

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT

Slither

BERNADETTE
GARDNER

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Bernadette Gardner

Rihana has seen a lot in five years working as a psychic for the NYPD, but the murder of a freelance reporter makes her question if she really wants to continue her law enforcement career.

The dark vibe she gets from this case is nothing new, but the main suspect, sexy, enigmatic tattoo artist Heath, leaves her heightened senses burning. She can read him like a book—and she can see his innocence but she can't prove it. His feral sexual thoughts make her insane with need and her desire for him jeopardizes her job and the investigation.

When she learns the truth about the man who can strip her soul bare with a glance, will she give up everything she knows to flee with him to a safer world? Or will she become a psychic killer in order to destroy a ruthless assassin and put an end to her lover's exile?

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SLITHER

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Dedication

This one is for everyone who asked for Heath's story. Enjoy!

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A heartfelt thanks to JB for reading and rereading and rereading and...

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Jell-O: Kraft Foods

Chapter One

The smell of death greeted Rihana Daniels even before she could flash her ID at the officer stationed at the door of Tanesha Wain's apartment. The patrolman, first on the scene judging by his slightly green pallor, flicked a bloodshot glance over the laminated card and badge and hastily lifted the yellow crime scene tape, which had been stretched over the threshold. Tucking her ID back into her jacket pocket, Rihana ducked under the flimsy barrier and came face to face with Detective Nathan DeYoung, the man who'd called her out on this rain-soaked Friday evening.

"You're late." DeYoung was a man of few words, most of them negative.

"Traffic on the Cross Bronx was a bitch." Rihana rarely made excuses for herself. Most of the time she didn't need to. For the past five years, her work with the NYPD had always been exemplary, or, to hear DeYoung tell it, unfailingly adequate.

"The body is over here." The detective executed a graceful about-face in the cramped area of Wain's living room. He skirted around a cluttered coffee table, an ancient-looking wing-back chair and an overflowing magazine caddy. Four people hustled to clear a path as he moved. Two rain-slickered homicide investigators, a crime scene photographer and a harried-looking CSI scrambled and scooted to avoid having DeYoung dress them down for being in his way. Clearly this was his domain and everyone knew it. They deferred to his sour-lipped, broad-shouldered presence and behind his back they kept their grumblings as quiet as possible.

Rihana followed DeYoung through the apartment. Unlike the others already assembled, she attempted to keep her observations to a minimum. She wasn't here to inspect blood stains on the carpet—and she hoped to God there weren't any—or to search for suspicious fibers on the victim's clothing.

She was here to listen and to feel.

"Tanesha Wain, single white female, age twenty-five. Freelance journalist and part-time bartender at a place down the street called The Dock. None of her friends or colleagues have had contact with her since Wednesday —"

Rihana held up a hand to silence DeYoung's narrative. "You told me all this over the phone."

He offered her a sardonic glance over the damp shoulder of his brown rain coat. "I guess I did. You tell me the rest."

Rihana sighed. She hated the dead body cases most. Why couldn't tonight have been stolen cars, smuggled drugs or plain old breaking and entering? These days every time she heard DeYoung's gravelly voice, she developed an instant headache, which

made interpreting her psychic visions even more difficult. "Give me a little space. Where is she?"

"Other side of the bed."

Rihana steeled herself and plunged headlong into the room the detective had led her to. Wain's bedroom was a study in beige from the generic, low-pile carpeting to the throw pillows on the neatly made bed. Shades of oatmeal, fawn and sand competed with each other for blandness. Maybe the woman had been color blind. There wasn't a scrap of contrast anywhere in the room.

A dark head popped up from behind the bed as soon as Rihana crossed the threshold and she halted with a gasp.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you." Andy Sullivan, from the coroner's office, unfolded his lanky frame and stretched to his full six feet. He offered a latex-gloved hand then realized his faux pas. "Sorry. How have you been, Ms. Daniels?"

"Fine, Andy. Can I have a few minutes in here?"

"Sure. I'm done. Placed T.O.D. at some time around six-thirty p.m. on Wednesday. Can't fix cause yet."

"Thanks." Rihana uttered the word before the full realization of Sullivan's announcement set in. Tanesha Wain had been dead for two days. That explained the murky depths of the stench permeating the apartment, relieved only marginally by the wisp of a breeze from the open bedroom window. Someone must have chanced breaking crime scene protocol in order to provide a much needed supply of untainted air.

Sullivan gathered his equipment bag and sidled around the end of the bed with an apologetic half-grin. Rihana waited until he'd cleared the room. She took note that DeYoung was hovering by the doorway, probably watching to see if she tossed her cookies before or after her reading.

She avoided taking a deep breath and inched forward for a cautious peek at the body. *Heaven help me, Gramma Essie. I don't know how much longer I can do this.*

The young woman lay curled on her side, her fists clenched near her face like a gloveless boxer. Fortunately she was fully clothed in stylish black jeans, a pretty yellow cardigan over a white blouse and brand new high-top sneakers. She wore a gold bracelet around one slim wrist and a butterfly-shaped barrette in her dark brown hair.

On first glance, she might have just been sleeping, though her position was not that of a body in a state of repose. Rihana allowed herself a closer look at the woman's waxy skin. Her eyes, once blue perhaps, had clouded over and her lips were slate gray. The odor of death became unbearable in close proximity to the body and after only a second, Rihana had to back up.

She closed her eyes. Visual observations were overrated. Sometimes the less she saw with her eyes, the better.

She set her feet wide apart on the boring carpet and locked her knees. Canting her head toward the ceiling, she tried to raise her nose above the stench of decay. It only took a moment for her to slip into the trance-like state her Gramma Essie called *the quaking*.

Everything slipped away, layer by layer. The sounds of muted conversation from the living room faded along with the street noises drifting up from four stories below. DeYoung's disapproving essence dissipated, as did the odor of death.

In a moment, Rihana stood in a shadowy version of the apartment. Visual details were sparse. She saw the bed, the nightstand, the window and a figure huddled on the floor. Tanesha Wain's frightened eyes were black in this colorless world. Her lips stretched wide in a scream and she threw her hands up to ward off an attacker who appeared as nothing more than a hulking figure in the dark.

Rihana fought off the icy tingle of fear that climbed up her legs heading for her stomach. She shifted her body to get a better look at the murderer who had reached long arms toward the woman on the floor. It was a man. The shape of the shoulders told her that much. A hawkish nose created a sharp, unpleasant profile. Heavy brows shielded his eyes. All black and smooth like that of a cat burglar, his clothing bore no significant details. Clearly, though, he wasn't here to steal anything. Wain's gold bracelet attested to that.

He wasn't here for her either. He barely touched her. His aim wasn't to cause pain and he hadn't been looking for sexual gratification. Beyond that, though, his motives were not apparent.

Reality blurred for Rihana while she watched the formless figure menace Tanesha. A scream echoed, bland like the natural colors of the room, passionless. She was dead before the sound left her lips and there was nothing Rihana could do to save her.

With a sharp, startled intake of fetid air, she lurched forward. Hands outstretched, she caught herself on the edge of the dark wood bureau and retched once before regaining her composure.

DeYoung was instantly at her side, though not to offer assistance while she struggled to hold her body upright after the shock of watching Tanesha Wain die. "Well?"

"Give me a minute..."

One shallow breath left her feeling slightly more stable. The second one reminded her that breathing was something best done as far away from a decomposing body as possible.

Without apology, she pushed past DeYoung and stumbled out of the bedroom. Like a dog hoping for scraps, he followed on her heels.

"What did you see?"

The man was a badger, all sharp teeth and unpleasant insistence on instant gratification. Rihana let her shoulders droop, wishing she could throw herself on Wain's bland sofa and kick off her shoes. "I saw a man, about your height, but not

as...bulky. I couldn't get details of his features except they were strong, pronounced. He's thin, ethnic but not dark-skinned. He killed her quickly."

"How?"

"I didn't see that. It was over too fast." Thank God. Beyond those few moments of abject terror before her death, Tanesha hadn't suffered...much.

"Can you get more?"

"I can once she's processed. Andy will give me an article of her clothing, and I can take impressions from that."

DeYoung nodded. "Release the body." He barked the command and both Andy and the CSI scurried back into the bedroom. A commotion at the front door cut off any further useless conversation.

The patrolman lifted the crime scene tape for a plainclothes officer. Carl Brogan strolled into the apartment, his black coat swirling behind him like a superhero's cape. He scanned the room with eagle eyes, absorbing every detail, before he settled his piercing gaze on Rihana.

"Did Miss Psychic Hotline solve the case yet?"

"Fuck off, Brogan." Rihana would have given him the finger, but her vision had left her too weak to expend that much energy. Her body felt like a wet rag, just hanging from her bones. She wanted to go home and recharge before she tackled any remote viewing for the case and the last thing she needed was Brogan calling her names like a jealous adolescent.

"I don't have time for this, Brogan. What have you got?" Fortunately, DeYoung's disdain extended to everyone who worked in his precinct. He didn't play favorites.

"The vic's employer came through with a name for us. She was working on an article for some rag mag called *Flash* and she had an interview scheduled with some uptown tattoo artist on Wednesday afternoon. It coincides with the notation in her appointment book. The guy's name is Gyland. Heath Gyland. He was probably the last person to see her alive."

"And he is where?"

"I've got someone picking him up now. We can meet him for questioning in an hour."

"If he cooperates."

"It's always fun when they don't." Brogan's wolfish grin made Rihana shiver. Or maybe it was just the aftermath of her vision. She was always cold afterward. Looking into the past was like visiting the grave, but it beat what happened to her whenever she tried to see the future.

"Last person to see them alive is usually the first person to see them dead." DeYoung delivered his remark with an oily sense of amusement. In his mind, he'd already solved the case. This tattoo artist was the perp, or so he wanted to believe. Rihana almost wished it was true. A neat resolution to a murder case would be a

pleasant change of pace for her and it might even lead DeYoung to crack a smile. Something in the back of her mind told her it wouldn't be that way with this one though. Nothing was ever neat in this city.

"I've got to wrap up here." DeYoung dismissed Brogan with a nod toward the door. "Relieve Ferrano, will ya? I don't need him puking in the hallway again." He turned to Rihana. "Can you pull yourself together and meet me at the station to welcome the perp?"

"He's not a perp yet, he's only a person of interest." Rihana chose to focus on DeYoung's Freudian slip rather than his condescending – though accurate – assumption that she needed to "pull herself together".

"Tomato tomahto." DeYoung shrugged and Brogan released a quick, barking laugh as he lumbered toward the door. "Bring your tinfoil beanie for this one and all your charms and whistles. If this is the guy, I want him in lockup tonight."

Rihana didn't comment on the beanie remark. Brogan had set DeYoung off, and if she hung around, both of them would probably end up in a competition of psychic jokes within a few minutes. If she hurried, she could, in fact, swing by her apartment and grab a warding stone or two to protect herself from the ill feeling she usually picked up after a second trip to the quaking on any given day. Too much time spent in the *in between* left her in a bad way, but it paid the bills and, according to her Gramma Essie, it was Rihana's destiny to use her gift, side effects be damned. She'd inherited the sight from her paternal grandmother and she was honor bound to use it. Poor Tanesha Wain deserved justice. Rihana would help get it for her, even if it meant putting up with men like Brogan and DeYoung who thought she was nothing more than a starry-eyed flower child, despite her sterling record of accurate psychic predictions over the years she'd served the NYPD.

Rihana jammed her icy hands into her jacket pockets and slipped out beneath the tape when Ferrano lifted it for her. She didn't say goodbye to DeYoung or even to Andy and she felt bad about that, but the younger man would understand. A crime scene really wasn't the place for pleasantries.

She did say a silent goodbye to Tanesha Wain, though, as she rode down four flights in the stiflingly hot elevator. She said a little prayer that maybe for once Brogan was right and the man who'd watched the pretty young reporter die was already in custody.

* * * * *

Heath Gyland smiled in satisfaction as the distinctive petals of an orange tiger lily took shape beneath his hands. A few more strokes and the image would be complete, an intricate design on the upper arm of the woman who lay in his tattoo chair.

"I'm thinking of a rose on my other arm, something in fuchsia," she said, her voice low and dreamy. She was clearly enjoying the sensation of the continuous, high-speed

needle pricks as Heath added the final highlights to the flower he'd drawn on her skin. "Can you do fuchsia?"

"I can do any color you like." The lie pinged his conscience a bit, but he dismissed the accompanying stab of guilt. He could, in fact, create almost any color for any design his clients wanted. The lie was implied though...that he would be *around* to provide another image for this client or for anyone else.

Another day, maybe two, and he'd have to put his life in Manhattan behind him, abandon SkIntense, the shop he'd built almost eight years ago, and move on. To what, he had no idea.

He shook away the melancholy brought on by the prospect of once again walking away from the half-finished framework of a life and forging into the unknown. After spending more than three quarters of his life this way, he probably should have been used to it.

He applied the last stroke, the last dot of color, then sat back and shut off the motor that powered his state-of-the-art tattoo needle. His client smiled, her eyes bright with a curious mixture of pleasure and pain.

"All done?" she asked.

"Yes. I'll get you a mirror." He reached behind him and retrieved a hand mirror that would allow the woman to see every nuance of the design, which now wrapped around her shapely biceps.

"It's gorgeous! Perfect. Omigod, do you think if I came back next week you could add a snake to it?"

Heath raised a brow and smirked. The twin serpents that coiled around his own forearms and rested their black and crimson heads on the backs of his hands inspired a number of his customers. Over the years, he'd developed a reputation as an expert in snake designs, while his partner, Darq Stone, specialized in dragons and creatures with wings. "I'm sure I could, if that's what you want. Why don't you take a little time to get used to this first?" He'd considered telling customers he was planning to leave, but since he couldn't answer their inevitable questions about where he was going, he'd decided to say nothing at all.

The woman sat up and returned the mirror to Heath. He heard the door chime from the front of his shop just as he was centering a square of surgical gauze over the reddened skin of her arm.

"I'll be right with you," he called and stifled a sigh. Darq should have been here today to deal with walk-ins, but not long ago his partner had met a woman, a very special woman who'd turned him inside out and changed his priorities seemingly overnight. The younger man had been AWOL from SkIntense for over a day now, leaving Heath to handle too many things at once.

"Mr. Gyland? Heath Gyland?" The deep voice held a tone of authority that immediately told Heath it didn't belong to a customer. This inquiry was official.

After helping his client climb out of the chair he turned to find two uniformed police officers standing near the back end of the counter. One seemed to be casing the shop, eyeing the artwork on the walls, the equipment arranged neatly around the work stations and the young woman now gingerly sliding her arm into the sleeve of a light jacket. The other stared at Heath as if sizing him up, watching his casual movements closely and with a mild air of suspicion.

"Yes?" Heath wiped his hands on a clean towel and studied his visitors. Halos of brilliant green surrounded their heads—invisible to his customer of course—but to Heath, who possessed the ability to see auras, they were beacons of strong emotion.

These men were curious, vigilant and mildly apprehensive. The colors fanning out in rays from their bodies told him they did expect trouble, and likewise had no doubt they could handle anything that might come their way.

Immediately, he thought of Darq. His partner had certainly gotten into his share of trouble over the years they'd traveled together, but ever since the two of them had settled in this bustling city, on this crowded planet, Heath hadn't had to bail the man he thought of as his brother out of trouble. He hoped that hadn't changed.

"Mr. Gyland, perhaps we could talk in private?" The lead officer inclined his head toward Heath's client.

"Of course. If you give me a minute, I'll finish up here."

The officers nodded and stepped back toward the front of the shop. He noticed though they scrutinized his upscale décor, neither of them were relaxed enough to take a seat in the waiting area. He tried to ignore them while he finished with his customer and sent her on her way, but their presence made the skin of his arms prickle just slightly.

His guardian beasts, fused to his body in the form of the tattooed serpents on his arms, sensed something amiss. It wasn't physical danger per se, but the creatures he'd bonded to as a boy on his homeworld responded to the vigilance of the officers and warned Heath to tread cautiously.

Once his client left, he met the cops in the waiting area. "What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

The lead officer casually swept his uniform jacket back from his hips, revealing the service revolver holstered there. The gesture, while benign, was clearly designed to intimidate just a bit. "Mr. Gyland, do you know a woman named Tanesha Wain?"

"Yes." Heath didn't need to ask if Miss Wain was dead. He saw it in their faces and in the dark sparks of apprehension that now swirled in the officers' auras. Clearly, they expected him to bolt and their muscles tensed in readiness. Heath feigned ignorance. "Is something wrong?"

"Would you be willing to come with us to the station to answer a few questions about Miss Wain, sir?"

"I'm not sure what I could tell you about her. I only met her once. Has something happened to her?"

The second officer spoke now, but his gaze still swept around the room. "You could say that, Mr. Gyland. She's been murdered. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"No." Again, Heath's conscience pinged, but he wasn't quite sure why this time.

* * * * *

Less than an hour later Heath sat in a small, windowless interrogation room at the police station. He concentrated on remaining perfectly still and maintaining the appearance of casual calm. Beneath his cool exterior, though, he was anything but tranquil. Fortunately the police officer currently pacing in front of the metal table at which Heath sat didn't know that.

Though he wasn't under arrest, the two officers had escorted him from SkIntense and left him here with a third plainclothes officer who'd informed him that Tanesha Wain's body had been found in her apartment. The detective in charge of the case clearly thought of Heath as a suspect, even though he hadn't actually admitted it yet.

After politely answering a litany of repetitive questions, Heath had noticed the detective's aura changing color from a bright, triumphant blue to the muddy brown of frustration. Finally, when streaks of angry black had begun to color the halo of invisible light around the man's head, Heath came to realize it wasn't his pleasant cooperation the man was really after but a confession.

"We need to go over this one more time, Mr. Gyland. When you met with Miss Wain, what exactly did the two of you talk about?"

Heath sighed. He thought of the single duffle bag he'd packed this morning, full of only the most essential of his belongings. He thought of the long journey ahead of him, now interrupted by this side trip through metropolitan bureaucracy. "We discussed my work, my shop, my partner and my plans for the future. As I said before, I believe she recorded most of the conversation on a handheld digital recorder."

"What did you discuss once she turned the recorder off?"

Heath raised a brow. This question was new. "Nothing. When the interview ended, she shut off the recorder."

"The taped conversation runs thirty-seven minutes, but the security cameras in Miss Wain's building show you arriving at one forty-five p.m. and not leaving until after three. There must have been some discussion after the recorder was turned off."

Heath worked at controlling his breathing. Memories of those extra forty minutes in Tanesha Wain's company raised his heart rate just a bit. She'd asked him to look at her own body art...all of it, which turned out to be rather extensive and cleverly positioned. He'd inspected her naked body quite thoroughly and given her some...pointers on where she might want to adorn herself with more ink. "We continued our discussion off the record."

"Hmm." The officer, whose name was Brogan according to his badge, pursed his lips and raised a brow. "Did you have sex with her?"

"No." Perhaps Heath answered too quickly, though he told the truth. By his personal definition, he had not had sex with Tanesha Wain. He hadn't fucked her, though given better circumstances he might have been so inclined. Clearly his response didn't satisfy Brogan.

"No?"

"No, *Detective?*"

"You spent approximately forty minutes alone in the company of an attractive young woman and you just talked."

Heath shrugged. "I spend a lot of time in the company of attractive young women at my shop. I am capable of scintillating conversation."

"Oh, I'm sure you are."

"Detective, am I being charged with something?"

Brogan checked his watch. Clearly the man was waiting for something or someone. "Not yet. If you did...have sex with Miss Wain, no one would hold it against you, as long as it was consensual."

"Are you implying Miss Wain had non-consensual sex before she died?"

"No. I'm just curious as to what happened between the two of you in her apartment the day she was last seen alive."

"As I said before, we didn't argue, we didn't have any physical confrontation. Our conversation was pleasant. It revolved around my business. Once the interview ended, she shut off her recorder and we had a more personal conversation, which was also pleasant, and then I left her apartment. I have not seen or heard from her since then."

"So let's talk more about this personal conversation."

The effort Heath expended not to roll his eyes at Brogan's constant innuendos was beginning to give him a headache. He rubbed one hand over his face, noting the stubble that had begun to form on his lower jaw. He wondered how long he'd be held in this room if he blurted out the sordid truth of those forty minutes with Tanesha. *She took off her clothes, detective, and I bent her over her bed. I ran my hands up and down the artwork that covered her gorgeous ass and then I rolled her over and thumbed her clit until she came. She thanked me and offered me a blowjob, which I would have accepted except I was running late for another appointment. If either of us had been in possession of a condom, I would have fucked her thoroughly, but we weren't, so I left her apartment with a hard-on, which I took care of myself later that evening in the shower.* He supposed by some definitions, what had taken place might be considered "having sex" but since no DNA changed hands, they hadn't actually consummated anything.

He decided on an abbreviated version of the truth that probably would have been enough to get Brogan drooling, but he never got to say a word. A knock on the tightly

closed door echoed around the room. Brogan's head shot up and he glared at the person who entered without waiting for an invitation.

Heath's next breath caught when he made eye contact with the woman who strolled into the room. Wrapped in a sparkling aura of lavender and gold, she moved with a deliberate grace. Her supreme self-control showed in her eyes. Pale sea green and rimmed by curling lashes, they made a surreal contrast to her flawless café au lait complexion. A stunning combination of Caucasian and African-American had produced such ethereal beauty that Heath found his mouth had gone dry and his cock semi-rigid against the zipper of his jeans.

Brogan offered a disdainful sound as she floated across the room and removed her bulky NYPD windbreaker. Beneath the jacket, she wore a form-fitting black shirt with a flattering scoop neck that just hinted at her well-rounded cleavage. Camel-colored pants covered her long legs and she wore casual heels, tasteful gold hoop earrings and a hint of green shadow at the corners of her almond-shaped eyes. She was perfectly cool, professional and composed, and yet Heath's mind immediately undressed her. He pictured her dusky skin beneath his hands, a taut navel perhaps adorned with a diamond stud, flexing as he ran curious fingers toward her sex. He pictured muscular female thighs wrapped around him and her slender fingers, tipped with neatly manicured, buff-colored nails, grasping his cock.

Normally, he had no problem keeping his thoughts professional in the presence of a beautiful woman, but there was something about her that set his nerve endings tingling.

"You can go," she said and Heath's renegade thoughts snapped back to the present. For a split second he thought her melodic comment had been directed at him then Brogan huffed and flung himself at the door.

"It's about time you got here."

"DeYoung had me wait until you'd completed your questioning."

"Well, I'm not done."

"He thinks you are."

The detective's aura darkened even further, mirroring the man's expression. The animosity in Brogan's tone stunned Heath. How could this gorgeous woman make the detective so angry? Unless, perhaps, she represented a failure of his less than adequate masculine charm.

Brogan slammed the door on his way out and Heath allowed himself a relieved exhalation. She smiled at him and his cock responded with a twitch.

"Good evening, Mr. Gyland. My name is Rihana Daniels. I have just a few more questions for you and then you can be on your way. I apologize for the amount of time you've had to spend here and I assure you, we'll be done very shortly. I'd like to thank you for your cooperation so far."

We'll be done very shortly. Heath suppressed a grin at those words. If he had his way, he might never be done with Ms. Rihana Daniels.

He placed his hands on the table in front of him and leveled a pointed gaze at her. "You say that like you're expecting my cooperation to stop."

She blushed, just slightly, tilted her head down and let out a polite laugh. "Usually at this point, the people we question are ranting about their rights and demanding to speak to their lawyers."

"Do I need a lawyer?"

"No, Mr. Gyland. I'm almost certain you don't. I just need to go over a few things with you and then you can be on your way."

He watched her while she opened a slim manila folder and produced a pen from the pocket of her slacks. She touched one of her dangling earrings and smoothed the spiky ends of her short, black hair near the nape of her neck before she began her own, far more pointed interrogation. "How long have you lived in Manhattan, Mr. Gyland?"

"Heath."

"Very well. Heath."

"I've lived here eight years."

"I notice that's when you were issued a social security number and naturalization papers. They list your country of origin as...Verakos. Where is that?"

"It's a very small island in the Mediterranean."

She observed him from under the fan of her lashes. "You don't look Mediterranean."

"I'm not and neither were my parents."

"You don't have an accent."

He wondered what these questions had to do with Tanesha Wain. "No. Neither do you, and yet I get the impression you've spent a lot of time in the Deep South."

Her sharp glance told him he'd struck a nerve. Her pink lips flattened. "And how would you know that if I don't have an accent?"

"Oh, it's there, under the surface of your words. There's a hint of Cajun spice. You keep it hidden along with a lot of things about your personality."

Her aura darkened. Streaks of red obliterated the purple. Heath smiled. He liked spice, and underneath her sleek exterior, Rihana Daniels was a boiling cauldron of it.

"You worked hard to obliterate your background. I suppose that's to make your life easier as a female in a male-dominated profession."

She bristled at his use of the word *dominated*. Violet stained the edges of her aura now. "I'm not a police officer. I'm a civilian adjunct to the department, attached to the social services division, which is largely populated by women, for your information."

"Why would social services be interested in me?"

"No particular reason. These are just routine questions. You were, as far as we can tell, the last person to see Tanesha Wain alive and therefore probably our best source of

information regarding her state of mind and physical condition just prior to her murder."

Heath stared at her mouth while she spoke. Her elocution was perfect. Her straight white teeth flashed and he caught just a glimpse of silver on her pink tongue. She had a piercing. He wondered if that was her only one and how the small, metal ball would feel running over the sensitive skin of his shaft. He imagined her using it to tease the slit of his cock and the ache in his balls intensified. "That's a nice way of saying I'm your chief suspect."

"I don't believe you killed Miss Wain."

"But maybe I know who did?"

"Do you?"

"Sorry. No. If I did, I would tell you."

"That's what everyone says."

"So you think I'm lying?"

She raised her gaze to his, and for one electrifying moment, Heath looked beyond Rihanna Daniel's mint julep eyes and directly into the maelstrom of conflicting emotions in her soul. A tremor ran through him and his blunt fingernails dug into the thin layer of gray paint on the surface of the table.

He knew in that instant that she could read him. She'd been sent in here to see into his mind.

"You're psychic." That was the word the people of this world used, often in a derogatory sense. Now he understood Detective Brogan's attitude. The man had fled the room quickly not because this heart-stoppingly beautiful woman had rejected him or emasculated him in some way, but because he feared she could see the truly pathetic quality of his mundane thoughts.

She raised a trembling hand to her chest, held it there for a moment as if by pressure alone she could calm her heartbeat. "I have certain...abilities that have proven useful to the police department in the past."

Heath didn't blink. He didn't flinch, though his own heart hammered against his sternum.

"Yes, I'm psychic."

"Well, then you know I was not involved with Miss Wain's death."

She nodded. "I need to be able to convince my supervisors of that. In lieu of hard evidence to the contrary, you are, in fact, the prime suspect."

Heath flattened his hands out on the table. "I see. They would believe you without question if you walked out of here and told them I did it. But they won't be as easily convinced of my innocence as my guilt."

"That's correct."

"Other than laying bare my psyche to you, I'm not sure what I can offer you that would be convincing."

"Leave that to me, Mr. Gyland. All I need you to do is answer my questions."

"What else would you like to know about me?"

"When did you –"

The door banged open, cutting off her question. The sudden intrusion clearly startled Rihana. Her whole body stiffened and her pupils contracted when she made eye contact with the man who'd walked in.

He was older than Detective Brogan. His brown hair was graying at the temples and the lines around his eyes were clearly not from laughing. He never glanced at Rihana as he moved toward the table. He tossed a glossy photograph down in front of Heath. The 8 x 10 showed the lower portion of Tanesha Wain's face and her upper left shoulder. A swirling black mark cut across her collarbone, darkening her light skin in an all too familiar pattern.

Heath clamped his lips shut and held himself motionless, afraid any wayward breath would give away his shock at what he saw.

"Interesting tattoo she has," the man commented.

"Mr. Gyland, this is Detective Sergeant DeYoung. He is –"

"He is interested in finding out how a tattoo killed this woman." DeYoung cut in.

Rihana's eyes widened and her confused gaze met Heath's.

"I don't know what you mean." He did though. He knew exactly what the detective meant.

"This mark was made by some kind of volatile substance that poisoned Tanesha Wain. This tattoo killed her."

Heath refused to allow any muscle in his body to tense up, even as his thoughts contracted into a single, white hot ball. "I didn't make that mark on her."

"Oh? Then who might have made it? It's new, according to the coroner. The skin around it is still irritated, so it was made just before she died. The ink is pooled underneath the skin in clumps...that's bad form, isn't it? Not how it's supposed to be done."

"No."

"So what is this stuff?"

"I don't know."

"Mr. Gyland, I can tell by looking at you that you're hiding something from me."

"Are you psychic as well, Detective?"

"I don't need to be."

"I didn't make that mark."

"He's telling the truth. He didn't kill her."

At Rihana's remark, Detective DeYoung's head whipped in her direction. She'd just done the job of a defense attorney, and the sergeant was obviously not pleased by her defending his chief suspect.

"Well, someone with a tattoo needle apparently did, and if that's not you, Mr. Gyland, then it's someone you know."

"I don't know every tattoo artist in the city."

"I bet you know the one in the mirror."

"Do I need a lawyer now, Miss Daniels?"

"No." She stood and gathered her paperwork against her chest. "Do you have any evidence to hold Mr. Gyland?"

Now DeYoung sputtered a little, as if someone had clamped their hands around his throat. Judging by the color of his aura, he wanted this conviction so badly it hurt.

"We haven't gotten an analysis of the substance yet. We can't say for certain it's ink."

"Can I go then, Detective? I promise I won't leave town, as the cliché goes."

DeYoung attempted to stare Heath down. Again, Heath didn't flinch. In his mind, though, he was making calculations. He wouldn't leave town, but he could cross the dimensional bridge to another world without ever having to leave his apartment.

"I'll be seeing you again, Mr. Gyland. Very soon. You can count on that."

"I look forward to it, Detective. Now if you'll excuse me." Heath rose and moved smoothly past DeYoung. He offered a polite nod to Rihana as he left the interrogation room. Pity he'd never see her again, but there would be time to mourn missed opportunities later, when he was safely away from the Gemii assassin who had killed Tanesha Wain.

Chapter Two

"He's guilty as sin," DeYoung said the moment Heath Gyland had cleared the room.

Hugging her file folder to her chest, Rihana stared after the man. Her knees felt like Jell-O and she had to lock them in order to remain standing. Over the years that she'd been allowed to speak to suspects and crime victims, she'd stared into a lot of eyes. She'd met evil head on a few times and she'd suffered right along with those who had been touched by violence and injustice. All those encounters had shaken her, made her nerves feel raw and exposed. No one, though, had ever affected her like Heath Gyland had.

She wasn't normally attracted to blond men, and certainly not men with visible tattoos, but when his blue eyes held hers, she'd felt utterly naked and at the same time cloaked in some protective layer. The outside world had faded when he looked at her, and for a moment, she hadn't feared the quaking.

"What?" She blinked away her confusion and forced herself to look at Nathan.

"He did it. I can tell just by looking at him."

"I didn't sense anything overt from him. He's not violent. I can tell that just by —"

Nathan waved a dismissive hand. "Come on. Did you see those tats? The fucker's got snakes on his arms for Christ's sake."

She'd seen them. The twining serpents hugged his muscular forearms, their triangular heads resting on the backs of his hands. "He's a tattoo artist. If he didn't have any art on him, that would be strange."

"And he was ice cold."

Rihana shivered involuntarily. She felt like someone had walked over her grave—at least that's the way Gramma Essie would have described it. "What do you mean?" She hadn't shaken Heath Gyland's hand and now she was glad she'd neglected that pleasantries. If she'd touched him, how deeply would he have been able to get inside her?

"He didn't break a sweat. I've seen little old ladies in here, pure as the driven snow, and they're soaked by the time they leave. Just being in this room makes people melt, and he didn't even have a bead on his upper lip."

"Maybe because he's innocent."

"And what makes you so sure? Your killer radar didn't go off?"

"No, it didn't." Rihana managed her first full breath since Heath's departure. Arguing with DeYoung actually helped her to focus for once. By degrees, she began to feel more grounded. "I did get the impression he was hiding something, especially after

you showed him that picture. I saw it just for a second in his eyes. He recognized the marks."

DeYoung pursed his lips. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Like you're so fond of telling me, Nathan, I can't prove anything with my...abilities. I can only give the 'real cops' leads to follow. Consider this a lead. Heath Gyland knows something about the marks on Tanesha Wain's body but he didn't kill her."

DeYoung rummaged in his coat pocket for his ever-present pack of cigarettes. In flagrant defiance of the No Smoking sign on the wall behind him, he pulled out one slim, paperbound cylinder and stuck it between his lips while he searched for his lighter. "The hell he didn't," he said just before the tiny flame erupted from beneath his thumb.

Rihana didn't bother to argue. She wouldn't be able to change Nathan's mind with talk about her psychic impressions. The only way she could prove Heath Gyland was innocent of Tanesha Wain's murder would be to find out who had done it. And that was something she believed he would ultimately be able to tell her.

* * * * *

Heath paced around the shop with his cell phone pressed to his ear. Every time he passed by the wide gallery window of SkIntense, he stopped to search the darkened street outside. No doubt the police would have their warrant soon and arrive to search the premises for what they believed was the poisoned tattoo ink that had killed Tanesha. The arrival of the authorities wasn't what had Heath worried. Someone else was coming, someone who moved in the dark and killed with a touch.

On the fifth ring, Darq finally picked up. A sleepy, slightly accented voice asked, "What is it?"

"We have to go. The Gemii are here."

The silence on the other end of the line stretched long enough that Heath thought perhaps his partner had hung up and sprung into action. "Darq? Did you —"

"I heard you. Are you sure?"

"They killed a journalist I met with earlier this week."

Another pause left him tapping his fingers impatiently on the counter. He longed to turn on all the lights in the place and banish the deep shadows where an assassin might hide, but if used properly, the darkness was his ally as well. He merely had to remain vigilant.

"Why would they kill —"

"I think to prevent us from starting another crèche. They can murder both of us, but if we've mated...they have a new generation to contend with."

That statement produced a breathy curse from Darq. After so many years on the run, surviving only on temporary relationships, the younger man had finally taken a

permanent mate. The choice had been quick and visceral, but one Heath sensed his partner would never regret. The woman, Makena Brady, had been one of Darq's customers. She'd come in to SkIntense lacking affirmation of her own independence and Darq had helped her regain some control over her life. He'd fallen desperately in love in the process. Heath couldn't blame him. Makena was beautiful and alluring and well-suited to a man like Darq. Now, unfortunately, her life was in danger as well.

"Meet me at the apartment in an hour. The police will want to question me again and I can't risk being delayed any longer."

"No."

Darq's response was definitive, but so quiet Heath wasn't quite sure he heard it.

"An hou —"

"No. Makena and I aren't leaving."

"They will find you, Darq. But what's worse is, they will find her first. They won't come after you until they're sure you haven't procreated."

"We'll get away from the city. This is a big planet with plenty of places to get lost."

Heath glanced out the window again. The traffic flowed normally on the street outside. The sound of distant sirens didn't cause him alarm, but nevertheless he sensed something. A curious presence made the hairs at the back of his neck rise. "Why would you take that risk?"

"I'm tired of running. I found what I want here and I'm not leaving."

"Do you hear yourself? You're tired of running, but you just said you'd take Makena and run away. This world might be large and overpopulated, but they found us anyway. There's nowhere you can go."

"Trust me. I can keep Makena safe. You go."

Heath shook his head. This wouldn't work. If they all left together, him and Darq and Makena, they could stay ahead of the Gemii. If he left the couple here alone to fend for themselves, ultimately *he* would be the only one left. The journey he'd begun with Darq when they were merely boys had been long and treacherous. It was not something he wanted to continue on his own. He'd already given up enough, his family, his entire world and a way of life he'd never been able to re-create in any of the dozens of places they'd settled. He wouldn't walk away from the only connection he still had to his true home.

"Darq, we have just enough time to get away."

"Time's up, my friend. My journey is over."

Heath would have launched into a litany of protests, but the psychic push at the back of his mind had grown to a distraction. He stared at the phone for a moment and decided it wasn't Darq. He could share his partner's thoughts on occasion and always knew his moods, but this wasn't a wordless communication riding under their verbal conversation. There was someone else here, someone feeling for his mind.

"I have to go," he said. "But I'll call back. Stay away from the store. If you want to leave, come to my apartment any time."

"We won't. We're staying on this world."

Heath broke the connection. Later he'd figure out what to do about Darq and Makena. Right now, he had to confront the creature that had stalked him to the shop.

* * * * *

She should have gone home and soothed her agitation with a glass of wine or a long soak in the tub, but something had drawn Rihana to the business address listed in Heath Gyland's paperwork. The tattoo shop, named SkIntense, occupied the corner section of a half-block building. Though the front window had been dark when she arrived, she'd been able to see enough through the tinted glass to discern that inside the place looked more like a couture boutique than a tattoo parlor.

Framed sample art covered the walls and the small waiting area sported velour upholstered benches and an espresso machine. Lush plants spilled from shelves and a few pieces of abstract art sat on pillars in the corners.

She could have spent an hour staring at all the visual stimuli the place had to offer, but movement in the shadowed interior sent her quickly around the corner to loiter by the emergency exit. How foolish of her to think she could glean any more information about the man just by lurking around his darkened store. The quaking had eluded her tonight, and to be honest, she was grateful. Her nerves were still raw from their earlier encounter, but she didn't seem able to distract herself from wondering what about him made her insides tremble just as badly as the visions that had plagued her since childhood.

She leaned against the brick façade of the building and pulled in a deep breath. She needed to leave and let the "real cops" take over from here.

The side door swung open just as she heaved her tired body away from the wall. An arm reached out and a strong hand closed over her wrist. "What are you doing here?"

Rihana's heart thundered when she came face to face with Heath. He looked more anxious than angry at finding her skulking outside the shop. "I just... I'm doing my job."

"Get inside." He yanked her unceremoniously across the threshold and shut the heavy metal door behind her. They stood for a second in darkness so complete she could only judge his whereabouts by body heat. She felt his arm slide by her, grazing her shoulder, then a brilliant light flared on above. "It's dangerous for you to be here."

"Why?"

"I don't have time to explain it." He drew away from her, turned and headed toward the still dark front section of the shop. "Did you drive here?"

Rihana hurried after him. "Yes, but —"

"I'll escort you to your car. Go home, keep your doors locked and don't come back here." He began flinging open a series of locks on the glass front door of the shop. The amber glow of the corner street lamp set his strong features in shades of copper. For a moment he resembled a sculpture made of some exotic metal, an icon of virile masculinity and predatory power. Just looking at him made her knees weak.

She put her hand on the door before he could pull it open. "Tell me what changed for you when Detective DeYoung showed you that photograph. And don't pretend you don't know what I mean. I can read you almost as easily as you can read me."

Steel blue eyes appraised her as he rolled up the sleeves of his black shirt to expose the serpents on his arms. He seemed more resigned than startled by her revelation. She hadn't surprised him.

"The less time you spend in my company, Miss Daniels, the better off you'll be."

"You didn't kill Tanesha Wain, but she was killed because of your association with her, isn't that right?"

The corded muscles in his naked forearms tensed. The serpents etched there seemed poised to strike, but perhaps that was a trick of the light. Slowly, he flipped the locks closed again and lowered his hands to his sides.

"Tell me what you think you know."

Rihana was shivering now. Tremors ran through her core and she fought to keep herself still. "She had to have known something she shouldn't have. She was killed to keep her quiet."

A faint smile lifted the corner of his upper lip. "Now you're guessing. What happened to your uncanny gift of perception?"

She could have lied, pulled a flippant response out of her well-rehearsed repertoire, but something prevented her from lying to this man. He'd see through any attempt to hide the truth anyway, so why bother? "It takes a toll. I prefer to rely on my own intuition when I can."

"If your intuition tells you Tanesha died to keep a secret, then leave it at that. And leave here before you learn any secrets that could get you killed too."

"If you were anyone else, I'd take that as a threat."

"You know I'm not a killer."

She met his gaze head on. "You could be. If it came down to it."

A movement in the shadows outside caught his attention and he stepped back away from the door, pulling her with him. Her skin burned where he touched her. The pressure of his hot fingers on her wrist seemed to brand her. "What did you see?"

"Nothing."

Rather than walk away, she clasped her hand over his, completing the electrical circuit of their physical contact. She met his gaze and willed herself into the quaking, shattering every rule of etiquette she'd learned from Gramma Essie. She plunged into his mind, figuring she'd get at most a snippet of his last conversation with the dead

woman. What she found instead ripped a scream from her lungs and sent her spiraling into darkness.

Chapter Three

Rihana's intrusion into his mind dragged Heath momentarily to a dark place guarded by the beasts to which he'd been bonded as a child. Images flashed before his eyes rapidly, as if someone were turning the pages of a photo album.

He caught glimpses of his homeworld. The grounds of the royal palace lay in ruins, decimated by the Gemii. He saw the parents of his crèche siblings crying for their lost children and watched them run screaming in the aftermath of an attack that left the sky filled with billowing black smoke.

Next he saw Darq, barely ten years old, skinny and frightened, fleeing to a protected grotto where their fathers showed them how to summon the dimensional bridge that would provide their only means of escape from a planet on the brink of a devastating war.

The vision of two young boys stepping through a swirling vortex into the unknown brought back a terror he'd hoped never to feel again, and at that moment, his guardian serpents attacked.

Their combined psychic energy became a wall, a blunt weapon that swept the intruder, screaming, out of his mind.

For an instant, Heath saw a different place, a colorless void full of ill-defined shadows and pits of darkness. Then he woke to find Rihana Daniels unconscious on the floor at his feet.

An interminable ten minutes later she came to slowly, drifting up from the cold, gray world of her visions. Heath understood now why she avoided that place and why her sultry voice took on a hint of sarcasm whenever she uttered the words *gift* or *ability*. Her unplanned intrusion into his mind had dragged him with her into the netherworld and sent his guardians into a protective frenzy.

She blinked in confusion, then her body went rigid when she realized she lay in his tattoo chair, hidden from prying eyes by the crimson curtain that wrapped around his work station. One shaking hand flew to her throat, which he'd exposed by opening her jacket and removing the soft, decorative scarf she wore.

"Was it worth the trip?" he asked, letting his curious gaze roam to the few faint strokes of ink visible above her collarbone. He hadn't noticed the body art in the interrogation room. She must have been careful to keep her shirt placed strategically so the markings remained covered.

His scrutiny made her blush and he wished he had time to appreciate her physical reaction to the sweep of his gaze along the contours of her body.

"The serpents attacked me."

Heath held up his arms to show her the images of the creatures to which he'd been bonded as a small boy. "You attacked. They defended. I'm sorry if they startled you. I've never had anyone...at least from this world, rush into my mind like that."

"From this world." Her gaze followed his movements as he circled the chair.

"Before you passed out, I believe you got just enough of a glimpse into my mind to know the truth. I'm not from an island in the Mediterranean. I'm a lot older than I look, and without regard for the investigation into Tanesha Wain's death, I plan to leave 'town' so to speak at the earliest possible opportunity."

"Verakos is..." She must have gleaned the word from him in the few seconds before his guardians pushed her probing mind away from his.

"The name of my home. A place I haven't been to in decades. I can't return until the balance of political power shifts from the currently ruling sect called Gemii. Unfortunately, they've sent assassins after all the surviving members of my crèche, which currently includes myself and my partner. We've spent eight years relatively safe and comfortable here. Thanks to the size and population of your world, we were difficult to track, but one of the Gemii has finally found us. Tanesha Wain became a casualty of the political unrest that has followed Darq and me across a dozen planets since we were children."

She slid her arms behind her and pushed her body up against the plush cushions of the chair. Heath couldn't help but admire her grace. Even shaken and disoriented from her aborted attempt to walk through his mind, she possessed a beguiling presence. Anyone else would have assumed he was insane and probably fled. Rather than try to inch away though, Rihana tilted her head forward, as if to get a better look at him. "How did Tanesha find all this out? She wasn't psychic too, was she?"

He pulled up his work stool and straddled it. The movement put his face even with her breasts and he let his gaze linger until he was certain he saw her nipples begin to harden beneath her shirt. "No. She was merely a tenacious journalist. The Gemii assassin likely killed her out of concern that she might carry my child."

She stiffened.

Heath wondered if it was jealousy that raised a path of gooseflesh down the length of her throat.

Her eyes glinted like green ice in the faint light filtering through a slit in the heavy curtain. "How long had you been with her?"

"Thirty-seven minutes." He laughed, though he regretted that she might assume he thought the situation in the least bit funny. "We weren't having sex..." There was that fine line again. Perhaps he should tell Miss Daniels what he'd done with Tanesha just to see her reaction. Would she be angry or aroused by the details of his escapade? He wondered if he could make Rihana come by describing the shuddering orgasm he'd given to Miss Wain.

"She was killed just for being seen with you?"

"Apparently. You should take into consideration that you may have been seen with me as well." He let that thought hang in the dense air between them for a moment. "The possibility of a new royal crèche being formed is foremost in the minds of the Gemii. My partner, Darq, is also from Verakos. He's recently taken a mate. The woman he's with is in danger now too and I need to convince both of them to accompany me away from here."

"By away, you don't mean to New Jersey, do you?"

Now he laughed with genuine amusement. "No." He held out his hand, certain she'd recovered from her brief trip to the shadowy psychic realm. She placed her fingers tentatively in his palm and let him help her sit up in the chair. "For your own safety you need to leave."

Her hand slid across his palm, leaving the flesh there tingling. "If this assassin is after you, let the department help. The NYPD can offer you protection, especially if you're willing to help them locate this man."

Heath shook his head. "It's not a matter of catching a clumsy human criminal. The Gemii have skills of deception and modes of killing that are beyond the experience of law enforcement."

She didn't look convinced. He wished he had time to fully explain, but more important right now was figuring out a way to convince Darq and Makena to cross the next bridge with him before the Gemii set his sights on another victim.

He considered the beautiful woman sitting in his chair. She might, very likely, be the next target. He didn't want to feel responsible for that but he couldn't fight it.

"Trust me, Miss Daniels. The longer you remain here, the more danger you're in."

Her crystal green gaze defied him and her expression made his cock stir almost as much as her words did. "Why? Will the killer assume you fucked me too?" She drew a deep breath, which pushed her breasts against the stretchy fabric of her shirt.

"Yes. He will. You've already been here long enough for someone to assume we've had sex."

"Not if we did it properly." The hint of mischief in her voice ignited his lust. It might already be too late to stop the Gemii from targeting her as a possible carrier of his DNA. Soon it would be too late to prevent that from being the truth.

He leaned close, taking in the subtle scent of her skin. A light perfume mixed with female musk and the competing aromas of coffee and city air made him think of a rainy spring evening and a stroll through Central Park. He had to wonder if her skin tasted as sweet as it looked. "I gather by that remark that you like it slow and thorough?"

"Well, what woman doesn't?"

The pressure in his balls skyrocketed. He had to get her out of here so he could concentrate on the crisis at hand. "Miss Daniels, I would like nothing better than to show you just how slow and thorough I can be, but once I've been inside you, the assassin will not be able to dismiss you. Let me give you something that will help

protect you from the killer once I'm gone rather than something that will make you more of a target."

She sighed through slightly parted lips and swung her legs off the chair. "The only thing I need from you is information. If you want to protect me, and anyone else who may be in danger from this man, you need to tell me something that will help me locate him."

"I can't do that, but I can give you a guardian of your own."

She tilted her head and he watched as a faint tremor went through her body when realization struck her. "You mean like those?" She pointed to the crimson serpents on his arms.

"Exactly like these."

She hopped off the chair. "I don't believe tattoos will protect me."

Heath rose and stepped close. Her eyes were even with his chin and she didn't look up. He wondered if she were looking down at the bulge in his jeans, which hovered only inches from her hip. "What about the ones you already have? What are they meant to protect you from?"

Now she did look up. Her lips compressed in annoyance. "How would you know that?"

Gambling that she wouldn't scream or slap him, Heath lifted a hand to her shoulder and swept the edge of her shirt back from her collarbone. Putting his hands on her naked shoulder was like touching electricity. Just as he suspected, the images inked on her dark skin were not decorative. No butterflies or hearts for Rihanna Daniels. She bore powerful religious symbols that he recognized from research he'd done for a Cajun client once. This woman had already been given protection from the dead. Now she needed protection from the deadly.

"These aren't for looks." The words came out in a sensual whisper. Her breath quickened, and beads of sweat formed on her upper lip.

"Someone marked you to keep your soul anchored to your body."

"You know a lot about the old ways for someone who supposedly comes from another planet." She paused for a shuddering breath. Her body trembled, and each tiny tremor made Heath desperate to crush her against him, to run his hands all over her bare skin and make her still.

"I've done a small amount of research on the subject of protection symbols. Where I come from, it's a social imperative to be marked. I bear the serpents and my partner a dragon to help protect us from threats like the Gemii."

She stepped back, breaking the contact. Heath dropped his tingling hand and watched her visibly relax. Clearly his touch affected her too. "Because of my...gift, my paternal grandmother worried that I would be in danger whenever I crossed over during a trance. She's the same as me. She has the sight, and based on her own experiences, she believed that spirits of the dead, and especially those of evil people,

could steal souls or influence the living who had come into their territory. She had me...marked...when I was sixteen." The confession seemed painful for her. Clearly the memories of it were unpleasant. She curled her hands around her abdomen, guarding herself from something.

"She taught you how to use your gift as well?"

"She compelled me to use it. She was a *traiteur*, a Cajun faith healer. She possessed abilities that didn't pass to me. I just got the psychic part, but that was enough. She insisted I'd been made this way for a reason and that I had an obligation to my creator to help people. I couldn't do that if I was susceptible to evil, so she made sure nothing could get into my soul when I was over there."

"The work must be extensive."

"Would you like to see?" The question was not delivered with a sultry lilt. She wasn't teasing him, merely offering to show him what had to be some incredible artwork. Nevertheless his mouth went dry.

"Of course."

He sensed his agreement didn't surprise her. She slithered by him and moved to the foot of the chair, putting a good three feet between them. With a pointed glance at him, she turned around and slipped her jacket off. She let the garment fall to the floor then reached sinuous arms behind her back to pull her shirt off over her head. She wore a black bra and the sight of the thin satin straps across her shoulders almost sent Heath to his knees. He wanted to slide the narrow bands of fabric down with his tongue. He pictured his fingers unfastening the hooks, but her own hands stole that privilege from him. She bowed forward to catch the bra in her hands then dropped it alongside her jacket.

Heath held his breath. He was too busy watching the play of muscles across her back to focus on her tattoos yet. He'd get to that, if he didn't come in his jeans first. Every nerve in his body caught fire when she shimmied her slacks down several inches, revealing the small of her back and the enticing valley between the rounded globes of her ass.

Hands on her naked hips, she waited for his assessment. And all he could do was take short, shallow breaths and hope his erection didn't burst through his zipper.

"Well? Don't you think this is enough protection?"

"I...how long did all this take?" At least he'd managed a coherent question. With monumental effort he forced his gaze to track clinically from the nape of her neck to the base of her spine. Her light brown skin bore the most intricate motif he'd ever seen. Starting at her shoulder, a man's hand reached up and curled across to the front—the hand of God, he imagined, if his knowledge of Cajun religious beliefs held. The arm trailed over her shoulder blade and dissolved into lines of runes and the words of a Psalm. Angels rested beneath the words, their wings spread and beatific faces tilted up in worship. From the open hand of one angel spilled a line of seeds that grew into intertwining runes and symbols even Heath's research had never turned up. The thorny

vines curved around her lower spine and terminated in a red rose in full bloom on her opposite hip.

The work was stunning, intricate in the extreme and took advantage of every slope and curve of her anatomy. As an artist, he was impressed to the point of envy. As a man, he was seconds away from orgasm.

She looked over her shoulder at him. "Summers in the bayou with Gramma Essie were...ten kinds of torture. She laid hands on me to ease the pain, but I still had to be held down while the 'artists' worked. They didn't use modern techniques like you do. No sterile needles and no rest periods. They would work all night while my grandmother chanted and prayed, and in the morning I'd be too sick from the agony of it to do anything but cry. Gramma told me it would keep me safe, but all it did was make me want to die."

Heath had raised his hands to touch the magnificent images. The details made them appear three dimensional in places, as if the angels' wings would feel soft or the thorns of the rose vines might prick his finger. Humbled by the raw emotion in her tone, he hesitated, allowing his hands to hover a few inches over her hot skin.

She was still shaking. Her aura flared red and orange, attesting to the pent-up anger the memories invoked. Unselfconscious, though, she turned to face him.

"So you see, I don't need any more protection. What I've got nearly killed me and I can't take any more. Keep your guardian serpents and let me take care of myself."

Heath struggled to hold her gaze, but his field of vision included the hardened tips of her brown nipples. Each of her labored inhalations brought her breasts closer to him. Each uncensored thought in his mind brought him closer to giving the Gemii a legitimate reason to want her dead.

"I don't doubt you think you can protect yourself."

Her eyes widened, and she reared back indignantly, brushing the soft folds of the curtain with her shoulder. "Don't be condescending. I've put up with that attitude from people all my life. 'How can a crazy girl like you help someone? You're just some psychic hack looking for a fast buck. Stay out of the way and let the real cops handle the case, honey.' I don't carry a badge, but I went through basic training. I can handle a gun and I can fight."

His first instinct was to apologize for his insensitive words, no matter how true they were, but the colors of her aura stopped him. The red of anger was fading off to now curious, defiant orange. Streaks of aqua blue arousal shimmered at the edges of the halo. Standing here before him, half naked, breathing his air and hurling all her pent-up rage and insecurities at him was turning her on.

"Do you want to be killed just because you let me touch you?" The words rasped from him. His throat was so dry from desire he could barely speak.

"I haven't let you..." Her words trailed off when he laid his hands on her shoulders. Her nipples grazed his forearms and unbidden, her hips canted toward him.

"You want me to touch you. When you stole into my mind before, we connected. I can read you so well. I can feel what you're feeling."

"No."

"Yes. The tattooing...you remember the pain, but that wasn't the worst part. You could cry to your grandmother about how much it hurt you, but what you could never tell her was how much it turned you on. You couldn't confess the orgasms you had as a teenager while the artist drew on your body, while calloused hands held your arms and legs and pressed your shoulders to the rough mat underneath you. I can see it. Just as you remember it. The flickering candles, the smell of incense and blood. You got used to the pain quickly enough, but the arousal it caused shamed you. You came while they worked on you, over and over again, and the tears were from feeling like you sinned while they layered God's protection on your skin." The words poured out of him, unrehearsed, as if he were reading a script directly from her mind.

In the silence that followed, she bit her lower lip. Huge tears formed in her eyes and spilled over the rim of her lower lashes to hang suspended on her perfect cheeks. He'd stripped her more effectively than she had done for herself. She might have been half naked before him, but she was totally bare emotionally.

"I could never tell anyone."

Heath clamped his lips closed. His first instinct was to continue the outpouring. He knew the rest because it flowed from her mind to his. Days after each session, when the shame and the discomfort subsided, she'd experimented with other ways to get herself off. The best way, she'd found, was a local boy named Sam. He was so big. So much taller than her with large, dark hands which he liked to run appreciatively over her breasts. She'd let him touch her while she lay naked on her stomach in the barn at the far back of his family's property. He'd take off his shirt and straddle her thighs. He'd press his naked chest to her back and kiss the pinkened skin where the new images lay. She'd tense up, anticipating the pain of the tattoo needle. Even without Sam putting his fingers between her legs, she'd come.

After a time or two, she'd roll over, spread her legs and let him in. The sex was quick and hard, but it worked to bring that same feeling of undeniable pleasure and illicit shame. She was lucky she hadn't gotten pregnant or all of Gramma Essie's protection spells would have been for nothing. As an unrepentant sinner, she'd be fair game for the Devil.

Heath allowed his hands to trail down from her shoulders and cover her breasts. She gasped but didn't pull away. "Think of the pleasure I could give you. I know you've never felt anything like those times since coming to New York."

"There's a reason for that. I hated myself then. I hated everything about my life."

"Only because you didn't understand. There was nothing shameful in what you experienced. Pleasure and pain are so closely linked, enjoying one while you're experiencing the other isn't abnormal."

"It's wrong." Her reply was weak, shaky. She didn't want it to be true but everything she'd been taught told her the complex roiling of emotions in her untried body was nothing more than evil spirits fighting for control. Giving in, letting the exquisite ache of sexual release wash over her, was akin to letting evil into her soul.

"I could show you it's not wrong." The words slipped out in a whisper. Having her standing so close to him made him forget himself for a moment. The perils that dogged his journey through the universe fell away, unable to penetrate the lingering connection between her mind and his. Heath slid his hungry hands down her body, reveling in the sumptuous curves. The indent of her waist, the slight rise of her belly, the flare of her hips excited him endlessly. He pushed her pants down over her thighs, taking her black panties along for the ride. Just as he'd imagined, her thighs were a little heavier than most women her height would probably have liked. Her ass was round and well formed and her hips womanly.

She kicked off her shoes and stepped out of the puddle of her clothes. "I'm not sure I can do this."

"I'll take care of you first. You'll be fine." He lifted one of her hands and led her back to his chair. "Lie down." He wanted to add that she should spread her legs, but he would do that for her so she didn't have to expend any effort. He'd show her how easy it would all be to just lie there and let him work on her.

"Serpents?" she asked once she'd reclined. Heath's hand shook a bit as he reached down to adjust the height of the chair. She looked magnificent stretched there, eager and vulnerable. He'd cut through the layer of bravado she'd had to weave around herself in order to survive in a world that had no problem using her abilities and ridiculing them at the same time. What remained was something pure that required special care. Something he could no longer resist.

"I favor them and the Gemii fear them most."

She shivered. Gooseflesh swept down her body and Heath followed its path. Her navel, a tight slit, seemed to contract even further. The dark hair of her pussy stood on end and the muscles in her calves rose to definition. His cock surged. In time, he would have his release, but he had to reach that peak slowly.

"Close your eyes and breathe."

She obeyed him, but her body remained taut. He placed a splayed hand on her stomach and everything tensed. "Rihana. If you come when you're like this, you'll shatter. You have to breathe or all you'll feel is pain."

She nodded, but rather than let go of the tension, she screwed her eyes up tight and bit her lower lip. That was it. Orgasm was pain for her. She'd never experienced it without the terror of believing she was sinning. He wasn't sure a few hours in his chair, under his hands, could cure that for her. It might take years to teach her to enjoy her sexuality and separate her most intense sexual feelings from the belief that they were caused by evil spirits.

Her mind understood, but her body had to be retrained.

He sighed and began to stroke her skin. He brushed the backs of his hands over her nipples and watched them peak. He wanted to put his mouth on one tight bud and suckle, but it was too soon for that. To taste her now would be too intimate. He took a chance even touching her, but he couldn't stop himself now. This bit of self-indulgence would be all he could experience with her, and he wanted it.

He moved his hands down her body, allowing the muscles in her belly to ripple in the wake of his touch. Her hips rose slightly when he reached her thighs, and she dug her heels into the cushions of the chair. He'd never seen a woman so tense in his life. "You have to breathe, slowly in and out. That's what a good fuck is all about. You feel it going in and you feel it coming out, just like breathing."

She opened her eyes. "So you're going to fuck me?"

He would have given anything to be able to say yes. "No. I shouldn't even be doing this, but..."

She pursed her lips and seemed disappointed. She had no idea how this was killing him. He should have climbed on top of her and given her everything he had, but that certainly would not have left her relaxed.

"If I don't do anything to help find Tanesha's killer, that will be worse for..." Her comment ended in a sharp intake of breath. Heath had put a hand on her inner thigh. The contact jolted them both and her back went rigid. She knew what was coming and she bit her lip in anticipation.

"You talk too much, Rihana. Breathe more, talk less." He put a modicum of pressure on her left leg, just enough to make her spread her knees and reveal her plump pussy to him. Her stiff pink clit rose to meet his incursion when he spread her lower lips. She moaned and gripped the arms of the chair, digging her nails into the upholstery.

"Maybe this will help you settle down." He pressed his thumb to her pleasure center while simultaneously massaging her mound with his fingers.

"I don't...I can't."

"Yes, you can. Just let your body move with me. You fight the sensation and you don't have to. It's all right to like it."

"Don't...stop."

"You mean, don't stop. Am I right?" He pressed harder, feeling the nub of hyper-sensitive flesh slide beneath the pad of his thumb. The scent of her arousal enveloped him, sending his own desire raging. Everything about her turned him on. The contrast of her skin next to his reminded him of coffee and cream. The silky curve of her inner thighs next to the wiry hair of her mound fascinated him. Her rounded hips beckoned him and her taut, flat stomach challenged him. She held her muscles there so tight he could probably have bounced a quarter off her abs.

Except for the fingers of the hand, which wrapped around her shoulder, she bore no other markings on the front of her body. She was a clean canvas and that excited him too. While he circled her clit, drawing her own slick moisture out over her pussy lips, he

surveyed the landscape on which he planned to work. He imagined a single serpent nestled on her hip, drawn to protect both her heart and her womb. He'd use a rich sienna and highlight the shimmering scales with blues and greens for contrast.

God, he needed to come. He worked faster, pressed harder. He'd have slipped a finger inside her, but again, that was too intimate an act to share with someone he never planned to see again.

"Ah...ah." She arched her back and pushed her hips forward, and Heath knew she'd almost reached her peak. While he concentrated on finishing her off with one hand he brushed his other over her stomach, her breasts. She felt like granite. Every bit of her was rock-hard. If her muscles contracted even more in orgasm she would be in agony.

"Rihana, breathe! Let yourself come."

"I can't...I can't." She shuddered and cried out, finally letting go. Her whole body shook, and she clamped her thighs tight while her body rocked in the chair. The keen she let out was pure pain, mixed with a dark, dense pleasure that left her panting and shivering.

He'd never seen anything like it. He'd never felt anything like it either. The ache of it attacked him through whatever psychic connection they shared and he let out a low groan. He wanted to fold over and guard his balls. His abdominal muscles hurt not just from working at holding back his own climax, but because of the agony she'd just been through.

"My God. I thought you'd feel better after that."

"I do. I'm fine." Her lower lip quivered and she bit it again. Pain seemed to be her panacea, both the cause and effect of her climax. He wondered what would happen to her once he began to draw on her. Hundreds of needle pricks per second might leave her in sensory overload.

"Rihana, I'm not sure I can do this for you. It might be too painful if you're unable to relax."

She took a deep breath, dug her nails into the armrests again and closed her eyes. "I'm fine. I'll be fine. I want it."

Heath surveyed his work station. He needed a warm cloth and some extra pigment from the supplies in back. In his mind, he'd already scaled down the design he'd planned for her in order to minimize her discomfort. A small guardian would be better than none at all. "Rest for a minute. I'll be right back."

She nodded convulsively, her eyes still clamped shut. She wasn't ready for this, but how could he stop now? He wanted nothing more than to have his hands on her skin, her body flexing and contracting beneath him, but he'd already gone too far. He planned only to convince her to accept a temporary guardian. Instead he'd put her further at risk. He had to make up for that lapse in judgment, for indulging the urgency brought on by their unplanned psychic connection.

He backed out of the alcove and pulled the curtain shut in front of him to afford her more privacy. A mental inventory told him he might find some organic incense in the back room as well. Maybe the scent of chamomile would help her relax. This girl needed help and he regretted that he didn't have the time it would take to undo the damage of her past. She was clearly worth the time and effort when all he had to do was look at her to get hard.

He gathered his supplies quickly and headed back to the alcove, thinking he could position the full-length mirror so she could watch him from any angle while he worked.

The chair was empty when he returned. He didn't bother calling for her or checking the rest room. Silent as smoke, she'd taken her clothes and disappeared. He hadn't even heard the back door close.

He could have run after her, but it wouldn't have done any good. He didn't have time to track her down and clearly she preferred to be on her own. He had to let her go and wish her the best. He could only hope to find someone on the next world who would have the same effect on him as Rihana Daniels had.

Chapter Four

After ten minutes of struggling, Rihanna finally managed to thrust her key into the lock on the front door of her apartment and stumble inside. She threw her keychain at the nearby table and slammed the door behind her, pressing the deadbolt closed with trembling fingers.

What on earth had possessed her to follow a suspect? To interact with him outside of the controlled environment of the police station?

She began to peel off her jacket as she headed for the bathroom then thought better of it. As much as she craved a long, steaming shower, she couldn't bring herself to take her clothes off again. Good Lord. Blindly, she headed for the kitchen, icy hands clamped to her burning cheeks in a vain attempt to quell the fire of shame that still burned under her skin.

It had felt like a trance. Every second, from the instant Heath Gyland opened his back door and pulled her into his shop, to the moment she'd come to her senses and yanked her discarded clothes back on, had felt like a dream. No, a nightmare.

She'd been completely out of control, like a drug addict, sleepwalking through some erotic hallucination. Their eyes had met and immediately she'd begun to ache deep in her womb. His voice, his eyes, every nuance of the way he spoke and moved had churned up half-remembered emotions from deep in her soul. It had been years since she'd allowed herself to feel desire for a man. She didn't have time for that kind of complication in her life. Tonight all that denial had come to head and she'd transformed into a sex-starved whore for a man she barely knew.

She scraped a kitchen chair across the old linoleum and threw herself into it, rested her elbows on the table and cradled her throbbing head in her hands. God, the way he'd touched her. He knew exactly what she craved in the secret recesses of her mind. His skillful hands had played her like harp strings and she'd come against his hand, hard, writhing, moaning.

She would never be able to look him in the eye again. Not him, not any man. Gramma Essie had been right. Her gift set her apart and she needed to keep a handle on her emotions so she didn't lose control. The thin veil that separated her waking mind from the other side could be swept away so easily and leave her unprotected. Tonight had been a perfect example of how vulnerable she was to the intrusive thoughts of others. His lust had overtaken her and left her without inhibitions, unable to think of anything but getting him to touch her.

Tea. She forced a deep breath into her lungs and thought of tea. That would soothe her nerves. She'd put off a bath until morning. She didn't want to be naked again for a while. Rising, she put her hand to her throat and realized she'd forgotten her scarf.

Damn. Hopefully Heath—the suspect—wouldn't try to return it. He'd said he would be leaving town. As much as that would interfere with the murder investigation, she hoped it was true. If he was gone she wouldn't have to worry about a chance encounter that might leave her on her knees begging to be fucked.

The clatter of the ceramic kettle on the stove burner made her wince. She felt like an exposed wound or a toothache. The flare of the gas jet and the hiss of the cold water from the tap teased her nerve endings. Her whole body throbbed and a sinful sensation emanated from the spot where Heath Gyland had touched her.

"Breathe." She echoed his command to her. "Take it easy. You did what you set out to do."

He wasn't the killer. She'd learned that much before she'd passed out at his feet. She'd seen far enough into his mind to know Tanesha hadn't met her end at his hands.

She paced while the kettle heated. The teacup she retrieved from the cupboard tipped out of her hand and crashed against the edge of the counter. It exploded into half a dozen pieces and rained across the floor.

She cursed.

"Slow. Go slow." Her pussy dampened when her mind supplied a quick, visceral image of Heath spreading her legs and petting her pubic hair. A fist clenched in her gut. She'd been this way before—after the tattoo sessions in the bayou she'd been so anxious for more she couldn't walk across a room without tripping over her own feet.

She swept up the remains of the broken cup and swiped down another. This one she set on the table with two hands, like a child entrusted with her first breakable object. The kettle whistled. She let it scream for attention while she chose a tea bag and laid it in the cup.

The act of pouring the boiling water actually went a long way toward easing her anxiety. Carelessness with that task would leave her burned, and she couldn't afford to add that type of pain to her nervous system right now. She'd have a stroke.

With exaggerated movements, she placed the kettle back on the stove and sat down in front of her steaming cup. Gramma Essie would have insisted she open the tea bag and read the leaves, but Rihana already knew what they would tell her. Stay the hell away from Heath Gyland. She would never get into his mind far enough to tease out any useful information about the mysterious, otherworldly assassin he spoke of, so she needed to let it go, let *him* go no matter what his presence did to her insides.

The first sip of tea worked its magic. In a few minutes she'd managed to control her breathing, and her racing heart calmed to a manageable level. As long as no one found out about what she'd done this evening, she would be all right.

* * * * *

After another unsuccessful conversation with Darq, Heath hung up the phone and paced the length of his bedroom. Throughout all the years he and his crèche-brother

had traveled together, Darq had always deferred to Heath's opinions. He supposed he'd gotten used to being the nominal leader back when being only three years older than his companion represented a large gap in their levels of maturity. Having Darq defy his advice and insist on remaining here with his mate left him out of balance.

He was certainly free to move on alone, but how could he justify leaving the only other surviving member of the Verakos royal family vulnerable to a Gemii assassin?

Secure that his guardians would protect him from an attack in his own home, Heath began to strip and walked into the shower in his adjoining bathroom. His mind whirled with possibilities of how to convince Darq to accompany him to the next world. His partner was stubborn and insistent and wouldn't change his mind easily. The wisest course of action would be to appeal to the woman he'd chosen as his mate. Makena was human and this world was her home, but surely she would be willing to give it up to protect the man she loved.

Hot water sluiced over his back, instantly releasing the tension that had built up in the muscles of his shoulders. He'd been wound tight as a spring since the moment he'd found Rihanna lurking outside SkIntense. Just talking to her had aroused him. Watching her lips move and matching the tone of her sultry voice to the constantly changing expression in her cool green eyes had felt like foreplay. Thinking of her now stirred his desires, and his cock sprang to attention.

Unlike Rihanna, release would calm his nerves and allow him to think clearly about his next course of action. He needed to get her out of his mind and the only way to do that was to get his need for her out of his body.

He ran wet hands over his hair, slicking back the blond strands, and let the spray of water blind him for a minute. In the brown darkness behind his eyelids, he conjured an image of her luscious body and replayed the intoxicating scenes of her stripping.

He'd only watched her remove her clothes then, but now, in his mind's eye, he participated. He stood behind her, close enough that the curves of her magnificent ass bumped his growing erection. He imagined reaching around in front of her and slipping his fingers under the hem of her shirt. Inch by sinful inch he'd raise the material over her abdomen, just grazing the underside of her bra with his fingertips. She'd raise her arms and allow him to pull the garment off then nestle against him, rubbing her bottom suggestively over his crotch.

He'd kiss her shoulder, following the carefully drawn lines of her body art. Then he'd flick the straps of her bra down off her shoulders and let them dangle against her arms. She'd sway a bit, teasing his cock, and he'd smile while he scraped his teeth over her skin.

God, he'd wanted to taste her. She'd be chocolate sweet and coffee sharp. Nipping at her shoulder would make her gasp and throw her head back to expose her throat.

Next he'd run his hands around her waist and up to the cups of her bra. He'd grasp the satin and pull it down so it rode at her hips. Then he'd go back and take the weight of her breasts in his hands. The thought of her hardened nipples in his palms tightened

his balls. He bent forward a little, letting the water cascade over the back of his neck while he massaged his erection. It wouldn't take much to finish. A few strokes of his soapy hand would have him spurting cum all over the shower wall, but he wanted to draw this out. He'd never have a chance to make love to Rihanna Daniels in real life, so he wanted his fantasy to be complete.

He imagined her breasts filling his palms, tightening at the tips as he applied just enough pressure to pull her body against his chest. He'd thumb her nipples lightly at first, then he'd pinch them—not too hard. The pain might set off her orgasm and he didn't want that yet...well, hell, it was his fantasy after all. So yes, she'd come just from having him pinch her nipples and rub his cock against her ass. She'd keen with it and shiver and he'd have to hold her up because her knees would go weak from it.

Once she'd calmed, he'd strip her bra away and lower his hands to her pants. A dainty button, a short zipper and he'd be peeling back the camel-colored material and sliding them over the swell of her hips. She'd shimmy for him, and each time her ass touched the hard tip of his cock, she'd let out a little gasp of appreciation. She'd want him in her but she'd have to wait until he was done playing her out.

Now she'd be wearing only panties. Black satin. Not quite a thong, but close enough. He'd admire the way the strip of material split her ass cheeks. He'd follow the thorns of the rose vine along her lower back and lay a kiss on the pink blossom on her hip. Then he'd rip the fabric barrier away with his teeth.

By now his cock was iron hard and burning for release. He slid the shaft through his hand, imagining he'd bent her over his chair and spread her legs with his own. He'd find her hot center with his fingers first, part her pussy lips and guide himself inside. She'd raise her ass for him to give him better access and she'd brace her hands on the cushions of the chair.

He squeezed the ring of his fingers hard around the base of his cock. Almost there. A deep thrust or two and he'd be done, but what about her? In his fantasy, one orgasm was only the beginning for the woman he chose. So while he fucked her, slowly at first, then fast, her mound would rub against the chair, causing another orgasm to tighten her pussy convulsively around him.

That would do it. He squeezed and thrust, letting the head of his dick slip through his tight fingers and pop out. The shower spray drumming on his glans added to the sensation. The slight sting of the soap in the slit made the whole thing more urgent. He drew up and he let out a groan as he climaxed, picturing Rihanna's gorgeous ass spread before him while he did.

He kept pumping until the last drop of cum fell to the tub and washed away and then he let out a long, low whistle. This one had been far better than the one after he'd been with Tanesha. He wondered how real life would compare, but he couldn't dwell on something that would never happen.

He dialed back the temperature on the water to help cool his skin and his still-pulsating balls. Now that his head was clear, the big head at least, he could concentrate

on what to do about getting the hell off this world before the Gemii assassin succeeded in eradicating the Verakos bloodline for good.

* * * * *

Rihana woke from an uncomfortable sleep with her clit pulsing. In her fevered dream she'd been with Heath. She still felt the pressure of his hands on her hips and her nipples were sore from him pinching and plucking at them. Sweat plastered her clothes to her body and left her feeling like a badly wrapped package left out in the rain.

She struggled to sit up on the couch where she'd dozed, fighting with the throw pillows and the old crocheted blanket she must have pulled over herself before she nodded off. Memories of an erotic encounter that hadn't actually happened swam through her muddled brain. Echoes of the satisfied sigh he'd let out when he came teased her senses. It all seemed so real. Her clit still pulsed and her thighs were damp. She felt like she'd been fucked.

Embarrassed by her dreams, she rubbed her eyes and squinted around the dim room. It had to be close to dawn. Everything was gray in the pale light filtering through her filmy curtains. She heard minimal traffic sounds coming from the street three stories below.

Drawing herself up, she stretched out the kinks in her back and yawned. Time to get over Heath Gyland and move on.

The clock on the table next to the couch read four-thirty. That left two hours to sleep properly and pull herself together before she had to be back at the station. *Pull herself together.* She banished Nathan's condescending phrase from her mind and pointed herself toward the bedroom.

An unfamiliar sound stopped her. She tensed from head to toe, sacrificing those few glorious moments of relaxation for nervous vigilance. Had something moved in the shadows?

A creak echoed through the apartment, loud as a gunshot, and Rihana gasped. Was it a footstep or just the floorboards in this old building cooling and contracting? The ticking of her kitchen clock seemed more like the dull thud of feet striding across the linoleum. The refrigerator compressor kicked on with a feral hiss and she whirled around to glare into the other room. *Get a grip. There's no one here.*

There were three locks on the front door. She remembered turning them all in succession when she got home. The windows all had safety catches on the frames. The coat closet next to the front door held a good old-fashioned wooden baseball bat and a modern, standard-issue billy club. Her gun, a department-issued Glock, lay in a box in her closet. Since she was technically a civilian, she couldn't carry it off duty and generally only brought it to active crime scenes, such as when she'd helped track down a kidnapping victim. She hated the weapon, but right now she wished she had it in her hand.

Something rustled, a sound so faint she wasn't even sure she'd heard it, but her heart began to pound nevertheless. Two more tentative steps carried her close enough to the bedroom door that she could peek around the frame.

Nothing moved, at least nothing she could see. She thought of entering the quaking. Then she could thrust her consciousness into the room ahead of her body and see what was there without it seeing her. If someone had broken in to her apartment, she'd be able to read their thoughts and know their intent but at the expense of leaving herself vulnerable.

The choice was not whether to use her abilities or not, but whether to plunge into the bedroom and sweep her hand across the light switch or slither back toward the entryway closet and ease the baseball bat out from behind her winter coat. Her training told her to step away, head for the door and let herself out, snatching her cell phone on the way to call for help. Her instincts told her to rush in and find out just who had the audacity to think they could enter her home and get away with it.

The closet won. She backed up all the way there, stopping between each step to listen for more movement. Tanesha Wain intruded on her thoughts as she reached for the closet door. The dead girl's posture had told a horror story. Twisted limbs and clenched fists meant she'd been afraid. She'd died trapped by the bulky furniture of her bedroom, unable to run. Rihana refused to end that way.

She flicked open the closet and rummaged inside. The satisfying weight of the bat gave her confidence as well as a boost of self-preservation instinct. She turned the locks on the front door over slowly, not allowing the tumblers to make a sound. Then she opened the door. Two steps would have put her safely in the hall, but it wasn't her plan to run away. Instead she heaved the door shut, making as loud a bang as she could. She hit the wall switch and flooded the entryway with light and, brandishing the bat, she charged for the bedroom.

When she burst into the room, shadows seemed to fly in all directions like a startled flock of black birds. She heard wings flapping and that otherworldly hiss again just before her shaking fingers found the light switch.

"Down on the floor, you muthafu..."

Nothing moved. Rihana stood in the middle of her bedroom, the bat raised over her shoulder like she was lining up a pop fly. Her panting breath moved her whole body back and forth, and the drum beat in the middle of her chest reached a crescendo that threatened to choke her.

Nothing stared back at her. All the shadows had fled. The hiss of a serpent's tongue, the flap of wings, the footsteps of a stalking killer all amounted to absolutely nothing.

She was alone.

And arguably insane.

On a deep but unsteady breath, she lowered the bat. If she'd been embarrassed before after waking up aroused for a man she'd just met, this had to be worse. Running

around her locked apartment – well, it was unlocked now – with a bat, hoping to crack the skull of an intruder, put her squarely in the company of the people who tied up the 9-1-1 phone lines on Halloween calling in reports of ghosts and goblins.

She sank against the doorframe and dropped the bat. This had to end. Whatever Heath Gyland had done to her, she had to overcome her reaction to the man and get her head on straight or she'd need that aluminum foil beanie Brogan always teased her about.

She needed that hot shower and a dose of the mild tranquilizers her doctor had prescribed a year ago. She'd only taken one of the pills so far and she knew one was enough to take the edge off. God, right now, she needed the edge off.

"Grama," she said to the ceiling. "I don't know how much longer I can do this. I need you to give me strength or let me go before I lose my mind."

There was no answer from Grama. There never was. Even the times she'd tried to contact her through the quaking, the woman from whom she'd inherited this "gift" had remained strangely silent since her death four years before. With a forced sigh, Rihana scooped up the bat and headed back to the living room to put it away and relock her front door. Not for the first time, she wondered just where her grandmother had gone after death and if she had any idea what kind of suffering she'd saddled her only granddaughter with in this life.

Chapter Five

If he'd intended to remain in business, Heath might have been bothered when the police showed up at SkIntense early the next morning. His clients certainly might have wondered why three armed police officers and a plainclothes detective needed to be snooping around the shop.

He'd let them in without a hint of reluctance and stood back while they pawed through his equipment and supplies.

"Do you keep ink anywhere else, Mr. Gyland?" the detective asked. Brogan looked just as sour as he had in the interrogation room, but now his perpetual sneer also held a hint of satisfaction since he had the privilege of waving a search warrant in Heath's face.

"It's all in the trays next to the chairs and on the shelves in back. There may be a bottle or two in the lower cabinets near the sink." It didn't bother him to cooperate. They wouldn't find what they were looking for, not that they really knew what they were looking for.

Brogan accepted his answer with a skeptical sigh and directed the uniformed officers to check all the cabinets and collect samples of dark inks—blues, blacks and browns—as well as needles, cloths and everything from the trash bins. Heath wanted to laugh at their methods. Did they expect he was dumb enough to kill a woman by giving her a poisoned tattoo and then leave the evidence of the crime lying in his garbage cans? "Check the dumpsters out back too," Brogan said while he nosed around the coffeemaker as if it might be an instrument of death.

"Would you like some espresso, Detective?" Heath made his offer with an innocent smile. He refused to let his agitation show, but this delay made his head spin. He'd wanted to show up at Makena Brady's apartment this morning, knowing he'd find Darq there, but he couldn't walk out now. He had to subject himself to this search to avoid any appearance of guilt or face another stint of useless questions. Perhaps the Gemii had planned this all along. Rather than kill him, if they framed him for a murder they could have him incarcerated for life and prevent him from someday returning to Verakos.

If only the Gemii were that crafty.

Brogan only shot him a disparaging look. "Your apartment is upstairs in this building, am I correct?"

"Your search warrant only covers my place of business, am I correct?"

Brogan held Heath's gaze for a second. "So you're not going to cooperate with us?"

"I am cooperating, Detective. To the letter of your warrant. If you wish to search my home, get another one."

"We will."

Brogan barked a few more orders then rounded up his men. The uniformed officers carried out their evidence bags and filed past him toward the front door. Heath made a quick mental inventory of the items they'd taken—bottles of ink and small pieces of equipment, nothing he would miss if he planned to continue servicing clients. The last officer in line, however, didn't carry a bag. Instead he held something up with the tip of a ballpoint pen and showed it to Brogan. The detective turned a questioning glance toward Heath.

"A woman's scarf," he said. "Looks like Gucci."

Heath swallowed. That was Rihana's. He remembered removing it from her slender neck just after his guardians had rendered her unconscious.

"One of my clients left it here."

"Could it be Tanesha Wain's?"

"She was never in my shop, Detective."

"But you were in her apartment."

"I was, but this scarf wasn't. It's not hers."

"Hmm. Leave it." Brogan dismissed the officer with a wave. "Even if it is hers, it won't prove anything, so you can keep it. For now."

Heath pushed the scarf out of his mind. He couldn't dwell on it, but he did have a pressing question. "Detective, I'm surprised Miss Daniels isn't with you today. Isn't this her case as well as yours?" He'd convinced himself it was only concern for her well-being that prompted his question.

"She didn't come in today. I'm not her keeper, so I can't say why. I guess proving you innocent isn't her top priority."

Heath ignored the twinge of concern growing in his gut. "Is that her job, to prove my innocence?"

"Her job is to get 'feelings' and 'impressions' about things and lead the rest of us on hunts for psychic evidence and boogey men. Good men with families to support are taking pay cuts because the city is out of money, but there's cash to hire palm readers and ghost hunters because they think dead people can solve crimes faster than live cops. This is not her case, Mr. Gyland, it's mine. And the conviction will be mine too." Brogan punctuated his derisive statement by shoving the warrant into Heath's hands. "Keep this for your records, sir. Thank you for your cooperation and have a nice day."

He swept out of the shop and Heath spared just half a second to watch him go, then locked the door behind him and headed out the back. He hadn't wanted to get any more involved with Rihana Daniels than necessary, but dammit, he couldn't just go about his business wondering if something had happened to her. He'd put her in

danger by touching her, by wanting her, and he had to make sure she was all right before he took Darq and Makena and left this world for good.

* * * * *

The insistent drumming of the shower spray on her back and the swirl of thick steam around her head made Rihana pleasantly sleepy. After a night filled with anxiety, she finally began to relax to the scent of hot water and herbal soap.

The hiss of the water leaving the shower head helped lull her at first, until she realized the thin, silvery sound had nothing to do with the shower. It rose and fell in intensity, growing slightly louder, then fading.

She froze despite the liquid heat sluicing over her body. An inner chill caused all of her skin to prickle and tightened her nipples to aching peaks. Before she could react, and shut the water off, her mind's eye exploded in a vision recalled from her brief, unsuccessful foray into Heath Gyland's mind.

The serpents, depicted in such startling clarity on his muscular forearms, appeared before her, their heads raised and drawn back like striking cobras. Crimson and black, they writhed in tandem. The startling colors told her she hadn't slipped into the quaking but was experiencing a different, rarer type of vision, one she didn't understand.

The serpents must have sensed her confusion because they wove closer, their yellow reptilian eyes flashing like warning beacons.

Rihana reared back, gasping when a black forked tongue shot out at her. The urge to escape overcame her and she flailed at the shower curtain. Her movement scattered the images before her and the snakes faded into serpentine curls of steam then disappeared entirely.

Shaking, Rihana stared at the now empty space before her. Her heart thundered and her hand trembled when she reached out to finally draw the curtain aside and survey the rest of the bathroom. Solid and black, her department-issued gun lay safely on the vanity where she'd placed it before locking herself in the bathroom.

Silly. It was only a memory, nothing more. She was safe and alone in her apartment.

She breathed out slowly and her breath condensed, attesting to the chill that now permeated the room. A shiver traced a lightning path down her spine and she stepped back under the warm spray just as the quaking came on her, unbidden. Usually she had to direct her subconscious mind into the between place, like stepping through a doorway in the back of her brain that led to a cold, dead wonderland. She hated the place with a vengeance, but grudgingly admitted the stark beauty of the gray, sunless landscape awed her. The things she saw there sometimes made her sick to her stomach, but she never failed to look beyond where she needed to go, to peer into the distance or around the next corner hoping to catch a glimpse of something amazing.

This time was no exception, even though it hadn't been her choice to go.

All around her the world drained of color. The sound of the shower became her only focus, as overwhelming as the rush of a waterfall and as desolate as the howl of wind through abandoned streets.

Barely breathing, she stepped out of the tub. In the real world, the porcelain was light pink, but here it was bone white like the tiles of the bathroom floor and the fluffy rug that lay atop them. The brass doorknob was black, as was her hand when she reached for it.

The old hinges hadn't made a sound, but the damp slap of her feet on the floor beyond the mat sounded like boulders crashing down a mountain side. The bedroom beyond lay partially in shadow...no...the shadow was within the room, not a trick of the directionless light but a presence coiled and crouched next to the bed.

Rihana's first instinct had been to turn and run, but there was no place to go. Vaguely she registered that her body was still in the shower and this was only her mind venturing out to "see" what lay on the other side of the locked bathroom door.

Armed with the knowledge that she was invisible to the intruder, she turned her attention to the shape. Black masses were common in the quaking. Gramma Essie had explained that they weren't all evil spirits. Some were collections of negative thoughts and emotions, floating around the macabre landscape like clouds. The symbols etched on her body would help protect her, but she still needed to approach such objects with caution. A filament of despair could easily attach itself to her psyche and follow her back through the door to reality.

She focused her gaze on the shadow and found shape and substance there. This was not a smoky jumble of bad vibes; it was a figure. A man. She couldn't make out his features but her instincts told her this was the same person who had been with Tanesha Wain at the moment of her death.

Her heart thundered. Had he been in her apartment all along, hiding somewhere even though she'd searched every corner and closet before daring to close her eyes?

He rose while she watched and moved *through* the bed.

Even in this realm, a real, living creature couldn't glide through solid objects. He was a ghost then, a spirit, and that meant he could see her.

She backed up to let him pass, but he didn't acknowledge her. Facing the bathroom door now, which she had opened and closed in order to leave the smaller room, he raised his hands and ran them along the doorjamb.

He located the emergency key, a small cylindrical piece of metal with an eye on one end and shallow threads on the other. Unlike a regular key, it had no specific shape and could be used to open any of the push button locks in the apartment. He maneuvered it toward the tiny hole beneath the knob. In a moment he'd be inside the bathroom with her. She had to get back to her body, grab her gun and defend herself.

Coming out of the quaking was like jumping through a sheet of ice or a freezing cascade of water. She had to take a deep breath first, then plunge, but it didn't work this time.

Instead of coming back into herself, she remained in the bedroom, standing behind the man as he opened the bathroom door. Oh God. She was stuck here. She'd be forced to watch him kill her or worse.

She tried screaming, but nothing escaped from her open mouth except a puff of condensed air. Instinct bade her to try to stop him, but on this side of the bathroom door, she didn't exist. Her outstretched hand went through his body, one filmy image colliding with another as he slowly turned the doorknob. As soon as a crack of white light appeared, Rihanna thrust herself forward. If he had any awareness of her psychic presence, he didn't let on. She moved with him one cautious step into the bathroom where pearlescent steam curled around the edges of the drawn shower curtain. Her body was a gray outline behind the thin sheet of plastic, motionless and completely vulnerable.

At least he didn't seem to notice her gun.

She reached for the weapon, knowing she couldn't fire it in this state, but she might be able to conjure enough psychic energy to push it off the sink. *Please, please, please.* She shoved at the Glock and it trembled. She'd moved it a millimeter. The intruder didn't notice. He took another step and lifted his arm toward the curtain.

Oh God. Come on! She shoved again. In reality her effort would have produced enough force to rattle the sink itself and dislodge the heavy weapon. Instead it barely shivered, producing just the faintest click against the porcelain. He probably hadn't heard it over the rush of the shower water.

Dark fingers wrapped around the edge of the curtain and Rihanna watched in horror as he pulled the useless barrier slowly back to reveal her naked body, standing like a mannequin in the tub. She screamed again and this time he heard her.

Chapter Six

Heath rang Rihana's doorbell a second time, stabbing his finger impatiently at the small white button on the doorframe. If she didn't answer in twenty seconds, he planned to break down the door.

If she actually wasn't home, he'd worry about feeling foolish later. Right now, something compelled him to find her and make sure she was all right.

He raised his clenched fist to knock just as rustling sounds reached him through the door. His heart raced while he listened to the series of clicks that had to represent the requisite collection of safety locks being thrown open. When she finally flung open the door and glared at him, he swallowed hard and let the relief wash over him. Disengaging from his worried brain, his cock responded to the vision before him by pressing against his zipper.

She was wet. Dripping. A fluffy crimson robe hung haphazardly from her shoulders, yanked tight at the waist with a matching belt and gaping precariously open to allow him a tantalizing view of one thigh. Her hair was slicked back, giving her the sleek appearance of a sea goddess. Water clung to her lashes and droplets ran down her neck into her scandalously visible cleavage. She held a gun in her right hand.

"Thank God it's you." Her words didn't match the look on her face. She sounded thrilled to see him, but her eyes flashed with repressed anger, which was reflected in the dark red streaks of her aura. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He blinked, not sure which comment to respond to first. "I was concerned."

"You damn well better be." She whirled around and strode across the room beyond. Heath took that as a wordless invitation to follow, only because she could have simply slammed the door in his face. He hurried over the threshold and shut the door behind him.

"Ah...maybe you should put the weapon down?" The pistol looked huge in her delicate hand, but no less dangerous than if she'd been a man. Though he really wasn't concerned that she'd shoot him, accidentally or on purpose, Heath didn't like the way her hand shook.

Fortunately, she saw the inherent danger of the situation and slowly set the gun down on the end table next to the sofa. Then she turned toward him, hands on her hips, nails digging into the blood-red terry cloth. "How did you know where I lived?"

"Internet search with my cell phone." He didn't explain that a mildly illegal search engine had provided her building address and the strange psychic connection they now seemed to share had led him to the right floor and apartment. "What's wrong? Detective Brogan said you'd called in sick."

Was he imagining the steam rising from her exposed skin? God, she was gorgeous. Eyes flashing, chest heaving, she looked like a sexual storm about to rain all over him.

"Dickhead." She added a few more creative curses, then flung her hand in the air. "Him, not you. I don't know *what* you are."

He probably should have been insulted by that, but he smiled instead. She was still alive and for some reason that knowledge made him buoyant. "You seem agitated."

His mild comment set her off like a bomb. "Agitated? No freaking kidding. He was here. Your psycho serpent smoke killer was in my apartment thirty seconds ago."

Heath tensed and his gaze slid reluctantly away from the vengeful goddess in front of him to the shadows at the corners of the room. "That can't be. You'd be dead if he'd found you."

"He found me. I saw him. I think he was here last night, maybe *all* night, watching me."

Heath didn't wait for an invitation. He rushed past her and made a quick but thorough circuit of the small apartment. The kitchen was too narrow to hold more than one person at a time. The bedroom was empty, the window locked securely. The bathroom was tiny and still warm and damp. She followed him from closet to closet, standing with her arms crossed over her chest while he threw open doors and rummaged through hanging clothes.

"Where did he go?"

"Great question. That's one for Houdini." She walked away, straightening her robe and raising the collar around her throat. "I was in the shower and I heard something. I saw him. He was in the bathroom. He'd found the key, unlocked the door and was about to...God knows what he was about to do. Then he vanished. Poof. Like smoke." Despair clouded her brilliant eyes for a moment. "The door was still locked. The key was still in place when I got out of the tub."

"So he *wasn't* here?"

"He was. I saw him. I followed him through the bedroom and watched him come after me, then he was gone."

Heath tried to keep the skepticism out of his voice. "The Gemii can disappear quickly, but if the door hadn't actually been touched..."

"You don't believe me."

"I do believe you. I just don't understand it."

"He's watching me. He knows I was with you and he probably thinks we had sex. Now I'm a target just like you said."

Heath had no doubt that was true. What he didn't understand was why the Gemii hadn't just killed him first and taken care of Rihana later. The longer Heath lived, the more chances he would have to spread his seed. "Sit down. You're shaking."

"I'm shaking all right. I've been shaking all night." She paced, the hem of her robe fluttering with each long step.

Heath couldn't take his eyes off her legs and the perfectly formed muscles of her calves. His balls ached, distracting him from the problem at hand. "Why didn't you call the police?"

"Because *there was no one here*. I searched the place, all over. I put every light on. I checked all the windows, then I fell asleep and I had these...disturbing dreams."

He raised a brow. "What kind of dreams?"

She blushed and cinched her belt tighter. Unconsciously, she seemed to move away from him and she didn't meet his gaze when she replied. "First it was the snakes." She gestured toward his forearms. "I saw them again, here, on the floor, on the walls. Then I saw you. I was with you and we..."

"Made love." His shower fantasy had been supremely satisfying, probably because she'd shared it with him through the connection she'd initiated.

A fresh wave of anger washed over her. "We didn't *make love*. I dreamed of you fucking me, but it was just sex. Just a dream."

"But it felt real, didn't it?"

She shivered and gave a reluctant nod.

"Because it was, to a degree. When you...tore into my mind yesterday you created a link between us. You shared my dreams."

Her mouth dropped open, and her eyes widened. "You had the same dream?"

"Well...I didn't dream, actually. I imagined."

Her shocked expression actually made her even more beautiful. "What we did...you made that up? You daydreamed about me?"

"What man wouldn't?"

She tossed her head, dismissing his comment. "You're some kind pervert."

"Because I masturbated in the shower while I thought about a stunningly beautiful woman who I can't get out of my head?"

"You made me feel it. I..."

Heath stepped close to her, into the envelope of her warm, clean scent. "No, Miss Daniels. *You* made you feel it. You used your gift to look into my mind and maybe for a man from your world that would have no lasting effect on either of you, but with me it created a subliminal bond. You wanted to get inside my head. Now you're there."

Their gazes held for an electric moment during which Heath chose to show Rihanna even more of his fantasies. He threw an image at her of the two of them tangled in bed, white satin sheets twining amid their limbs as their bodies writhed. He showed her the moment of their shared climax, her back arched, fingers clutching the shimmering material, her mouth open in a sigh of ecstasy while he pumped into her. It was a ruthless tactic really, crude for someone of his station, but by his estimation, necessary to show her the full extent of their unintended connection.

He expected her response to be shock and anger mixed, hopefully, with a hint of arousal. What occurred instead left him gaping in surprise.

She fought back with an image of her own. In her version, she straddled him and lowered her glorious body over his tumescent erection. He clutched her hips and thrust upward, drawing a scream of desire from her. He felt the climax she imagined, just as she had, and the force of their shared orgasm drew their bodies together like magnets.

* * * * *

Rihana's thoughts lost all coherence the moment Heath touched her. She'd been a raw nerve from the moment she'd come back to herself in the shower, fumbled for her gun and threw the bathroom door open, searching for someone to shoot. She suspected it had been the sound of the doorbell that scared away her psychic intruder or simply disrupted her trance. Either way, Heath's arrival had spared her what she knew would have been a violent end to a real or imagined confrontation.

Her inner tremors hadn't eased upon finding him at her door, though. In fact, through their entire conversation her body shook. She felt like a lit fuse, crackling and sizzling toward an explosion she wouldn't be able to control, and when he showed her the vision of their bodies joined, every pent-up emotion she had boiled over.

Vaguely she recognized the hands that tore at his belt buckle as her own. With surgical precision, she pulled the leather strap out of its metal fastening, opened the button of his jeans and pushed the zipper down. She had to work around his hands, which were busy untying the soft belt of her robe.

She gasped when he drew the thick material open and off her shoulders and she dropped her arms momentarily to let the garment slip off her body completely. She didn't think about being naked or about reaching into the underwear of a man she'd met less than twenty-four hours ago and pulling his cock out for her inspection.

He pushed her hands away long enough to shove his pants down and step out of them and he pulled his shirt off while she dropped to her knees in front of him. She hadn't felt this kind of urgency since she was seventeen and racing with Sam on dirt bikes to the back of his family's barn, so hyped on teenage hormones that she could come merely from riding the bumpy lanes out beyond the pasture.

His erection was bigger than she imagined and no doubt paler than Sam's. She'd never seen the younger man's penis. It wasn't something a good girl did—look at a man's cock—and besides, whenever he was about to do it, she'd always closed her eyes tight to spare herself the vision of her own sin. This time, she wanted to look.

She took him in one hand and let her fingers play over the taut shaft. The skin there felt like velvet, stretched over a perfect male form. All the lines and curves flowed beautifully from the minute slit in the head to the thick base nestled in dark blond curls. He was long and hot, hard but flexible enough that she could maneuver him toward her mouth while she cupped his balls. He groaned and thrust his hips forward, eager for what she had to offer.

She took him into her mouth, letting the stainless steel ball of her tongue piercing slide along the bottom of his glans and down his shaft. He uttered a series of words that she assumed were curses, though they didn't sound like English, and he clutched at her wet hair. She smiled around the fleshy intrusion. This would top any fantasy he'd already had of her.

Closing her mouth over the tip of his penis, she rubbed her tongue back and forth and squeezed his balls lightly. The muscles in his thighs flexed and he grunted something that definitely sounded like encouragement. That prompted her to take him in deeper, to the back of her throat, then she backed off just far enough to settle her piercing at the base of his glans. She pressed the tiny metal ball into the spot where the soft head met the granite-hard shaft and just as she anticipated, he groaned and bent forward.

Next she licked him up and down, drawing lines of sensation with her hardware that left him panting. His body trembled. He cupped the back of her head and gently eased her forward to take him in again, all the way. The head of his cock slid along the roof of her mouth, and she tapped her tongue on his shaft and licked again, lost in the power she had over him. Each movement of her lips and tongue caused a reaction in him, a pulse in his cock, a tightening of his abs or the muscles of his thighs. She controlled him and she loved it.

"I'm coming..." He'd barely uttered the words before he exploded. His cum shot into her mouth, a hot, salty stream that she swallowed eagerly. She couldn't get enough. To help him along, she squeezed his balls and sucked the head, letting the metal stud roll against the pulsing tip until he had nothing left. Then she released him and licked her lips.

She let him go and he staggered back a step then went down on his knees in front of her. "My God...I want to fuck you."

"So do it. I'm on the Pill. I won't get pregnant."

"It doesn't matter to the Gemii..."

"No, it doesn't. Fuck me, Heath, because I need it or I'll lose my mind. I can't control it."

She sensed his hesitation even as she put her hands on his chest and pushed him backward. He wanted her, but part of his mind was occupied with concern for the assassin, working out the logistics of his successful escape. She knew that because she saw his thoughts, the images of them splayed together on the carpet next to her sofa, tearing at each other in mating heat, juxtaposed with visions of him pulling her along while they ran from a shadowy, incorporeal threat.

Something hissed, and out of the corner of her eye, she swore she saw movement. A shape slithered toward the door. Heath's eyes followed it, but his hands sought her breasts. Vaguely, as she arched into his embrace, she registered that his forearms were bare. The twining serpents were gone.

She didn't comment. Her brain wouldn't let her form words and her mouth was busy, caught by his. He pushed his tongue between her lips and she suckled it just as she had his cock. She tasted sweet and spicy at the same time, with a hint of musk and salt from his cum. He wrapped himself around her and asserted his dominance, pushing her back and stretching her out on the floor beneath him.

The images in their minds collided and battled just as their bodies did. Rihana sighed at the sensation of his lean hips sliding between her spread thighs. She crossed her legs over his ass and threaded her arms under his to grip his shoulders.

His rising erection needed no help finding her heat. The slick head bumped her clit then glided easily between her pussy lips and inside her. She tightened reflexively, prepared for the psychological torment that accompanied sexual release for her.

"Don't...Rihana. Don't fight it." His coarse whisper made the nerves in her belly tingle. She didn't want to, but her body worked on autopilot. Fear drew her nerves up into coils and she clenched everything. The pressure of her tight pussy around his cock made him grunt and he threw another image at her, this one of her letting go of her anxiety and becoming limp in his arms.

She wanted to obey. She wanted this to be pure pleasure because she needed it so badly. After a terrible night spent alternating between erotic dreams and bouts of terror, she needed to let go of everything and float. Instead she bucked her hips up, urging him deeper inside, making their connection tighter to the point of pain. "Do it. Fast and hard," she panted in his ear. To entice him, she followed her breathless command with a swipe of her tongue along the smooth patch of skin just beneath his short sideburn. He shivered and clutched her, working his hands down beneath her ass to hold her to him while he began to thrust.

His control impressed her. Usually, given such a directive from a woman, a man couldn't help but obey. His cock would do all the work for his brain, taking ruthlessly the moment it was given permission. Instead he slowed his movements, maddening her with an easy glide in and out. His hands were everywhere, massaging her backside, riding over her hips, worshiping her breasts. She ached for him, for the human connection she'd missed for so long, and for the climax which he refused to rush.

"Come on, do it." She bucked. She bit his shoulder and the taste of his skin left her wanting more. He was delicious, salty and firm. She wanted to eat him, to have him filling every orifice. "Do it!"

He smiled against her throat and nipped, thrust twice hard then drew back, almost leaving her before plunging in again. She moaned. This was torture. It had to be fast. The faster the act, the quicker she could recover from the ravages to her body and her mind, the shame of enjoying it, the rippling waves of pleasure-pain that left her open to possession by dark spirits who resided in the quaking just waiting for their chance to infiltrate her soul. Those very thoughts made her tighten up. It was coming. Her orgasm, kindled from a faint spark by his erotic visions, flamed low in her belly. Arrows of electric current shot upward and she bit her lower lip against the desire to revel in the gathering of her womb.

He breathed hard against her shoulder, lips tickling her skin, rough golden stubble exciting her nerve endings even further. "You're going to break. Let it go, Ree...please or I'll hurt you."

"Hurt me." It was the only way to get through it, the only way to reach the fleeting moment of incoherent bliss on the other side.

He plunged. She rocked. He stiffened and she tensed and just as in his fantasy, they came at the same time. Like a mountain river, he exploded into her, pumping deliriously. She drew herself up, held on and moaned her way through the fireworks that left every inch of her pulsing and slick with sweat.

It hurt, but only for an instant. When he'd emptied into her, he pulled out and covered her throbbing clit with his hand. He rubbed the ache, eased the tension, worked his thumb into the swollen folds and found her clit. Kneeling over her, he continued to work her with his hand until the sensation in her pussy peaked again.

"No, no!" She couldn't handle two orgasms. She needed to crawl away and hide her face, let her body cool, but he refused to let her. He pinched and pulled, swirled his thumb and fingers through their co-mingled fluids until she found herself reaching for another illicit bout of ecstasy.

"That's it...once more." He eased her over the precipice again and she fell with a jolt into the second wave of sensation, crying out his name.

She clamped her thighs around his hand. "No, no."

"Let it go. I can do this until you can't fight it anymore, then you'll see how it's supposed to feel."

"I can't. I can't. Please, no more."

He bowed his head and a few drops of sweat arced from the ends of his hair to splatter on her belly. "Rihana, you're close. You can enjoy this."

She let out a sharp laugh. "You think I didn't enjoy that? I've been dying for that since..." Dare she admit it? "Since the moment I laid eyes on you. It was...amazing."

He trailed his warm hand down her thigh and sat up on his haunches. "It could be perfect. It could be everything you need to overcome your..."

She held up a hand and struggled her still trembling body to a sitting position. "I've done the therapy route. I've paid doctors to tell me I needed to have more sex so I could get 'better' at controlling my fears. I've been with men who thought they could fix me by fucking me. It is what it is, Heath..." She retrieved her robe, pulled it across her to combat the sudden self-consciousness. Here she was sitting naked on her living room floor with a man who was still, technically, the chief suspect in a murder case. She smelled of him, bore his cum on her thighs and tasted him at the back of her throat. And in a day or two, who knew if she would have to watch her colleagues arrest him.

Talk about shame.

He reached out and caressed her cheek. The contact made her heart skip a beat, and against her better judgment, she turned her face to his palm and kissed it. "This was good. This was what I needed. Thank you."

"I won't leave you like this."

She looked up, startled that he'd responded to words she hadn't even said. She'd been thinking he should go so she could pull herself together. There were those words again. "If the assassin really wasn't here..."

"Whether he was or not, you need a guardian tattoo. If he should track you down again, you won't be alone." Heath rose and offered Rihana his hand. She accepted his help and climbed to her feet, holding her robe in front of her with one hand as if she hadn't just been writhing under him begging him to fuck her hard and fast.

"You think a tattoo will really help me fight this guy off?"

"The ones on your back help you fight off evil spirits, don't they?"

She pursed her lips. "Superstition. Well, most of it. And using symbols as protection against spirits and feelings is one thing. How is some ink going to protect me from a flesh-and-blood person? This guy *is* flesh and blood, right? He's real?"

"He's real, which begs the question, how did he get out of your apartment so fast without using a door or window? If you saw him in the room with you, where did he go?"

She sighed. "Well, that's the thing. I saw him...in between. I was in a trance. When I came out of it, he wasn't there. Maybe it was all a dream."

"Maybe it was," he said in a tone that told her he didn't believe that at all. "But he will show up for real eventually and before he does, you need to be prepared. Get dressed and come with me. I'll give you a guardian now."

She shook her head. "I don't think I can. I don't think I should."

"It's the only way I know how to protect you."

"Then what? You disappear to some other planet?" She didn't want to think about that possibility. Which would be worse, seeing him go to jail, or never seeing him again at all?

"No. I won't leave here until I know the Gemii won't be able to hurt you. Please." He held out his hand to her. "Come with me."

After a deep, resigned breath, she put her hand in his. "I don't know why I trust you, but I do."

"You trust me because you know me now. Better than you know anyone else in this world."

Chapter Seven

While Rihana dressed, Heath searched her apartment again. Having been in her mind as well as her body, he knew the place almost as well as he knew his own home at this point, so finding anything out of the ordinary would be easy. If it was there to find, which it wasn't.

The door and all the windows were secure. Nothing looked as though it had been tampered with. He thought of Tanesha and wondered how the assassin had gotten in to her place. Had she let him in, believing he was human? He could have posed as a delivery person or even a police officer. He could have simply broken in like a common thief. The detectives hadn't given Heath any details beyond the disturbing photograph of the death mark the Gemii had left on the reporter's body.

Frustrated, he wandered into her bedroom where he found her slipping a jacket on over a clean blouse. She eyed him expectantly. "You don't knock?"

"Aren't we past that?"

A sculpted brow rose. "No. No matter what happened...out there," she said with a truncated gesture at the living room floor. "We still barely know each other. I haven't yet figured out why I'm even considering letting you draw on me."

"Because you know it will help. It may be the only thing that can help you now, especially since you're guilty of exactly what the Gemii assassin suspected of Tanesha."

She turned away, but he caught the hint of pink on her cheeks. What they'd just done was wrong. It had been about uncontrolled lust and it had put her in greater danger. Now there wasn't time to waste if he wanted to spare her from the same fate as Tanesha.

"I still don't understand, if he found her, how come he hasn't found you yet?"

Heath shrugged. He waited with his hands on his hips, surveying the bedroom again while Rihana stuffed her gun into her purse. "He may be assuming I've had a number of lovers since I've been here. He could be observing to find out if there are any other females I might have been with."

She flung her purse strap over her shoulder and gave him a disapproving glance. "So he might be planning to track down every woman you've had sex with in the last eight years?"

That thought turned Heath's stomach. He cursed.

"Jesus. How many women are we talking about?"

"Was that a professional inquiry or did I detect a hint of jealousy in your tone?" He smirked and she pushed past him and sauntered out of the bedroom.

"I work with the police department. The last thing we need is a serial killer taking out half the women in Manhattan."

Under other circumstances Heath might have laughed at her insinuation. "Don't worry. He could never track down *all* the women I've been with."

* * * * *

Rihana still had no idea what had possessed her to accompany Heath. She'd climbed into his car without comment and sat clutching her purse—made extra heavy by the weight of her Glock—in her lap as if it were made of gold. She didn't have a permit to carry a concealed weapon unless she was officially on duty and in the company of NYPD personnel. If she was caught with the gun, she could technically be arrested and lose her job. For some reason, that concern wasn't foremost in her mind, though, as Heath drove her across town.

"I don't think we should go back to the shop. I have enough equipment at my place to do the work there. It's less likely we'll be interrupted." His comments were delivered in a deceptively casual tone, but the announcement made her skin tingle and the nerves in her belly jump. She stiffened.

"I don't think I can do this. I can't. You have to take me home."

"Rihana, you're not safe at your apartment. You might not be safe anywhere, but at least at my place I'll be better able to protect you."

She glared at him, trying hard to ignore the perfection of his profile against the blur of city streets as they careened through traffic. "What, am I going to be living with you now?"

"Until I'm done constructing a guardian for you."

"Oh no. Stop the car. I don't like this at all." She actually fumbled for the door handle. She didn't have the guts to jump out of a moving car, but he didn't know that. Or maybe he did, if his claims of being inside her head held any weight.

"Rihana!" He clamped a hand over her knee and she jolted at the contact. Not an hour ago she'd been sucking his dick and now she was afraid to have him touch her. "I understand why you're scared but—"

"I'm not scared. I just don't want to... I don't want to do it."

"You don't want to lose control. You don't want to relive what happened to you when you were a teenager."

"Don't act like you know everything about me."

"I practically do. The only thing I don't know is why you let men like Brogan and DeYoung treat you the way they do. You have so much more insight and intuition than they do. You're brilliant. You could be a detective, but you're so entrenched in the idea that you have to serve your gift that you won't pursue anything else."

"None of that is true. That just shows how little you do know about me."

He nodded in a maddeningly male way that showcased his perceived superiority. She wanted to smack him.

"So prove me wrong."

"Well now, there's a challenge I might be inclined to take, except according to you, you won't be around. You're leaving town, or the planet or the galaxy as soon as you can, so why should I waste any time trying to impress you when you won't be here to see it?"

His lips flattened and his hands tightened on the wheel. "You're right. You shouldn't do anything just to teach me a lesson. Do it for yourself."

"The only thing I'm going to do for myself is get out of this car at the next light."

"If you do, you'll end up like Tanesha."

"And if I don't, what happens to me? How do I handle this guardian beast you want to give me?"

"You'll adapt very quickly and you may even enjoy it."

"Oh right. That's what they all say."

He smirked again. God, if he wasn't so handsome she'd rearrange his face for him.

"Don't take my word for it. Why don't you talk to someone just like you who has her own guardian beast?"

She rolled her eyes. "Let me guess, one of your many lovers?"

"Not at all. Before we go to my place, I'll take you to meet Makena Brady. She's my partner's mate. She has a guardian. She can tell you what it's like."

Rihana crossed her arms over her chest. It seemed like the perfect way to postpone this tattooing session he had planned. "Fine. I'd love to meet her. Let's go right now."

If Heath was privy to her ulterior motive, he didn't let on. He merely adjusted his route through the city, and less than a quarter hour later they pulled into the parking garage of a high rise in SoHo.

She sensed his concern as they navigated the dim concrete cavern of the garage. His gaze never left the shadows as they made their way toward an elevator and his hand never left the small of her back. The possessive gesture irritated her more so because it turned her on. The feel of his fingers pressing her flesh through the layers of her jacket and blouse brought back memories of their feverish coupling on her living room carpet. Heat rose in her cheeks and she fingered her collar as if that might help relieve her psychological discomfort.

She distracted herself by thinking about the dead reporter. She still had nothing concrete to offer Brogan and DeYoung about the case other than a vague physical description of Tanesha's killer. The man's features hadn't been any more distinct in her own vision, so she might need to visit Andy Sullivan and pick up a piece of the victim's clothing. That thought offered her no comfort. It was one of the least pleasant aspects of her job, but at least it took her mind off the uncontrolled erotic images that swirled through her mind every time she looked at Heath.

They rode the elevator to the fourth floor in the company of an elderly woman who carried a small dog in her oversized purse. She leveled a slightly apprehensive smile at them and Rihana watched Heath's natural charm soften the woman's expression the moment he looked at her.

They left her on the elevator and followed the corridor to the last apartment on the left. Heath knocked, and a moment later a man answered the door. He was just slightly taller than Heath and just as physically striking. Jet black hair fell to his jawline, which was defined by a shadow of blue-black stubble. His eyes were dark amber and rimmed by thick lashes. He wore a soft white dress shirt, dark jeans and brown loafers and stood with his hands in his pockets, shoulders at ease. His stance was casual but his hawk-like gaze attested to the gravity of the situation. He offered Rihana a tight smile and gestured the two of them into the apartment.

The place was done in rich earth tones and sleek modern furniture. Light cherry paneling gave it a cozy warmth, brightened by white throw rugs on the polished floor. Someone had an eye for decorating that put Rihana's reliance on hand-me-downs and flea market bargains to shame.

"You must be Rihana," he said as Heath closed the door behind them. "Heath told me about you and your special talents."

She nodded. "And you must be..."

"Darq Stone, my partner and my crèche brother." Heath didn't really need to make the introductions. Rihana already felt like she knew the dark-haired man. Her foray into Heath's mind had supplied, if not a host of personal details, at least a vague familiarity. She got the feeling that even though their visit had seemed impromptu, Darq was not at all surprised by their arrival. Something told her the two men could communicate on a nonverbal level. In fact they seemed to be having a conversation now while she stood between them soaking in the ambience of the gorgeous apartment.

"Makena?" Darq called after exchanging a meaningful look with Heath.

Rihana raised a brow. A second later a woman emerged from another room. The statuesque blonde wore a flowing peasant skirt and an embroidered turquoise blouse. Her feet were bare. Clearly the couple had been relaxing, though they both wore expressions of concern. The woman moved to stand next to Darq and he slipped an arm around her waist. Though the gesture was common, it struck Rihana as being deeply intimate. The bond between these two people was palpable and it made her heart ache just a little bit.

Heath made the introductions and the woman offered her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Rihana. I understand you work with the police to solve murders."

"I'm an NYPD psychic." For once, Rihana didn't feel self-conscious to admit that. Ever since she'd signed on with the department, along with a score of other gifted individuals, she'd battled the prejudices that still existed against people like her. Color had long since ceased to be an issue. Now it was what was on the inside that set her apart from her colleagues, the unusual structure of her mind as opposed to the shade of

her skin tone. The more things changed, as the saying went, the more they stayed the same.

"I imagine your job is difficult at the best of times," Makena said. The sentiment surprised Rihana. Most people figured her work would be exciting and she'd learned not to tell the truth about it and shatter their illusions.

She nodded. "You must work for the city." She let out a faint laugh and the woman smiled. Darq gazed at his...girlfriend? wife? adoringly.

"No, but I know what it's like to do a job that's a lot harder than it looks. I work in public relations for a plastics manufacturer. Why don't you come sit down with me? Heath told us why you're here."

The confession startled Rihana. She glanced at Heath. He hadn't called his partner while they were in the car, so unless he'd planned this whole meeting previously, it didn't make sense that Makena would know exactly why they'd come.

"It's a little like telepathy between them. It works over short distances. Heath contacted Darq while the two of you were in the parking garage."

Rihana's gaze bounced between the two men, who both managed to look sheepish at being tattled on. "Oh...another psychic link?"

Heath nodded. "Yes. Forged when we were children. I can contact him if he's within a few miles of me...though he doesn't always listen to what I say."

"Hmm. Distance has no bearing on that. I rarely listen to what you say." Darq's tone held a hint of amusement.

Heath's faint smile in response faded quickly enough. "We need to talk as well."

"I'll take Rihana into the other room." Makena gestured for Rihana to follow her and she obeyed reluctantly. She would have liked to listen in on Heath's conversation with his partner. She'd probably learn a lot more about the case that way, but she weighed that against what she might learn from Makena.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"No. I'm fine. Your place is beautiful." She suppressed a sigh as they settled into an overstuffed cream-colored couch in the next room. The wood accents seemed to be teak, and shades of deep salmon complemented the décor like treasures, peeking out from piles of throw pillows or hidden in the impressionist artwork on the walls. "You have quite an eye."

"Thank you."

Rihana expected more small talk, but instead Makena fell silent. She gave Rihana an appraising look. "Heath wants to give you a guardian."

"Yes. Apparently you know more about it than I do."

"He relayed his request to Darq. He wants me to explain it to you."

"I don't understand what a tattoo will do for me." She didn't feel like mentioning those she already possessed. She'd never questioned Gramma Essie's insistence that the symbols etched on her skin would protect her. Why should this be any different?

"On Verakos, where Darq and Heath are from, there are people who have the ability to create...living creatures out of images. Children especially are bonded to these animals through the images and the animals act like totems. It's similar to our Native American myths in some respects."

"Myths won't protect me from a killer."

"No, but a guardian beast will...well, it may. I don't think we're dealing in absolutes here. The man who killed that reporter...used a poisonous image to do it. It's like a guardian, only without a specific form and purpose. It's just a tainted mass that he injected into her body. A guardian could have prevented that from happening."

"Is that the only way this...Gemii can kill?"

Makena's lips flattened and her hazel eyes seemed to darken. She looked down at her hands. "I don't know. From what Darq tells me about the Gemii as a whole, they don't have any particular set of rules. I don't think this person is above doing whatever he has to in order to carry out his assignment."

"And that's to kill Heath and Darq and make sure they don't have any children running around who could take over back on Verakos?"

"Exactly. Heath could explain all the history of their world to you better than I can, but essentially, Verakos was ruled by an extended royal family, several bloodlines merged together. They produced large numbers of children and reared them in a crèche, so they would always consider themselves a family. Darq and Heath had different fathers and mothers but they were reared as brothers and sent away together for their own protection when they were young boys, when the Gemii decided to overthrow the royal family and began killing the members of their crèche. They've been running for a long time, trying to preserve what little is left of the royal bloodlines."

"And the Gemii have finally found them."

Makena nodded again. She glanced at the doorway and Rihana sensed the woman's concern for the man she obviously loved.

"Heath said he wanted you all to leave...to go to some other planet to escape the assassin."

"Darq refuses to leave. He's tired of running."

"Isn't he afraid for you? If this Gemii is killing anyone who might possibly have conceived a child with Heath or Darq..." She let the question hang. Clearly, she didn't need to ask if Makena and Darq were intimate. Even if Heath hadn't used the word "mate" when discussing them, their relationship would have been obvious just by the way they looked at each other, the way Darq had slid his arm possessively around Makena's waist, the way their hips touched when they stood next to each other.

Makena's exasperated sigh spoke of her affection for Heath's partner. "Darq would rather fight than run. He won't let anything happen to me."

Rihana wondered if it was true conviction or just blind naivety behind Makena's words. There was no way she could imagine herself mustering either emotion for

herself. She would never believe Heath could protect her from a cold-blooded killer and she would never trust anyone enough to put her life in their hands, no matter how skilled. "You have one of these guardians yourself?"

"Yes." Makena smiled. "When we first met, Darq gave me a temporary one. She watched over me, but eventually she faded. Now I have a permanent guardian. Would you like to see?"

Temporary? That might work. She could agree to something painless to appease Heath's protective nature and not have to undergo another branding. She nodded without fully realizing what she'd agreed to and sat somewhat dumbfounded when the beautiful woman before her pulled off her blouse.

Makena stripped to the waist without a hint of self-consciousness and twisted her upper body away from Rihana. The movement revealed an image that stretched from her lower rib cage across her back. Scales of silvery lavender coalesced there to form something that looked to be half dragon and half snake. Its head rested on her shoulder, much like the hand of God rested on Rihana's. The body of the beast curled around her as if it might be riding on her back. The creature's sparkling sapphire eye seemed to stare at Rihana with benign curiosity.

"Oh...my." Shock at having a woman she'd just met disrobe before her coupled with awe at the stunning clarity of the image. The creature seemed almost three-dimensional. Its hide sparkled and shifted as if it were moving and breathing. The urge to touch it was overwhelming and Rihana feared it might actually be a desire to feel the woman's soft skin and exceptional curves under her hand rather than the rough texture of the reptilian guardian.

"She's bonded to me, but she goes away sometimes...to be with Darq's guardian."

Rihana raised a brow, her temporary trance broken. Makena retrieved her blouse and slipped it over her head. The movement caused the muscles under her pale skin to ripple and the dragon creature to stretch languidly. The idea of a living image on her skin made her shiver. If this talk was supposed to ease her anxiety about being tattooed, it had failed. She didn't want a dragon living on her body, all sharp claws and teeth wrapped around her naked flesh.

"Don't you...do you feel..."

"It's not painful. It's actually amazing. I don't know how I lived before I was bonded. I must have been a lot more lonely than I realized. Of course, I'm not sure how I managed to survive before I met Darq either. He changed my life."

For some reason, that put Rihana slightly more at ease. Makena's devotion to the man who was her "mate" seemed more natural than this guardian beast business. She understood loving someone enough to do anything they asked. It was that emotion that had kept her from ever disobeying her grandmother—the one person in her life who had always looked out for her and would have done anything, no matter how painful, in order to protect her.

"Darq must be very special for you to trust him so much." She hoped Makena wasn't offended by the implication that she might not ever trust anyone that much herself.

"He is. He's my world and I know I'm safe with him." Makena rose and straightened her blouse. She headed back out of the room the way she'd come and Rihana followed, strangely eager to be reunited with Heath.

"How long have you been together?" she asked as she passed a small framed photograph of Makena and Darq together. It looked like it had been taken recently.

The woman's skirt swished as she turned slightly to toss her casual response over her shoulder. "We met eight days ago."

Chapter Eight

Any small hope that Rihana would agree to a guardian tattoo had evaporated completely by the time they returned to Heath's car. She'd been charming and polite to Darq and Makena, graciously accepting an invitation to share a small meal with them before leaving. They'd ridden the elevator down to the parking garage in pregnant silence. Only once she'd closed the passenger door, sealing them in a quiet bubble of Corinthian leather, did she erupt.

"Eight days? They've known each other a *week*? You had me thinking they were married."

"By Verakos tradition, they are. The length of time they've known each other isn't important. They have a connection."

She crossed her arms over her chest and tossed her head. "Where I come from that's called control. It's having a power over someone and it's not normal."

"So you don't believe in love at first sight?" He allowed himself a glance at her as he maneuvered the car out of the dank parking level and back into traffic. He didn't ask her permission, merely headed instinctively toward the apartment that was his alone now, since Darq had begun spending all his free time at Makena's.

She raised her chin, a sure sign that some internal battle was taking place. "No, I don't. Those kinds of relationships are all about lust. The connection isn't real, it's just sex." The thready tone of her voice told him she didn't really believe that. He didn't need a psychic link to figure out the idea of a fairy-tale romance appealed to her. She rebelled because she didn't think she could ever achieve that and probably because of the pragmatic influence of her grandmother as well. Heath imagined a woman who put all her faith in the supernatural and very little in the normal instincts that governed human behavior, such as the desire for physical intimacy.

"Sex can help form a bond like that. I won't deny it's a chemical reaction as well as a psychological one, but it's just as strong and real."

"Trust doesn't just happen over night. I'm sorry. I don't believe that."

"Back at your apartment you said you trusted me."

"I meant I believed you. I believe that you believe what you're telling me. I'm still not sure I trust that it's actually all true."

That stung a bit, but he did understand where she was coming from. "What about Makena's tattoo? You saw it. It's not a run-of-the-mill image, is it?"

"No. It seemed to breathe. Back at my place when we were...busy...I thought the snakes on your arms were gone. I swore I didn't see them, but when I looked again after, they were back."

"They were protecting us."

"Right." She didn't believe that at all. He sensed by the darkening of her aura that she probably would rather assume she'd imagined it than believe her eyes had not been playing tricks on her. For someone who had the ability to see into the minds of others, she certainly was a skeptic.

"I can give you a demonstration if you like."

"That's all right."

"If you don't believe the guardian beasts are alive, then what about Makena's explanation of the way Tanesha died? Do you believe that a protective tattoo can counteract the poison used by the assassin?"

Rihana shrugged. "I don't know what to believe. I only know I don't feel like going back to my place. I feel like he was there and I think he'll come back."

Heath nodded. That was one point in his favor and he would take what he could get. At least at his place, Rihana would be safe, tattoo or not. He didn't ask her where she wanted to go, just drove to his building and parked. They sat for a moment in the car, listening to the echoes of sounds in the parking garage.

"Makena said she had a temporary tattoo first," she said finally. "What about that?"

Heath sighed. He'd hoped Makena wouldn't mention that. Darq had drawn a surface image on her skin only because she hadn't decided on a permanent image when she came into SkIntense as a client. The small guardian Darq had given her was meant only as a watcher, to help him connect with the woman who had awakened such strong emotions in him. A temporary image would not protect Rihana from the Gemii indefinitely, but at the very least it might make her more receptive to the idea of a permanent image. "We could start that way. Come up with me and we'll talk about it."

She finally turned her suspicious gaze on him and there was just the faintest hint of mischief in her eyes. "Just talk?"

"If that's all you want to do, fine. We'll do nothing but talk. Once I get you naked, of course."

* * * * *

Rihana tried to ignore the tingle of anticipation that raced down her spine at Heath's suggestive words. She'd struggled all afternoon to put their erotic interlude out of her mind and at every turn she'd been reminded of her indiscretion. Now here she was, alone with the man her colleagues would call "the suspect", riding another elevator with him to another luxury apartment where God knows what would happen between them.

She should have left, but she'd fallen under his spell as completely, it seemed, as the lovely Makena Brady had fallen under the spell of Darq Stone. Every time Rihana allowed her gaze to wander to Heath, her belly clenched, and the temperature ratcheted up a degree or two. Her pussy ached each time her mind brought up images of their

fevered coupling. Already tension crawled along her nerves, drawing her shoulders up tight and prickling her skin. She wouldn't be able to relax until she came.

By the time they reached his apartment on the eighth floor, she was sweating under her jacket and her panties were damp. She didn't like the feeling. It shamed her to realize how strong an effect he had on her and that she had no control over her body's reactions. Her nipples were so tightly contracted they hurt. Her limbs felt heavy, and butterflies beat their wings against the walls of her stomach.

She wondered if he were partially responsible for the tide of lust that threatened to drown her. Was she only reacting to his thoughts and feelings, at the mercy of the psychic link he insisted she'd initiated?

The look he turned on her once he'd closed the front door behind her told her that might be true. His own thoughts were influencing hers. How could she fight that? Weren't her own tattoos supposed to protect her from the spirits of others?

"Welcome to my home," he said and showed her in through a narrow entry hall. The décor here was more traditional than at Makena's place. Heath's apartment sported intricate crown moldings and brocade upholstery. The furniture was massive and mostly carved of dark, highly polished wood. The walls were ecru, the carpeting uniform gray, soft pile and freshly vacuumed, judging by the lack of footprints.

With the flip of a wall switch, he flooded the place with a current of classical music. "Come with me into the bedroom. I have some equipment in there."

"Convenient place to keep it."

He grinned. "Yes, it is."

She didn't want to follow because she knew what would happen. In no time at all she'd be naked and ravenous, probably sucking him off again or on her knees for some other reason. Her feet refused to indulge her reluctance and she shuffled after him.

The bedroom was just dark enough to be sultry. The California king-sized bed bore sheets of gunmetal satin that made it look like a block of iron sitting in the middle of the room. He adjusted the lighting to give the place a warm glow from overhead spotlights set around the perimeter of the ceiling. Behind the bed was a mirror and at its foot, a black leather bench. Her missing scarf lay across the end of the mattress.

She blushed. "I accidentally left that at your shop."

"It was no accident."

She resented the implication. She'd been in such a hurry to escape after he'd brought her to a shuddering orgasm that she'd barely had both her shoes on when she stumbled out the back door. Acute embarrassment made her shiver.

She jumped at the feel of his fingers on her shoulders, but she managed to keep herself calm while he slid her jacket off.

He placed the garment on a high-backed chair in the corner of the room and returned to walk around her in a circle. "You stand like you have a stick up your ass."

She burst into surprised laughter. She'd expected sexual innuendo, or even an open invitation to fuck. "I knew you were charming, but wow. Way to knock a girl's socks off."

He faced her, wry amusement lighting his features. "It's not just your socks I want off. How do you manage to get through life being so uptight, Miss Daniels?" He grazed her cheek with a forefinger and the feathery touch sent a cascade of awareness down her body. Next he rested his hands on her shoulders and pressed down a bit. "Drop your arms. Breathe deep. If you lock up all your muscles, you'll impede blood flow to your brain and you'll pass out."

"Is this a yoga class? Because I forgot my mat."

"Do you suffer from dizzy spells? Do you get lightheaded often?"

She did. Gramma Essie always told her that was her connection to the quaking. It drained her energy.

"No," he said, not in response to his own question, but to her unspoken thoughts. "It's because you clench up everything all the time. You're suffocating yourself with your own nervous tension."

"And how are you going to relax me?" Her impertinent question prompted him to slip his fingers into the collar of her blouse. One by one he opened the buttons, making sure to brush against her bare skin as he did so. "Oh."

After he flicked open the last button, he spread the shirt and pushed it off her shoulders, exposing her bra. She figured he would go for that next. God, she wanted him to, but with her jaw clenched so tightly to keep from moaning aloud, she couldn't tell him.

Maddeningly, he ignored her breasts and instead ran his hands down her abdomen to the fly of her jeans. He worked quickly to open the button and zipper and then eased the stiff denim down over her hips and thighs. She arched her back instinctively but refused to make a sound. He helped her slip her shoes off and step out of the jeans. He squeezed her ass before stripping off her panties, and she stifled a groan. This had already gone too far. Why couldn't he simply paint on her hand or her arm? Why did she have to be so exposed and so vulnerable to him?

She squeezed her eyes shut when he dropped a kiss on her shoulder and her knees threatened to buckle when he tugged her sleeves free of her arms and dropped her shirt on the floor. Now she wore only her bra, and he made quick work of that, opening the fastening in the back with expert fingers.

At the foot of the bed, he snagged her scarf and returned to her side. For a moment she worried that he planned to tie her up and she tensed even further. A stab of fear wormed its way through her lower belly and he must have felt it because he grunted.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "I'd love to tie you up, but I won't." He offered her the scarf. "Cover your eyes with this. I don't want you to watch me work. I'd rather you be surprised." The sleek watered silk felt like heaven against her sensitive skin, but fear of losing control made her hesitate. "You can remove it any time. It's

about trust. If you trust me not to take advantage of your not being able to see, I'll trust you not to remove the blindfold."

She pursed her lips and considered the offer. Why not? Her hands would be free. Slowly she raised the scarf and folded it in half. With sinuous movements, she tied it around her head and adjusted it to cover her eyes.

"That's better. Now lie down." She heard him pat the bed, and she permitted him to help her into the center of the huge mattress. The sheets flowed like mercury beneath her trembling body as she positioned herself. Wickedly, he dipped a finger between her thighs, teasing her pussy lips with the illicit contact.

In response, she clamped her knees together and he laughed. "That won't save you, my goddess. You know what you want and you know you won't resist for much longer."

She closed her eyes under the silk. "I thought you were going to draw a temporary tattoo on me."

"I am. I haven't decided where yet."

She shivered in anticipation but kept her legs together. Her clit pulsed and she ignored it.

"Lie still," he said close to her ear. The words startled her because she hadn't figured he was that close. "I don't want to spill anything on the bed." On that cryptic note he left the room. She knew because she dared to peek. When he returned a moment later, she slammed her eyes quickly shut. Anticipation made her muscles feel like steel cables. If she stiffened any more, she'd probably float right off the bed.

She didn't need to be psychic to feel his appraisal. Once again, she was naked before him and enjoying his scrutiny. Her body tingled and her hands fisted in the sheets. "Well?"

"Now you're anxious. Before you were reluctant."

"It's not the tattoo I'm anxious for. It's what comes after."

He let out a low growl. "I wish you hadn't said that. Now I'll be rushing to finish my work."

She smiled. Good. She couldn't wait to finish herself. Now if only she could entice him to begin.

He remained silent for a long time and finally, just as she was considering removing the blindfold to check on him, she felt the sensual touch of bristles on her skin. She raised her brows but forced herself not to try to peek. A paintbrush? A series of quick strokes tickled her left thigh. Her pussy dampened in response to the tantalizing sensation. She'd expected the hiss of an airbrush, not the layering of thick, cool paint on her body.

Each pass of the brush felt like a rough tongue, and she imagined him licking her as he worked. Slowly, he made his way up from her thigh, across her belly to her right

breast. Long strokes followed short ones. The curving journey of the bristles left her skin tingling everywhere.

She had no idea what the image might be, but it stretched across her body in a winding path all the way to her right breast. There, he dabbed at her nipple with sweet-smelling paint—tap, tap, tap. Her body responded as if she'd been shocked. Arrows of need raced through her. She grasped the sheet and finally let out a low moan. If a few strokes of a paintbrush felt like this, what would his tongue do to her?

"Heath..."

"I'm almost finished."

"My God. I think I'm going to come."

She sensed him smiling and the pressure of the brush against her nipple grew more intense. Her whole breast tingled. Moisture pooled between her legs and she spread them instinctively, not anticipating the effect a rush of cool air would have against her clit. She bit her lower lip. How could she be on the edge of an orgasm just from having him run a brush over her skin?

"You're close," he said, his voice husky. "Let me help you."

Her breath caught in her throat as he ran the hard handle of the brush down her body in a serpentine line, exciting the taut muscles of her abdomen, parting her intimate curls and finally touching the hot, hard nub of her clitoris. The contact jolted her hard, not just the feel of the slim finger of wood touching her most sensitive flesh, but the sudden irrational fear that he might thrust the handle into her cunt. She tensed every muscle in her body and on a low keen, she came hard. Sensation ricocheted through her womb, tightening and releasing. Moisture spilled from her pussy with each pulse of her orgasm. Her body rocked and she cried out with the inevitable pleasure/pain.

Above her, Heath moaned as well. "Beautiful...damn. I could come just from watching you."

"Oh God...I never..."

He leaned over her body and blew a warm breath across her unpainted nipple. "You never came so hard in your life?"

She nodded, still shivering, shaking. The pulsing of her clit matched the thundering of her heart. "No...God no."

"Take a deep breath, Rihana. This is only the beginning."

She obeyed and a second later he did impale her—not with the brush fortunately, but with his fingers. Two—thrust deep. She screamed his name and her back arched off the bed.

"That's it. Feel it, Ree. I'm going to make you come every way I know how until you can't move, can't think, until you don't have enough energy left in you to be tense. Then, when you're too wrung out to cringe or grit your teeth and hold your breath, when you're too exhausted to worry about feeling shame for your pleasure, I'm going to fuck you."

Chapter Nine

Heath wasn't sure he could last until the paint on Rihana's skin dried enough to touch. He'd made the image thick and dark, infusing it with as much power as he could without using permanent ink.

Running a brush along her curves had been difficult enough with a rock-hard erection straining against his fly. Watching her come had nearly done him in. He couldn't keep his hands off her any longer, so he gave in.

Casting the paintbrush aside, he'd spread her thighs and pushed two fingers inside her. His cock jumped at her sharp intake of breath. She was still coming, her smooth inner walls contracting rhythmically around his fingers. He took advantage of that and began thrusting in time and rubbing her clit simultaneously.

She bit her lip and hissed through her teeth as the next orgasm hit her on the heels of the first. Her body shuddered, and she strained with the effort to ride the increasing wave of sensation without breaking apart.

He smiled. God, he wanted to pull off his clothes and take her, but it was still too soon. She still held her thighs rigid and the muscles of her flat belly were taut as bowstrings. She needed more and he gave it.

At just the right moment, he increased pressure on her clitoris, massaging with his thumb while he swirled one finger in her slick cunt. She bucked her hips, drawing in rasping breaths. If he timed it right, he could give her half a dozen orgasms, one after another until her nerve endings gave out and left her practically helpless.

"Good...very good." He brushed at the tight black curls of her mound and watched her shiver. Her hands fisted in his sheets and beneath the band of golden silk covering her eyes her cheeks were damp with sweat. "Tell me you want more."

"Mmm...more...Ah!" He entered her again, reaching carefully for her G-spot. Her inner contractions renewed, harder at first, wringing a sob from her. "Heath...please...please..."

"You're not done yet, my goddess. Not even close."

Shivering with his own anticipation, he settled himself between her thighs. While her body rocked in the throes of orgasm number three, he set off a fourth with his tongue. A quick lick and suck of her clit, then he ran his tongue down her slit and inside, a fast, illicit thrust as deep as he could go.

She shuddered and curled up, grabbing at his hair. She pulled and he smiled while working a finger into her wet recesses. "No more..."

"Come on, be honest. You've never gone this far or this long before, have you? You didn't know you could."

She didn't respond with words. Images flashed in his mind of a musty barn, her teenaged self pulling a sweatshirt over her breasts while a young man slipped faded jeans up over his slim hips. Heath felt the moment as clearly as she remembered it—the smell of sweat and sex mixed with the aromas of fresh hay and wood, grain and horses. Her legs trembled from the force of her young lover's anxious thrusts. She wanted to toss her clothes aside and beg him to take her again because she needed more, but fear of being caught made them dress quickly and race back home on their dirt bikes.

Next, a dark apartment filled his mind, candles cast a dim glow over a familiar bed. A man rose above her, thick cock in his hand.

Heath slowed his movements. "This was recent," he said, fighting a stab of jealousy. "Who is he?"

"No one important. Good...sex, bad relationship."

"Hmm." He channeled some of that frustration into his next mission and drew her clit into his mouth. She cried out and pushed her hips forward. He felt the tremors inside her and he sucked harder. She dug her nails into his shoulders and swallowed a moan.

"Is this good sex?" He worked his thumb against her sensitive flesh again, harder, faster. Beneath her flawless skin, her muscles tensed. Sweat beaded on her upper lip and her breath became ragged. Heath stared at her parted lips and focused on the teasing glint of silver visible between her teeth. Her piercing clicked against her upper incisors as she shuddered. Bringing her pleasure made him hard. His power over her in this moment was the ultimate turn-on. He allowed himself a wicked smile and increased the rhythm of his intimate massage.

She'd break soon, then he could do what he wanted with her, what he needed to do before he exploded.

"Yes..."

"Very good sex?"

She growled. "Yes!"

"Great sex?"

"Oh God, yes..."

"Do you want to come one more time, Rihana?"

"No, please, no...I can't."

"I'm sorry. That's not the answer I'm looking for."

"Damn you!"

"What is the right answer? Tell me, and then you'll get your reward. Do you want to come again?"

"Yes, yes. Do it."

He did and finally she gave in and let herself go.

* * * * *

Rihana panted as if she'd run a marathon. Rivulets of sweat ran between her breasts and down from her temples under the band of silk across her eyes. She never thought she'd be grateful for a blindfold, but the cloth barrier actually made it easier for her to deal with the emotions spinning out of control in her brain.

If she couldn't see Heath, she could fight the instinct to be ashamed of her body's reactions. Behind the silk, she was alone, experiencing this forbidden, exhausting pleasure that made her limbs tremble and her heart thunder.

She'd lost count after five orgasms. Finally, Heath allowed her to rest. She lay limp as a rag doll, stretched out in the center of his bed. The soft sheets gathered loosely under her hands now. She'd lost the ability to make a fist, along with the will to hold herself stiff in anticipation of each new race to completion. For the first time since she was sixteen, she just let it happen and the freedom left her weak with exhilaration.

While she lay humming tunelessly to herself, lost in the rhythmic contractions of her womb and the gentle pulse of her pussy lips, he began to massage her arms, her wrists, her hands. The friction of skin on skin felt wonderful. Little by little her breathing slowed to normal. She would have drifted off, except the sound of a zipper being pulled open startled her. She listened to clothing rustle and felt the mattress dip beneath her as he climbed aboard again.

Her first instinct, of course, was to tense. Though she wanted him to fuck her, she didn't think she could handle it in this liquid state of being. She whimpered when he took her hands in his.

"It's all right. Sit up."

"I can't. Too tired." She hummed again and he laughed.

"You can sleep when I'm done with you."

"Aww..."

"Come on. I have something to show you." He tugged and she managed to find enough strength to pull herself up. Her stomach muscles protested. They'd been wrung hard. Her clit pulsed from the pressure of her thighs when she closed her legs and drew them beneath her.

Carefully, he guided her to turn around, eased her up onto her knees and straightened her shoulders and her back. "You can take the blindfold off now and look at your guardian."

Her heartbeat picked up pace again. She'd forgotten about the image that crossed her body from breast to opposite hip. *Temporary*. Her mind supplied the word to calm her ricocheting anxiety. She wouldn't have to keep it if she didn't like it.

"You'll like it," he said, his psychic presence a comfort rather than an intrusion in her mind. "You'll like what it does for you."

She made a noncommittal noise and lifted her hands. Her arms felt heavy as lead bars, but she managed to find the edges of the scarf and pull it off. He'd maneuvered her to face the mirrored wall behind the bed, and the view made her suck in a startled breath.

Softly lit with the spotlights above, she looked like an exotic island princess. Sweat shone on her limbs and her chest and color darkened her cheekbones.

Slashed across her torso lay a serpent, its body as thick as her wrist. Its head, the size of her fist, lay on her hip, just beneath the slight swell of her abdomen. Detailed scales in shades of burnt orange and fire red stretched over her belly and up between her breasts. A tail the color of sand lay across her nipple, and she moaned at the memory of the stiff bristles teasing her hypersensitive flesh.

Heath slid his arms around her waist and pulled her back against him. The contact didn't disturb the now dry paint, but it fired all the nerves in her body again, this time with a liquid warmth that made her feel as if she would melt into a puddle.

The hard ridge of his erection slid beneath her ass as he positioned himself behind her.

"What do you think?"

"I think that's a very big snake."

His laugh vibrated against her back. "I mean about your guardian."

"Oh that. Very...interesting."

"Careful, it has teeth." To punctuate his words, he bit her shoulder. Desire slithered down her body, hardening her nipples and making the serpent's tail stand up, as if it were ready to strike at something.

"How long will it last?"

"Just a day or so." He grasped her hips, guided her backward at the same time he bent her upper body forward. "When it fades, you'll be ready for a permanent image. I promise you that."

She wanted to ask him if he would still be around then but thought better of it. Her mind fogged and her thoughts seemed to scatter. Concentration centered on the hot shaft intruding between her legs. She allowed him to guide her down to the mattress and adjust her hips. She no longer had the strength to tense up in fear of the pleasure/pain of penetration. She was boneless and utterly obedient to his every move, and when he slid into her from behind, it felt like heaven.

He growled something that might have been a curse as he took her. "You're so fucking tight..."

Hmm. She wanted to respond. The words formed in her mind, praise for his size and length, but they never made it to her lips. Instead she gasped as he thrust forward. She clenched the sheets, spread her legs wider and held on, watching his face in the mirror as he impaled her.

His fingers gripped her hips hard, but she'd lost the desire to cringe or bite her lip. Instead she hummed with pleasure, shoving back each time he pushed forward, taking him in deep. Watching him make love to her was the most erotic thing she'd ever experienced. Seeing her breasts bounce with the rhythm of his thrusts and his expression change from determination to ecstasy when he reached his peak incited her own exhausted body to yet another orgasm.

The contractions hit like a truck and she cried out, amazed that her tortured nerves could still reach such a height. Behind her, Heath groaned. He gripped her hips and his body went rigid. His thighs pressed against hers, the thick muscles iron hard. With a fierce final thrust he came, growling like a jungle cat.

When the pulsing of his cock subsided, he slid out of her and she collapsed onto the bed. He threw himself down next to her, breathing hard. Sweat had darkened strands of his hair to the color of wet sand and his eyes had dilated to pools of bottomless black rimmed by the thinnest ring of blue.

He stroked a hand over her back, gently tracing her spine down to where it met her backside. "You are amazing."

"I think you actually did all the work." She managed a smile and would have reached out to brush at one of those damp tendrils of hair on his forehead, but she didn't have the strength to do much more than breathe at the moment.

"You let me. You let yourself go."

"Hmm. You distracted me."

He shifted his body and gathered her in his arms. "Rest a bit and I'll be happy to distract you again."

The front of her brain agreed that would be nice. She looked forward to another round of this no-holds-barred lovemaking, but there was that little voice in the back of her brain. The disturbing echo of Gramma Essie's words intruded on this stolen moment of bliss. *You can't get involved with him. He'll be gone, and then where will you be?*

That voice would require a lot of arguing to shut it up. Her heart might require a lot of healing if she let this strange liaison go any further, but right now, all she could do was give in to the weight of her eyelids. She let them slide closed on an image of his handsome face only inches from hers and the feel of his strong arms wrapped around her, protecting her from everything. Later she'd fix it. She'd extricate herself from his life and this Svengali-like hold he seemed to have over her. Later she'd come back to her senses, but for now, she was completely his to do with as he pleased, and for a moment, she had no regrets.

Chapter Ten

The smell of fresh espresso helped lift the fog of sleep that clouded Heath's thoughts the next morning. Spending the night with Rihana in his bed, in his arms, had left him pleasantly sated physically, but something gnawed at him. Unable to extricate himself from her thoughts, he felt almost drugged by her presence in his mind.

He'd dreamed her dreams through the night. He'd felt her body quicken when he woke her in the darkness and sought her sexual heat. Every sensation she experienced was mirrored and magnified for him, and now, just like her, he was almost too tired to move.

No session with a member of the opposite sex had ever left him this drained and this fulfilled at the same time. That bothered him.

A double shot of caffeine gave him a minor boost and cleared away some of the veil, but even though he'd left her sleeping, he still felt twined with her as if she were walking beside him while he wandered through the kitchen preparing a morning meal.

He wanted to call Darq, but he wasn't yet ready to put words to this unusual mood. It could be that stress had left his mental defenses low. Time and distance would dissolve the psychic link between them and he'd feel normal again, eventually.

For now, the best he could do was strong coffee and lots of protein. He pulled a carton of eggs from the fridge and considered what ingredients he had on hand for omelets. His plan to leave this world had involved cleaning out the perishables in his pantry...partly as a courtesy for whoever might inherit the place when he was gone and partly in a desire not to waste the bounty available in this teeming city. He'd spent years in places where food was scarce and what little could be found was barely nutritious. He and Darq had experienced hunger and lived on worlds where they had to spend each day searching and fighting for sustenance. This world had seemed like paradise when they'd arrived, with its abundance of food and water, theirs for nothing more than the exchange of currency, which they'd discovered was easy enough to obtain with the skills they'd acquired over their years in exile.

He'd miss this home, the surge of humanity, the diversity.

He'd miss Rihana.

That thought startled him. Certainly she was beautiful, but he'd bedded countless beautiful females during his journey. He had no guarantee of finding a bed partner easily on the next world. In some places, mating was a sacred ritual undertaken only with permission from an entire tribe. Here, it was recreation. He would definitely miss that.

He shook off the troubling concerns and began rummaging for a proper pan. The door chime interrupted his mission and he sighed before pressing the intercom button.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Gyland, can I speak to you for a moment?" Detective Brogan's voice rumbled through the speaker.

"You are speaking to me." He couldn't resist the quip, though he knew sarcasm would not endear him to the surly investigator.

"In person, if you don't mind, unless you'd like everyone in the lobby of your building to hear our conversation."

Heath hit the access key. "Come on up."

Brogan made no further comment. Heath knew from experience he had seven minutes before the elevator reached his floor. He slipped back into the bedroom, pulled on a pair of pants and a fresh shirt and cast a longing glance at the mocha brown body wrapped in his sheets.

He couldn't resist touching her. A kiss on her cheek roused her and she shivered when he ran a fingertip down the glorious curve of her spine. "Stay in here, Ree. Brogan's come to talk to me."

Her eyes snapped open, and she hissed in a breath. "Shit."

"It'll be fine. I don't think he's come here to search the place." Even as he said the words, his heart sank. He'd told Brogan to come back with a warrant for his apartment and that was probably exactly what the detective had done. The door chime rang again and Rihanna bolted upright, clutching the sheet to her chest.

"I can't hide. If he finds me hiding it will be worse for both of us."

"Don't hide, just stay in here. It'll be fine."

She gave him a disparaging look and he would have argued but the chime rang once more and he had no desire to have Brogan lead a battalion of cops through his front door. He hurried through the apartment and opened the door, careful not to make any move that would look like an invitation for the detective to enter.

"Good morning," Heath said, mustering a tight smile. He purposefully left off any honorific.

"I'm sorry to barge in on you so early," Brogan began without a hint of sincerity. One uniformed officer stood behind him, arms behind his back at parade rest.

"I'm an early riser."

"May I come in?"

"So you obtained the search warrant?" Heath hated to bring it up, but the idea of denying Brogan entrance did have appeal. It would, at the very least, spare Rihanna the embarrassment of being found in the apartment of a murder suspect.

"Actually, I'm still waiting on the judge for that. It seems none of the items found in your shop turned up anything out of the ordinary. That's a deciding factor in whether or not it's appropriate to continue our search in your apartment."

Heath crossed his arms over his chest. "Deciding for or against?"

"That's what the judge is mulling over right now, so don't plan to range too far. We may be back later today."

"If that's the case, why are you here now?"

Brogan's smile was slick and oily. "Just to ask a few questions about your business partner, a Mr. Darq Stone."

"What about him?"

"Interesting name. Is it an alias?"

Heath chuckled. "No. That was the name his parents gave him."

Brogan pulled a small notebook out of his jacket pocket and made a note of Heath's response. The officer behind him shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Public records list this as his address, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Is he here now?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know." Lying to Brogan was too easy. The detective made a few more notes. "Is Mr. Stone a suspect now as well?"

"He does have access to tattoo equipment and the information we obtained from Ms. Wain's laptop shows that he was also the subject of the article she was writing about your shop. One of the questions she asked you in her recorded interview was if she could have a few words with Mr. Stone and you said you didn't think he would be interested in being interviewed."

"Yes. I recall that."

"Why was that?"

"Darq is a very private person. He doesn't like publicity and wasn't interested in the magazine for which Ms. Wain wrote."

"That's odd. Our information shows that Mr. Stone is a graphic artist also. Why would he not want publicity for his work?"

"He prefers to obtain clients through word of mouth."

"But you like publicity?"

"Not so much."

"Then why did you agree to the interview?"

Heath sighed. "To appease Ms. Wain. She'd been hounding me for weeks and I finally decided that a short article for which I cooperated would be, in the long run, less intrusive than an expose on the 'mystery tattoo artist'."

"Plus you found her attractive, is that right?"

"She was attractive, Detective."

"Hmm. Yes. Do you mind if we come inside? I'd hate for this conversation to disturb your neighbors."

Heath wanted to resist, but he could tell by Brogan's bright aura that the man's curiosity was piqued. The best way to thwart him would be to give him what he thought he wanted. Seeing for himself that Heath had nothing to hide would be far more disappointing to the man than being denied access. That would only convince him his suspicions were correct.

Heath stepped back, allowing Brogan into the entry hall. The uniformed officer remained in the corridor, kept at bay by a gruff command from the detective.

"Nice place."

"Thank you."

"Coffee smells good."

"It's decaf." Another lie. Brogan didn't seem the type to worry about the effects of energy-boosting chemicals.

"So you don't know where your partner is?"

"No."

"Does he disappear a lot?"

"He hasn't disappeared. He's just not home." Heath could have given Brogan Makena's name, but it seemed like a betrayal. Even though Darq did have nothing to hide with regards to Tanesha's murder, Heath shared a protective feeling for the woman his crèche brother had chosen to mate with. The police might track down Darq eventually, but hopefully by then it wouldn't matter to their investigation.

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

"No."

"You live with him, but you have no idea when he'll return?"

"He's a grown man, Detective. I don't keep tabs on him."

"Is he expected at your shop?"

"He may have clients scheduled. I plan to be at work in a few hours. If you'd like to come in and check my appointment book, you're welcome to do so."

"You know something, Mr. Gyland, I don't like you."

Heath feigned disappointment. "I can't imagine why not."

"You've got an answer for everything. In my experience, when people have all the answers, it's because they've been rehearsing them, planning how to respond to every question. That, in my mind, implies guilt."

"So I would seem more innocent if I sputtered in confusion at your questions? If I hesitated and hemmed as though I didn't know what to say?"

Brogan pursed his lips. "Mr. Gyland, there's no way in hell you could seem more innocent to me. You're hiding something. I know..." The detective stopped, his attention snagged on something behind Heath.

In a calculated move, Brogan dodged Heath and strode to the sofa where Rihanna's purse lay half-hidden among the throw pillows. He picked it up, a bold move and one that Heath could probably contest in court, if he were ever so inclined to take Brogan to task for his investigative faux pas.

"This isn't your color. It's not your partner's, is it?"

"Darq prefers canvas to leather," Heath quipped back. He kept his eyes off the entrance to the hallway leading to the bedroom and tossed an image of Brogan to Rihanna. Hopefully she would interpret it as a warning and stay in the other room.

There was no amusement in Brogan's laugh. "This wouldn't belong to Tanesha Wain, would it?"

"I believe her purse was found in her apartment, wasn't it?"

Brogan raised a brow. "How do you know what was found in her apartment?"

"Because one of your officers said no robbery had taken place, therefore ruling that out as a motive."

"Hmm." Brogan studied the purse with a speculative eye. He turned it over and over, perhaps hoping something might fall out, but fortunately the various pockets were zippered.

Finally, Brogan set the purse down. "If you hear from your partner, tell him I'd like to speak to him."

"I will."

Brogan cast a jaundiced glance around the apartment and cocked his head as if listening for something. "Your guest is very quiet."

"She's asleep."

"Ah. Well, I'll let you get back to...making breakfast. Thank you for your time." With a last look at the purse, Brogan swiveled on his heel and headed for the door. He let himself out and Heath allowed himself a sigh of relief. He had no doubt the detective would be back with his promised warrant.

Rihana emerged from his bedroom fully dressed a moment later. Her features were stiff with concern. "I heard everything."

"Don't worry about it."

"Don't worry? Brogan has you tried and convicted already. He's just waiting on the paperwork."

"Well, he can't prove anything. I didn't kill Tanesha, so there will be no evidence that I did."

"You have motive, means and opportunity. That's almost enough to have you charged. Have you thought about getting a lawyer?"

"Ree, I don't need a lawyer. The only thing I need to do is keep the Gemii from hurting anyone else before Darq and Makena and I can leave." He felt her pain the moment the words left his mouth. He reached for her, but she pulled away and scooped her purse off the couch.

"I need to get to work. While Brogan is trying to prove you're guilty, I've got to figure out how to track the real killer. Maybe Tanesha's clothing will give me a lead."

After another try, he caught her hand. The contact electrified him, but he tamped down the feeling and managed to control the urge to drag her into his arms. He didn't want her to leave this small, safe haven. "Rihana, I need you to understand what's happening here."

"What's happening is there's still a killer out there and I'm a target. So is Makena. This Gemii is a person, right? He's a man just like you and that means he can be captured. That's my job. If you have to leave...then go. Do what you have to in order to be safe. I'm going to do what I have to do."

"Will you come back here tonight?"

"Will you be here?"

"Yes."

She held his gaze for a tense moment. Her aura looked like an explosion around her head, streaks of red anger competing with the muddy brown of frustration and a swirling hint of blue arousal. He felt that too and would have given anything for the time to nurture it into another session in bed, but he had his own work to do. If Darq and Makena wouldn't cross over to another world, or at least leave the city, then maybe they could work toward locating the Gemii.

Roughly he tugged Rihana toward him, slid his hand around the back of her neck and kissed her. She didn't struggle despite the image in her mind of her racing out of the apartment. After a moment of stiffness, she softened in his arms, opened to him and invited him in. He thrust his tongue into her mouth and tasted her desire mixed with the flavor of his toothpaste. She was heaven, a sensual feast, and he was starving despite their rigorous night together.

He showed her an image of them falling to the floor, tearing each other's clothes off. She blocked it, put her hands on his chest and broke the kiss, leaving him wanting.

"We can't do this right now."

He stepped back. "Will I see you later?"

She nodded and left. Unspoken warnings and promises hung in the air, mixing with the faint echo of the door clicking shut.

He had enough faith in the guardian he'd given her to know she would be all right for the time being. He wished he had the same faith in himself to be able to walk away when the time came for him to leave this world for good.

Chapter Eleven

Rihana struggled to keep thoughts of Heath out of her mind as she hurried across town. She didn't bother going home to pick up her car or change. She'd showered quickly at Heath's and she kept toiletries and makeup in her locker at work for quick touchups so no one would suspect she'd been out all night.

Her first stop was the morgue, where Andy Sullivan greeted her with his usual deferential respect. At her request, he handed over a zipper-sealed plastic bag with Tanesha Wain's sweater inside. Normally, Rihana would have signed the evidence out and taken it to an upstairs viewing room where she could work with some semblance of privacy, but she had no desire to carry around the dead reporter's clothing.

"Can I open this here, Andy?" she asked as he settled at his cluttered desk.

Andy shrugged. "Sure. Once you sign the register you can do whatever you want...well...you know what I mean."

"Thanks." She scribbled her name on the sign-out sheet and crossed the room to a vinyl padded bench. She didn't care if Andy witnessed her trance. In fact she was grateful for the company. After her last trip to the quaking, she wasn't sure she wanted her corporeal body to be alone while her spirit roamed the in-between.

She opened the bag's plastic fastening and pulled out Tanesha's sweater. The soft cashmere had created static electricity inside the plastic bag. It crackled as she moved it and featherlight tendrils of the expensive wool stood straight up in all directions. She smoothed the garment, keeping it mostly folded on her lap, and closed her eyes.

In an instant she was back in the bland apartment surrounded by shades of gray and deep shadows. Through her hands she felt a rhythmic pulse, like a heartbeat, and realized that's exactly what it was. Tanesha's sweater retained the staccato beat of the young woman's heart and it played like a record, changing tempo from smooth and even to wild and erratic.

Rihana turned and tried to survey the room, forcing her consciousness back through the bursts of emotional energy that she was able to read from the sweater.

She heard muffled voices—a woman's high-pitched plea and the low rumble of a man. Someone touched her throat and pain arced through her body. She screamed and shoved at her attacker only to find herself sitting on the padded bench, staring at the sweater, which she'd thrown to the floor.

Andy stared at her over his desk. "You okay?"

"Mmm. Yes. Sorry about that."

"No problem. I've never actually seen one of you...you know, work before. What did you see?"

"Not much, but I felt a lot." She forced her fingers not to shake as she gathered the sweater from the floor and tried to stuff it back in the bag. It barely fit. She had to ball it up and cram it inside the plastic pouch then squeeze out the excess air in order to get the zipper fastener closed again.

"I always figured it would take a lot longer."

"Sometimes it does. Tanesha Wain was killed quickly. That's all I get. I can't seem to go any further back than that moment. I can't see the face of the man who did it."

Andy rose and took the bag from her. He watched while she signed the register again with quick, slashing strokes of the pen. Anyone who looked later on might wonder how her signature could have changed so much in less than five minutes.

"Sorry it didn't help."

"Me too. Thanks for your help, Andy."

Rihana left the morgue without a backward glance, eager to put distance between herself and Tanesha's last moments of life. Her inner tremors subsided bit by bit as she concentrated on climbing the stairs to the third floor where her desk was located. Halfway there she ran into one of the secretaries from Social Services who greeted her with a sunny smile. "Miss Daniels, I'm glad I found you. Detective DeYoung is looking for you."

That was no surprise. She hadn't spoken to Nathan in over twenty-four hours and he was probably expecting a report on her investigation. "I'm on my way to his office now. Thank you, Elaine."

Rihana quickened her pace, taking the stairs at a jog. By the time she reached DeYoung's office, she was winded. The exertion actually did her some good. With her blood pumping, the lingering chill of the quaking had faded away. She felt normal again, if a little tired.

She knocked on the glass door. DeYoung's gruff reply came quickly. He slammed his phone down as she let herself in and glared at her until she settled in the chair opposite his desk. "What's wrong?"

His expression morphed from blatant anger to sarcasm. "Don't you know? You're the mind reader."

She bristled. One important rule for psychics assigned to precinct work was never to intrude on the minds of their co-workers, even if they could. Fear of having their innermost thoughts read or broadcast still made many employees of the force skittish. The average person was somewhat paranoid to begin with, so working with someone who might be able to hear them thinking about playing hookey or stealing a box of pens from the supply closet made everyone a little nervous. She wasn't alone in her fight to demystify her abilities and reduce some of the tension they caused, but the constant uphill battle made her bone weary.

"That's uncalled for, Nathan. You're supposed to be on my side about this position and lately..."

"You're going to tell me what you think is appropriate behavior when I've just been informed that you spent the night with a suspect?"

Her heart plummeted into her stomach. Holy fuck. How had Brogan figured it out? "Excuse me?"

"Come on, Rihana. Carl can be a horse's ass on the best of days, but he knows his job. He saw your purse in Heath Gyland's apartment."

The same purse she was carrying now. Damn. Why hadn't she gone home and gotten a different one...to keep up the subterfuge? Yes. That was a good question. Why hadn't she tried harder to perpetuate the lie? "He knows it was my purse?"

"Tell me it wasn't and I'll drop this. I'll even apologize and I'll make him do the same."

She would have given anything to accommodate him, but Gramma Essie's voice in her head pinged her conscience. *Good girls never lie. They don't need to.*

"He's innocent."

Nathan's jaw dropped. "That's your response?"

"Do you want me to make excuses?"

"Yes. Actually, I do. I'd prefer you to give me a song and dance about how you were working under cover...leading him on, doing whatever you had to in order to find out the truth. It would still be disgusting, but at least I'd understand it. What would make you throw down for a perp? I don't get that. This guy could be a killer and you want to jump his bones?"

Rihana felt ill. "He's not a killer. That much I have found out. I didn't sleep with him to get that information." Why *had* she slept with him then? Because she wanted to believe he could make her feel something other than shame for her sensuality? Because just looking at him set her nerves on fire and from the moment they'd met, she couldn't get him out of her mind?

"You're jeopardizing the investigation."

"I'm telling you the investigation is going in the wrong direction. Heath Gyland should not be a suspect and neither should his partner."

Nathan threw his hands in the air. "Then who should be?"

"I don't know. I don't have a face, but I've seen the man who killed Tanesha. He stalked her. He let himself into her apartment and surprised her sometime after Heath left her."

"And how did he manage to inject poisoned ink under her skin without a struggle? She had no defensive wounds, her clothing wasn't out of place and nothing in the room was broken or disturbed. The facts say she knew her killer."

"I don't think she did."

"The facts say Gyland had motive, means and opportunity. His prints are on her doorknob. One of his hairs was found on her bed."

"He admits to being in the apartment."

"She knew him. She liked him. She let him tattoo her and he killed her. All I need is a plausible reason why."

Rihana rose. "He. Didn't. Do. It. I know that. You've believed my instincts in the past. Why not now?"

"I believed you when I thought you couldn't lie. You've never been dishonest, Rihana. In fact, it's a fault of yours. Whatever your personal moral code has been up until now, I always knew I could count on you to give me straight facts. Tell me now, are you having some kind of relationship with our suspect?"

No. The word echoed in her head. She didn't have a relationship with Heath. She'd had sex—incredible sex—but that was all. Her hesitation cost her.

DeYoung rose also. "You're off the case. Do yourself a favor, stay the hell away from this guy until the investigation is closed. If he's innocent and you want to help him, back off. If he's guilty and you want to stay alive, back the hell off. Am I clear?"

She'd never, ever been removed from a case before. It stung like a burn, like a slap across her face. She wanted to hate Brogan for it, but truth was, the blame was all hers. She'd lost her head over Heath, lost her perspective and, worst of all, her heart. Now she might lose her job.

She straightened her spine and looked Nathan in the eye. It was the hardest thing she'd ever done. "I'll be at my desk, working on my other cases."

"Be careful, Rihana. When I say I think you could be in danger, I mean it. I don't trust this guy."

"Well, I do." She whirled around and left the office, head high despite the burden of shame weighing her shoulders down. Gramma Essie would have been mortified. Thank God she wasn't here to see this. Thank God she'd never know how far her perfect granddaughter had fallen.

* * * * *

Despite what he'd told Brogan, Heath didn't go to SkIntense. He called Darq and told him about the detective's visit, then he headed to Tanesha's apartment.

Getting past the unbroken police tape and the lock on her door took little effort. His own guardians saw to that for him. Once inside, he scouted around, not sure exactly what he expected to find. The Gemii assassin had been here in person, not simply as a wraith the way he'd visited Rihana. That meant he had to have left some evidence behind.

Heath stared at the bed for a long time, trying to imagine how soon after his interlude with Tanesha the killer had gotten inside. The outline of her body, rendered in white reflective tape on the carpet next to the bed, disconcerted him. He'd never been to a crime scene, at least not on this world. The obsession with small details fascinated him. On Verakos, so he vaguely recalled from his brief childhood there, crime was rare

and easily solved when it did occur thanks to the psychic abilities of his people and the guardian beasts with which they bonded.

The population here lacked the luxury of being able to see directly into the minds of others, so they had to rely on drops of blood, strands of hair and stray marks on the floor to tell them what had transpired. They should have been grateful for people like Rihana, who could take the guesswork out of finding criminals. Instead they ridiculed her at every opportunity, even while they relied on her services.

The thought of her suffering for her gift made him angry. The thought of the Gemii assassin killing more women in his quest to wipe out the royal bloodline enraged him.

He struggled to control his anger and continued searching Tanesha's apartment. Her bedroom yielded nothing and the living room had been stripped of anything valuable to the police investigation such as her computer, her paperwork and her date book. The bathroom seemed to have been similarly stripped. The medicine cabinet was nearly empty, but smudges on the shelves told him there had been bottles and boxes sitting inside. The various closets had been rifled through and someone, perhaps a landlord, had cleaned out the refrigerator, leaving nothing behind but an unopened quart bottle of water.

Heath closed the fridge and sighed. He felt foolish snooping in Tanesha's kitchen for clues. Something on the door of the refrigerator caught his attention then and he reached up to move an old calendar that had been stuck to the metal surface by a bulbous, smiley-faced magnet.

The calendar itself was more than a year out of date, probably why the police hadn't bothered to move it. Odd that a freelance writer, with so many appointments and rendezvous in her schedule, wouldn't update the calendar in her kitchen. Heath guessed perhaps she kept it because she liked the picture, a tangle of adorable puppies climbing over bales of hay. Heath pursed his lips as the calendar slid lower down the fridge door revealing a small photograph that had been taped behind it.

The picture held Heath's attention riveted. It was a head shot of a dark-haired man. His faint smile looked pained rather than amused. Heavy brows shadowed his eyes and a long, sharp nose defined his face as narrow and severe. He supposed the man might be considered handsome by the opposite sex, though Heath found his expression seemed to convey distrust.

He wondered how Tanesha knew the man and why she would have hidden his picture behind the old calendar.

Evidence. The word echoed in his mind as he slipped the photo into his back pocket. He should not be touching it and certainly not removing it from the apartment. Fortunately, police procedure wasn't his concern at the moment.

* * * * *

Rihana found it nearly impossible to concentrate on any of her other work. When not actively involved in trailing suspects or getting impressions from clothing or

interrogations and interviews, she normally searched through old missing persons files and cross-referenced them with city maps. On occasion, details from the files would trigger images or short trances in which she would see or feel the victims. She'd closed four cases this way over the years—finding two people alive years after searches for their bodies had been called off. She'd also led police to two unmarked graves. She didn't consider those cases to be successful, despite Nathan's assurances that she had done the grieving families a great service by helping to find their loved ones even after they were beyond saving.

Today, nothing held her attention. She shuffled through papers and evidence lists, photographs and maps and came up blank time after time. Her thoughts kept drifting back to Heath.

Only after Carl Brogan drifted into her field of vision did she shake off her malaise. She followed his movements with her eyes as he waltzed into Nathan's office, then stared through the glass while the two men talked. Figuring she was already in trouble, she did something that not only had she never even attempted before, but that she'd specifically promised DeYoung she would never do. She summoned the quaking and projected herself into the glass enclosure.

The icy cold of the nether realm surrounded her, and for once she didn't allow it to bother her. Her consciousness drifted across the room and hovered outside DeYoung's door a moment before she entered. Though she watched her own hand turn the knob and swing the door into the office, she knew, out in the real world, her body still remained passively at her desk.

The two men's voices reached her like echoes as she slithered into the room. She was a wraith, without width or depth. A ghost.

Brogan spoke first, not waiting for acknowledgement from his superior. "Wain's boyfriend is missing."

"Which boyfriend is this? Gyland?"

"No. Not Stone either. A neighbor fessed up that a few months ago there was a guy hanging around. Dark hair, mean-looking. Tanesha called him Jem or Jim. They fought a lot and one night she threw the guy out of the apartment. A few minutes later a pile of stuff goes sailing out the window and hits the sidewalk, clothes, pictures, crap like that."

"You have a full name?"

"Not a real one. I got a 'Jim Smith' from a couple of people on the block. Sounds like an alias. Sketchy descriptions match what the neighbor said. Swarthy, short, wiry. He walked fast and talked fast. Apparently when she threw him out, she was thorough because we found nothing in the apartment belonging to a man. One of the earliest dates in her book was with a J E M or J I M. They had lunch. That was about a week before the neighbor reported the fight."

DeYoung glanced over Brogan's shoulder and Rihanna knew his gaze sought her out. She couldn't see herself, sitting at her desk, but she hoped she didn't look too

spaced out. If something seemed wrong, the two men might leave the office to investigate.

"So you think a disgruntled ex killed her."

"Not really. I think Gyland did it, but the ex adds a new dimension. It's a stone I can't leave unturned, no pun intended."

"Any luck with the partner?"

"No. He's laying low and I don't like that. Wain was apparently a pain in the ass reporter. She hounded people until she got a story. If these two had something to hide, it makes sense they might kill her to shut her up, keep her from publishing their secrets."

"Her notes didn't turn up anything out of the ordinary on the men or their business." DeYoung returned his attention to Brogan. If Rihana could have, she would have let out a sigh of relief. A wind whistled through the quaking, chilling her. She fought to ignore it. If she stayed on this side of the divide much longer, she would come out of the trance sick and shaking and she couldn't afford that, but she also couldn't stand to miss any part of this conversation. If there was another suspect, then she had a lead she could follow to help clear Heath's name.

"There's still something not right about the guy. Those snakes on his arms...I don't like them. I've run the images through our gang database and didn't come up with anything. Now I'm checking cults and prison tats. The guy has a history. I know it."

"Well, hurry up with your search. If there's anything on this guy, even a parking ticket, I want to know about it."

Brogan gestured over his shoulder. "You think a rap sheet will make a difference to Rihana?"

"I don't know. She's hooked on this guy and I don't like it. Not only is it bad form, it's not like her. She's going to get hurt."

"And fuck up our case."

DeYoung glared. "Look, she might not be a cop, but she works for me and I don't stand for watching my people get screwed over. If this guy has some hold over her or he's tricked her into thinking he's innocent, she could be his next victim."

"So take her off the case."

"Don't you think that's the first thing I did?"

"So send her out of town. We can lend her out to Long Island or Newark. They're always begging for extra psychics. Hell, send her to Chicago or LA for a month or two until we pin this guy."

"Hmm."

Rihana would have kicked Brogan for his cavalier attitude. He saw her as a commodity to be loaned out at DeYoung's whim. If Nathan fell for his suggestion, she'd just refuse to go until the case was closed or until Heath left, whichever came first. Once he was gone, she'd have no interest in staying in Manhattan anyway.

A rush of frigid air accompanied Brogan's swift movement toward the door, and Rihana hastened to keep up.

"Get me something on Gyland I can use and I want to see something concrete on this Jim Smith person before your shift is over." Nathan's final command was muffled by the closing of the door.

Rihana concentrated for a second, drawing herself backward toward her body.

She came to with a mild gasp. Fortunately Brogan didn't notice. He was wise to breeze past her desk without comment. He must have sensed her rising animosity because he didn't even glance in her direction. She let her eyes follow him until he left the room. Then she hung her head and dragged in a great, shuddering breath.

Shame at what she'd just done made her shiver even more violently than the bone-deep cold of the quaking. She'd allowed herself to become exactly what the general population feared about people with her abilities. She'd compromised her integrity for a man, and the worst part was, she knew deep down that she'd do it again in a heartbeat.

Chapter Twelve

"I can't stay," Rihana told Heath when she arrived at his apartment at dusk. "I just wanted to tell you I'm off the case."

Her news didn't surprise him, nor did her reluctance to step over the threshold. "You could have called to tell me that. If you can't stay, why did you come?" He knew the answer. Her reasons were in the images swirling through her mind. He saw bodies entwined on the floor, tasted salty sweat on his tongue.

"I shouldn't be here and I shouldn't be telling you this."

He stepped back, hoping to entice her inside by putting distance between them. Clearly she wanted him. Her body shook with desire. Her aura was indigo and violet. Lust drove her emotions. "Telling me what?"

"They have another suspect."

"And I know who. Come in and I'll show you what I've found."

Her brows arched and her curiosity cooled her ardor by a degree or two. That certainly wasn't his intent, but at least it got her to move a few steps forward. He closed the door behind her, making sure to brush his arm against hers as he moved. The contact sizzled and she gasped. He hid his smile, telling himself he was just glad she was still safe.

"Found what?"

He led her into the living room and snatched the photo off the coffee table. "I believe this is the assassin."

She took the small rectangle from him and her eyes widened. "Where did you get this?"

"Tanesha Wain's apartment."

She glared. "As if I'm not in enough trouble because of you. Now you're stealing evidence from crime scenes?"

"Exciting, isn't it?" He moved to stand next to her so they could survey the face together. "Is this the man you saw in your vision?"

"I...can't be sure. He's generally similar. The shape of the face is right, the eyes...the eyes are dead on."

"It's him. It has to be."

"So Tanesha *did* know him?"

"It makes sense now. That's why she pestered Darq and me for an interview for so long. She was helping the Gemii. He used her to get to us."

Rihana thrust the picture back into his hand as if it burned her skin. "Then why did he kill her and not you?"

He shrugged. "She'd outlived her usefulness, I suppose."

Rihana shook her head. "No, they had a fight. This must be the man Brogan was talking about today."

"You talked to Detective Brogan?" That did surprise him. For some reason, jealousy flared in his gut, even though he knew Rihana had no attraction to her colleague.

"No. I overheard. God...I can't believe the things I've done since I met you."

"What things?"

She waved off his suggestive question. "Brogan has been following a lead. Tanesha knew a man who looked like this. They were dating, maybe living together, and they had a fight. She threw him out. That makes him a suspect."

"And me less of one."

She eyed him. "That explains why there was no sign of a struggle in the apartment. Maybe he had his own key that she forgot to get back from him when he left. Maybe she didn't even know he had a key. When he came in, she was afraid, but not panicked because she did know him and she thought she could handle him. She let him touch her and that's when he injected the poisoned ink."

"Does Brogan know how to find this man?"

"Not yet. He went by the name of Jim Smith, or maybe Jem. Tanesha's neighbor thought the man's name was Jem."

"How can we track him down?"

Rihana took the photo back from him. "We can give this to Brogan."

"And tell him how we got it?"

"No. I'll get it to him anonymously."

"Okay." Heath closed his hands over his. "Later. Right now..."

"No." She pulled out of his grasp. "I didn't come here for that."

"Yes, you did. That's the only reason you came here." He threw her own fantasy images back at her. Panting breath. Tongues laving ridges and valleys. Beads of sweat rolling down straining muscles.

She moaned. "Don't, Heath. Please."

"I don't want you to leave. Stay here with me where you're safe." He took her hand, and the photo fluttered to the floor.

"I'm not safe here. Every minute I spend with you, I lose more of myself. I'm not me anymore...I'm someone who eavesdrops on my co-workers. I think about sex all the time."

"That part is you."

"No. Just because for once I was able to...enjoy myself doesn't mean —"

He slid his fingers to the back of her neck and pulled her close to him. "You want that again. Why shouldn't you have it?" He wasn't sure whose thoughts he was voicing. His desire had skyrocketed the moment he'd opened the door. Now her emotions seeped into his brain, and he felt her desperation. She'd been alone in her shame so long, wanting things she couldn't have. After starving for years she had a feast before her and she couldn't justify walking away from it. He understood how she felt. He'd carried his own burden for longer than he cared to remember. Keeping apart from the inhabitants of the worlds on which he and Darq had lived hadn't always been easy. The isolation imposed by their imperative to elude the Gemii had left them both lonely and wanting.

"Just one more time..." She whispered the words and whimpered as his hands sought the buttons of her blouse. In her mind, he already had her naked. He was already inside her. The image made him instantly hard. The moment he finished yanking her blouse out of the waistband of her pants, he threw open his belt buckle and liberated his erection.

"As many times as you want," he told her, roughly shoving her own pants down her hips. He had her out of her panties in a heartbeat and guided her to straddle him as he sat on the couch.

"I should go. I should go." She repeated the mantra over and over between gasps of pleasure as he settled her over his cock and thrust upward. Knees spread on either side of his hips, she rose up and slammed down hard, impaling herself. Her body arched back and he caught her. He let her rise up and down, twice, three times. Her juices coated his erection, making the glide sweet and easy. She rocked her hips back and forth while he flicked open her bra and took her breasts in his hands.

The guardian beast he'd painted across her body writhed with her, its slender body expanding and contracting as if it took in each labored breath as she did. The scent of their combined arousal floated between them, heightening his desire, making him insatiable. He needed her in this moment more than he'd ever needed anyone or anything in his life. She was air for him, a lifeline, reminding him that he was more than a political pawn from a dying government. He was a man who'd put his most intimate desires on hold for too long.

"You saw this in your mind the moment I opened the door," he told her before running his tongue between her breasts. "You came here for this, for me."

"No." She rocked, rose and fell above him, eyes closed, head back. He ran a hand up her body, rested it in the center of her chest to feel the wild drumbeat of her heart. The steady thrum of his own matched her rhythm and merged with it as their bodies became one.

Her aura was electric blue now, pulsing with the same beat. Her pussy contracted around him and she bowed forward, lips forming an "o" as a shudder ran through her.

"You can't lie to me, Ree. We're completely connected now. You wanted me in you. You wanted this again."

She bit her lower lip and squeezed his cock with her inner muscles. His balls tightened, but he held back. He wanted to come with her. He pictured it in his head and pushed her hips down to seat her more tightly against him.

She braced her hands on his shoulders and canted her knees forward. "I wanted it one more time. How long will you be around?"

He refused to respond. He wanted to say forever. He wanted to claim her the way Darq had claimed Makena but he knew he couldn't. That would be too dangerous for them both, too selfish.

"How long, Heath?" She ground into him, forcing his orgasm up from his balls. He grunted and dug his fingers into her hips, pushing her up almost all the way off him then ramming her down again. "How long?"

Forever. The word echoed in his mind. Though she probably heard it in her head, he refused to say it out loud. That would have given it weight and made it real, and staying with Rihana forever was a fantasy he could never achieve. "I'm here now, Ree. That's all that matters."

Shuddering, she cried out, surged forward and rose up, riding him hard while his shaft pulsed within her. Her slick walls contracted. She guided his mouth to her nipple and he suckled hard, drawing the beaded tip deep against his tongue until she moaned.

Fire tightened his loins and his climax slammed into him, dragging a growl from his throat. For a moment he was complete. He had everything he needed, everything he wanted within reach, his for the taking while he emptied himself into her.

Above him, Rihana's succulent body reacted. Her pussy convulsed like a fist, milking him relentlessly, drawing out his pleasure to the ultimate height. She keened from deep in her belly and continued to rock until the tremors ceased. Then she deflated, draping herself over his shoulder like a ribbon of warm chocolate silk.

He wrapped his arms around her slim waist and hugged her, dropping kisses on her shoulder and her throat. She tasted sweet and salty, a confection that left his mouth watering for more.

"I'll stay until you're safe," he said finally. That was a promise he had no right to keep. Putting the safety of one individual before the continuation of the royal bloodline went against everything he'd been taught. Since Darq had done that very thing by refusing to leave even though he had a mate, it was up to Heath now to keep the integrity of their family.

If he died here defending Rihana, their line might end and the Gemii would win. If she died because of him, what value would his own life have? He didn't want to calculate that. He didn't want to let her go.

Gently, he lifted her off him, scooped her up and carried her to his bed. They'd worry about their future in the morning. Together or separate, he decided they were both entitled to one more night of pleasure.

* * * * *

Rihana woke to the gray darkness that often fooled her into believing she'd slipped into the quaking while asleep. Only the small green light at the base of the cordless phone on the nightstand clued her in that she was truly awake. The only spot of color in the room at this hour, the glow cast a faint, otherworldly illumination over Heath's features.

He slept beside her, the magnificent angles of his hard body covered by nothing more than the corner of the satin sheet. She could have easily slid the shimmering fabric away from him to reveal his cock, slightly arched in the beginnings of a dream-induced morning erection.

She thought about waking him with a kiss or with trembling fingers curling around his shaft, warm lips parting to suck his glans into her mouth or lick a drop of precum from its tip.

No. She shook the feral thoughts from her mind. If she dwelled too long on images from the night spent spread beneath him in the huge bed, he'd awaken and he'd have her again. Of course she wanted that, but she was already dangerously close to an addiction. What would she do when he was gone? How would she sate this newfound need for a man who, until three days ago, she'd never laid eyes on?

Fighting to keep her thoughts focused on the task at hand, she slithered from the bed, careful not to disturb the sheet. His mattress was the expensive kind that absorbed weight and movement, so she could have bounced a bowling ball next to him without waking him, but she didn't want to take the chance her absence would be felt if she lingered too long.

Holding her breath, she slipped away, grateful her clothes were scattered around the living room. She could dress in peace out there and direct her thoughts away from him.

She indulged in a final glance before she left the room. He was exquisite. His face was finely chiseled, his jaw solid and strong. His chest rose evenly with each deep breath and a faint smile curled the edges of his sensual upper lip. She'd never forget his face or anything else about him. She'd never forget what he'd given her, but she couldn't keep taking.

Even the act of sliding her shirt and panties on aroused her hypersensitive flesh. He'd done things to her through the night that had left her heart hammering and her body tingling for hours. The pull of clingy fabric across her breasts made her nipples harden as she recalled his mouth there, suckling until she orgasmed. Pulling her jeans over her hips and fitting the stiff denim snugly against her crotch made her clit pulse. He'd been there with his hands, his mouth, his cock, spreading her and delving deep inside, past the shame she'd harbored for so long. She wondered if she'd be able to experience that same freedom with another man when he was gone.

Maybe not, if the twinge of guilt she felt when she scooped up her purse was any indication. The thought of Brogan imagining her in bed with Heath weighed her

shoulders down. The embarrassment of being removed from the case came flooding back as she headed for the door. She'd carry that with her for a long time, even though she vowed never to let it happen again.

During the interminable elevator ride, she battled with the shame of having left Heath's apartment like a thief. Part of it was wanting to avoid any more pointless discussion of how and when he planned to leave. Part of it was fear she'd end up begging him not to go and another part, the worst part, was the desire to let him know what it might feel like to be abandoned.

She didn't want to be that person. She'd climbed above teaching people lessons a long time ago...about the time Sam left for college, ending their final summer as illicit lovers with no more than a chaste kiss on the cheek. She'd spent a month dreaming of making him sorry for going away, wondering what it would be like to show up at his Chicago dorm room with a pillow stuffed under her shirt just to see his reaction to an unplanned pregnancy. Knowing Gramma Essie would tan her hide for even thinking such a thought, she'd instead invented an illness to write to him about, hoping he'd be worried enough about her welfare to come home and see her.

He hadn't returned, but he'd called...once. She'd laughed off the ruse, too afraid to continue the lie. No more head games, she'd decided then, because the results weren't satisfying enough.

She'd call Heath later, from the safety of her apartment, and apologize, but right now she needed to be away from him in order to clear her head.

The street lights were still on, illuminating the short walk to the underground garage in which she'd left her car. She hated the automated garages that had sprung up over the last decade. A live attendant on duty at all times meant higher fares but no long walk through the echoing sub levels.

She shivered as she slid her debit card through the reader and waited for the machinery encased in bullet-proof glass to cycle through and relinquish her valet key. With a metallic clink, it fell into the slot, along with a paper receipt that she crumpled and jammed in her pocket. Holding the key in her clenched fist, she power walked down the winding access way, scanning the numbers painted in brilliant white on each parking space.

A familiar feeling settled at the back of Rihana's neck as she reached the level on which she'd parked her car. Some people experienced the weight of eyes upon them, the prickly sensation of being watched was common, even among those with no measurable extrasensory perception, but it was different for Rihana. Rather than the tingle caused by the belief that she wasn't alone in the dim, fluorescent-lit garage, she felt icy drops of awareness slide down her spine, one at a time. Distinct and separate like ancient water torture, they pinged on her heightened senses, sharp and pristine.

With her car in sight, she instinctively picked up her pace, key at the ready, clutched like a weapon. Protruding from between her index and middle finger, the two inches of serrated metal could blind an assailant or scar his face. She could create a

puncture would that would require stitches, forcing a criminal to seek medical attention or chance bleeding to death.

Grateful for her soft-soled shoes, she strained to listen for footsteps but heard nothing beyond her own raspy breath...except she wasn't breathing. She had drawn air into her lungs and held it, prepared to use the coiled power in her muscles to repel a physical attack.

The rasping belonged to someone else. To him.

A loud hiss made her attention ricochet behind her. She whirled in time to see a shadow slide across her field of vision. It had no distinct form and it moved without sound. She shivered and stepped backward. Her car was barely two yards away now, a haven...or a coffin if the intruder managed to follow her inside it.

She considered triggering the panic alarm. A button on her keychain would set off a deafening wail and activate a police beacon under the dash if it wasn't shut off again within fifteen seconds.

In the automated garage, she'd still be alone, but help would come within minutes.

The hiss sounded again, close behind her ear, and she jumped. A form sailed past her, colliding with an inky mass that launched itself from a narrow crevice between a black SUV and the grimy cinderblock wall.

The two objects coalesced into a shower of writhing color and darkness. Rihana stared at the spectacle, inching back until her knees hit the bumper of her car and she stumbled.

Long, sinuous streaks of umber and ochre braided through the bilious, smoky cloud above her head. She recognized the colors from the images Heath had painted on her body.

The battle raged while she eased herself toward the car door. Cold tendrils reached out from the melee to graze her cheek. She shrieked and her keys fell from her hand. The open mouth of a fanged serpent surfaced for an instant, its golden eyes blazing. Then a ribbon of black wrapped around its pale throat and drew tight.

Rihana dragged her gaze away from the battle and patted the cold, dirty floor, searching for her keys. She snagged them with the tip of her finger and palmed the panic button. All she had to do was press it, but before she could make her fingers work, an explosion of color and light erupted above her head, soundless, like a soap bubble breaking, but far more chaotic. She tensed as the ghostly image of the formless black mass disintegrated into thin, anemic wisps. A fine dust rained down, also silent, casting a reddish brown haze across the hood of her silver Ford.

She sat motionless for over a minute, staring at the space above her that had, moments ago, been a battlefield. The convulsive tap of her thumb on the panic button would have brought the NYPD raining down on the garage like the colored dust, but she didn't press it. Instead she tore open her purse and fished out her cell phone. She realized a second later that she didn't have Heath's number. She'd seen it on his file

when she'd made a note of the address of SkIntense, but she hadn't memorized it, hadn't added it to her speed dial, because they weren't, after all, dating.

She dragged herself up from the ground and broke into a jog, heading back the way she'd come. She didn't stop to return her keys to the dispenser and she jumped the turnstile to escape the damp, cloying atmosphere of the garage.

Later, when she finally did leave, she'd be in for a ticket when her departure time didn't match the amount already drawn on her debit card, but she'd worry about that later. Right now she needed to return to Heath because she knew, even without checking, that the temporary guardian beast he'd given her was gone.

* * * * *

He'd known she was gone before he woke up fully. Though her departure hadn't disturbed the bed in any significant way, he'd been aware of her withdrawal from his mind and the mild change in temperature of the air next to him.

The lack of her body heat had roused him. He'd searched sleepily for her thoughts and found the half-formed wall she'd tried to erect to keep him out.

He saw, as if through frosted glass, the image of her body twined with his. She was trying not to think about sex, trying not to want him again. He smiled at her wan attempt to cleanse her thoughts of the desire to repeat their wild coupling.

She could never forget.

Problem was, neither could he.

After a moment of unproductive fantasizing in which he toyed with the dangerous idea of doing as Darq had suggested to him and actually remaining here, he sat up in bed, tossed the sheets aside and set his mind to a cold shower to quicken his thoughts, cool his blood and vanquish the unruly erection he'd woken with.

The door chime interrupted his journey to the bathroom. Still naked, he strolled to answer it and Rihana's frantic voice poured out of the speaker. "Let me up, please..."

He hit the access key without hesitation. "Ree? What happened?"

She didn't answer. A thread of panic tightened his balls and made his skin tingle, but he told himself she'd simply entered the inner lobby and was on her way up in the elevator by now, on her way back to him.

He reached out mentally for her and encountered her agitation, her jangled nerves and racing heart. Something had frightened her. He met her at the door, a robe thrown carelessly around him and cinched at the waist.

Spikes of black stabbed through her aura. Flashes of red and dark orange accompanied her words as she grasped his forearms and he pulled her inside.

"It saved me. I don't know from what, but it saved me."

"What did? What happened to you? Why did you leave?" He knew exactly why. He had no right to ask, but for a moment he was a normal man with a normal life,

mildly hurt that the woman he loved had left his bed in the small hours of the morning without saying goodbye.

The woman he loved.

God. He'd scoffed at Darq for falling "in love" with Makena so quickly. He'd admonished his crèche brother for such a hasty decision that Heath believed was fueled by loneliness and the desire to recapture what would have been theirs by now if they'd been able to stay on Verakos and live their lives in peace.

As attractive as the prospect was of forming a permanent connection, even beginning a new crèche on one of the worlds of their exile, they'd resisted all this time, believing they would one day have the chance to return home. Maybe that had been foolish. The political atmosphere that had fostered the crèche system and the rule of the extended royal bloodline had been in peril for decades before either of them had been born.

After years of telling himself otherwise, he'd grudgingly come to believe that their families had sent them away not to preserve the integrity of the embattled royal line, but simply to spare their youngest sons the horror of dying at the hands of the insurgent Gemii.

He dismissed the notion of romantic love and guided Rihana to the couch. "Tell me what happened."

She met his gaze and showed him. An explosion of color assaulted his mind's eye. He witnessed the battle between what he recognized as Rihana's serpent and the formless guardian of the assassin.

She pulled open her blouse, revealing her flawless café au lait skin. "It's gone. That thing destroyed it."

Heath nodded. "It sacrificed itself for you."

"Would a permanent one have survived? Are they stronger?"

He didn't need to answer. She knew.

"Then I want one. This thing knows me and that means it will be able to find you soon. Heath, give me a permanent guardian, then leave before the killer finds you."

* * * * *

It took Heath forever to prepare his equipment, not because he didn't want to give Rihana a permanent guardian—in fact he already saw the beast in his mind's eye—but because his concern for the true depths of her fear of the needles slowed his hands.

He must have glanced at her a thousand times as he searched for the proper array of pigments, placed wet and dry cloths within reach and arranged his portable trays near the chair at the back of the shop. He'd taken her to SkIntense because that's where most of his best supplies were stored and now he worried about privacy and security. Would the police drop by with another warrant? Would the assassin be able to track them here from his apartment?

He'd double-locked the doors, both of them, kept the lights in the front section off and the closed sign up. His schedule had been void of appointments for days in preparation for his departure, as had Darq's in deference to his need to be with Makena, but walk-ins still showed up throughout any given work day. Some knocked on the glass of the front door and cupped their hands over their eyes to peer inside, disregarding the sign either because they couldn't read English or didn't believe any establishment could be closed to them.

He'd pulled the crimson curtain around the chair and watched her reaction. The metallic hiss made by the casters on the thin metal bar that held the curtain made her shiver. Her skin prickled with anticipation and she clutched the arm of the chair, digging her nails into the fabric. She wore her jeans and a bra because having her completely naked now would only distract him from the important task at hand. There would be time later to appreciate her body when the work was done...if the work was done.

"Can you handle this?" he asked, his voice low. He couldn't bear the thought of causing her even a fraction of the mental anguish she'd suffered through as a teen. The magnificent images on her back had been torture for her and whatever hang-ups he might have helped her overcome with vigorous sex didn't extend to washing away the memories of those brutal protection rituals.

She nodded, but her teeth were clenched. A muscle in her jaw twitched.

"Ree, you're not ready."

"I am. Just do it. I don't want to be alone when that thing comes back."

He drew in a slow breath and rearranged the pigment bottles again, needlessly. He wanted to tell her she wouldn't be alone, ever. He wanted to make the same pledge to her that Darq had made to Makena, but even if he did something so selfish and spontaneous, he couldn't guarantee her safety.

He pulled up his stool and sat down, placing his hand on her upper arm where he planned to begin his design. She trembled at his touch.

Normally he would have begun the process with a line drawing transferred onto the skin with a washable pigment, but guardian beasts weren't anything like the images he gave to his regular clients. He didn't need a guide this time. Once he began to draw, the beast would practically create itself. His hand would move according to the contours of a living thing, and he would know the image was finished when the beast told him so.

"Once I begin, I can't stop. The image has to be completed."

"Just start. I can do this." A vision flashed in the mental space they shared of a room lit by fat, dripping candles, hazy with incense smoke. An older black woman with ash gray hair and an angel's voice crooned to the frightened young girl who lay on a woven mat with her bare back exposed to the relentless tap-tap-tap of a hand-controlled tattoo needle. Blood oozed across light brown skin as a dark-eyed man with tobacco-stained lips drew the hand of God on her shoulder.

Heath squeezed her arm. He'd never felt this much apprehension before beginning a design. Causing Rihanna pain would hurt him, but an incomplete guardian would cause her far greater agony than the primitive rituals she'd undergone as a girl. He'd originally wanted to re-create the temporary serpent. Its size and strength had proven adequate and it would be formidable in permanent ink, not to mention the fact that the sinuous design, stretching sexily across her magnificent body, had left him aching with sexual need.

Unfortunately, they'd both agreed there wasn't time for something that large, so he had to rethink his strategy. A smaller creature with a more compact but powerful form would work. He now planned a thicker body, coiled twice on her biceps with the head of the creature resting just beneath the fingers that peeked over her shoulder. It would look as if God were reaching down to pet the beast. That image would take much less time to translate from his mind to her skin.

"Go on." With shaky movements she pulled one strap of her bra off, exposing her collarbone and breast. Then she lay back, head straight, eyes closed, lashes fluttering.

He couldn't deny her. With slow, deliberate movements he chose the ink with which he would outline the image of her guardian. He prepared his needle and pressed the tip to her naked skin.

Chapter Thirteen

Rihana never felt the vibrating needles pierce her skin. The moment she'd sat in Heath's chair, she'd known what she needed to do to get through this and as soon as he began his work, she'd gone to the quaking. The place for which all her previous tattoos had been a protective barrier now became her refuge. The cold, echoing emptiness became her haven.

As soon as she had immersed herself completely in the quaking, she rose from the chair, calm and focused, leaving her body in Heath's competent hands. She hadn't expected to slip into a trance so quickly, considering how nervous she'd been about allowing him to tattoo her.

It seemed oddly comforting to step away and watch the scene from outside herself. She wasn't used to seeking out her body while she was in the quaking. Most trips to the netherworld were for work, so she focused on an object, a room, a body or the last known location of a victim or missing person. Her own whereabouts had always been secondary.

She smiled to herself as she watched Heath. He looked so intent, his hand resting on her shoulder while he worked. Each minute movement of his wrist created another stroke on her skin, and in time the outline of a guardian beast took shape.

Here in this grayscale copy of the world, she was removed from the pain, from the fear and the overtly sexual tension that built to a fever pitch in response. She wondered, as she circled the chair, observing the scene from all angles, if she could have gotten through it on her own. Would she be writhing in ecstatic agony, sobbing from the discomfort and the shame of admitting that the pain turned her on? Would she have come already?

A soft moan escaped her lips at the thought and Heath stopped working momentarily to glance at her face. She didn't move or make another sound, so he resumed his task of filling in the gleaming bright spots in the creature's indigo eyes.

She wanted to touch him, to run her hands along the strong lines of his back, to brush his hair out of his eyes, wrap her arms around his waist and rest her head on his shoulder.

She wanted to watch him fuck her. She'd never done that, never stepped out of herself during sex. It had seemed wrong, to use her gift for her own pleasure. Besides, she'd never before felt even a glimmer of arousal while wandering around in the quaking where everything was dead and colorless.

Could she stay here until he finished with her? She'd never spent more than an hour in the netherworld, mostly because after that time the cold desolation of the place became too much for her. Gramma Essie had always warned her, the longer she stayed

away, the greater the chance that something lurking in the netherworld would find her and attempt to cross back into the world of the living by attaching itself to her soul. That had been the stuff of her nightmares as a girl, but right now, watching the man who held her heart draw on her body, she realized a greater fear was losing him to the assassin. The perils of the quaking paled in comparison to the terror she'd felt in the parking garage as she'd watched the shadow creature attack her guardian.

Memories of that encounter darkened the shadows around her and deepened her lingering fears. She thought of the formless creature and the shapeless black marks the Gemii had left on Tanesha Wain's body.

Would the same thing have happened to her if her guardian hadn't sacrificed itself to protect her?

As if in response to her silent question, a hollow sound startled her from her musings. She dragged her gaze away from Heath and scanned the cylindrical area of privacy he'd created around his chair with the red curtain. In the quaking, the fabric was dark gray and heavy as iron. Something moved the thick folds opposite the chair and Rihana tensed. Her first instinct was to return to her body and warn Heath, but he seemed unaware of both the movement and the sound.

She crossed the small space, prepared to confront the shadow man from her apartment, prepared to fight. With great effort, she swept the curtain aside. A quick, backward glance told her Heath was unaware of the movement. He still worked intently, eyes following the carefully controlled movement of his hand as he guided the buzzing needle along her skin.

She stepped through the curtain and found herself staring out through the open back door of the shop. At first she assumed someone must have come in and left the door open, but she'd watched Heath lock everything, saw him activate the alarm, which had not been triggered. Maybe his partner had arrived, noticed the intimate work going on and moved quietly to another section of the store?

Rihana might have been satisfied with that explanation except the view through the door was wrong. The street beyond looked different, narrower and darker. The building across from the shop had changed. In the real world, the back door of SkIntense faced a long, unbroken expanse of tan brick. A warehouse furniture store with no side windows took up half of the opposite block.

Now, standing on the threshold of the back door, Rihana stared out at an old tenement building. A bent, partially rusted fire escape snaked up the side of the building, connecting broken, dirt-encrusted windows on each floor.

A face appeared in one of the windows where a triangle of ancient glass had broken away. Rihana glared up, shielding her eyes from the garish white light that blazed in the sky of the netherworld.

Dark eyes met hers. The man grimaced and disappeared.

Forgetting herself, Rihana called for Heath. Her voice echoed off the buildings, tinny and flat. He would never hear her, separated as they were by the veil between life

and death. To get his attention and tell him what she'd seen, she'd have to go back to her body.

With a final glance at the tenement, she turned and rushed back to the curtained space. She flung the heavy fabric aside and stopped, amazed by what she saw.

Heath had almost finished the tattoo. How long had she been gone? It seemed like only a few minutes, but how could he have possibly done such detailed, extensive work in so short a time?

The beast he'd drawn on her skin was much smaller than the temporary serpent but more detailed. Its compact, muscular body rested above her breast. Indigo scales on its raised back lay only millimeters from the edge of the fingers that curled over her shoulders. A graceful wing brushed the base of her throat and a forked tail lay coiled on her upper arm. The beauty of the image stunned her. She hadn't expected to feel anything other than discomfort, certainly not a strange sense of kinship.

Heath's voice was muffled by the veil, but she still heard the concern in his tone when he spoke to her. "Ree, come back now...you're scaring me."

How long had he been trying to get her to respond? Fear stabbed at her. What if this time she couldn't get back? That had been another of her grandmother's constant worries. *Too long on the other side and you might forget your way. Never stray too far or your body could die while you're gone.*

Panic sent her reeling back toward Heath's chair. She threw her consciousness at her body and woke with a terrified gasp. Immediately, she began to shiver as the delayed pain of the tattoo assaulted her nerve endings.

* * * * *

Heath's heartbeat slowed by agonizing degrees as normal color returned to Rihana's lips. He'd been so intent on his work and on finishing the guardian before her fear of the needles overwhelmed her, he hadn't noticed the duskiness creep across her skin. He'd figured out soon enough after he'd begun to work that she'd put herself in a trance. It seemed like the perfect solution at first, but when he couldn't rouse her, panic had seized his gut and stilled his hand.

She came back in an icy rush of consciousness that scared him almost as much as her deathly stillness had. Clutching his arm, she ground out a few barely audible words while trying to catch her breath. "I know...where he...is."

He helped her sit up and took her face in his hands. "Breathe, Rihana. You'll pass out again if you don't take a deep breath."

She pushed his hands away, annoyance twisting her lips. "I'm fine...I'm fine. I was in the quaking."

"I gathered that." He stopped her from dragging her bra strap up over the guardian image. She winced at the pain caused by slight pressure on her newly inked skin. "I didn't realize you stopped breathing when you go over to the other side."

"I...normally don't. It's usually so quick. How long was I gone?"

"Hours. Where were you?"

"I was here...all I did was walk to the back door. I heard something and when I looked out I saw it. There was an abandoned building across the street."

He squinted at her. She seemed coherent, but her ragged breathing made him nervous. What kind of side effects did her gifts have? How much of her grandmother's warnings were based on fact and how much on pure superstition?

"I recognized the place. It's near Tanesha's apartment. I saw it on the way over the night Nathan called me in on the case. It's maybe a block away and it's where he's been hiding since she threw him out."

"How...why would you see that?"

She put a hand on her chest to calm herself, steadied her breathing and swallowed. Heath handed over her discarded blouse. She clutched it while he affixed a clean square of gauze over the guardian image.

"I was thinking about the Gemii when I crossed over. That's how I normally work. I focus my thoughts on something and on the other side I can zero in on a place that's connected to the person or event I'm concentrating on. I don't always have to be physically in that place to see it." She took another deep breath, as if her lungs couldn't possibly fill with enough oxygen to satisfy her.

Heath took the blouse from her shaking hand and helped her slip it over her arms. "So he's there now?"

"I can't be sure. He looked out one of the windows. I don't know if he could see me or not. Some people, very few, are aware of spirits. Maybe because he's from Verakos, he's more sensitive. If that's the case, he might be gone already."

"We have to at least try to find him."

She grabbed his hand. "No. Let the police find him. I'll call Brogan and DeYoung and they'll—"

"They'll lose him. And even if they did corner him, they wouldn't be able to fight him. They'd end up like Tanesha. Tell me where this building is, show me. I'll call Darq and he and I can take care of it."

Rihana vaulted out of the chair and followed Heath the few steps to the sink. He thrust his hands under hot water to help restore the circulation and get his blood pumping normally again. "Do you think Makena will let him go? The last thing the two of you should do is confront the man who's trying to kill you. Having both of you together in one place is exactly what he's been hoping for. That's probably why he had Tanesha demanding to interview you both. He knew if he only killed one of you, the other would be on to him and would escape."

Heath shut off the water and met her terrified gaze. "You're right. That's probably why we're both still alive. He couldn't figure out how to do it. Separate, we're easier

targets, but the death of one of us would give the other time to cross the bridge to another world. Together, with our guardians, we may be too powerful for him to fight."

"Maybe, but there's no guarantee."

"One thing I can guarantee you, Brogan and DeYoung won't be able to stop him. Even if they caught him, they can't arrest him, he could slip away like a shadow. He has to be killed and they might not do that. I know the police aren't supposed to kill anyone unless they're faced with no other choice."

The look in her eyes told him he was right. As much as he disliked both of the detectives Rihana worked with, he'd pegged them as men with some integrity when it came to their jobs. They didn't want Tanesha's killer dead because that would rob them of the satisfaction of seeing him convicted and imprisoned. They'd try to capture him alive so they could find out what made him work. His motives were just as important to them as his punishment.

"Rihana, show me where to find him. If Darq and I can end this...maybe we won't have to leave here." Shame tangled with his emotions the moment he spoke those words. The hope in her eyes seared him, but he didn't know another way to convince her that allowing him and Darq to confront the Gemii was the right thing to do, the only thing to do.

Mentally, he pulled away before she had the chance to read his thoughts and know the truth. Even with the assassin dead, their destiny—well, his at least—still lay on Verakos.

"The only way I'll show you is if you take me with you. I have a guardian now. I can help you fight him."

"No." He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and punched in the speed dial code for Darq's phone. "You should stay with Makena. If anything happens to Darq and me, the two of you will be safer if you're together."

Rihana planted her hands on her hips. "Go ahead. You tell Makena that and see what she says. If Darq can convince her to stay behind while the two of you run off to risk your lives, then I'll stay with her."

He eyed her over the glowing screen of the phone as it dialed Darq's number. She pursed her lips and raised a brow. "Go on."

Under other circumstances, he might have been amused, but he knew she was right. He hadn't known Makena long, but the depth of her feeling for Darq was evident in her every thought and action.

He sighed. "Let's go then. I'll tell Darq...and Makena to meet us there."

Chapter Fourteen

In the real world, the tenement building looked almost exactly as it had in Rihana's vision. Except for a few tufts of tall, green weeds sprouting from cracks in the sidewalk near its crumbling foundation, the color of the place was consistently dismal gray. The dust on the windows bore the occasional epithet or demonic symbol and the front entranceway, which looked singed in places as though it might have survived a minor fire, was boarded up.

Rihana protested when Heath bypassed the building and continued on around the corner of the block. "I'm going in with you, so don't think you can drop me off somewhere else."

He laughed, but the sound held no amusement. He was too focused on his task. "As much as I'd love to get you away from here, the rest of this neighborhood isn't much safer, so don't worry."

He cruised to the next block and pulled his car into an alley between what appeared to be a bar on one side and a barber shop on the other. "The Gemii might not have concerned himself with the make of my car, but if he sees us pull up in front of the building, he'll definitely be suspicious."

"Anyone would be suspicious of this car. It's a little too nice for this part of town."

Heath only nodded as they climbed out of the car and tried to shut the doors as quietly as possible. Rihana hoped it would still be there when they got back. If they got back.

"Darq is nearby and Makena is with him," he said.

Rihana allowed herself a smirk. She didn't need to be psychic to predict Makena would not let her "mate" out of her sight. All the way across town, she'd thought of calling Nathan. Her instincts told her the four of them were getting in over their heads, but deep down, she had no doubt Heath was right about the assassin. The NYPD might be able to catch him, but they wouldn't be able to contain him.

The notion that they were on a mission to kill someone rattled her. That was another reason to call for help. Did she want to see Heath commit murder? Would it change her feelings for him?

She put those thoughts out of her mind. Denial was the key to getting through this moment by moment. For now, she could still tell herself they would find a way to catch the man and serve him up to Nathan on a silver platter.

They reached the corner and caught sight of Darq and Makena coming from the other direction. She sensed the silent communication that passed between Heath and

his partner and didn't question when they cut through the adjacent alley to approach the abandoned tenement from the back.

She wanted to say something to Makena but she couldn't think of anything. *How are you?* seemed so lame. The blonde woman smiled briefly at her when their paths crossed then fell into step behind Darq who took the lead without comment.

Rihana knew neither of the men possessed conventional weapons. There would be no gunfire, thank God. But that left precious few alternatives. Did they plan to tear the Gemii apart with their bare hands?

"Rihana, can you tell if he's in the building now?" Heath asked once they'd assembled on a small slab of concrete outside the back door. The fire escape above them created a protective overhang under which the shadows were deep enough to shield them from view. The door here had not been boarded over, or perhaps someone had removed the barrier. Deep scratches around what appeared to be an old deadbolt lock attested to the fact that at one time someone had at least attempted to break in.

Rihana nodded and leaned her back against the cold brick wall to steady herself. Two trips to the quaking in one day would take their toll on her, but it had been some time since she'd found real purpose in her gift. Anything she could do to help Heath and his crèche brother succeed was worth the risk.

The icy cold of the netherworld swept over her and she shuddered. Her entire body felt nearly paralyzed from it and she wondered if she would even be able to move. Weakly she forced herself to turn and slip through the small opening Darq had created by forcing the back door open a few inches.

Walking through the building would take too much time, so she concentrated on the assassin as she had during her earlier trance. She recalled seeing his face through the broken window on the second floor and projected herself there. A narrow hallway seemed to run the length of the building with two doors on either side, which she guessed each led to apartments. The place looked like a war zone and Rihana had to continually remind herself that her body was still safely downstairs, outside with Heath. Nothing could touch her here, at least not physically.

A faint sound echoed in the emptiness, and she followed it. The farthest door on the right was closed tightly but that didn't stop her from entering. Normally while in the quaking she relied on the conventions of movement. She opened doors and skirted around furniture as she would in the real world because the alternative only heightened the aftereffects of the journey.

This time she had to put aside her own discomfort. She plunged headlong through the closed door. The sensation was a bit like breaking through a thick paper barrier. Though her passage caused no damage to herself or the door, she felt as though she'd torn through something. Her skin tingled unnaturally and she imagined molecules of ancient wood sloughing off her body and trailing behind her like dust.

The room she emerged into was lit by a small lamp. It glowed just a shade or two lighter gray than its surroundings, which were sparse yet unkempt.

A triangle of black identified the broken window she'd seen from below. This spot probably provided the best vantage point for watching the street. Rihana moved across the room for a better look and a shadow crossed her path. She froze. He was here and he'd just stepped into the room.

She came back to her body with such force that her head hit the bricks behind her.

Gentle female hands reached up to support her as she sagged against the wall, shivering so violently she could barely control her movements.

Makena wrapped her arms around Rihana and helped her sit down. "Are you going to be all right? You looked terrified the whole time you were gone."

Rihana struggled to focus on the woman's eyes and her voice. She'd never been so cold. All over her body, her skin had turned to gooseflesh. When she breathed out, her breath condensed into a white cloud despite the heat of the evening.

"I'm okay. I just...I can't do that too often."

"From the looks of it, I don't think you should do it at all. What did you see?"

"He's here. He's on the second floor, just like before." She looked around, expecting more questions from Heath, but both he and Darq were gone.

Makena must have sensed her question. She patted Rihana's shoulder. "They went in. Heath held your hand while you were in your trance. I gather he was able to see what you saw because he took off a few seconds before you came back. He told me to stay with you."

Rihana nodded. Bastard. That was his plan then to keep her out of danger. She pursed her lips and stared at her companion. "Are we going to stay out here?"

Makena raised a brow. "I promised Heath I'd stay with you. Wherever you are."

Rihana smiled. Despite the cold-induced stiffness in her limbs, she managed to haul herself up from the ground. "He's alone in there. Two against one is good odds, but four against one is better."

Makena nodded toward the half-open door. "Lead the way."

* * * * *

As they made their way through the building, Heath saw the reluctance in Darq's expression. He felt it himself, but he could think of no alternative. He couldn't remember the last time he and Darq had marched into battle. They'd been on this world too long and they'd forgotten what it was like to have to fight for survival. Their skills had afforded them comfortable living space and all the amenities a technologically advanced, highly populated world had to offer.

They'd lost the kill-or-be-killed instinct they'd had to learn in the early years of their exile when the Gemii had lurked around every corner.

After a shared glance, they burst into the room he'd seen in Rihana's vision. The Gemii was there, as expected, surrounded by the few luxuries he'd allowed himself – an

arm chair, a collection of snack food and a small television. He jumped up at the intrusion and cloaked himself in moving shadows.

Weapons would be useless against him, but fortunately time and easy living hadn't dulled the instincts of their guardian beasts. In response to the assassin's presence, Heath's twin serpents and Darq's dragon leapt into existence, creating a maelstrom of writhing color at the center of the room.

Somewhere within the melee, the Gemii crouched. Heath plunged in despite a yelled warning from Darq. He wanted this over quickly and he refused to allow the Gemii to have a chance to escape.

* * * * *

By the time Rihana and Makena made their way up the disintegrating staircase that led to the second floor, the sounds of the battle were reverberating through the thin walls. Outside the now open door of the apartment, the two women paused. "If we go in, our guardians will join the fight," Makena said.

Rihana might have scoffed at the idea if she hadn't witnessed the terrifying battle in the parking garage. She'd felt nothing then except fear and amazement, but now the skin above her left breast tingled. Her upper arm still ached from the pain of the tattoo, but beyond that normal and expected sensation lingered something else.

She felt the desire of her guardian beast, a thin but persistent layer of emotion underneath her own anxious fear. The creature sensed the danger just beyond the cracked, peeling wall and it wanted in.

"Let's go."

Though she had no psychic link to Makena, the other woman seemed to be aware of her unspoken intentions. She held back a step, allowing Rihana to enter first then followed on her heels.

Inside the now familiar room, the scene brought back memories of the garage. Dead center of the square space hung a ball of scintillating color. Black, red, brown, ochre and streaks of vibrant blue and violet entwined in a writhing mass. Vague shapes appeared and disappeared within it, and beneath the storm of color, three men grappled.

Rihana instantly recognized the assassin. His was the face in the photo Heath had taken from Tanesha's apartment, the face she'd seen peering out the broken window in her vision. Heath and Darq seemed to have him pinned to the stained, scuffed floorboards, yet he wore an expression of determined triumph.

One of Darq's hands was wrapped around the man's neck, and Rihana feared that she and Makena would be witness as he strangled the Gemii, but after a second she realized the truth of the situation. Though Darq straddled the man, and Heath seemed to have his legs pinned, the Gemii actually held Darq in a death grip and Darq was attempting to free himself by crushing the man's windpipe. Something besides the strength of straining muscles passed between them. Rihana saw streaks of deep red

fanning out across the assassin's skin from where Darq touched him. Here and there the streaks connected with thick tendrils of black that snaked down from the ball of color that hung above them like a macabre Christmas ornament. As she watched, mesmerized by the scene, those black ropes began to wind themselves around Darq's neck.

The sounds in the room were those of animals fighting. The hiss of serpents, the roar of dragons and a cold, ear-splitting squeal that could only come from the insidious black mass that represented the Gemii's guardian echoed off the naked walls.

Amid the swirling colors, Rihana caught a glimpse of the violet wings of Makena's guardian and the coiled red tail of her own small beast, but those additions to the maelstrom seemed to have no effect on the strength of the formless creature.

Rihana had no idea what to do. She hung back a moment, afraid to step in and try to pry Darq away from the Gemii and equally afraid not to. She wondered if the streaky red webbing now covering half the assassin's face was equivalent to the black marks left by him on Tanesha's body. Were he and Darq attempting to poison each other?

Once she too realized what was happening, Makena lunged forward, hands outstretched toward her mate. Swift as lightning, Heath broke contact with the Gemii and caught her, forcing her backward away from the melee. "Don't break their contact," he warned while Makena struggled in his arms. "The Gemii guardian will only attack you and you're not strong enough to fight it off."

"Help him!" Makena fought Heath and Rihana moved to assist him in pulling her back away from the fight. Before she could reach them, though, something in the color storm caught her attention and held it.

She recognized something there beyond the swirling shapes of the guardian beasts, something she'd seen only a few times before during her trips to the quaking. She stepped back, reluctant to leave Heath to deal with Makena alone, but she had an idea that might tip the balance of power in their favor.

Once her back hit the nearest wall, she plunged forward again, not physically but psychically into the quaking.

Ice rippled across her skin and she screamed. She'd never been so cold or felt so weak in her life. It took every ounce of strength she had to lift her head and confront the scene before her. Here in the netherworld, the guardian beasts were invisible. Only the black mass hung in the center of the room, undulating like a tentacled creature of the deep. Thick ropes of black attached the creature to Darq, who still wrestled on the floor with the assassin. A shape had formed on the side of his face. Like a blotchy bruise, it resembled the marks left on Tanesha's body.

With each second, the tendrils wrapping themselves around Darq's head and neck grew thicker. Rihana didn't need to ask Heath what the outcome would be if the black mass consumed his crèche brother. Darq would die the way Tanesha had.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Heath pushing Makena toward the door. He shoved her back several steps then turned and lunged for the combatants on the floor.

At the same moment, she threw herself at the Gemii guardian and plunged into utter blackness.

Chapter Fifteen

Heath cursed under his breath as he tried to break contact between Darq and the Gemii. Though it appeared the man was beginning to weaken, his whole life had been spent building the strength of his poisonous guardian and teaching it to kill. Even after his death, the formless creature might live long enough to do damage to any one of them.

Faintly, he registered Makena's cries of protest and that made him fight harder. Losing his crèche brother would be devastating, but to have it happen while Darq's chosen mate looked on would be unbearable.

He wrapped his own hands around the Gemii's skinny throat and concentrated on fighting the transfer of poisoned energy. He would have held on until the death—the assassin's or his own—but he didn't have to. With a force that knocked him backward and shook the dilapidated walls of the tenement, the battle above him ended as quickly as it had begun.

Stunned, he looked up as black dust rained down across the room. The Gemii guardian had exploded, sending harmless streaks of itself all over everything and everyone. Makena met his startled gaze and a millisecond later threw herself at Darq. He coughed once, convulsively, and caught his mate as she wrapped her trembling arms around him.

Heath allowed himself a relieved half-smile and dragged himself across the floor to examine the assassin. A spider work of black and red marred his face and his eyes were open and unseeing.

Under Heath's searching fingers his pulse faded and a moment later death halted his last strangled inhalation.

Amazing. It appeared that the man's own guardian had killed him, possibly in a backlash when the transfer from Darq was interrupted.

Heath leaned back on his haunches, taking grateful gulps of air, and turned to Darq. "How did you manage to—"

"I didn't." Darq shook his head and shrugged as Makena undraped herself from his body. "I was almost gone myself."

"Well it wasn't me."

"Heath." After leaving Darq's embrace, Makena had scuttled to the far corner of the room. She huddled there now over a crumpled form. The tone of her voice sent a blade of dread through Heath's heart.

Rihana's skin had turned a shade of lifeless gray. Her lips were blue and her eyes were open, staring without focus like those of the Gemii.

"She went back to the other side." Makena spoke in a monotone as if she was in shock. "Why hasn't she come back?"

"No!" Heath dragged Rihana's body away from the wall against which she'd slumped. He pulled her into his lap and cradled her head. "I know you can hear me, Ree. I know you're still in this room. Come back...now! I need you to come back now."

"Heath." Makena's gentle touch on his arm burned like acid and he flung her off.

"She's here. She just needs to come back."

"Darq, call 9-1-1. We need to get her help."

Vaguely Heath registered the electronic tones of a cell phone as Darq obeyed Makena's quiet command. He knew by the time help arrived, Rihana's body would be too far gone to resuscitate, even if her spirit wanted to return to it.

Ignoring Makena's soothing words, he clutched Rihana's cold hand and projected his frantic consciousness into her mind.

* * * * *

Forcing the Gemii guardian away from Darq had actually been the easy part. Now, confronted with its remnants, the sticky, grasping tentacles of negative emotions that had made up the guardian's spirit, Rihana had no idea how to proceed.

She could see her body lying in Heath's arms and hear his desperate voice begging her to step back through the veil, but she couldn't move. The web of hatred, anger, greed and deceit had trapped her here. It would cling to her and use her as a conduit to journey back to the living world. She couldn't allow that, but she didn't know how to prevent it.

Gramma Essie had always warned her to avoid the black masses and she'd obeyed. Only on rare occasions had she chanced observing them and then only for a moment or two before fleeing back to the safety of the living world. Now she had one on her, its oily limbs draped around her like a cloak, as cold and heavy as a wet blanket in winter.

She didn't have the strength to pull it off her.

"Rihana, it's time to come back." Heath's voice bounced off the dirty walls, less distant now than it had been a moment ago.

She managed to turn, though the movement caused her frozen joints and limbs to ache, and she found him standing beside her. In the far corner of the room lay her body, still wrapped in his arms. Darq and Makena hovered nearby, their faces pale and drawn.

Heath had followed her over to the quaking and now he was in danger too.

"Go back. I can't leave or this thing will come with me." She pushed ineffectively at the clinging mass, but it only seemed to tighten like elastic around her wrist and arm. A tendril snaked out and clamped on her biceps, gaining purchase for its anticipated journey through the veil.

Heath moved to stand beside her. Here in the netherworld his blond hair was white and the twin serpents on his arms stark black. "You don't have much time. If you don't come back now, you won't be able to."

"I can't take the chance. This thing needs to stay here."

"It will." He took her hand and grasped the slick strands that bound her. "I promise."

She met his gaze and her heart thudded with the dull cadence of rocks dropping into mud. The hardest part of staying here would be leaving him. She put her hand over his. "I'm afraid."

"I know. It's going to hurt to break away from this and it's going to hurt to wake up, but you've got to do it."

"Let me go. I'm too weak to do this."

"No, you're not." He began to pry the shimmery strands from her body. It seemed so easy for him, but each time he pulled one of the sticky tentacles away, a wave of fatigue swept over her. She felt the last of her energy ebb, stolen by the evil thing.

"I can't, Heath. Please, just leave me here."

He grabbed her chin and stared into her eyes. "I won't leave you here. I love you and I'm not going to let you die."

A sob escaped her, cutting through the damp, metallic atmosphere like an explosion. She wrapped her free hand around his neck and kissed him. "I love you too, but—"

He kissed her back, fiercely, and a puff of air rushed into her lungs. She gasped as the world spun sideways and when she opened her eyes she was lying in his arms, looking up at Darq and Makena as they peered over his shoulder.

The pain and the cold left her breathless and shivering violently. Heath wrestled her convulsing form against him and held her, warming her enough through sheer force of will that she could finally pry her clattering jaws apart and speak.

Sirens wailed in the distance and fear absorbed her last drop of energy, but she managed to croak out two words. "Get out."

Heath rubbed her arms and her face. His hands felt like branding irons on her frigid skin. "Don't try to talk."

"Go! Now. Don't...let the police find you all here. Too many questions."

"No." Heath dismissed her plea, but Makena reached out to squeeze his shoulder.

"She's right. Look at him." She nodded toward the Gemii's body and the formless black tattoo that covered half his face. "He died the same way that reporter did. With you two here, no one will believe he killed himself or that he died accidentally."

Heath helped Rihana to sit up and settled her against the crumbling plaster wall. "I don't want to do this."

"It's all right. I'll be okay." Rihana managed to gain enough control over her hand to thread her fingers through his. "You didn't let it get through the veil."

Heath kissed her again, gently as a whisper, and cupped her face. "I'll see you soon."

She nodded, too tired to form any more words. All she could do was show him a brief, translucent image of the two of them locked in an embrace and he smiled briefly before Darq pulled him out of the room.

* * * * *

A nurse had just finished removing Rihana's IV when Nathan arrived at her hospital room the next morning. His visit the night before had been cut short by doctors insisting she spend at least twelve hours resting quietly.

"So they're springing you?" he asked once the nurse had excused herself.

Rihana wanted nothing more than to fling the thin white blankets aside and retrieve her street clothes from the small closet across from the bed, but she forced herself to remain still. Heath would be waiting for her, no matter how long it took. She knew that. "I just need the doctor's signature. The nurse said she'd track him down for me. No permanent damage."

Nathan nodded his tacit approval and pursed his lips. Clearly he needed a smoke. Too much time spent in the sterile corridors of the hospital would make him increasingly jittery. "Do you remember any more of what happened?"

Rihana looked away. She remembered it all, very little of which DeYoung would believe, even if he'd been there himself. "Just what I told you last night. I saw him while I was in a trance. I recognized the building and I went there. I was going to call for backup, but he caught me looking around, grabbed me and knocked me out."

"Something doesn't jive. Preliminary autopsy says he was poisoned the same way as Tanesha. Why would he kill himself before you?"

"He *did* kill me first. He just didn't bank on someone getting there in time to revive me."

"Another unanswered question. Who called 9-1-1?"

"Someone must have seen him drag me into the building."

"Anonymous Samaritan saves life of NYPD psychic. That's what the headline will read."

"It has a nice ring. I'm sure the papers will get some mileage out of it." Rihana forced a chuckle, but beneath the blankets, her whole body tingled with anticipation. She had a lot more to say to Nathan and she wasn't sure where to begin.

"Brogan's pissed," Nathan added quickly. Half a smile played around his lips. "We don't get a conviction on this one. We'll never know why he killed Tanesha."

"I think he was just a violent man and she had the misfortune to get involved with him."

"So it's case closed. Another gold star on your record."

"Does that cancel out the demerits for fraternizing with a suspect?" She hated to bring that up. Five years with the department had taught her that the official rule was the end didn't justify the means. Results could be negated too easily by not following procedures.

"No one saw you at Gyland's apartment. Brogan made an assumption based on circumstantial evidence and he could have been mistaken."

"But he wasn't."

"But he could have been."

"So you're not writing me up?"

"Nope. I've got too many backlogged cases to put one of my best people on disciplinary suspension."

Rihana's spine stiffened. She had to speak now or she'd never be free. "About that, Nathan. I think it's time for a change..."

* * * * *

Heath was waiting in her apartment when she returned from the hospital. She was tired, still shaky and under orders to take a full week off to recover. The moment she saw Heath, unshaven but still as handsome as the first time she'd laid eyes on him, she began to feel better.

He drew her into a tight hug as soon as she closed the front door behind her and she melted against him, grateful for his warmth and his strength.

"How did everything go with Brogan and DeYoung?" he asked, running his fingers over her cheeks and the bridge of her nose as if committing her face to memory.

"We can talk later," she said, snaking her arms behind his neck and clasping them to lock herself against him. "Right now, we need to go to bed."

He didn't argue. He merely scooped her up and carried her toward her bedroom. When he settled her on the soft blankets and made a move to leave, she ran her hands down from his shoulders and tugged at his belt. "Not me. We. I don't want to be alone."

"You need to rest. You died yesterday."

"I died twice yesterday, actually, but who's counting? I can barely move, so I need you to move for me."

He raised a golden brow. "Are you asking me to make love to you?"

"No. I'm telling you. I couldn't tense a muscle right now if my life depended on it."

His upper lip curled into a sardonic grin. "I bet I could fix that."

"Who says it needs fixing?"

He held her gaze for a moment, contemplating, then began to pull off his shirt. An image formed in her mind of him rising above her, naked and hard. She closed her eyes and drifted on pure desire until the vision became reality.

Heath slowly pulled off her shirt and worked her jeans open. He slid the denim down her thighs and yanked the stiff fabric away from her legs. Her panties followed and then he eased her bra off, careful of the still sore patch of skin beneath the body of her guardian beast.

Just as in the vision he'd shown her, he climbed over her, easing her legs apart with his. She wrapped her arms under his and clutched his back, drawing her nails along his flesh. Just as she intended, the sensation caused his muscles to tense and he moaned softly into her ear as he stretched his lean body over hers.

His erection slipped down between her pussy lips and found her entrance. She arched her back to make penetration easier for him and used the pressure of her crossed legs over his ass to help guide him into her.

Rihana took his length with a low, appreciative groan and a quick inhalation once he'd reached full depth. He settled himself and brushed a featherlight touch across her brow, meeting her expectant gaze.

"I've never seen you this relaxed."

She closed her eyes and smiled. "I'll tell you my secret. They gave me something at the hospital to calm my nerves."

"Oh. Does that mean you're going to fall asleep on me?" He nuzzled her neck and the journey of his lips across her skin caused a tingling that traveled down her nerve endings and stirred the deep places inside her. The places only he had been able to reach.

"No, I'm not that calm. In fact—ah—" She gasped when he tilted his hips forward, reminding her of the long, hard shaft within her. "In fact, I'm very much awake."

"Good. I don't want you to miss any of this."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. Any world."

He smiled at that, but a hint of regret clouded the clear, deep blue of his eyes. She pretended not to see it, just as she planned to pretend while he made love to her that this might not be the last time.

Mustering the last of her strength, she began to move, urging him to take her. He didn't need words or psychic visions to understand what she wanted and in response to the wanton suggestions she made with her body, he gave without reservation.

Rihana bit her lip and locked her arms around Heath's back. He began to pump hard and fast, the rhythm of his movements matching the rising beat of her heart. Each thrust brought him deeper and Rihana found herself quickly reaching for orgasm. This time, though, the mounting tension in her muscles was from arousal rather than the fear of it. She met her desires head on and finally let herself enjoy the sensual demands of her own body.

Sweat beaded on her upper lip and he kissed the salty moisture away. He nipped at her neck, then bent to flick his tongue across her nipple. When it rose and hardened in response, he took the puckered flesh in his mouth and suckled. Each long, sensual pull sent electric pulses racing down to her womb to ignite the fires of her climax.

Years of resisting her own sexuality threatened to derail her pleasure and a faint thread of unrequited shame made her close her eyes and turn her head. This time, though, it wasn't fear of sin that made her suddenly self-conscious, but the realization that she needed him as badly as she did. Fear that she might never feel like this again brought the sting of unshed tears to her eyes even as her nerve endings reached the point of overload. She loved him. It felt like she always had. Knowing him only a few days didn't make a difference. He'd become her world in that time. How could she survive without him?

She pushed the rising tide of doubt away and let herself drift in him, in the perfect current of sensation they'd created together.

Finally, he took her to the edge and she cried out as her orgasm ravaged her exhausted body. She trembled like a leaf beneath him, and within her, his erection surged. She clutched her hips and growled as he came, emptying into her with long, hot spurts.

When he'd finished, he lay next to her and drew circles on her skin with his finger, smiling as her flesh pebbled and her nipples hardened again in response.

"You're beautiful," he said finally, and the rich timbre of his voice made her shiver. "You know, if you were naked..."

She raised a brow. "I *am* naked. Didn't you notice?"

"I mean your skin. If you had no tattoos, I wouldn't draw on you."

Rihana shifted to meet his languid gaze. "Why not?"

"Well, maybe a guardian beast, but nothing else. Your skin is perfect. There's nothing I could do to improve it."

She ran a hand up to the image above her breast. The creature there seemed as relaxed as she was. "So no more guardians for me?"

"You don't need another one. This one performed admirably in battle. I believe she's strong enough to protect you."

Rihana rolled on her side now to face him completely. "Do you think there are other Gemii here looking for you and Darq?"

"No. Not right now. I have no doubt more will be sent, but they'll have a hard time finding us."

"How many worlds are there...I mean that you can get to by crossing your bridges?"

"Thousands."

"How will you decide where to go?"

"I've already decided."

"Oh?"

Heath sat up. He grabbed the folded quilt from the end of Rihana's bed and opened it up to spread over them. "There's really only one choice at this point."

Rihana didn't need to ask what he meant. She wanted to retreat under the warmth of the blanket with him and never emerge. If they stayed here, cocooned in her bed, he would never have to leave her. "Verakos. It's probably long past time you and Darq went home, right?"

He met her gaze, and his eyes narrowed just a bit. "I've thought of little else but the day Darq and I would return home. The problem is, thanks to Makena, he's already there."

Confused, Rihana clutched the quilt over her and sat up as well. "You mean they left already?"

"No, I mean, Darq refuses to leave. He's decided to remain here permanently. He and Makena want to begin a new crèche."

"Raising royal babies in Manhattan?" Rihana almost laughed, but deep down she envied the couple. As new as their love might be, they already knew it would last forever.

"They've decided to leave the city and find a place that's more secluded and more...quaint."

"You say that like you disapprove."

"Well, in order to form a proper crèche, I should go with them and find a mate of my own."

"I see." She didn't though. Was he saying he wasn't leaving the planet, but he'd still be off to some distant land to look for a woman to bear his children?

"I don't like secluded and quaint."

"Oh."

"I like big, bustling, populated places. I like this city."

"There are cities that are a little more quaint than New York." Rihana regretted that statement. She didn't want to help him disappear.

"But this has become my home." Now he caught her hand and held it up to his face. Rihana shivered at the vision he showed her. The four of them—Darq and Makena, herself and Heath—stood with generations of children surrounding them. A new royal bloodline.

"Are you asking me to stay with you?" Emotion choked her words.

"Or go with me, wherever we decide. I can't guarantee the Gemii won't find us one day, but I can promise you what Darq and Makena have. I love you, Rihana. Will you join me?"

She should have thought about it, made careful consideration of the enormity of his request, but the beauty of the vision he'd showed her obliterated all doubt in her mind.

Gramma Essie had often told her, when love was right, it required no debate and it brooked no questioning.

She threw her arms around his neck. "Yes, I will. Anywhere."

"Even if it means leaving this city, this country?"

She nodded. "I haven't written my resignation letter yet, but I told Nathan I'm done with the psychic program. I was considering joining the police academy and becoming a detective, but that doesn't have to be here."

"You're going to stop using your gift?"

She sighed. That was something she'd given plenty of thought. The guilt would be difficult to overcome, but it was finally time to lay aside her obligation to Gramma Essie and start living for herself. "I need to put it away and move on. I did what I could, and I realize that while my grandmother wanted me to use my gift, everything she did was about protecting me from the dangers that came with it. I think she'll understand now, if I step back for my own protection. I'm done with the quaking."

Heath nodded and she sensed his relief. Having seen the netherworld twice, he clearly had no desire to ever go back again. Rihana wondered how she'd had the courage to make as many trips there as she had over the years.

Heath pulled the quilt around them and guided her back to the pillows. He cradled her against his chest and stroked the skin of her shoulder where the hand of God lay across her skin. "So, these quaint cities...tell me about them."

"Nope."

"Why not? Would you rather stay here in Manhattan?"

"Not particularly."

"Then where do *you* suggest we go to start our new crèche?"

"I'm not saying." She planted a kiss on his chest then lay her head down over the strong, steady beat of his heart. "If you want any more information out of me, detective, you'll just have to read my mind."

About the Author

Drawn to spicy tales of adventure from an early age, Bernadette Gardner made the leap from writing hard science fiction to writing erotic romance in 2005 and has never looked back.

Now multi-published, Bernadette also writes paranormal, fantasy and contemporary titles under the name Jennifer Colgan. When not exploring distant galaxies or alternate universes, Bernadette can be found at home with her husband of fifteen years, two children and one slightly neurotic Dalmatian. She spends her spare time reading, quilting and haunting the local craft stores, and looks forward to bringing steamy stories to her fans for decades to come.

Bernadette 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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