

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



CIANA
STONE

HEARTS OF FIRE
MEMORY'S EYE

Memory's Eye

Ciana Stone

Book 1 in the Hearts of Fire series

My name's Memory and I have a slight problem. I walked out on a business I poured my heart and soul into and took off across country to "find myself". No luck on finding *me* yet, but I found something I wasn't expecting. Marco Redwing. Sexy? Hell, that doesn't even come close. Oh, the things I long to do to him. The kicker? He has a crystal pendant that's an exact match to the one I've worn since I was eighteen.

It's almost too good to be true. Problem is, every time I'm around the man my crystal pendant goes crazy. Damn thing sends off energy spikes I'm afraid are going to electrocute me.

Could I really find the man of my dreams in this charming Southern city? And that's the real problem. The crystal is supposed to lead me to the man I'm destined to mate with. Which sounds damn fine to me. But it also lets me know there's something not so good getting closer.

And that's the rub. There's a demon after me.

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Memory's Eye

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MEMORY'S EYE

Ciana Stone

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Prologue

Memory took great care to make as little noise as possible when she closed the heavy wooden door of the chapel. For a few moments she just stood rooted in place, letting her eyes adjust to the dim surroundings.

At this time of night, half past midnight, the chapel was empty. Normally it would be completely dark, but tonight three enormous candles burned on a small table in front of the altar.

Headmistress Raguel, or Angela, as the children of the home called her, had asked Memory to meet her here but had not said why. Only that it was a private matter and she should not tell anyone else about it.

As a rule, there was nothing Memory kept from the three girls she called her “sisters”. Charlotte, Kenna and De’alla were not related to her by blood, but were as close to her as if they shared common genetics. All younger than Memory, each of them was as precious to her as any blood relative could ever be.

Maybe that was because of all the children of the home, they were bound by the common bond of being different. Sweet, shy Charlotte was empathic. Which was why she hurt so much of time. Not only did she feel the emotions of others, sometimes she was overwhelmed by them.

Kenna, short for McKenna, might have been born in the wrong time. Memory could imagine her as a warrior of old, fighting evil and overcoming adversaries with her sharp mind and her psychokinetic abilities. She, like Charlotte, was something of a loner, hiding not only her ability to direct and manipulate energy but her uncanny ability to predict the future.

De’alla didn’t have a shy bone in her but she was very selective about who she let get close to her. She had an unusual ability – she could commune with nature, actually

communicate with it and be guided by its forces. Even more unique, she could control water, something Memory had never heard of, but had certainly witnessed.

In comparison, Memory felt her abilities were the most unremarkable. A clairvoyant of sorts, her primary skill was the ability to project what was in her mind. She could picture something and have it appear on the film in a camera or a piece of paper, and occasionally she could make parts of what she imagined manifest in a shadowy fashion. But that was rare and it lasted only a moment. Still, it was enough to make her different from the “normals” and feel at home with her sisters.

Maybe it was because they were so different that Memory had been drawn to them the moment each arrived at the home. Whatever had drawn them together, the bonds that had formed were strong and true and Memory really disliked keeping anything from them.

But she'd promised Angela, and a person was only as good as their word, so she'd kept silent and snuck out of the room she shared with Kenna, Charlotte and De'alla to do as she'd agreed.

“Ah, there you are,” Angela's voice snapped her out of her reverie.

Memory looked in the direction of the voice. Angela was standing before the table bearing the candles, a halo of golden light surrounding her. Dressed in a flowing white gown and matching robe, she looked like an angel, something Memory had thought more than once.

Ageless and beautiful, Angela was the personification of feminine loveliness. Her hair was a pale blonde that cascaded in gentle curls over her shoulders. Her eyes were the clearest blue, rimmed with the most curious pale but thick lashes. Memory often wondered why Angela didn't color her lashes, but then she'd never seen Angela wear makeup of any kind, so she supposed it was fitting that she left her lashes natural.

“Come,” Angela gestured.

Memory approached and took the hand that Angela offered.

"I've asked you here tonight because this is the day of your birth. Today you are eighteen, an adult by legal standards. This will be the last night you spend in our home, and before you leave here there is something I must give you."

"A birthday present?"

"In a manner of speaking." Angela reached inside the pocket of her flowing robe. When she lifted her hand, an odd-shaped crystal dangled from a silver chain wrapped around her fingers.

The crystal not only captured Memory's eyes, it consumed her entire focus. Angela, the candles, the chapel—it all faded. All she could see was the crystal—the way the light reflected off it and refracted through it, the swirling faint shapes that seemed to swim in its depths as it twirled and swayed before her face.

A double terminated quartz of remarkable clarity, its heart was a milky white, semi-transparent. Memory focused on that small milky center, gasping in surprise as she realized that when she looked through it, objects were reflected back in double.

Angela's voice rang softly in her mind, an accompaniment to the enchantment cast by the crystal.

"Outside these walls, people view us as the unwanted, beings cast aside and forgotten, meriting little consideration.

"Yet nothing could be farther from the truth. Housed inside this home are beings that have been chosen to play a pivotal role in the evolution and protection of mankind. You, Memory, are one of the Chosen."

That last sentence had Memory snapping out of her trance and looking into Angela's eyes, shock warring with confusion and a liberal sprinkling of fear.

"Chosen?"

Angela smiled and Memory could not help but think that the smile seemed one of sadness rather than joy. That ramped up the fear another notch, making her hands feel suddenly clammy.

Angela looped the necklace over Memory's head, letting the crystal settle on her chest. Something like an electrical current radiated out from the point of contact, racing through Memory's body with enough force to have her stagger. Angela took her hands, supporting her and leading her to the front pew.

"Listen carefully to what I have to tell you, Memory," Angela said once they were seated. "In the time when the world was young and man and beast were one with nature, the Ancients foresaw the coming of a time when all they had built, all they had accomplished would be rent asunder. Mankind, in its ignorance, would set upon a course of destruction with the arrogant yet earnest belief that it was for the betterment of our kind. Unbeknownst to them, they would be guided by malevolence, intent only upon the subjugation of man. This entity, the counterbalance to the forces of good, could not be destroyed as it is an eternal dictate that all must have its opposite or none can exist.

"In preparation for what was to come, the Ancients took the Atlantean crystals and secreted them away in the hopes that their enemy could not find them. Implanted upon powerful nodes, these crystals contained the original star codes that Atlantis was holding in safe keeping.

"The Ancients encoded light codes into crystals within the veins of the earth. Using interfaced crystals, which are essentially ordinary crystals that have been reprogrammed to interface with the Atlantean stratum, it is possible to access the light codes and unravel the secret power of the original crystals."

Memory had no clue what to make of the things Angela was saying. It all sounded like bad science fiction to her. "Is this a story or something?"

"Hardly, my dear child. What you now wear is an interfaced crystal, part of a set of crystals, that when combined, provide—for lack of a better analogy—a GPS to the implanted original Atlantean crystals."

"Part of a set?"

“Eight in all. The Ancients were wise in their plans. They knew that the time would come when the power of the original crystals would be threatened. They needed to ensure that there was a chance to stop evil from accessing the enormous power these crystals possessed and so they created the Hearts of Fire—eight crystals that, when combined, not only pointed the way, but imbued the owners with the abilities necessary to battle and hopefully defeat this enemy.”

Memory swiped at sweat that trickled down her face. Her stomach was churning and she felt like she was about to be sick. This couldn't be real.

“Why are you telling me this stuff?”

“Because you are one of the eight, Memory. And one day you'll unite with the others and do battle with the enemy.”

“What enemy? A monster?”

“Much worse. Asmodeus is the name he has chosen to be called. There is much written about him. He is often called a prince of hell, or demon of lust, as one of his strongest and most insidious powers is the ability to twist a person's sexual desires.”

“And this...demon—it's real? It's here, walking around?”

“At times. It requires enormous power to manifest in the physical realm and when he has amassed enough power to do so he is formidable. He will seduce and trick you into believing him to be someone who cares—who loves you. If you fall sway to his charms, he will feed off your life energy, steadily draining you to sustain his corporeal form.”

Memory grabbed the chain holding the crystal, intent on giving it back. “I don't want it. If this is true then find someone else. What's wrong with this damn thing? Get it off me!”

Try as she might, she could not remove the crystal. Each time she tried, the strength drained out of her arms and hands. It was as if the crystal suddenly weighed a thousand pounds. She couldn't budge it.

"Angela, help me!"

Angela shook her head sadly. "This is not of my doing, child. You were chosen before you were born, by the spirit that inhabits you. The crystal cannot be removed until time for it to be united with the remaining seven."

"No."

"Yes, you are one of The Eight. There is no escaping that. And if you look into the crystal you will know I speak the truth."

Memory was scared. Scared to look at the crystal and scared to believe Angela. Angela had never lied to her, never misled her. She'd known only love and compassion from this beautiful woman. But still...what she'd said. It was crazy.

"It will require courage," Angela said softly.

"I don't have that much," Memory whispered.

"Not even for your sisters?"

Memory's heart thumped almost painfully and her eyes sought Angela's. "What do you mean?"

"Your sisters. They are of The Eight as well. If you do not accept your role, then you cannot protect them should the Enemy turn his sights on them."

Nothing could have convinced Memory as easily as a threat to the people she loved. Sucking in a deep breath, she held the crystal up before her eyes. And fell into a truth that robbed her of conscious thought.

Chapter One

Memory stood beside her partner Romeo, her laptop remote in her hand. Both of them were focused on the images that flashed on the big LED screen on the wall of Memory's office. The photos were from a shoot they'd just completed in the studio.

Her office door opened and Romeo nudged her with his elbow. She looked in the direction of the door. One of the models she'd shot earlier was headed her way, his hair artfully mussed, his shirt unbuttoned and displaying a lot of chest and abdomen. His pants were unbuttoned and slinking low. *Looking like something out of a magazine*, Memory thought. *Every woman's fantasy*.

Hormones flared, making her pulse kick up a notch and she mentally cursed. She'd sworn off models but damn if she could get her hormones to agree. The one headed in her direction had her imagining sweat-tangled sheets and quick but satisfying sexual release.

"Just wanted to say thanks," the model said as he stopped in front of the table. "I know you'll make me look fabulous."

"Do my best," she replied, trying to squelch her hormones. "Thanks for being so easy to work with."

"I was thinking maybe we could have dinner. If you don't have plans, that is. I know this great B&B not too far that has the best crab cakes you've ever tasted in your life."

Memory smiled at the idea. She knew as well as he that if she accepted, they'd get to the crab cakes *after* he'd given his best shot at giving her the most mind-blowing sex she'd ever experienced and hopefully securing her backing in propelling him from midlist model to one of the hottest talents in the industry. It was no secret that it had

happened before. Not something she was extraordinarily proud of, but a fact nonetheless.

That thought was enough to quiet her raging hormones and reaffirm her resolve to stay away from sexual liaisons with models.

"Thanks, but no," she said. "Gotta go through all these shots and get them sent to the client."

"Do it later," he suggested with a sexy smile that threatened her resolve.

She reconsidered it for a moment. It had been quite a while since she'd felt that wonderful release that comes with orgasm not self-induced. It would be nice to indulge just once, release all the pent-up tension and frustration.

And start another round of empty encounters that will end up having you nicknamed a real model whore, her conscience reminded her.

"No can do."

"I promise to show you a *real* good time."

Memory cut her eyes up at him and was struck by how he suddenly seemed far less attractive. His hair didn't look near as shiny and luxurious as it had a few minutes ago, and there was an almost bruised appearance on the skin around his eyes that the makeup had not quite hidden. She wondered why she hadn't noticed it earlier. Or had she? Now that she thought about it, didn't she have that thought at the onset of the shoot?

Shit! Had she done a mind-paste? Her eyes cut to the image displayed on the big screen. Was it the result of a legitimate shot or had she projected what she wanted to see?

"Come on, baby." The sexy croon pulled her attention back to what his real intention was. It earned him a sharp look from Mem, and an even sharper retort.

"I said no. Now if you'll excuse me?" With that she turned her back on him.

"Fuck you!" he snapped. "I was trying to do you a favor, bitch."

"Hey!" Romeo barked as the model stalked away.

"Let it go." Memory put her hand on Romeo's arm. "Really. It's not important. He just needed to have the last word."

"Fuck having the last word! Just who the hell does he think he is talking to you like that?"

"Rom, let it go," she said with a sigh. "It's my own fault. I should've never slept with one model let alone a string of them. Now the ambitious pretty boys think if they grant me a night with them I'll turn them into stars."

"We all make mistakes," Rom said.

Memory snorted. "Yeah, well I've made one too many in that department."

"You're just sexually frustrated is all," he said and followed it with a sigh. "Honey, sometimes I really wish I was straight because you seriously need to have your world rocked."

Memory snorted. "That's the last thing I need, thank you."

"Scoff if you want, but you and I both know that it's been...good god, since Randy, and that was—"

"Let's not go there, okay?" she asked.

Randy George was the final mistake in her life she'd like to forget. When she'd met him he was a midlist model, approaching forty and looking at the end of his career. She was one of the top photographers in the world, enjoying remarkable success in her professional life.

Her personal life was the polar opposite. In the early years of her career, she'd been mesmerized by the gorgeous men she shot, and had found herself having a string of short-lived affairs. When she finally realized that the men she ended up with were far more interested in what she could do for their careers than in her, she swore off men entirely. Until Randy.

She was certain Randy was different. He was funny and sweet, and didn't seem to have much of an ego. Two shoots with Memory and Randy's flagging career took off like a rocket. He became the poster boy for the gorgeous man approaching middle age and was in demand internationally. For six months they were inseparable. The drop-dead-beautiful male model and the much-sought-after photographer. She thought it was love. Then things started to change. Randy became increasingly self-absorbed, reminding her daily how lucky she was to be with one of the sexiest men in the world.

She put up with his burgeoning ego, until she returned home early from an out-of-town shoot and found him in bed with a beautiful female model. That's when reality sank in. He was no different than any of the others. He'd just played her. Memory booted him out of her house that very night and swore off men altogether.

Romeo came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her in a hug. "I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to make you sad. I just don't like seeing you alone, Mem."

"It's okay," she said and leaned back against him. "And if you were straight, I'd tie you up and hide you away all for myself. There aren't men out there like you, Rom—smart, funny...honest. No offense but in general men are a bunch of narcissistic pricks with the emotional depth of turnips. They're interested in two things—a hot fuck or someone who can pave their way to the top. I'm not hot and I'm tired of paving."

Romeo turned her around reached up to loosen the plastic clip she always used to pin her hair up, letting her long dark hair spill free, tumbling in a cascade of shining waves to the middle of her back.

"You listen to me, girl," he spoke in a scolding tone. "You are hot. You just hide it. Like this granny clip, and those glasses. If you're not hiding your face behind a camera you've got it so covered with...accessories that no one can even see what you look like. And your clothes—"

Memory couldn't help but laugh. She and Romeo had played this scenario before. He detested the way she dressed and she refused to update her wardrobe just to try to

attract a man. Nothing she owned was formfitting, from her baggy jeans to her habit of wearing men's dress shirts over her t-shirts.

"Tell you what," she said. "If I meet a man who's genuine, I'll buy a bikini and parade down main street USA while you take pictures."

"From your mouth to God's ears."

"Let's get out of here," she suggested. "How about I buy you a drink?"

"Sounds like a plan to—"

They both looked around as the door to her office banged open. Randy George walked in, followed closely by Memory's secretary, Janet.

"I'm sorry," Janet blurted. "I told him you were busy but he—"

"It's okay," Memory interrupted as she stood. She waited until Janet left before she addressed Randy.

"What do you want?"

"Buzz me when you're done here," Romeo said and made a swift exit.

Randy waited until the door was closed. "Look at this shit!" He tossed a stack of glossy 8 x 10 color photos down on her desk.

Memory leafed through the stack. "Not bad. Could have used more fill here but still not too bad. Not crazy about the Dutch angle in this—"

"I'm not talking about technical mumbo jumbo! Look what that fuck did to me! I look like I'm...forty!"

She cut her eyes up at him with a smile. "Well, technically you're over forty."

"Fuck you!" he shouted and threw himself into one of the chairs in front of her desk. "I'm ruined!"

Memory took a seat behind the desk, giving the photos another look. "It's not that bad, Randy. A little airbrushing around the eyes and maybe on the neck—"

"I don't want goddamn airbrushing! Mem, you know as well as I that once you have to start getting touchups, you're done."

She sat back and regarded him with knitted brows. "And so you're here to – what? I'm not a cosmetic surgeon, Randy. And I'm not God. We all age. No way to stop that except the alternative."

A grin of mischief came on her face. "Of course, if you're here to ask me to shoot you and put you out of your misery, we might be able to work something out."

"Yes!" he blurted while she was still talking.

"What?"

"I want you to shoot me. Mem, you know you have the 'magic eye'. Everyone knows it. You see what no one else does. You shoot someone and they look like a million bucks. I need you to do this shoot again."

"It's not my job," she pointed out. "Not my client."

"I don't care! Those photos can't see daylight or I'm finished. You have to do it, Mem. For us."

"Us? There is no us. Hasn't been since the moment I found you and that...that poster child for breast implants in my bed."

Randy bounded to his feet and circled the desk to throw himself down on one knee beside her chair. "I was wrong, Mem. I admit it. I was a fool. Nothing's been right since you kicked me out. I want you back. I want us back."

She rolled her chair back away from him. "Get up," she said as she stood. "And get out."

Randy climbed to his feet and reached out to take her arm and pull her to him. "Come on, baby. It'll be like old times. Me and you, conquering the world. Remember how great we were together? It can be that way again. Only better."

Memory twisted out of his grasp. "Get out, Randy. Now."

"Come on, babe. Where else are you gonna get this kind of offer? I'm still the hottest thing going and you know it. Millions of women would kill to be in your shoes right now. And let's face it, you don't exactly have them lined up to get a piece of you."

"Get out!" she shouted and pointed toward the door.

"Memory –"

"Out!" she screamed, picked up a crystal paperweight on the desk and threw it at him.

The crash of the glass as the paperweight broke the window brought a stampede of people to her office.

"Mem?" Romeo fought his way to the forefront of people rushing in. He hurried over to stand protectively in front of Memory.

"Leave," he ordered Randy.

"Fuck you, fag!" Randy yelled. A split second later he lurched to one side as the cordless phone connected with the side of his head.

Memory had already hurled another object, this time a coffee mug and was about to hurl a small metal-framed photo when Romeo grabbed her. "Mem, no!"

By then her office was complete chaos. Randy was screaming and going on about all he'd done was try to make up with her and she'd attacked him, people were shouting for someone to call the police while several of the women were trying to convince Randy to let them check his head to make sure he wasn't bleeding.

Amid all that, Memory pulled away from Romeo, snatched up her shoulder bag and ran, forcing her way through the crowd. He caught up with her at the front door.

"I'm done," she announced. "It's yours, Rom."

"Hey, hold on!" He grabbed her arm and was pulled along behind her as she headed out the door. "Mem, stop!"

She stopped abruptly and he turned her to face him. "Honey, I know you're mad, but you can't run. You can't give him the power to make you do that. Please, let's just go into my office and talk. Please."

She shook her head. "It isn't just him, Rom. It's everything. I'm not happy and unless I do something to change it, this is all life's ever going to be."

"Memory! You're one of the most successful photographers in the world. That isn't something that's just handed out arbitrarily. You have something no one else does, and —"

"And what's it gotten me?" she interrupted. "Look at me, Rom. I'm pushing forty and I'm alone. I go back in there and the next thing I know I'm fifty and still in the same place."

"Running away won't change who you are, Mem."

"Maybe not. But I can't stay here, Rom. I have to go." Not until she'd said the words did she realize how true they were. She wasn't happy. Hadn't been for a long time. And unless she did something to change her life, she was going to waste what time she had left being miserable.

"Where will you go?" Rom asked.

"I don't know. I just have to go."

"And what are we supposed to do here without you? You're the Magic Eye, Mem. Without you we're just —"

"The Studio," she interjected. "The finest group of photographers in the country with more commercial accounts than anyone in the business. You'll be fine, Rom. You already run the place anyway."

"Memory, please." His voice broke. "Don't go."

"I have to, Rom." She fought back tears.

"For how long?"

"I don't know."

He hugged her tight for a long time. "I'll let you go if you promise to call me every single day and always answer your phone when I call."

"I promise," she murmured against his shoulder, holding on to him tightly.

After a minute, he released her. "Just remember, I have your phone and computer lo-jacked."

She smiled and brushed away the tears on her face, then reached up to cup the side of his face. "I know. I love you, Rom."

"I love you too, honey."

"I'll talk to you soon," she said and turned away.

"Tonight!"

"Tonight," she agreed with a wave over her shoulder, and kept walking. If she didn't keep going she might chicken out, and now that she'd made the decision she knew it was right. The only question was, where was she headed?

Chapter Two

Marco tossed his cards down on the table.

"Fold."

The man across the table from him, his oldest friend, Anthony, snickered around the stub of cigar in his mouth. "Who's ya daddy?" He raked in the loose dollar bills and quarters from the center of the table.

All of the men laughed. Normally the cards favored Marco and turned a cold shoulder on Anthony. Tonight the roles were reversed. Marco wasn't upset that he'd lost a few bucks. He was just in a foul mood.

"Think I'll call it a night," he announced and pushed back from the table.

"Me too," Anthony said and stood. "Gretchen gets testy when I stay out too late."

The other two men at the table mumbled something in agreement and within minutes the weekly poker game was concluded. Marco and Anthony walked outside together.

"Something gnawing at you?" Anthony asked.

"Nope."

"Yeah, now I know something's eating at you. What's up?"

Marco stopped at the curb and leaned up against the 1966 GTO he'd worked so hard to restore. "Just a shitty mood."

"Any particular reason?"

Marco blew out his breath and shook his head. "Nothing I can really put my finger on, man. Just general...dissatisfaction."

Anthony's dark features arranged into a thoughtful frown. He leaned up against the car beside Marco. "Everything okay at the ranch? I know things are tough with you being short-handed. If you need some help I might be able to —"

"It's okay," Marco cut him off. "I'm making out okay."

"If it's not business then... You got woman problems, brother?"

"Nope. No woman to have problems with. Maybe that's the problem. Damn, Anthony, I'm running out of time if I ever want to have a family."

"Hey now. We're not that old!"

"Easy for you to say. You and Gretchen have had five good years so far, and a baby on the way. The way my life is going, all I'm ever gonna be is old Uncle Marco, the bachelor."

Anthony chuckled. "Not like you haven't had your share of chances, my man. Like that hottie last month. Gretchen and I were both a little blown away by the way she was all over you at the softball cookout."

"Yeah, well she changed her tune real fast when she found out what I did for a living." It still stung a little at the way the woman had treated him like sub-human when she found out his business was running a failing ranch and restoring classic cars, or as she called it "junk cars".

"Look, man, we all know there's a lot of women out there who are more interested in money than anything else, but there's still good women out there too. Your problem is your looks."

"Well gee, thanks, Anthony."

"Man, you know what I mean. You're one of those guys who have it going on in the looks department. You got what it takes to attract the ladies and maybe you just choose to act on the wrong attractions and end up with the Barbie dolls instead of the gals that might have something real to offer."

"Bullshit! When have I ever judged a person on their looks?"

Anthony pushed away from the car. "Marco, me and you been best friends since we were five and you stopped those rednecks from beating up on the new black kid. I know your heart's in the right place, but women are a whole other breed than us. Maybe you're just using the wrong criteria for selecting women."

"So, what? I should start asking out every ugly woman I meet?"

"Uh, no. Just don't look past someone who might be worth taking another look at as you make your way to another Barbie."

Marco regarded his friend for a few moments. He knew Anthony meant well, and he'd be the first to admit that anyone who took a look at his life would assume that he was only interested in what Anthony called Barbie dolls. He'd dated more than his fair share of them. But Anthony knew that what Marco wanted was someone to love and build a life with.

They might not share genetics, but they did share a past that dated back to their childhood. Anthony's father died when he was an infant. When he was six his mother died and Mirriam had taken him in. To this day he couldn't think of her as anything but his mother.

"Sometimes I think maybe it's just not in the cards for me."

"Not according to Mama," Anthony argued.

Marco cut him a hard look. "Just because she believes it doesn't mean it's true."

"But you still wear the crystal," Anthony pointed out. "And who knows, maybe it will end up leading you to the woman meant for you. Stranger shit's happened, bro. Remember when Mama told me to pack a picnic and take Congo out to Reedy Creek Park on a cold February day? I thought she was nuts. But if I hadn't been out there tossing that disc to Congo, I'd never have met Gretchen."

Marco shrugged. No point in arguing that point. It was a fact. "You better hit it," he said instead. "Or Gretchen'll have your skinny ass."

Anthony chuckled. "I wish. Right now she's swearing she's carrying around a baby Beluga and in no mood at all to have anything to do with my skinny ass."

Marco laughed. "See you later, man. Hey to Gretchen for me."

"Later," Anthony replied and headed to his car, a nice sensible Subaru parked in front of Marco's GTO.

Marco walked around the car and got in behind the wheel. Maybe Anthony was right. Maybe he just wasn't looking in the right direction when it came to love. He just wished he knew which direction was the right one.

* * * * *

Memory had been on the road for two weeks. She'd left San Francisco, found I-40 and hit the road, driving until she was tired or saw something of interest. Then she'd stop, check into a hotel and wander around with her camera, keeping no timetable or schedule. It'd been relaxing and she loved some of the shots she'd taken. Ordinary people in ordinary situations—an old couple sitting on a bench outside of an ice-cream shop sharing a cone, children playing in the water of an oscillating sprinkler in their yard—simple life that somehow seemed far more beautiful to her than any of the photography she'd done the last few years.

But now she was getting tired of the road, and wanted to find a place she could stay while she decided what she wanted to do with her life. She followed the signs to the city of Charlotte, North Carolina.

The first thing she noticed about the city was how green it was. There were so many trees. It wasn't a large city, but was an interesting blend of old and new. With no idea where she was headed, Memory just drove around.

Spotting a bookstore, she stopped and went inside. An hour later, armed with a bag of books ranging from city guides to the history of the area along with a couple of maps and an oversized container of coffee, she wandered outside and made herself comfortable on a bench outside the bookstore.

She put the bag on the sidewalk between her feet and dug out one of the maps and a city guide. According to the information she read, there was a historic home in an old section of the city that had been converted into a bed and breakfast. The Duke Mansion. The photos she saw of the place had her itching to take some of her own. On an impulse she hurried to her car and drove over to see if there was room at the inn.

Her first glance at the place had her and her mind conjured up images of fantasy and romance. Located in an old but upscale area just outside the city, the house spoke of times gone by, of warm Southern nights and nightingales singing at dusk.

It was enormous. Built in the architectural style of the Colonial Revival, the mansion was surrounded by lush grounds. Towering oaks, magnificent magnolia and dogwood trees provided ample shade, while flowers and shrubbery tastefully landscaped a sweeping lawn that housed several impressive fountains.

Memory was enchanted. And lucky. There was one room available. The Nesbit Room. She eagerly followed the bellman to her room. And fell in love. A huge room furnished tastefully and expensively, with a large porch, or what the people at the Mansion called a sleeping porch, furnished in white wicker furniture with deep cushions. It overlooked a wide sweep of lawn, and a beautiful fountain and gazing pool.

It took Memory all of five minutes to shove her luggage into the closet, grab her favorite Nikon and head out to explore the Mansion and its grounds, excited as a child who's found a new playground. Nightfall came entirely too soon, but satisfied and a little tired, she showered and leafed through the available delivery menus from nearby restaurants. After calling in a delivery order, she went to the sleeping porch, sat down in one of the deeply padded wicker chairs and called Romeo.

"Mem!" he answered excitedly. "Where are you now?"

"Charlotte, North Carolina. Romeo, you should see this place!"

"The city?"

"Oh, well yeah, it's great but I mean this place where I'm staying. It's an old mansion that's been restored and turned into a bed and breakfast. It's fantastic. I'm sitting on what they call a sleeping porch just off my room, looking out over the greenest lawn I've ever seen, and I swear I expect to see Rhett and Scarlett stroll across the grass at any moment."

Romeo laughed. "Honey, it's so good to hear you sounding so excited."

"I am, Rom, I really am. The past couple of weeks have been good. It's like with every mile I dumped a little more of what had been weighing me down, and when I got here, I felt...clean again. Does that make sense?"

"Perfect," he replied. "So how long are you going to stay?"

"I don't know," she said and voiced something that had been niggling at her all afternoon. "Rom, I know this sounds crazy, but I think I'm supposed to be here. It's like there's something calling to me. Something I can't quite hear but I know it's there." She laughed. "Listen to me. Half a day in the South and already I'm waxing romantic."

Romeo chuckled. "I love it. I haven't heard you sound like this in ages, sweetie. So, go find whatever it is that's calling you. Just don't forget about us guys back home who love you."

"Oh, Rom." She felt a stab of guilt. "I'm sorry. I just dumped it all on you. Are things okay?"

"Fine," he assured her. "Don't worry. I've told everyone you're off on a photographic walkabout."

She laughed. "I love you, Rom. You're always there to save my butt and pick up my slack. I owe you big."

"Honey, you don't owe me anything. Well, except for that fabulous raise I gave myself the morning after you left."

She howled with delighted laughter. "Well, however much it was it isn't enough. Oh, there's my dinner. Gotta scoot. Talk to you tomorrow."

"Okay, have fun. I love you."

"I love you. Hugs to Jay for me."

"Will do. Smooches!"

She severed the connection and opened the door to pay for her food. Taking it to the porch, she set it up on a table along with her laptop. While she ate, she downloaded the memory cards from her camera and viewed the photos she'd taken.

Halfway through the batch of photos something akin to a panic attack seized her. In the space of a breath her heart was racing, her skin was damp and clammy and she felt as if she were about to jump out of her skin. She had to talk to her sisters. Immediately.

Snatching up her cell phone she hit the speed dial for Charlotte. When she heard Charlotte's soft voice mail message she grimaced and hit the number 3 button to interrupt the recording.

"Hey, sweetie, it's Mem. I just had this...I don't know what it was...just a really intense unease and I need to know that you're okay. Call me? Love you!"

She dialed Kenna. No answer. Memory left a message for Kenna to call then dialed Dee. On the third ring Dee answered.

"Thank god!"

"Mem? I was just about to call you. I can't reach Char or Kenna. I had this —"

"Panic attack? Weird energy surge?"

"Yeah. What the hell was that?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm calling. I can't get Kenna or Char either. Damn, Dee, you don't think... Shit, I can't even say it."

"Don't even think it. Surely we'd know if...no, I'm not going there. Forget the phone, Mem. Let's see if we can tap into them through the crystals."

"Good idea. I'm going to put the phone down but don't hang up."

"Okay."

Memory put the phone on the table and wrapped her right hand around the crystal. She closed her eyes and took several long, deep breaths, clearing her mind of everything but the image of her sisters.

This was a technique she and her sisters had discovered shortly after Kenna, the youngest, had received her crystal. If they focused they could sense each others' presence.

The crystal in her hand warmed as an image of Kenna formed in her mind. Memory smiled at the image that took shape. Kenna arm wrestling a man twice her size while a crowded bar full of men shouted bets. All at once Kenna looked up, a frown marring her beautiful features.

Memory was sure that it wouldn't be long before Kenna called. And if Memory was a gambler, she'd bet that Kenna would have a bit more walking-around money in her pocket. She mentally felt Dee chuckle and knew Dee had gotten the same impression.

Erasing the image of Kenna from her mind, she thought of Charlotte. It wasn't long before a scene started to take shape. Charlotte coming through the door of her kitchen, a small basket of freshly clipped herbs. Her face wore a worried expression.

Memory opened her eyes and picked up the phone. "Unless I'm not receiving right, they're okay. But they're picking up something."

"Yeah, but what? Oh, hold on. Charlotte's calling."

"Okay."

Memory no more than uttered the word when her call waiting beeped. She switched over. "Kenna?"

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. So's Dee. I've got her on hold. She's on the phone with Charlotte now."

"What the fuck was that?"

"I don't know."

"Where are you?"

"In Charlotte, North Carolina."

"Mem...I hate to say it but I think it's you."

"What do you mean it's me?"

"The energy. I think it's coming from somewhere close around you."

Memory felt fear swell. "Have you seen something?"

"Just glimpses. Nothing specific. Just be careful, okay? And if you need me to come there..."

"I'll call. I promise. But so far nothing out of the way has happened. It's peaceful and...and wonderful here, Kenna. Strange. It's like coming home to a place I've never been. And there *is* an energy here. Something calling me. But it doesn't feel evil."

"And that's what makes it deadly. Remember that, Mem. And be on guard."

"I will. Oh, that's Dee beeping. I'll let her know you're okay and I'll call you soon. I love you."

"Same here."

Memory switched over to Dee's call. "Kenna's fine. She thinks whatever it is, it's here."

"Charlotte and I agree. Maybe I should fly there. Just in case."

"No. I'm fine, Dee. Really. I'll call if I need you."

"You promise?"

"Yes. Don't worry."

"Easier said than done."

"It'll be fine," Memory promised with more assurance than she actually felt. She was a little unnerved but didn't want to show it.

"Okay. I love you."

"I love you. Talk to you soon."

Memory hung up the phone and sat back, letting her eyes drift over the landscape. Maybe she'd overreacted. Maybe what her sisters had sensed was nothing more than the nervousness she felt at having ditched a business she'd spent most of her life building to take off on her walkabout.

Maybe she'd just finish going through the photos then call it a day, get a good night's sleep and see what tomorrow would bring.

* * * * *

Marco was in the middle of changing gears when an electric shock ripped through his body. His hand slipped on the gear shift and a horrible grinding protest came from the gears at the same moment he swore out loud.

Hurrying to shift into fourth gear, he then reached up to grab the small crystal that was suspended around his neck by a golden chain.

"Shit!" He cursed at the rippling shock that raced from his hand all the way up to his shoulder, and quickly released the crystal.

Another charge of energy came from the crystal as it touched his chest. It was like a miniature explosion, originating directly beneath the crystal then radiating out, working its way throughout his body.

Marco wasn't a man who frightened easily, but this had him a little unnerved. Maybe he was having a stroke. That thought shook him enough that he pulled over and parked at the curb of the road leading to the Duke Mansion, put the car in neutral and set the brake.

His hand was still tingling. Was that the sign of a stroke? He didn't feel disoriented or short of breath or mentally impaired. So what the hell had happened?

The crystal seemed to vibrate against his skin. He tensed at first, and then realized the sensation was not painful, just very intense. The sensation spread out from its point of origin, swam through his veins until his entire body hummed. And with the hum came sensuous warmth that had him becoming erect.

That was another surprise. Marco was astonished. He'd had erections since he was a boy, but never one that came on spontaneously and without provocation. A split second before the thought entered his mind that perhaps something was physically wrong with him, it was over.

Tentatively, he touched the crystal with the tip of his index finger. Nothing. He waited a minute and tried again. No reaction at all.

There was only one thing to do. As much as he disliked the idea, he was going to have to ask his mother about the crystal.

Chapter Three

The place was dark. Marco looked back as he unlocked the door. Yes, that was definitely his mother's car parked on the curb. "Mama?" he called out as he let himself into the small street-front shop.

"Marco?" a soft feminine voice came from the dark.

"Yeah, it's me, Mama. What're you doing sitting here in the dark? I thought this was your night out with the girls?"

"We had a change in plans," she replied.

A bright flare of light accompanied her words. She guided the long-stemmed match to an amber glass candleholder and lit the white candle within. One whiff of air and the match was extinguished, leaving a halo of dim warm light around her in the darkness.

"Come on over and sit down here." She patted the cushion of the old-fashioned divan.

Marco crossed the room and flopped down beside her, his long legs stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles.

"What brings you here?" his mother asked.

"Just checking up on you."

"Hmmm, of course."

"And...well, I wanted to ask about the crystal."

"What about it, dear?"

"Where does it come from?"

"From another place and time. A time of great learning, great achievement and great loss. Its origins are shrouded in mystery. I can only tell you that it is a crystal of The Chosen, eight beings preordained to unite and battle a great evil.

"Each crystal is mated, male to female to form four pairs. When paired their power is doubled. When all are combined, their power is infinite."

"Sounds like a fairy tale to me. And you never said how you came to have it. Or where its supposed mate is. You don't really believe that it has power, do you?"

"Have I ever lied to you about what I believe?"

"No, not that I know of."

"Then why would I lie about this? Marco, why the sudden interest in the crystal?"

Marco considered how much to reveal. His mother was not a frivolous woman, given to flights of fancy. Her beliefs did not always mesh with the norm, but he'd learned at an early age that she was rarely wrong.

"I felt something. From it. A...I don't know what you'd call it. An energy."

"Consider it a beacon," she replied. "Like the lighthouse that sheds its brilliant light to the sea to safely guide the traveler home, this will lead you to that which you seek. You have only to open your heart, Marco, and allow love to enter."

"Mama, I've been disappointed so many times I don't know if my heart even knows how to love."

"Shhh." She put one long-nailed finger to his lips. "A heart never forgets, Marco. You just have to believe."

"If you say so." He lifted the crystal and let it fall back to his chest. There was no shock at the contact this time. He shrugged it away. If his mother believed then maybe he'd try. One day.

But for one day, he'd had enough. "Come on, Mama, let me drive you home,"

"Thank you, my darling, but I have my car. I think I'll sit here a bit longer. I feel a strong energy tonight, something I want to investigate."

Marco had long ago learned not to question his mother on such matters. He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I love you."

"And I you, my darling," she replied. "Now off with you."

"See you tomorrow."

"Yes." She waved to him as he left, then stared for a long time into the flickering candlelight. At length she nodded.

"So, the paths converge."

She returned her gaze to the candle. If Marco's crystal had been activated then there were forces at play very close to home. Soon he would face his destiny. She could only pray that he would be strong enough to face what was to come.

* * * * *

By the time Memory finished looking at all the photos, her eyes were getting heavy. Shutting down the computer, she climbed into the big bed. In moments she was sound asleep.

And that's when the dream came.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

A fiery sun sank into the horizon, streaking the barren landscape with tongues of light, leaving sharp contrasts between the strips of light and dark. A wind picked up, sending dust and sand swirling around her.

Memory turned her back to the wind and realized she stood at the edge of an encampment in a vast desert. Tents were arranged in a crescent line that bulged along the western slope of a hill. A large herd of sheep and goats roamed the ground of the semicircular enclosure of the tents.

Memory recognized the scene from a shoot she'd done once in the Sinai. It was a Bedouin encampment. She had no idea how she came to be there, but knew the custom was to enter the camp from the northwest to the sheik's tent.

She started forward and only then realized that she was dressed in the fashion of the Bedouin, a loose dress in a deep indigo that was topped by a heavy, hip-length,

dark wool jubbe, an overcoat of bright blue ornamented with braided trim in various hues of blue.

Memory raised her hand to feel the silk scarf that covered her hair. On it were stitched designs in threads of gold and silver. Her arms jingled when she moved. Mixed widths of gold and silver bracelets adorned her wrists.

A little scared but curious, she approached the camp. There was a celebration taking place, obviously a wedding. People were eating and drinking. Women were singing while a variety of reed flutes and stringed instruments played an accompaniment.

Memory made her way through the people, watching curiously. She found a place to sit among the women. Her presence didn't attract attention, rather she seemed to be an accepted part of the community.

For several minutes she occupied herself watching the people, listening to the music. Then an old, stately man rose and held his hand up for silence. He made an announcement, welcoming everyone again, and telling them of an extraordinary treat that was in store for them. A dancer, famous in all of the lands of the Middle East was there to dance for them.

There was a ripple of excitement that went through the camp, almost tangible it was so strong. Memory could only equate it to the excitement that precedes the appearance of a famous rock star at a concert.

Music started and the crowd parted for the passage of a woman. A large, full-figured woman who would have been considered fat by current fashion and Western society, her hair was long and dark, her eyes midnight dark and flashing.

Memory was not overcome with the same excitement as those around her. To her, the woman was just an overlarge female in clothing that displayed far too much skin. Then the woman started to dance.

Within moments, Memory was transfixed, mesmerized by the seductive aura that emanated from the woman who captured every eye. She was quite sure she'd never seen a woman so seductive, so alluring.

When the dance ended, Memory's eyes followed the woman as she approached the sheikh. It was then she saw him.

Time stopped, the earth stopped spinning, and the planets halted their orbit around the sun. Her universe contained only him.

Long dark hair peeked from beneath the white kaffia-cloth that covered his head. Eyes the color of the sky at twilight adorned a face that was nothing short of a study in masculine beauty. Thick elegant eyebrows, strong nose and full lips were housed in a face that was angular but strong, as if chiseled from living stone.

Those eyes captured hers and abruptly there was sound in her quiet universe. The steady rapid pulse of her heart hammered suddenly in her ears and her breath quickened. Memory was spellbound. Every nerve ending in her body ignited and a flood of longing so strong it was close to pain forced a low moan from her throat. The air crackled with the energy that passed between them.

And suddenly the spell was broken. The dancer was standing before her, a knowing but gentle smile on her beautiful face. "Fear not your destiny, my daughter. It lies in wait for you. Travel with light steps and open your heart to love, your mind to possibility and you will find what you seek."

She pressed something into Memory's hand then kissed her on both cheeks and turned away. Memory looked down at the object in her hand, and then looked up to call out to the woman. Nothing remained of the encampment. The man stood alone in the light of the moon.

He stretched out his hand to her in invitation. Memory's heart leapt in her chest. She did not feel the ground beneath her feet, hear the voices surrounding her. All that existed was him. He drew her like the proverbial moth to a flame.

She made her way to him, never once breaking the magnetic connection of their eyes. She stopped in front of him and hesitantly placed her hand in his.

A surge of energy so erotic it took her breath, swept through her, causing her fingers to tighten in his grasp. Her heart rate quickened and heat flooded her body. He pulled her to him, his eyes holding her hostage.

He murmured in a soft but deep voice. She did not understand the words, but the tone with which they were uttered spoke to her of love and passion such as that found only in dreams.

His free hand moved to cup the back of her head and pull her close, their breath mingling and bodies molding to one another. With infinite slowness his lips, warm and soft, claimed hers. His tongue traced the outline of her mouth, parting her lips gently. She surrendered eagerly and the kiss turned to one of passion and longing, tongues exploring and teeth nipping. His erection pressed against her belly and she undulated against him, her sex wet and inflamed with hunger.

His hands moved around her, cupping her ass to draw her more firmly against his erection. Memory groaned and wound her arms around his neck, devouring his mouth hungrily.

"I must have you," he murmured against her lips. "Come with me now, to my tent."

"Yes," she agreed without hesitation.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

And suddenly the dream was over. She found herself standing beside her bed and the light of a new day brightening the sky.

Blowing out her breath, she raised both hands to her head, running her fingers through her hair from front to back, thinking what a shame it was that life didn't mimic dreams, because sure as sunrise if she ever met a man like that she'd latch on and never let go.

Knowing that she'd be unable to get back to sleep, she went to shower and dress. She might as well put the day to use and explore the city. Maybe her dream was an omen. Maybe whatever hidden thing was calling to her was around the next corner.

* * * * *

Marco cursed as the wrench slipped out of his hand and he banged his knuckles on the tractor manifold. He'd woken before dawn in a foul mood and it had not improved in the hours since.

He blamed the damn story about the crystal. He'd gone to bed thinking about it and fallen asleep feeling a slight current where it lay against his chest. Then the dream had started.

And what a dream. He'd had more than his fair share of erotic encounters and had bedded more women than he cared to remember, but nothing in his real life had ever come close to the dream.

Even now, hours later, he was still trying to analyze just what it was about the dream that was so extraordinary. In it, he'd been in bed with a woman with dark hair. That's all he could remember about her. Which was disappointing, considering the sex had inspired sensations that were more powerful than anything he'd ever experienced.

Not that the sex had been kinky or unusual. It wasn't the act itself that had been so remarkable, but the feelings it evoked. And the fact that he couldn't remember what the woman looked like. That nagged at him for a reason he didn't understand. He'd never been haunted by a dream.

He told himself he had to just forget about it. It was meaningless, despite his mother's admonishment that dreams were portends that directed people. Marco figured his dream was little more than a mirror of his dissatisfaction with the pattern of his love life.

And pondering it wasn't going to get this damn tractor up and running. So, pushing thoughts of the dream aside, he concentrated on the task at hand.

* * * * *

Memory sipped from a takeout coffee cup and scanned the shops alongside the street as she drove. Some of them sparked her interest. She thought she'd just find a place to park and wander on foot, puttering through the shops.

A sputter from the engine of her car gained her attention. One sputter was followed by two and then another. She pumped on the accelerator and the car literally coughed, jerked and then stopped completely.

Her first inclination was to restart it. That didn't work. The starter ground and whined and after several minutes of sitting in the street blocking traffic, it went dead. Completely.

"Shit!" She fumbled for her cell phone in her shoulder bag, and then changed her mind at the blare of horns behind her.

Putting the car into neutral, she got out and started pushing. It wasn't easy. Her 1959 Cadillac Eldorado was twenty feet long, six feet wide and weighed in at a full two tons. It was a lot for a one hundred and ten pound woman to push. Bearing down, she dug in and tried to get it rolling. Nothing happened. She grunted, hunched down, tucked in her head and tried again. At first there was no movement, then suddenly the car started rolling forward.

Memory's head popped up and to her surprise, she saw a woman on the opposite side of the car, pushing along with her. A big woman. Not just in height but girth as well. Dressed in a flowing shirt, colorful peasant blouse with a wide belt around her ample middle, with long dark hair and bejeweled wrists and fingers, she looked like something out of gypsy movie.

There was, however, little time for Memory to ponder the appearance of her savior, because now that the car was in motion, she had to concentrate on steering with one hand while she pushed. Between the two of them, they got the car out of the middle of the street and over to the curb. Memory jumped in and steered the car into the middle of two parallel parking places.

As soon as she set the brake, she got out of the car and hurried to approach the exotic woman who had so graciously come to her rescue.

"Thank you so much," Memory said with a grateful smile.

"My pleasure, dear," the woman replied in a voice that Memory could only describe as musical. "It's a lovely car."

Memory cut a look over at the Caddy. "Yeah, I love the old girl. She belonged to my mentor."

"Then it is more than a mere means of transportation," the woman commented.

Memory nodded, thinking about her father as she looked at the car. "Yes. He bought it the year he won the Pulitzer in photojournalism. Said it took everything he had and he nearly starved to pay for it, but it was worth it."

The woman regarded her thoughtfully. "And now that he has passed, the symbol of his success finds care in your hands."

Memory jerked around to look at the woman. "Why do you think he's dead?"

The woman chuckled. "My dear, what man would relinquish such a prized possession as long as he drew breath?"

Memory laughed. "Well, you're right about that. I had to beg to drive his baby while he was alive. He sure loved this car." A frown marred her features. "It's so odd. I had it serviced last month and it's been running fine. I can't imagine why it just stopped."

"Perhaps it was simply destiny," the woman said.

Memory shrugged. "Maybe, but it's darn inconvenient. You don't happen to know if there's a place around that services classic cars do you?"

The woman smiled and offered her hand. "Come, dear. Let's go inside my school and I'll give you the name of a very reputable person."

"Oh thank you," Memory said. "Let me grab my stuff."

She got her camera case and shoulder bag and followed the woman to the entrance of one of the small storefronts. A tasteful green awning sheltered the front window and door, and artful gold lettering announced "Mirriam's".

The interior was tastefully appointed with a distinctly exotic flair. On the walls were paintings of scantily clad belly dancers, sheer material swirling around them like liquid light. Sculptures of various cultures were scattered among plants and deeply padded backless chairs. An antique desk from what Memory thought was the Baroque period occupied a position of command over the room.

Mirriam floated over to the desk. That was the only way Memory could describe her movements, liquid and smooth. She placed her woven handbag on top of the desk then turned to Memory. "Now, you need someone to fix your chariot and I happen to know someone very adept with engines."

"Yeah?"

"Yes, indeed. Marco Redwing."

"Redwing. Interesting name." Memory pulled out her cell phone to dial for directory assistance. "Spelled like it sounds?" she asked as she dialed.

"No need." Mirriam plucked the phone from her hand and closed it. "I happen to have a close personal relationship with Marco."

With that she picked up the phone on her desk and dialed with long-nailed fingers. "Hello, dear, I have a lovely woman here who is having problems with her car. Yes, I am perfectly aware of that. That's why I called you. This particular chariot is a..." She looked to Memory for the information.

"A 1959 Cadillac Eldorado," Memory said.

Mirriam repeated the information into the phone then smiled. "Yes, of course. I shall endeavor to keep her comfortable until you arrive."

"I'm afraid it will be some time before he can get here," she announced to Memory. "You're welcome to stay here and wait."

"Oh no, no, that's okay." Memory wanted to take her up on the offer. The woman was quite likeable, and exuded an air of something Memory couldn't identify but did intrigue her. She'd like to spend more time with the woman, maybe get a few shots of her. There was a certain erotic appeal to her that puzzled yet drew Memory. But she didn't like the idea of imposing on the woman.

"I really appreciate all your help...oh, I'm sorry. I'm Memory Wells."

Mirriam replied with a smile. "I am Mirriam."

"So you own this place," Memory stated the obvious. "You said something about it being a school?"

"Why yes, dear. I teach belly dancing."

Memory's mouth nearly dropped open. Surely the woman was jesting. She moved well and was quite charming and attractive for an older woman, but a belly dancer?

Something niggled at her mind but she couldn't pull it into the foreground. Whatever it was, it inspired a sudden itch to feel her camera in her hand. Shooting a belly-dancing class would be an interesting addition to her collection of travel photos.

"Perhaps you'd like to observe a class?" Mirriam suggested.

"Really?" Memory was delighted at the invitation. "Would you consider letting me shoot you?"

Mirriam put a hand to her ample bosom. "Well that hardly seems kind."

Memory laughed. "No, I mean take photos. I'm a photographer."

"Yes dear, I know exactly who you are." Mirriam's voice dropped in timbre, making a slight chill run down Memory's spine.

"You do? How?"

Mirriam's smile was mysterious. "Why darling, even here in the South we ladies like to look at photos of luscious men. And when it comes to glamour photography, you are without a doubt the reigning queen."

Memory blushed and sipped at the tea. "So, is that a yes on the shoot?"

"How could I say no to the queen?" Mirriam said with a chuckle. "Oh my, look at the time. I must change for class. The ladies will be arriving shortly. Is there any special preparation you need?"

"Would it be okay for me to take a look at the studio so I can get an idea on the light?"

"Certainly, my dear. Right through there. I'll be with you as soon as I change."

"Thanks, Mirriam." Memory smiled and watched Mirriam glide away. She opened the door to the studio and stepped across the threshold with a smile. She might have to deal with a broken-down car later in the day, but right now she was going to have a little fun.

Chapter Four

Marco finished cleaning his hands and finger combed his hair back from his face. It'd taken longer than he'd anticipated to get the tractor running. Now he'd be able to mow the grass for the Stewart farm. The Stewarts grew feed for cattle, and doing the mowing and bailing would earn Marco enough to meet his goal for the month. If he managed to squeeze in enough time to finish the restoration on the 1963 Thunderbird he'd gotten the job on last week, he might even have a little extra, something that was rare these days.

The ranch hadn't shown a profit in three years, and unless he borrowed money against the land, he was going to have to let his foreman Fred go. Marco didn't know how he could ever bring himself to do that. Fred and his wife Irene had been on the ranch longer than Marco had been alive. Fred had gone to work for Marco's father before he was born.

In some ways Fred and Irene were like second parents to him. Marco's dad had died when Marco was fifteen, and Mirriam had been so devastated that she could no longer live on the ranch. Truth be told, she was never cut out to be the wife of a rancher. Mirriam was a social creature and thrived on being around people.

Marco's father, John Redwing, was three-quarters Cherokee and a quiet man as far as Marco could remember. To say his parents had been an odd match was an understatement. Descended from the Bedouin and flavored with a generous dose of English Wiccans and Spanish aristocracy, Mirriam was a breed of her own.

Which made Marco a real mutt in his own way of thinking. And right now the mutt had better heed the call of his mother or there would be hell to pay. He stripped off the coveralls he wore while working on the tractor and decided against a shirt. It was a nice day and the black t-shirt was presentable enough.

Grabbing the keys to the GTO from the desk in the house, he headed for the dance studio.

* * * * *

"That was...amazing." Memory grinned at Mirriam as the last of the class filed out of the studio, chattering among themselves. "You're amazing. I've never seen anyone so graceful or..." As the memory of her dream came back to her she trailed off and stared at Mirriam in surprise. Mirriam was the woman from her dream! God, why had she not realized that earlier?

"Or?" Mirriam asked with a smile.

"Sorry. I just realized that you look just like someone from a dream."

"A dream to some, a nightmare to others," Mirriam laughed and looked behind Memory.

"I find that hard to believe."

"Believe it," a deep male voice said from behind her.

Memory saw the amused smile that lit Mirriam's face and turned. Her heart gave one swift lurch then threatened to stop stone cold dead. This could *not* be happening! Facing her was the man from her dreams.

Clad in a tight black t-shirt that stretched across a broad chest and shoulders, jeans that were worn but clung snugly to hip and thigh and an old pair of riding boots, he was even sexier than her dream.

Dark hair that brushed his shoulders and glinted with the midnight indigo one would equate with a raven, his eyes were a twilight blue so dark that in the right light would appear nearly black. And just like the man in her dreams, his face was the stuff of fantasy. Not pretty-boy beautiful like so many of the models she'd photographed, but ruggedly handsome – the face of a real man. A real sexy-as-holy-sin man.

If that wasn't enough to deal with, her crystal was sending off sparks of energy that were about to electrocute her. What the heck was going on? It was impossible not to

reach up and place her hand over it, trapping it against her chest. That was a mistake. Energy sizzled through her hand and up her arm.

"Marco darling, I need you to fix my new friend's car." Mirriam broke the awkward silence and diverted the man's attention from Memory, who was trying to break free from the spell he seemed to have cast and not get turned into a crispy critter by her suddenly possessed crystal.

Marco heard his mother, but her words didn't register. His mind was torn between the alarming current pulsing from his crystal and disbelief. Standing before him was the woman from his dreams. This couldn't be possible.

"Marco?" His mother's voice filtered in, making him wonder just how long he'd been standing there gawking at the woman.

"Yes?" He forced himself to focus on his mother, which helped pull him back from whatever force had turned him into the equivalent of a gawking teenage boy.

"Memory's car needs attention, my dear."

"Yes," he replied automatically then paused. "Memory?"

"My new friend, Memory Wells." Mirriam gestured gracefully toward the stunning brunette.

Marco smiled and took a step closer, extending his hand to Memory. "Marco Redwing, Ms. Wells. It's a pleasure to meet you."

She placed her hand in his and immediately jerked it back. So did he. Sparks literally flew at the touch. Mirriam chuckled. "My, we are electric today, aren't we? Now, Marco, Memory's car is on the street. You can't miss it. It's very big and red."

"'59 Eldorado?" Marco asked.

Memory nodded with a smile.

"Sweet." He returned the smile. "So tell me what happened."

"It just stopped running."

"Choked, spewed, stuttered, coughed?"

"A little of all of it. It doesn't make sense. I had it serviced about a month ago and it's been running like a dream until now."

"You sure you wouldn't feel more confident having your regular mechanic take care of it?"

"Well, since he's in California, no. Besides, Mirriam tells me you're a regular magician with cars."

"Yes, well, mothers do tend to exaggerate at times."

Memory's eyes widened. "You're..." She looked at Mirriam, who simply smiled. "Oh well, what the heck. I have a feeling she wouldn't lie. You think you have time to take a look?"

"That's why I'm here."

"Okay, great." Memory turned to Mirriam. "Would it be okay if I left my stuff here while I show Mr. —"

"Marco," Mirriam and Marco both interrupted at the same time then laughed.

"Okay, thanks. While I show Marco the car?" Memory asked with a smile.

"Absolutely. Take your time."

Memory looked up at Marco. "It's just across the street and down a little ways."

"Yes, I saw it on the way in. After you." He stepped aside for her to precede him, and plucked his hat from a table by the door.

Once on the sidewalk, Marco clapped his hat on his head and they fell into step beside one another. "So, you're from California. Are you here visiting family or just passing through?"

"Neither." She looked up at him as she answered and he was struck once again with a blast of energy, but this time not from the crystal. "I'm sort of on walkabout."

"Walkabout?"

"It sounds better than saying I'm running away from home. I'm a little too old to pull that off."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Marco decided it would be wise not to comment on why she was running, or what she might be running from. Those were things you could talk to a friend about. Not a complete stranger.

She looked up at him again and stopped dead in her tracks at almost the same moment another sizzle of energy ripped through him.

"Okay, look, I know we don't know each other," she said. "But something really bizarre is going on here and I have to know if it's just me that's feeling these weird energy spikes."

That was the last thing he expected to hear her say. He wouldn't have had the courage to bring it up and thought she had a hell of a lot of spunk. "No, I feel it. I just don't know what the hell it is."

Memory blew out her breath in relief. She wasn't good at keeping things in, and when something was gnawing at her she had to get it out or go nuts. Sometimes it landed her in trouble, but that was the way of things. This time it was easier to focus on the strange energy surges than the all-too-powerful effect Marco had on her hormones.

She smiled up at him. "Well, at least I know that if I'm losing my mind, I've got company. Are we near a power plant or sub-station or something?"

"No."

"And you're not carrying some kind of science-fiction, electric zappy thing in your pocket?"

"Nope." He grinned.

"Then what the hell is it?"

"I don't know."

She resumed walking. "Have you ever experienced anything like this before?"

"Nope."

"Neither have I. Any ideas on what it is?"

When he stopped, she walked past him and had to stop and turn around. The look on his face had her breath hitching in her throat. It was a look of raw hunger and need, a look that mirrored the sensations rioting through her.

She wondered if he had any clue, the picture he presented. Here was a man who could epitomize masculine sexuality. Exotic cowboy with a body to die for and a face that made a woman's mind turn to thoughts of sweat-slicked skin and long low moans.

And most definitely a man she would like to take for a very long, very hard ride.

"Since you seem to be a woman who's upfront, I'm going to say it straight out." He interrupted her lascivious thoughts. "Crazy as it sounds, this...thing, this energy. Maybe it's an attraction thing."

"An attraction thing?"

"Yeah. I was instantly attracted to you so..."

It had been longer than she wanted to remember since anything had excited her as much as those words. Marco was nothing like any man she'd ever been with. He wasn't polished, waxed, plucked and primped. His clothes hadn't come off the latest designer racks and his hair had not been styled to artfully fall one way or another to maximize his eyes or jawline or strong cheekbones. He wasn't toned from hours at the gym to have the perfect model physique or schooled to make sure he kept his best side to people.

He wasn't any of that, and put every man she'd ever seen to shame with his raw good looks, muscular build and natural manner. And he was, without a doubt, the sexiest thing she'd ever laid eyes on.

He was also probably horribly wrong for her and it would probably be a monumental mistake to be honest with him. But the attraction she felt was far stronger than her good sense.

"Same here."

He stared at her for a few seconds then slowly approached. She couldn't help thinking how like a sleek beast he seemed, his stride powerful but smooth, his eyes locked to hers like two laser beams, holding her captive without a touch.

"So, what are we going to do about it, Memory Wells?"

"Well..." Despite the warning her better sense was screaming, the sexual energy arcing between them was too strong to smother her inclination to flirt. "First, you're going to take a look at my land yacht and tell me if you think you can get her running. Then I'm going to need a ride back to the B&B where I'm staying. After that...well, let me just say that I really hope I'm not going to make any mistakes with you, Marco Redwing."

"What kind of mistakes could you make?"

"Multiple and diverse."

"Hate to say it but I kinda like the sound of that, sugar."

"Oh you're a bad one, aren't you?"

"I guess that's something else you'll have to find out."

"I guess it is. So, you ready to check out my ride?"

"That I am."

Feeling suddenly full of excitement and the thrill of possibility, Memory turned and headed for her car. When she cut a look over her shoulder and saw Marco watching her ass, another bolt of energy passed through her. For the first time in years she couldn't wait to see what happened next.

"Here she is." Memory stopped beside the car, running her hand over its hood.

Marco whistled appreciatively. "I think I'm in love."

"Watch it, big guy. She's spoken for," Memory teased as Marco opened the door, adjusted the seat and slid in behind the wheel.

He tried starting the car. Nothing happened. His brow furrowed then he got up and popped the hood.

"Oh yeah." His voice was almost a croon. A sexy, deep sound that had shivers dancing down Memory's spine.

"Cadillac V8."

"Q," Memory added as she stepped up beside him. "Dual barrel carb."

"Air suspension." Marco looked down at her, his eyes a smoldering accompaniment to his seductive tone.

"Electric door locks," Memory whispered. "Fog lamps."

"Power seats." It suddenly dawned on her that even though they were reciting merits of the car, what was really happening was sex talk. Strange sex talk, but sex talk nonetheless. She was about as worked up as she'd ever been, standing there with the heat of his body radiating out to warm her, and his voice sliding over her like a soft kiss.

"Big spacious power seats," he murmured, leaning down a bit closer.

"Really big," she breathed.

"Yo, Marco!"

The sudden yell from the sidewalk had both of them jumping. A thin, handsome black man jogged up to them. "What's up, brother?"

"Hey, Anthony," Marco said with a grin. "This is Memory. She's visiting and her boat broke down. Memory, this is Anthony."

"Nice to meet you." Memory stuck out her hand.

"Likewise," Anthony said and clasped her hand.

Without warning she had a flash. A woman screaming and the sound of voices telling her to push just once more. She blinked and the vision faded.

"So, where're you visiting from?" Anthony asked.

"California."

"You navigated this yacht across the country? Cool. How long're you staying?"

Memory looked over at Marco. "That depends on how long it takes the big guy to get my baby up and running."

"Pressure's on, bro," Anthony said with a laugh.

Marco smiled. "I'll call Mike and have him tow her down to the ranch and get started on her in the morning. I should know something by midday."

"The ranch? I thought you were a mechanic?"

"Only when I have to be. I can call one of the local fellas if you'd prefer."

"No. Mirriam said you were good, so I'll trust her."

"Then I'll see about getting Mike to tow it."

"Great. Now, if one of you could tell me the nearest place to rent a car? I need a way back to the B&B where I'm staying."

"I'd be happy to give you a ride," Anthony offered.

"I'll give you a ride," Marco said at the same moment then looked at Anthony. "And you'll go home to your very pregnant wife."

Another flash went through Memory's mind, one that brought a smile to her face. "Have you picked out his name yet?"

"His?" Anthony asked. "What makes you think it's a he?"

She shrugged. "Women's intuition?"

"Well, from your mouth to god's ears... Naw, not really. I'll just be happy if it's healthy and has all its fingers and toes."

"I'm sure it will," she said then added, "Thanks for the offer, Anthony. It was really nice to meet you."

"You too. Marco, I'll catch you later, man."

"Yeah. Say hi to Gretchen."

"Will do."

Memory watched Anthony walk away then looked at Marco as he slammed the hood. "So what now?"

"You want to go over and get your things from Mama's? I'm parked around behind her place. I just need to call Mike and make sure he can get your car. I wouldn't want to leave it on the street, so we'll need to wait on him."

"Okay."

They made their way back to Mirriam's with little conversation. Memory wondered why her crystal had not given her any more jolts after their initial meeting. And what exactly did that energy signify?

It'd been a long time since she'd given the crystal much thought. Since the night Angela put it on her she'd never had anything unusual happen—no energy surges, strange dreams and thankfully no appearances of anything resembling a demon. So why had it suddenly now awakened?

The question was put aside when Marco stopped to open the door to Mirriam's school for her. The heat from his body had her stopping to look up at him. The hunger she saw in his eyes had her ready to say to hell with the car. All she really wanted was to get her hands on him. Along with her lips and teeth and a few other body parts.

"Maybe I can get Mama to keep an eye on the car until Mike gets here," he suggested in a low sexy growl that had her body temperature rising several degrees.

"Fine by me."

"Mama?" he yelled as he followed Memory inside. "Would you call Mike and tell him to come tow Memory's car? And keep an eye on it until he gets here? I'm going to give her a ride to the bed and breakfast."

Mirriam appeared at the door to the studio, startling Memory with her silent approach. "Of course, darling. Don't worry about a thing. I'll take care of it."

"Thanks." Marco leaned down to kiss her cheek.

"Thanks," Memory echoed. "For everything. I hope I see you again. Oh, I guess I will. I have to get you prints of the photos I took."

"That would be lovely," Mirriam replied and enveloped Memory in a hug. "Now off with you."

"Yes ma'am." Marco waited for Memory to gather up her things then led her to the rear exit.

"Oh baby, love at first sight," she breathed as she got a look at the 1968 GTO. "I bet this bad boy flies."

"Indeed it does," he grinned, and opened the passenger door for her.

She slid inside, admiring the interior as Marco rounded the car and climbed in behind the wheel. "Oh yeah," she said with enthusiasm as the engine roared to life. "Now I know I'm in love."

"I get the feeling you have a thing for powerful engines."

"You have no idea," she replied and glanced over at him. "Top end or off the line."

"Sudden thrust or staying power."

His comment and tone left no doubt that he was no more talking about cars than she was.

Memory grinned. "Just how fast can you get us to the B&B?"

"In a hurry?"

"You have *no* idea."

Chapter Five

Memory led the way into her room. "Nice," Marco commented as she put her camera case and purse on the sofa in the sitting area.

"Yes, it is. " She turned to face him, intending on extolling the virtues of the inn. But when their eyes met the ability to form coherent sentences fled.

Marco crossed the room to her, tossing his hat in the direction of the coffee table then cupping her shoulders gently with his large rough hands. "Honey, I know full well that the smart thing to do would be to take you to dinner, ask you about your life, your likes and dislikes and what you want out of life. But god as my witness, Memory, all I can think about is tasting you."

Her lips couldn't form words, but they could smile. And her arms could snake up to wind around his neck. One of Marco's arms went around her, pulling her tight to the hard length of his body.

Her lips parted to his on contact and a shiver danced over her skin as his free hand traced its way down her neck. The kiss turned frenzied in the space of a heartbeat. Memory moved her hands to his chest and lower, pulling the clinging t-shirt free from his jeans. His skin was hot to her touch as she moved her hands over the muscles of his abdomen and up over the hard swell of his chest.

His lips broke free from hers to move to her neck then down its curve to the hollow of her throat. Memory felt like she was about to spontaneously combust when he pulled her shirt over her head and ran his hands over the bare skin of her back.

She pulled him down to her, their mouths meeting in a clash, tongues seeking, teeth nipping. And all the while the feel of his hands on her drove her to want more. She felt him unfasten her bra and allowed him to break free of the kiss to remove it.

He looked down at her breasts and suddenly went still. Memory felt a stab of anxiety in her gut. What was wrong? Did he find her unattractive?

"Where did you get this?" He reached up to touch the crystal that dangled between her breasts.

"I've had it a very long time. It was a birthday gift."

"Your eighteenth birthday?"

"Yes, how did you guess?"

Marco reached inside the neck of his t-shirt. Memory's mouth fell open in shock when a crystal identical to hers appeared in his hand.

"On your eighteenth birthday?" she asked in amazement.

He nodded.

"What does it mean?"

"I know someone who would call it fate."

"What do you call it?"

"I don't know. And right now it doesn't matter."

She considered it. It would matter. Later. But now? No. All that mattered was him and how much she wanted him.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured, running one hand lightly over the top of her breasts.

"I could say the same." She barely had time to get the words out before he bent to lick at her breasts.

She gasped as his tongue circled her nipple slowly. "Oh...ahhh...god, get out of those clothes."

He rose up to look into her eyes, his voice teasing. "In a hurry?"

"You have no idea," she whispered, hoarse with desire.

"I like taking my time, darlin'. Don't want to rush and miss anything."

Not rush? All she could think about was wrapping her legs around him and riding him like a jack hammer, fast and hard.

He smiled and kissed her gently and slowly. The sweet taste of him filled her mouth. She breathed in his scent and felt her desire grow deeper as if the very smell of him triggered a basic primal need. Her teeth nipped at his tongue and lips, and then fastened more securely on his mouth to feed on his kiss.

Memory had never dreamed that a kiss could produce such an overwhelming physical reaction. The heat flowed from her mouth to her breasts, through her belly and pooled between her legs like liquid fire.

Marco walked her backward to the bed and lowered her back, never once severing the contact of their lips. Another blast of heat consumed her when he took one nipple between his index finger and thumb and rolled it. The heat expanded into an explosion of sensation that had her arching up for more.

She broke free from the kiss to tear at his clothing but he captured her hands. "We have all the time in the world."

"You're killing me," she panted. At that moment it didn't matter how much time they did or didn't have. She wanted him inside her.

"Lie back, sweetheart." His voice caressed her with as much skill as his hands.

He took his time tormenting her with ever-increasing arousal. Her breasts grew heavy, the nipples sensitive under his teeth and tongue. He suckled her then laved the taut flesh into plump fullness, only to gather the responsive flesh into his mouth again and reduce her nipples to tight pebbles of sensation.

Marco sat up and removed her jeans and panties, his mouth moving over every inch of skin that was revealed. Once she lay nude before him, he stripped off his shirt and knelt above her, taking another trip down her body with his lips and tongue.

His tongue dipped into her navel then traveled steadily south. When he reached the moist nest of curls, he lifted her so that her legs rested on his shoulders, her sex open and vulnerable to his questing mouth.

His fingers spread her labia wide, circling within and without, lubricating her with her own juice. Memory screamed with pleasure and longing when he lowered his head and lapped her from anus to clit in one slow stroke. He took her clit in his mouth and suckled it as he had her breasts.

A moan ripped up her throat as an orgasm built. Her body arched, welcoming the onslaught of the sensation that intensified like a great wave rushing toward the shore. She was about to crest, to slide into that sublime void when his mouth moved, leaving her clit throbbing with unresolved need.

"Please" she begged, trying to wiggle herself back into position for his mouth to take her clit once more.

"Soon," he whispered, just before his tongue plunged into her wet channel.

Memory's legs tightened around him, trying to pull his tongue deeper inside her. He let her approach the edge of release then pulled back. "Not yet."

Before he could issue another sublime torment, she wiggled free and got to her knees in front of him. "My turn," she said with a hungry smile.

Something flared hot in his eyes at her words. Their lips devoured one another as her hands worked at his jeans. Wanting to give as much as she received, she took care to keep her touch gentle. And she took delight in taking her time—touching, kissing and licking every inch of him along the way.

At last there was nothing between them. Memory's hands roamed over him, stroking and caressing their way down his body. Her lips then followed.

Marco groaned slightly as she took his erection in her hands and licked at him. She took her time, savoring the way he felt, the way he smelled and tasted. He was a living aphrodisiac to her, everything about him excited her. She felt the skin of his silken sac begin to tighten and knew he was close to release.

With a heavy breath he pulled her up and claimed her lips with a kiss. Then he rolled her over on her back and claimed her wet sex with his mouth again.

She gasped as his tongue touched her clit, flicking at the swollen nub then gathering it in his mouth to suck on it. Stars exploded in her head when two of his long fingers eased into her wet channel and began to pump rhythmically. She wound her fingers in his long hair and cried out as a shuddering orgasm started to claim her. Still caught up in the climax, she gasped as he moved between her legs and slid inside her. It sent her tumbling into an unending void of pure sensation from which she did not want to return.

As the climax began to fade, she opened her eyes and looked up at him. He smiled down at her and she arched up against him. His smile faded to be replaced by a look of deep hunger.

Their movements became harder and more demanding. Their lovemaking became more primitive. Nothing existed but their need for one another. Memory cried his name as he took her over the edge.

She felt the tension in his body intensify, recognized that he was close. Winding her legs tightly around him, she rocked against him. He pounded into her, his climax sending her rocketing into another spiral of sensation.

When at last it abated, Marco rolled over onto his back on the bed, pulling her on top of him. Memory felt the wet evidence of their passion on her skin. That's when it dawned on her.

"Oh shit!

Marco's handsome face arranged in an expression of puzzlement and concern. "What?"

"We didn't use protection."

He was silent for a long time. Long enough that she started to worry. "Is there a reason for me to be concerned?" he asked.

"No. I can guarantee you're not going to catch anything."

"And I can offer you that same guarantee. I'm clean, Memory. I swear."

Memory had never taken a man's word on that before, but found herself surprised to be doing just that. She knew instinctively that Marco was telling her the truth. She started to sit and something caught on the chain bearing the crystal.

"What the... Marco?"

He raised his head to look. What had once been two crystals was now one. Marco worked the chain over his head and Memory sat up. Two chains attached at the same point from one crystal.

"How is this possible?" she whispered, feeling the first stir of unease.

"I have no idea. What do you know about the crystal?"

Memory sighed. "God, is this really the time to get into that?"

"From the looks of things, yes. What just happened is impossible. You do realize that, don't you? It defies the laws of...of everything I know."

Memory nodded. "You're right. We need to talk."

She moved off him and started to get off the bed but his hand captured hers and pulled her back down on him. His arms circled her. "Don't be afraid, Memory. It'll be okay. This could be a good thing."

Memory could only hope that was true. But if the crystals had fused then there was a very strong chance that the one thing she'd hoped to avoid was near. For the crystals to fuse there had to have been a tremendous amount of energy involved. Energy that Asmodeus would recognize and home in on. Like it or not, they'd just handed the demon the equivalent of a cosmic GPS locator.

* * * * *

Marco opened the door to admit the delivery person. He and Memory had spent the last two hours revealing what they'd been told about the crystals. Even with their combined knowledge the crystals were still largely a mystery.

"Food's here," he announced as he paid and showed the man out.

Memory emerged from the bathroom wearing a pair of men's boxers that rode low on her hips and a tank top that was cropped just below her breasts. As hungry as Marco was, the sight of her tempted him to let the pizza grow cold.

"Yea, food." She grinned as she dug into the box and lifted a slice of pizza. "Ummmm," she moaned appreciatively around a big bite. "Good."

Marco couldn't help but grin. She didn't have the shyness some women seemed possessed of about eating. Memory dug into the pizza with gusto. He helped himself to a piece as she grabbed a napkin and settled on the couch with her legs folded Indian-style beneath her.

"So." She swallowed, took a long drink of soda and burped. "Sorry. So, if your mother gave you the crystal, where did she get it and why did she give it to you?"

"I guess you'd need to ask her that."

"Why don't we?"

"Guess we should," he said as he took a seat beside her. "But can we wait until tomorrow for that? My brain's almost into overload."

"You don't want to ask her, do you?"

Marco hated that she'd nailed him on his reluctance. The truth was he wasn't sure he was prepared to hear his mother tell Memory things she'd told him, about the crystal leading him to his soul mate and how it was part of his destiny. That wasn't the kind of thing you wanted a woman to hear after knowing her for less than a day. Regardless of whether your heart was screaming that Mama had been right.

He wasn't ready to admit what his emotions were saying. That Memory was the woman he'd been waiting for. That making love with her had bonded more than just their crystals. That he'd felt a bond solidify deep inside him that he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to break.

The truth was it all scared the living shit out of him. He'd wished for real love to come his way, wished to fall madly in love. Now that he was actually faced with it, he was afraid to trust it.

"I'd just prefer to wait until tomorrow."

"Okay. Want another slice?"

"Maybe later."

"I could order you something else if you don't like the pizza."

"No, it's great."

"Not hungry."

"Starved."

The rather concerned expression on her face changed at his last word. A sexy smile rose slowly. She scooted over close to him. "And just what can we do to quell that hunger?"

He smiled and lowered his lips to hers. Thoughts of food and mysterious crystals fled her mind. All that existed was him, the passion he inspired and the empty place in her heart he filled.

She couldn't let herself think about her heart. No matter that there was a certainty within her now that had not existed before, an assuredness that she'd found the man she wanted for ever after. It was too much to hope for that something that big could happen this quickly.

But passion was something she could believe in. And Marco inspired that in spades. She made no protest as he pushed her back, sliding her boxers down. When he moved to his knees in front of the couch, kissing and biting his way down her body, she adjusted to accommodate his position.

Marco spread her legs, running his fingers into her wet folds. His tongue followed. Memory reached back behind her, gripping the top of the sofa, digging her fingers into

the fabric. Her body quivered as he lapped at her then bucked when his fingers plunged inside her. It was enough to have her tilting her head back and closing her eyes to lose herself in sensation.

He took his time, making sure that every part of her pussy was being stroked from within and without. Memory bit back the first moan but could not contain the second. His ministrations soon had her screaming as an orgasm ripped through her. She sagged as he rose, gathering her to pull her toward him for a kiss.

Locked in the kiss, he reached beneath her and stood. With his hands supporting her by the ass, he navigated them to the bed. Their lips unlocked as they fell on the bed. Before Memory could seek his again, his powerful hands sought her wet and ready pussy, his fingers working inside her.

It didn't take long before he had her rocking against him in a slow and steady pace. While his hands kept her moving steadily forward to another orgasm, his mouth found hers again. Hot and wet, his lips traveled down her neck, leaving a burning trail of liquid longing in their wake. His lips teased her nipples into aching nubs that could not get enough of the delicious sensation his talented mouth offered.

Trying to slow her breath, Memory tried to stem the tide of pleasure, to stretch it out. No use. She was too far gone. The force of her orgasm had her groaning as she bucked and undulated beneath the delicious torture of his hands and mouth. His lips remained locked on one nipple as she came, grazing the sensitive tip with his teeth then sucking it into the warmth of his mouth.

Before she could recover from the orgasm, she was caught in another swell. He moved down the bed, between her legs, his strong hands spreading her wide. His mouth locked onto her hot wetness, sucking her outer lips, biting and licking. She wasn't sure she could take much more of the delicious torment and started to pull him up, intent upon getting him buried inside her.

“Not yet,” he admonished in a rough, sexy tone. He pinned her hands to her side, holding her down. Her weak moan of protest was cut short by a gasp of pleasure as his tongue sank into her wet center.

Marco released her hands and they found their way to his long hair, fisting in the thick strands. His tongue caressed her clit, driving her to a higher level of sensation and longing.

When his fingers penetrated her dark wetness, a jolt of pleasure shot through her so intense, she thought for a second she would pass out. He continued his assault until she was at the brink of release then pulled back and worked his way back up her body, his mouth taking time with each sensitized spot on its journey.

Memory could think of nothing except the sensation and need. She reached down to take hold of his straining cock and guided him to her. She gasped as he filled her, wrapping her legs around her to pull him deeper.

He pushed them ever closer to the edge. It was all she could do to hang on and ride the wave, heart pounding and body slicking with sweat. Part of her hoped the end would never come, that she'd be caught in this web of near orgasmic longing. Another part yearned desperately for release.

Memory felt the vibration coursing through Marco's body, felt his body tighten as he succumbed. He pounded into her, pulsing inside her. His orgasm triggered an answering climax in her. Together they rode the wave until they crashed, limp and satiated, in each other's arms.

As they lay there, breath recovering and heartbeats slowing, Memory became acutely aware of every sensation—every beat of her heart, every sensitized nerve ending, every satisfied breath. Much more slowly she became aware of her surroundings, feeling the cool of the air waft across her hot skin, noticing the wetness of the sheets beneath them.

When Marco finally stirred and pushed himself up on his elbows, he looked into her eyes and smiled. She pulled him to her for a kiss, and then let her head fall back on the bed, her tangled, still damp hair fanned out on the pillow.

He rolled over, pulling her against him. With the steady beat of his heart against the side of her face she drifted to sleep.

Chapter Six

Marco watched Memory sleep as dawn lightened the sky, filtering in from the opened French doors to the breakfast porch. Making love with her had definitely been an act of bonding for him. He couldn't rationalize or explain it, but he knew without question that she was *his* woman, the one he'd wished for.

And that meant that she was also one of The Chosen his mother had mentioned. He'd have cast aside such fanciful notions had it not been for the fact that their crystals had fused in the same moment their bodies joined.

He'd never dreamed that this level of intimacy was possible. Even now he could feel her in his mind. What was more unusual was that even though the fused crystal hung around her neck, he could feel its energy hum through his body just as if he wore it.

Since their joining the crystal had been putting off a slight but constant stream of energy. It had not ever done that before. He couldn't even begin to imagine what had caused the crystals to fuse, much less why it seemed to be constantly broadcasting. Unless it had something to do with what his mother had told him.

Accepting that his mother was right, that he was part of a group of Chosen people, it followed that he and Memory would not be granted a life of happily ever after. Not until, or if, they managed to defeat some evil entity.

Which led to the sixty-four thousand dollar question? How the hell did you fight and defeat something that wasn't even tangible?

More importantly, how could he risk losing something so rare and precious, something he'd just found? What if they couldn't defeat this enemy? Didn't they have to have more of the pieces of the crystal? There were supposed to be eight in all. His

and Memory's were just two pieces of the puzzle. How did they find the other six? And how did he keep Memory safe until they did find the others?

Like it or not, he'd have to talk to his mother about it. But not until he'd made sure Memory was protected. A memory suddenly surfaced, taking him back in time...

He was twelve years old and it was his birthday. As was the custom, his father took him riding at dawn. They rode the fence lines of the ranch, watching the sky lighten and listening as the sounds of the night creatures gave way to the noise of the day.

When they reached the lake, they stopped and his father unpacked breakfast from his saddlebags. Each year it was the same—sweet, smoke-cured country ham and egg biscuits and a thermos of sweet, hot coffee. It was the only time Marco ever drank the stuff and the only time it ever really tasted good.

They took a seat on the soft green grass, eating in silence and watching a flock of geese descend on the still water. Ripples moved out, breaking the pristine surface reflection with radiating soft waves.

"One day all this will be yours, Marco," his father said softly.

"I'm going to be a rancher just like you." In Marco's eyes there was no man as large, as strong, honest or courageous as his father. No man more loving or kind. "I'm going to marry a Romany Bedouin and have a son and eat ham and egg biscuits right here on his birthday."

"I hope that's true, Son, but you might have to go some to find a mix like your ma."

"Is Mama a witch?"

His father cut him a look. "What makes you ask something like that?"

"Anthony said his grandma said that Mama was a witch. Not a bad one but she was still a witch."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, and his grandma said that you married her because you were like two peas in a pod 'cause your dad was a medicine man."

"She said all that, did she?"

"Yeah. So is it true?"

"Your mother is a very special person, Marco. She sees things others can't and walks to her own beat."

"Do you? Walk to your own beat?"

"That I do, Son."

"And was your dad a medicine man?"

"My father was a very...spiritual man, very in touch with the world around him."

"Are you, Dad?"

"I'd like to think so. Marco, we all have the ability to be in touch with our world. Especially here, on this land. This is sacred ground, Son. That's why we stay instead of heading to the city like a lot of folks. Here we're safe. This is a place of great power, great importance. Never forget that, Marco, because this place is part of you and you're part of it. If the day ever comes when you go out into the world and feel threatened or afraid, you come here. Here you can overcome anything that threatens you."

Marco didn't understand but his father looked so serious and his voice had that tone he only used when he was telling Marco something very important, so Marco just nodded.

Now Marco wondered if his father knew about the Chosen and if there was something on the ranch that could be used to help defeat the evil they were supposed to battle. He knew his mother hated talking about the ranch and his father. It still caused her such pain. But he needed answers.

And the ranch was the place to find them. Suddenly he was sure. He made up his mind. He'd take Memory there today. She'd be safe there while he went and talked to his mother.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Memory's voice was husky from sleep.

Marco wondered how long she'd been awake. "Morning, gorgeous."

"Hmmm, yes it is," she said with a smile, and ran one hand along the side of his face. "I'd so love to shoot you."

"Damn, darlin', you know how to hurt a man. I thought I was pretty good."

She laughed and gave his ear a playful tug. "Take pictures of you. And no, you were not pretty good."

"No?"

"You were spectacular."

"Well, hey now, I'm starting to like the flow of this conversation."

"Hmmm, well, I better shut up before I give you a swelled head."

He took her hand and guided it beneath the covers. "Too late for that, sugar."

Memory laughed in utter delight and Marco pulled her to him. He hadn't forgotten his resolve to talk to his mother and try to figure out what he was supposed to do. But right now, he had the chance to make love to the woman of his dreams. He'd be a fool to turn his back on that, and one thing his mother had not done was raise a fool.

* * * * *

Memory had her camera out of the case and was firing shots left and right as Marco turned off the main road and onto the private road. The countryside was gorgeous, rolling pastures, massive oaks and everything green and lush.

The entrance to the Redwing Ranch was half a mile. Each side of the road seemed to be fenced pastures, vast expanses of thick grass giving way to big patches of trees and shade.

"How big is your ranch?" she asked as she maneuvered to shoot around him and capture two horses running alongside the fence.

"It's a little spread. About five square miles."

"Is that a lot of acres?"

"A little over three thousand."

"Three thousand?" Memory lowered her camera. "You call three thousand acres a little spread?"

"For a ranch, yeah. It used to be bigger, but we sold part of it to buy Mama the house in Charlotte and the dance school when my dad died."

Memory fell silent, watching Marco as they pulled through the gate. It was clear from the expression on his face and the way his eyes moved over the land that he loved it. She wondered what it would feel like to be so attached to a place, to have a family history that could be traced back and know that those who'd come before had loved the land and then passed along that love to their children.

As they rounded a curve, the house came into view. It wasn't a large place, but it was obviously well-maintained. All natural wood, it was two levels. The bottom level boasted a wide porch that appeared to wrap around the house. Wooden rocking chairs and a porch swing mixed with enormous terra cotta pots overflowing with plants, gave the porch a welcoming "come take a load off your feet" appeal.

"It's beautiful," she murmured appreciatively, snapping more photos.

"It is to me," he agreed in a voice that sounded as close to reverence as she'd ever heard.

Marco parked in front of the big detached garage to the right of the house. Memory put her camera back in its case. Marco reached in the backseat to get her luggage while she gathered her camera, laptop and shoulder bag.

It hadn't taken much convincing for him to get her to agree to stay at the ranch. While the bed and breakfast was lovely, she'd never been on a ranch and was eager to

roam around and take photos. And there was the matter of spending more time with Marco. If she was honest, that was the real appeal.

Marco led the way inside the house. It was as neat and tidy inside as it was out. Hardwood floors scattered with colorful woven rugs, what might be called a rustic style of furnishings and a preponderance of house plants gave it an inviting feel.

Memory had no problem discerning that the bedroom he put her things in was his room. That brought an unexpected wave of emotionalism to the forefront, something she was trying hard to avoid. She might be able to admit to herself that despite the improbability of it, she'd fallen in love with Marco in less than a day, but she sure didn't want him to be aware of those feelings. At least not yet. Not until she had some idea if the connection she felt with him was one-sided.

Marco led her to the back of the house where an enormous set of French doors led out onto a huge screened-in sun porch. "See that house over there, just before the barn?" He pointed through the stand of trees that bordered the backyard.

"Yeah."

"That's where Fred and Irene live. Fred's my foreman and Irene takes care of the house for me. Fred's probably not in the house much during the day, but you can find Irene there—or here. If you need anything while I'm gone, you go get Irene. Okay?"

"While you're gone?"

"I need to go talk to Mama and see if there's anything else she can tell me about the crystal."

Memory pulled the now-enlarged crystal from beneath her shirt. "Maybe you should wear this. Show it to her."

"No, you keep it on."

"But she might want to see—"

"No."

"Okay. So when will you be back?"

"I don't know. I'll call when I'm on my way. Give me your cell number, and keep your phone on you."

She recited her number then programmed his number into her own phone. "Is it okay if I wander around and take some pictures?"

"You do anything you want—except leave the boundaries of the ranch."

"That had kind of an ominous ring to it."

"I didn't mean it that way, honey. Now, I'm going to stop by and tell Fred and Irene that you're here then go see Mama. I'll get back as soon as I can."

"If it's about the crystal, maybe I should go with you."

"You could be right, but I really need to see her alone this time. Now before you get your feelings hurt, I'm not trying to shut you out. I just need a little time alone with my mother."

"Okay. I can understand that."

Marco leaned down and kissed her gently. "Be back soon."

Memory watched him go then turned and went back inside. For a while she wandered the house, familiarizing herself with the layout and getting a feel for the place where he lived.

She wasn't empathic like Charlotte, but even she could feel the love that had collected in the house. This was definitely a place where love lived. What would it feel like to live in such a place?

That question inspired fantasies she'd shoved aside for too many years. Dreams of a husband and a home, of family and belonging. Memory forced the thoughts away. She couldn't let herself go there. It opened the door to getting hurt. Besides, she had a family. Her sisters.

Her cell phone rang and she smiled as she looked at the caller ID. "Hey, Rom," she answered with a smile.

"I must have the wrong number."

"Rom, it's me."

"Girl, what's happened to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You sound different."

Memory considered it for a moment. "Maybe I am. A little. Rested, I guess. What's up with you?"

"Same as always."

"Things okay at the shop?"

"Aside from not having our best photographer available?"

"Come on, Rom."

"Okay, I won't be a whining bitch. Everything's fine. We picked up three new accounts and are set to do the perfume thing next week."

"That's great!"

"So, any idea how much longer you're going to be gone?"

"Ummm, no. My car broke down so I have to wait to get it fixed. And there's some things here I want to...investigate."

"Memory Wells, you've found a man!"

She laughed. "Maybe."

"Okay, so give me the dirt."

"Not yet. I just met him yesterday."

Rom sighed into the phone. "Oh god, the discovery phase. I remember that. The excitement, anticipation—the longing... the horrible case of 'please do me now'."

Memory laughed again. "Yep, you got it."

"Well, I'm thrilled, Mem. And I want to hear every single detail—when you're ready."

"Don't worry, you will."

"Okay. Well, I have to scoot. Call me."

"I will."

"Love you."

"I love you, Rom. Bye."

Smiling to herself, Memory started to tuck her phone into the clip on the waistband of her jeans. A sudden flash in her mind had her pausing then dialing quickly.

"Will you please put on some clothes before you zap me?" she asked when Dee answered.

Dee laughed. "What, like you've never seen me naked?"

"More times than I care to remember," Memory said with a laugh.

"So, are you calling to tell me about *da man* that has you so revved up?"

"You got that, did you?"

Dee laughed. "Honey, we *all* got that. Damn, you've been transmitting like a satellite for close to twenty-four hours."

Memory groaned. "Please tell me you didn't see —"

"Not the juicy parts. Energy interference. Just flashes. Enough to know that you're redlining with lust." There was a pause before Dee added, "And fighting to keep from admitting this guy's stolen your heart."

"Anything else, Yoda?"

There was a long silence. "I was going to wait to see if you'd volunteer the info. Kenna wanted to nail you right away, but Charlotte and I got her to agree to wait."

"What do you mean? Nail me on what?"

"About twelve to fourteen hours ago all our crystals went bonkers. Supercharged. I thought I was going to be electrocuted."

Memory didn't have to wonder what it meant. "It's my crystal. This guy, Dee. His name is Marco and he had a crystal that was an exact match to mine."

"Had?"

"Yeah. When we had – when we made love, the crystals fused."

"Fuck me sideways!"

"There was a bit of that, too," Memory said with an attempt to lighten what was becoming a conversation that was uncomfortably serious.

"Mem, you know what this means, don't you?"

"Yeah. I found him. My match. God, Dee, I don't know what to do. I'm over the moon in love with him. It's like finding a missing part of myself. But I'm scared. What if he doesn't feel it? What if I'm fooling myself? Even worse, what if I'm being fooled?"

The swift intake of breath told Memory that Dee had realized what Memory had been afraid to face. What if Marco wasn't her destined mate? What if he was her enemy? The wolf in sheep's clothing.

"No," Dee insisted. "No. You'd know it. There'd be some sign, some evidence. After you make love with him do you feel weak or lifeless? When you're with him do you want to...to do strange or perverted things? Things you'd never consider doing?"

"Oh no. No. Just the opposite."

"Then it can't be Asmodeus."

Relief washed through Memory like a soothing balm. "Still, if I've found him and you got the signal..."

"So did Asmodeus. Shit, Mem. He's probably got you in his crosshairs."

Memory didn't want to agree but she couldn't ignore the possibility. "So what now?"

"You want me to come? I'll summon the rest of the sisters and –"

"No. Not now. This isn't the time."

"Is that a bit of clairvoyant sight or wishful thinking?"

"Call it a gut feeling."

"Okay, but I'm a little uneasy with this. Listen, this Marco. Does he have any abilities?"

The question surprised Memory. She hadn't thought to ask. "I don't know."

"Well, you better find out, sister, 'cause if Asmo-what's-his-butt shows up, you're gonna need some firepower. And despite how well you mind-paste, I'm not sure that's enough to kick his butt."

"You're right. I'll find out. Just as soon as he gets back." Memory quickly explained about Marco going to see his mother, and bringing her to his ranch.

"You feel safe there?"

"Yes."

"Okay, but you watch your back, Mem."

"I will. I love you, Dee."

"Same here. Call if you need me. I'll let Kenna and Charlotte know what's happening."

"Thanks. Talk to you soon."

Talking with Dee had both comforted her and made her edgy. She wasn't ready to deal with a demon, to face some destiny she didn't particularly want. But if the chance to have Marco was the prize to be won for fulfilling that destiny then she'd fight Asmodeus with her bare hands if necessary.

Thankfully, she didn't feel anything negative or frightening at the moment and she wasn't about to waste time worrying about when or if the slime-sucker would make an appearance. The morning was perfect and she was eager to see more of Marco's home. Grabbing her camera, she headed outside.

* * * * *

Marco sat at the kitchen table in his mother's small home in the historic district of the city. Once an area that had wasted into near ghetto, it had been revamped and now

boasted well-tended homes and manicured lawns, a place he felt safe for his mother to live.

She finished preparing a cup of tea and took a seat across from him. "Now, what brings you here in the middle of the morning, my dear?"

"I need to talk to you about the crystal."

"That seems to be occupying a dominant position in your thoughts of late."

"Something happened, Mama."

"With Memory."

He shouldn't have been surprised. It was probably pretty clear that he and Memory were attracted right from the get-go. And his mother wasn't blind.

"Yeah."

She sat silent for a long time, took a sip of tea and sighed. "Are you going to tell me or am I supposed to guess?"

Marco blew out his breath and leaned back in his chair. "She had a crystal. An exact match to mine."

"Ah, yes."

"You knew?"

"I suspected."

"How?"

"Remember the energy I spoke of?"

He did remember. And now he remembered something else. The way his crystal had gone berserk the night he drove by the bed and breakfast where Memory was staying. The night before he met her.

"Something's happening between me and Memory."

"Something of a romantic nature?"

He hesitated. It was hard enough to admit to himself that he'd fallen in love with Memory without even knowing her. Admitting that to his mother wasn't something he was sure he could do.

Mirriam's eyes seemed to take on a flinty edge. "Marco Redwing, you better not tell me it was just sex."

Once again she surprised him. His mother had never voiced much of an opinion about his sex life. She knew there'd been a lot of women in his life, but she'd never offered an opinion on how he conducted his sex life. This was a first.

"No," he admitted. It wouldn't do any good to lie. She'd always been able to tell if he was lying to her. "It wasn't."

"Good. Now tell me."

"When we...when we made love last night our crystals fused into one."

Mirriam's eyes widened for a split second then a thoughtful expression appeared on her face.

"Mama, what the hell is it with those crystals? If Memory and I are part of some...some group of Chosen people, and there's some demon out there we're supposed to fight, then how exactly are we supposed to do it? And what about the rest of the Chosen? Don't we have to find them?"

"Marco, I don't have all the answers. All I can tell you is that now the fusion of yours and Memory's crystals have provided you with a weapon of sorts. How its power manifests will depend upon the abilities you and Memory possess."

"Abilities?"

"Darling, don't be obtuse with your mother. We both know that you, like your father and his father before him, possess abilities beyond the norm."

"You mean the energy hits."

"I'm not fond of the label, but yes. You have the ability to project energy. Whether it's a wave of comfort that you send to wash over someone or a blast of pain you hurl

against an enemy, you are able to gather the energy from your environment and direct it."

Marco wasn't fond of thinking about that particular skill. He'd spent most of his life either trying to ignore it, or learning to master it and keep it in check.

"The question is, what is Memory's skill?" Mirriam asked.

"I don't know."

"You should find out. If it complements your own then your combined skills, added to the power of the crystal, could prove to be a very effective weapon."

"And what about the others?"

"I suspect Memory knows—at least part—who some of the others are."

Marco considered it. "If Memory knows who the Chosen are, why didn't she mention it?"

"Trust is often slow to build, my dear. While she may be attracted to you, may be desperately in love with you, that doesn't mean she's ready to trust you with all her secrets."

"In love?" He locked onto those words at the expense of all the others.

"Yes. I suspect that as bound to her as you feel, she feels the same. Marco, the crystals wouldn't have fused unless they were matched."

He thought about it for a long time. "Mama, do you really think I've found her?"

"Yes, darling, I do."

"And yet, I could lose her just as easy. If this demon has his way. If I'm not strong enough."

"You have strength you have never imagined, Marco. But in order to harness it, you have to trust in what you've found. Trust in the strength of that bond and the power of the light it offers."

"Like you say, trust doesn't just appear full-blown."

"No, indeed it does not. But taking the first step is a move in the right direction, don't you –"

As one they both started. Something hot and sickening stabbed inside Marco, nearly taking his breath. He saw his mother's face pale at the same moment.

"Mama?"

"I'm okay, Marco. But you have to go. The sanctity of the land has been breached."

He was already on his feet, but hesitated. "You're sure you're okay? I don't want to leave you alone."

"He does not come for me, Marco. Now go!"

"I love you." He hurried to kiss her cheek then ran out of the house, his heart pounding wildly in his chest.

Chapter Seven

Memory let herself into the house, putting her camera on the kitchen counter as she opened the refrigerator to see what there was to drink. A plastic gallon jug of water drew her eye.

She turned with it in hand to look for a glass and saw Marco standing on the other side of the bar that divided the kitchen from the dinette area.

"Hey," she said with a smile. "I thought you were going to call when you were on your way back?"

"In my haste to return to you I must have forgotten."

She smiled, but couldn't help wondering about the odd way he phrased his response. Dismissing it, she set the jug of water on the counter. "Where are your glasses?"

"Where you'd imagine."

Again she dismissed his response. Maybe the talk with his mother had rattled or upset him. "So, how'd it go with your mom?" she asked as she started opening cabinets.

Marco rounded the bar as she located the glasses and pulled one from the shelf. He took the glass from her, put it on the counter and wedged her back up against the counter, trapping her by placing his hands on it on either side of her.

"My interest lies here," he said in a sexy croon just before he kissed her.

Memory literally went weak in the knees as he plundered her mouth. This was a side of Marco she hadn't seen. Rough and demanding, almost to the point of pain, one hand closed on her breast, pinching her nipple through the fabric of her top.

She thought to protest, not really into pain, but suddenly lost the will. She felt him groan into her mouth, his free hand cupping her sex, fingers digging in hard enough to nearly push the fabric inside her.

Her senses were bombarded with hunger. Hot, strong and of a nature she'd never experienced. Need that somehow seemed alien.

Realization had her eyes flying open wide and her hands clawing to get his hands off her.

"Get away from me!" She shoved against his chest.

"Why? You want me." He yanked her close again, reaching behind her to squeeze her ass painfully.

"Get the fuck off me!"

"You heard her."

Memory's eyes jerked in the direction of the voice and renewed strength flowed through her.

Marco leapt at the mirror image of himself who held Memory. His hand reached for the creature's arm, intent on jerking him away from Memory. And closed on nothing,

One moment an exact duplicate of himself was there and the next, Memory was rushing into his arms. Marco wrapped his arms around her, turning as he held her to scan the room.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I thought it was you."

Rage surged through him. Not only had the demon threatened the woman he loved, he'd invaded sacred ground. An hour ago Marco might not have been sure about the battle. Now he had every intention of not only fighting, but kicking Asmodeus straight back to hell.

It took a few minutes for Memory to stop shaking. She pulled back to look up at him. "I'm sorry."

"Darlin', you've got nothing to be sorry for. This is just the hand of cards we've been dealt. What we have to do is figure out how to win the game."

"Did your mother help?"

"Some. One thing, honey. Do you have any clue about the whereabouts or identity of any of the other Chosen?"

Anxiety lanced through her. Revealing her own past was one thing. Telling her sisters' secrets was another. It was something deeply ingrained, the need to protect them. But did they need protection from Marco? Years of habit forced a hesitation. Love overrode habit.

"My sisters," she replied, meeting his eyes.

"Your sisters? I thought you were an orphan?"

"We chose each other as sisters."

"I'm not sure I follow. Come on, let's sit."

They went into the den and settled onto the sofa. Memory took a moment to compose her thoughts. "I'm the oldest. Then there's De'alla or Dee, Charlotte and Kenna. We all were brought to the orphanage as infants. And as we grew we realized we were different from the other kids. We could do things other people couldn't."

"Like what?"

"Well, Dee is...she's like a water elemental. She can manipulate water, control it. And she can communicate with nature. Charlotte's an empath, a strong one, and Kenna...well Kenna has telekinetic abilities and is...intuitive. She gets glimpses of things."

"And you?"

Memory rolled her eyes. "I'm the least impressive. I get a tiny glimpse now and again but not enough to call me clairvoyant. What I can do is...you know it'd be easier to show you. Do you have a pad of paper?"

Marco got up and disappeared down the hall. When he returned he carried a legal pad. "Thanks." Memory took the pad and put it on the couch cushion between them.

"Okay." She closed her eyes and visualized Dee in her mind.

"What?" Marco asked when she opened her eyes.

She looked down at the pad and knew he had when she heard the soft "holy shit" he muttered.

"How'd you do that?"

She shrugged. "Seems that whatever I see clear enough in my head I can project onto physical objects and film. Even onto a digital memory card or a hard drive."

"That's incredible."

"But not very useful, well, except in my profession. Beats the hell out of Photoshop."

"Not sure I follow you."

"Well, instead of me taking a photo and having to airbrush out a wrinkle or discoloration, I just visualize the subject or location without the flaws and that's what the camera records."

"Again, incredible."

"There're times I can sort of project an image into the space around me."

"Come again?"

"It's kind of like a ghost or hologram. Not really substantial but kind of there."

"Interesting. Mama said that it was important to know what our abilities are so that we could figure a way to combine them and use them as a weapon against this demon."

"Asmodeus."

"Yeah, the shitheel who apparently looks an awful lot like me."

"He can appear in different forms. He chose your form because he knew he could get to me that way."

"Oh?"

Memory wasn't ready to cross the bridge of confession just yet. "You said your mother said we needed to know how to combine our abilities. Which suggests that you have special skills."

"Yeah, but it's not something I'm real comfortable with."

"Why?"

"Because it's dangerous."

"Really? Show me."

He frowned for a moment then blew out his breath. "Okay, let's see." He tossed the legal pad over the coffee table and onto the floor.

Memory watched as he drew in a breath. He raised his hand, palm out toward the pad. It literally disintegrated into a puff of confetti that billowed up and rained down, covering the floor, the coffee table and dusting them as well.

"Whoa! That's some ability. I can see why you'd consider it dangerous. How the hell did you survive puberty with that?"

"With great difficulty."

She thought about it. "I don't see how our abilities can be combined."

"Me either..." His eyes suddenly brightened. "Unless...try this. Visualize an arrow in your mind and try to project it in front of us."

Memory closed her eyes, focusing. When the image was clear, when she could see light glinting off the metal tip and air stirring the feathers at the base of the shaft, she opened her eyes.

And there in front of them hung a ghostly arrow. Marco drew in a breath and extended his hand toward it.

The crash of a ceramic planter preceded a thunk. Both of them jumped up and ran across the room. Dirt and plant littered the floor and the top of a low credenza. And in the wall behind it was a hole.

"It works!" Memory said with a grin.

"But will an arrow kill a demon?"

Her grin faded. "Probably not. We'll have to come up with something that would be effective against him."

"What would that be?"

A sense of defeat threatened. "I have no idea."

"Hey, none of that." He took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. "This thing isn't going to beat us."

"Marco, we can't defeat it alone. We may be able to hurt it, buy some time, but it's going to take the power of all the Chosen to send it back where it came from and lock the door behind it."

"And your sisters...?"

"Haven't found their mates."

The moment the words were out of her mouth they both froze. Memory could have kicked herself. She'd promised herself not to walk this path yet. But now it was too late.

"Memory —"

"No, don't." She broke away, crossing the room to stand in front of the French doors, looking out across the sun porch to the serene landscape.

"Darlin', look at me."

It took her a moment to summon the courage, and then she turned. Marco stood a few feet behind her.

"You don't have to be afraid."

"Oh yes, I do."

"Not of me."

"Of you most of all."

Marco came to her, cupping her face in both hands. "Never. I'll never hurt you, Memory, never betray you. I'll love you as long as I live and beyond if the power exists to make that possible."

Memory sighed, swept into surrender by his words. Marco lowered his head, grazing her lips with his then trailing kisses along her face and down her throat to where her pulse pounded. His hands slid slowly across her shoulders then down to her waist where they tightened, pulling her firmly against him.

She eagerly accepted his kiss when his lips sought hers again, lifting her arms to encircle his neck, pressing against him and deepening the kiss. At length she pulled away, her breath coming quicker and her skin flushed. "I want you."

He smiled at her, running his hands around to cup her ass and pull her against him, his erection pressing against her belly. "Sugar, I'll never stop wanting you."

"Then have at it, cowboy."

"Oh, no. I'm a man who likes to take his time."

"Hmmm, I seem to remember something like that. Still, you could shuck those clothes. No harm in a gal looking."

"Darlin, you can't be asking me to strip for you."

"The hell I can't. You got any music?"

"No. Uh-uh, not going to happen."

"Ahhh, come on, Marco."

"How 'bout if you show me the way."

"Me?"

"Yep."

Memory gave him a smile. "Well, it just so happens that I did do a brief stint as an exotic dancer."

"Oh? How brief?"

"One dance. Couldn't take it. All those eyes on me. Gave me the creeping willies."

“Only my eyes on you now, sugar. And I’d purely love to see you strip.”

“Then point me to some music and take a seat, big boy.”

He released her and moved to take a seat on the sofa, pointing toward a stereo system in the cabinet beneath the television. Memory saw the hunger in his eyes and it worked to resolve her of any inhibitions. With him she didn’t have to pretend. She smiled and sauntered to the stereo, going through his CDs and selecting a sexy, slow track.

Marco watched with anticipation as she put the CD into the player. Music filled the room and she turned toward him. She began to move, her body swaying and grinding to the beat. His eyes followed the movement of her hands as they moved up her body to her breasts. She cupped her breasts through the t-shirt then moved them lower to work the t-shirt up.

The bottoms of her breasts were revealed then she turned, pulling the shirt off and presenting him with her back. Holding the top over her breasts, she turned again, executed a seductive roll of her hips that had her sinking almost to the floor.

Now that was sex in motion. She held the position for a moment, knees bent and splayed out to the sides. He felt his erection straining at the fabric of his slacks, imagining her performing that same move, naked, and with him beneath her.

As she rose, she peeled the top away to bare her breasts and dropped it. Her hands moved to her breasts, cupping and caressing, thumbs circling her nipples as her hips continued to grind and roll.

Marco’s eyes moved from her breasts to her hips, those sexy moves making it increasingly uncomfortable to sit. When Memory unfastened the button of her shorts and started working them slowly down her hips, he had no choice but to readjust his jeans.

Memory pivoted so her back was to him again. Lower the pants slid, revealing a narrow strip of black material that circled her hips. An adjoining strip disappeared into

the cleft of her ass. His eyes followed the path of the shorts, passion expanding with each new inch of skin revealed to him.

When the shorts slithered down her legs to puddle at her feet, she bent forward. The movement presented him with a view of her scrumptious ass, the thin strip of the thong cutting across her anus and joining with a narrow triangle of lace that did little to cover her sex. Need that was already burning developed sharpened claws.

Memory straightened and turned, crossing the room to him. Their eyes locked and she leaned over, her luscious breasts hanging full and inviting as she deftly worked the buttons on his shirt. The moment she parted the material to bare his chest, she lowered her mouth to his skin. Wet and warm, her tongue traced a trail of fire from his neck to his waist. All the while her hands worked at his belt and the zipper of his pants.

Memory lowered to her knees in front of him as she worked his jeans down over his hips and legs, pausing to remove his boots and socks in order to slide the jeans off and toss them to the side. Her hand was hot on his dick, stroking an erection that was strained and pulsing.

When her mouth closed on him, every nerve in his body was electrified. Her tongue circled the head, starting a burn that spread down its length, into his balls and radiated out. Marco peeled off his shirt and wound his fingers in her hair. Silken wetness enveloped him as she deep-throated him, each stroke driving the need higher.

Memory felt his need spike and knew that his control was weakening. He was close to climax. His hands tightened in her hair, pulling her up to meet his lips. One touch and the need to devour him was overwhelming. She gripped his face in both hands, plundering his mouth as their bodies strained against one another, need bringing perspiration bursting through their pores to slick their skin.

The world narrowed to the confines of the room, then smaller. All that existed was him. Nothing mattered but the feel of his body pressed against hers, the taste of him as

his tongue filled her mouth, and the fire that burned inside her as his hands roamed down her back to cup her ass and press her firmly against his erection.

She ended the kiss and started another slow trek down his body, her lips and tongue working slowly toward their destination. As she knelt in front of him she felt his hands working onto her hair.

His grip tightened when she took him in her hand, running her tongue around the head of his penis, probing the tiny opening. Pre-cum gave him an exotic spicy flavor that was intoxicating. She licked at the tiny droplets, using her tongue to smooth the lubricant over the engorged head.

When she ran her tongue down the length of his shaft and back up, a low groan came from him that had her desire burning even hotter. Knowing that her touch affected him so was exhilarating. She wanted to give him more, to take him higher and further than he'd ever gone.

She'd never had this reaction to a man. He was like a drug in her blood, one she'd formed an instant addiction to and had no desire to break. The only measurement of time she was aware of was the reactions of his body as she took him close to the edge, time after time. Every time she felt that slight vibration sing in his body, felt his muscles tighten, she would slow, pulling back to circle the head of his penis with her tongue. And each time she felt that tension in him release she would start again.

Finally he stopped her, pulling her up off her knees and onto him.

Marco had never in his life experienced anything like the sensations Memory evoked in him. What made it all the more exciting was that he knew without asking the same was true for her. Yet knowing wasn't enough. He needed to show her.

He rolled her over onto her back on the sofa, working his way up from her navel to her breasts and suckling them until she gasped. He'd already learned to recognize that curious sound she made, a cross between a gasp and a moan that signaled a heightened

state of yearning. He was rewarded with confirmation by the way her body ground against him and small moans came from her lips.

Marco had never felt this kind of need. It was more than sex, more than the desire for release. He wanted to brand her, make her his completely, give her what she could never hope to find with another man.

He captured her lips with his, tasting himself on her tongue. She groaned into his mouth, her hands moving down his sides to pull him more firmly onto her. He could taste her desire and it inflamed him almost to the point of breaking. His desires nearly made him forget the pleasure he wanted to show her, and spread her legs to sink into her delicious warmth and sate his hunger.

But the desire to pleasure her was stronger. He lingered on her lips a moment longer then released her from the kiss, his lips traveling down her neck to nip at the tender skin.

Savoring the sweet taste of her on his tongue, he moved lower, capturing one nipple in his mouth and flicking his tongue over the taut nub.

She pressed against his mouth, her hands tangling in his hair to pull him more firmly to her breast.

He flicked his tongue over the peaked nub, letting his hand drift down her body and over her mound. His fingers slid between the wet folds. She moved against his hand then gasped when his finger eased over her hard clit.

Marco felt her desire almost as if it were his own. As her desire flamed higher, it fueled the fire in his mind and body, spurring him to trap her arms over her head and tease her nipple, his tongue circling and flicking over it before finally sucking it into his mouth.

She pressed up into the sensation, her breath coming faster as his fingers worked over her clit, pinching and stroking. When he felt a ripple run through her body and heard her breathy gasp, he knew she was about to come.

He eased back, spread her legs and knelt between them. Her heavy-lidded eyes watched as he spread her sex wide and bent forward to lave her from perineum to clit in one slow stroke.

Her throaty groan preceded her arching against his mouth. He raised his head to see her hands moving to her breasts, pinching her reddened nipples.

Hot didn't even begin to describe her. Sexy, sensual, gloriously uninhibited. None of it was adequate to describe what she inspired inside him. He wanted to dominate her, possess her, and yet the need to pleasure her outranked his own desire. He needed to give her what no other ever could, and in doing so know that it was him she wanted and needed. Only him.

His finger stroked between the lips of her labia then spread them to circle the silky wet flesh. When he pushed one finger inside her, she moaned and pressed into the feeling. He inserted another finger, gently probing the vaginal walls, pressing deeper. When her body arched he knew he'd found that one spot that delivered the most intense pleasure.

Her hips moved in time to the strokes of his hand, her own hands tracing down her body to her inner thighs to spread them wider. The newly formed bond between them enabled him to feel her need almost as strongly as his own. It was an intoxicating blend, almost overwhelming in its intensity. He bent forward to lave slowly over her clit and she moaned, moving faster against his fingers. He felt the vibration that raced through her and stroked faster and deeper inside her, sucking her clit into his mouth and flicking his tongue rapidly over it.

"Now, please. In me. Now!" Her panted words came a moment before her pussy started to spasm around his fingers and wetness streamed from inside her.

Before her orgasm could end, he straightened and pushed the head of his dick against her wet opening. She pushed against him, her body yielding to him.

The way her pussy clenched on him and her undulating movements beneath him threatened to undo him, break his control. She smiled up at him, that expression of sex

and lust that said clearly she knew the effect she had on him. He nearly came before he was fully seated inside her.

Running his hands up her body, he gently squeezed her swollen nipple. She let out a long lusty breath then lifted his hand from her breast and raised it to her mouth, sucking one finger then two. The sight of her sucking the juice from her pussy from his fingers made his dick throb and his balls tightened.

"Take me," she begged.

Her words were the call of a siren he had no power to resist. He started to stroke, slow and steady, fighting to maintain control and keep the impending orgasm at bay. Her tight pussy pulsed on him, tightening then releasing. Her hips rose and fell, meeting each thrust and matching his pace.

It was not long before they both were breathing hard, trying to hold back the dam of sensation that threatened to burst. She was the first to succumb. "I...I can't...stop," she gasped and arched her body, stretching her arms back over her head in a gesture of surrender. "Please...please."

The sight of her submissively offering herself and the husky plea of her words was more than he could resist. He released the last of the restraints holding his lust intact and let the full force of his need be set free.

Memory groaned when he grabbed her hips and roughly pulled her to him, impaling her on his full length. Her body quaked as he rode her, soft cries urging him on. When he felt her muscles tighten around him, he lowered down, propped on one elbow so that his free hand could pin her arms above her head securely.

His thrusts became more urgent and forceful and her cries deeper but he would not gentle his movements. Nor did she encourage him to do so. This was mating at its most primitive.

"Now," she moaned, and a moment later her body began to quake in orgasm, ending his control. With a hard thrust, he hilted himself in her and surrendered.

His sense of self grew indistinct and blurred. There was no way to differentiate between the riot of feeling that racked his body and those that tossed Memory in an ecstatic maelstrom of sensation. There was no way to tell whether the overpowering realization of love was his own or belonged to the woman who had captured his heart without even trying.

It was nothing like he'd ever imagined and more than he'd dare hope for. For the first time in his long life, he was complete.

When at last reality returned, he sank down on her, listening to the sound of their breaths, their hearts pounding against one another, and feeling their sweat-slicked skin gradually cooling.

He rolled off her onto his side and she shifted to face him, reaching up to stroke along the side of his face. The depth of love he saw in her eyes was as breathtaking as the nirvana he'd just experienced.

Marco reached over to place his hand on top of hers. "My love."

"Always." She smiled. And for the first time in his life, Marco Redwing believed in the possibility of happily ever after.

Chapter Eight

Memory felt Marco kiss her shoulder and stirred from sleep. "I have to run into town and pick up some parts for the car I'm restoring. Be back soon."

"I'll get up," she said sleepily.

"Sleep, baby. I won't be long."

"Hmmm. I love you."

"I love you."

With the feel of his lips fresh against hers she drifted back to sleep. She had no idea how long she'd been asleep but it must have been a while because the next thing she knew he was in bed with her, his hands running over the bare skin of her back.

"Hmmm," she hummed, not bothering to open her eyes, just floating on the sea of sensation.

Lips pressed against her shoulder, worked up to the crook of her neck. Memory rolled onto her side and he pressed her over onto her back, capturing her lips in a kiss that had her body temperature rising.

His hands played over her body, gently caressing and arousing. At first Memory wallowed in the desire, savoring each touch, each kiss. Another wave of heat washed over her, but this one was accompanied by a tinge of nausea. She broke free of the kiss.

"Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Yeah. I guess. Just felt kind of sick to my stomach for a second."

His lips descended on hers, obliterating all thought but the hard length of him pressed against her and the erection that pressed against her belly. When the phone rang she pulled back from the kiss, expecting him to roll over and pick up the extension on the night stand.

"Let it ring," he said and fisted his hands in her hair to draw her back to his lips.

A few seconds later the phone rang again. This time Memory sat up. "You should probably get that."

"It can wait." He pushed her back down.

With his lips, tongue and hands he teased her into a heightened state of arousal that had her wet and moaning. And still feeling a bit queasy. She ignored it until the phone rang again then pushed away. "Maybe you should answer that."

"Later." He pulled her on top of him.

Memory couldn't resist rocking on the length of his hard cock trapped beneath her, letting her hands move over the broad expanse of his chest and then down to tease the head of his cock.

Her cell phone rang and she frowned, jumped up and grabbed it from the bureau. "Hello?"

"Memory? It's Anthony."

She looked over at Marco who was lying back on the bed with his arms up, head propped on his hands. "Hi, Anthony."

"I tried calling the house number but no one answered. Mirriam's school was set on fire. She's in the hospital and is going to be fine. Marco tried to call but you didn't answer. He didn't want you to worry. He'll be there as soon as he can."

"But – Anthony, Marco's right here. Do you want to talk to him?"

"He's there? But I thought he was going to the hospital?"

"I don't know anything about it. He didn't mention it when he got back."

"Oh well, okay. Sorry to bother you."

"It's no bother. Thanks, Anthony."

She put the phone down and turned to look at Marco. "Anthony said your mom's dance school burned down."

"Yes."

"And she's in the hospital?"

"She'll be fine. Come back to bed."

Alarms went off in Memory's head. No way Marco would react that way to news that his mother was in the hospital. Which meant that the "thing" in the bed wasn't Marco.

Fear almost made her gag. "I have to go to the bathroom. Be right back."

Memory fled to the bathroom, standing at the sink and staring at her reflection. What a dumbass. She should have brought the phone so she could call Marco. Too late. What was she going to do?

The only option that came to mind was to stall for time and at the first chance, run. She opened the door to find Marco still in the same position. "Come back to bed," he said.

"I know this sound crazy, but I'm starving. Why don't we have some breakfast then maybe we can have a nice long shower."

"Come back to bed."

"Please? I really am hungry. And...shower sex is...well, it's one of my favorite things."

"Very well."

Memory wasted no time throwing on a pair of shorts and t-shirt. Before he was out of the bed she was headed for the kitchen.

* * * * *

When Marco's cell phone rang he rose from the chair beside his mother's bed. "Sorry," he whispered. "I'll take this outside."

"Son, I'm fine," she insisted. "Answer the phone."

"Yeah?" Marco punched the receive button.

"Where are you?" Anthony asked.

"At the hospital."

There was a long silence. "Anthony?"

"I called Memory and she said you were with her."

"I'll call you back." Marco turned to face his mother. "He's with her. Anthony called to tell her about you being here and she said I was there with her."

"Go."

"I can't leave you."

"I'm fine. You heard the doctor. They're already processing my discharge papers. Go, Marco."

He nodded and turned for the door but her voice halted his steps. "Angels and demons, Marco. Natural enemies. But the light is stronger."

Marco understood. He knew how to fight the demon. "I love you, Mama." He didn't wait for a reply, just ran as fast as he could back through the emergency room and to his car in the parking lot. It was a good forty-minute drive to the ranch. A lot could happen in forty minutes. A lot of bad stuff.

* * * * *

Memory picked up her plate and cup and carried it to the sink. The thing calling itself Marco had refused breakfast. Acting on her claim to be ravenous, Memory had cooked bacon and eggs, made hash browns and even found a plastic storage box in the freezer labeled biscuits that she put into the oven to bake.

Even with the baking, in half an hour the food was ready. She took as long as possible to eat, having to force the food down. Her stomach was in a knot and the clock was ticking.

"The dishes can wait," he said.

"I don't want to leave a mess for Grace."

"That's what she is paid for."

That was just further proof that she was dealing with Asmodeus. The lady who helped Marco in the house was Irene, not Grace.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Those photos I took of your mother are supposed to be ready this morning. Would you mind taking me to pick them up? Then we can take them to the hospital and show her."

"Later."

"Marco, she's in the hospital. Don't you think you should be there?"

"I'm not a physician."

"But you're her son!"

"She is being well cared for. Let's go to bed."

Memory put a hand to her stomach. "God, I'm too stuffed for that. Give me a couple of hours. Unless you find hurling attractive."

"Then we shall shower."

"Sorry, big guy, but not even a naked wet you could tempt me until this breakfast goes down. Why don't we go for a walk? I haven't seen all of the ranch yet."

"I'd rather see all of you."

"Flattering but no go, stud. I told you, I'm too full."

"We'll start slow."

Memory turned with a forced laugh. "We'll see. Right after I finish cleaning the kitchen."

She dared not look at him and moved as slowly as possible, washing each dish and cooking implement thoroughly and stacking each in a draining rack. As soon as everything was washed, she starting drying.

Her eyes moved to the clock on the microwave. It'd been nearly an hour since Anthony called. She prayed that he thought it strange enough that she insisted Marco was with her to call Marco and inquire. If so, then help could be on the way. If not...she didn't have a clue.

"I am tired of waiting." She felt it grab her arm in a vise-like grip and whirl her around.

"I'm sorry." She couldn't look at it. "How about we take this to the den. That's a mighty comfortable couch."

"I want you naked."

Memory's mind raced. She needed to find a way to throw him off track, make him think she didn't suspect who he was. Obviously the full stomach wasn't going to deter him.

As if in answer to a prayer Charlotte's face flashed in her mind. Memory knew that her sister much be picking up on what she was feeling. *What do I do?*

The answer came to her in a flash of inspiration. "You know..." She let her fingers of one hand walk up his abdomen to his chest. "There're things you and I haven't explored yet."

"Such as?"

"Well..." She pulled away gently, cutting what she hoped was a sexy look over her shoulder as she walked by him toward the den. "For example. How do you feel about bondage? Ever been tied up?"

"I do not submit."

"Hmmm, of course not. Well, then...how about role playing? You know, pirate and wench, doctor and patient, sexy cable guy who installs more than a new cable outlet?"

"I do not need games."

"No?" She turned as he followed, gauging the distance between her and the French doors. "Then what do you need? Come on, baby. Talk to me. It gets me worked up hearing what you want to do to me."

"Very well." His eyes glittered, sending a shiver of fear skittering down her spine. "I intend to wrap your legs around the back of your head and fuck you until you bleed."

And when I've finished that I'll bend you over and fuck you up the ass. And then I'll start again – over and over."

The gig was up. If his words hadn't made it clear the look on his face did. No time left. Memory whirled and ran for the door. She made it to the sun porch door. It was locked. As she fumbled with the lock he grabbed her around the waist and slung her around, carrying her back inside the house.

Memory kicked, screamed, clawed and bit as he tore at her clothes, but her strength was no match for his and hers was fading. She was about to give up hope when suddenly they both went down in a tangle on the floor.

Memory tore free of his hands and was suddenly hauled to her feet. Marco shoved her behind him, shielding her with his body.

"You pathetic human," Asmodeus sneered. "Do you honestly think you can beat me? I'll make you watch as I kill her."

She couldn't believe how calm Marco's voice was when he spoke. And his words were meant for her. "Remember what we talked about? Combining things?"

"Yes," she whispered from behind him.

"We need an angel. Now."

Memory slammed her eyes closed, trying to focus. Oh god, all she could see was the demon. She gritted her teeth. An angel. An angel.

Suddenly the image was there. Angela. Beautiful golden Angela. Only the Angela in her mind was a warrior, armed with golden sword and protected by an aura of light.

Memory could feel sweat bead on her forehead, trickle down between her breasts. The image grew clearer, more vivid. When the angel in her mind smiled she opened her eyes.

Between her and Marco and the demon was an angel. Gloriously beautiful, so radiant that it hurt to gaze on her. "Now," Memory urged Marco. "Hurry!"

He extended his hand and in the same moment the angel and the demon flew at one another. Memory screamed as the crystal against her chest flared. Before the next heartbeat the opponents clashed. Light flared into a blinding sea of white. It was the last thing Memory saw.

* * * * *

Marco blinked and the ceiling of his den swam into view. He turned his head, seeing Memory crumpled on the floor a few feet away.

Panic sent adrenaline rocketing through him. He rolled over, reaching for her. "Memory? Honey, can you hear me?"

For a few seconds there was no response, and then she groaned and opened her eyes. "Marco?"

"It's me, babe."

She scooted over to him, both of them sitting to come together in a tight clinch. "That was..." She paused and looked up at him and he nodded.

"It sure was."

"Do you think we got rid of him?"

"For the time being, I'd venture a guess that he won't be so eager for a repeat performance now that he knows we're on to him. And that we can hurt him."

"I hope you're right. God, I was so scared. I thought..."

"You're safe, honey," he soothed with voice and touch. "And you're going to stay that way. I promise."

"How? You can't be with me 24/7."

"Says who?"

"Well..." Memory didn't know quite what to say or where the conversation was leading. "I mean...I have to work and so do you."

"And we will. But together."

"Together?"

"Yeah."

"But my home is in California."

"Unless you want to call this home."

She stared at him, heart racing but too scared to hope he was suggesting what she wanted the most. "Here?"

"I love you, Memory. And I'd be the happiest man in the world if you'd say yes to becoming my wife."

"Your wife?"

"Yes. As in, married?"

All at once the horror of the day vanished. All of the failed attempts at relationships, all the loneliness and doubts fled. Happiness filled her, every bit as bright as the angel they'd created to save themselves.

"Yes," she whispered. "Oh yes. Right now."

"Well, darlin', we're going to need a preacher or a judge for that. But if you're inclined we could have our own little ceremony right now."

The look in his eyes told her that even though his words were spoken in a teasing tone, the intent was not made lightly. She knew that when they made love this time, the bond would be complete. They would be irrevocably mated.

And she couldn't wait.

Epilogue

"It's a street." Kenna announced the obvious as she stared at the video feed on her computer. "She wants us to watch a street?"

"I guess," Charlotte replied. "At least that's all I can see. Dee, are you sure she didn't give you any hints about what's going on?"

"Just that she'd lost a bet to Romeo before she left California and now it's time to pay up."

"A bet?" Kenna asked.

"That's what she said."

The scene displayed wiggled, jostled and turned topsy-turvy then Romeo's face appeared. "Hello, Angels," he said then laughed. "Sorry, always wanted to say that. Everyone ready?"

"Hey, Romeo," Kenna responded. "What the hell's going on?"

"An event, honey. Something you've never seen before and aren't likely to see again. A once-in-a-lifetime moment."

"Well, that's clear as mud," Charlotte murmured.

"Oh wait, we're almost ready!" The scene did another tumble and refocused on a view of the street.

"What's that?" Kenna asked.

"What?" Dee replied. "I don't see anything."

"No, listen. Hear that?"

"Music," Charlotte said. "What in the world. Oh my god! Do you see that?"

"Holy shit!" Kenna burst out laughing as Memory's big red Cadillac convertible came into frame.

There was Memory, standing on the front seat of the car wearing a bikini and singing at the top of her lungs to Natalie Cole's "Everlasting Love". Driving the car and smiling up at her was Marco.

"Oh shit," Kenna laughed. "Shit on a stick."

Dee and Charlotte joined in on the laughter. The car slowed and the camera panned in on Memory and Marco. Her hand was on his shoulder and he was grinning at her like he was the happiest man in the world.

"She really found it," Charlotte said softly.

"Come on, sisters, sing it with me!" Memory shouted at the camera.

"What the hell," Dee said and piped up. A second later Charlotte joined in.

"Shit!" Kenna groused then chimed up as Memory spread her arms wide as if to embrace them. "This will be..."

"An everlasting love."

About the Author

Ciana Stone has been reading since the age of three, and wrote her first story at age five. Since then she has enjoyed writing as a solitary form of entertainment, and has just recently come out of the closet to share her stories with others. She holds several post graduate degrees and has often been referred to as a professional student. Her latest fields of interest are quantum mechanics and Taoism. When she is not writing (or studying) she enjoys painting (canvas, not walls), sculpting, running, hiking and yoga. She lives with her long-time lover in several locations in the United States.

Ciana welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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