the stone wall, he experienced a split second of blinding pain, then everything went black.

\* \* \* \*

Lilli screamed immediately, she tried to get off the bed to go to him, but she was stunned to find herself helpless to move, pinned down by a heavy weight. Now, she did see the mist, swirling and eddying in front of her. She watched, mesmerized, as the white haze coagulated into the form of a man, towering over her.

Unreality washed over her as the face of a dark angel suddenly loomed in front of her own. Disoriented, and stunned by the sheer beauty of the man, Lilli did not immediately react. Hair like black silk floated around the man's ethereal face. His broad shoulders and massive chest blocked her vision. As he straddled her, his strange ebony eyes, ringed in gold, were intently focused on her own. His stare seemed to exude a heat that spread quickly through her, eliciting an arousal such as she'd never experienced. Her concern for Charlie disappeared as she became helplessly swept up in the strange fever that all but consumed her. By the time the apparition mounted her, her need for him was so intense she pulled him hungrily toward her. As she was drawn into the vortex of the apparition's charisma, she heard a deep whisper that seemed to come from everywhere, and nowhere but her own mind.

I have awakened. Love me, for I am as one starved.

She heard herself moan deeply as his hands roamed over her body, his touch igniting instant fire in its tracks. She could not stop herself from raking her fingers through the man's flowing hair, wrapping herself around him tightly, as lust awakened every part of her body. When he finally rammed into her, she exploded in a succession of orgasms that rocked her to the core.

From a dim recess of her mind, she heard the echo of a woman's voice. Resist him, break from his spell. A vague question formed as to who had just spoken, but it slipped away as the incredibly erotic pull of the dark-haired angel continued to envelop her.

After what seemed like an eternity, she felt him shudder deeply. A sigh escaped him, and he stilled inside her.

He looked directly into her eyes, as if marking her. Almost immediately, he began to disintegrate, gradually dissipating into strands of white mist, until finally nothing remained of him but his darkly-shining eyes. Eyes that suddenly appeared black as hell and ringed in fire. Then, they too disappeared.

The instant he vanished, whatever spell she'd been under broke. The mist in the room dissipated, and she spotted Charlie, propped up against the wall, blood running from the corner of his mouth and nose. His eyes were open, but vacant, and a cold rush of dread ran through her at the sight of him. She tried to scream, but the mewling sound that came out was no more than the cry of a weak kitten. "Oh, God. Charlie."

She jumped up, almost falling off the bed in her hurry to get to him. His head was tilted back, his open eyes staring at the ceiling.

"Help! Somebody help us," she cried, finding her voice. Charlie did not appear to be breathing. She searched frantically for a pulse, and found none.

The hot, sticky fluid running down the inside of her leg went unheeded. Lilli screamed again, louder this time. She shook Charlie, calling his name. All the while, a terrible instinct rose up, assuring her she needn't bother, Charlie was quite dead. Lilli grabbed his shirt from the floor where he had dropped it earlier and yanked it on as she ran out into the hallway, screaming for help.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 2

An hysterical Lilli had been trying for over an hour to convince the stern-looking police official, who had arrived shortly after Khalid had summoned him, that her recounting of the strange events leading up to Charlie's death was the truth.

He thinks I'm crazy, I can tell by the way he's looking at me. Christ, and who wouldn't? She could hardly believe her own words as they tumbled incoherently out of her mouth. A man, she told him, had appeared to her after Charlie had gone flying across the room. A man who had sexually assaulted her and then disappeared into thin air afterward.

"I know how this must sound, but it's the truth, I swear," she insisted stubbornly between bursts of tears.

"With respect, I must ask you," said the official, "did you or your husband obtain hashish during your stay? Tourists are often approached by the local dealers. If you were under the influence—"

"No" she said, feeling her anger rise. "We don't use drugs, and we didn't buy any."

"I see." He seemed to be studying her intently. "And did you make any effort to resist this man who 'appeared' in your room?"

She felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment at the question as she remembered how consumed by lust she'd been in the man's presence. "I, I think he may have done something to me, hypnotized me somehow," she stammered. "I didn't feel like I was in control of myself." Her head, which had begun to throb dully a half hour ago, exploded into a migraine. She felt hot, feverish, and sick to her stomach.

"Please," she asked, "I need to speak with the embassy. I want to go home. I want to take my husband home." She burst into tears again, which only caused the pounding at her temples to increase.

"A message has been left with night staff at the embassy on your behalf. The building opens at eight. Someone will likely be in touch with you then."

Khalid poked his head in to announce that the call she had asked him to place to her sister, Dora, had been made, and she could use the telephone in the office. She felt the officer's eyes on her as she walked unsteadily around the desk and quickly picked up the handset. "Dora? Oh, God, Dora," she said, erupting into tears again. "Something terrible's happened."

\* \* \*

In the early hours of the morning, back in the suite where Charlie's body had lain until a short time ago, Lilli pulled the bedding closer around her, shivering uncontrollably. She alternated between sweating with fever and freezing every time the breeze from the overhead fan reached her. Each time she snapped awake, her eyes felt swollen and painful. Through the terrace window, she could see a brilliant full moon, sitting high in an unfamiliar sky.

Charlie's dead. The remembrance sent her sinking back into oblivion.

She had taken the first of the antibiotics prescribed by the doctor Khalid had summoned earlier, but knew they wouldn't kick in for a couple of days. A battle raged in her body. Her fevered dreams felt more like hallucinations. Visions of the dark angel who had come to her disturbed her already restless sleep. She glimpsed him in her dreams, prowling the dark night like a panther in search of prey. As she followed him through her confused delirium, he trained his shimmering, gold-ringed eyes on her. An unconscious moan escaped her. Those shadowy eyes aroused her, even in her disconcerted slumber.

In between the haunting visions of the man, her dead husband intruded on her sleeping thoughts, his face a mask of fear, his hand reaching out to her as if in

warning. "Charlie," she whispered through lips chapped with fever. He was trying to tell her something, but she could not hear him clearly, and could only discern the urgent tone of his far-away dream voice.

She started awake again, shivering with cold and burning with heat. Her bones felt as if they were filled with broken glass. Even the soft cotton sheets caused her skin to hurt. Have to get back home. She had to bring Charlie home, because Charlie was dead, she reminded herself. She had to bury her dead husband.

A vague memory of having spoken to Dora earlier on the telephone to deliver the awful news about Charlie surfaced, but with her fever spiking, she could only recall disjointed snippets of the conversation. Her head throbbed mercilessly, making it hard to think. Even so, she tried to get out of bed. She had to do something. But as she lifted the covers away, blackness seeped into her vision. She fell back onto the bed, unable to get to her feet. Her eyes closed again, and she drifted back into her nightmares.

The next time she opened her eyes, it was dusk. A man was in the room with her, she saw with a start. She stifled a cry, seeing it was Khalid who stood just inside the doorway. He had prepared a dinner tray and encouraged her in broken English to eat something. She shook her head, which still throbbed mightily, and began to ramble, "My husband ... Charlie's dead ... I need to..." It was no use. Her stomach roiled at the sight of the food on the tray Khalid held. Still burning up with fever, she didn't manage to get the rest of the words out before her head sank back down into the pillow. Just before she trailed off into unconsciousness, she saw Khalid leave the room, the untouched dinner tray still in his hand, shutting the door firmly behind him.

On the following morning, she woke with a raging thirst. Her throat was sore and parched, but the splitting headache had eased up. Her fever had broken. She tried to sit up in bed, and succeeded. Just then, a knock sounded at the door and Khalid entered, carrying a large glass of orange juice and a breakfast tray. This time she accepted it gratefully.

"You are feeling better today, yes?" Khalid asked in an anxious voice.

She felt weak and exhausted, but her mind was clear again and her thoughts already racing. She needed to make arrangements to have Charlie's body released and get back home, away from this nightmare. Far too much time had been lost already on account of her strange illness.

"Yes," she said, "better. Khalid, I need to get in touch with the Embassy. I need to ... My husband ... I need to arrange to bring him home." The words caught in her throat as she forced back the tears that threatened to erupt.

"There is a man downstairs from the Consulate. He arrived last night, but you were too ill to meet with him. The doctor advised him to return this morning. Your sister contacted him yesterday morning. If you are well enough now, I will tell him."

Relief flooded over her as she mentally blessed Dora. She could only imagine what must have been involved in getting her the help she needed, but Lilli knew well enough how formidable Dora could be when circumstances required.

"Thank you. I'll get dressed and come down right away."

\* \* \* \*

On the morning of the following day, she walked on still-weak legs along the dim alley to the waiting taxi. Khalid followed, carrying her luggage. While he loaded the suitcases into the trunk, she got inside the taxi that would take her to the train station for the trip back to Casablanca. From there, she was booked on the next flight out to the States. She felt wretchedly alone, and still weak from the mysterious illness. She kept imagining Charlie, lying in a casket soon to be loaded into the cargo hold of the plane. The trip home would be a nightmare, knowing her husband's body would be in the compartment below, with only the luggage of the other tourists to sit vigil. She could not believe the drastic suddenness with which her life had fallen apart.

Through the rolled-down window, she said a quick good-bye to Khalid. Although grateful for his help, she wanted only to leave this place of death behind.

During the taxi ride to the train station, the events of that night replayed themselves in her mind like a bad movie. What had happened to her? And to Charlie? She'd watched in horror as he'd gone flying across the room, yet nothing visible had propelled him. Hysteria bubbled to the surface every time she pictured the scene, knowing the impossibility of what she had witnessed. The darkly beautiful man who had materialized out of thin air was responsible for Charlie's death, she was positive. She had been visited by something unnatural, but what? A phantom? He had appeared so at first, but his body had been as solid as her own when she ... Oh, God.

Feelings of shame and guilt overwhelmed her again. She had not fought to keep the man, or whatever he was, from her. She had wanted him, lusted for him. God help her, it was true. Only afterward had she even thought about her husband lying dead on the floor. And yet, she knew in her heart the man must have done something to cause her unnatural behavior. She remembered the strange lethargy she'd felt, as if she'd been drugged. No matter which way she viewed what had happened, she was not able to come up with a believable explanation.

Certainly, the police had not believed her disjointed ranting. Yet neither had they suspected her of being involved in her husband's death. In the end, the officer in charge had assured her solemnly that a thorough investigation would be conducted into Charlie's murder and that every effort would be made to find the intruder, and she was permitted to return home.

As the taxi turned onto the street leading to the train station, she fumbled through her purse for her wallet. She found foreign currency confusing and didn't want to take the chance of missing the express train. As she rummaged through her bag, her hand touched something metallic, and she yanked it out, momentarily taken aback. She didn't remember having put the pendant inside her purse, but that wasn't surprising. Her mind was all over the place, she hardly remembered packing.

The old silver gleamed in the morning sunshine. It felt warm, a little too warm, as it rested in the palm of her hand. Her thoughts began to blur. The dizzy spells from her illness hadn't completely left and nausea struck again. She cranked the taxi window lower to gasp in hot but fresh air, big gulps of it, over and over, until her thoughts cleared and her stomach stopped being queasy.

As she looked at the pendant, an eerie sensation rippled through her. For some reason, holding the pendant made her feel inexplicably afraid. The thing seemed ... wrong, somehow. She could almost see the bad vibrations coming off it in waves. Suddenly, she knew she didn't want it anymore. Acting purely on impulse, Lilli put her hand out the open window of the moving car and tossed the pendant. She watched it strike the pavement and then disappear as the car sped forward.

A second later, she worried whether she'd done the right thing in throwing it away. It was a gift from Charlie, she told herself, the last thing he had given her. A shadow of guilt passed over her briefly, replaced almost immediately by an overwhelming relief at having rid herself of the pendant. And soon she would rid herself of this country, a place that had filled her with shocking opposites and that had propelled her from joy and awe to a grief she knew would last forever.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



Lilli snapped awake, gasping for air. They're back. Fear exploded as she struggled to sit up. Can't breathe! A heavy weight crushed her chest, making it impossible to move. Breathe, goddamnit, just breathe! The thought raced around her mind like a trapped rat. Gasping for air, she scanned the shadowy corners of her bedroom. Mounting panic quickly replaced the certainty that she was going to die.

Time stopped. She focused her entire being on the simple act of taking a breath. Blackness crept into the edges of her vision, the pressure on her chest enormous; she was suffocating.

Suddenly, the weight lifted from her chest and she gasped, taking air into her lungs in ragged bursts that seared her throat. Calm down, she commanded herself. No longer paralyzed, she bolted from her bed and ran to the hallway, where she sat down on the floor, hugging her knees until her racing heart slowed and her breathing returned to normal.

This was not the first time she had awoken this way in the past months. Rarely did a week go by without one of them arriving in the middle of the night to torment her. Still, each episode brought with it fresh terror. Lilli listened carefully, but the taunting voices she often heard during the visitations were silent. When she regained some composure and her breathing returned to normal, she leaned her head back against the wall and rubbed the taught skin of her enormous belly. Her baby. She had to remain calm. Her baby was due to arrive any day now.

Awkwardly, she got to her feet and walked unsteadily to the kitchen, trailing remnants of her fear. With shaking hands, she poured herself a glass of milk and carried it into the living room. They're gone. They're gone, and they're not coming back. She repeated the mantra over and over, until she almost convinced herself it was true.

In the living room of the house she now shared with Dora, Lilli listened for any indication that they had returned. How she wished Dora was home. She was sorry now she had insisted Dora go out when her friend had called. But poor Dora had spent the past seven months fretting over her like a mother hen, ever since she'd learned Lilli was pregnant following her return home from Morocco. Dora deserved a night out after all she had done.

Lilli had accepted Dora's invitation—insistence, really—that she return to live with her in their parents' old house. It should have been a comfortable haven for her while she waited for the baby to arrive, but Lilli had come to understand that no place was safe for her anymore.

She recalled her dismay at Dora's shocked reaction when she'd confided in her about the unnatural events that had taken place in Marrakesh. Her sister was a practical soul, and Lilli could tell by the look Dora had given her that she did not believe her, even though she had not said so in so many words. Oh, Dora believed Lilli had been raped and her husband murdered, all right. But when she described the phantom-turned-to-flesh being who had appeared, Dora's first question had been the same as the policeman's in Marrakesh—she'd asked if they had been doing drugs at the time. When Lilli reminded her that the last time she'd smoked a joint was in high school, Dora's next reaction had been to press Lilli to seek therapy. Lilli had adamantly refused to do so, and never mentioned the phantom to her sister again. Regardless, Dora had steadfastly stood by her, even after Lilli's behavior became erratic, bordering finally on the bizarre—especially after the voices began.

She'd not told Dora about the voices, knowing her sister would not believe her, and probably think her delusional. Lilli herself had trouble believing she was being visited by dark spirits. There were times, usually after waking up the way she had tonight, when an insidious voice would steal into her thoughts, telling her that oh yes, she was crazy, had to be. She had imagined everything. The baby was Charlie's, and what happened in Morocco last year could not possibly have happened. And the voices were nothing but a by-product of trauma, the trauma of having watched Charlie die. Yet, in her heart, she didn't think so. She didn't feel crazy. Only alone and afraid of what she knew.

"The baby isn't due for another week," she'd told Dora. "There's no reason you shouldn't enjoy an evening out. I'll be perfectly fine on my own for one night."

But she wasn't fine at all, not by a long shot.

She turned to study her reflection in the dark window, perturbed at the sight of the haggard face peering back. Her long hair, once silky, hung in limp, greasy strands around her pale face. Puffy eyes, underscored with dark circles, stared back at her. She looked like a ghost, a shadow of the woman she'd once been.

Lilli turned away from her reflection and used the remote to turn on the television. Muting it, she sat back, gazing blankly at the moving pictures on the screen. She missed Charlie. Always, she missed Charlie. Yet she knew even Charlie would not have been able to stop what was happening to her, or help her to protect the baby. The baby she was now quite certain was not his. Her heart began to beat double-time in acknowledgment of the dreadful truth.

The clock on the mantle ticked away like a bomb in the silent room. Almost one-thirty in the morning. Dora would be home soon, and they didn't like to make themselves known to others. Usually, they arrived when she was alone, or in the early morning hours when Dora was sound asleep. She'd be safe once Dora got back. She wrapped her arms protectively around her belly and watched the silent screen.

Minutes later, her head snapped up. The soft sound of a whispered voice floated toward her. "No ... please," she moaned. She placed her hands over her ears and began to slowly rock back and forth. Hot tears spilled onto her cheeks. She felt flushed, fevered. The baby kicked inside her, as if in warning. "Go away," she whispered into the empty room.

Other menacing voices chimed in, whispering sly words she could not make out. Soon, the subtle, sinister sounds surrounded her. She closed her eyes and tried to will them away, but it did no good. Suddenly, the hushed voices turned loud, making the hair at the nape of her neck stand up. A trickle of sweat rolled down her back. As the angry voices rose in unison, terror engulfed her all over again.

Invisible hands began to prod and poke at her. Phantom fingers brushed against her face and hair. Soon the slapping sensations on her arms and around her head would begin. Lilli sat helplessly on the couch, shielding herself against what she knew was coming. When the first blows struck, she jumped up and tried to fight them off, but her fists encountered only air.

As she tried to defend herself against the phantasms, something she saw on the side table caused her to freeze in shock. She stood perfectly still, the blood in her veins turning to sludge, no longer aware of the unseen hands pushing and slapping at her. "That's impossible," she whispered to herself. She stared in disbelief. The pendant. The one she had thrown away in Morocco. It can't be. But there it sat anyway, glittering malignantly. A bolt of dread shot through her. Somehow, the awful thing had found its way back to her.

"Charlie, please," she whispered, "if you can hear me, help me." She backed away slowly from the table.

At that instant, another voice spoke. It was different from the others, deep and sensuous, but she detected the underlying cruelty, a voice that made her think of velvet over steel.

"You seek help from one who no longer exists," the voice said. "He could not help you when he was alive, how can he possibly help you now? It is my child who grows within you. Still you refuse to acknowledge me."

Lilli remained silent, but her fear grew huge as the voice continued to speak.

"Submit to me, Lillian, and you will share in the joy of our child's life. Resist, and you will not live to see it take its first breath." A wispy, silvery mist appeared out of nowhere and drifted through the room.

Lilli's eyes lit up with feral hatred when they latched onto the form taking shape before her, rising out of the mist.

She exploded in anger. "Fuck you!" she cried. "Stay away from me! Stay away from my baby!"

\* \* \* \*

Ahriman glanced at his reflection in the mirror over the fireplace mantle as he made his entry. Seeing his image was something he was unable to do in the spiritual realm. As he caught sight of the darkly handsome and imposing form he inhabited in the mortal world, he swelled with pride.

What was the matter with this woman? The stupid mortal seemed unaware of the privilege he'd bestowed on her by impregnating her. He caught the look of disdain on the perfectly chiseled features of his face reflected in the glass and immediately masked it with a more appropriate one as he moved toward the ungrateful woman.

"The baby will live," he whispered close to her ear, as the spirits yanked Lilli off the ground, suspending her in mid-air. "And what of you? Choose."

The voices of his faithful spirits chanted all around him. "Kill her—kill her, Ahriman."

When the woman said nothing, but only continued to avoid his gaze with her rebellious eyes, Ahriman did not bother to disguise his deadly intent when he uttered his next words. "Do you think I would hesitate to put an end to your life? You are nothing. Less than nothing!"

Still he saw no sign of submission in her, only defiance. "So be it," he hissed. "Die, then. The child is mine."

With the slightest motion of his hand, he signaled to the chanting spirits. He regretted the fact that the woman could not see the grotesque souls. The sight of them would have served to increase her terror. He watched as the dark ones pummeled the woman, and laughed at her feeble attempts to fight off her unseen attackers. When she began to sputter and gasp, Ahriman picked up the handset of the telephone next to him and depressed three buttons. Then he placed the open line next to the woman, who was now making hideous gurgling noises, and waited.

Moments later, the sound of a screaming siren cut through the night, and he gave the final order. "Finish her. Quickly."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 4

Dora stopped dead in her tracks as she took in the scene playing out in her living room, one worse than any nightmare she could imagine. What was left of her family, her only sister, lay on the floor, pale and unmoving, in a pool of blood. A paramedic was in the process of cutting into Lilli's stomach.

"Stop," she screamed, bolting for her sister. A uniformed officer stepped in front of her, holding her back.

"Please, that's my sister," she cried, alarmed to see the medic paid no attention at all to Lilli as he continued to cut into her. More blood gushed to the floor beneath Lilli. Her sister did not move or make a sound.

"Miss, stay back. There's nothing you can do for her," said the officer as he continued to restrain her. "She's dead. They're performing an emergency C-section to try to save the baby."

A cry of despair escaped Dora. A moment ago, her taxi had pulled up in front of the house to the flashing lights of an ambulance, fire truck and police car. Her heart in her throat, cursing herself for having left Lilli alone, she shoved some bills into the driver's hand and raced past the emergency vehicles into the house, only to be confronted with the terrible news this man had just imparted.

A hush fell over the room, and the air was thick with tension as the medic finished making the incision. Within seconds, he had the baby out. Dora could see, even through her frightened tears, it was a girl. The medic cleared the infant's mouth, but the tiny body made no sound, not even when he slapped the infant's bottom, twice. The slaps rang out loudly in the quiet room, but they were followed by absolute silence. The room was well-lit and Dora could not help but notice the bluish-gray pallor of the infant's skin through the placenta clinging to it. One of the attendants uttered a single whispered word that pierced Dora like a dagger. "Stillborn".

"No," she sobbed, refusing to accept that both her sister and the child were gone. "Please, do something!" The medic turned to look at her.

Suddenly, the baby let out a keening wail, and everyone cried out in relief and surprise. Dora wept, for the sister she had lost, and out of relief that the child had been delivered safely after all. She watched as the attendants bundled up the baby to transport her to the hospital.

Still numb with shock, Dora could only look on as the ambulance attendants placed her sister in a body bag and put her on a stretcher to carry her out. She whispered a promise to her dead sister, hoping somehow Lilli would hear it. "I should never have left you alone, Lilli. I'm so sorry ... I'll take care of your baby, I promise. I'll love her enough for the both of us."

\* \* \* \*

As she sat in the waiting room on the third floor pediatric unit, anxiously waiting for confirmation that the baby had suffered no complications, Dora fought to keep her grief for her dead sister under control. She blamed herself bitterly for having left Lilli alone. She should have tried harder to persuade Lilli to seek medical help, even though her many attempts over the past months had been met with stubborn refusal. She recalled their last conversation about it, just over two weeks ago.

"You need help dealing with what happened, don't you see that? You were raped, for God's sake. You witnessed your husband's murder. You've suffered a terrible trauma, and you need to speak to a professional, someone who knows about these things."

Lilli had just looked at her. The dead look in her sister's once-sparkling green eyes frightened her as much as the words that had come out of her mouth. "I'm not crazy, Dora. And there's nothing a psychiatrist can do for me. In fact, there's nothing anyone can do for me. Just leave it alone, all right?"

Then, last week, Dora had awoken in the middle of the night to the sound of Lilli's raised voice. When she had rushed to Lilli's bedroom to make sure her sister was all right, she found Lilli crouched in the corner, crying.

"Lilli, what's the matter? Who were you talking to?" The sight of her sister cringing in the corner of the dark room, and the fact that she'd been too frightened to do anything but sob hysterically, caused Dora to bring up the subject of getting help again.

"No," said Lilly, when she was able to speak coherently. "I had a nightmare, that's all. It's nothing. Go back to bed," she said, her voice shaking.

Not knowing what else to do, Dora got into bed with her and remained there until Lilli had fallen back asleep, worried sick that her sister was becoming delusional. The signs were there, and I didn't act. I should have found a way to get help for her.

A heavy-set nurse in rubber-soled shoes came walking toward her, interrupting her sad thoughts. In her arms, she held Lilli's daughter, all cleaned up and wrapped in a pink blanket.

Dora took the tiny infant carefully into her arms. The baby's eyes were open and staring directly at her. The child resembled Lilli, she realized, causing tears to flow again. Dora searched the child's face for any signs of resemblance to Charlie, but found none. Not for the first time, she wondered whether the child was Charlie's or whether it had been fathered by the man who had raped her sister in Morocco. She decided it didn't matter. She'd made a promise to her dead sister and she intended to keep it. She would raise Lilli's daughter as her own and would give her all the love she had.

"Have you thought of a name for her?" the nurse asked, not unkindly.

"Jasmine," Dora said softly, not taking her eyes off the infant. "It's the name my sister had chosen for a girl. She's beautiful, isn't she?"

The nurse smiled and nodded. "I have to take her back now. If you want to stay for a while, she'll be in the last bassinet on the left in the nursery."

Dora spent the next couple of hours in front of the glass partition separating the nursery from the visitors, studying the little miracle that had entered her life and wishing with all her heart that her sister could be here to see the beautiful child she had given birth to.

\* \* \* \*

On the following day, as she prepared the house for the baby's homecoming, Dora went about her work with a heavy heart. She had done her best to remain stalwart throughout the ordeal of her sister's passing, but unanswered questions remained about the manner in which Lilli had died. Even though the cause of death was listed as heart failure, Dora picked up on the fact that bruises had been found on Lilli's body, and she overheard one policeman speculate that they had been self-inflicted. The police had conducted a thorough investigation and found no signs of forced entry to the house. The doors and windows were all locked. Neither had they found any injuries or evidence to indicate her sister had been trying to defend herself against an attacker. Dora refused to believe Lilli would try to harm herself, even though her mental state had not been the best since Charlie's death. Lilli would never have risked harming her baby; of that, Dora was absolutely certain.

It wasn't until she was on her hands and knees, scrubbing her dead sister's blood from the living room floor, that Dora finally broke down. The act proved more than she could bear. She sat back on her haunches and sobbed, letting out some of the emotion she had held back until now. She cried for a long time, and when her outpouring of grief was over, she felt cleansed of the worst of it, at least.

Wiping away the last of her tears, she was about to turn back to her repugnant task when she caught a glint of sunlight reflecting off something on the side table. She got to her feet to investigate, and found a striking-looking antique silver necklace resting there. Must be Lilli's. She picked it up to examine it, although she could not remember ever having seen her sister wear it. Even so, once she looked more carefully at the piece of jewelry, something about it struck her as familiar, and then she realized why.

She went upstairs to Lilli's room and, in the closet, located the box where her sister kept her photographs. Dora flipped through them and found what she was looking for near the bottom, the photographs of her sister's fateful trip to Morocco. Only two pictures had been taken in Marrakesh, where Charlie had died. One of the snapshots showed Lilli and Charlie on a terrace overlooking a square. The other was of the two of them in a marketplace. The second photo had been shot fairly close-up. Sure enough, in the picture, Lilli was sporting the pendant Dora now held in her hand. Why had her sister taken the necklace out after almost a year of never having worn it? It made Dora shiver to think Lilli had been wearing the pendant on the day Charlie died and had not taken it out again until the day of her own death.

Doubt began to creep in again. Had Lilli tried to kill herself? Was that why she had taken out the pendant? Had she planned the whole thing?

Dora understood she would never know for sure what had happened to Lilli, and the thought sent sadness flooding through her. Not knowing the truth just made everything worse. She decided to put the pendant away for now and placed it in the box, along with the photographs. When the time was right, she would give the necklace to Jasmine, along with the other things that had been important to her sister.

Back downstairs, she completed the odious task of scrubbing the living room floor of her sister's blood, and then placed calls to the people she and Lilli were close to, to deliver the sad news of Lilli's death. The last call she placed was to Tom. Dora knew Tom had been in love with her sister at one time, and thought he would want to know.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## PART TWO

### Immortality

#### Chapter 5

##### Tampa, Florida-Present Day

Jasmine Fairchild stared at T.K.'s handsome face as he slept. Predictably, the sound of his gentle snoring grated on her nerves, and she found herself becoming annoyed. A few minutes ago, caught up in the ecstasy of their lovemaking, he had captivated her, and she thought maybe, maybe this time would be different. But it wasn't. After it was over, T.K. had flopped back, exhausted, telling her he'd never been with anyone like her before, and that she was amazing. Instead of feeling content to remain close to him, she found she couldn't wait to get out of his bed, his apartment and his life. Just like all the others.

She lifted back the disheveled sheets and got up quietly, not wanting to wake him or to engage in the awkward conversation she knew would ensue. After slipping on her panties, and while looking around for her jeans, T.K.'s head popped up.

"Hey, where are you going?" His eyes betrayed that he desperately wanted her to stay.

The look only caused her irritation to increase. Why did she have to be like this? So hot before and so cold after.

"Can't," she said, offhandedly. She had learned from experience it was better not to drag it out. "Aunt Dora's probably waiting up for me. Look, it was great and all, but I've gotta go."

"When will I see you again?" he asked, too quickly.

"I dunno. I'm pretty busy what with mid-terms and working at the Blue Flame..." She knew how lame it sounded. She never had been any good at pretending.

T.K.'s look hardened. "Okay. I get it. The earth didn't move for you. Sure had me fooled for a while there, though."

"It's not that." She caught the annoyance in her tone and softened a bit. "It was great, actually. I just don't—"

"Don't what?"

"Nothing." She couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence. I just don't feel anything for you, was what she had been about to say. She wanted nothing more to do with him. She pulled up her jeans and, under his scrutiny, collected her bra, hooked it up in the back and slipped her cotton t-shirt over her head. Stepping into her sandals, she hurried out the front door of his apartment without a backward glance, leaving T.K. to wonder what he had done wrong.

The red numbers on the digital clock displayed on the office building across the street told her it was nearly four in the morning as she exited the air-conditioned lobby of T.K.'s apartment and stepped into the steamy, sultry night. Home was fifteen minutes away, and despite the lateness of the hour and Aunt Dora's constant lectures on not to walk the streets late at night, she decided to do just that, and headed south on Willow. The air was thick and still, and so laden with moisture that halos formed around the street lamps. Jasmine enjoyed the sweltering heat almost as much as most people found it oppressive. The sauna-like humidity never caused her to perspire or wilt. Like an exotic flower, she seemed to thrive on it.

She passed a coffee shop still open for business and stopped to buy a large cup of Columbian, black. She'd had too much to drink before going home with T.K. and didn't want any grief from her aunt on the off-chance she might be waiting up for her. Back outside, stopped at an intersection waiting for the light to change, she rummaged through her purse for her cigarettes, brought one to her lips to light it, then jumped when a man's voice spoke close by her ear. She hadn't noticed anyone nearby.

"Looking for company?"

She turned and came face-to-face with a man in his late twenties, dressed in jeans and t-shirt with cut-off sleeves, a look no doubt designed to show off the musculature of his biceps which, admittedly, was impressive. His dark hair was cropped short and gelled, giving him a tough, dangerous look. He looked her up and down with wolf's eyes.

Jasmine said nothing for a moment as she studied him, sizing him up. Her appetite for sex was large, and she found the prospect of taking him up on his offer tempting, but something about the rapacious gleam in his eye caused her to reconsider. She narrowed her jade eyes down to slits and she stared back hard at him. Forget it, asshole, you don't want to do this. Walk away while you still can.

The man's head jerked back in surprise. His expression quickly changed from salaciousness to one of confusion. She had not spoken a word.

The light changed to green and Jasmine continued to stare at him. That's right. It's all downhill from here, buddy. Walk away.

The man turned from her and hurried in the opposite direction as if he'd seen a ghost, looking back over his shoulder at her before picking up his pace. Jasmine crossed at the light and continued on her way home.

She was used to it. What had just happened had happened countless times before. She had come to think of her particular ability as "pressing". Some were more susceptible to it than others, but it was something she had always been able to do, pressing her thoughts on people. She tried not to take advantage of the talent, generally preferring to play fair, but she had to admit, it came in pretty handy sometimes.

Once, when she was nine, she had tried explaining it to Aunt Dora, but her aunt had not believed her. And when she first confided in her best friend, Carla had looked at her like she was a couple of cards short of a full deck.

"Prove it," Carla had demanded. When Jasmine pressed a thought on her, Carla had stared back at her in amazement.

"That's freaky," she declared. "Can you do it all the time?"

"Yes. But I don't like to. Especially with grown-ups."

After that, she had experimented with her ability on one of her teachers, with disastrous results. Miss Richter had insisted she be transferred to another class, telling the principal there was something "off about the girl". Jasmine, hurt and angry after she'd heard some of the kids talking about it at recess, had cried herself to sleep that night. The very next day, Miss Richter was permanently injured in a car accident and never came back. That was the other thing about Jasmine, the thing that convinced her she was, indeed, a freak. Bad things happened to people who crossed her.

All she wanted was to be like everyone else, to fit in. But she didn't, and she never would. Especially after what she'd come to think of as the incident. What had happened when she turned sixteen had cemented her suspicion that there was something inherently wrong with her.

Getting used to high school had been difficult enough, and the first two years without Carla, whose parents had sent her to a private school, had been hell. The boys pursued her relentlessly and, as a result, the girls despised her. In the cafeteria, she always sat alone, her previous attempts to sit with other groups of girls having been met with icy stares and silence. Except for the snickering afterward when she walked away.

The real trouble started with her first sexual encounter, a boy named Brendon Walker. A sad smile touched her lips as she remembered the heady sensation of that first experience with what would soon become an addiction. The first time with Brendon had awakened a latent and powerful emotion in her. She remembered how the act itself had felt sacred to her, an awakening that had affected her profoundly. After that first time, Jasmine sought out sex at every opportunity, for she discovered it was the only time she felt truly in her element. She craved it the way most people craved salt on their food; she needed it as much as the air she breathed.

Brendon had been a willing participant in her search for sexual ecstasy. Unfortunately for Jasmine, having been shunned by the girls in school, she had no way of knowing that spiteful Sharon McGillivray, who was one tough cookie and ringleader extraordinaire, considered Brendon to be her property. The day came when, returning home late from school one afternoon, Jasmine found Aunt Dora on her knees, scrubbing away at the sidewalk in front of the house they shared. Even the solvent and scrub brush Aunt Dora was using had not managed to completely erase the words whore and slut painted in large red letters on the walkway.

One look at the dismal expression on Aunt Dora's face had been enough. Something snapped in Jasmine. A kind of slow burn began inside her, something that grew and grew, until it became too huge to contain. Frightened by what was happening, feeling she would explode if it continued, she directed her growing rage outward with her mind. Immediately, a blast of energy flew from her body, so powerful it rocked her. It all happened so quickly, she'd not had time to think about what she was doing; her reaction had been instinctive. Once she expelled the strange energy, no trace of rage remained, only the empty feeling that had been her constant companion for as far back as she could remember.

She had cause to recall the strange incident the following morning in Lit class when an announcement came over the intercom that Sharon McGillivray and Brendon Walker had both died on the previous day. After watching the news reports, Jasmine learned both teens had died at the same time, in unrelated incidents—right around the time Jasmine had returned from school to find her aunt cleaning the sidewalk. The information had caused her to start shaking uncontrollably. I did that. I made it happen. But how? What did I do? She didn't know, but it had scared her so badly, she'd not been able to go to school for a week. After that, she'd been extremely careful about controlling her emotions when someone angered or disappointed her.

Returning her thoughts to the present, she discovered she'd arrived at Bayshore and stopped at the stone balustrade to look out at the ocean lapping at the shore. A bright moon lit up the night sky, reflecting off the inky surface of the water. The deepest part of night was her very favorite time, the only time she felt really alive, and

she often wondered why this should be so, and why the dead of night held fascination for her. Maybe it was because the most ordinary daytime objects took on such an alien quality in the middle of the night, reflecting her own feeling of being somehow different. The darkness felt familiar to her, as if this was the reality, and daylight the illusion. A sense of loneliness washed over her and she sighed, wondering if she'd always feel so out of step with the rest of the world.

As she looked out over the moonlit water, a strange doubling-over took place in her thoughts. The moon suddenly appeared unfamiliar, the shore foreign. As if from far away, strains of mystic-sounding music reached her, and for a second, she caught the scent of animals. Jasmine shook her head to clear it, and all returned to normal. Smiling at her fanciful nature, she turned away from the water and resumed walking.

Continuing along Bayshore, she turned the corner at South Orleans. She loved the old neighborhood and the picture-pretty house she and Aunt Dora shared. Large old trees flanked both sides of the avenue. The scent of gardenia from one of the yards filled the night air as she walked along. Many of the houses had stood in the same spot for over a century, a couple of them dating back to the 1800s. About halfway down the street, she pulled open the front gate set into the white picket fence surrounding her house. All was quiet as she moved along the walkway to the long porch fronting the large clapboard house. Aunt Dora had left the outside light on for her, and she entered, using her key.

Before she got halfway up the stairs, Aunt Dora's voice floated up to her from the living room and Jasmine trotted back down, resigning herself to yet another confrontation with her aunt.

"It's late, Jasmine. Almost four-thirty."

Jasmine found her aunt reclined on the large chaise-lounge in the living room, a book on the table beside her, and wearing the silky blue robe she favored. Her thick, silver-and-gold hair tumbled loosely in waves around her shoulders. Jasmine thought how her Aunt, now in her fifties, was still a beautiful woman, and wondered once again why she had never married. "I was just hanging out with some friends," she said, keeping her tone casual.

"I didn't hear a car pull up. How did you get home?"

"I, uh, well, I walked. It wasn't far."

"Jasmine." Her aunt's face was painted with disapproval. "We've talked and talked about this. It's not safe to walk the streets alone at this hour of the night. It's no wonder I wait up for you to get home. And don't think I can't see that you've had too much to drink."

"Aunt Dora, I can take care of myself," she said, trying hard not to slur her words. The effects of the alcohol she had consumed earlier had not completely dissipated. "You don't need to worry about me. I'm a grown woman now. I'll be twenty-one next week."

\* \* \* \*

Dora sighed. Tired, she didn't feel like engaging in the ritual argument with her niece.

"Twenty-one," she said, almost to herself. Her disapproval melted a little as she turned back to Jasmine. How the girl reminded her of Lilli. If possible, Jasmine was even more exquisite than Lilli had been at the same age. She had inherited Lilli's golden wavy mane, as well as her tall, slim build and intense jade eyes; eyes which, against her sunkissed complexion, sparkled like emeralds.

"You're thinking how much she looked like me," Jasmine said.

Dora stared at her niece, startled out of her reverie. Having raised the girl, she should not have been surprised that Jasmine had articulated her exact thought, but at times the girl's ability to practically read her mind still took her unawares. She stood up and tied her robe closer around her.

"Yes ... she was very much like you. Beautiful. A bit of a rebel when she was your age, also like you. Until she met your father. Charlie was good for her." Dora paused, remembering how happy her sister had been before Charlie died. "It will be the same for you, I imagine. Someone will come along and make you feel complete, and you won't feel the need to swim so hard against the current anymore."

Jasmine suddenly moved toward her and hugged her, hard. It was a rare moment, one of the few times she felt truly connected to her wayward niece.

"G'night Aunt Dora."

"More like 'good morning'. Get some sleep now."

Dora watched Jasmine as she took the stairs, and asked herself once again whether she had done a good enough job of raising her. Had she loved her enough? So much about Jasmine remained an enigma to Dora. Even as a young child, she'd seemed so different from other children. Nothing Dora had ever been able to put her finger on, but there was just something about the girl that set her apart from others, an aloneness that often translated into aloofness.

As Jasmine grew older, the two of them had found themselves at cross purposes more often than not. She remembered the way her niece had displayed no embarrassment in asking about contraceptives when she'd turned sixteen, and all the sleepless nights Dora had endured—especially after the humiliating incident of the sidewalk graffiti. More recently, Dora's disapproval centered on Jasmine's lifestyle, the constant late nights and drinking. And tonight, the way she had hugged her, like she was desperate for love. Didn't she know how much she was loved?

Dora remained staring after her niece disappeared up the stairs. The feeling that Jasmine was headed for disaster had been strong lately, although she couldn't say why exactly. Perhaps it was just that Jasmine so closely resembled Lilli now, causing Dora to connect her sister's terrible fate with the child. Dora had always been vigilant with Jasmine, never having gotten over her guilt at having left Lilli alone on the night of her death, yet her efforts were more often than not in vain. She's not Lilli. Nothing will happen to her. Then, reminding herself that she had always done her very best for the girl, she followed her niece upstairs to try to get a couple of hours sleep.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 6

Tom Janzen sat in his air conditioned office on the fifth floor of the medical center, staring absently out the window at the pedestrians on the street below. A moment later, he swiveled back to face his desk, and looked again at the file folder containing information about the patient he'd just finished with, Melody Wynn. Mrs. Wynn's husband had been transferred to Tampa from Atlanta. In the last trimester of her pregnancy, she had asked for a referral to a good obstetrician in the area and had been given his name. Wasting no time, she'd booked her appointment with him immediately upon arriving in the city, and he'd just finished his examination of her.

His hand trembled as he closed the folder. Seeing Mrs. Wynn had shaken him up badly. Something about the woman—her hair, the lilt in her voice when she greeted him, something—had made him feel like he'd seen a ghost. An old wound had been re-opened, causing almost-forgotten pain to return with a vengeance. All because she reminded him of another woman, one whom he had loved deeply. One who had chosen someone else over him.

He thought he had dispelled the aching memory of Lilli long ago, but as the past came rushing back at him like a train wreck, he realized some feelings could never be erased, only buried. He remembered the sad look on her beautiful face the day she told him she was in love with someone else...

"I'm so sorry, Tom. I never meant to hurt you. I didn't mean for this to happen, but it has. I love Charlie. He's asked me to marry him ... and I've said yes."

He wants to tell her that this man who had taken her from him will never love her as much he does. He wants to yell, or punch a hole through the wall to dispel some of the anger that has sprung up in him. In the end, he does neither. Because he loves her. He knows he loves her because he wants only for her to be happy.

"If this is what you want, if you're sure he makes you happy, marry him."

After she leaves, he takes the engagement ring he had planned to give her from his bedroom dresser and looks at it long and hard before putting it away, knowing exactly what he has lost.

Having lost her to another man had been bad enough. But in a cruel twist of fate, three years later, she had returned to him, seeking his help. For all his trying, he'd not been able to stop what had happened to her. She died. And a part of him had died with her.

He sat with his elbows propped on the desk in front of him, his head resting in his hands, remembering how tormented Lilli had been the last time he'd seen her, the morning she'd arrived on his doorstep seeking help...

One look at her wraith-like figure when he opens the door tells him something terrible has happened to her. Her heartbreaking beauty is still apparent, only slightly diminished by the gaunt look of her face and her too-pale skin. Yet, it's her eyes he notices the most. The eyes that once sparked emerald fire stare at him, flat and emotionless.

Haunted eyes.

The shock must have registered on his face because, in a quiet voice, she says, "I know what I look like." Lowering her head as she stands on his doorstep, she asks if she can come inside.

"Lilli," he stutters. "Of course. Come in."

When she's settled in the comfortable chair in his living room and sipping on the glass of water he brings to her, she says, "I know I have no right to be here, Tom, but ... I need help. I'm so scared." Her voice cracks on the last word and the glass of water shakes in her trembling hand.

"Tell me what's wrong."

Her face becomes calmer when she hears his words. Then she turns those haunted eyes on him and says, "Do you believe in evil spirits, Tom?"

He practically jumped out of his skin when Adele buzzed him to say his three o'clock appointment, Ms. Amodeo, was settled in room four.

Still wrapped up in the memory of his last encounter with Lilli, a premonitory feeling rushed through him. Too much time had gone by since his last excursion downtown, and he resolved to go soon, tonight, if possible. Shaking off the dark shadow of apprehension that had fallen over him, he walked out of his office to see about Patty Amodeo, who was due to deliver next week.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 7

Jasmine leaned in close to the gold-framed mirror over the dressing table and applied Baby Love lip gloss to her full, well-delineated lips. Then she stepped back to assess the overall effect. Not bad. Silky folds of crimson fabric fell to the top of her slender thighs and the halter-style top of the dress criss-crossed her bosom, revealing the swell of her small, perfect breasts. The soft fabric bounced against her legs as she turned around to admire the cut, which left her lightly-tanned back exposed right down to the waist. Jasmine's hair, freshly washed, fell in shiny golden waves over her smooth shoulders and halfway down her back, partially obscuring the tiny tattoo of a winged demon on her right shoulder. Aunt Dora had been appalled by the tattoo when she'd gotten it last year. Jasmine really didn't know why she'd selected the image of the winged devil, except she'd felt drawn to it. She chose to wear no jewelry, save for the silver infinity ring Aunt Dora had given her for her sixteenth birthday, and which had belonged to Jasmine's mother. Aunt Dora had the twin of that ring; her mother and aunt had purchased them during a trip to New York back in the early seventies.

Twenty-one! She could barely believe it. Carla and some of her friends from the Blue Flame had arranged something special at Raven's, the trendiest new club in the city. A tiny frown crossed her brow when she realized T.K. would probably show up tonight as well, but she banished the thought immediately. She'd deal with it. Nothing was going to spoil her special night.

Jasmine glanced at the clock on her nightstand. Ten-thirty. She wasn't due at Raven's until eleven, but she called for a taxi and then went downstairs, intending to spend a few moments with Aunt Dora before leaving. Earlier, her aunt had gone to the trouble of preparing a special birthday dinner, and Jasmine appreciated the gesture, especially given the fact that they'd spoken little over the past couple of days as result of what Aunt Dora termed her carousing. She found her aunt in the kitchen, tidying up.

Aunt Dora smiled at her as she entered the room, a smile that turned her normally worried expression into one of sweetness.

"Let me look at you. Absolutely gorgeous."

Jasmine was relieved Aunt Dora wasn't mad anymore. Perhaps she had intuited that Jasmine's careless demeanor was just her way of masking the isolation she felt. She also noticed that, for once, Aunt Dora had refrained from commenting that her outfit might attract the wrong kind of attention.

After a slight hesitation, her aunt said, "I have something for you. Something I've been keeping for you."

Jasmine's face lit up. "Sounds mysterious. What is it?" She followed her aunt to the foot of the stairs.

"Wait here," said Dora. "I'll be right down."

A moment later, Aunt Dora came back downstairs, carrying two parcels wrapped in red paper and bound together with gold satin ribbon. She handed them to Jasmine.

"These belonged to your mother," Dora said. "I thought today might be a good day for you to have them."

Jasmine, who adored opening gifts, became doubly excited to learn her present had come, indirectly at least, from the mother she had never known. She was



beginning to develop a real soft spot for Aunt Dora, despite their constant arguments.

"Open the small one first," instructed her aunt, as they moved to the living room and sat down next to each other on the sofa.

"I've never seen this picture before. Where was it taken?" asked Jasmine. The photo showed her father and mother with their arms around one another.

"During their last trip, at the marketplace in Marrakesh."

Jasmine said nothing at first as she studied the picture, trying to imagine what her parents had been thinking at the precise moment the snapshot had captured them. They looked so happy and in love. "Thank you, Aunt Dora. This means a lot to me," she said.

"I'm glad. Now open the other one."

Jasmine gasped. The exotic silver pendant looked to be very old. Fashioned more or less in the shape of an elongated cone, about three inches long, the bottom was rounded and two tiny, ancient-looking coins dangled from it. The top of the piece was worked in a lacy pattern with openings. The antique silver gleamed against the black velvet bed of the jewelry case. She lifted it out of the box carefully, surprised by the weight of it.

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

A strange sensation of déjà vu fell over her as she held the necklace in her hand, a feeling of familiarity that seemed to vanish as quickly as it had arrived. Wasting no time, she slipped the pendant around her neck, liking the heavy feel of it against her bosom. She marveled to think her mother had once worn this very same necklace.

"Thank you, Aunt Dora," she said, hugging her aunt tightly. For one of the few times in her life, Jasmine actually felt loved and safe. Maybe there was hope for the two of them after all.

"It's the same one your mother's wearing in the photograph, see?"

"Oh, Aunt Dora, this is so special," she said, looking at the photo again and seeing that it was, in fact, identical to the pendant her mother sported in the picture. Perhaps that was the reason the necklace seemed familiar to her. Maybe she'd seen the picture as a child.

"It looks lovely on you. Happy birthday, Jasmine."

Jasmine smiled at her aunt, grateful for what she had just done. "Thank you so much for this. It's ... well, it's almost like..."

"Like your mother is here," Dora finished for her.

"Yes."

Just then, the beep-beep of the taxi horn sounded outside.

"I'd better be off. My taxi's here. I'll be late I'm sure, so no need to wait up, okay?"

"Have a good time tonight, but please remember to take a taxi home," Dora said emphatically.

"I promise," Jasmine assured her, bussing her aunt's cheek and then hurrying out the front door.

\* \* \* \*

Loud, pounding music spilled out onto the street as the door opened to allow a few patrons inside the club; the lineup outside stretched halfway down the block when Jasmine stepped out of the cab in front of Raven's.

"Jasmine. Jazzy, over here!"

Jasmine spotted Carla and the others milling around out front, awaiting her arrival before going in. As she began to weave her way through the crowd, men and women alike turned to take a second look as she passed by.

"Wow!" said Carla. "Look at you! Happy birthday, Jazz," she said, hugging her when she got close enough. "That dress looks amazing on you!"

Jasmine returned her friend's hug. "Thanks, Carla, you look pretty awesome yourself." Jasmine thought Carla's jet-black hair, olive complexion and eyes like black pearls gave her a sexy, earthy beauty all her own.

Jasmine accepted birthday hugs from Jenna and Anne, her co-workers at the Blue Flame, where she worked part-time waiting tables, and from Mike and Emma, her friends from the university. Then she spotted T.K. making his way toward her.

"Hey. Happy birthday," he said awkwardly when he reached her.

She saw he was about to embrace her in a hug and quickly proffered her cheek. He took the hint and kissed her lightly on the cheek, but remained standing a bit too close.

Noticing the look of disappointment on T.K.'s face, and finding herself suddenly uncomfortable in his presence, Jasmine said, "Damn. I forgot to stop for cigarettes. I'm out. There's a place around the corner. I'll be right back."

Before T.K. had a chance to stop her, she left, walking as quickly as her three-inch high heels would allow to the end of the block. Once she turned the corner, relieved she was out of sight, she slowed her pace a little.

\* \* \* \*

Carla watched Jasmine sashay down the street until the flash of her red dress disappeared around the corner. As usual, everyone turned to gawk at her as she passed. Her best friend was a hard act to follow, that was for sure. It wasn't that Carla didn't think herself attractive. She had her share of admirers. But the minute Jasmine showed up, all eyes immediately gravitated to her. Jasmine's peculiar thought-projection ability aside, there was something about her that caused people, men in particular, to swarm to her like bees to nectar. Jasmine just oozed sex appeal. Carla had spent most of her life emulating her best friend. She copied the way she talked and walked and dressed. Yet, no matter how hard Carla tried to define and duplicate that special quality Jasmine possessed, she never quite managed it. Never one to be jealous, and despite the fact that her best friend had always been a bit of an enigma, Carla loved Jasmine like a sister. After Carla's parents passed away three years ago, it was Jasmine with whom she shared her grief and the sense of isolation that had ensued. Jasmine had understood better than anyone else what she'd gone through, and their friendship had only deepened after that.

Carla sighed and turned back to the group. She smiled brightly at T.K. She had a feeling Jasmine was no longer interested in him and, as far as leftovers went, T.K. would do nicely.

\* \* \* \*

Don't sweat it. Jasmine walked to the convenience store. Once they got inside the club, things would be more relaxed. A couple of drinks and she'd be back in party mode and on the dance floor.

She entered the shop, asked the clerk for a pack of Lights, paid with her last ten, then decided she better stop at the ATM inside the store to get money for a cab, and whatever else she might need. She intended to keep her promise to Aunt Dora. In fact, she had decided to do everything in her power to improve their relationship, starting tonight.

As she stepped out of the store onto the street, she spotted a man standing across the intersection, dressed all in black and leaning against a lamp post. He was staring directly at her. Just looking at him sent a chill up her spine and, despite the heat, her bare arms broke into gooseflesh. For some reason, the sight of him filled her with absolute dread.

She didn't move, unable to tear her eyes from him. He was tall, six-three or four, maybe. His ebony hair glistened under the streetlight, falling to his broad shoulders in waves. Even from across the crowded intersection, she could see the incredibly arrogant look on his handsome face. She couldn't be sure because of the distance between them, but she got the distinct impression that his eyes were black. Flawlessly attired in a formal black suit and dress shirt, he managed to appear magnificent, and at the same time, terrifying. The man remained motionless and continued to stare at her, as if he knew something she did not. Something Jasmine felt sure she did not want to know.

They stood staring at each other across the street for what seemed like minutes, until her instincts screamed at her to leave before something awful happened. She turned away from him, in a hurry to get back to her friends and safety. Before rounding the corner, she allowed herself a backward glance. The man, she noticed with alarm, was making his way across the street toward her, moving quickly and with deliberation. Jasmine just knew something horrible would happen if he caught up with her, and she had to exercise all of her self-control to keep from running.

In her rush to get away, she ran headlong into a middle-aged, bespectacled man, dressed in blue jeans and t-shirt.

"Oh. Sorry," she blurted out.

The man placed his hand lightly on her shoulder to steady her. The moment he touched her, Jasmine felt calmer.

The stranger gave her a reassuring look. "Don't worry," he told her, "you're all right."

Jasmine turned to see if the man in black was still following her, only to find he had stopped in the middle of the intersection. The light had changed and, incredibly, with traffic whizzing by him in both directions, he remained stationary in the middle of the street, staring at the two of them. Jasmine turned back to the stranger. He was looking directly at the man in black. The two of them appeared to be engaged in a stand-off of some kind, each trying to stare the other down. Finally, the man in black sneered, then looked away, retreating back across the street.

Jasmine looked the stranger, who smiled kindly at her and patted her shoulder once more. He waited until the man in black disappeared from sight.

"Thank you," said Jasmine.

"No trouble. My name's Tom," he said, offering his hand.

"Mine's Jasmine," she said, taking the man's hand. "Well. Thank you again, Tom. I'd better get back to my friends."

The man nodded and continued on his way. Jasmine satisfied herself that the man in black was gone and then hurried down the street to get back to her friends. What had just happened? Trembling all over, she felt as if she'd just averted a terrible accident.

Her friends were getting ready to enter the club when she caught up with them.

"Jazzy, did your friend find you?" Carla asked.

"What friend?"

"A guy stopped us to ask if we knew where you'd gone, an older fellow. He said he was a friend of yours."

"What did he look like?" she asked, frowning. Her heart sped up again at the thought of the man in black.

"Oh, fiftyish maybe, salt-and-pepper hair, glasses. He didn't give his name, but he looked harmless enough, so I told him."

Her heart lurched. Carla had just described Tom, the man who had helped her moments ago. "Was he wearing jeans and t-shirt?"

"Yeah."

The strange encounter left her feeling oddly vulnerable and more than a little creeped out.

"Everything okay?"

She considered telling Carla what had happened and decided not to. The whole thing sounded crazy, even to her. "Sure," she said. "Let's go inside. Time to celebrate, right?"

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 8

The club throbbed with frenetic energy, the music blaring from the speakers so loud Jasmine could feel the vibrations in her teeth. Patrons were jammed up against each other in the area surrounding the dance floor, holding onto their drinks, yelling to make themselves heard over the pulsating bass.

Jasmine and her entourage made their way along the perimeter of the dance floor to the table reserved for them close to the bar, and took their seats. T.K. sat down next to her and immediately ordered a round of drinks. She downed her first too quickly in an effort to put the strange encounter with the man in black behind her. At the same time, she tried to figure out a way to distance herself from T.K., who seemed glued to her side. The answer presented itself before the next round of drinks



arrived.

She spotted him standing near the bar, a black-haired Adonis. He looked a little older than her, and was dressed in slacks and a black crew-neck top emphasizing his muscular chest and arms. He had the most incredible body she had ever seen, and she found herself thinking she could stare at him all night. He appeared oblivious to the effect he was having on the women in his immediate vicinity, most of whom were staring openly at him. One of them, a girl-next-door-gone-wrong-type dressed in silver lycra, moved next to him and leaned in close to say something. He turned away from her after shaking his head 'no' and stared directly at Jasmine instead.

A fever seemed to fall over her as his smoldering eyes, the color of smoke, locked with her own, making her body sizzle. Unable to take her eyes off him, she watched as he set his drink down on the bar and began to walk purposefully toward her.

She quickly glanced at T.K., who had not only noticed the man but her reaction to him as well. His scowling face underscored his displeasure. She had a feeling things were about to turn ugly, and tried to diffuse the situation. "T.K., listen, I—"

"Forget it." He got up quickly, almost overturning his chair. "Knock yourself out," he told her, his face full of resentment. He left the table and headed for the exit. Carla flashed Jasmine a look she wasn't able to decipher and hurried after him.

Jasmine sighed, shrugging her shoulders at Jenna and Anne, who had taken in the exchange and appeared a little uncomfortable. Some birthday party this is turning out to be.

But then he was suddenly standing over her, looking at her with those smoking eyes of his.

"I was hoping you'd dance with me. Unless, that is," he said, turning toward T.K.'s retreating form, "you're here with someone else."

Jasmine couldn't help smiling at his formal tone. "Apparently not," she said, glancing in T.K.'s direction as he disappeared into the crowd with Carla close behind. Carla signaled to her that she'd be back, and Jasmine nodded. Returning her attention to the man standing next to her, she took his outstretched hand and followed him onto the dance floor.

The music switched to Mariah Carey's latest just as they reached the floor. She adored the way he moved, sleek and sinewy, like a panther. They were close enough she could feel his body heat, and every time he brushed against her, she felt lightening strike. Her overwhelming attraction to him was undeniable. Something about this man told her he could lead her to places she'd never been before. When the music changed to a slow, grinding tune, he moved in close, pressing her to him. They joined in a rhythm that felt timeless, almost ritualistic.

What was happening to her? She had never felt quite this way with a man before, and she'd been with many. She brushed her smooth cheek against his and broke her rule. She pressed a thought on him. Are you feeling this?

He didn't miss a beat, nor did he pull back to look at her or otherwise acknowledge that he'd heard her.

She tried again. I could love you.

Aside from pulling her a little closer, he did nothing to indicate that her thought had reached him.

Unusual. In fact, this was a first. Apparently, some people weren't capable of hearing it. In a way, she was glad. It leveled the playing field. They could get to know each other on an equal footing. And she did intend on getting to know him, she decided.

"Do you believe in love at first sight?" he asked her suddenly, moving his cheek away from hers to look at her.

Relief flooded over her when she realized the attraction was mutual. What's wrong with me? Desperation was just not her style. "I don't know. Maybe," is what came out. She cursed herself. That was smooth. "I don't even know your name," she said, looking up at him.

"It's Christopher." He smiled. "And yours?"

"Jasmine."

He pulled her close to him as they danced, and she felt his heart racing in his chest. A secret smile touched her lips as she anticipated what the rest of the night would bring.

\* \* \* \*

Later, at his apartment, she prowled naked around his expensively furnished bedroom as he slept. She paused to admire the tasteful artwork, and ran her hand along the arm of the soft velvet tub chair next to the window. As she moved about the room, wriggling her toes every now and then in the plush oriental carpet, she picked up objects and returned them to their place, wanting to know everything about him. Because Christopher was the one. She had known it the minute their long bout of lovemaking ended. Afterward, she had wanted only to stay close to him; the thought of leaving him felt unbearable.

She had studied him as he slept, marveling at the perfection of his muscular physique and facial features that could only be described as renaissance. Christopher had the perfect body—and he knew how to use it.

She heard the rustling of sheets behind her and turned to find him awake.

"Come back to bed," he said.

How she loved that deep voice of his. Playfully, she pounced on top of him, wrapping her lithe body around his muscular one. He flipped her over easily and, already hard, entered her again. She closed her eyes and remained still, breathing in his masculine scent while he moved over her. As he explored every inch of her body with his hands and mouth, she abandoned herself to the heady sensations that ran through her, submerging herself in the ocean of his lovemaking. Her mounting pleasure was matched by his, and by the time she felt his release inside her, she'd been rocked by multiple orgasms. Afterward, as they collapsed into each other's arms, Jasmine understood she had discovered something precious with Christopher, something not to be taken lightly.

So this is what it feels like to be in love. She rolled over to lie next to him while he ran his hand up and down her body. She didn't speak, unable to put into words what she felt had just happened between them.

She glanced at the clock on the night table to see that almost four hours had gone by since she'd come to his apartment, and remembered Aunt Dora would be expecting her home soon. Not wanting to ruin the fragile harmony that had sprung up between her and Aunt Dora by disappearing without a call, she got out of bed and pulled her cellphone from her purse.

He looked at her. "The fellow from the club?"

"No, my aunt. I live with her. I'm expected back," she said, taking the cell back to bed with her and kissing him again.

A look of relief crossed his perfect features. “Jasmine. I know we don't know each other very well, but we will. If you give me the chance, that is. You're different from anyone I've ever met. Special.”

"Yes," she said happily, “this feels right to me, too.” She brushed her lips against his lightly, then dialed Aunt Dora's number to let her know she'd be back in the morning.

She frowned when her call went unanswered. Aunt Dora was a light sleeper. She couldn't imagine why she wasn't picking up.

"That's strange," she muttered, dialing the number again. When her aunt didn't answer on the second try either, uneasiness crept over her.

"I might have to leave. Something's not right," she told him, her concern growing. It wasn't like Aunt Dora not to answer a late night phone call.

He must have seen the worry on her face, because Christopher didn't argue, although a look of disappointment crossed his face. He called a taxi for her while she dressed, then wrote his number on a slip of paper and handed it to her.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," he said gently, “but let me know if anything's gone wrong.” His concern sounded genuine, and it touched her.

"I will ... thank you for tonight."

He shot her one of his smoldering looks. “Believe me,” he said, “the pleasure was all mine.”

Mixed emotions ran through her when she walked out of his apartment to the waiting taxi, as her concern for Aunt Dora fused with the feeling that, for the first time in her life, she was really in love.

\* \* \* \*

Dora tossed and turned restlessly in bed. Her thoughts, which for some reason kept returning to Lilli, were unsettled, and intertwined with a strange sense of apprehension she couldn't explain. She glanced at the clock again to find that only five minutes had gone by since the last time she'd checked. At three in the morning, sleep still evading her, she donned her robe, intending to retreat downstairs to the living room to read.

As she was about to descend the staircase, she heard a noise from downstairs and froze, her hand clutching the banister tightly. She stopped, listening intently, but heard nothing else. Just then, the phone rang, making her jump. She turned, intending to pick up the call from her bedroom. She had barely taken her first step back, when the sound of voices floated up to her from the floor below, striking fear in her heart. She remained perfectly still, straining to hear over the sound of the ringing phone. When the telephone became silent, she distinctly heard voices coming from downstairs. Could Jasmine have returned to the house with some of her friends?

"Jasmine?" she called out tentatively.

No answer.

"Jasmine? Is that you?" she asked, louder this time.

She listened as the murmuring voices continued, and her trepidation turned quickly to alarm. The sounds she heard were not the convivial voices of Jasmine and her friends. The hushed voices sounded menacing. She took a hesitant step down, but thought better of it. What if intruders had entered her home? Her safest course would probably be to call for help. She could use the phone in her room and wait there until the police arrived.

The telephone began to ring again, the shrill sound resonating in the darkness. Soundlessly, she made her way back to her bedroom, avoiding the loose floorboards that squeaked, and hoping whoever was in the house had not heard her call out for Jasmine a moment ago. By the time she got back to her room, the phone had stopped ringing. She picked up the handset to call nine-one-one. And blinked in surprise. The line was dead. Now what? And on the heels of that, she cursed herself for not getting a cellphone last year, as Jasmine had suggested.

She felt the first bite of panic. A picture of tomorrow's headline flashed through her mind: Woman Found Dead Following Home Invasion. She scolded herself for being dramatic, but took the precaution of locking her bedroom door. Then she rummaged through the closet and located the antique walking stick that had belonged to her father. The heavy brass-and-wood cane provided her with some small sense of security. Maybe they'll take what they want and leave, she hoped, sitting down on the edge of the bed to wait it out. But then an awful thought occurred to her. Jasmine. She might arrive home at any minute. What would happen to her if she walked in on the intruders? The mental picture this conjured up spurred her into action.

She tried the phone once more. Again, there was no dial tone. She would have to leave the house to get help.

Dora walked over to the window and looked out. It was a good twenty-foot drop to the ground. She'd probably break a leg trying to get out that way. No, it would be easier, and quicker, if she used the tiny back stairway leading to the small foyer in the rear of the house, behind the kitchen. If she could make it down the back stairs without the intruders hearing her, she could exit the house without being seen and get help from her next door neighbor.

She got moving before she lost her courage and slipped quietly out of her room. Holding the cane in front of her, Dora walked to a small door at the end of the hallway. The seldom used door to the back stairs creaked as she opened it and Dora froze, waiting to see if her presence had been detected. Hearing nothing, she started down the narrow staircase.

The voices floated up to her again. She listened carefully, but wasn't able to make out what they were saying, or from what part of the main floor they emanated. Fear sloshed over her, as it struck her that the noises sounded unnatural—moans, whispers, cries. She paused to get herself under control. She had to carry on. There was Jasmine to think about.

By the time she arrived at the bottom of the stairs, she knew something was very wrong. The voices seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. Looking quickly all around her, and seeing no one, she bolted for the back door.

Before her hand touched the doorknob to unlock it, something pulled her backward, lifting her off the ground and slamming her up against the wall. Nothing appeared to be holding her there, yet she found herself unable to move. The voices rose like thunder around her. Now she could make out what they were saying. It was Jasmine's name they called, over and over, accompanied by words that sounded like “the chosen one” and “the first”.

And in that moment, she understood. It was all true. Her mind reeled. So many years she'd spent denying it. All true, she thought, despairing. Oh God! She had to fight them, for Jasmine's sake.

Dora struggled in vain against the invisible forces holding her. Plastered to the wall, her arms pinned to her side, her feet floating above the floor, she twisted and turned in an effort to release herself. The more she strained to extricate herself, the more firmly the unseen hands gripped her. As she continued to struggle, Dora felt her chest suddenly clench like a fist. An excruciating pain shot up her arm. Oh, God, please. Not now ... not now! Her legs, dangling in the air above the ground, went limp. She would have tumbled to the floor, but for whatever was holding her in place. Her vision blurred.

As if from a great distance, she heard the front door burst open, then Jasmine calling out to her. At once, the forces that bound her released their hold, and Dora dropped to the ground with a thud. She heard Jasmine's footsteps ascending the main stairway, receding in proportion to her voice as she continued calling out, then growing loud again as her niece raced back downstairs.

Dora managed a weak cry. Seconds later, Jasmine was at her side, crouched down beside her.

"Aunt Dora! Don't move," she cried, "I'm calling for help."

She heard Jasmine speaking frantically into the phone, which appeared to be working perfectly fine now.

"I need an ambulance right away! Please hurry, I think my aunt is having a heart attack."

\* \* \* \*

Jasmine rushed back to Aunt Dora after hanging up the phone. She switched on the overhead light in the back foyer and knelt at her side. Seeing that Aunt Dora was attempting to speak, she said, "Don't talk. Stay still, Aunt Dora. The ambulance is on its way." As she tried to make her aunt comfortable, it dawned on Jasmine she might lose the one person who had been like a mother to her.

"Jasmine ... you're—"

"Don't try to talk. I'm here. I won't leave you." She gripped her aunt's hand and held it tightly.

"...danger."

Seconds later, Aunt Dora's hand went slack in her own. Her body slumped, and her eyes took on a vacant look.

"Aunt Dora!" Jasmine tilted Dora's head back and began CPR. She wasn't even aware she was crying until she saw her tears falling like raindrops onto her aunt's face. Moments passed, and Jasmine doubled her efforts to draw breath from her aunt. Finally, the shrill sound of a siren pierced the night, cut short when the ambulance pulled up outside.

Too late, she thought with dismay as she looked at Aunt Dora's motionless form. They're too late. And I couldn't save her.

Dora's unseeing eyes remained fixed on the ceiling, silently confirming the fact.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 9

At the funeral home the following day, the proprietor did his best to be helpful, but Jasmine found herself overwhelmed by the number of decisions needing to be made in order to arrange for Aunt Dora's funeral. Still in shock over her aunt's untimely demise, she felt pressured for answers. Burial or cremation? Mahogany or Oak casket? Where would the funeral take place? Which outfit would her aunt have wished to be buried in? Was there a cemetery plot or niche? And, of course, the matter of cost and payment needed to be addressed. Every detail served to hit home the fact that Aunt Dora was gone and never coming back. Jasmine was on her own now.

It was after five in the afternoon by the time she got back to the house. Stepping into the empty place sent her into a spiral of depression. Aunt Dora had been so good to her, and she had mostly taken that love for granted. Now her aunt was gone, and Jasmine would never have the chance to tell her what she'd finally learned, too late. The irony of losing Aunt Dora, just when Jasmine had begun to connect with her, filled her with deep regret.

And to think I was so happy with Christopher, while she was ... Guilt and confusion flooded over her. Her erotic memories of Christopher seemed all tangled up with Aunt Dora's death. Other questions preoccupied her, too, like why Aunt Dora had been at the back door. Her aunt's last words haunted her as well. She had been trying to warn her about something. Aunt Dora must have felt herself to be in danger, otherwise why would she have been carrying the cane she'd found on the floor beside her? And yet, there had been no sign of intruders, and Jasmine's search of the house had turned up nothing missing or out of place.

The dismal thoughts caused her to feel wretchedly alone, and she considered calling Carla, or Christopher, but felt too drained and numb to think, let alone carry on a conversation. She had eaten nothing since yesterday, the birthday dinner Aunt Dora had prepared for her, but the mere thought of food made her stomach churn. She headed for the small liquor cabinet in the sitting room and splashed some Vodka into a tumbler instead. After gulping down half the liquid in the glass, she carried the rest upstairs with her, wanting nothing more than to sleep, and forget.

On an empty stomach, the liquor hit her hard. She had barely finished undressing before she began to feel shaky on her feet. Exhausted, she crawled into bed, still wearing the pendant which she'd not bothered to remove from the previous night, and fell fast asleep.

When she awoke, there was no light at all. Nothing. Disoriented, she sat up in bed—and then remembered. Aunt Dora was dead. Jasmine was alone in the house. How many times, she wondered, would this happen before she got used to it—waking up thinking everything was all right, and then remembering she was alone. She tried hard not to cry, but did anyway.

Do not weep, child who bears the name of the flower. You are not alone.

Jasmine's heart leapt to her throat. She jumped out of bed and stood perfectly still in the dark room, listening. Blood pounded at her temples, where a dull ache had begun to form. She could have sworn a woman had just spoken to her.

She waited. The tears dried on her face, her sadness replaced for the moment by fear. After a while, hearing nothing further, she moved to the night table to switch on the lamp.

At that exact moment, the voice spoke again. You are in danger.

Those four small words sent terror racing through her. The same words her aunt had spoken to her before she died. The voice, she realized with a start, was not external. It was coming from inside her, yet separate and apart from her. She could almost feel it gently probing her mind. Even through her fear, she noted the woman's voice sounded foreign, an accent she could not place.

She reached again for the light and the voice moaned, a low, tortured sound. Immediately, a cacophony of wailing filled her head as a chorus of feminine voices began to weep, a sound that pushed her over the edge of fear into the realm of terror.

"No!" Jasmine covered her ears with her hands to block the sound.

Instantly, the voices fell silent.

"Who are you?" she called out into the darkness. She waited, but the voice did not speak again. She remained crouched in the dark room with her back to the wall for a long time, breathing heavily, waiting...

\* \* \* \*

When Jasmine next opened her eyes, the sun coming in from her bedroom window almost dispelled the memory of her nightmare. Then she noticed the angle of light was wrong and, with a start, realized she was staring at the floorboard. How long had she been lying on the bedroom floor? Getting to her knees, she checked the bedroom clock and was amazed to find it was after four in the afternoon. She'd been out for at least ten or twelve hours.

Thinking about the woman's voice she'd heard last night caused her heart to start pumping wildly. It hadn't felt like a dream. Not at all. What's happening to me? She felt more frightened and alone than ever.

In spite of the fact that she wanted nothing more than to crawl back into bed, she got moving. She needed to get some food in her stomach and clean herself up. Then she would call Carla—and Christopher, too. She couldn't bear to be alone another minute. Hopefully one or both of them would accompany her to the funeral home, where she was due in a couple of hours for Aunt Dora's viewing.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 10

On the afternoon of the following day, the house overflowed with visitors, those who had attended the morning funeral service and the interment that followed. The number of people who had arrived and the kindness they displayed to Jasmine reminded her how well-loved her aunt had been.

Christopher had been full of concern for her upon hearing what had happened and arrived shortly after getting the call yesterday, as had Carla. Seeing how difficult the situation was proving for her, Christopher stepped in to help, arranging for a post-funeral lunch to be catered. Many of the neighbors who stopped by arrived with casseroles or dessert as well, and in no time, the dining room became a hub of activity as people filled their plates and sat down to eat. Just seeing all the food made Jasmine queasy. She spotted Christopher talking with one of the neighbors across the room and sought out Carla, who she found sitting by herself on the living room couch.

"Hey," said Carla, after Jasmine sat down next to her. "How're you doing, Jazz?"

"Okay, I guess. This just all feels so strange."

"I know. I felt the same way after my parents' funeral." Carla gave her hand a tiny squeeze. "I'm here for you, whatever you need. You know that."

Jasmine sighed, remembering the anguish Carla had gone through for months after her parents' death. "I miss Aunt Dora."

"It will get better," Carla said, "but it takes time. I still miss them. That part doesn't go away."

Jasmine's gaze drifted across the room and settled on Christopher, who was still talking to Mrs. Cantore from next door.

"He's incredibly good-looking," Carla said, "and he seems really nice."

When Jasmine didn't answer, Carla added, "And judging by the look on your face right now, I'd say you might even be in love."

Jasmine snapped back to attention at Carla's words, and gave her friend a wan smile. "Between you and me? I think I might be."

"I'm glad for you, then" Carla said, hugging her. "Maybe it will help you to deal with all of this—finally finding someone you care about, I mean."

"Maybe. But I'm still glad you're here. You're the only real friend I've ever had."

As she continued talking to Carla, Jasmine happened to glance at the doorway. A tall, middle-aged man entered the house and stopped just inside the door, looking around nervously. It took Jasmine a few seconds to recognize him, because he was wearing a suit, but the salt-and-pepper hair and spectacles jolted her memory. Her heart lurched as she recognized him. It was Tom, the stranger who had helped her on the night of her birthday when she'd encountered the man in black. She stopped talking to Carla and got up, making a bee-line for him. Who is he? And what's he doing here?

As she made her way toward him, a couple of the neighbors stopped her to talk, and by the time she worked her way to the front door, the man was nowhere to be found. She stepped outside onto the porch and spotted him getting into a car parked halfway up the street.

"Wait!" she called, but he was already inside. She watched, her curiosity growing by the second, as the car pulled away from the curb.

She didn't notice Christopher had followed her outside until he said, "Who's that guy?"

"Oh. Uh, I'm not sure. I just thought I recognized him from somewhere." This didn't seem like the right time to tell him what had happened on the night of her birthday.

Christopher looked at her closely, but only said, "Should we go back in? Some of your visitors are getting ready to leave, I think."

"Sure." She smiled up at him. "Thanks for everything you've done. I couldn't have gotten through this without you."

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Everything's going to be all right," he said, taking her hand.

She searched his face and found the reassurance she needed in his faded gray eyes. For the first time since Aunt Dora's death, Jasmine began to believe that maybe it could be true.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 11

For all of the following week, she and Christopher were inseparable. Each evening, he arrived at her door, groceries in hand. He made dinner for her, and the meals he put together came close to rivaling Aunt Dora's, which was saying something. Jasmine was secretly pleased to learn his masculinity was tempered with such a gentle and nurturing side.

As he made himself at home in her kitchen, the patter of his gentle conversation washed away the layers of sadness that had built up around her over the past few days. He talked about the law firm he'd signed on with after having been admitted to the bar last year. She soon became familiar with the many personalities in his workplace by the colorful nicknames he assigned them. His anecdotes were amusing, and he always managed to coax a laugh from her.

After dinner, they would sit together, talking or not, but always in close proximity to each other. On the nights when he stayed over, the tenderness with which he made love to her conveyed the extent of his feelings in a way words couldn't. Other nights, he would return to his apartment, but not before lying down next to her in bed until her eyes closed in sleep. In the morning, there would be a note or some other sweet reminder on her pillow for her to wake up to. He never failed to read her mood correctly, loving her in exactly the way she needed to be loved.

To her relief, the voice which had frightened her so badly the night after Aunt Dora passed away did not return. When several nights went by without further incident, she began to believe maybe she'd imagined the whole thing and decided not to bother mentioning it to Christopher.

\* \* \* \*

Just over a week had passed when she woke up one morning to Christopher's voice, rousing her. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and looked up to find him standing next to the bed, dressed for work. "What time is it?" she mumbled.

"Early. Not quite seven," he said, sitting down next to her on the bed. "Jasmine, something's come up. I've got to leave for New York later this morning with Farnsworth. He's got an irate client that needs some hand-holding, and he's asked me to go with him since I know the file."

"Oh. When will you be back?" she asked, trying not to sound as needy as she felt.

"Three days, max, promise." He looked at her with concern. "I need to know you'll be all right until then."

Jasmine smiled at him. He'd been so good to her. The last thing she wanted to do was cause him to worry on her account. "Of course I'll be fine. Not that I won't miss you, but I'm really okay. Thanks to you. I don't know what I would have done without you," she said hugging him.

He looked relieved and gave her a slow good-bye kiss. "Hopefully, you'll never have to find out," he said.

Ten minutes after he left, she found herself missing him already. Three days, she reminded herself. Then he'll be back.

She turned on the shower, then removed her mother's pendant and placed it on the dresser. She loved the exotic-looking piece and had worn it every day since her Aunt had given it to her. She stepped into the steamy shower and let the hot water roll over her, thinking about how good Christopher was for her and how close they'd become over the past week. She felt certain Aunt Dora would have approved of him. She sighed at the bittersweet thought, and wondered if she'd ever be able to disassociate the memory of her happiness at having found Christopher from that of her Aunt's death.

While shampooing her long mane, she replayed the previous night's lovemaking and daydreamed about Christopher. No one had ever been able to pleasure her the way he did, and the thought brought a satisfied smile to her lips. The way he had kissed her good-bye this morning boded well, too, and she found herself wondering what their future would hold.

Suddenly, a shadowy image of the man in black popped into her head, blocking out the pleasant images. Her happy thoughts about Christopher evaporated and, despite the steamy heat of the shower, she shivered. Trembling, she finished rinsing her hair and left the shower, doing her best to dispel the anxiety that had suddenly come over her.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 12

A ribbon of mist danced along the moonbeam that fell across Jasmine's sleeping form. Ahriman's spirit glided around the room and hovered over the bed, studying her as she slept. He had seduced many mortal women in the course of his existence, and had sought out the most exquisite among them, but even he was captivated by the stunning little goddess who slumbered beneath his gaze. Here was perfection. He admired the way the moon's light turned her tresses into luminous shades of gold and how it made her moist, full mouth sparkle. Some long-forgotten emotion seemed to awaken in him as he regarded Jasmine in repose. Softly, he came to rest next to her on the bed.

"Jasmine." He heard her sigh in her sleep as he converged around her, enveloping her. "My queen ... my creation."

She stirred, and Ahriman noticed the way the moonlight transformed her skin to alabaster and the toes of her delicate feet into pearls. Desire surged in him. He whispered close to her ear as she slept. "How the sight of you consumes me. I long to feel your creamy skin against my own, to taste your mouth and smell your perfumed hair. You are mine, although you know it not."

She sighed softly once more as his words penetrated her dream.

Ahriman was unable to resist touching her golden tresses, fanned out across the pillow. He gently stroked her hair, combing it with his fingers, then moved along the delicate curve of her neck to her shoulder. Drifting beneath the coverlet, he travelled the length of her body, taking in her sweet scent. He memorized every detail of her, the curve of her hip, her tiny waist and small round breasts, her sculpted arms, the fingers of her slender hand. He wrapped himself around her, loath to release her and the sensations she aroused in him. But release her he would, for tonight at least. His ability to glamour her would be strongest at the full moon.

"Tomorrow, when the moon is round and I am once again flesh and blood, I will return to claim you. For now, sleep my beauty. And dream of me."

\* \* \* \*

Open your eyes!

Jasmine was startled out of sleep by the voice of the woman who had taken up residence in her head. She sat bolt upright, breathing heavily. She'd been dreaming about Christopher, she thought, but the remnants of the mildly erotic dream evaporated the moment the imperative voice had sounded.

The moonlight pouring in from the window seemed to have a strange, foggy quality. She held her breath, waiting to see if the voice would speak again. When it did, it uttered only a single word.

Beware.

From the dim recess of her consciousness, a chorus of wails sounded.

God, what's happening to me? Am I losing my mind? She rubbed at her eyes. When she opened them again, the moonlight had returned to normal, the mistiness

gone. Through her window, in the night sky, an almost full moon was made ghostly by drifting clouds.

She reached over and switched on the lamp next to her bed. Everything looked in its usual place, but the room was infused with a rich scent she couldn't place, a spicy fragrance with an underlying sweet smell. She found the scent strangely soothing, even though she knew it had no business being in her room. She waited to see whether anything else would happen, or if the voice would speak again.

"Tell me who you are. What do you want?" she asked of the empty room, but the voice remained silent.

Now that she'd heard it a second time, Jasmine was convinced she'd not been speaking to herself. It crossed her mind that Aunt Dora might be trying to communicate with her from beyond the grave. Her aunt had tried to utter a warning to her on the night she died, and the voice had also been trying to warn her about something. But that did not ring true. The woman's voice bore a heavy accent, one she still could not place. She decided it could not be Aunt Dora. She was no expert on ghosts, but she doubted Aunt Dora had developed a foreign accent after death. It also occurred to her that whatever or whoever was trying to communicate with her might not be evil-intentioned, otherwise, why the warning? And what, exactly, was she supposed to be in danger of?

Unanswered questions rolled around in her head. She tossed and turned for the rest of the night and watched the sun come up. Around seven, she got up to shower and dress and then called Carla.

"Did I wake you?" she asked.

"No, I was up. Is everything all right?"

"I don't know," said Jasmine. "I need to ask you something."

"Ask."

"I was just wondering ... after your parents died, did you ever, well, hear voices or anything?"

"What do you mean? Like my mom and dad talking to me? Are you talking about ghosts?"

"I don't know. It's just ... I heard something last night, and not for the first time. A woman's voice, but it sounded foreign, not like Aunt Dora at all. And it seemed to be trying to warn me about something."

"Well, I can't say I ever experienced anything like that after my parents passed on. But..."

"What?"

"I don't know, things just seemed really strange after they died and there were a couple of times I felt like I was losing it. Grief can cause strange behavior. Trust me, I know."

Jasmine sighed. "I suppose you're right. Carla?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for listening."

"S'okay. Anytime you need to talk, I'm here."

\* \* \* \*

On her way to a lecture at the university later that day, Jasmine wandered in a daze, unable to put a name to the peculiar malaise she felt. It was more than just being short on sleep. Her thoughts were muddy, her mind clouded with confusion. The voice from last night still weighed heavily on her mind, and she'd not been able to shake off a growing sense of apprehension. The rich, unfamiliar scent still lingering in her room this morning was another mystery she'd not been able to unravel.

For the tenth time, she found herself wishing Christopher was here. As if in answer to her thought, her cellphone went off, startling her back into reality. Christopher's number popped up on the call display. She smiled and quickly answered.

"Miss me?" he asked.

"No more than usual, which is all the time now."

"I can't wait to get back to you. Farnsworth is driving me batty. How are you?"

She hesitated, wondering whether to tell him about last night. But he was hundreds of miles away. She knew she would sound delusional if she tried to explain it over the phone.

"Hello ... are you still there?"

"Um-hmm, sorry, I was just trying to get better reception," she said absently.

"Are you all right, Jasmine?"

She caught the concern in his voice and did her best to reassure him. "Sure, of course. I just miss you. That's all."

"I'll be back in two more days, and then we'll make up for lost time," he told her. "Jasmine?"

"Yes?"

"I love you. Being away from you has made me realize just how much."

It was the first time he had spoken the words out loud, and her heart soared. "I love you too, Christopher. Hurry back."

After saying good-bye to him, she felt a little better. When Christopher returned, she would try to explain to him about the voice. Maybe he could help her make sense of it. In the meantime, she thought it might be a good idea to sleep downstairs on the chaise-lounge tonight instead of her bedroom. The thought of waking up to that voice again gave her chills and, so far, her bedroom was the only place she'd heard it.

To cheer herself up, she replayed the sound Christopher's voice, telling her he loved her. She felt strongly that being with him would finally give her the sense of belonging she had looked for all of her life. As she walked, she found herself hoping Christopher wanted children. The unexpected thought sent tiny butterflies

uttering against her stomach, and she reminded herself that this was what it felt like to be a woman in love.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 13

At ten-thirty that night, wearing her softest cotton pajamas, carrying a velvet throw and one of the down pillows from her bedroom with her, Jasmine prepared a makeshift bed on the antique chaise in the living room. The wood trimmed chaise-lounge, covered in rich burgundy damask, was where Aunt Dora used to retreat when she couldn't sleep. Jasmine missed her aunt more than ever, and the fact that many of Aunt Dora's sleepless nights in this same room had been on Jasmine's account did nothing to lift her spirits.

She moved to the window to draw the heavy, yellow silk curtains. It was full dark and, with the lamp on, she would be on display to anyone walking along the sidewalk in front of the house. Just before she yanked the drapes closed, she could have sworn she saw something moving beneath the shadow of the large black walnut tree close to her house.

She ran to turn out the lamp so she could peek out the window in anonymity. Her vantage point provided a clear view of most of the street, but the low branches of the trees shrouded parts of the walkway in darkness. She waited. A moment later, something darted from the shadows, and Jasmine shrieked. When she realized her imagined stalker had been nothing more than a cat, she exhaled in relief. The feline scrambled up the rough bark of the tree trunk. In the next instant, she heard its cry of attack, followed by the screeching of an injured bird. The leaves in the low branches of the tree rustled violently as the hunter snatched its prey. The sound made by the dying bird was pitiful, and Jasmine quickly closed the curtains tight.

Witnessing the cat's attack on the helpless bird left her unsettled. It felt like a bad omen, a warning of some pending misfortune. Stop scaring yourself. Turning the table lamp back on and settling herself on the chaise, she closed her eyes, willing herself to go to sleep before her imagination got the better of her.

\* \* \* \*

Dizziness rolled over her as she floated up through layers of sleep to consciousness, a sensation of riding on the waves of a tumultuous sea. She opened her eyes to utter blackness. The lamp she'd turned on earlier was no longer lit. In the darkness, something caressed her cheek. She screamed, or tried to, but found herself in the grip of a strange lethargy, as if she'd been drugged. Her movements as she tried to sit up were sluggish and slow, like moving underwater. Wake up, you're dreaming. But when she went sprawling while trying to get to her feet and hit her chin on the ground, the pain was real enough. This was no dream, she realized with a shock.

She could see nothing in the pitch black room, but the air was infused with the same spicy-sweet scent from the night before. The sound of someone breathing close by reached her, and she froze. She was not alone in the dark room.

Her heart thudded madly, but she remained perfectly still, sprawled face-down on the floor. The sense of danger emanating from whatever hid in the darkness lay heavily in the air, palpable. She heard the rustling sound of movement and, in the next instant, she was lifted off the ground by strong arms. She tried to struggle, but that odd feeling was on her again, so she barely managed to lift her arm before it fell back. After being gently deposited back on the chaise-lounge, she heard—no, felt—the thing's heart, beating alongside her own racing pulse. She barely had time to absorb this fact when the beeswax candles on the mantle of the room's fireplace suddenly ignited of their own accord. Jasmine gasped.

By the light of the glowing candles, she saw him. The man who had so terrified her on the night of her birthday, the man in black, was in the room with her. He stood still as a statue, regarding her, and Jasmine's heart exploded in terror.

Do not fear me. I mean you no harm.

Jasmine heard him as plainly as if he had spoken, although his lips had not moved.

Candlelight shimmered over his imposing form and in his raven hair. He stood close enough that she could see the handsome features of his face clearly, as well as the look of deep desire that crossed his face as he studied her. His eyes were indeed black as she had sensed on the night she'd first seen him, but the irises were ringed with gold, the most extraordinary eyes she'd ever seen. Unlike the first time she'd seen him, his face held no hint of maliciousness now. Looking into his eyes caused her to swoon. She was drowning in them, and struggled to regain control of herself. His intoxicating scent filled the air, his charismatic presence kept her spellbound. The image of a dying bird in the jaws of a feline flashed across her mind, just as the voice of the woman reared its head, crying out a warning. Run. Remove yourself from his presence. Go now.

Hearing the voice again cut through some of the lethargy she felt, and Jasmine almost managed to move from the couch when the man sent another thought to her, paralyzing her.

Remain where you are. There are matters of which we must speak.

Fear wormed its way into her again, yet she could not seem to help herself from sitting back down in response to his command.

You may use your thoughts to converse with me. I can hear them, just as I know you can hear mine.

She tried to tear her gaze from his hypnotic eyes, but found herself unable to. The woman's voice inside her head cried out again, but it seemed far away, barely audible this time.

She directed a thought to him. Who are you? What do you want from me?

I am Ahriman.

He moved toward her.

Stay away.

He continued his approach.

She struggled to try to rouse herself from the stupor, but managed to move only a fraction before he reached her. Once again, the moment he touched her, she could hear the blood racing through his veins, could feel his heart beating as if it was her own.

Do you not sense it? We are the same, you and I. Do not be afraid, my little one. All is as it should be.

His thoughts enticed her like the song of a siren.

Instinctively, she knew whatever was sitting next to her was not entirely human. Yet she felt a connection to him, as surely as she'd always known she was not the same



as other people. The thought shocked her causing her mind to form a question. What are you?

He brought his hand to her face and stroked it gently. Instead of cringing from him, she found herself moving toward his touch, hungry for it beyond belief.

Does it matter? Do you not feel the same need for me that I crave from you?

He took his hand away. Instantly, sorrow filled her at the loss of his touch.

It is not within your comprehension to grasp the nature of my origin. At one time, I roamed the hidden realm as a spirit, an incubus, but I am much more than that now. I am a spirit who has learned to exist as flesh and blood, able to travel between both worlds as I please. I am the first of my kind.

Part of her recoiled in horror, but another part was even more powerfully drawn to him, as a strange paradox of repulsion and desire rose up inside her. Why she felt compelled to the entity beside her, this unnatural being, she did not know.

He snatched the thought from her mind. You are drawn to me because you are akin to me. We share certain traits. Suffice it to say you are, in part, a succubus. The other part of you is mortal. 'Cambion' is, I believe, the name which humans assign to those who are like you.

Disbelief washed over her. A succubus? What madness was this? Let this be a dream, she prayed, hoping against hope that none of this was actually happening.

You are not dreaming. I am as real as you. And I have waited centuries for this moment to arrive. You belong at my side, Jasmine. Although you know it not, you have been travelling toward me all your life. Accept me, for it is your destiny to be with me.

He reached for her, gently pulling her head toward his and covering her mouth with his own. His scent surrounded her, acting like an aphrodisiac on her heightened senses. The moment she tasted the ambrosia of his lips and felt his hands on her body, she knew all was lost. His lightest touch ignited a passion so strong it frightened her.

As he began to move his powerful body over her own, she responded instinctively, like an animal carrying out a mating ritual hardwired into her being. She felt helpless, unable to stop herself from responding to his advances. Within minutes, she surrendered completely to him, a surrender that went beyond the physical into the spiritual the moment he entered her. As he took her, body and soul, she exploded in passion.

\* \* \* \*

Ahriman watched Jasmine as she slept beside him, guarding her jealously, like a wolf protecting its kill. His exquisite creation, this halfling, would be the key to his immortality in the physical world.

She had asked him what he was, and he'd told her, in part. His history, however, was long and complicated, and one he had never shared with another living being.

As Jasmine slept beside him, Ahriman evoked the few memories remaining to him of his beginning, his mortal life in ancient Persia. His was an old soul, and his recollection of his human existence had dimmed, as first centuries and then millennia passed. The memories he did retain were fragmented. He could still recall the brilliant white sands and hot, dry climate of his ancestral home, and he had a vague recollection of his abode—a stone dwelling built around a shady courtyard. Associated with that were images of richly furnished rooms, where thick carpets covered the floor and tables were set with silver plates and golden goblets. He remembered, too, his sleek and muscular steed, draped in armor, upon which he had ridden into battle. The name of the Persian King under whom he served was Cyrus, he recalled, but he had long since forgotten the man's face. Nor could he any longer summon the faces of the many wives he had taken during his human lifetime, or those of the countless other women he had defiled. Ahriman could no longer even remember the manner of his corporeal death, only the dismal realm he had entered into afterward, where his soul had languished in darkness for over a thousand years.

He shook the memory of those dark centuries off. Things were much different now. For the past millennia, Ahriman had imposed his rule over the inhabitants of the dark realm, and his power remained undisputed. For it was he who had uncovered the greatest mystery of the hidden world, he who had discovered the portal—the doorway between the hidden realm and the physical plane. The knowledge of the location of the portal remained his and his alone. His ability to travel as a spirit between the two worlds at will had rendered him powerful.

It was not until six centuries ago, however, that his power had become absolute. It was then Ahriman had discovered, quite by accident, how to incarnate while in the physical plane.

On the occasion of his first incarnation early in the fourteenth century, his spirit had streaked through the hidden portal, about to embark on an excursion into the world of mortals, only to collide head-on with a man of nobility, a Count in the land known then as Germania. The unlucky nobleman had been engaged in rutting with a servant girl as Ahriman made his entry. In a twist of fate, the man's body and soul had merged with Ahriman's spirit at the exact moment of release. The unfortunate Count died instantly. Since that time, though, when Ahriman ventured into the physical plane, he found he could materialize, albeit for mere seconds at first, gradually building to short periods lasting minutes.

Recognizing that an enormous gift had been bestowed on him, he had sought to utilize his new ability to incarnate at every opportunity. In following his compulsion to mate with mortal women, Ahriman had ended up courting disaster. It was in the year eighteen twelve, by mortal counting, that he became obsessed with a woman, returning to her again and again in human form. But the woman had betrayed him. She'd paid the price for her betrayal, but so had he. He'd nearly been destroyed, his spirit remaining dormant for almost two centuries, trapped inside the portal.

After that close call, whatever tatters of human sentiment he'd clung to ceased to exist. For the past two decades, since his awakening in Morocco, he remained emotionally detached in his seduction of females.

Yes, he had become god-like; he commanded many dark souls, both in the hidden realm and in the physical world. But Ahriman's ambitions were large. One burning desire remained to be fulfilled. He longed to achieve immortality in the physical plane, incarnate, with his powers intact. And for that, he needed Jasmine.

To be sure, there were other halflings who walked among mortals, the product of his successful attempts to breed with mortal women. Before he'd become dormant, he managed to produce seven children, all male. His offspring tended to live extremely long lives. Only three of the original seven remained, he'd learned upon his awakening in the twentieth century. All three were now over two centuries old. Seven more offspring had been born since his awakening in the twentieth century.

But Jasmine was the only halfling capable of giving him what he needed. She was, for reasons unknown to him, the only female Cambion to have survived birth. The only one with whom he could breed. And breeding, he reasoned, was the key to his attaining immortality.

The mere act of fornicating with a female Cambion had already resulted in increased longevity of his physical state. Whereas in the past, he'd only been able to sustain his physicality for mere minutes, almost five hours had passed since his joining with Jasmine, and still he remained flesh and blood. Producing a child with this halfling, a physical extension of not only his human form, but his spirit, would all but ensure he could choose to remain in the mortal world for as long as he wanted. Forever.

The ramifications were staggering. Inbreeding would be required, but eventually, he would be able to repopulate the earth with a new race, one over which he, of course, would preside. He would truly become a god, the creator of a new life form, one to be worshipped.



Ahriman ran his fingers through Jasmine's golden curls. His seed had been planted in her during their coupling tonight. Thinking about the powerful offspring their union would produce filled him with euphoria. He had no doubt his new race would be superior to anything that had walked the earth up until now. Their children would be endowed with power and beauty, a heady combination for mortals, which would aid his offspring in their quick rise to prominence. And they would be made more powerful still by their ability to exist for centuries. Ahriman himself would become an immortal god. And he would have an eternity within which to satisfy his every dark desire.

He left Jasmine to her slumber. His body gave off none of the warnings that signaled imminent disembodiment, and he felt certain he would be able to remain incarnate for the entire night, thanks to their intense sexual encounter.

He rose and moved quietly about the house, delighting in his corporeal senses and the accompanying sensations that had lain dormant for so long. How he had missed the mortal world and its transient pleasures. He meandered through the bedrooms and then descended to the main level of the house, getting reacquainted with his senses, with his humanness. It wasn't until he found himself in the kitchen, where he spotted a bowl of fruit, that he realized the rumbling in his midsection represented hunger. He had completely forgotten what it felt like to require nourishment, and found the sensation slightly alarming.

He devoured several pears, savoring the russet color and rough texture of the skin almost as much as the sweet pulp as it slid down his throat. The familiar taste elicited a clear memory of his home in Persia, and the pear and pomegranate trees that shaded the courtyard. He discovered other delights for his awakened sense of taste—a type of cheese he was unfamiliar with, but which he consumed hungrily, and a crusty bread with bits of black olive and fennel baked into it. The texture was different than he remembered, not as coarse, but tasty nonetheless. With his appetite somewhat under control, he returned to Jasmine. As he walked, he admired the way the muscles in his legs contracted and expanded, delighting in each precise movement of his exquisite mortal body.

He looked down upon his slumbering queen, knowing he would need to take careful steps to protect Jasmine, to bond with her and ensure her loyalty to him. He brushed his cheek along the softness of her neck, breathing in her unique scent, a scent unlike any other. It was the scent of immortality, and power.

Just before dawn, she stirred beside him and slowly opened her eyes. Ahriman could feel his state altering, and knew he had only moments left before his transformation back to spirit took place. He wasted no time in pressing his question on her.

I must leave now, but when night falls, I will return to you. Tell me, for I must know. Will you take your place with me? Will you come to me of your own accord?

Jasmine regarded him with enraptured eyes. Yes ... return to me. I will be yours, she murmured.

Satisfied that she was safely ensnared in the web of sensuality he had woven, he watched her eyes close again in sleep. We shall see. He had been betrayed once before. It had resulted in his dormancy for over two hundred years. He had no intention of allowing anything similar to happen again. He would prefer Jasmine to be a willing accomplice in his plan. If not, he had other ways of ensuring her compliance.

Moments later, he began to disembody, stretching first into layers of fine mist that slowly dissolved, until no trace of him remained.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 14

When Jasmine opened her eyes, Ahriman was gone. She was naked under the velvet throw cover, disoriented, but wrapped up in a delicious bliss, her thoughts consumed by the powerful shaman who had arrived to claim her. Ahriman. The room was still infused with his heady scent. She whispered his name out loud, touching her lips, remembering the taste of him.

Dragging the coverlet along behind her, she wandered slowly upstairs. She had no desire to shake off the obsessive emotions consuming her. Stretching out across her bed, she lost herself in the memory of their encounter.

It was the incessant ringing of the telephone, over an hour later, that finally penetrated her dream-like trance and brought her back to reality. She had not thought of Christopher at all, not until she glanced at the phone and saw his number pop up.

Guilt pierced the foggy veil hanging over her thoughts, hitting her like a sledgehammer. Christopher—how could she have betrayed him so easily? She did not answer the ringing phone. She needed to think, but her mind was already clouding over again with thoughts of Ahriman, carrying her away from unpleasant reality. She unplugged the telephone, feeling a great need to sleep. She would deal with everything later.

\* \* \* \*

It was early evening when she next awoke, feeling a bit more clear-headed. The events of the night before had lost the dream-like quality of earlier, but remained powerfully entrenched in her consciousness. Could she have been dreaming, she wondered? Aside from the intoxicating scent which still permeated the air, what proof did she have that Ahriman really existed, and that he was what he claimed to be? The bodily fluids on the inside of her thigh confirmed she'd indeed had sex with someone. But a spirit turned flesh? She decided she needed further evidence before she accepted that to be the truth.

She found a strand of long black hair on the coverlet. She moved around the house, looking for more clues. In the kitchen, she found some partially eaten fruit and breadcrumbs and, then, in the living room, she saw something that gave her pause. On the floor next to the chaise-lounge, she spotted a small patch of darkish gel. Crouching down, she touched her fingertips to the substance lightly. It was thick, and viscous, and gave off more of the same scent which still permeated the room—Ahriman's scent. She rolled the jelly-like substance between her fingertips, repelled by the gooey texture and the greenish-black color of it. She had no idea what to make of it. Then she remembered something she'd seen on TV, a documentary. Spirits, it had pointed out, created ectoplasm when materializing and dematerializing. Could that be what this was? The thought frightened her, but it rang true. She was able to come up with no other explanation for the dark matter.

After she cleaned the floor, she returned upstairs, where she quickly showered and dressed. Back downstairs in the kitchen, she put on a pot of coffee. She had a lot to think about and, she knew, a decision to make.

Jasmine sat at the kitchen table and lit a smoke. She sipped absently from the steaming mug of black coffee in her hand. Somehow, she had to try to incorporate into her reality what had happened.

Ahriman, she was now convinced, was what he claimed to be—a spirit that could turn to flesh. She also could not deny her connection to him. They could read each other's minds, for one thing. And she had felt his heart beating as if in her own body, had sensed the blood coursing through his veins. Both physically and mentally, she seemed joined to him. If she was what he said she was, a halfling, it raised many questions. Had her mother mated with an incubus, or herself been a succubus? It sounded too incredible, but how else could she have come into being? Having no memory of her mother, and with Aunt Dora gone, there was no one left who might be able to shed some light on the circumstances of her existence. She had grown up believing she was as human as everyone else, but it had all been a lie. She allowed the knowledge to settle into her. She was a halfling, a Cambion. That knowledge went far toward explaining the sense of alienation she had always suffered with.

But where did all this leave her? Never, not even with Christopher, had she experienced anything like the passion that had consumed her last night with Ahriman. By

Whatever means, he had enraptured her with a single look. She knew she would be incapable of resisting him when he returned. That much had become apparent last night. Yet, she argued with herself, what would she be getting into with this being who called himself Ahriman? Certainly, he was powerful. And he had told her their union was preordained. Part of her found the prospect of entering his world thrilling beyond imagination, but another part of her was afraid.

She stubbed out her cigarette and lit another, thinking about all the times she had felt out of her element, the disconnectedness to other people she had always experienced. But she remembered Aunt Dora, too, who had tried so hard to reach her and whose life had been taken, just as Jasmine had begun to love her. And Christopher. For the first time in her life, she had fallen in love, and that was real, too. Part of her did not want to lose what she had found with him. Ahriman represented the unknown within herself needing to be discovered, Christopher the solid foundation in a world that had, up until she'd met him, seemed foreign and confusing. Was being with Ahriman worth leaving the only world she had ever known behind?

Thinking about Christopher filled her with sadness. She would never be able to explain to him what had happened, or what Ahriman had told her about her true nature, for that matter. Neither would he be able to understand what she had experienced with Ahriman last night. If she tried to hold on to Christopher, they would only end up being a burden to each other.

And there was another, more important, consideration. During the time she had spent with Ahriman, she had sensed how powerful a being he was. Having claimed her as his own, who knew what he would be capable of if he found out about her attachment to Christopher? She might only end up placing him in danger. The thought appalled her. No, the only way to make sure Christopher would be all right would be to sever her connection with him. Completely.

It was with a heavy heart, then, that she picked up her ringing cellphone an hour later to see Christopher's number displayed.

Might as well get it over with. A clean cut is best.

"Jasmine?"

"Christopher..."

"I've been calling all day, I was getting worried. I'm in a meeting, but stepped out to call you. Is everything all right?"

Her throat seized up. She felt unable to get the words out.

"Jasmine? What's wrong?"

She braced herself, knowing how cruel the blow she was about to deliver to him would sound. "Christopher, I've been doing some thinking while you've been away." She paused for a second and then carried on. "I just don't think it's going to work out between us. I'm sorry."

The silence on the other end stretched out forever. She waited.

"What's happened to change your mind?" he asked, finally.

She didn't answer, unsure of what to say.

"Is there someone else?" he asked her.

She paused again before delivering the final blow, knowing he would hate her for it. "No," she said, "it's nothing like that. I just don't love you, Christopher. I'm sorry."

She waited, but when he said nothing else, she replaced the receiver gently, knowing full well what she had just thrown away.

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, she sat at the kitchen table, staring into oblivion and trying to deduce what would happen next. Every time she thought about Ahriman, her feelings ran out of control. Anticipation and desire collided with a fear of the unknown territory she was about to enter with him. He had assured her he would return tonight, and she became tremulous at the thought of being with him again. Mixed into all of this was the nagging pain of having let Christopher go. Had she acted too quickly? What if Ahriman did not return as he had promised? The thought sent dismal emotion running through her. If Ahriman did not return, she had thrown Christopher's love away for nothing.

With her thoughts running off in all directions, it was no wonder she practically jumped out of the chair when the front doorbell sounded.

Now what?

She peeked out from behind the curtain covering the top half of the door, and took a step back in surprise when she recognized the caller. Tom, the man who had helped her on the night she had first seen Ahriman, stood on her doorstep.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 15

Jasmine's thoughts raced as she tried to decide whether to open the door. The man had appeared to be protecting her from Ahriman on the night of her birthday, yet last night she had embraced the very thing he had been trying to save her from. Who was this man? Why had he shown up at the house after Aunt Dora's funeral? And what did he want from her?

Her curiosity finally won out, and she opened the door. They stared at each other. He spoke first.

"Hello, Jasmine." His expression was serious.

"Tom, isn't it?"

"Yes. Tom Janzen."

"Who are you, Mr. Janzen? I mean, I remember you, and I saw you after Aunt Dora's funeral, but ... Why are you here?"

As he continued to scrutinize her, he said, "I think we need to talk. May I come in?"

She hesitated, then opened the door all the way to let him in.

When they were seated across from each other in the living room with coffee in front of them, she turned to him and said, "Maybe you better tell me what this is about,

Mr. Janzen."

"Call me Tom. And to tell you the truth, I'm not quite sure where to begin."

"You could start by explaining why you were following me that night. My friend told me you asked where I'd gone. It was no accident, my running into you, was it?"

"No. No, it wasn't. Still, I..." He ran a hand through his hair, as if at a loss for words.

Jasmine prompted him. "You were at the house after my Aunt Dora's funeral too. I saw you, but you left before I got a chance to talk to you."

"Yes. I wanted to speak with you, but after I got here, I realized it wasn't the right time and left. I knew your aunt well, Jasmine. Even though we had a falling out many years ago, I always thought her a fine person, and I was sorry to learn she'd passed away."

Jasmine blinked in surprise. "You knew Aunt Dora?"

He nodded. "Not nearly as well as I knew your mother, though."

Jasmine was floored. "My mother?"

"Lilli, yes. You see, before she married Charlie, I was ... Well, I was in love with her, to state it plainly. And forgive me for staring at you before. It's just you look so much like her, it's unnerving."

Jasmine wasn't sure what to make of the man, but she got the distinct feeling he had something important to say. She pressed a thought on him. What's going on, Mr. Janzen—Tom?

He jumped back in his seat, almost spilling his coffee, and gave her a startled look. "Did you just do something?"

Jasmine stared steadily at him. "Yes. Now, what is it you want to tell me?" she asked, hoping she'd shaken him up a little, at least enough to get him to start talking.

He shot her a look, as if to say she'd just confirmed a suspicion.

"All right, then," he said. "To put it simply, I think you might be in serious danger."

She studied him, remembering the sense of calm she had felt that night when he placed his arm on her shoulder. The fact that he had just repeated the same warning given to her by Aunt Dora before she died and by the strange voice she'd heard was not lost on her either. "Tell me," she said.

He took a deep breath and began.

"As I said, I was in love with your mother, before she met Charlie. When he came along, there was no question but that I'd lost her. Before the year was out, they were married. It wasn't easy for me. I loved your mother very much. When I heard Charlie had died during a trip he and your mother took to Morocco, I thought about going to her, but then I learned she was pregnant. I thought it might be best to wait—it might be too difficult for her if I tried to re-enter her life before she had a chance to adjust to her new circumstances."

Jasmine nodded and motioned for him to continue.

"By the time your mother came to me for help, she was nearing the end of her pregnancy. She was in bad shape, to put it mildly. I thought..."

...he thinks something terrible has happened to her.

"Lilli ... come inside."

When she's settled in the living room, he says, "Tell me what's wrong."

Lilli's face becomes calmer when she hears his words. Then she turns those haunted eyes on him and says, "Do you believe in evil spirits, Tom? Because I think a really bad one is after me."

She tells him everything, from the beginning. The trip to Marrakesh. Charlie's purchase of the pendant, and what happened in the riad on the night Charlie died. She tells him about the entity that arrived to seduce her, the one that killed Charlie. She tells him about throwing away the pendant, the bad vibrations she felt coming from it. She even hands him a small book in which she's made a drawing of the pendant, which she's convinced is responsible for the misfortune that has befallen her. The book contains other scribbled entries. She continues with her shocking story, telling him about the spirits plaguing her and how they torment her.

Then she tells him something that rocks him to the core.

"I don't think this baby is Charlie's, Tom. I think it's ... his. The one that raped me. And I think he's coming back for it."

When she's done, she turns her jade eyes on him, pleading silently for his help.

"You have to understand, Jasmine, I'm a doctor. I knew your mother had just gone through a very stressful time and I—God help me, I didn't believe her. I was convinced she'd had a breakdown caused by the stress of everything that had happened. I'd heard of similar cases and felt she was losing touch with reality. I called a psychiatrist, a friend of mine, and made an appointment for her for the next day, telling her I would accompany her myself. I thought I was doing the right thing, getting her the help she needed. Afterward, she just looked at me. I could tell it wasn't what she wanted to hear. Then she left, telling me she'd see me the next day. As it turned out, I never saw her again. She died that same night."

He stopped at this point. Jasmine could tell he was trying hard to pull himself together. But she was too stunned to offer him any comfort. She looked at the pendant hanging from her neck and knew it was the same one her mother had spoken to him about, the one her mother had been wearing in the picture. The one Aunt Dora had given her on the night of her birthday.

"Did Aunt Dora know about any of this?" Jasmine asked, confused and shocked by what he had told her.

"I tried to talk to her after Lilli died, after I checked the records and found there were marks on Lilli's body no one seemed able to explain. I still wasn't convinced everything Lilli told me was true, but I just couldn't believe she would try to hurt herself, that she would put her unborn child at risk. She wasn't like that. I wanted Dora to know what Lilli had said to me. She was afraid something was after her, something that might be a danger to you, but I didn't get very far. Dora..."

...she looks at him like he is a monster. "Why are you doing this? What right do you have coming here, spewing this garbage to me about Lilli. Lilli had a difficult time coping with what happened to her, but she wasn't crazy, Tom. You of all people should know that. There was a time I thought you loved her," she says with reproach, holding Lilli's baby close to her bosom. "Why are you tarnishing Lilli's memory by spreading these lies about her?"

He looks at her, thinking he should have waited until her grief had abated before coming to her with this. "Dora. I did love her. I still do. That's why I'm here. She was terrified when she came to me. I was as shocked by what she told me as you are now. I didn't believe her. I thought she needed medical attention and tried to arrange it for her. But when I found out about the marks on her body after she died, I began to wonder if there wasn't something to what she was trying to tell me. What if the baby's in danger? What if—"

"That's when she snapped. Dora threw me out and told me never to come back. She said if I ever went anywhere near you she'd call the police. We never spoke again."

Jasmine looked at him. "But you kept track of me, didn't you?"

He nodded. "I thought it's what Lilli would have wanted me to do. Then, one day a couple of weeks ago, I saw a patient who reminded me of your mother. I hadn't checked on you for a while, and something told me to show up at your place that night, to make sure everything was still all right. I saw you getting into a taxi as you left the house and noticed you were wearing that." He gestured toward the pendant around her neck. "I knew something was wrong. Lilli swore she threw the pendant away in Morocco. She described it to me in detail and showed me a drawing of it, but I couldn't be sure it was the same one you were wearing without getting a closer look, so I followed you." He paused, and then asked, "Where did you get the pendant, Jasmine?"

"Aunt Dora gave it to me on the night of my birthday," she replied slowly, her voice barely a whisper.

Now it was his turn to look shocked.

"Tom, did you tell Aunt Dora about the pendant?"

After a long silence, he said, "No. I remember my entire conversation with Dora. I never got that far. She told me to leave before I had a chance to mention it. I can't imagine how she came to have it."

They looked at each other, neither of them speaking. Then a terrible thought occurred to Jasmine.

"The man, or whatever he was, that my mother said raped her. You think he was the man we saw that night, the one you were trying to protect me from?"

He pulled something from his jacket pocket, a small book. He flipped quickly through it and handed it to her, opened to a page near the front. "Judge for yourself. She wrote some of it down. At the time, it read like something out of a bad movie, but when I saw him, I knew ... I just knew."

Jasmine's stomach did a slow turn and her heart felt as if it were suspended from the back of her throat as she read the passage from the open book, written in her mother's hand.

I thought an angel had appeared to me when I first saw him. His features were too perfect, too beautiful to be human. His hair was long and black, and fell like silk to his shoulders. He was tall, his chest and arms muscular. He had the most startling eyes, blacker than black, and ringed in gold. They seemed to radiate heat, an invisible fire that ran through me, drawing me to him. His physical beauty took my breath away, but I know now it was nothing more than a clever disguise for the evil that hid beneath. He raped me, even though he didn't use physical force to do it. Whatever spell he cast on me did not break until he disappeared into thin air afterward.

The enormity of what she had just learned dropped on Jasmine like an anvil. She was indeed the product of a union between a mortal and an incubus. Ahriman had fathered her.

Tom spoke again. "Pretty fair description of the man we saw, wouldn't you say? And he felt, well, dangerous, for lack of a better word. That's why I had to come. If that man, or whatever the hell he is, tries to approach you again, I want you to call me. Right away. I need your promise on this, Jasmine."

She felt the blood drain from her face. Her hand seemed disembodied from the rest of her as she held out the diary to return it to Tom.

"No, that belongs to you. Read it. There are other things in there you might need to know." He walked over to her and pressed a business card into her palm.

"My home address and numbers are all listed there. Call me any time, day or night, even if you only need to talk. I know you need some time to digest all of this, but promise me you'll call if you see anyone who looks even remotely suspicious. I don't live far from here. I can get to you in five minutes."

Jasmine's head was spinning. She opened her mouth, about to tell him everything, and then closed it again, unable to speak the terrible truth about what she'd done. She needed time to process what she had learned, and to think about what to do next.

Before he left, he turned to her and said, "You should get rid of that necklace. I don't know how Dora came to have it, but your mother wouldn't want it near you, I'm sure." He added, "I know how crazy this all sounds. But don't let that stop you from taking what I've told you seriously. I made a mistake with your mother a long time ago, and I've never forgiven myself for it. I owe it to her to be here for you. And I will be."

After she shut the door behind him, Jasmine hurried upstairs and found Aunt Dora's security box in her bedroom closet. She removed the pendant, not wanting it near her another minute, and locked it inside. It was two in the afternoon. Ahriman had told her he would return tonight. She had to figure out what to do before then, but first she needed to finish reading what her mother had written. Grabbing her purse, and her mother's diary, she left the house. Although Ahriman had told her he would return at night, who was to say he would not come back sooner? She decided to take no chances. Once outside, she ran as far as Bayshore, where she knew plenty of people would be around, walking, cycling or jogging, and sat on one of the benches facing the ocean on the busy sidewalk. With a sense of rising dread, she picked up the small diary to read the rest of what her mother had written. Her hands shook as she opened the book to the first page.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 16

The hastily scribbled notes comprised only eleven pages. Not much, but enough to provide Jasmine with a peek into the soul of the woman who had given birth to her and whose absence she had felt so keenly all her life. By the time she got to the blank pages following the last entry, the extent to which her mother had been terrorized during her last days on earth was heartbreakingly clear. And Jasmine knew exactly who had been responsible for it.

The pencil sketch her mother had made of the pendant on the second page was surprisingly accurate, right down to the small symbols on the two tiny coins suspended from the bottom. The notation below the sketch contained a shred of hope:

The more I think about what happened, the more I'm sure it was the pendant that drew him to me. The shopkeeper who sold it to us said it was rumored to have been cursed. Charlie thought it was superstitious nonsense, but I should have trusted my intuition. Maybe he'd still be alive if I had ... Thank God I threw the disgusting thing away before returning home. I don't think it can harm me now.

A chill ran through her as she read the words. Whether or not the pendant had been cursed, it was definitely evil. It was, Jasmine now suspected, the gateway through which Ahriman entered the mortal world. Somehow, Ahriman had found a way to return the pendant to her mother after she'd thrown it away in Morocco. Snippets of what her mother had written jumped out at her.

He commands many spirits on earth, the souls of evil men and women that remain earthbound. I can't see them, but I can hear them. They torment me relentlessly. They have the ability to inflict pain, both physical and mental, and they do it at his bidding, that monster.

The last few entries were almost illegible and Jasmine's instincts told her they had been written right after her mother's encounters with what she referred to as "the dark souls".

They're gone for now, but I know they'll be back to hurt me some more, if not tomorrow, the next night. I can't sleep anymore for fear of them and what they might do. They're clever bastards. I should be black and blue, but they know how to hurt me without leaving too many marks...

and

...There's no question now, it's the baby he wants. I heard them, whispering among themselves before they started in on me. They hurt me so bad I almost passed out. My lip is cut. I'll have to tell Dora I banged it. I can't drag her into this. They love to hurt me, but they won't kill me. They have to keep me alive because of the baby. But Dora. I think they'd enjoy killing her, just to make me suffer...

Oh, God. Aunt Dora. Had she died at the hands of the dark souls described in her mother's journal? The thought rang true, and deep pain seared her heart at the idea of Aunt Dora being attacked by the evil entities.

The last entry was the most chilling, written on the night before her mother died:

I can't wait any longer. Whether I'm insane or whether this is really happening, I have to get some help. Last night was the worst yet. I can barely move after what they did to me. And it's almost time for the baby to come. I know there's nothing wrong with the baby, I would sense it. It's innocent, my flesh and blood. I have to find a way to protect it from him. I know what he has planned for the tiny daughter still inside me. He needs my baby because it's a girl. I don't know how, but I have to find a way to stop him. He will not take my child. I've made up my mind to go see Tom tomorrow. He said he loved me once, maybe he can help me. I don't know who else to turn to...

Jasmine was moved to tears as she read the last words her mother had written. Her mother. For the first time in her life, the woman felt real to her. Her mother had died trying to save her. In that moment, her heart turned to stone against the being who called himself Ahriman. Her mother had not been able to stop him. But her mother was not a Cambion, like her. She would have to find a way to do what her mother had not been able to.

The pendant had to be destroyed. Her mother had been right to fear it. And Tom had been right in telling her to get rid of it. It was important, and Jasmine knew why. If she destroyed the pendant, she might be able to prevent Ahriman from entering the mortal world again. She had to hurry. Ahriman had promised to return tonight and it was already three o'clock.

Armed with new knowledge, she got moving. She tucked Tom's card inside the small book and raced back home. As she ran, she contemplated the best way to destroy Ahriman's portal. Throwing it away would do no good. He would find a way to send it back to her, as he had done with his mother. Just before she arrived back at the house, the answer came to her. Fire. Fire was the best way, the purest form of destruction. She hurried into the house and placed her mother's diary in one of the drawers of the mahogany desk in the living room, burying the book beneath a stack of papers. Then she raced upstairs to retrieve the pendant.

She moved to the fireplace, which hadn't been used for quite some time, and opened the flue. There was kindling and wood in the backyard shed, she knew, and she ran back and forth carrying in logs until she had enough to build a roaring fire. She felt certain the old silver would melt if it remained in the fire long enough. Then she would throw the molten remnants into the ocean.

Fifteen minutes later, perspiration rolling down her face from the heat of the roaring fire in front of her, she tossed the pendant into the fireplace and watched as the licking flames surrounded it. She waited.

Just over an hour later, she used a poker to fish around in the hot embers for the molten pieces. The poker caught on something, and she pulled it out of the ashes. Stunned, she looked at the silver chain dangling from it, the pendant still attached. Incredibly, it was intact, and unmarked. She touched it lightly with her finger. The silver did not feel the least bit warm, even after having been placed in a roaring fire for almost two hours. She extricated the necklace from the poker and held it in the palm of her hand, unable to understand how it had survived the fire unscathed.

Now what? Gripped by a sense of urgency, she decided to throw the damned thing in the ocean. What else could she do? It was after four already. As she ran for the front door, ribbons of silvery mist began to ooze out from the pendant clutched in her hand. Energy, like a small force field, formed around the pendant. Panicked, Jasmine realized Ahriman was in the process of coming through from the other side, even though night had not yet fallen.

In no time, the room filled with a strange, bright mist. Mesmerized, Jasmine watched as Ahriman's transmutation from spirit to flesh took place before her eyes. Her hand released the pendant. It went clattering to the floor.

The mist seemed to condense, gathering itself together and coagulating into the spectral shape of a man. Ahriman's piercing eyes and other-worldly face emerged first, surrounded by loosely flowing waves of his hair, so his head seemed to momentarily float in front of her. Then the rest of him manifested in gradual downward increments. The air between them shimmered and bent before settling back into place. The static charge of electricity ran through the room. A moment later, he stood whole before her, a spirit made flesh and blood.

Jasmine steeled herself against the pull of his beauty, doing her best to utilize her newly found hatred of him for what he had done to her mother and Aunt Dora. She closed her mind to him, sending her thoughts downward to a place where, instinctively, she knew they would not be detected by him. She focused her hidden thoughts on the evil that dwelled inside the darkly beautiful creature standing before her in an attempt to prevent him from glamouring her, and avoided his shadowy stare, averting her eyes to a spot just over his head. Even so, an overwhelming compulsion to go to him, to touch his face, his mouth, to feel one with him again, came over her. She managed to stand her ground, willing herself not to move.

Jasmine...

"Speak out loud to me," she said, frightened his probing mind might discover the knowledge she now possessed. She was amazed at how calm her voice sounded in comparison to her frenzied thoughts.

"As you wish."

She felt his mind furiously probing her own and breathed a sigh of relief when she felt it withdraw, certain it had not detected her knowledge. Her relief was short-lived, however. The very sound of his voice pulled her to him; it was deep and sonorous, almost as compelling as his flesh. His eyes dragged her gaze toward him like magnets. She understood at once that her only recourse would be to confront him. She would not be able to resist his allure for much longer, and she had no intention of allowing him to defile her again without a fight.

Come to me. I have been pacing like a caged animal, counting the seconds, starving for you."

She felt her anger smolder inside her, and allowed her deadly wrath to build. In a low voice, and not meeting his eyes, she said, "I know who you are. I know what you did to my mother, and my aunt. I know everything. And I want no part of you."

The words were barely out of her mouth when his fist connected with her face. She dropped, unconscious before she hit the floor.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 17

Ahriman looked upon Jasmine's unconscious form with black malice. She had closed her mind to him, and he had known immediately she'd been trying to hide something. The girl had spirit, but he would soon break it. He searched for something to tie her up with, and finding nothing, hurried to the outbuilding in back of the house. There he found rope. Once he returned inside, he turned Jasmine on her stomach and bound her arms and legs behind her, connecting the hands and feet. He had hit her harder than he intended, but her breathing appeared normal. She'd not been seriously damaged. He picked up the pendant from the floor and lifted her head to place it once again around her neck. She belonged to him. She would submit.

How had she learned about her mother? Someone must have supplied her with the information, which meant he had an enemy. His instinct told him the man who appeared to be protecting her on the night he had first appeared to her was somehow involved. The thought filled him with malevolence. He hoped such was not the case, for his sake.

While Jasmine remained unconscious on the floor, he tore around the house, intent on putting his suspicion to rest. After searching Jasmine's bedroom and examining the contents of her closet and dressers, he moved to the other rooms upstairs and inspected them thoroughly, but found nothing. He searched the downstairs closet and kitchen and came up empty-handed. Returning to the living room, he rummaged through the drawers of the old desk in the corner, examining the papers housed within. Beneath a stack of correspondence, he spotted a small book. He picked it up, slowly flipping through the handwritten pages. A tiny frown creased his brow. He read on, becoming more and more incensed, until finally his anger transformed into blinding rage.

By the time he got to the blank pages at the back of the little book, the flames of his fury threatened to consume him. The last written page was bookmarked with a business card. He scanned it, memorizing the address, and then replaced it in the small book, returning it to its hiding place. Less than an hour had gone by since he had incarnated. Approximately seven hours remained to him before he disembodied, he gauged. It would be time enough to deal with the situation. After checking Jasmine's restraints, he left the house. Once he concluded his business with the man, he would return to deal with Jasmine in a way that would leave no doubt as to what would happen were she to misplace her loyalty again.

\* \* \*

Jasmine sprang awake, alarmed by the shrill voice crying out in her head. She was lying in the middle of the living room on her stomach, looking across the floor, unable to move. She'd been hogtied from behind. Her head exploded in pain. She struggled to remember what had happened, but the strident voice gave her no chance to think.

Rise. You must free yourself. There is no time.

She tried to quell the insistent voice, which caused the throbbing at her temples to increase, but the voice only intensified.

You may yet be able to save him, but you must act quickly. Now.

Remembrance seeped into her consciousness. The pendant hung once again from her neck, resting on the floor beside her. Ahriman. She concentrated, and found she was able to single out his energy. He was no longer in the house. But he was still earthbound. And not far away. The pain from her head wound made her want to sink back into unconsciousness, but the relentless voice prevented it.

You must help him, while it is still within your power to do so.

"Who are you? What do you want from me!" she cried in frustration, close to tears at the knowledge that her mother's killer would soon return for her. She had to find a way to free herself.

His death will be on your hands. You must make haste.

The words spoken by the voice halted her racing thoughts. "Whose death? Who am I supposed to help?" She considered how crazy she sounded, having a conversation with a voice in her head.

The healer. The physician. Ahriman will destroy him. It may already be too late.

Tom. The voice was warning her Tom was in danger? Icy dread coursed through her, cutting through her pain. She had hidden her thoughts from Ahriman, he had not known what she had uncovered. Unless ... The thought sent shock waves running through her.

She had to escape these ropes. Her head pounded badly, making it difficult to think. The voice in her head didn't help things either, screaming urgent warnings at her, telling her to 'make haste'.

From her position on the floor she could see the clock on the mantle. Eight-thirty. She'd been out for over four hours.

She ignored the pain at her temples. "Be quiet," she said to the voice, "I have to concentrate." The voice complied with her request and fell silent. Jasmine focused on a small section of the wall next to the fireplace and breathed deeply. She allowed no fear or panic to enter her mind, and permitted her body to completely relax. Minutes passed. She stared at the wall, unmoving, and mentally executed the steps she would take before she moved even a finger.

Ten minutes later, she was ready to begin. She flipped onto her side, and arched her back. Little by little, she worked her bound wrists downward until they were at her buttocks, close to her feet. Next, she tucked her knees as far into her chest as she could, and tried to slip her tied hands over her feet to bring them in front of her, but did not succeed. She waited a few moments and tried again, with the same result. She breathed and relaxed her body before attempting the maneuver once more. When she felt ready, she arched her back deeply, brought her hands down and drew her knees into her chest in one movement. This time, her hands slid over her feet. Now the ropes were in front of her and she was able to sit with her knees bent. Working as quickly as she could, she untied the ropes at her feet with her bound hands. Moments later, she was on her feet and running to the kitchen, where she used a knife to cut the ropes at her wrists.

She tore the pendant from around her neck and flung it away from her. Then she raced back to the living room to retrieve what she had hidden in the desk drawer.

When she finally held Tom's business card in her trembling hand, she noticed a brown smudge on it that had not been there before. Panic gripped her when she



understood Ahriman had discovered her mother's book and had seen Tom's card. Fresh fear sluiced through her veins. She had to warn Tom. It might already be too late.

She picked up the phone to call the home number listed on Tom's card. After the fourth ring, his answering machine came on. Shit!

The clock on mantle told her it was just after nine. She called the number twice more, and got his machine again.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 18

Ahriman's lip curled in a smug smile of anticipation as, when darkness fell, he heard the front door open. Just over four hours ago, Ahriman had entered the house of the man, Tom, breaking in through a basement window. Since then, he'd been sitting in the man's bed chamber at the top of the stairs, awaiting his arrival home. He'd almost given up, and was about to return to deal with Jasmine when he heard the man's entry downstairs. The sound of clinking glass and running water reached him from below.

Ahriman whispered an incantation sotto voce, one that would summon forth the trapped spirits of the physical plane who were loyal to him. They were many in number. Ahriman had cultivated a large following over the centuries and many spirits were beholden to him for past favors. He could easily summon forth hundreds of them at any given moment, and he did so now.

The dark souls arrived, one by one, anxious to learn what amusement Ahriman had conjured up for them this time, and doing their best to remain patient until the last of the stragglers arrived. When the room overflowed with them, the spirits listened attentively as Ahriman put forth his command, their hushed voices becoming raucous as they learned his intention.

A moment later, footsteps sounded on the staircase as the man ascended. When he reached the doorway of the darkened bedroom, he froze.

Ahriman's smile widened as he watched the man start, his face a mask of wide-eyed terror when he spotted Ahriman.

"Hello, Tom."

The spirits snickered, and the man looked wildly about the room in search of the source of the voices.

"I should have killed you the other night for your interference," Ahriman said, "but I mistook you for someone less stupid, one who would know better than to repeat such a grave mistake. Now I am left with no choice."

To the man's credit, Ahriman noticed he did not flinch.

"Get out of here," Tom said in a low voice. "Go back to whatever dark hole you crawled out of and leave us alone. Leave her alone."

Ahriman sensed the terror masked by Tom's unwavering voice. He could smell it on him, like a wild animal snatching the scent of fear on hidden prey. Suppressing his rage at the man's insolence and speaking in a low voice, he asked, "Do you have any inkling as to what you are dealing with? What I'm capable of?"

"Don't flatter yourself," came the man's reply. "I know what you are. A common murderer, nothing more. You killed Lilli. And now you're after Jasmine."

"Lilli was an ungrateful fool who deserved to die."

Tom's eyes blazed.

"Ah. You were in love with her—and now you think you can protect Jasmine. I have plans for Jasmine. Plans with which you have interfered."

"Stay away from her."

"Who do you think will stop me ... you?"

The spirits murmured and tittered.

Tom scanned the room again but did not move. "I told you to get out of my house."

"Such bravado. I'm impressed." Ahriman's arm shot out to restrain the spirits from attacking, silencing their outraged voices.

"You have a lot to say." Ahriman's voice became deadly. "And you've interfered in something you should not have. Do you know what happens to those who engage in idle chatter, Tom?"

The man fell silent. Ahriman waited until the smell of panic emanating from the mortal became overpowering. Satisfied, he motioned the spirits forward.

The sound of screeching souls filled the room as they blasted forward in a frenzy, muffling the man's screams of terror as they carried out the instructions issued moments earlier by Ahriman.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 19

Jasmine hung up the phone after calling Tom's office and getting an after-hour recording. Tom's home was not far from hers. She'd get there faster by walking than waiting for a cab to arrive. She had to find him and warn him.

As she hurried out the door into the gloaming, Jasmine did her best to dispel the fear pulsing through her. She had good reason to be afraid. There was no telling what she'd find when she got to Tom's house. And what would Ahriman do to her, she wondered, for her part in what he would surely perceive as a serious transgression? Jasmine did her best not to focus on that question. She only knew she could not allow harm to come to the gentle man who had loved her mother, and who had risked his own safety to warn her. The evil being had already killed her mother and Aunt Dora, and who knew how many others before them. If she did nothing to keep Tom from falling prey to him, she would never be able to live with herself.

Less than ten minutes later, she arrived, out of breath, at Tom's doorstep. The front door stood slightly ajar. Jasmine remained on the stoop, her heart thudding madly as she listened. She did not detect Ahriman's presence in the house, which did nothing to relieve her anxiety. He had either been here and gone, or had yet to arrive.

Either way, it boded ill. Terror gripped her hard, but she steeled herself, took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

She stepped into the dark vestibule and listened, but was met with silence.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Only silent darkness answered.

"Tom?"

She took a tentative step from the hallway into the room on her left, fumbling around in the dark for a light switch. When she found it, the overhead light revealed only a cozy sitting area.

Her heart continued to pound relentlessly as she moved into the adjoining dining room, but again she detected nothing unusual. Moving on, she entered the kitchen, and switched on another light. Once again, she saw no signs of a disturbance.

Returning to the main hall via the kitchen, she walked to the staircase leading to the second floor. Darkness shrouded the top of the stairway, and she flicked another switch that lit the upstairs hall.

The silence as she ascended amplified her misgivings, causing her rapidly beating heart to pound loudly in her ears. Fear sat heavily in her stomach.

On the second floor landing, she noticed a large bathroom straight ahead and three other rooms to her left running along the upstairs hall. The door of the room closest to her was shut, the remaining two wide open. Sensing the closed door led to Tom's bedroom, she moved toward it, grasped the doorknob and slowly turned it. The door swung open. From the light spilling in from the hallway, she could see the room was unoccupied. She entered, moving quickly and giving a cursory glance around, noticing nothing out of the ordinary. She endured a heart-stopping moment when she yanked the closet door open, but was greeted only by two rows of neatly arranged shirts and suits, and a shoe rack.

Returning to the centre of the room next to the bed, she was about to leave to explore the remaining two bedrooms when a drop of something wet struck the top of her head. She touched her fingers to it. When she brought her hand to her face, she blinked in surprise at the deep crimson smear on her fingertips. Another drop fell on her upraised hand, thick and ruby-red, leaving no doubt as to what it could be. Only then did she notice the large stain on the oriental carpet beneath her feet. Her heart in her mouth, she turned her gaze upward. And found Tom.

His crumpled body was fastened to the ceiling with spikes driven through his arms and legs. The unnatural angles of his limbs told her every bone in his body had been broken before he'd been killed. As she continued staring at the shocking spectacle, she imagined the suffering he must have endured before he died. His dead face was frozen in a grimace of pain. Blood dripped from his gaping mouth. It took a moment for understanding to dawn, and then it did. His tongue had been cut out.

Something terrible began to gather in her as she surveyed Ahriman's handiwork. She turned away from the gruesome sight, but made no effort to stem the fury inside her. She permitted her emotions free rein, allowing the rage to flow through her, no longer concerned by the strange forces that had reacted to her anger in the past. She doubted she would be able to cause any real damage to a being like Ahriman, but it felt right to try. It felt good to try. She waited for her anger to crest, until it felt white-hot, before releasing her pent-up rage, focusing her thoughts on Ahriman as she unleashed it.

The force of the angry energy as it flew out of her sent her reeling, and she stumbled to her knees. The moment it left her, she felt drained and exhausted.

In the aftermath, as she tried to gather her energy, a thought flew across her mind that almost went unnoticed. Then it swung back, hitting her like a tidal wave. She let out a cry of dismay as it occurred to her that she had made a fatal mistake. The pendant. She had left it back at the house. Ahriman, having dealt with Tom, must now be on his way back to it. There was nothing to stop him from taking it. And if he did that, she would never be able to find a way to destroy his means of entry to her world.

I'm so sorry, Tom. She tore out of the house, telling herself that her gentle protector would have understood, and forgiven her for leaving him in such a terrible condition.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 20

Ahriman cursed as he streaked back toward Jasmine's house, once again a spirit. Something, some force, had rocked him like an explosion, causing his disembodiment to begin sooner than he'd expected. He travelled quickly through the dark night, speeding back to Jasmine. And the pendant.

When he entered the house to find her gone and the ropes with which he'd tied her lying on the ground, he suffered a moment's panic. How had she managed to escape? Then he remembered the strange projectile of white hot energy that had barreled through him on his way back to the house. Was it possible? Had she managed to do that? He stilled himself, his inner ear trained on tracking her. After a moment he singled out her energy. She was not far, and headed back this way. He attempted to get a bead on her thoughts, but ran up against a brick wall. She was guarding her mind fiercely.

Then he spied the pendant on the floor, and understood. The conniving little bitch had not only turned against him, she was coming back for the pendant, in hopes of destroying it.

He needed to return to the dark realm, for it was only by passing from there through the portal into the mortal world that he could reincarnate. But first he had to ensure his portal remained safe. He had no intention of becoming trapped as a weak spirit in the human plane, nor locked inside the dark realm, unable to return to earth as flesh and blood. He would deal with Jasmine's betrayal when he next emerged.

As a spirit, he possessed the ability to move material objects, but it required great effort on his part and, even then, he was not able to transport them any great distance. He needed to move the pendant to safety, and quickly. He could sense Jasmine's rapid approach. He had only one option, and he acted.

Not long after, exhausted by his undertaking, but satisfied that his precious portal would be safe, he streaked back through it to the other side, where he would plan a proper revenge for his traitorous queen.

\* \* \* \*

Jasmine stood outside her front door, her breath ragged from running, trying to determine if Ahriman waited inside for her. She focused her internal sense, but did not detect his presence at all. Nothing. He was no longer earthbound. Praying Ahriman had not made off with the pendant, she burst through the door. When she didn't spot the pendant right away, she got down on her hands and knees and searched every square inch of the kitchen floor where she'd tossed it, but came up empty-handed. Frantically, she searched the rest of the main level, and then the rest of the house, but the pendant was nowhere to be found. Ahriman had removed it, as she'd feared. It was gone.



Jasmine quelled her rising panic, and tried to think. She knew it would be pointless to run. If she could sense his presence, she reasoned, he would certainly have no problem tracking her down wherever she went; his powers were greater than hers. She had failed miserably in leaving the pendant behind, and in doing so, had sealed her own fate. He would come for her. And there was nothing she could do except wait, like a sitting duck, for his return.

Exhausted, she sat down at the kitchen table. With a trembling hand, she tapped out a cigarette from the pack she'd left there yesterday, and lit it. Think. Minutes ticked by as she considered her situation. She had seen with her own eyes what Ahriman had done to Tom, but she knew Ahriman would not kill her. No, he had a different fate in mind for her, one worse than death. He needed her alive. To breed with her.

In the silent kitchen, she contemplated what her life would soon become. Ahriman would think nothing of subduing her by whatever means he deemed necessary. She would be subjected to his overtures and the accompanying guilt and shame for as long as he decided. There was nothing she could do to prevent it from happening. Her situation was hopeless.

No, not hopeless, she corrected herself. One last recourse remained. One from which there could be no turning back.

She lit another smoke, knowing what she had to do. But, oh, she felt loath to carry it out. She smoked the cigarette down to the filter, wracking her brain for another solution, and finding none. A strange numbness penetrated her as she walked to the counter and selected a small knife from the wooden knife-rack. She tested the blade of the knife and found it razor sharp. Aunt Dora always kept her kitchen tools in good working order. Her body seemed to burn both hot and cold as she studied the knife in her hand, contemplating what she was about to do.

She had no intention of allowing herself to be condemned to the existence Ahriman intended for her. She would take her own life, now, before he could return to stop her. It was the only way.

Doing her best not to dwell on the act she was about to carry out, she slid to the floor, her back against the cabinet. Tears rolled down her face. She cleared her mind and thought about her mother. Her mother had been a mortal, and Jasmine knew by her own intention that, regardless of what she was, her own heart was also human. Whatever qualities she had inherited from Ahriman, they were not strong enough to eradicate her mortal emotions.

She set to her task, knowing enough to cut up and down her wrists, not across. As crimson blood welled to the top of the first tentative incision, she had to look away, afraid she would lose her nerve. She steeled herself, and made a second cut beside the first, cutting deeper this time. It hurt. What hurt more, what marked her deep inside, was the knowledge that Ahriman had thought nothing about destroying her. Blood gushed from the wound, running down her arm to her elbow, dripping from there to the floor. She struggled not to pass out, sickened by the sight of her own blood. No turning back now. The third cut was quicker, but lightheadedness followed. Don't pass out. Finish it, she ordered herself. The pool of blood on the floor expanded, and she thought about how red it looked, her blood, as she went about the business of ending her life.

A kind of peace fell over her then, or perhaps it was just relief at having found a way to extricate herself from a fate she knew she would not be able to live with. Black stars began to blossom in and out of her vision, and she reminded herself to hurry, she was fading fast.

She switched the knife over to her other hand. Her bad hand was drenched in blood and she struggled to get a grip on the knife's handle.

Vague awareness of a loud banging noise jarred her from the peaceful feeling that now permeated her. From the back of her consciousness came the thought that someone was pounding on the front door. The thought slipped from her mind as easily as the blood flowed from her body. She focused all of her concentration on making the cut to her other arm, but the sound of approaching footsteps distracted her, and in the next instant she glimpsed a pair of shiny black shoes in the doorway leading to the kitchen.

"Jasmine! My God, what have you done?"

She recognized the voice. Her gaze travelled upwards. Christopher. Christopher had returned. She tried to speak, but nothing intelligible came out.

He caught her as she fell sideways to the floor.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 21

Jasmine looked around the darkened room through bleary eyes. She was in a hospital. Not dead. I'm not dead. She raised her left arm, and the gauze wrapped around her wrist came into focus. The cuts beneath the bandage hurt like hell. Then she noticed Christopher sitting in a chair in the corner. When he saw she had awakened, he got up quickly and moved to her side.

"Jasmine."

She turned away from him. The movement caused her head to throb. "Should've let me die," she said, her voice emotionless. Thoughts of Ahriman pursued her like a relentless hound. "How long have I been here?" she croaked.

"Since last night, after I found you. Jasmine. Look at me."

Last night. And it was night again. Late, judging from the blackness beyond the window and the lack of movement in the hallway outside her room. An entire day had gone by. She struggled to understand. Ahriman. Why had he not returned?

Christopher continued talking, his voice deep and gentle. "I spoke to the doctor. You've lost a lot of blood, but you're going to be all right. Jasmine ... what happened to make you think you had to do this? Can you tell me?"

She remained silent, but a single tear rolled down her cheek. She'd never be able to explain it to him, why bother trying?

"I knew something was wrong after our last call and took the next flight home. Please talk to me, I need to know."

She looked at him through swollen eyes, her head still throbbing. "I'm already dead, Christopher. If you're smart, you'll get as far away from me as you can. That's what I want you to do."

His face registered shock at her words, but he didn't let it go. "No," he said simply. "I don't accept that. I'm not going anywhere. You're going to be all right. You have to be. And I'm going to do whatever it takes to make sure you will be. Then, if you still decide you don't want me around, I'll go. But not before."

Panic bit into her. Ahriman might be on his way back to her at this very minute. "Go away, Christopher," she cried. "You can't help me. Nobody can."

He sat back down in the chair next to her bed. He didn't say anything, but he didn't leave, either. Christopher poured some ice water from a jug on the hospital table

into a tumbler and lifted her head from the pillow to help him drink. "I'm not going anywhere," he said softly. "I won't leave you."

Too exhausted to argue, she sank back into uneasy sleep.

\* \* \* \*

When she opened her eyes again, morning sunlight poured into the room, and Christopher, still slouched in the chair beside her bed, was asleep. The stitched cuts on her wrist throbbed and a dull ache nagged at her temples, but it was nothing compared to the way she had felt last night. Worry flooded over her again when Ahriman sprang to mind. She immediately focused inward to determine if he was earthbound. She was astounded when she sensed nothing, nothing at all. Unable to fathom Ahriman's reason for staying away, her jangled nerves stretched taught, she tried to think what to do next. She'd been certain Ahriman would waste no time in coming for her.

She watched as Christopher slowly opened his eyes and sat up.

"Hey." He smiled. "You're awake. You look a little better."

Before she could stop them, the words tumbled out. "I love you, Christopher. So much. No matter what happens."

A look of relief crossed his face. He got up and leaned over her, kissing her mouth gently. "That's all I need to know. And nothing else is going to happen," he said, "except that you're going to get better."

His words elicited a spark of hope, but she quickly extinguished it. Ahriman would return. There was no point in wishing otherwise. She opened her mouth to speak, but he stopped her by putting a finger gently to her lips.

"I don't want you to worry about anything right now. Just rest. Whatever happened, we'll make it right. Together. I promise."

He wrapped his strong arms around her and for a brief moment she felt safe again, the way she had before Ahriman had entered her life.

When he released her, Jasmine noticed a small frown creased his brow. "The staff psychiatrist I spoke to yesterday said he'll be carrying out an assessment today. To determine whether you might ... you know ... try to hurt yourself again." He paused. "You wouldn't, right? Do anything like this again, I mean?"

Not until Ahriman comes back, was the thought that jumped to mind. Now that Christopher mentioned it, Jasmine realized it would suit her purposes better if she was not confined to a hospital when Ahriman returned. "No. I won't," she said. It was a promise she knew she would not be able to keep, but it was worth it to see the worry lift from Christopher's face.

Just then, Carla entered the hospital room, looking slightly distracted but perfectly turned out in a sleeveless black cotton shift and red sandals, her silky black hair tied back.

"Jazzy," she said, rushing to her bedside. "I've been so worried about you since Christopher called. The hospital told me you couldn't have visitors until this morning, so I came first thing. I hope it's okay I'm here. Do you feel up to company?"

Company was the last thing she wanted, and there was no way she could ever explain her actions to Carla. Still, Carla was her best friend, and it felt wrong to turn her away. "Sure," she said in a quiet voice.

"I'll leave you two to talk for a while," Christopher said. "I've got to grab a shower and change, anyway. Then I'll be back."

\* \* \* \*

Christopher smiled warmly at Carla on the way out, but Carla paid no notice. And to think she had thought him so incredibly sexy only a few days ago. A small sigh escaped her, as an image of the dark stranger she'd met last night flitted across her mind. Not even the call from Christopher telling her Jasmine was in trouble had managed to wipe away the erotic sensations still running through her from their encounter.

She'd spotted the extraordinarily beautiful man just before she left the club and had actually blinked in surprise when she looked into his strange dark eyes. The hungry look he'd given her had rocked her right down to the soles of her feet. And when he'd spoken to her in that beguiling voice of his, she'd practically orgasmed on the spot.

Her cheeks burned with embarrassment just thinking about the things he'd done to her after she took him home to her apartment, the most incredible sex she'd ever had. Then, yesterday morning, she'd awoken to find him gone. She'd been devastated, until she saw his note, telling her he'd be back in town in a few days and would return. Just the thought of seeing him again made her wet.

She realized she was staring absently at Jasmine and gave her head a little shake. What was wrong with her? She'd been in a daze all morning. Bringing herself back to the present, she studied her friend. Carla was shocked, of course, to see Jasmine's bandaged wrist and the disheveled state she was in. She still could not believe Jasmine had tried to take her own life. Never in her wildest imaginings would she have thought her friend would do such a thing. It was just too awful. What could have prompted her suicide attempt?

"What happened Jazzy? Why'd you do this?"

Jasmine sighed. "I don't know, Carla. I guess I was more depressed about Aunt Dora than I thought."

Carla studied her friend's face. She'd known Jasmine almost all her life. She'd never been a very good liar.

"Uh-uh. I want the truth."

"It's complicated," Jasmine said, closing her eyes.

Carla waited, but Jasmine said nothing more.

"Does this have anything to do with Christopher?" she asked. Jasmine, who never remained interested in any man for more than a couple of days, had fallen hard for him, she knew. It was all she could think of that might have driven her to such desperate action. Even though Jasmine had been devastated by Dora's death, Carla had not noticed any of the warning signals afterward that might indicate she was contemplating taking her own life.

"No," Jasmine said quickly. "It's nothing to do with him."

"What, then?" Carla asked, seeing the look of despair that had crept into Jasmine's eyes. "Please tell me. I want to help if I can."

Jasmine turned away and didn't answer.

"All right," Carla said, finally. "Maybe you can't talk about it yet. But when you're ready. I'm here, okay?" she said, patting her friend's hand gently.

Jasmine turned back to her. "You're a good friend, Carla," she said in a small voice. "Don't worry about me. I'll be all right."

But Carla found she was worried. Very worried.

\* \* \* \*

Later that day, Jasmine sat across from Dr. Harold Stronik, the staff psychiatrist, a tall, balding man in his late fifties, and did her best to answer in a calm manner the questions he posed, which were many. He made notes of each answer she gave. Jasmine noticed the man made very little eye contact with her during the assessment, and thought it strange that a psychiatrist would appear so disinterested. His whole demeanor was cold and clinical, and something about the man made her feel decidedly uncomfortable. Jasmine couldn't wait for the assessment to be over. In response to his last question, she said, "Aunt Dora was the only family I had left. I guess after she died, it hit me how alone I really was."

He put down his pen, removed his spectacles and rubbed his tired-looking eyes. After putting his glasses back on, he finally looked directly at her and said, "Ms. Fairchild, the depressed feelings we experience after a serious loss may last for some time. Everyone is different. In your case, I'm going to prescribe an anti-depressant, short-term, just a few months. If you agree, then I believe I can approve you for discharge."

That was easy. "Okay, doctor," she said, relieved he'd bought her explanation. "I'm sure I'll be all right. Thank you."

He nodded, but something about the strange way he was looking at her made her uncomfortable all over again. "Is there anything else?" she asked.

"No, Miss Fairchild. Nothing," he said, finally, although he continued to stare at her as if she'd just landed from outer space. "Best of luck to you."

\* \* \* \*

On the following morning, Jasmine sat on the corner of her hospital bed, waiting for Christopher to pick her up. She was no closer to understanding why Ahriman had not returned. Was it possible she had somehow managed to stop him when she'd unleashed her fury at him? She decided it was highly unlikely. Ahriman was too strong a being for her to have caused him irreparable damage. Perhaps some act of God or fate had occurred that had prevented Ahriman from re-entering the mortal world. She just did not know, although she prayed that was the case. All she knew for certain was that Ahriman was not earthbound, and Christopher's love had saved her from taking her own life.

Earlier, she'd arrived at a decision. She would not take drastic action again unless she absolutely had to. She would remain on constant alert for Ahriman's arrival. If she sensed his approach and Christopher was around, she'd arrange to leave on some pretext, and then finish the job she had started a few days ago. In the meantime, she would give Christopher as much of her love as she could for however long she had left. She knew she was living on borrowed time, but they loved each other, and nothing else mattered to her anymore.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 22

When Jasmine arrived home with Christopher, she found the house spotless. Every trace of the dismal events had been wiped clean. Christopher had also gone to the trouble of placing fresh flowers in each room to welcome her home.

She went upstairs to change and, as she slowly undressed, her thoughts focused on the awful events that had transpired over the course of the past week. Just days ago, she'd believed herself to be human and had been looking forward to a happy life with Christopher. She sighed. Her life had never been filled with much joy, and it did not look as if she would be breaking with tradition anytime soon. Now she knew she was a Cambion, one targeted by Ahriman in order to advance his plan to breed, and she wondered if she'd done the right thing by allowing Christopher to remain in her life.

As if in answer to her thoughts, she turned to see Christopher standing in the doorway. He walked over to her and hugged her to him. She leaned against him, grateful for comfort, and he brushed her hair to one side, nuzzling her neck.

She had never needed love as badly as she did at that moment. "Make love to me," she whispered.

He said nothing at first, and then, "I thought I'd lost you."

She lifted her face to his, wanting and needing him more than ever, and kissed him hungrily. Seconds later, they found themselves in bed, where they spent the next several hours making up for lost time.

\* \* \* \*

That evening, Jasmine padded around downstairs in her bathrobe, searching for a cigarette. Finding none, she began to rummage through her purse, where she usually kept an emergency stash, removing the contents of her handbag onto the coffee table in the living room. Christopher picked up a slip of paper from the floor. It was the prescription Dr. Stronik had written up for her.

"What's this for?"

"Oh. Dr. Stronik prescribed an anti-depressant for me, but I don't think I'm going to fill it. I'll be fine without it." She located a half-full pack of smokes at the bottom of her bag and lit one.

"Jasmine."

"Um-hmm?" she took a drag of the cigarette.

"I didn't tell you this earlier, but I know Dr. Stronik."

"You do?" She exhaled. Watching the smoke from her cigarette floating in the air around her caused her to feel suddenly anxious. The drifting smoke reminded her of Ahriman. Probably ought to quit these things.

"Yes. I met him when he testified as an expert on one of our cases. He's a good doctor. If he prescribed this medication, then he must feel you need it. We should get this prescription filled. I can go do it for you now if you want."

Jasmine felt a twinge of embarrassment. That explained the strange looks she'd gotten from the doctor earlier. He'd probably just been curious about Christopher's

suicidal girlfriend. "It's all right, Christopher, I'm really okay. There's no need." She had no intention of medicating herself. She needed to remain alert. For when Ahriman returned.

"Please," he said, "do what Dr. Stronik says. I don't want you to take any chances. I need to know you're going to be all right."

His face was painted with concern. Not wanting to cause him any more worry, she said, "Okay, I guess you're right. It's only for a couple of months, anyway. I can do that," she lied. I'll just pretend to take them, if it'll make him feel better. Besides, she wasn't depressed, really. She had a rational explanation for having tried to do away with herself. And she had already decided not to do anything drastic unless and until she sensed Ahriman's arrival.

He smiled and kissed her. "All right then. I'll go fill the prescription. I'll be right back."

He returned a half hour later with a little vial of yellow-and-white capsules. After removing one, he brought it to her with some water.

She popped it in her mouth, but tucked it between her teeth and cheek with her tongue before taking a swallow of water. "There," she smiled, "all right?"

A couple of minutes later, before the capsule dissolved, she went to the bathroom and got rid of the pill, flushing it down the toilet.

\* \* \* \*

Over the next few days, Jasmine listened attentively to the news reports surrounding the bizarre murder of Dr. Tom Janzen. To her relief, no mention was made of a woman having been seen leaving his house. No one had spotted her entering or leaving, and she'd not been approached by the police in connection with his death. Jasmine was grateful the police hadn't connected her, but the horrible image of his corpse had been burned permanently into her memory. It proved to be more than ample fodder for her nightmares, when she wasn't busy obsessing over Ahriman's imminent return.

Days passed. Then a week. Then two. Still Ahriman did not arrive, nor was Jasmine able to detect his presence in the mortal world. Even so, she refused to allow herself to hope, convinced he would come back to finish what he had started with her. She worried constantly about the reason behind Ahriman's absence, while trying to hide her fearful feelings from Christopher. Despite her anxious state, she was grateful Christopher was in her life again, and did everything in her power to hold on to the one good thing she had left, besides Carla. She pretended to take her medication, and never spoke to him about the real reason for her attempted suicide, telling him she wanted only to put the episode behind her. After a while, he gave up asking, although she knew he had not given up thinking about it.

Jasmine had chosen not to return to University for the time being. She spent her evenings with Christopher. Most afternoons, while he was at work, she visited with Carla after her classes, but her best friend seemed different lately—distant, and wrapped up in her own little world. Jasmine suspected Carla was having an affair with a married man. She'd told Jasmine she'd fallen in love with someone, yet when she asked about him, Carla seemed short on details and gave only vague answers. Then, two days ago, Carla had dropped a bomb, telling Jasmine she was moving to England to be with her lover.

"Oh, Carla ... England?" Jasmine didn't know what to say. Her friend could be impulsive at times, but not to this extent. The idea of her moving to another country to be with a man she hardly knew seemed out of character. "Are you sure you know what you're getting into with this guy?" she asked. "You only met him a few weeks ago ... and now you're moving to England to be with him?"

Carla had just looked at her with a dreamy, far-away look in her eyes. "Oh, yeah. I'm sure. You have no idea, Jazzy. He's just the most fantastic man."

"So when do I get to meet him?"

"I dunno," she'd answered. "He travels a lot. I don't even get to see him all that much myself. But when we're together ... God, you just can't imagine. My flight's booked two weeks from now."

Jasmine expressed her concern. "Why not give it a little more time? Get to know him better before moving in with him."

Carla sounded disappointed. "You know, I thought you'd be happy for me Jazzy. Instead, you're acting like I don't have enough sense to know what I want."

Jasmine didn't respond. Carla had fallen for this fellow like a ton of bricks, whoever he was, and it worried her. Still, the last thing she wanted to do was alienate her only friend. And despite her concern, Jasmine had her own problems to deal with. She decided she needed to trust Carla to do what was right for her.

"If you're sure about all of this, then I'm happy for you," she'd told her, "even though I'm going to miss you. Promise me you'll stay in touch?"

"Sure," Carla said. "You know it."

\* \* \* \*

After Carla left for England, Jasmine spent long, lonely days rehashing her encounters with Ahriman. She often thought about the strange voice in her head, the voice of the woman, as well. It had not returned since sending her the warning about Tom. Who was the owner of that voice? She supposed she would never learn the answer.

It wasn't until a little over a month following Jasmine's return home from hospital when disaster finally struck. She woke early one morning with nausea sitting heavily in her stomach, and raced for the bathroom, barely getting the door shut behind her before being sick.

A moment later, Christopher, who must have heard her get up, knocked on the bathroom door. "Jasmine?"

She knelt on the floor with her head over the toilet, unable to answer.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine," she lied, when she came up for air. "Must've been something I ate." Anxiously, she counted back the days since her last period and realized with a shock that she was already a week overdue. Oh, God. I'm pregnant? The thought was enough to start her retching again.

An hour and a half later, she found herself in the bathroom once more, this time staring at the test stick from a pregnancy kit. She had picked one up from the drug store the minute Christopher left for work. Trying to remain calm, she studied the piece of plastic in her hand. Maybe I'm just late.

Then she saw the symbol indicating a positive result, and her world crashed down around her. She sank to the floor and burst into tears.

There was a chance, she reminded herself, that the baby might be Christopher's. The thought did little to relieve her distress. Because in her heart she believed Ahriman had fathered the child. Hadn't that been his motivation in appearing to her in the first place? And, she realized with a shock, that was probably why he hadn't returned—he'd succeeded in his mission. He'd impregnated her.

For another half hour, she sat on the bathroom floor, staring at nothing, her eyes swollen from crying. Finally, she decided that, before she did anything else, she had to find out for sure who had fathered the baby.

Later, staring at the Google search results on the screen of her open laptop, she made a note of the name and phone number of a lab located downtown. Apparently, DNA testing could be conducted during pregnancy. She could determine whether or not the baby was Christopher's by providing a hair sample, which she could easily collect. She'd been surprised to find out the testing could be carried out before birth, but dismayed to learn the earliest the test could be conducted would be ten weeks into pregnancy, just before the end of her first trimester. It meant she would need to wait another six weeks or so. She knew they would be the longest six weeks of her life. The waiting would be hell, but she owed it to Christopher and to herself to find out if the baby was his. Just in case. If, by some blessing it turned out to be true, she'd devote the rest of her days to Christopher and the child produced by their love. If, on the other hand, her deepest fear was realized and the test concluded the baby had not been fathered by Christopher, she would face another, much more difficult, decision. One Christopher would never know about.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 23

A week before her scheduled paternity testing, Jasmine moved between the table and sink, clearing the dinner dishes. She watched Christopher out of the corner of her eye as, for the third time since they finished eating, he checked his watch.

He suspected something, she was certain. She'd done her best to hide the symptoms of her pregnancy from him. Nearly three months along, her shape had not yet changed, but she'd not been able to hide the stress of wondering whether she was carrying Ahriman's child. Christopher had asked her on several occasions what was bothering her. And he'd noticed immediately that she had stopped smoking.

When she caught him glancing nervously at his watch yet again, she opened her mouth to ask him why, but the phone rang, stopping her. As soon as she saw Carla's cell number pop up on the call display, she picked up.

"Hi, Jazzy. Sorry I haven't called until now, but I've been getting acquainted with my new home."

Jasmine laughed, genuinely pleased to hear her friend's voice. "So? Tell me everything. How's England?"

"Jazz, you wouldn't believe it. I'm living in the lap of luxury here. An estate home in the country no less."

"Wow. I'm impressed—what time is it there now?"

"Midnight. I was just about to hit the sack, but wanted to call and say hi, first."

Her conversation was interrupted by a loud knock at the front door. Christopher motioned to her that he'd answer.

"Sorry, someone's at the door, although I can't imagine who." It was after nine o'clock, and she wasn't expecting anyone.

"Do you want me to call back?" asked Carla.

Jasmine turned, and was startled to see Dr. Stronik, the psychiatrist who had treated her at the hospital, standing in the kitchen doorway next to Christopher.

"Jasmine?"

"Uh, I'll have to call you back, Carla, okay?"

"Sure. Everything all right?"

"Yes. Fine. I'll call you back."

She hung up and directed a questioning glance at Christopher.

"I asked him to come, Jasmine," Christopher said, ushering Dr. Stronik into the room.

"What for?" she asked in astonishment, noticing the small black leather satchel Dr. Stronik carried. She looked back and forth between the two men.

"What's going on?" she asked Christopher, suddenly alarmed. Her worry only deepened as she studied Christopher's face, the face of the man she loved. The look he gave her was completely devoid of emotion. He remained stonily silent. "Christopher..."

"We need to talk," Christopher said, taking her by the arm and leading her to one of the kitchen chairs. "Sit down," he said.

Dr. Stronik placed his leather case on the table and opened it, without saying a word.

The coldness in Christopher's voice felt like a slap in the face.

"I'm not going to sit down," she said, trying to keep her anger in check. "And I didn't ask you to come," she said to Dr. Stronik. "Please leave. Now."

"I've already told you, he's here because I asked him to come," Christopher said, cutting her off.

Dumbfounded, she could only stare at Christopher.

"Did you think I didn't know?" he asked, in a quiet voice.

She froze. Her voice barely a whisper, she asked, "Know what?"

"About the baby."

So he did know. But what did that have to do with Stronik? Christopher's face took on a disdainful look when he next spoke.

"Did you really believe Ahriman would leave the fate of this child to chance?"

A stunned gasp escaped her at the unexpected words. "Ahriman? What do you know about Ahriman?"

The look he gave her was glacial. "He's my father," came the devastating reply, "and you, the woman he chose to bear the first of his new race, have betrayed him."

"Your father ... then you ... you..." Comprehension began to sink in. She remembered how surprised she'd been on meeting him that she'd not been able to press her

thoughts on Christopher.

"Yes. I'm like you. A Cambion."

The pain accompanying his revelation was stunning, but she pushed past the initial shock of his words to react, summoning her deadly anger to take aim at the two of them.

"Now. Do it now!" Christopher yelled to Dr. Stronik.

Jasmine's deadly wrath did not have a chance to coalesce before she felt the sharp prick of a needle on her upper arm. "What did you do, you bastard! Why—"

Suddenly, the world turned black and she felt herself falling. The last thing she remembered seeing were the arms of her betrayer as he reached out to catch her.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 24

"Come in." Carla pulled the crisp, Egyptian cotton sheets up to hide her nakedness from the prissy-looking maid who entered, carrying a tray.

"Breakfast, Miss," said the maid, whose name Carla remembered was Emma.

"Thanks," she said, taking the tray from her. Emma left the room quickly and discreetly. British maids are nothing if not proper, she thought.

She checked her cellphone for any missed calls, and was surprised to see it did not show any. Jasmine hadn't called back last night, although she'd waited up to talk to her. Seven in the morning would make it two in the morning back home. She'd leave it until noon and then try her again.

Carla sat up in the king-size bed and lifted the silver lid off the plate on the tray. Eggs Benedict. Cool. As she dug into her breakfast, Carla reflected on the past couple of weeks and marveled at the wonderful turn her life had taken since meeting Ahriman.

Her arrival at Ahriman's estate had been nothing short of thrilling, the long drive from the airport notwithstanding. She'd been amazed when the car, a Rolls-Royce no less, stopped in front of tall, wrought iron gates set into a stone wall and she spied the mansion up ahead. The driver buzzed for the gates to be opened, and Carla heard the barking of dogs.

"Does Ahriman have dogs?" she asked the driver. She adored animals.

"They're guard dogs, Miss. For security."

"Oh."

The car travelled the long driveway and pulled up in front of a sprawling estate home. Just how wealthy was he if he could afford the upkeep on a place like this? An English garden surrounded the old stone manor. Behind the three-story structure loomed a forest. The driver retrieved her bags from the trunk of the car and accompanied her inside.

Then, disappointment struck. Ahriman had not been there to greet her when she arrived. He'd left word for her through his staff that he'd been called away on urgent business and would return in a couple of weeks. She was to make herself at home in the meantime.

Once her initial displeasure at not being able to unite with her inamorato right away had worn off, she consoled herself by exploring the stately old home and surrounding countryside. Her new home was fit for royalty, and provided plenty of distractions for her while she waited for Ahriman to arrive.

Decorated in elaborate Gothic style, the three-story manor resembled a small palace, and Carla had been amazed at the opulence of the place as she set out to explore it following her arrival. An enormous ballroom with an elaborately carved oak ceiling and arched stained-glass windows took up much of the main floor. The drawing room and library overlooked the formal gardens and were decorated with plaster frieze and cornice. The hand-carved floor to ceiling bookcases in the library contained many old volumes and fine porcelain displays. The stone fireplace in the drawing room was so tall she could stand inside it. Over the mantle hung a large portrait of a woman, centuries old, by the looks of it. As she paused to admire the painting, she could not help but think that the woman's features appeared vaguely familiar.

The second and third floors were each made up of four suites. Carla's rooms were on the third floor and she'd actually gasped in surprise on entering her luxurious rooms, which were decorated in velvet and silks, heavy dark wood furniture, tapestries and plush carpets. A regal, four-poster canopied bed dominated the bedroom.

She'd spent part of each day since her arrival walking the formal gardens surrounding the estate that seemed to stretch out forever, although she avoided the front perimeter of the property because of the guard dogs. Security was certainly a consideration here. She'd been surprised to learn there were no telephones in the house when she'd asked to use the phone to call Jasmine. Emma explained Ahriman wanted complete and uninterrupted privacy while at home. She supposed it made sense, busy as he was. With each passing day, Carla's anticipation of seeing Ahriman again became more and more delicious. It'll be worth the wait.

After Carla finished her breakfast, she slid out of bed and entered the adjoining bathroom, admiring the old marble and elegant fixtures as she ran water for her bath. Yes, she decided, she was going to be very happy here.

\* \* \* \*

What have they done to me? Jasmine glimpsed a city nightscape flashing by with dizzying speed from a car window, and the view told her they were no longer in Florida. The stale air in the car, combined with the speed at which they were travelling, caused the nausea she'd been experiencing over the past three months to worsen considerably. She opened her mouth to protest, but only managed to moan weakly. Slumped in the back seat, she tried to lift her head, but the effort was too great, her head too heavy for her neck. Drugged. They drugged me. The thought surfaced through the cotton stuffing that seemed to occupy her mind. Only the back of the driver's head was visible to her, but she recognized the bald spot as belonging to Dr. Stronik. Christopher sat next to her in the back, regarding her with cool detachment. Jasmine had no idea how long they'd been travelling or where they were headed. Her eyes refused to stay open, and she passed out again.

The next time she came around, squinting in the gray afternoon light, she looked out the window to see they were on a highway. The car turned off at an exit marking the docks in New York. She had no idea how long she'd been out. "Where ... are you taking me?" she managed to croak.

"Out of the country. I've booked our passage on the ocean crossing to Southampton. You'll remain under Dr. Stronik's care during the voyage, and afterward, until the child is born. In seclusion, as per Ahriman's instructions. Isn't that right, doctor?"

In the rearview mirror, Jasmine caught a glimpse of Stronik's shifty eyes as he said in cold voice, "Yes. For your own protection. As well as that of your unborn child."

Christopher snickered, a sound that ripped through her heart like a knife. She closed her eyes and sank back into oblivion.

\*\*\*\*

When she next awoke, she found herself in bed, her head resting on soft pillows, a low thrumming noise in the air around her. To her left, through sliding glass doors, she could see a small balcony and, beyond it, the ocean. Christopher and Stronik were in the room with her, she noted, as her head lolled to the right. Confusion raced through her until fragments of her conversation with Christopher in the car earlier drifted back to her. They were on board a ship, crossing the ocean, headed for England.

Nausea assaulted her the minute she opened her eyes. She tried to get out of bed when she realized she was going to be sick, but too weak to move, she soiled the bedding. Immediately, she heard Christopher's irritated voice. "For Christ's sake, clean her up."

She watched Stronik get up from chair in the corner and move toward her. A spark of anger and thoughts of revenge passed through her when the strange doctor arrived at her bedside, but they were quickly extinguished by the drugs in her system. She closed her eyes, not wanting to know or understand anything more.

The entire remainder of the ocean crossing was nothing but a blur. On one occasion, she awoke to find herself hooked up to an IV. Her state of almost total inertia meant Stronik had pumped more drugs into her. She slept through most of the remaining six days. On the few occasions she came round, either Christopher or Stronik were in the stateroom with her, guarding her. She wondered bitterly what story they had concocted to explain her bedridden condition on board the ship. She supposed Stronik had been able to come up with a plausible explanation and the necessary paperwork to explain why his patient needed to travel to England by ship.

On the seventh day, they made landfall. Jasmine was carried off the vessel on a stretcher and deposited into a waiting car. Soon after, the car sped off as they began the journey to their ultimate destination, which she heard Christopher tell the driver was in Northumberland.

\*\*\*\*

Carla sipped champagne from a fluted glass and double-checked her reflection in the gilt-framed mirror over her dressing table. The red silk night gown and matching robe had arrived an hour earlier, delivered by Emma in her usual courteous manner, along with the champagne, on instructions from Ahriman. Carla twirled around in front of the mirror, admiring the way the smooth fabric clung to her thighs and complemented her long black hair. Ahriman would be here any minute, and she wanted to look perfect for him. The past two weeks awaiting his arrival had felt like an eternity.

As she turned away from the mirror, she was startled to see Ahriman standing just inside the doorway. She'd not heard him enter. At the sight of him, her heart began to pound madly and a pleasant warmth spread through her southern regions. His gaze travelled up and down her body before he looked into her eyes. When he fixed her with a stare, desire erupted in her like hot lava. He moved toward her, impaling her with those eyes of his. The world swam around her.

"You're here," she murmured.

As if from outside herself, Carla noticed his lips did not appear to move when he spoke to her. So strange. Yet the images that sprang into her mind were incredibly delicious and spoke to her of his love. She leaned into him as he covered her lips with his own. The images intensified. She felt faint just being close to him. He slipped the silk straps from her shoulders, and her gown slid to the floor. He lifted her, and backed her against the wall, driving into her as she moaned her pleasure. Glancing at his face, she noticed the odd, almost sly look that crossed his features, but dismissed it as one of passion.

\*\*\*\*

Christopher was right. Carla would prove to be a most pleasant distraction while he waited for his child to enter the world. Tonight, he would tell Carla who he really was ... what he really was. He intended to keep her around, for a while at least. Although her beauty was no match for Jasmine's, Carla was malleable as warm putty. He liked that about her. And he delighted in the idea of Jasmine arriving later tonight to find Carla here. Pity he wouldn't be here to see it with his own eyes, but by the time Christopher arrived with her, Ahriman would probably already have disembodied. His sexual appetite being what it was, he preferred to spend his time fornicating.

He reminded himself that, in the meantime, he will have planted another seed in Carla. Another Cambion to stand beside him, while he perfected his new race with Jasmine and her offspring.

Carla cried out again, and he returned his attention to her, chuckling under his breath. Life was good. And getting better.

\*\*\*\*

A couple of hours later, Carla floated awake and ran her hand along the mattress next to her. She found the spot still warm, but Ahriman had departed. The scent of the peculiar aftershave he favored still lingered on the bedding, though, and every delicious detail of their lovemaking burned brightly in her memory. Suddenly, she started, and sat up quickly in bed, remembering.

Christ, what a crazy dream. In it, Ahriman had told her ... But had it been a dream or had the strange conversation taken place? She tried to clear her mind so she could remember, but the details remained fuzzy. Confusion muddled her thoughts as she tried to recall his words. She could have sworn Ahriman had confided something to her ... something that had struck her as bizarre. Then the sound of his voice returned to her, telling her ... No, that's impossible. Had he really told her was not human? That he was a spirit who had the ability to mutate into flesh and blood ... or had she dreamt it? That's insane, you idiot, you were dreaming.

From the open window of her third floor bedroom, she heard the sound of a car door slam shut and caught snatches of low conversation coming from outside. Three-thirty in the morning. What could be going on at this hour? She moved sluggishly as she slid out of bed and covered herself with the red silk robe which she'd discarded on the floor earlier. Thoughts of Ahriman clouded her mind. Ahriman. Just thinking about him caused her heart to speed up.

She opened the door to her room and padded along the dimly lit hallway to the staircase. The sound of voices traveled up to her and she wondered again what the commotion was about. When she descended the stairs and stood in the main entryway, she found the staff lined up in the large foyer, uniformed and ready, obviously awaiting someone's arrival.

\*\*\*\*

Jasmine jolted awake when the car stopped. Through her drug-induced haze, she glimpsed the dim gray walls of a massive stone structure towering above her. Darkness had fallen, but exterior lights revealed the enormous façade of a gothic building. She could see hilly terrain and a dark forest behind the palatial edifice. There appeared to be no other houses nearby, and she discerned no other signs of life, no sound of cars—although somewhere nearby she heard dogs barking.

Dr. Stronik emerged from the car first, and hurried along the wide cobblestone walkway to the front steps. Christopher lifted her out of the car and followed him, carrying her. Jasmine was awake, but her arms and legs dangled uselessly as Christopher moved with her toward the massive entry doors of the manor. Her body felt numb. What did they give me? Not only had her physical strength been sapped, she felt oddly emotionless, her reactions blunted. Try as she might, she was unable to summon the anger which she desperately required. Whatever drugs they'd administered had caused her emotions to become as flat as the line on a monitor attached to a dead heart.

Stronik held the heavy doors open as Christopher carried her across the threshold, like a nightmare groom ushering her into hell. Jasmine gazed up at the carved oak



ceiling of the entry way that soared three stories high. Soft light infused the great hall and Jasmine caught glimpses of heavy furniture and an elaborate staircase that circled up to encompass all three floors.

As Christopher swung her around, Jasmine came face-to-face with a line of uniformed maids and stewards. Christopher addressed them in a matter-of-fact voice. "This is the woman I spoke to you of. You are all aware of the instructions regarding her?"

When they murmured their assent, he said, "She's sedated. Is her room ready?"

One of the gray-and-white-clad maids stepped out of line and said, "Yes, sir, just as you and Mr. Ahriman requested."

Jasmine's head flopped to one side. Barely conscious, she caught a glimpse of a dark-haired woman standing off to one side, dressed in a red silk robe. Something about the way she held herself seemed familiar and Jasmine strained to focus her vision.

Then it dawned on her. Carla. How ... Jasmine struggled to gain her attention, even though she wasn't sure what she was seeing was real or imagined. "Carla..." she mumbled in her direction. But Carla only stared back at her, a shocked look on her face. Then Carla swung out of sight again as Christopher turned to carry Jasmine up the circular stairway. Dr. Stronik followed them, his heavy footsteps echoing loudly in the large open space.

\* \* \* \*

When the main doors opened, Carla took a step back, caught off-guard by the sight of Christopher, who entered the house in a proprietary manner. What the ... What's Christopher doing here? Then she saw the semi-conscious woman he carried in his arms, and blinked in disbelief. As soon as Carla saw the long mane of blond curls and the graceful curve of the arms dangling at the woman's side, she gasped. Jasmine. What the fuck was going on? Why was Christopher here—and what had happened to Jasmine? She opened her mouth to speak, but could only watch, astounded, as Christopher issued orders to the staff. Jasmine was to be confined to her room, under the care of the strange doctor, Stronik, who had arrived with him. As Christopher turned to carry Jasmine upstairs, Jasmine looked directly at her and called out in a barely audible voice.

Carla, shocked by the sight of her friend, did not react quickly enough. "Jasmine!" she called back, but Christopher was already halfway up the stairs with her. Stronik stopped her with an icy command. "Wait here," he said, giving her a stony stare.

Intimidated by the strange-looking man, Carla backed down.

"You. Come with me," Stronik said to one of the maids, who hurried to follow him up the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

Christopher carried Jasmine into a bedroom that would have done justice to royalty, save for the leaded-glass windows which revealed it for the prison it was. He placed her on the edge of the bed and helped her to sit up until the chestnut-haired maid who had addressed Christopher downstairs a moment ago entered to assist in undressing her.

Jasmine tried again to elicit help as the woman tugged at her clothes to undress her. "Holding me ... against my will."

The woman appeared taken aback by her comment and glanced at Stronik.

"It's the medication," Dr. Stronik explained. "The only type suitable for pregnant women, I'm afraid. I'll keep an eye on the dosage. It can cause strange behavior sometimes."

"Yes, sir," said the servant, as she placed a soft cotton nightgown over Jasmine's head.

The maid helped Stronik to position Jasmine's limp body on the bed and pulled the bedcovers up to her chin.

"Thank you, that'll be all," said Christopher, with a dismissive nod.

After the woman left, Christopher whispered something to Dr. Stronik, who also left the room, closing the heavy wooden door behind him.

When they were alone, Jasmine struggled to speak. Staring at Christopher, she said, "Won't ... get away with this."

The sound of his laughter in response made her skin crawl.

"Who do you expect will help you ... Carla?" He bent over her, bringing his face close to hers. "Ahriman's taken quite a liking to her. I think I can safely say she won't be lifting a finger to help you."

Oh, Carla. Her mystery lover ... Ahriman.

"As for your confinement, be thankful you're here, and not where others who've betrayed him ended up. If not for the child you're carrying, your fate would have been much worse, you ungrateful bitch."

His despicable words flowed through her, eliciting sparks of anger. "Where's ... the pendant?"

"It's safe," he assured her with a sneer. "Ahriman left it with me for safekeeping on the day you betrayed him. It'll be returned to you when it's time for the baby to arrive. After all, Ahriman will want to witness the birth. Then he'll decide your fate, my love. For the time being, he's engaged in other ... pursuits."

He turned to leave, but stopped before he reached the door. "Oh, and just in case you get any bright ideas, you should know you're being watched. The same guardians that kept your mother company while she waited for you to enter the world will be watching over you. Ahriman's faithful ones."

Just before he exited the room, he flicked the switch on the wall next to the door, leaving her in darkness. The sound of a deadbolt clicking into place told her she was locked in.

Moonlight poured into the room from the large window on the wall to her left. Only the tops of trees from the forest beyond were visible from the window, lined up like sentinels beneath a brightly-lit moon stationed high in the night sky. As Jasmine watched, a dark shadow drifted past the backlit window. Then another, and another.

Gooseflesh rippled along her body. As she looked on, the room filled up with shadowy outlines of malformed creatures that jerked and crawled about with quick, strobe-like movements. The sound of their whispering, snickering voices reached her.

Disjointed thoughts flitted back and forth behind her eyes as she stared at the grotesque faces of the damned souls. One of the evil creatures appeared at her bedside and ran a withered hand along her face, but Jasmine hadn't the strength to fight him off. The remaining phantasms lurched toward her as she watched their advance, helpless to move. She tried to focus on conjuring her anger to keep them at bay, but only succeeded in fending them off for a few moments before



exhausting herself. Mercifully, after the first few blows struck, she passed out.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 25

Carla waited at the bottom of the staircase, pacing back and forth like a caged tigress. After a couple of moments, Christopher returned downstairs, and she hurried over to him.

"What are you doing here? And what's wrong with Jasmine?" she shot at him. He grabbed her by the arm and led her outside, away from the staff, who were still milling about and within earshot.

Once outside, Carla shook herself loose and turned on him. "What are you doing here? What's happened to Jasmine?" she repeated, her heart racing. Something was terribly wrong with this scenario.

She heard him chuff in annoyance. "I guess Ahriman left it me to tell you."

"How do you know Ahriman?"

He looked at her calmly, but did not answer right away.

"Answer me," she demanded, her voice rising in frustration.

"Keep your voice down!" His look silenced her.

"Okay," she said, struggling to hold back her anger at his imperious tone. "What's going on? How do you know Ahriman? And what the hell's wrong with Jasmine? She looked totally out of it." Her thoughts raced like bullets as the questions tumbled out on top of each other. She paused to afford him a chance to answer.

"Just for the record, I don't have to tell you anything," he snarled, bringing his face close to hers in a threatening manner. "But seeing as Ahriman's seen fit to have you brought here, I suppose it'll be made clear to you eventually."

Carla took a step back. "What do you mean?"

"I do know Ahriman," he said calmly. "Rather well, in fact. I've known him for over two centuries."

"Two—what are you talking about?"

"Stop interrupting me, if you want to know."

Carla bit back her resentment, and waited.

"Ahriman is my father. This estate is my home. I share it with Ahriman."

"Your father." Carla stared at him.

"Look, hard as this may be for your little mind to absorb, I'll try to lay it out for you."

He stopped to glare at her, and it took all of Carla's self-control to hold back from lashing out at him for his insulting manner and condescension. She waited for an explanation of his absurd statement of a moment ago.

"I am not," Christopher continued calmly, "a mortal. I'm a halfling, a Cambion—half mortal, half incubus. You are aware of Ahriman's nature, by now, I hope?"

Oh my God. The dream. What Ahriman had told her. She hadn't dreamt it? He'd really said those things?

"He told me something," she said weakly, "but it's not possible. It can't be."

"What did he tell you?"

Shock washed over her like ice water. "I think he told me earlier tonight that he was a spirit who could become flesh and blood. But I thought I'd dreamt it, that it couldn't possibly be..."

"True?" Christopher sneered. "It is. Ahriman is an incubus, an old soul. Or at least he was, until the fifteenth century. That's when he learned how to materialize. Since then he's been able to travel between the spiritual realm and the mortal world. Ahriman's been mating with mortal women since the fifteen hundreds. I'm living proof. This estate belonged to my mother before me. Her portrait hangs over the mantle in the drawing room—perhaps you noticed it. Ahriman mated with her in this very house in 1789. I was born the following year. Unfortunately, my mother died shortly after my birth. For the first twenty years of my life, Ahriman visited me on a fairly regular basis. Then, early in the eighteen hundreds, he disappeared, and I thought that was it, that I'd never see my father again. I found out later that something had happened to him. He kind of got stuck between the two worlds for some reason. He resurfaced again just over twenty years ago. Over the past two decades we've grown close again. Halflings live a long time, you understand. I'm almost two hundred and fifty years old, but from what I know of the elders who went before me, that's only about half my life span. Something about our unique nature, half spirit, half human, slows down the aging process in our bodies." He spoke with undeniable pride, and looked at her as if to ensure she was suitably impressed by all he'd told her.

All she could do was stare at him in utter disbelief. He carried on.

"There aren't many of us old halflings left. Only two others, aside from me, Thomas and Nathaniel. Ahriman's produced other children in the past two decades since awakening, of course, six of them last I heard, but most of them were too young to be brought into the fold."

When he finished talking, Carla finally found her tongue. "This is bullshit. I don't believe a word of it. Whatever stupid game you're playing, what does any of it have to do with Jasmine—or me for that matter?" she asked, shooting him a suspicious look. "Why did you bring Jasmine here? And what have you done to her?"

Christopher suddenly moved toward her, pushing her up against the wall and bringing his face up to hers until they were nose-to-nose. "Don't ever speak to me that way again. Understand? If you weren't here under Ahriman's protection, I'd—"

Carla remained perfectly still. The man was insane.

"Jasmine is the key to everything," Christopher said. "She's the only female Cambion in existence, so—"

"Jasmine—you're saying Jasmine is a Cambion, too?" Carla asked in amazement.

"Yes. As I said, the only female in existence. Unfortunately, she wasn't as cooperative as you when it came to Ahriman's advances. As for what we've done to her, she's merely been heavily sedated. Large doses of anti-anxiety medication. Nothing more. The medication won't adversely affect the fetus."

"The—what did you say?"

"You heard right. The child Jasmine's carrying was fathered by Ahriman. And it's the first of its kind. With an incubus father and Cambion mother, the child will be almost as powerful as Ahriman himself. We're about to witness the birth of a new race. And," he added, "once the child is born, Ahriman believes he'll become immortal. And, of course, eventually, he'll be able to supplant the human race with his new breed. Ahriman's going to be the most powerful being on earth once he achieves immortality."

Carla raised her hands, as if by doing so, she could ward off his insane words. "No. No more. This is craziness. I don't believe any of it. And you! How could you do this to Jasmine?" It dawned on her what a monumental mistake she had made in following Ahriman here, a mistake which she might not now be able to redress. These people were crazy.

"I did what Ahriman asked me to, as will you." His voice became threatening again. "You would do well to listen to what I'm telling you. You must have sensed Ahriman's real nature on some level ... You've felt his attraction. Haven't you ever asked yourself why he is so irresistible? And once he claims you, you're his for life."

I've got to get out of here. Tonight. She was frightened to death now. Before she did anything else, though, she had to find Jasmine. What Christopher had just told her was unbelievable, and yet ... Even after what she'd just heard, the desire that swept through her at the mere mention of Ahriman's name caused her to wonder if he wasn't what he claimed to be. Had she fallen under the spell of a monster?

"I want to see Jasmine."

"You don't give the orders around here. Jasmine's off-limits to you and everybody else," Christopher said in a steely voice. "Got it? As for you, don't be getting any ideas about running. Ahriman wouldn't like it. Besides, there's no getting away from him if he wants you here."

Carla gave him a rebellious stare.

"It's not wise to cross him, Carla ... You've heard of the dark souls? Ahriman's faithful ones?" His lip curled in a sly smile.

Carla felt the blood drain from her face. "No," she said, feeling nauseated and wanting to put an end to this incredible conversation.

"Just as well. They're deadly mean ... and very protective of Ahriman. You wouldn't want to run into them. Not for any reason, I assure you." He looked intently at her. "So, are we clear on the ground rules here?"

She hesitated, refusing to meet his eyes. Dark souls? Ahriman's faithful? This wasn't a game. Both her own life and Jasmine's were in danger. That much had gotten through to her. Finally, she said, "Yes. Perfectly clear." She hurried back inside, wanting to get as far away from him as she could.

Once inside, she raced upstairs. No matter what Christopher had said, she needed to find Jasmine and make sure she was all right. With a shock, she realized what she had learned tonight from Christopher was most likely the reason behind Jasmine's attempt to take her own life. Dear God. What had they gotten into? And Jasmine. A Cambion? It did seem to explain a lot, once she thought about it. Cambion or not, Jasmine was her best friend. She had to make sure she was all right.

When she got to the second floor, she glimpsed the strange doctor, Stronik, through the half-open door of his suite of rooms at the top of the landing. She slowed her pace and quietly continued along the hallway, trying every door as she went along. One of the suites had been prepared for Christopher, his bags set down inside the door. She continued on, finding nothing, until she arrived at the end of the long corridor. The last door on the left was locked. She placed her ear against the rough wood of the heavy door and listened.

Her head jerked back when she heard the strange sounds coming from the other side. "Jasmine! Jazzy, are you in there?" she whispered frantically, rattling the knob. The voices shrieked, and Carla stepped away from the door, terrified by the hideous sounds.

She recalled what Christopher had told her about the dark souls. They're deadly mean ... You wouldn't want to run into them for any reason.

Something slammed against the door from the other side, accompanied by a high-pitched, screeching noise that paralyzed her with fear. She prayed for her friend. But she ran. And did not pause for breath until she was back in her third floor bedroom with the door locked. She raced to retrieve her cellphone to call for help. It was nowhere to be found.

\* \* \* \*

Someone shook Jasmine awake. "Time to eat."

Jasmine opened her eyes to bright sunlight and squinted to focus on the face of the woman. It was the maid from the night before who stood next to her bed, holding a tray. A fierce headache penetrated Jasmine's eyes like daggers. Her remembrance of the previous night's encounter with the dark souls was blurred, but images of upraised hands and the sound of chanting voices floated through her dazed mind. She stared blankly at the woman.

"Breakfast, Miss" the maid repeated, setting the tray down on a small table next to the bed. She lifted Jasmine's head and arranged the pillows to sit her up. The woman's face appeared too long, the room distorted. The maid dipped a spoon into the bowl on the tray and held it out in front of Jasmine's lips. "You have to eat something."

The woman slipped the spoon between Jasmine's lips. The cream of wheat that landed in Jasmine's mouth plopped back out. Strands of white goo dribbled down her chin and neck. The maid used a napkin from the tray to wipe it away.

A clear memory from the night before came into focus, of a scarecrow-like spirit standing over her, ready to strike her with an emaciated hand.

Jasmine suddenly grasped the lapel of the maid's uniform. "Help me ... Help me get out of here..."

"Now, now," said the woman, as she pried Jasmine's fingers from her collar. "No one's going to hurt you, dear. You're safe here. Mr. Ahriman left word that you're to be well-looked after, and you will be, ma'am."

"...last night," Jasmine rambled, her head throbbing mercilessly. "They were in my room..."

Using a device she pulled from her pocket, the maid paged Dr. Stronik to the room.

"No. Don't do that..."

Seconds later, Stronik rushed in. "Thank you, Miss Wylde, I'll take it from here."

Dr. Stronik suctioned the contents of a small vial into a syringe and used a cotton ball saturated with alcohol to rub the area below her shoulder. Jasmine flailed her arms about weakly in an attempt to keep him away, but he grabbed her upper arm and jammed the needle in before she knew what had happened.

"I've increased the dosage," she heard him say from far away. "She'll be fine now."

Immediately, her body went limp. Her thoughts turned vaporous, drifting through her mind like the clouds in the sky outside her window. Blissful nothingness descended over her.

\* \* \* \*

Night again. Jasmine stared at the storm raging outside her window, mesmerized by the back-and-forth motion of the wind-whipped trees. The images skittering across her mind made no sense, not even to her. Lightning lit the sky nearby, and in the momentary flash of light, she saw them—the dark souls. They filled the room, some standing, others crawling with spider-like movements up the walls and along the ceiling. Still others hung upside-down like bats on the heavy curtains flanking the window.

Jasmine did not immediately react, feeling oddly disconnected from the sight of the hideously deformed creatures. Her debilitated mind wondered vaguely why her mother had not been able to see them. Because she wasn't a Cambion, came the answer from within. The phantasms stared, their dead eyes trained on her as they inched their way closer and closer to the bed. Sparks of anger ignited and sputtered out as Jasmine attempted in vain to summon her wrath.

"You don't scare me, you dumb, dead m'fuckers."

She did her best to keep them back, away from her, but that bastard, Stronik, had increased the dosage, and her mental push collapsed. Seconds later, they surrounded her, ready to begin their night's work.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 26

Carla looked out her bedroom window at the dreary day. A drizzly rain, which had begun early that morning, continued to fall, muting the vibrant colors of the landscape and turning the tree trunks slick and dark. Dismal gray afternoon light filtered into the room, underscoring her dark mood.

Two months. Eight weeks and two days to be exact, since Jasmine had arrived and Carla had learned the truth. She walked listlessly to the dressing table tucked into the room's corner and sat, brushing her velvety black hair in quick, downward strokes. She turned away from her reflection in the mirror, as if by doing so, she could eradicate the truth contained in the frightened eyes that stared back at her.

Her hands moved to her midsection, where nausea, and something more, sat heavily. Two months. And now I'm pregnant. Another Cambion to add to his collection. She covered her face with her hands and wept.

To her horror and disgust, everything Christopher had told her turned out to be true. Ahriman had made it abundantly clear to her that she would remain here with him, to be used at his pleasure, or suffer the consequences. The one night she had endured in the company of the dark souls was all it had taken to convince her Ahriman was never again to be crossed, not under any circumstances. Once she had emerged, shaken and bruised from her night of torment at the hands of the faithful, she'd agreed to his conditions without argument. In return, Ahriman told her she would be allowed free access to the house, and be permitted to walk the gardens twice a day.

That bastard. She grabbed one of the perfume bottles from the dressing table, remembering how she'd so admired the dainty glass creations on her arrival, and hurled it across the room where it shattered against the wall. Roiling anger erupted inside her. How could I have been so stupid?

And Jasmine. She could not imagine what her friend must be enduring at the hands of the dark souls every night. Carla had done her best over the past two months to try to gain entry to Jasmine's room, but the key was under Ahriman's control, or Christopher's when Ahriman wasn't around. She'd tried to communicate with Jasmine through the locked door many times during the daylight hours when no one was nearby, but Jasmine did not respond. No doubt she was too doped up to talk, or even hear her. Carla knew her friend was still alive, and would remain so, at least until she gave birth, but nothing more. She'd not seen her since the first night Jasmine had been carried in, and was sick with worry for her.

Mixed in with Carla's anger and worry was the shame of knowing she had taken Ahriman into her bed many times in the past two months. On each occasion he'd materialized, his shadowy charisma had only increased, making it impossible for her to reject him. He continued to glamour her at whim. Save for when she was under his spell, her days were filled with fear and despair. She'd not been able to come up with a way out of this miserable mess. Not yet, anyway.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 27

Jasmine mechanically swallowed the food being spoon fed to her. "What day?" she asked the maid assigned to her care, whom she knew only as Miss Wylde. Then she turned to stare vacantly outside the window again, at the early morning fog as it slowly burned away in the sunlight. Vague memories of her life back in Tampa drifted and rolled through her mind. They were blotted out by menacing images of Ahriman, and Christopher's arrogant face, causing vengeful thoughts to momentarily awaken before dissipating.

Another day of endless routine awaited her. Breakfast and sponge bath in the morning, followed by a visit from Dr. Stronik, and an injection. Then lunch. In the afternoon, Miss Wylde assisted her in walking around her bedroom. Dinner, more walking. Then night, and the arrival of her nocturnal companions.

"Tuesday, miss."

"No, what day ... what date?" she stuttered. She looked down at her enlarged stomach. The sight of it filled her with unformed dread.

"The twenty-second of April today."

"How long...?"

Miss Wylde looked at her sympathetically. "How long have you been here?"

Jasmine nodded.

"Almost six months now."

A single teardrop rolled down her cheek as the unwanted knowledge seeped in. It's almost time.

"Come now, don't cry, Miss. Dr. Stronik says you're getting better. You're going to be all right," she told her. "Eat something, now. You need your strength. For the baby."

Jasmine attempted to focus on the woman's face, trying, and not succeeding, to penetrate the nurse's mind. She noticed the woman glanced furtively at her scarred wrist and understood the expression in her eyes. She thinks I'm crazy. An indiscretion on the part of her employer, knocking up a woman who'd turned out to have mental problems.

Jasmine disconnected again, opening her mouth like a baby bird waiting for its mother to feed it.

\* \* \* \*

The next several days floated by like all the others for Jasmine, until she awoke early one evening, vaguely aware that the bedding beneath her was saturated with moisture. The lock turned in the heavy door to her room, and Dr. Stronik entered. Her confusion increased. No injections at night, only morning. Then Christopher walked in, and she remembered. She faced forward again. It's time. The baby's coming. That's why they're here. That's why the bed's wet. Her water had broken.

She heard Christopher's whispered voice as he spoke to Stronik. "I sent the last of the staff home for the next two weeks. Ahriman wanted no outsiders in the house during the birth and for a while after. They were happy for the time off. No one batted an eye. How long do you think it'll be before she delivers?"

"Could be as early as tonight. Certainly within the next forty-eight hours. I'm prepared for a C-section, if one becomes necessary."

Jasmine heard their shuffling footsteps as the two men moved about. What were they doing? Suddenly, the deep glow of candlelight infused the room. Jasmine lifted her head weakly to see the men had placed heavy candles around the perimeter of the bed. Soon after, the scent of burning incense assailed her.

Christopher and Dr. Stronik stood over her. Jasmine looked straight ahead with a catatonic stare while the doctor snapped something into place on the posts at the head of the bed. Stronik and Christopher moved her arms away from her sides and bound her wrists with fat leather straps that snapped shut with grommets. She struggled feebly against the new restraints. It occurred to her, not for the first time, that Ahriman probably intended to kill her once the child was born.

Then Christopher leaned over her, and she shrank away from him, not wanting to even brush his shadow. He smiled at her distress as he removed something from his pocket and dangled it over her expressionless face.

The pendant. "No." She struggled as he unbuttoned the front of her nightgown and placed it around her neck.

"It's almost time," he whispered close to her ear.

Hot anger flashed through her momentarily. Before it dissolved, she met his eyes, and spat in his face. He moved as if to strike her, but calmly wiped the spittle from his face instead.

The weight of the pendant resting between her breasts felt dead, the precursor of a dreaded event. Soon, Ahriman would arrive to witness the birth.

I am here, my child. You are not alone.

Jasmine started. Her eyes snapped open. This was not Ahriman's voice, but the other, the one she had heard months ago that had abandoned her. Christopher moved away from the bed to talk to Stronik on the other side of the room. She had heard the voice clearly, even through the foggy of her drugged mind. The men's whispers faded into the background as the voice spoke again. Follow me, it urged. Travel toward me.

Jasmine latched onto the voice like a lifeline. She closed her eyes again and followed the voice down as it continued to speak soothingly to her.

After a moment, she entered a state where she was neither asleep nor awake. As she trailed the voice down through the layers of consciousness, her thoughts became less confused, her mind clearer.

Finally, she arrived at a place where she felt surrounded by a gentle presence, one that seemed to exude light and warmth. The remaining cobwebs parted and clarity returned to her, for the first time since she'd entered this prison.

Who are you?

I am Sephora, came the soft reply.

Are you a spirit?

Yes, although I do not reside in the land of spirits. I exist between the two worlds. My home is a desolate place from which there is no escape. Sephora sighed. My prison is dark. I can see neither the mortal world, nor the land of spirits. Only when he passes through where I am does the light enter my dark abode, and then only for an instant.

Only when he passes through ... was it possible? Do you mean Ahriman? Does Ahriman pass through where you live to enter the mortal world? In her unconscious body, her heart began to pound.

Yes. It is within the pendant that I dwell, where I am imprisoned.

Jasmine tried hard to remember the other occasions she had heard the woman's voice, and realized she had been wearing the pendant on each occasion. She heard the spirit sigh again, a sorrowful sound.

You carry his child.

Yes.

Sephora began to gently weep.

Can you help me? Jasmine asked.

The weeping stopped. I risk my own existence, such as it is, by communing with you. Ahriman knows not that I dwell here. Up until this time, I have managed to remain

hidden from him. If he detects my presence, I fear he will bind me to him for eternity. It is only after he has passed through into your world that I may make my presence known to you safely, and he rests in the spirit world at present. I should remain silent, and yet your plight has moved me to speak. You must know by now that once the child is born, Ahriman will become immortal in your world. If this comes to pass, there will be no hope of salvation for my soul, or the souls of the others.

Jasmine listened in shocked silence to Sephora's words. Ahriman. Immortal? Because of her child? No wonder he'd been hell-bent on breeding with her. And who were the 'others' of which Sephora spoke?

There are others?

Yes. The spirits of the women who have died on his account, and his interference in their mortal lives, are many. They have sought me out. I share their grief, and yet I am powerless to help them. Their souls cannot rest. They wander, earthbound, searching for retribution, having chosen to roam in darkness until the wrongs committed against them are righted. Among these lost souls, your own mother walks.

My mother. Jasmine recalled the first time she had heard Sephora's voice just after Aunt Dora had passed away. A strange doubling over took place in her mind as she recalled her life before Ahriman. At the time, she had thought the wailing voices in her head to be the voices of the damned. She felt grief, and shame to think she'd been frightened by the sound of those mournful souls, of which her mother was one.

Suddenly, she was jolted back to reality as her first contraction hit her, hard. Her abdomen contracted and hardened with searing pain that cut across her midsection like a knife.

Dr. Stronik quickly moved toward her, Christopher at his side.

"It's starting. Ahriman will make his entry soon," said Christopher.

Jasmine delved back down through the layers of consciousness to where Sephora waited. When she was once again in the spirit's presence, she cried, Hide. He's coming. She felt Sephora's fear rippling through her subconscious.

I will return once he has crossed over. Listen for me.

Yes. Go.

\* \* \* \*

Several hours later, Jasmine strained against the leather bindings at her wrists and cried out against the powerful pain as another contraction rocked her. They were coming close together now, and the mood-altering drugs in her system did nothing to ease the pain of her labor. After hours of increasingly painful contractions, her body glistened with sweat, her hair was drenched and plastered to her head. The cotton nightgown she wore clung wetly to her. She arched her back as the contraction peaked and the pain climaxed, doing her best to regulate her breathing until the spasm died down.

Her breath became ragged, partly from exertion and partly out of fear of what was transpiring. She had never experienced childbirth, so had nothing against which to gauge the enormous pain she experienced with each contraction. Something told her, though, the pain was not the normal pain of childbirth. Twice she had passed out from it. She did not have enough energy to be concerned about Ahriman's imminent arrival. She focused every bit of attention on managing the pain as her unborn child attempted to enter the world. Her arms ached terribly from being restrained for so many hours, and her hands had gone numb hours ago. She focused on breathing deeply following the contraction, knowing another would hit momentarily.

As she struggled against the blinding pain of her next convulsion, the pendant resting against her chest became warm. The skin beneath it began to tingle. Through half-closed lids, she watched as a tiny ribbon of mist emerged from the pendant, signaling Ahriman's entry. She bit back a scream as the contraction peaked.

Christopher and Dr. Stronik, who up until now had watched silently as Jasmine struggled with her pain, got to their feet immediately and stood to one side of the room. The candles had all but burned down, although dawn had not yet broken. Silver mist began to pour from the pendant around her neck. In seconds, the room filled with the glow of a thick bright haze Jasmine remembered all too well.

Christopher remained expressionless as the mist began to gather into itself, but she heard Dr. Stronik's sharp intake of breath and saw him blink before taking a small step backward, his mouth sagging in surprise. When Ahriman's face emerged, Jasmine closed her eyes. Immediately, Sephora spoke to her.

I am here. Do not be afraid. I will not leave you now. Pay no heed to what Ahriman says or does, for he needs you intact and will not risk your death. Close your mind to him and remain calm. The child will be born. Once the birth has taken place, if it is within my power, I will do what I can to help you.

Jasmine opened her eyes to see Ahriman's shadowy form standing at the foot of her bed, his piercing black-and-gold eyes looking directly at her.

"How fares my queen?" he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

As Jasmine surveyed her enemy, she was grateful to find that the drugs in her system had the effect of dulling not only her anger, but her response to his charismatic attraction, as well. She stared silently at the monster that lurked behind the mask of enchantment.

Ahriman moved suddenly, ripping the nightgown from her. "Get on with it," he growled at Stronik, grabbing the man by the collar and pushing him toward the bed.

Dr. Stronik appeared to shake all over as he hurried to examine her. "Yes. She's nearly dilated enough to accommodate the baby."

"I'm impatient to see the child," Ahriman said, fixing Stronik with a dagger-like stare.

Dr. Stronik appeared to be in shock at the apparition that was Ahriman, but he nodded and arranged Jasmine's legs, instructing her to begin pushing at the next contraction.

The pain hit hard again, cutting through her unfocused thoughts. Up until this moment, the child growing within her had represented only the dreadful consequence of her mating with Ahriman, one Sephora had told her would result in Ahriman's immortality. What she hadn't counted on was the primal reaction that washed over her, one which, under the circumstances, she fought to resist. But there was no denying it. The child she was about to give birth to was her flesh and blood. A wave of protectiveness for her offspring ran through her, overriding the wrenching pain.

"Push," Stronik urged her.

Instinctively, she bore down hard, breathed, bore down again. She felt a searing, burning pain as the baby's head began to crown.

"Good. Again," directed Stronik, who had positioned himself between her legs to assist in the birth.

Jasmine screeched, unable to help the sound from escaping, as she exerted maximum pressure in an attempt to expel the child from her body.

Once more. It's almost out," said Stronik.

Jasmine squeezed her eyes shut and pushed with all her might. She felt her flesh tear as the baby slid out of her.

A second later, Stronik held the baby up by its feet in front of her. A small moan escaped Jasmine when she looked upon the child she had birthed—a girl. A girl with a shock of hair as black as Ahriman's.

Heavy silence hung in the room. Her daughter did not cry even when Stronik slapped her tiny bottom, once, twice, three times. Jasmine watched as Stronik stared fearfully at the infant's limp body dangling from his hand. The grayish-blue color of the baby's skin sent a clear message of lifelessness. Pain of a different kind cut through Jasmine's debilitated mind and coursed through her at the sight of her poor, dead daughter. "Dead," she muttered to herself.

The word brought with it the knowledge that Ahriman had not succeeded. If what Sephora had told her was true, until she produced a living breathing child for him, immortality would not be his.

No, came Sephora's soft voice, Wait.

\* \* \* \*

Ahriman focused his attention on the lifeless infant and spoke. "She has yet to emerge from the realm of death. Once she navigates her way through the hidden realm, she will arrive in the world of the living," he said, turning to Jasmine. "As did you."

He waited in silence, confident that the baby would take its first breath. Jasmine had survived the passage through the dark realm. She had been the first female to do so. Her daughter would do the same, he felt certain. A moment passed, and another. Still the infant showed no signs of life. Ahriman turned his deadly gaze on Stronik, whose own eyes now fairly bugged out of their sockets with fear. "You'd better pray the child lives," he threatened in a low whisper, "or I'll cut off your head and feed it to the rats."

Stronik visibly paled. Still holding the infant in his shaking hand, he said, "I'll do whatever I—"

All at once, the baby let out a howling wail. Ahriman shot a triumphant glance at Jasmine. "Congratulations," he sneered, "on the birth of our first child. The first of many," he added, caressing her cheek.

He heard a tiny moan escape her as she turned her face away from him and watched as Stronik cut the umbilical cord and wiped the baby clean.

Ahriman took his new daughter in his arms and directed Stronik, whose face was now the color of curdled milk, to unbind Jasmine's wrists and leave. When Stronik had done as he was told, Ahriman summoned the dark souls to come forth.

The faithful began to arrive, one by one, to bear witness to the historic birth of the first and to pay homage to Ahriman and the child. Before long, the room was filled with the chanting voices of the dark souls as they groveled before the newly immortal Ahriman.

Ahriman held his daughter up as the dark souls paid their respects to her. "She is the first," said Ahriman, holding the infant high in the air before him. "Her name will be Pandora, for she bears the gifts which I will bestow upon mankind."

He lowered the child and, with Christopher by his side, paraded her proudly before his hideous audience.

Afterward, Ahriman spoke his instruction to Jasmine. "You will see to the child's nourishment. Her powers will develop quickly and fully only if she receives nourishment from your body. That will be the extent of your involvement with her. She will be raised under my direction and mine alone."

Jasmine's arms were still numb from being bound, and it took several moments before enough feeling returned to her hands that she was able to take the baby in her arms. As she received her newborn daughter, a deadly thought surfaced, hovering just above the chaos of her mind. If the child dies before I can bear him another, Ahriman's hope of immortality dies with it. She understood that she could put an end to everything, and that an opportunity to do so might present itself. She pushed the terrible thought away and looked down upon her daughter.

Jasmine gasped out loud as she studied the face of her newborn. Her daughter's tiny features mirrored Ahriman's, from her rose-red lips to the long, velvety lashes of her closed eyelids and the raven-black curls that crowned her perfectly formed little head. To describe the child as magnificent would be an understatement. Her singular beauty was beyond measure. While she held her gorgeous infant to her bosom, Pandora opened her eyes and looked directly at Jasmine. Her daughter's eyes were ebony, like Ahriman's. The irises were not ringed with gold, however, but with the same deep jade color of her own eyes. As she captured Pandora's riveting gaze, a connective thread formed between them, and Jasmine was astounded to catch a glimpse into her tiny daughter's mind. The mental image that came through was one of pristine white light. Jasmine's mind translated the image into a single word. Innocence.

As Pandora's rosebud lips latched on to her breast and began to suckle, Jasmine knew what she had contemplated earlier would never come to pass. She would allow no harm to come to her child. Even if it meant the end of all humankind.

\* \* \* \*

Carla crouched in the corner at the end of the hall, next to the locked door of Jasmine's bedroom. The house was empty, the staff having been sent home the night before. The birth, she knew, was taking place behind the locked door. For hours, she had sat in the corner, listening to Jasmine's screams, until short moments ago, when finally her cries had ceased.

Please, God, let her be all right, she prayed, clenching her fists so tightly that her nails dug into the palms of her hands. Minutes went by, but still no sound carried past the door. No sound from Jasmine. No infant crying to signal the birth had taken place. She strained to hear through the heavy door, waiting, wondering whether Jasmine was dead or alive. Suddenly, she heard the wail of a newborn, and then Ahriman's murmured words to Jasmine. Relief flooded over her. Jasmine had survived the birth, as had her child. It's done, then. He got what he wanted. Now he's immortal. Relief that Jasmine and the child had survived mingled with fear. What would happen to them now?

The door was yanked open, and Carla scabbled deeper into the corner, her back against the wall, praying the open door would block her from view. Through the crack where the door hinged, she caught a glimpse of Jasmine, lying naked on the bed. She was motionless, and bloody from childbirth, but breathing.

Stronik exited the room, closing the door and hurrying down the hall, away from her. She held her breath. If he turned around, she'd be in plain sight. But he reached the staircase at the end of the corridor and descended without a backward glance.

After he disappeared from sight, Carla returned to her room on the floor above. Jasmine and her child had survived. There was that to be thankful for. At least she was not alone in this house of horror. Now that Jasmine had given birth, Carla fantasized again about escaping to safety with her friend and the baby. If they could get past the guard dogs and onto the road, maybe they could hitch a ride, or obtain outside help by getting to a phone.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

PART THREE

Black Karma

Chapter 28

Venice, Italy

Thomas watched the gentle rise and fall of Elisabeta's breath as she slept beside him. He enjoyed nothing more than studying her in repose. Thick, dark waves of her hair streamed across the pillow. Her long black eyelashes rested lightly against the olive skin of her delicate face, which was nestled in the crook of a slender arm. His gaze traveled downward and lingered on her lovely breasts, and from there to the slight curve of her stomach and the tanned, shapely legs protruding from the swath of sheets tangled around her hips. Her sweet scent lingered in the air around him, the taste of her remained on his lips. Mortal beauty was so fleeting, and therefore to be treasured.

The trilling sound of the telephone interrupted his pleasant pastime. Elisabeta opened her eyes and murmured something to him as he reached for the bedside phone without taking his eyes from her.

"Pronto."

"Hello, Thomas."

Thomas swiveled around on the bed and sat up ramrod straight.

"Christopher."

The last time he'd seen his half-brother was twenty years ago, in England, and under unpleasant circumstances. Why the devil would he be calling now?

He listened in shocked silence as Christopher conveyed Ahriman's instructions. He and Nathaniel were to return to England. Immediately.

"Why?" he asked between clenched teeth.

"He'll explain everything himself once you're here."

Thomas frowned, replacing the receiver without saying good-bye.

"Cos' e successo? What is it, amore?"

Thomas turned to Elisabeta, now wide awake and sitting up in bed. "I'm sorry, love. Something's come up."

Sighing, Elisabeta rose, dragging the sheet with her to the bathroom. After several minutes, she emerged, dressed and ready to depart. She brushed her lips lightly against Thomas's cheek and whispered in his ear. "Call me soon. I'd like to see you again."

"I have to be out of the country for a while—business—but I'll call you as soon as I return."

He watched her as she slipped on her shoes and soundlessly let herself out.

After the conversation he'd just had, Thomas seriously doubted he would ever see the lovely Elisabeta again. He took another moment to collect his thoughts. The fact that he and his brother had been summoned to England by Ahriman did not bode well. After a quick shower, he dressed and left the comfort of his bedroom and the memory of last night's lovemaking behind. He made his way through the large and well-appointed sitting room, and stepped out onto the ancient stone balcony of the apartment he shared with his brother, Nathaniel. He found Nathaniel occupied with the morning paper and sipping an espresso.

Thomas said nothing at first, only walked to the balustrade to take in the spectacular view of St. Mark's square, as he'd done each morning for the past twenty years. It had taken many months of wrangling for him and Nathaniel to procure the exclusive apartment, located in the procuratie nuove, the centuries old buildings over the arcades that surrounded the square, and it had cost them a tidy fortune. But waking each day to the sight of the domes and spires of St. Mark's Cathedral, with its unique blending of Byzantine and Romanesque architecture, and the porticos and finely wrought loggias of the Dodge's Palace, would have been worth any price to Thomas. He and his brother shared a deep fascination and appreciation for the renaissance city which they'd chosen to call home.

Neither of them had regretted moving here from England two decades ago. Life in the romantic city, with its stunning architecture and surrounded as it was by the sparkling waters of the Adriatic, had an idyllic, fairy-tale quality they both found enchanting, despite the tourists that flooded the place on a daily basis.

The fact that he and Nathaniel had displayed no outward signs of aging for the past ninety years or so made it difficult for them to remain in one place for long stretches of time. Both of them were just over two centuries old, even though to mortals they appeared to be in their mid-thirties. Ever mindful that their Cambion natures must remain hidden to humans, they seldom lingered in one spot for very long.

Throughout their long lives, they had dedicated themselves to reconciling their spiritual personalities with their mortal natures. As had always been the case for Thomas and Nathaniel, their humanness took precedence over their incubus tendencies, and they sought to dwell contentedly in the mainstream of human existence.

Unfortunately, no female Cambions existed with whom they could consort, a fact that weighed more and more heavily on both of them as the years ground on. However, they regularly indulged in brief liaisons with mortal women, whose company they truly enjoyed. The handsome brothers were seldom seen about Venice unless accompanied by a striking beauty. Despite their origins, Thomas and Nathaniel had managed to live long, rich and fulfilling lives in the world of mortals. But their contentment was about to come to a screeching halt.

As he surveyed the sun-drenched Piazza San Marco, a deep pang of regret cut through Thomas. The fact that they'd been ordered to return to England meant that he and Nathaniel would not be enjoying the view, or their comfortable life in Venice, for much longer.

"We need to talk, brother," he said to Nathaniel, who peeked out from behind his newspaper when Thomas spoke.

\* \* \* \*

Nathaniel put the paper aside and looked sharply at his brother when he heard the grave tone of Thomas's voice.

Despite the fact that they had been birthed by the same mortal mother, Nathaniel differed greatly in appearance from his fair-haired brother. Thomas's complexion was fair, his hair thick and blond like their mother's had been. In striking contrast, Nathaniel sported a shock of raven-black hair, his complexion Mediterranean. He closely resembled their father, Ahriman.



"What's the matter, Thomas?"

"I've just received a disturbing call."

Nathaniel looked at his brother, waiting. Whatever news had arrived, it didn't bode well, judging by the thunderclouds that had gathered in Thomas's blue eyes.

"From Christopher," he added.

"Shit," muttered Nathaniel, "what did he want?" There was certainly no love lost between the brothers and Christopher. Or between them and their father, for that matter, although they'd never dared to voice their distaste for Ahriman to anyone but each other. They were not fools.

Both he and Thomas had believed Ahriman to be out of their lives for good when his visitations to the mortal world had ceased almost two centuries ago. They'd been shocked and dismayed to learn of Ahriman's return to the mortal world just over twenty years ago. Ahriman's return had, in fact, prompted them to leave England immediately.

"There's been a development," said Thomas, "although Christopher wouldn't say what. Just that Ahriman has ordered us to return to England."

Nathaniel's annoyance transformed into worry. He and Thomas had succeeded, for the most part, in remaining outside the circle of Ahriman's earthly endeavors for the past two decades. Neither of them wanted anything to do with their father's undertakings in the mortal world. The powerful spirit who had fathered them had lost whatever trace of humanity he'd possessed long before they'd come along. As children, their early encounters with Ahriman before he'd disappeared had left them with a deep-seated hatred for the cold-hearted being who called himself their father. And Ahriman's treatment of the mortal women he chose to consort with repulsed them. They knew only too well that most of the women he used to satisfy his unbridled lust had ended up dead at his hands. Their own mother had been one of Ahriman's victims.

Nathaniel himself had no memory of his mother. She'd died shortly after birthing him. Thomas, though, had been eight years old when he witnessed their mother's murder at Ahriman's hands in 1794. Thomas still carried a small locket-sized portrait of their mother with him, just as he carried his enmity for their murderous father in the secret recesses of his heart. An enmity which Nathaniel also shared.

"We're to leave immediately," Thomas said. "Today."

Nathaniel sighed in resignation. Like Thomas, he knew that such a call meant something of epic proportion had occurred and, as such, could not go unheeded. "I'll phone the airline." Following his brother's gaze to the square below, he said, "I'm going to miss this place."

Thomas didn't answer, and worry flooded over Nathaniel again. The look on his brother's face assured him things were about to get very bad indeed.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 29

Ahriman sipped cognac from a snifter, savoring the taste of the amber liquid as it burned a path down his throat. So many new sensations, and so much time, now, to explore them.

It had taken him almost a full week following Pandora's birth to adjust to his new state. The human condition had long ago ceased to be familiar to him, and he'd needed to re-learn the signs of hunger, the requirement for sleep, and all of the other bodily functions to which mortals were prone. It was a task he applied himself to willingly now that his energy had been made concrete in the physical plane.

Disembodiment, he was pleased to discover, remained a choice but no longer a necessity. Never again would he be required to return to the dreary hidden realm in order to effect his materialization in the mortal world. Certainly, he had no desire to return to the sub-astral plane. His new life began here and now, in the mortal world.

He sighed in satisfaction. His journey had been a long one, but he'd finally succeeded. That which he had longed for since his soul's entry into the dark realm had finally come to pass. Immortality in the physical plane was his at last.

No permanent damage could now be caused to his physical body. He had, since Pandora's birth, tested the boundaries, so to speak. The knife he'd driven into his arm had penetrated his flesh and caused him to bleed, but the wound had almost immediately sealed shut, leaving no mark. He'd felt no pain, only a prickly feeling as the blade entered and exited.

Next, he'd taken a firearm and gone out into the woods. Risky, but he needed to know exactly what his body could withstand. The impact of the gunshot he'd fired into himself had tossed him back, and he'd suffered a moment's panic as he surveyed the tiny hole in his stomach and the blood that gushed from it. In the next instant, however, his abdomen spat the bullet back out and, once again, the wound sealed itself quickly, leaving no trace of injury.

There was nothing extraordinary about his physical strength, he learned. His attempts to lift unusually heavy objects proved unsuccessful. And he moved roughly at the same speed as ordinary mortals as well, although if he needed to get somewhere in a hurry, he could always disembody and move about as a spirit. His ability to glamour mortals, he was pleased to discover, had not diminished in the least.

He rose from the chaise upon which he'd been ruminating in the suite of rooms he'd converted to a nursery. Ahriman chose to remain close by his daughter since her birth and would continue to keep her under his watchful eye. Until Jasmine produced another child for him, Pandora's existence was the only means by which his immortality would be sustained. She was, therefore, his most precious possession.

He had allowed Jasmine the past week to recuperate from childbirth. Tomorrow he would pay her a visit. The sooner he got started producing another child, the better. Even in her present condition, Jasmine remained ravishingly beautiful, and he ached to join with her again. Aside from Pandora, she was still the most exquisite creature he'd ever laid eyes on. He'd had to fight the temptation to take her immediately again after the birth. Not wanting to risk damage to her, though, he'd restrained himself. For that reason, he'd also called off the dark souls, who no longer visited her each night. They had inflicted enough pain on her for the time being. He had made his point. The drugs Stronik continued to administer to Jasmine would be enough to ensure her submissiveness.

He frowned, suddenly remembering the bolt of energy that had caused him to disembody on the day Jasmine had betrayed him. The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that Jasmine possessed the rare ability to summon raw energy, a by-product of her hybrid nature, perhaps. He determined it would not be wise to take any chances with her. She would remain heavily sedated.

There was Carla to amuse himself with. She'd balked at first, when he explained she had no choice but to remain at his disposal for as long as he wanted. In the end, his faithful had convinced her, and she had submitted to his will. His ravenous appetite for sex had only increased since he'd assumed his permanent physical form. Now that he was eternally established in the mortal world, he'd spent many delightful hours with Carla following Pandora's birth. And once the breeding process with Jasmine got underway, there remained an endless supply of mortal women with whom he could mate if he so chose, now that his time was no longer subject to

restriction.

Standing over the pristinely outfitted crib where Pandora rested, he looked at his daughter, who had just awakened. It pleased him to no end that the child had inherited his darkly beautiful looks. The only characteristic that betrayed her connection to Jasmine was the emerald ring around the irises of her black eyes—eyes as riveting as his own.

He had already begun to penetrate Pandora's thoughts, undeveloped though they were. As understanding grew in the child, he would have no trouble influencing her. Ultimately, like the other children he intended to father with Jasmine, Pandora would grow up to become a powerful being. He looked lovingly upon the baby, knowing that, in time, she would reign beside him.

A soft knock sounded on the door.

"Who is it?" he fairly growled, annoyed at the interruption.

"Christopher," came the response. "Thomas and Nathaniel have arrived. They're waiting for you in the drawing room."

His tone softened at the sound of his favored son's voice. "I'll be right down," he said, anxious to reunite with Thomas and Nathaniel. He'd seen little of his other sons over the past two decades since his awakening.

Before Ahriman left, he summoned the spirits of the faithful to watch over Pandora in his absence. They arrived immediately, filling the room. After paying their respects to Ahriman, their sinister forms jostled for position around the crib, crowding around Pandora.

A tiny smile curled his lip as Ahriman watched his daughter's magnetic eyes flitting back and forth among the deformed phantasms, appearing to draw them toward her. She was seeing them, he knew. And she did not cry.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 30

Carla peeked out from behind the heavy velvet curtain of her bedroom window to see a sleek black Mercedes traveling along the road leading to the manor. Seconds later, it pulled up in front of the house, and Christopher emerged to greet the two exceptionally handsome men who exited the car. Thomas and Nathaniel, Ahriman's other sons. She'd overheard Christopher mention they'd be arriving today.

Just two days ago, Carla had caught her first glimpse of Pandora as Ahriman carried the tiny infant to Jasmine's room to be fed. The daughter Jasmine had given birth to was extraordinary. Even from a distance, Carla could see that the child was uniquely beautiful. Her exquisite looks were dark, like Ahriman's. Seeing the protective manner in which Ahriman held the child caused a chill to run up her spine. The thought of that madman instilling his poison into Jasmine's baby sickened her. Carla decided, after seeing Ahriman with Pandora, that she must do something—anything—to try to extricate herself, as well as Jasmine and her baby, from Ahriman's web of madness.

If only she could get to Jasmine. Her clever friend might be able to think of a way they could escape. But there was no point in trying to speak to Jasmine. Not while she remained drugged, unable to think, barely able to speak. No, she decided she had to first find a way to stop Stronik from drugging Jasmine. Then maybe the two of them could come up with a plan. She could no longer sit idly by and do nothing. Her own baby was due to arrive in another month. The thought of bringing a child into this evil environment terrified her.

The staff had been dismissed by Christopher the night before Pandora's birth and were not due to return for another week. Christopher had arranged for the kitchen help to arrive in the mornings to prepare the day's meals and then leave again. That meant the house would be empty most of the day, save for Ahriman, Christopher and Stronik—and now the new arrivals, Thomas and Nathaniel.

Ahriman and Christopher, she knew, would be meeting with Thomas and Nathaniel today, and hopefully they'd be tied up for an hour or two. She prayed Stronik would be invited to join them. That would give her time to look around and try to ferret out where Stronik kept his stash of medical supplies. If she could locate the medication while everyone was occupied, maybe she could figure something out.

She descended the staircase to the second floor landing and crouched down, so as to observe the newcomers unnoticed. The brothers, Thomas and Nathaniel, looked nothing alike. Both were tall and extremely attractive, but any resemblance ended there. One was fair-haired and blue-eyed, while the other bore Ahriman's dark good looks. Carla hated both of them on sight. No doubt they'd been summoned to assist Ahriman in carrying out his grand plan.

At three that afternoon, after hanging around the third floor landing above Stronik's suite for over an hour, she finally heard a soft knocking from the floor below, and the sound of a door being opened. Then Christopher's voice, saying "Thomas and Nathaniel have arrived. Ahriman's invited you to join us."

"Ah. Very kind of you," came Stronik's reply. "I'll be right down."

Carla waited until she heard Christopher's footsteps recede down the stairway. A moment later, a door opened and closed, and Stronik's heavy steps sounded on the stairs.

When all was silent again, she raced down to the second level, and ran to the locked door of Jasmine's bedroom, knocking and calling out.

"Jasmine ... Jasmine, can you hear me? It's Carla."

She rattled the door knob and knocked several more times.

She heard a tiny sound from the other side, perhaps a weak cry of acknowledgment.

"Jazzy, can you get up?"

Carla put her ear to the door. She waited, but heard nothing further.

"Listen," she said, hoping her friend could hear her, even if she was too weak to talk. "I'm trying to find a way to get us out of here. You, me and the baby. I'm working on it."

She listened at the door again, only silence answered.

"Jasmine. Can you hear me?"

Her friend did not respond.

"Don't worry," she whispered through the door. "We're going to get out of here, somehow. I promise."

She wiped away the tears that spilled onto her face and headed for Stronik's suite down the hall, figuring the stash of medication to be somewhere in his rooms, and praying that he had not locked the door behind him. When she tried the door, it swung open, and she exhaled in relief. Glancing around furtively, she entered.

Once inside, she rummaged through the drawers of the furniture in the sitting area, but came up empty handed. In his bedroom, she opened dresser drawers and searched the closet, again finding nothing. Finally, she opened a connecting door that led into a small adjoining room. It contained a large cabinet that spanned one wall. Carla flung open the cupboard doors and struck pay dirt. Shelf after shelf was filled with vials of different sizes and colors. She picked them up one at a time, noting that the labels bore many different names, none of which she recognized.

Shit! Having gotten this far, she had no idea what to do next. Destroying the medication would be useless. Stronik could easily replace it; not to mention, with the staff gone, suspicion would fall on her when the fact was discovered. She had hoped to be able to switch the medication somehow, but had no idea where to begin. She picked up several of the vials, studying the strange, unpronounceable names. Minutes ticked by, and her nervousness increased.

Some of the vials contained clear liquid. What if she switched them with water? That might be a start.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 31

Jasmine opened her eyes to the confusion which, by now, had become a way of life for her, and wondered whether she was dreaming when she found herself staring into Pandora's tiny face. Then she looked up to see Ahriman standing at her bedside, holding the infant out in front of her. The dark souls that always accompanied Ahriman jerked and crawled about the room, their excitement evident in their frenzied movements. It was time for Pandora's feeding.

After Ahriman placed Pandora on her lap, Jasmine instinctively drew the child close to her in an effort to protect her from the evil phantasms surrounding them. The dark souls hovered around the bed, reaching out for her daughter with their filthy hands as they cackled and murmured strange sounds of adulation.

Pandora could see them, Jasmine knew—she could tell by the way the infant's eyes flitted back and forth as the dark entities surrounded her. To keep her daughter from looking, Jasmine fought hard to focus on holding and keeping Pandora's gaze while the child fed from her breast.

All too soon, Pandora had taken her fill from first one breast and then the other. The moment the baby stopped taking nourishment, Ahriman quickly snatched her back, carrying her away to wherever he'd sequestered the child. The dark souls trailed after him. Jasmine could only stare helplessly as her daughter was once again taken from her. After Ahriman closed and locked the door behind him, Jasmine retreated to her only place of safety. She sought out Sephora.

Now that he had achieved his goal of immortality with the birth of Pandora, Ahriman no longer concerned himself with the pendant. Jasmine kept it on her person so she could commune with Sephora in the lonely hours that made up her days. Most of her time was spent deep below the layers of consciousness with the spirit. Outwardly, anyone watching her would think her asleep. But once she delved deep into her subconscious where Sephora resided, her thoughts, although dream-like, achieved a clarity they did not possess when she was awake. Sephora had become her anchor. Their silent conversations kept her mind from atrophying, and kept the despair that always lurked in the recesses of her subconscious at bay.

Tell me about your mortal life, Sephora. What happened to you? How did you become trapped in the pendant?

The spirit sighed deeply, a dismal sound. At first Jasmine thought Sephora would not speak, but then the sound of her words began to fall like gentle raindrops.

In my human lifetime, I lived on the great continent, in Morocco. The time, by your counting, would have been at the turn of the eighteenth century.

As Jasmine listened to the soft cadence of Sephora's voice, a strange osmosis began, so that Jasmine herself seemed to travel back in time, seeing the world through Sephora's eyes.

My home was in the mountains not far from Imlil on the banks of the river Mizane. I have only pleasant memories of my childhood home, although my family was poor. From the window next to my bed in our tiny abode, I could see the forest that covered the valleys and the snow of Mount Toubkal. I was the only child conceived to my parents and well-loved. I lived happily with them until the day came when, as a young woman, my father told me that I was to marry.

The man who had asked for my hand in marriage was named Askim, a man of standing and considerable wealth. As was the custom, when Askim had found no suitable woman to wed in Imlil, he began to search the nearby mountains for a wife. One day, he happened upon me as I washed clothes in the river, unobserved by me. Soon after, he arrived at our home to request the consent of my father to take me as his wife.

My father, as I stated, was a poor man who could offer little by way of dowry, but Askim, it was said, was so smitten by me that he agreed to take the pittance my father was able to provide. My mother and father rejoiced upon hearing this, for they knew it meant my life would not be marred by the poverty that had marked their own married life. At first, I was happy as well. Askim struck me as not an unpleasant man, and any woman of marriageable age would have considered the union a fortunate one.

Sephora sighed softly again, and Jasmine felt a ripple of sadness run through her.

My happiness, however, was soon marred. Events transpired against us even before the marriage took place. The men who claimed to be friends of Askim felt the match would not be a fortuitous one. Seeing how obsessed Askim had become with me, they attempted to dissuade him from taking me as his wife and to convince him that he had fallen under the spell of the 'jnun'. They blamed my poor father and mother for Askim's inability to put aside his desire for me, telling him they had cast the spell.

During the first days of Ramadan, Askim was taken by his friends to a 'fqil', a holy man, who proclaimed Askim had indeed fallen victim to magic. Askim refused to be swayed by the fqil, and turned away from his friends.

It was on the morning of the final day of the feast of Ramadan that I awoke to find my dear father and mother had been murdered in their sleep. I was heartbroken and convinced that Askim's companions had committed the murders to keep my family from continuing the spell, which they insisted had been placed on him. Askim shared my suspicion and confronted his companions, yet they denied any involvement.

Fearing retribution from these men, I attempted to dissuade Askim from taking me as his wife. Askim would not hear of it and insisted the marriage proceed.

And so, having just lost both my mother and father, I was taken from the only home I had ever known to become Askim's wife.

For seven days and seven nights before the marriage took place, the feasting carried on in the village, even as my sadness at the death of my parents increased. No amount of silver and gold bracelets, or pretty robes, could lift the grief from my heart.

Among the gifts presented to me by Askim was a small, simple pendant. It was the one gift that captured my attention, and I chose to keep it close to me, for I had never seen anything like it before in terms of workmanship or quality. It pleased Askim greatly that he had presented me with a gift I admired, and he recounted to me how he had purchased it, at great cost, from an old artisan in a neighboring village.

Askim told me he had viewed and discarded many pieces of jewelry from this artisan, not satisfied that any of them would be suitable for his future bride. The old man then asked Askim to wait and disappeared behind a curtain in the back of his shop. Shortly after, he emerged carrying a pouch fashioned out of leather. The leather case appeared old and marked, and not the type of container in which anything of value would be stored. Askim looked on with impatience as the man carefully removed something from the worn pouch, and held it out.

Askim recounted that he was astonished to find such a beautiful piece of craftsmanship in so humble a shop. He was even more astonished when the shopkeeper claimed that the pendant was said to have the power to bestow on the woman who wore it love for the man who gifted it to her. Askim decided it was a worthy gift, and purchased it immediately, despite the large sum the artisan demanded.

I was touched by Askim's gesture and willingly wore the pendant in the hope that somehow the two of us would find happiness amidst the unhappy events that had transpired. Had I known then the nature of the accursed object, I would have convinced Askim to return it immediately. Perhaps if I had done so, Askim and I might have found happiness together.

Sephora wept softly. Jasmine waited in silence, and after a moment, the spirit continued.

On the following day, Askim and I exchanged our vows. It was the day after my marriage to Askim that I first glimpsed the evil spirit, Ahriman. He appeared to me in my chamber, just after the sun had set, as I bathed. I saw him only for a moment by the light of the oil lantern, but in that moment, as I looked into his eyes, I lost my soul to him.

I dreamt of the beguiling apparition that night, dreams which aroused in me emotions I had not experienced before. On the following day, I mentioned nothing of what had transpired to Askim, for fear that he would not believe me, or worse, imagine that I desired to be with another man. For days the image of Ahriman haunted me, so that I went about as one dreaming, yet awake.

Some time passed before Ahriman next appeared to me. On that occasion, Askim had departed before sunup to the medina. While I was still asleep in my bedchamber, the apparition arrived. I awakened to find him watching me. He spoke to me for the first time, and his words ... I know not how to describe the way he sounded to me. His voice enticed me, and I approached him without fear or hesitation. He touched my hair and caressed my face. All the while, his eyes enthralled me. He appeared to be the most beautiful of creations, a god who had descended to earth, one who claimed to have chosen me to be his beloved.

To my shame, I surrendered to his advances. I felt powerless in his presence and unable to resist his allure. I wasted no thought on Askim, or the dishonor I brought upon my departed family in taking the phantasm who had become flesh into my bed. The beguiling apparition came to life captivated me completely, so that nothing else seemed of consequence. I gave myself over to him without thought of what might happen were we to be discovered.

When Askim returned home that evening, he sensed the change in me. I could not bring myself to share Askim's bed, so enchanted had I become by the spirit who had stolen my heart. I told Askim I was unwell. Although my husband did not press me, I read the doubt in his eyes.

Ahriman was to return to me on the day of the next full moon, and I made efforts to ensure I would be alone when he arrived. The intervening time seemed interminable, so that I felt I would die of longing for him. As the days passed and my disinterest in Askim grew, my husband became more and more suspicious. I understood that he no longer trusted me, and still I could not keep myself from meeting with my beloved Ahriman when the day of our planned meeting finally arrived.

That day, Askim followed me. He watched, hidden, as the apparition arrived. As Ahriman became flesh and embraced me, Askim cried out, making his presence known. Ahriman turned toward Askim with a look that was terrible to behold. I heard my lover whisper an incantation. Immediately afterward, a horde of dark spirits arrived, evil souls who groveled in supplication at Ahriman's feet. Ahriman entreated them to destroy Askim, and the black souls hurried to do his bidding. They fell upon my husband like bats, shrieking their deadly intent. Askim attempted to defend himself against them, but to no avail.

Sephora stopped speaking, and Jasmine felt the spirit's sorrow sitting heavily in her own heart.

What I confess to you now fills me with shame. For I lifted not a finger to assist my poor Askim. Only Ahriman filled my thoughts. I watched and stood idly by, still under the enchantment of my murderous lover, as the black spirits killed my husband. Before Ahriman departed, he directed me to leave Askim's body where it was and return home. This I did, to my disgrace.

When the murder of Askim was discovered, several of the men who had sought to keep Askim from taking me as his wife spoke out against me, citing me as the cause of his death. They incited the townspeople, demanding retribution for Askim's death, telling them I had employed magic to destroy Askim. The rumor spread throughout the town, and when Ahriman next appeared to me, I was beside myself with fear, and not only on account of the town's growing resentment against me. By that time, my menses had stopped. I was with child—and I knew it to be Ahriman's child.

I begged Ahriman to deliver me, for with Askim now gone, I knew those who had turned against me would do everything in their power to accuse me of adultery once my condition was discovered. Ahriman assured me I would not be harmed, that arrangements would be made for me to travel across the ocean to a land where I could bear his child in safety. As was always the case when I found myself in his presence, I fell under his spell and believed his words, so that I ceased to worry about my perilous circumstances.

We arranged to meet again at the next full moon. Ahriman reassured me, telling me he would bring with him those who would assist me in travelling to the port where I was to board a vessel to carry me to safety. I questioned nothing. My trust in the demon was complete, and I set about making preparations for the voyage.

When the townspeople arrived at my door on the morning of my arranged escape, among them was the fqi. He accused me of having consorted with a devil to bring about Askim's death. I was questioned at length. Finally, I was examined and found to be with child. As I feared, several of the townspeople voiced their opinion that the child was not Askim's. Despite my protests, the fqi was persuaded and judged me to be an adulteress. Throughout all of this, I remained unafraid, for I trusted that Ahriman would appear to deliver me from their persecution. Even after they pushed me roughly out of my house, I walked calmly along the dirt road to the outskirts of the medina. A hole was dug in the sand. I was forced to stand in it, as the angry men buried me up to my bosom. It was only then that the first seed of doubt took hold.

Beneath my robe, I wore the pendant. As my fear of being executed mounted, I called out for Ahriman in a loud voice, pleading with him to arrive, to save not only my life, but that of his unborn child. My desperation increased when my calls went unheeded. Someone in the crowd cast the first stone. It struck my face, cutting my cheek. Seconds later, the next stone flew, and then the next. In order to prolong my suffering, the enraged crowd cast stones large enough to cause me pain, but not so large as to immediately cause my death. Angry faces surrounded me, jeering as the rocks struck, cutting my face, head, shoulders and neck, while my buried arms remained pinned at my sides.

I screamed out to the crowd, cursing them for their actions, as the volley of stones continued. Again and again I called upon Ahriman, whom I knew to be my only salvation. As the rocks continued to strike me, I invoked him repeatedly. Even when blood flowed into my eyes, so that I could barely see, and my injuries became grave, I would not be silenced. Soon the blood flowed freely down my neck and from there into the dry sand below. The pain from my many wounds was immense. Before long, I was no longer able to cry out, having lost large amounts of blood. I became weak, able only to watch as the sand below me drank my blood.

It was near to death when Ahriman finally appeared. My first instinct was elation that my beloved had arrived to rescue me from the hands of my tormentors. The air between us shimmered and shook as his form emerged from the pendant. The crowd ceased casting their projectiles of death and cried out in fear when they witnessed Ahriman's arrival. My lips, although cut and bleeding, formed a tiny smile, for I knew he had the power to save us.

It was only then, on the cusp of death, that I beheld Ahriman in his true form. The creature that appeared before me was grotesque beyond words. I glimpsed a demonic head, from which eyes that spoke of everlasting damnation shone; his hands and feet were withered claws, and he exuded a malignance that poisoned the air around him.

In that moment, I understood all. I had been duped by an evil spirit and my soul surely damned. I had only seconds of life left to me. Even as Ahriman whispered his assurance that I would be delivered, I found the strength to call out once more to the mob, who continued to watch in awe and fear at the apparition that had arrived. "Finish what you have started," I cried out to them. "Kill me, if you would be rid of this evil."

Ahriman turned to me, astonished by my words, his face a mask of betrayal. His howl of anger resonated in the air, the sound of a wounded beast.

Suddenly, the stones flew again, large rocks that struck me with terrible force. In the final moment before death arrived, I searched the face of the demon, and saw the knowledge that I had defeated him writ large on his features.

I expired.

My next memory was of this dark place where my soul still remains. I know not for certain how I became trapped here. It is my belief that Ahriman sought to return to the spirit realm through the pendant at the moment of my death, and attempted to take my soul with him to the other side. Yet my soul did not pass over. Perhaps the blood that flowed from my dying body into the Pendant sealed the portal, for indeed, Ahriman himself was unable to pass through to the spirit world. As Ahriman's spirit entered the pendant with my soul, it became dormant, and remained so for many years.

Almost two centuries passed before Ahriman awakened once again.

When I first became aware of his stirring a little more than two decades ago, I hid in the murky recesses of my prison, for there are chambers within chambers in this dark place within which I am able to take refuge. His spirit took its leave, passing into the hidden realm without detecting me.

Since Ahriman's awakening, he has returned here only to travel between the two worlds by passing through it. Thus far, he has remained unaware that my soul resides here, for I take great pains to remain hidden when I sense his approach. My soul, I believe, will remain trapped here, unable to break the seal formed by the blood of my death for as long as Ahriman remains in existence. Unless and until Ahriman is destroyed, my soul will not be set free.

All of this I accept, for I have much to atone for.

Jasmine, unaware that her cheeks were wet with tears, asked a question, one to which she already knew the answer. Can Ahriman be destroyed?

The woeful voice that was Sephora responded. The birth of your child has granted him immortality. While she lives, he will not die.

Jasmine twitched in her sleep at the implication. My daughter must not be harmed.

No, the gentle spirit assured her. Her innocent blood must not be spilled. But there may be another way.

How?

Be patient. When the proper circumstances present themselves, I will tell you all that you need to know.

Sephora's recounting of her sad tale left Jasmine drained and tired. But her parting words lit a spark of hope inside her. Was it possible? Did Sephora know something that might help her to defeat Ahriman?

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 32

Thomas made every effort to keep his face expressionless as he sipped from the tumbler of scotch handed to him by Christopher a moment ago and listened to Ahriman's voice. Today marked only the second time since Ahriman had re-emerged two decades ago that Thomas and his brother had found themselves in their father's presence. On the last occasion, the sight of Ahriman had immediately wrenched from Thomas the terrible memory that had haunted him since childhood. With Ahriman once again standing before him, Thomas found himself reliving that night in 1794, the same day Nathaniel was born, when, in the dead of night he was...

...startled awake by the sound of his mother crying. He cannot make out the words, only the fear in his mother's raised voice. Throwing back the covers, he slips from his bed and pads into the dimly-lit corridor. His mother's cries grow louder, and he wonders if something has happened to the baby brother he saw for the first time that morning. Hesitantly, he makes his way along the corridor toward his mother's bedchamber, his hard-pounding little boy's heart reverberating loudly in his ears. The wooden door to her room is slightly ajar, and he almost goes running in, but some instinct stops him, and he stands just outside, breathing heavily, waiting. Then he hears a voice, one that causes dread to wash over him. Father. His father has returned, he realizes with dismay.

"Do not presume to withhold from me that which is mine." The words are spoken quietly. His father does not raise his voice, yet Thomas fears for his mother. His father is displeased.

His mother's distraught voice rises in fear. "I beg of you, do not take them from me. They are all that is left to me. I no longer have any vestige of life, save for my sons."

"Silence! Your miserable existence is of no importance to me. And your insolence tells me you have outlived your usefulness."

"No ... please, do not—"

He hears the sound of a blow and his mother's frightened scream. Terror lodges in his throat, but he peeks inside. His father holds his infant brother in one arm. His mother lies on the floor, her face smeared with blood. But what happens next sends his young mind teetering on the edge of insanity. One by one, he sees them arrive, dark spirits whose faces he mercifully cannot see, but who radiate a malevolence he can feel in his bones. He should run, but he remains rooted to the spot, unable to move. Ahriman directs the groveling phantasms to his mother, still helpless on the floor. By the time he recovers from the shock of seeing the dark spirits, they have surrounded his mother. The shrieking sounds they make mingle with his mother's screams and the sound of the rending of her flesh, as they tear her limb from limb. It is over in a matter of seconds. His mother's blood is everywhere; her remains, no more than broken bones and torn flesh, are scattered on the ground. Time seems to stop as the terrible scene brands itself into his young mind. He sees the smirk on his father's face as he surveys the scene of her destruction. In the silence that ensues following the departure of the black souls, he hears his newborn brother crying, and the sound of his father's soft laughter, a sound that buries his

ender heard in snow. His mind begins to shut down, but not before his father detects his presence and turns his wrath on him, commanding him to return to his bedroom, away from the hellish scene. All that night, he lies awake in the dark. The tears he sheds are silent, but his mourning for his beloved mother runs deep. He is eight years old and powerless to avenge her murder. But he will not remain so. His father will pay for what he has done...

Thomas blinked the memory away, returning his thoughts to the here and now. He glanced over at Nathaniel, sitting next to him, looking uncomfortable, the way he always did as a child whenever their father arrived for one of his visits, up until Ahriman had disappeared.

"Why have we been summoned, father?" asked Thomas, taking care not to betray the angry thoughts the old memory had stirred up. It had taken much practice, but both he and Nathaniel had perfected the art of parallel thinking, and their subconscious thoughts did not interfere with those they allowed to surface.

"An event of great significance has occurred," Ahriman said, visibly swelling with pride, "one which I feel compelled to share with you both." He paused a moment before continuing. "It has come to pass that a child, my offspring, has been born to a female Cambion. My daughter, whom I have named Pandora, was birthed last week. Since her coming, I have remained incarnate. I am now a permanent fixture in the physical plane. I have accomplished what no other being who has heretofore walked the earth has been able to. I have achieved immortality."

Thomas cast a sidelong glance at Nathaniel, and caught the look of shocked surprise that crossed his face at their father's words. Ahriman's egotistical tone notwithstanding, he had succeeded in rendering them both speechless with the news.

After a moment, Thomas found his voice. "A female Cambion has given birth?" Neither he nor Nathaniel had any idea a female Cambion even existed, let alone that Ahriman had mated with one.

"Yes," said Ahriman. Thomas could tell his father was delighted at the incredulity with which Thomas had uttered his question.

"It's already become obvious to me that Pandora will be very powerful," Ahriman continued. "Now that my energy will remain concrete in the physical world, I have certain plans with which I am ready to move forward. It is my intention to repopulate the earth with others of Pandora's kind. It is my decision that the two of you return here, with us," he said, glancing at Christopher, "to assist in my new endeavor."

"Christopher will track down the younger ones, those that were sired over the past twenty years. There are six of them, all males, of course. You and Nathaniel will have charge over them until they are able to start reproducing. Their offspring, as well as yours and Christopher's, will form the second strata of the new order and will be placed in key positions. My offspring with Jasmine, and eventually, after her demise, with the second generation, will step into the positions of power for which they will have been groomed. All of them, once in place, will answer to me and to me alone in the process of decision-making."

Thomas turned his attention to Christopher, Ahriman's favored son, despising him for the smug look that crossed his face at his father's words. Christopher had always been proud to align himself with Ahriman. Thomas knew he'd stop at nothing to support their father in this mad enterprise. Unlike Thomas and Nathaniel, Christopher had inherited Ahriman's dark soul. Like Ahriman, Christopher had no conscience, and little of the human emotions that Thomas and Nathaniel shared. Even after Ahriman had destroyed Christopher's mother, the little bastard had turned over his inheritance and this estate to their father without a second thought.

"Is it necessary, father?" asked Thomas, feigning humility. "You know Nathaniel and I have never been as adept as Christopher in our abilities, and not to the extent you would require for such an undertaking. Although we support you," he lied, "we may not be of much use to you in your new endeavor."

Ahriman's voice turned stony. "It is not a request. You will remain here, as will the younger ones once Christopher has located them and brought them to me."

When neither Thomas nor Nathaniel spoke, Ahriman said, "I expect total compliance with my instructions. Up until now I have permitted you both to reside in the mortal world as you deemed fit. Now, it is time for you to take your places at my side. You will both be actively involved in carrying out my plans."

Thomas discerned the unspoken threat in his father's words. Anyone who was not with him was against him. And Thomas knew Ahriman would take lethal action if they expressed anything other than complete loyalty to him.

Nathaniel, who up until now had remained silent, opened his mouth to speak, but Thomas stopped him with his next words. "As you wish, father. We are at your service, of course."

Thomas was relieved when Nathaniel hesitated only a second before following his lead. "Of course," his brother echoed.

"It's settled then," said Ahriman. "Your rooms have been prepared. Welcome home, my sons."

Ahriman rose, studying them both with eyes of granite. It was all Thomas could do to keep his expression bland and his inner thoughts from surfacing to where they could be detected. He prayed Nathaniel was doing the same.

At that moment, a knock sounded and a tall, balding man entered.

"This is Doctor Stronik, the physician who presided over the birth, and who oversees the child's mother," Ahriman said.

"Why does she require a doctor?" asked Nathaniel before taking Stronik's outstretched hand.

"She remains in need of medical treatment," came Ahriman's curt reply.

Thomas also took Dr. Stronik's hand when he offered it. Medical treatment. I'll just bet.

After exchanging pleasantries with the strange-looking doctor, Thomas excused himself to use the lavatory. Once the door closed behind him, he walked quickly to the main staircase, intending to have a quick look around in the hope of running across the female Cambion. As he reached the second floor landing, he noticed the door to the suite closest to the stairway was ajar and the sound of movement from within. He stepped inside and, seeing no one in the sitting room, he moved to the open door of the bedroom. In an adjacent room, he spotted a woman, rummaging through a wall of cupboards, her long dark hair streaming down her back.

\* \* \* \*

"What have we here?"

Carla froze. Her heart pounding, she whirled around and came face-to-face with one of Ahriman's sons. Fear at having been found in Stronik's rooms momentarily paralyzed her. Ahriman would not take lightly what she'd done, and panic bit into her at the thought of being subjected to the dark souls for a second time. She capped the vial, the contents of which she'd just replaced with water, and returned it to the shelf, feigning nonchalance.

"Who are you?" he asked in a beguiling voice that was not unlike Ahriman's. Up close, Ahriman's fair-haired son was even more stunningly handsome than he'd appeared when she'd glimpsed him earlier. He stared at her with piercing blue eyes.

"I'm nobody," she said, summoning her courage and attempting to sweep by him as if she'd been doing nothing wrong. He reached out and took her arm, turning her



around. As he looked her up and down, his gaze lingered on her enlarged midsection.

When she refused to meet his eyes, he said, "I'm Thomas."

She raised her eyes to his, unable to hide the venom in her voice when she spoke. "Another Cambion. How fucking delightful."

He surprised her by saying nothing in response to her defiant words. Her surprise turned to disbelief when he delivered a thought telepathically to her. I am not my father's son. And whatever you were doing in here, your secret is safe with me.

Carla ran from the room, expecting him to raise an alarm. But he didn't call out, nor did he follow her.

\* \* \* \*

Sometime later, Nathaniel unpacked his bags in the second floor suite he'd been shown to, his mind still reeling from the information imparted by Ahriman earlier. A knock sounded at the door and Thomas entered, shutting the door behind him.

Nathaniel eyed him, managing a weak smile.

"That was quite a performance earlier."

"Glad you enjoyed it," Thomas retorted. His face became serious. "We need to talk."

"Yes," Nathaniel said, trying, but not succeeding, in keeping the worry from his voice. "How the devil could this have happened? No female Cambion has ever survived birth. And Ahriman—immortal! What a nightmare. And now he expects us to help him carry out his mad scheme, along with that little weasel, Christopher." He looked squarely at his brother. "What are we going to do?" Thomas would think of something. He had to.

Instead of answering his question, Thomas said, "I ran into someone earlier, when I left the room to nose around a bit."

"I thought that's what you were up to. What did you find?"

"A woman. Not the Cambion—a mortal. I was able to penetrate her thoughts. She's pregnant. And very beautiful. No doubt one of Ahriman's women."

"Oh?"

"What's interesting is when I discovered her, she was pilfering through medical supplies in what I believe was the suite of rooms belonging to that demented-looking doctor. I got the distinct impression that she might turn out to be a useful ally, but I didn't have any luck getting her to talk to me. I didn't glamour her, naturally, but I did probe her mind. I didn't detect any loyalty to Ahriman when I scanned her thoughts. I thought maybe you could try to speak to her. If she sees we're all together in this, she might talk to us, give us information."

Nathaniel considered his brother's words. "I'll try, if you think it'll help," he said finally. "I'll do anything at this point. I don't know about you, but the idea of spending the rest of my life in the service of our father is insufferable."

His brother clapped him on the back. "Don't worry. That won't happen. We won't let it."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 33

Carla sensed someone behind her as she made her way back to the house along the path running through luxuriant gardens, and turned. She was surprised to see Ahriman's son, not the one she'd run into earlier, but the dark-haired one, Nathaniel, observing her from beneath the low branches of a Hawthorn tree. Unlike Thomas, this one bore an uncanny resemblance to Ahriman. Even though Thomas had apparently not turned her in, she remained distrustful. They were, after all, Cambions, like Christopher.

"What do you want?" she asked, unable to keep the hostility from her voice.

"I'm Nathaniel," he told her, "Thomas's brother. I want to talk to you, nothing more."

"I wouldn't advise it. Ahriman's probably on his way to my suite right now. He usually comes to me around this time of day. I don't think he'd take kindly to you moving in on his turf," she said bitterly.

Nathaniel probed her mind. What's your name?

She remained stonily silent. No way was she going to trust one of them.

He spoke out loud again. "Listen, there's not much time. If Ahriman really is on his way to see you, I don't want him to wonder where you are. Thomas and I need information. My brother seems to think you may not be a willing participant in all of this. If that's the case, and you want to help yourself—and us—meet me after Ahriman leaves you. I'll return to the house now, but I'll meet you back here, at whatever time you say."

Carla looked directly at him. "Why should I trust you?"

"Because," he said, "we need each other. As Thomas tried to tell you earlier, Ahriman is our father in name only. We have no love for him."

Carla did not respond, studying him silently. Was it possible? Could these two Cambions be different? Jasmine, she reminded herself, was also a Cambion. And she was nothing like Christopher.

Nathaniel probed her mind again. Will you come?

"I'll think about it," she said. "If I do decide to, I won't be able to return here for another four hours."

Nathaniel smiled and gave her a quick nod. "I'll be waiting." He turned and walked back to the house without saying anything else.

\* \* \* \*

Exactly four hours later, Nathaniel paced back and forth along the same section of the garden path where he had spoken to Carla earlier. Thomas had asked Ahriman and Christopher to join him in his suite on the pretext that he wanted to go over some details, and the three of them had entered Thomas's rooms ten minutes ago.



Nathaniel had asked to step outside for some air before joining them and was expected to return shortly. Worried that they might notice his absence if he remained out here too long, he was about to head back to the house when he spotted Carla walking toward him, glancing around stealthily. He breathed a sigh of relief. She's certainly an attractive woman. But then, Ahriman has impeccable taste. He felt foolish, but the dark-haired beauty had not left his thoughts for a moment since he'd met her earlier. She was, he thought, one of the most beautiful mortals he'd ever laid eyes on.

"I'm glad you decided to come."

"Where are Ahriman and Christopher?" Carla blurted out, suspicion apparent in her voice.

"Thomas is keeping them occupied so we can talk. What's your name?" he asked her gently. "You didn't tell me before."

"It's Carla," she said, lowering her eyes.

"All right. Carla, I don't know how to convince you that you can trust us, except to repeat that my brother and I want to find a way to put a stop to what Ahriman's doing." He pressed a thought on her. It's what you want too, isn't it?

"Yes. But I don't see why—"

Why we would go against our father? I despise him, as does Thomas. We have good reason to. He's a murderer. He's killed countless people over the course of his time in the mortal world—including our mother. If, as he claims, Ahriman has succeeded in achieving immortality, there's no telling what destruction he'll cause. Although he has chosen to remain incarnate, he is completely devoid of human understanding and seeks only to empower himself. And he will not wield his power mercifully. His plans involve havoc for humanity, trust me. He must be stopped.

"How?" she wailed. "Nobody can stop him now that Jasmine's given birth."

"Is that the name of the Cambion—the female—who birthed Pandora?"

"Yes. She's my friend. And she's in big trouble, worse than you or me. Ahriman's keeping her drugged up, using her to produce offspring. The more children she bears for him, the sooner he can get his new race underway."

Nathaniel looked away. A startling thought occurred to him. As of now, the Cambion, Jasmine, had produced only one child. If that child were to die...

He turned back to Carla, voicing his thought. "Pandora is what's permitting Ahriman to remain incarnate. Until the Cambion bears him another child, he's vulnerable."

"Her name's Jasmine." Carla frowned at him. "She may be just a Cambion to you, but she's my friend." When Nathaniel nodded apologetically, she said, "So, what's your point?"

Thomas paused, knowing how what he was about to say would sound, especially to a woman who was herself about to give birth.

"I don't know how to put this, but if Pandora ceased to exist, it would put an end to Ahriman's plan ... and his immortality."

Carla wrapped her arms around her belly in a protective gesture and stepped back in surprise. "Kill the baby?" she said, shocked. "No fucking way, Jose. I may have my faults, but I'm no baby-killer."

She turned to leave, but he took hold of her arm, stopping her. "I'm sorry ... I realize that's the logical solution, not necessarily the right one. I'm not a killer. I was just thinking out loud."

Carla studied him, no longer convinced she could trust him in view of the logical solution he had presented. Perhaps Cambions didn't look at things the same way mortals did. At least he'd admitted it was the wrong way to go about putting a stop to Ahriman. And he hadn't tried to glamour her. There was that.

Carla hesitated. She was desperate to find a way out of this nightmare, but could she really trust one of Ahriman's sons? She studied Nathaniel closely for moment and then made a decision.

"Help me get to Jasmine," she said. "But first, she's got to get off the dope, so I can talk to her. When Thomas discovered me in Stronik's rooms, I was trying to switch some of the medication with water, but I only got one of the vials switched before he found me, and I don't know if it was even the right medication. Jasmine might be able to come up with a solution, or maybe if the four of us put our heads together, we'll be able to come up with another plan."

It was Nathaniel's turn to voice a suspicion. "And what assurance do Thomas and I have that we can trust this Cambion?" he asked. "After all, she's the mother of Ahriman's child. How do we know he hasn't secured her loyalty?"

"Because I'm telling you, that's why," Carla snapped. "I saw her the night they brought her here. She was drugged and kidnapped. She's here against her will. I guarantee you, she wants no part of this."

Nathaniel considered her words. "All right," he said, finally. "I think I'll be able to convince Dr. Stronik to lay off medicating your friend. I can be very persuasive. A little gift I inherited from Ahriman."

Relieved that she may have found the help she needed, Carla said, "Okay, but there's no time to waste, you have to do it soon."

Nathaniel nodded. "I'll pay Stronik a visit tonight."

"Thank you," Carla said. "I have to go now. It's not safe. They might notice we're both gone and come outside."

She could feel his eyes on her as she made her way quickly along the path back to the house. She tried not to get her hopes up, but her conversation with Nathaniel had left her feeling reassured. Despite his Cambion nature, something about him told her he could be trusted. She just hoped she wasn't making a fatal mistake.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 34

Dinner that evening was an interminable affair, presided over by Ahriman. After two hours of listening to Christopher parroting every statement made by their father and hailing Ahriman as the second coming, it was all Thomas could do to keep his food down. He drank several glasses of Chardonnay in an effort to maintain his façade of enthusiasm for Ahriman's plans. The doctor, Stronik, remained silent throughout most of the meal, and the more Thomas studied him, the less he liked the strange-looking man—an emotionless fellow with humorless eyes. After probing Stronik's mind, he was not the least bit surprised to find the good doctor's involvement in Ahriman's scheme had not been as a result of being glamourised by Ahriman or Christopher. He had entered into the arrangement willingly, of his own accord. The

ile man was supposed to believe that Christopher and Ahriman would reward him for his part in getting the new race underway.

Thomas had not yet had an opportunity to speak to Nathaniel alone since his brother's rendezvous with the woman earlier. When he felt it would be safe to do so without arousing suspicion, Thomas cited tiredness and a little too much wine, and excused himself to retire to his suite.

Twenty minutes later, he heard a tap on his door, and Nathaniel entered.

"What happened? Did she show up?"

After Nathaniel recounted what the woman, who was named Carla, had told him, Thomas asked, "Do you really think it's wise to enlist help from the female Cambion? How can we be sure she's not thrown her lot in with Ahriman?" The very fact that a female Cambion even existed made him wary. How had she managed to survive when none of the others had? At the same time, the thought of having a sister he knew nothing about intrigued him to no end.

"For heaven's sake, Thomas, if what Carla told me is true, she's being drugged and held hostage. Does that sound like she's a willing participant in all this?"

"I suppose not," Thomas conceded. "But what good will talking to her do? What can she possibly do that we can't?"

Nathaniel paused. "I don't know," he said, finally. "But we can't just go around killing babies before we've exhausted every other option."

True enough. Like his brother, Thomas had concluded that destroying Pandora would put an end to Ahriman's immortality. Yet, in his all-too-human heart, he knew that neither he nor Nathaniel would be able to take the life of an innocent child. Not for any reason. "All right," said Thomas. "Where's Stronik now?"

"In his room," Nathaniel said. "Alone." After a moment, he got up. "Wish me luck."

"You won't need it, brother" replied Thomas. "You can glamour anyone, and you know it."

\* \* \* \*

Nathaniel gave Thomas a wry smile before he exited the room. Once in the corridor, he shut the door quietly behind him. Ahriman and Christopher were cloistered in Ahriman's suite down the hall to the left; he could hear their muffled voices as he stepped out the door. He turned right, making his way silently along the second floor hallway. When he arrived at the door nearest the staircase, he knocked softly and waited, praying that Christopher or Ahriman would not choose this moment to exit and spot him. A moment later, the door in front of him swung open. The doctor eyed him in surprise.

"Dr. Stronik, a word with you, if I may," Nathaniel said, stepping over the threshold and closing the door behind him.

"Yes? What is it?"

Nathaniel stared into the eyes of the doctor, until his gruff expression changed, replaced by one of confusion.

"It's about the female Cambion."

"Yes?" The doctor spoke as if in a trance.

"The medication you're administering to her daily. You're to cease doing so immediately."

Nathaniel smiled inwardly. The man would present no problem. He was motivated by greed and the need for power, and Nathaniel would be able to plant appropriate images in the doctor's mind to correspond with his motivations.

"Yes, of course," Stronik replied in a bland voice. "She'll receive no more of it."

"Very well, then. We're in agreement. You will be properly rewarded for your compliance."

Stronik's eyes shone in anticipation of the rewards which Nathaniel implanted in his mind.

"And you'll forget we ever had this conversation."

"What conversation?"

"Thank you, doctor. Please return to whatever you were doing."

Stronik smiled vacantly at him and returned to the book he'd been reading.

Nathaniel let himself out.

\* \* \* \*

"I don't trust them. Either of them," Christopher said. "Why do you insist on them being a part of this?" he asked Ahriman, in a petulant voice. "They've never aspired to your ideals. Not the way I have."

Ahriman studied his favored son. Christopher had been nothing if not loyal to him. It was Christopher to whom he had entrusted the pendant on the day of Jasmine's betrayal, Christopher who had dutifully stepped in and prevented Jasmine from taking her own life. He had also found and employed the services of Stronik to assist him in spiriting Jasmine out of the country without arousing suspicion. He owed much to his son, and yet Ahriman felt nothing but disdain for him. Probing Christopher's mind, he detected the bitter jealousy that had motivated him to speak. His son was weak, still prone to the human emotions he had never quite managed to dispel. Such emotions served no purpose and made him vulnerable. Ahriman had no intention of allowing his son to influence his decisions.

Still, he decided Christopher might have a point. Although Thomas and Nathaniel had agreed to assist him, and he'd read nothing in their thoughts to the contrary, they'd not seemed as enthusiastic as he'd hoped over dinner. "I'll keep an eye on them," Ahriman replied. "I'll know soon enough."

"Watch your back," Christopher said.

Ahriman glared at him. He jumped from his chair and shoved Christopher against the wall, drilling into him with his eyes. "Don't forget your place, son," he said, his voice icy. "You don't give me instructions. Ever."

The fear in Christopher's voice was palpable as Ahriman heard him say, "Of course not. I meant no disrespect, father."

Satisfied, Ahriman released him. He walked over to Pandora's crib. The sound of the scuffle had awoken her, and he lifted her from the crib and held her gently to him. "Get out," he said to Christopher, his voice low. "I want to be alone with Pandora."

Chapter 35

Two days following Nathaniel's visit to Dr. Stronik, Jasmine opened her eyes and glanced around the room. Something was different, although it took her a moment to understand what had changed. The confusion that normally clouded her thoughts seemed to have dissipated somewhat, and she felt more alert than she had since her arrival here. Then, she realized the reason. Dr. Stronik had left this morning without giving her an injection. Why? An inadvertent slip? She struggled to remember whether she'd been medicated yesterday, but could not. All she knew was that her mind seemed to function more normally. She felt physically stronger, as well. It took a lot of effort, and quite a bit of time, but she managed to sit up in bed on her own.

She closed her eyes, seeking out Sephora. After a moment, her breathing slowed and her body relaxed, as if asleep.

Something's changed. My mind feels clear. And I can move around better. I didn't receive any medication today, and maybe not yesterday, either. I don't know why, or for how long I'll continue this way. If there is something I need to know, Sephora, please, tell me now.

The gentle voice responded. Yes. If you are certain that you will be able to retain the knowledge and your body is strong enough to execute what must be done. You must be cautious, Sephora continued. The time to act must be of your choosing. Only you can decide when you are ready, for you will be afforded but one opportunity to attempt what it is you must do. Do not act prematurely, or you will bring disaster upon yourself.

I won't, Jasmine assured her. Tell me.

Sephora did.

\* \* \* \*

Late that afternoon, Jasmine pondered the information Sephora had imparted to her. As she considered the best way to execute her plan, she was startled by a tapping sound at her door, accompanied by an urgent whisper. "Jasmine. Jazzy, it's me, Carla. Can you hear me?"

Carla. She had heard her at the door several days ago, but had not been able to respond. The sound of her friend's voice sent a fresh surge of hope running through her.

"Yes," she croaked, "I can hear you. Wait." Jasmine managed to get to a sitting position again. She slid her legs off the bed and allowed her feet to dangle over the side. A wave of dizziness rolled over her. She had sat up too quickly, and stopped to allow the blackness that had crept into the edges of her vision to fade before continuing, not wanting to risk passing out.

"Jazz..." Carla whispered urgently through the door, "Listen, I don't have much time. Ahriman and Christopher are in the drawing room, but if one of them comes upstairs and catches me, I'm toast. Can you hear me?"

Jasmine got to her feet on weak legs and held on to the side of the bed as she made her way carefully to the footboard. "I hear you," she said. "Hold on, I'm almost there." This was taking too long. She got on her hands and knees and crawled the rest of the way to the door. Once there, she sat down heavily, her cheek resting against the rough wood of the door. "I'm here," she said, running her hand along the door, as if, by doing so, she could feel her friend on the other side of it.

"Listen," Carla said. "I can't stay long, but I wanted to tell you I've gotten us some help. Ahriman's sons, Thomas and Nathaniel."

Jasmine snatched her hand back from the door at Carla's words. Ahriman's sons? "No," she whispered vehemently through the closed door. "Don't trust them. They're like Christopher, Carla, he's one of them—"

"I know," her friend interrupted. "I know everything, Jazzy. I know what Christopher is, and what Ahriman has planned ... and I know about you too," she added, "that you're a Cambion."

Jasmine swallowed hard. Did Carla feel differently about her, now that she knew?

As if in answer to her thought, Carla said, "It doesn't matter, Jazzy, I know you're not like them. Ahriman's other sons, Thomas and Nathaniel, are different, too. Like you. We can trust them. They got Stronik to stop medicating you."

"How?" she asked warily. The idea of Carla consorting with Ahriman's sons frightened her. What if they had tricked her?

"Nathaniel did it. He glamourised Stronik, I think. Thomas told me."

When Jasmine didn't say anything, Carla said, "They said they'd help us, Jazzy. They want to stop Ahriman. They hate him."

"How do they think they can stop him?" Jasmine's chest rose and fell as fear for her daughter raced through her. "Did they say anything about Pandora?"

She sensed Carla's hesitation before her voice reached her from the other side of the door. "They know that Ahriman is only immortal because of Pandora."

"They're going to try to kill Pandora," Jasmine said, alarmed by the words.

"For Chrissakes, Jazzy, do you think I would let them hurt your baby? No, we talked about it. Neither of them wants to hurt Pandora. I told them I'd speak to you, in case you could think of another way."

Relief washed over her at Carla's words. After a moment, she said, "Do you really think you can trust these two?"

"I do," said Carla.

Jasmine paused, her throat raw from talking after so many months of imposed silence. She had grave reservations about trusting Ahriman's sons, but Carla was a different story. She'd always been the one person Jasmine could count on. At this point, it wasn't like she had a lot of options. She didn't know if she could carry out what needed to be done without some help.

"All right," Jasmine whispered through the door. "There might be a way they can help. Tell them this. Ahriman brings Pandora to me for feeding each night, around two o'clock, I think. Tomorrow night—I figure I'll be strong enough by then if I'm still off the medication—I'm going to do something that I hope will put an end to Ahriman. When he brings Pandora to me tomorrow night, tell your friends to make sure Christopher and Stronik are with them. They have to make sure Christopher and Stronik are out of the way. Permanently. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes," said Carla.

"Stronik won't be much of a problem, he's human, but they'll have to make sure that Christopher is dealt with. If he suspects anything, he'll find a way to stop me. Afterward," Jasmine continued, "they're to come here, to my room. Tell them to break the door down if they have to. I might need help. Did you get all of that?"

Carla repeated Jasmine's instructions. "Tomorrow night, when Ahriman brings Pandora to you, they get rid of Stronik and Christopher. After that, they're to come here, break down the door if they have to." After a pause, Carla asked, "What are you planning to do, Jazz?"

"Leave it to me," she said, breathing heavily. The effort of speaking had drained what little strength she had left. "Just make sure they deal with Christopher. He'll stop at nothing to interfere if he finds out."

"Don't worry, I'll make sure." After a pause, she asked, "Do you really think there's a chance you can stop him?"

Jasmine felt the weight of her decision resting heavily on her. "I hope so. I think so. Carla?"

"Yes?"

"In case I don't make it ... do what you can for Pandora." A second later, she heard the sound of soft crying from the other side of the door.

"Whatever you're planning, Jazzy, make it work. Your baby needs you. And mine needs me."

"What? What do you mean?"

"My baby's due in a couple of weeks ... It's Ahriman's," she added miserably.

Jasmine leaned her head against the door and closed her eyes. Was this madness never going to end?

"I won't screw up," she told Carla. "Make sure your friends don't either." She could hear Carla breathing heavily on the other side of the door.

"All right, I have to go now," said Carla.

"Yes ... If everything goes the way it's supposed to, I'll see you tomorrow night," Jasmine reassured her.

She waited until the sound of Carla's running footsteps receded. Unable to get all the way to her feet, she crawled back to the side of her bed and managed to hoist herself back up. Too nervous to sleep, she spent the rest of that afternoon and evening reviewing what Sephora had told her and trying to envision how things would play out the following night. It comforted her to know that she would not be alone when she confronted Ahriman.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 36

"That's everything she said," Carla told Thomas and Nathaniel the following day.

Thomas had his doubts. "That's all she told you? She didn't tell you how she was planning to stop him?"

"No, there wasn't much time, we only talked for few minutes," Carla said. "I was afraid Ahriman would see me. At least she was able to get to the door and speak—thanks to you, Nathaniel. Now that she's off the medication, she thinks she'll be able to do it tonight."

Thomas remained silent. He could see from the expectant look on Nathaniel's face that he'd already decided.

"So?" asked Carla.

Thomas looked at his brother. "I don't know. I don't like going in blind. Maybe if I knew what she had planned, I—"

"Look," Carla interrupted, "if Jazzy says she can do it, she will. I know her. Besides, she's the one with the most at stake here, isn't she?"

"No," said Thomas quietly. "There's a lot more at stake here than just Jasmine and her baby, Carla. Ahriman is looking to repopulate the world. The whole mortal race will eventually be at stake."

"It's at stake anyway, unless you have another plan ... and don't bring up Pandora again. You'd have to get through me to kill her. That's not happening."

Thomas noticed the steely glint in Carla's eyes and understood why Nathaniel had taken such a liking to her, but he remained doubtful. On the one hand, neither he nor Nathaniel had been able to come up with an effective solution as to how to put an end to their father. On the other, they'd both agreed that killing an innocent child would not be an option for either of them. "All right," he agreed. "Nathaniel?"

His brother replied without hesitation. "Yes, I'm in."

"Good. It's settled then," said Carla. "What's the plan? How do we take out Stronik and Christopher tonight?"

"We don't do anything. You're out of this. Nathaniel and I will look after it," said Thomas.

Carla didn't argue, he noted. The poor thing was probably worried sick about her baby, which was clearly due to arrive any time now. He hoped like hell the Cambion sister he'd never met knew what she was doing.

\* \* \* \*

Over the evening meal, Thomas listened as Ahriman set out a timetable for Christopher's expedition to round up the young ones, and what methods Thomas and Nathaniel should employ to convince them of their new purpose in life.

"Sounds like something we can handle, father," agreed Thomas. Ahriman, he noticed, had been furiously probing his mind during the meal. Christopher, who appeared sullen and had spoken little up until now, shot him a withering look.

"Don't be too sure," said Christopher. "Several of the halflings are still quite young. They'll be shocked when they find out they won't be returning to their mortal homes. You may have to employ force to persuade them their place is here. And you'll have to make sure any mortals who may try to track them down will be dealt with."

He doesn't like that Ahriman's brought us back into the fold. He'd kill us both if he could. If not for the seriousness of the situation, the fact might have amused Thomas. He took a perverse pleasure in knowing that, if all went according to plan, his half-brother, Christopher, would not see the sun rise tomorrow.

Nathaniel responded to Christopher's comment. "I'm sure we'll manage. And it'll be good to have some direction in our lives," he said, digging into the food on his plate. "We've been coasting along without purpose for too long."

Thomas smiled his acquiescence, then shot Christopher a knowing look when Ahriman expressed his approval.

\* \* \* \*

At just after two in the morning, Thomas, who had been glued to the door of his suite for the past several hours, heard the click of a latch and then a door closing in the hallway. The suite of rooms Ahriman shared with Pandora, the child who neither Thomas nor Nathaniel had yet laid eyes on, was on the same floor as theirs. So were Jasmine's, Christopher's and Stronik's.

Thomas motioned to Nathaniel, who sat nervously waiting in the chair next to the window, and his brother joined him by the door.

They heard the sound of approaching footsteps and then their father's voice as he murmured something drowned out by the sound of a wailing infant. A moment later they heard another door open and shut, and a lock click into place. Ahriman had entered Jasmine's room with the child.

"That's it, then," said Nathaniel.

"Meet me outside of Christopher's room the second you're done," Thomas told him.

\* \* \* \*

Nathaniel slipped into the deserted hallway, turning right. When he arrived in front of Stronik's door, he saw Thomas exit his room and make his way soundlessly in the opposite direction, toward Christopher's suite.

Nathaniel gently tried the door in front of him, hoping the good doctor wasn't in the habit of locking his door at night, but his luck wasn't in. He rapped softly several times, until he heard a sleepy voice say, "Yes ... Who is it?"

Speaking in a low voice, he said, "It's Nathaniel. Ahriman wants me to tell you that Carla's baby is coming. You're to come upstairs with me, right away."

After a moment he heard Stronik's reply. "Coming ... I'll be right there."

"I'll wait," said Nathaniel. He'd planned to dispose of Stronik as he slept, but that wasn't going to be possible. He'd have to get him to the floor above, where he could deal with the man without making a commotion that might awaken Christopher or alert Ahriman.

Seconds later, Stronik emerged, looking disheveled and carrying a black bag. Nathaniel hurried him upstairs to the third floor, toward Carla's room. Nathaniel walked ahead of Stronik to her door and opened it. Carla, he saw, was sitting up in bed, awake, and he'd startled her. Quickly, he put a finger to his lips to signal her to be quiet. When Stronik stepped inside, Nathaniel closed and locked the door behind him.

Stronik looked at Carla and then back at Nathaniel. "Where's Ahriman? She's not—"

His words were stopped by the knife Nathaniel plunged into his back. Stronik fell to the floor. A pool of crimson quickly spread on the carpet beneath him.

"Sorry," he said to a wide-eyed Carla who sat staring at Stronik's body with her hand over her mouth, "His door was locked, and I didn't want to take a chance of making noise by killing him downstairs. Are you all right?" he asked, seeing the shocked look on her face.

"Yes, I ... I just wasn't expecting it to happen here, that's all ... But I'm glad he's dead," she told him, "after what he did to Jasmine."

Nathaniel nodded. "I've got to get back downstairs."

"I'm coming with you."

There was no time to argue with her. He'd taken too long and now had to make sure Thomas had been able to deal with Christopher. Nathaniel hurried out the door, Carla on his heels.

\* \* \* \*

Thomas moved like a cat through the sitting area of Christopher's suite. He'd encountered no problem in entering. The door had opened soundlessly when he turned the knob. Thomas stopped to allow his eyes to adjust to the darkness. When the shadows of the room's furniture began to take shape, he cautiously made his way to the double doors leading to Christopher's bedroom. No light emanated from beneath the doors and he breathed a sigh of relief. What he was about to do could be accomplished easily enough if Christopher was asleep, as it appeared he might be.

He took hold of the handle and gently pushed down on it, opening the bedroom door just a crack before slipping inside the room. Moonlight poured in from the window, affording him a clear view of the large bed directly ahead. He moved silently toward it.

"Well, well," came a voice from behind.

He turned, moving as if under water, fear sitting heavily in the pit of his stomach, to see Christopher pointing a gun directly at his head.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

### Chapter 37

When Jasmine heard the lock turn in the door to her room, she stared straight forward, doing her best to duplicate the look of catatonia which, up until two days ago, had been her normal condition.

She knew she had to be extremely careful. Don't look at him. She heard the rasping, guttural sounds made by the dark souls that accompanied him and Pandora's wails. Ahriman lit the small lamp next to her bed. She did not turn to face him.

Jasmine remained perfectly still, terrified that the pulse at her throat would betray her racing heart, or that her nervousness would cause her to twitch, or that she would otherwise give away the fact she was mentally alert. Pandora's cries distracted her again. Don't look. Everything hinged on her performance.

Calm yourself. The sweet sound of Sephora's voice came to her. Around her neck, she wore the pendant.

From the periphery of her vision, she could see the dark spirits crowding around Ahriman's form as he moved to her side. Ahriman shook her roughly, and she feigned being startled, taking care to keep her eyes lowered.

"Wake up," he demanded. "Pandora needs to be fed."

Her eyes remained downcast, and she allowed her body to go limp when Ahriman pulled her up in bed so she could take the child to feed her. She focused all her effort on keeping her breathing controlled, even as the anger within her began to smolder.

Ahriman placed Pandora in her lap, and her daughter ceased crying, nuzzling at Jasmine's breast until she latched on. Pandora began to suckle.

Jasmine bit back her rising fury, swallowed it, although it took every fiber of her being to control it.

Remember, said Sephora. It is Ahriman's soul that must be destroyed, for it is the dark energy of his soul that sustains him. Without it, his body will also cease to exist. Use your force to expel his soul from his body. The others will take care of the rest.

Jasmine knew that she had passed through the land of the dead to arrive in the world of the living on the day of her birth. This she had learned from Ahriman himself on the day Pandora was born. For that reason, Sephora had told her, Jasmine, like Ahriman, had the power to summon souls.

And the souls of the women wronged by Ahriman were many.

It was to those tormented spirits that the task of destroying Ahriman's black soul would fall. Sephora had taught Jasmine the ancient words of the incantation to summon souls. Sephora had remembered them, for she had heard Ahriman speak them on the day he killed Askim.

Jasmine felt the raw energy of her anger reach boiling point, and fought the impulse to unleash it. Not yet. First, she had to summon the souls. They would destroy Ahriman's faithful and weaken Ahriman. Only then might she succeed in expelling his soul.

An eerie calm fell over her as she began to recite the incantation under her breath. The archaic-sounding words seemed to roll off her tongue of their own accord. She felt herself grow strong, speaking faster and faster, the words flying from her mouth. She heard Ahriman's gasp of surprise as it dawned on him what she was doing.

Jasmine clutched Pandora tightly, using her arms to shield the child from what was about to happen. Jasmine finished speaking the incantation just as Ahriman uttered an angry outcry. She did her best to prepare herself for the souls' arrival, but what happened next still astounded her.

Blinding light filled the room as the first line of furies arrived in the form of brilliant, fluid streaks. As they flew at the dark souls that surrounded Ahriman, another wave materialized to attack Ahriman. The dark souls of the faithful shrieked, first in surprise, then in anger, as they came under attack by the brilliant entities. Line after line of the scintillating white souls arrived like an avenging army. Some collided with Ahriman's faithful, destroying them upon impact, while others attacked Ahriman with savage ferocity.

Ahriman, enraged, screamed like a wild beast, swatting at his attackers as they continued to bear down on him. Still Jasmine waited, containing her deadly wrath. She clamped down hard, restraining it, for it was the last weapon that remained to her. The effort it took to hold back was monumental. Her blood vessels bulged, her head felt on fire, her entire being trembled. But she had to be sure Ahriman was weak enough that her blast of fury would expel his soul. The furies continued to attack him, working together like a pack of hungry wolves. The dark souls screeched in desperation as they fell all around him, and Ahriman's hellish howl filled the air as he battled the souls of the women who had waited centuries for their moment of reckoning.

Jasmine shook from the effort of suppressing the tide of raw anger that threatened to erupt. As if from far away, she heard Pandora wailing.

It was now or never, Jasmine knew. She could no longer control the raging inferno inside her.

\* \* \* \*

"I knew you were up to something," Christopher said. "I told Ahriman not to trust you. What were you planning to do, Thomas?"

"Kill you," Thomas said levelly. "And then destroy our father."

Christopher burst out laughing. "Destroy Ahriman? You're insane. He can't be destroyed."

"Our Cambion sister says otherwise."

The look of surprise on Christopher's face was almost enough for Thomas. He closed his eyes and waited for death to arrive. There were worse ways to die, he supposed, and his life had already spanned over two centuries. He prayed he would not awaken from death to find himself in the dark realm of his father's afterlife. And he prayed Jasmine would be able to do what she said she could.

Instead of a gun blast, Thomas heard a thud, and opened his eyes. Nathaniel and Carla stood in front of him looking down at Christopher's body. The black handle of a hunting knife protruded from Christopher's back. Christopher twitched, and Nathaniel retrieved the knife and turned him over, plunging the blade deep into Christopher's heart to finish the job.

Before any of them could speak, the sound of savage howling reached them, causing all three of them to jump.

"Shit, let's go!" said Nathaniel as he dropped the bloody knife and raced for the door.

Thomas followed Nathaniel into the hallway, but not before prying the gun from Christopher's dead hand. Carla followed right behind him.

The animalistic sounds emanating from Jasmine's bedroom brought all three of them to a screeching halt outside the door.

"Oh, God ... Jasmine! Break the door down. Hurry," yelled Carla.

Thomas pointed the revolver at the lock and fired. He and Nathaniel kicked at the door until it gave way, bursting open onto a scene from hell.

"Oh my God," uttered Carla.

The three of them stood transfixed by the scene confronting them. The room was filled with sinuous streaks of blinding white light. Ahriman jerked back and forth at the foot of the bed, attempting to defend himself against them. The dark souls of his faithful dropped like stones all around him as the luminous entities attacked them. The black ectoplasm of their remains covered the floor. Before their eyes, the gel-like goo seeped into the floorboards and walls, disappearing almost on contact.

Ahriman howled at anger and surprise, his arms flailing as he attempted to deflect the brilliant entities from him, to no avail.

On the bed, Jasmine clutched a wailing Pandora in her arms. Jasmine's head was tilted back, and her face bore a look as terrifying as it was beautiful. They watched in amazement as, a second later, what appeared to be an electrical current flew out of her, striking Ahriman like a bolt of lightning. Ahriman fell.

In the next instant, he got to his feet, still intact.

Chaos descended.

"You dare to try to destroy me!" he raged at her. He lashed out at the bright forms that continued to pound at him, wave after wave of them, circling and returning to attack him over and over.

Jasmine watched in horror and disbelief as Ahriman rose to his feet and fought his way toward her. She had failed to separate him from his soul. Her strength drained from having unleashed her fury, the knowledge of defeat weighing heavily on her, she looked down at the crying infant in her arms. "I'm sorry," she whispered to her uncomprehending child. "I'm so sorry." In that moment, looking at her tiny daughter's tear-streaked face, something happened. Fresh anger, such as she'd never experienced, rose up in her. Without wasting time, Jasmine reached deep into the well of her soul, dredged up the last reserve of her power and summoned her anger once more.

Thomas fired the gun at Ahriman in an attempt to slow him down. Nathaniel and Carla rushed in but were stopped in their tracks by a white-hot streak of light that went flying in front of them.

They turned to Jasmine again, for it was from her the eerie white light flowed as she unleashed the last of her righteous anger on Ahriman.

The brilliant force caught Ahriman squarely in the chest. He dropped to his knees once more, his cry deafening. At the same time, a viscous black force roared out of him as his soul was driven from his body. His corporeal form fell face-forward onto the floor with a loud thud.

The instant his dark soul emerged, the white souls surrounded it. Jasmine clenched her fist around the pendant. Sephora had warned her Ahriman's soul might try to seek refuge by plunging through it back into the dark realm. What she saw next put an end to her fears.

The brilliant white light of the furies intensified, nearly blinding her, as they converged on Ahriman's soul. A feeding frenzy ensued as they ripped into his black spirit like wild predators tearing into prey. The souls of the women continued to feed, absorbing his black spirit into their brilliant light, bit by bit. Jasmine, exhausted by her effort, shielded her eyes as the souls of the wronged women exacted their revenge. Within moments, Ahriman's malignant soul was completely consumed by the ravenous avengers.

The fluid streaks of light slowed, winding down in the aftermath of frenzy. Jasmine, who up until now had been riveted to the sight of the powerful spirit's demise, looked down at Pandora again. The baby's crying had abated. Her daughter locked eyes with her, and Jasmine caught another glimpse into Pandora's mind. Once again, she received an image of luminosity. This time, however, she had the strangest sensation that Pandora was responding, probing back with her own tiny unformed thought. Tears of relief sprang to her eyes. Her child, who moments ago had been doomed to a life of darkness with Ahriman, was now safe.

Suddenly, Carla arrived at her side, throwing her arms around her and the baby, crying unabashedly. As they embraced, Jasmine glanced over her friend's shoulder and took her first look at her brothers, Thomas and Nathaniel. They stood just inside the doorway, their stunned gazes travelling back and forth between her and the bright souls that still filled the room.

It was not until Jasmine turned back to the brilliant entities that her own tears began to fall. "Look!" she cried, pointing to them.

The others turned to watch, enthralled, as one by one, the bright souls of Ahriman's victims departed, travelling upward then vanishing from sight. Jasmine watched solemnly, knowing that, after centuries of suffering, the tormented souls had found redemption, and could rest in peace.

As the bright lights retreated, two of them shot out of formation, streaking toward Jasmine. She gasped in surprise as first one, and then the other, passed straight through her, causing a rush of air to ruffle her curls. The instant the luminous beings entered her, Jasmine knew. The souls of her mother and aunt had touched her. Through fresh tears, she watched as the two glowing souls rejoined the others. A moment later, they, too, disappeared from sight.

The exodus continued for several moments. Jasmine looked on in silence, humbled by the sheer number of souls who had arrived to intervene on her behalf.

At last, the final soul drifted upward and disappeared. Only then did Jasmine notice the tingling sensation on the skin of her breast. The pendant hanging from her neck heated. She looked down in alarm to see smoky tendrils of vapor emerging from it. "No," she cried out in surprise, fearing that somehow Ahriman had managed to escape.

Her fear was put to rest immediately. Seconds later, it was not Ahriman who stood before her, but Sephora.

She appeared not as the other bright souls, but as she must have looked in life, a regal-looking woman with luxurious waves of black hair, liquid ebony eyes and ruby lips. She hovered off the ground, above Jasmine, the light flowing through her without touching her. Her dark eyes lit up, her lips bore the hint of a smile. A tiny orb of light flitted around her like fairy dust, and Jasmine understood she was looking at the soul of Sephora's unborn child. Sephora looked down at Ahriman's body, which had already begun to shrivel, and then directly at Jasmine. Her voice, when she spoke, had the same peaceful quality Jasmine remembered from their unspoken conversations.

"As his spirit fell, so mine rose. The souls you have freed this day are many, and are forever in your debt, child who bears the name of the flower." The spirit bowed her head in a gesture of thanks.

Jasmine, too awed by the vision of Sephora to speak, hoped the gentle soul who had guided her to safety understood the gratitude filling her heart.

The apparition lingered for another moment before it disassembled, shooting upward and out of sight in the blink of an eye.

Silence reigned in the aftermath. Jasmine glanced at Thomas and Nathaniel, who stared back at her in awe. Pandora had fallen fast asleep in her arms.

It was Carla who finally broke the silence. Her voice trembled as she said, "Uh, I hate to break up the party, but I had my first contraction a half hour ago, and I think I'm having another one now..."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 38

In the chaotic aftermath of Ahriman's death, it was Thomas who took charge, executing what needed to be done with cool efficiency.



"Oh, no..." Carla doubled over in pain.

Nathaniel rushed to Carla's side to assist her.

"Bring her into Ahriman's suite. It's the largest," directed Thomas.

After taking Pandora from Jasmine, Thomas helped her to Ahriman's room, where Nathaniel had already settled Carla on the bed. Thomas dragged the lounge next to the bed so that Jasmine could remain near her friend, and then placed a sleeping Pandora in her crib.

"I'm going to see what I can find in Stronik's room that might help," said Thomas, casting a worried glance at Jasmine when Carla was rocked with another contraction right away. "I don't think there's time to get her to a hospital."

"Is it supposed to hurt this much?" asked Carla through gritted teeth.

Jasmine did her best to calm her friend. She remembered all too well the excruciating pain of her own labor in birthing Pandora.

"Oh, God ... What if it's a girl?" Carla asked suddenly, her face betraying her fear. "Female Cambions don't survive..."

"You don't know that ... I survived, didn't I? And so did Pandora. Don't upset yourself thinking that way. We're here, Carla, and we won't leave you. Everything's going to be all right."

Thomas returned bearing a box of instruments and clean sheets and towels.

Not two hours later, Nathaniel wiped the perspiration from Carla's brow and held her hand tightly as Thomas assisted Carla in delivering her baby, a healthy male Cambion.

Carla cried tears of relief and joy when, after Thomas cut the umbilical cord and cleaned the baby up, he handed her son to her.

"He's beautiful," whispered Jasmine.

"Downright angelic," agreed Nathaniel. "What will you name him?"

Carla seemed unable to tear her gaze away from her gorgeous child. "I don't know ... I hadn't given it any thought."

"May I make a suggestion?" Nathaniel asked.

When Carla nodded, he said "Athen. It's the name of the very first Cambion, one who lived for almost five hundred years before taking his leave of this earth."

"What?" Jasmine thought she had misunderstood. "What do you mean five hundred years?"

Nathaniel shot a surprised look at Thomas.

"Cambions live a long time, Jasmine," explained Thomas. "Even though you are the first female, I can pretty much assure you that you'll be around for roughly four hundred years in the normal course of things."

Stunned by the revelation, Jasmine watched as Carla and Nathaniel looked over the infant between them.

"Athen it is," Carla said. She smiled at Nathaniel.

Jasmine looked at the two of them. He's in love with her. She could see it in Nathaniel's eyes as he regarded Carla and her newborn son. And by the look on her best friend's face, the feeling was mutual. The thought filled her with a strange mixture of joy and angst. She pictured the years to come, were they to unite. Carla would grow old, while Nathaniel would retain his youthful appearance for another two centuries, or more. He would remain alive long after Carla passed on. The thought saddened her, but the joy on her friend's face overrode her concern.

\* \* \* \*

Just before dawn, Jasmine remained awake, studying Carla and her baby, who were now both sleeping soundly. Thomas poked his head in the door.

"Nathaniel and I will be back in an hour or two. Will you be all right until we return?"

"Yes, of course. Where are you going?" Jasmine asked.

He stepped inside and sat down next to her.

"I think it's best that Nathaniel and I dispose of the bodies. What happened here tonight, and who we are, can't be made public. You understand?"

Jasmine nodded. She had been thinking the same thing herself.

"The forest on the property is large and inside the walls of the estate. We'll find a place to bury the bodies where they won't be discovered. Tomorrow, I'll contact the staff and advise them their services are no longer required. I'll tell them Ahriman and Christopher have left on business for an undetermined length of time—they're used to them being gone for long stretches. And I'll let them know Stronik's returned to America. Then Nathaniel I will make arrangements to close the place up."

Jasmine nodded again. "All right. But it'll be a while before Carla and I will be able to travel so we can return home. Will you stay with us until then?"

Thomas smiled kindly at her. "That's the other thing I wanted to talk to you about. I think the two of you and the children should return to Venice with Nathaniel and me, once you're both able to travel."

"Venice?"

"Yes. That's where we live. I think you'll find our home comfortable, and it'll give everyone a chance to recover from all that's happened. Besides," he continued, glancing at a sleeping Carla, "Nathaniel made it clear he wants to look after Carla and Athen. I don't think he'll take no for an answer."

"I don't think Carla will protest too much," Jasmine said. "I suspect the feeling's mutual. It's very generous of you, thank you. To be honest, the thought of returning to my life in Tampa doesn't seem to make sense after everything that's happened. I think a fresh start is a good idea."

"We're agreed then. We'll work out the details tomorrow."

He left then to join Nathaniel in carrying out the gruesome task of disposing of Ahriman's remains, as well as those of Christopher and Stronik.

Two hours later, the brothers returned. Thomas confided to Jasmine that their father's mortal body had decomposed in an unnatural manner, and that, by the time he had buried Ahriman's remains deep within the forest backing onto the estate, there had been nothing left of him but shards of bones and quickly disintegrating chunks of flesh. He voiced his suspicion that, were the grave to be dug up, no trace of him would be found.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Epilogue

### Ten Months Later

Jasmine ambled along the panoramic main deck of the luxury cruise ship, pushing a stroller bearing Pandora, who cooed her contentment in the afternoon sunlight. The seven-day Mediterranean cruise had been Thomas's idea, a celebration of Pandora's first birthday. The six of them, Jasmine, Thomas, Nathaniel, Carla, Pandora, and little Athen, had boarded the ship four days ago at the port of Civitavecchia, near Rome. From there, they had travelled to Genoa, and Barcelona. Yesterday afternoon, they'd arrived in Tunis, and tomorrow they would dock in Malta, where they'd spend the day. After that, they'd head for Palermo, Sicily, then back to Rome and on to Venice, where, for the past ten months, Jasmine had taken up residence with her new family in Thomas and Nathaniel's extraordinary home.

Jasmine settled herself on one of the loungers lining the deck and bent over the stroller to adjust the light blanket Pandora had once again kicked away. The warmth of the sun beating down on her, combined with the Mediterranean sea breeze, made a pleasant combination. She still hadn't gotten her fill of fresh air and sunshine following her enforced confinement last year.

After a moment, she spotted Thomas emerging from the stairwell onto the deck, dressed conservatively, as usual, in a sports jacket, slacks and loafers, his waves of blond hair neatly gelled back.

A smile touched her lips as she studied him, the brother she had never known and with whom she shared so much in common. Over the past ten months, she'd come to respect his quiet intelligence and the fine sense of humor that lurked beneath it. He and Nathaniel, having lived such long lives, had been a source of knowledge and inspiration for her. And she owed so much to Thomas, she reminded herself, her thoughts returning to the hellish night of Ahriman's demise almost a year ago.

Jasmine, who had never travelled abroad save for the dreadful ocean voyage she'd endured and her forcible confinement in England, had immediately fallen in love with the magical city of bridges. The six of them had spent many memorable days touring the marvelous city. The past ten months had proven to be a time of healing and bonding for all of them.

Carla and Nathaniel had indeed become lovers not long after they arrived in Venice. Both made it clear that they would remain together as long as they wished. As Carla wisely pointed out, all of them were subject to death by misfortune at any time, just like mortals. Also, Carla had confided to Jasmine that Nathaniel had expressed his desire to raise Athen as his own child. He would be there for her halfling son, even after her demise. Jasmine knew that despite Nathaniel's striking physical resemblance to Ahriman, her brother had a generous nature and a heart big enough to encompass Carla's humanness as well as her Cambion son. He would take good care of her friend and little Athen.

Jasmine delighted in spending every waking hour with Pandora, who still remained, for the most part, an enigma to her. She really had no idea what the child was capable of. That her daughter would eventually have the ability to summon souls, as did Jasmine and Ahriman before her, was a fair assumption. Just over a month ago, Pandora revealed that she may also have inherited Jasmine's ability to summon raw energy. On more than a few occasions, Pandora had caused objects in her vicinity to move or topple over, most noticeably when the child became excited, or upset. Jasmine supposed the full extent of her daughter's powers would be revealed a little at a time as she grew older. In the meantime, she had watched her precious daughter take her first steps and utter her first words.

Jasmine looked up to find Thomas standing beside her. After eliciting a smile from Pandora, he sat down next to Jasmine. As if he had read her thoughts, which of course he could not, being a Cambion like she was, Thomas said, "Have you given any more thought to what we discussed?"

Jasmine gathered Pandora from the stroller, suddenly wanting her near. Luxuriating in the baby-fresh scent of her, she looked into her daughter's mysterious, black-and-jade eyes and hugged her close. She did not immediately answer Thomas's question, wondering, as she had for the past month, whether they should go ahead with what he had proposed.

Thomas continued in his usual calm and considered manner. "The villa outside of Rome won't be available indefinitely. We'll have to make a decision immediately upon our return home."

"Yes, I know," Jasmine replied.

"It would be a safe environment for Pandora—secluded, but close enough to Rome that she wouldn't be culturally deprived. Besides, Nathaniel and I want to take an active part in helping you to raise her. She's an extraordinary child, and her needs will have to be carefully considered. It would be good for her to be raised there, out of the public eye, until we know better what she's capable of. Besides," he added, "there are the others to consider..."

Jasmine sighed. "Do you really think it's the right thing to do, Thomas? The young ones—their lives will be completely disrupted once we explain their true nature. We don't even know how old the remaining six are ... They might be too young to deal with the information. We may be doing them more harm than good by telling them."

Thomas took her hand. "Have you forgotten what you went through? You've told me many times over the past year how apart and alone you always felt growing up, how the sense of not belonging anywhere haunted you. They have the right to know. And," he added, "they'll have the recourse of joining us in Rome at any time they feel the need. We can help them to assimilate, and give them the sense of community that they'll otherwise lack. It's the right thing to do. Besides, they'll learn the truth eventually. As they remain the same while everyone around them grows old and dies, their real natures will be revealed, not just to themselves but to the mortals in their lives. That could have disastrous consequences for them."

She could not dispute Thomas's logic. "You're right, of course." She sighed. "Still, I'm going to miss living in Venice. It's been wonderful these past months. I've never been happier."

Thomas brushed an errant lock of hair away from her face and smiled. "The privilege has been mine, sister. And I can't think of anyone more deserving of happiness than you."

Her brother appeared genuinely pleased. "It's settled then. Nathaniel and I will arrange to go ahead with the purchase of the Villa as soon as we return. Once we're settled in, we'll begin our search for the others. Hopefully, it won't take too long to locate them. I have notes made by Christopher from information Ahriman gave him. We'll have a starting point for each of the six. Naturally, the choice to join us will be theirs, and they will decide if and when to do so. We'll have a better idea of what to expect once we meet them."

On impulse, Jasmine reached over and hugged her brother, nearly crushing Pandora between them. The child expressed her annoyance by overturning the stroller in front of them, using only her mind.

Jasmine looked into her daughter's eyes, probing her thoughts. Pandora responded, probing back, but it came across as nothing more than a mental question mark. Jasmine broke out laughing, and Pandora returned the favor by giving her mother a cherubic smile. The child's extraordinary beauty struck Jasmine anew.

Her daughter's eyes were on the pendant Jasmine wore, which twinkled in the sunlight. Jasmine had tried on many occasions, both on her own and with Thomas's help, to destroy the pendant following Ahriman's demise. They had not succeeded in doing so. Whatever the origin of the thing, it appeared to be indestructible. She had spent many sleepless nights worrying about what to do with the pendant. Ahriman had stumbled upon it and used it to enter the physical world. What, she worried, was to stop some other dark entity from doing the same? In the end, she decided it would be wise to keep the pendant on her person at all times. If anything were to attempt to come through again, at least they would have immediate knowledge of it.

She turned back to Thomas, about to ask him when the move to Rome might take place, when the pendant suddenly moved of its own accord, slipping over Jasmine's head and hovering in the air above her. Jasmine looked up in surprise at the pendant floating above her, then back at her daughter. Pandora's eyes were glued to the pendant, her chubby little arms outstretched as she attempted to pluck it from the air.

"Pandora," cried Jasmine, surprised at what the child had just done.

Her tone of voice must have startled the child, because in the next second, Pandora began to cry. At the same time, Jasmine reached for the pendant above her, but before she could grasp it, it went flying through the air away from her, across the ship's deck and past the railing to the sea below.

"Oh, no." Jasmine got up, holding her wailing child, and she and Thomas raced to the ship's railing to look over. They saw nothing that might have broken the pendant's fall into the churning water below. The sea had swallowed it.

Jasmine and Thomas looked at each other, neither of them knowing what to do. From several feet away, Jasmine heard a woman say: "Did you see that?"

They were attracting unwanted attention. Thomas gave her a knowing look and stepped over to the nearby tourists. A moment later, following a brief conversation with the group, he returned.

"Let's go," he said, taking Pandora from her and placing her back in the stroller. "They've already forgotten what they saw."

As they walked away, Jasmine said, "But the pendant..."

Thomas, she could see, shared her concern. "I know. Unfortunate. I would have preferred it to remain in our possession."

"Yes, and now it's gone for good. We'll never be able to retrieve it."

"Still," Thomas said, "who knows? Maybe it's for the best."

Jasmine considered this. "Perhaps. I suppose there are worse places it might have ended up than the bottom of the ocean."

After a moment of silence, he said, "It's strange. When you think about it, you and I wouldn't even be here if not for that thing."

"I know," she said gently. "I've thought about that, too."

Three Days Later:

Luca finished his cigarette in the brilliant morning sunshine, surrounded by the sparkling blue water of the Mediterranean. He stopped chatting with Andrea when the captain, his uncle, gave the order to haul in the drifting longline from the stern of the fishing trawler. He and Andrea gloved up and began the process of hauling in the day's catch of swordfish.

Luca enjoyed working on his uncle's fishing boat, but two weeks at sea found him more than ready to head back to his home in Valletta, Malta, not to mention back to his girl, the lovely Martina. As he and the crew wrestled the lines and hooked fish into the boat, Luca daydreamed about Martina, remembering the taste of her sensuous lips when she'd kissed him good-bye two weeks ago. Her dark eyes had sparkled, the caramel skin of her bare arms as smooth as silk beneath his fingers. Tomorrow, he had decided, when he returned to Valletta, he would ask the dark-haired beauty to be his wife.

After the strenuous job of hoisting in the longlines was done, Luca joined the other men in the messy task of gutting and cleaning the catch, his least-favorite part of the job, before putting the swordfish on ice. Nevertheless, Luca went about the task quickly and efficiently. After removing the hooks, he laid the catch out on the padded floor of the stern. Using a saw, he removed first the head, then the fins and gillcovers. He turned each fish belly-up and slit the abdomen open with a sharp knife, then gutted the fish.

An hour later, Luca turned a large swordfish over and made a clean slit. As he emptied the cavity, the midday sun glinted off something metallic in the innards that had spilled out onto the padded floor.

Luca used a gloved hand to pick up the object and wiped the blood and fish guts from it. A second later, he called out to his friend in surprise.

"Hares, Andrea. Come look at this."

Luca stared down in amazement at the exotic-looking necklace in his hand.

"What, you found that in the fish?" asked Andrea when he arrived at his side.

"Yes. It's silver, I think ... and heavy. It looks old."

"This is a lucky day for you. Looks like it might be worth some money, my friend," said Andrea after inspecting the pendant more closely and clapping him on the back.

"Maybe," said Luca. But already he knew he would not sell the piece even if it turned out to be valuable.

As he stood on the stern of his uncle's fishing boat, examining the pendant in the brilliant sunshine, all he could think about was Martina and the look on her lovely face when he gifted it to her tomorrow.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

A lifelong fan of dark fiction, Rita Vetere combines elements of the supernatural and suspense to steer her tales down a dark and twisting path. Good and evil is the recurring theme and, as in real life, it's always a coin toss as to which side will win out.

Rita currently resides in the Greater Toronto Area. When she's not writing, she's reading or indulging her addiction to horror and adventure flicks.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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Table of Contents

[Highlight](#)

[Born of Darkness](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[PART ONE](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[PART TWO](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[PART THREE](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Rita Vetere](#)

[More from Lyrical Press](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)