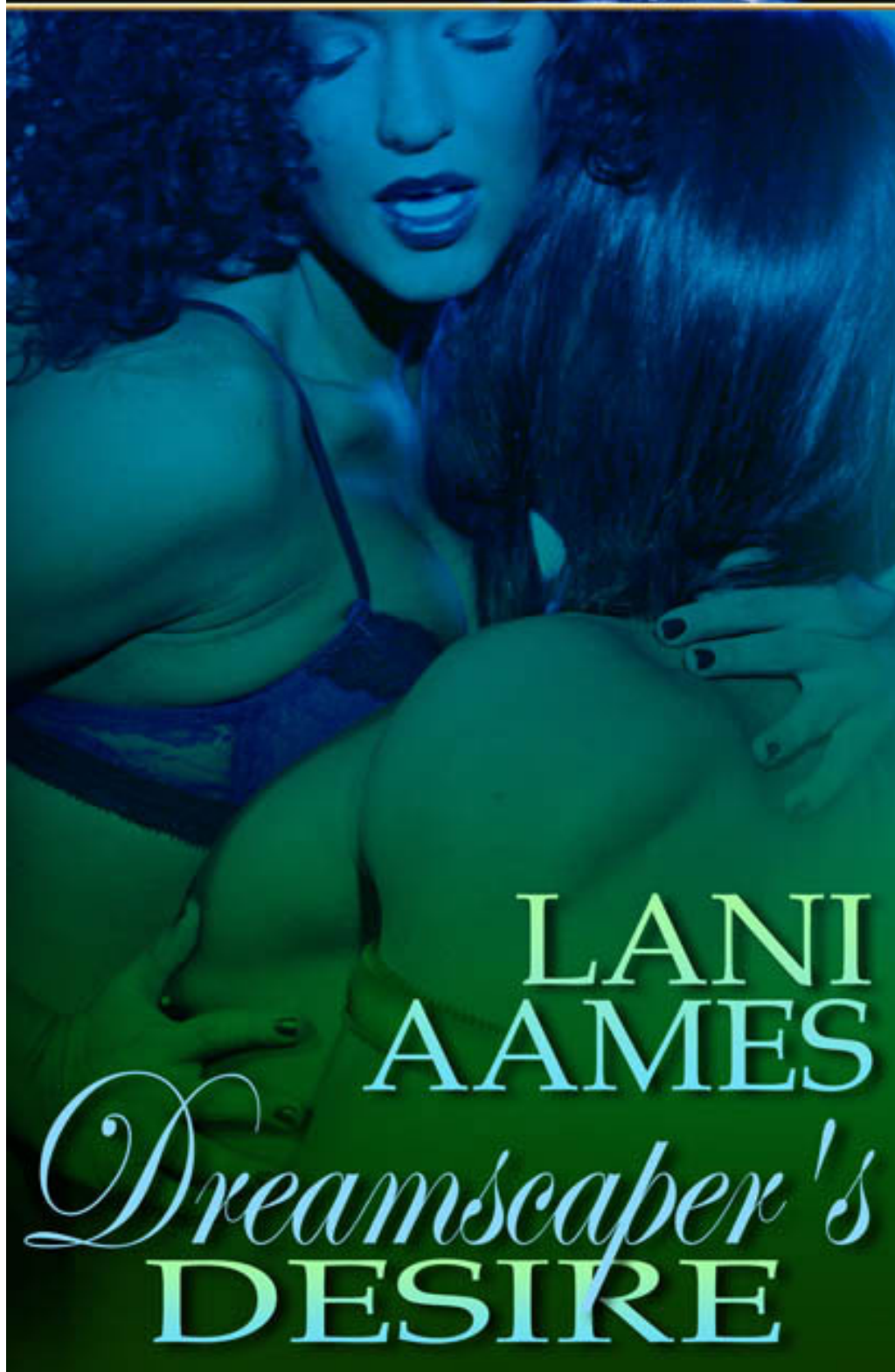


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



LANI
AAMES

Dreamscaper's
DESIRE

Dreamscaper's Desire

Lani Aames

Carmen dreams of a handsome, sexy man who fulfills all her fantasies. His touch ignites her body and makes her soar to new heights of fiery sensation. But Nicodemus is merely a dream, isn't he? A figment of her imagination conjured in her sleep because there is no *real* man in her mundane life.

When Carmen comes to the difficult decision to find a way to give up her dream lover, a friend tells her about a place where sleep habits and dreams are studied. Sounds like exactly what Carmen needs.

Nicodemus spends hot, sweaty nights locked in Carmen's embrace, making all her dreams come true. There he finds true peace and love. But Nic knows demons can also escape through Carmen's dreams and he's fighting to keep the real world from turning into a nightmare.

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Dreamscaper's Desire

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DREAMSCAPER'S DESIRE

Lani Aames

Chapter One

Carmen opened her eyes when a pair of lips grazed her shoulder, followed by a warm palm on her arm and a hot body snuggled against her backside. Already wet in anticipation, she squirmed into the rigid cock prodding the crevice between the backs of her thighs. Her clit throbbed, echoing the beat of the native drums deep within the jungle outside the tent.

Kisses were sprinkled along her throat while the hand caressed her arm. Both left trails of heat that burned her skin, claiming her with a brand of desire she'd never experienced before. She moaned and the sound came from deep within her primal core, a place she rarely allowed free rein.

Fingers entwined with hers and moved her arm upward to rest beside her head on the pillow. A hard, muscled leg prodded her thigh until her knee bent, allowing easy access to her pussy. The tip of a cock nudged between her damp folds.

"Yes...oh, yes," Carmen murmured.

He thrust hard and deep and her back arched, hips tilting to meet him each time.

Their bodies rocked together in a divine rhythm, the humidity of the tropical air mingling with their sweat. Carmen strained against him with each backward push. Her body hummed with their mounting ecstasy and her skin tingled with the slow burn of her desire. She never wanted the moment to end, to lose the perfection of their union and the amazing completeness that fulfilled her.

The flash of pleasure took her by surprise. Her back stiffened and warmth flushed her body. She ground her pussy into him. His hand tightened on hers and he pumped into her with quick, clean strokes.

"Carmen, yes, come with me," he said, his ragged breaths tickling her ear and sending quivers throughout her body.

Her hips undulated with each wave of pleasure. His movements became frenzied as his iron-hard cock plumbed her depths until he spilled within, groaning with his released passion. When their bodies lay still, a breath of jungle air, rich with the perfume of some exotic flower, caressed her sweat-damp skin. The sultry breeze did little to cool her but she wasn't uncomfortable at all. She turned to face him—her dream lover.

She looked into his golden eyes, burning brightly, reminding her of a wild tiger prowling the night in search of prey. His taut body, as powerfully built as that of a fierce cat, radiated the spent heat of his desire.

"Nicodemus." She reached up and touched his face, his skin warm and damp and *solid* beneath her fingertips. "You're here again."

He swept his hand up into her hair and drew her closer for a kiss. When his demanding lips broke from hers, leaving her breathless, he smiled. "I will be here as long as you need and want me."

"Of course, you will. You have no choice."

He chuckled, the sound vibrating deep in his chest. "I do have a choice and I choose to be with you as often as I can."

"So you say."

He sighed and shook his head, his long black hair moving silkily over his broad shoulders, the feathery tips caressing her breasts. "You still do not believe me."

"I believe that you believe it but how can I think of you as anything other than what I know you to be—a dream."

Nicodemus, her dream lover...literally.

"This whole setup," she continued, refusing to allow the disappointment in his golden eyes to sway her, "the bed, the tent, the drums and the jungle—it's like something out of an old Tarzan movie. I manufactured all of this out of memories, so I made you up too."

He frowned, but it was a gentle frown of puzzlement, not disapproval. "Yes, all of this came from your memories. You have woven a sexual fantasy from images you find fascinating in your life but I have explained to you that I am not one of your creations. This body I wear is to please you but I—the spirit within that is Nicodemus—am as real as you." He drew a deep breath. "I am a Dreamscaper, a guardian of the realm where human dreams occur."

So he had told her several times before and she still didn't believe him. Dreams were created in one's mind, not on an elaborate stage somewhere in another dimension. And Nic's insistence that he was real could only be her subconscious trying to justify why she continued to dream about him and make love to him instead of finding and developing a relationship with a real man.

Nic put his arm around her and drew her close. With her hand on his broad chest, she could feel the beating of his heart. His sweat dampened her palm and his legs tangled with hers. Nic felt as concrete as any real man she had ever touched.

"I will not be able to come to you as often for a while. The Shadow Demons grow restless."

"Shadow Demons?" Carmen gazed up at him.

His solemn eyes darkened as he explained, "The Shadows are the lowest order in the demon hierarchy. They serve the higher orders and they are not content. When they attempt to escape into your world, we, the Dreamscapers, always foil their plans."

Carmen stifled a laugh, fearing she would hurt his feelings if she let it loose. Her imagination proved to be much more vivid than she'd ever thought it could be. Maybe she should write a book! Though her dream lover uttered pure nonsense, she played along just to see what else she would come up with through Nic. "Are the demons here in Dreamscape? What would happen if they were able to get into my world?"

Nic scowled. "You do not want to know."

Scratch the book. Her imagination wasn't creative enough to provide a nasty scenario for the dreaded demons.

"The demons have their own plane of existence, just as other kinds of spirits have theirs," he continued. "The demon plane borders Dreamscape. It is why we are here. The guardians prevent the demons, and any others who might want to cross over, from using Dreamscape and human dreams to enter your world."

Before she could ask more questions, a terrible shriek, like a wild jungle bird crying out in agony, shattered the quiet night. The continuous sound filled her with cold dread. Carmen tried to wrap her arms around Nic but he held her away from him.

"You know you cannot," he admonished softly, but sorrow filled his eyes and deepened the frown on his face.

"No, I don't want to go!" Tears stung her eyes and desperation filled her soul. She knew he was a dream, a figment of her imagination, but she didn't want to leave the comfort of his arms, no matter how insubstantial they were in reality.

"You have to. I will try to return to you tomorrow night." Nic grew dimmer as the light from the candles faded and the tent started to melt away.

"Nooooo..." she moaned, mourning the loss of her lover. As always, she felt a tug within, as if wire connected her limbs together and some invisible force used it to pull her back into the real world.

"Tomorrow night." His husky voice grew fainter until she could hardly hear it and he grew indistinct until she could barely see him. "I promise."

Everything around her faded to black...

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Carmen Tavaréz-King bolted upright and her eyes flew open. Tears spilled down her cheeks and a sob caught in her throat. The wild jungle bird still screamed its agony and she reached over to slam her hand on the alarm clock button, abruptly cutting off the sound.

Silence filled her apartment.

Carmen rubbed her face and ran her fingers back through her hair, resting her elbows on her bent knees. She cast a glance at the empty place beside her. Nicodemus... He could never fill that space. He was a figment of her imagination, a creation of her unfulfilled desire and need. She had conjured him in her dreams because she longed for someone who understood her completely, along with a warm body to share her bed at night.

He wasn't real and she had to let go. Let *him* go.

Tossing back the blanket, Carmen got out of bed and padded to the bathroom. She blinked when she flipped on the harsh overhead light and frowned at her haggard appearance in the mirror. She had inherited the wealth of deep brown, almost-black hair, thick arched brows and coffee brown eyes from her Mexican-American mother but her usual creamy complexion with a natural rose blush to her cheeks had come from her Anglo father.

Her reflection looked paler than usual. The rose blush drained from her cheeks and the shaded crescents under her eyes emphasized the many hours of lost sleep.

Carmen ran water in a glass and rinsed the dry cotton taste out of her mouth, then turned off the light. Back in bed, she reset the alarm for several hours later. She didn't have to be at work at the book café until noon, but she'd planned to get up early to run errands and do household chores. They could wait. She needed sleep—soothing, restful sleep.

She lay in bed but her eyes would not close. She stared at the ceiling with only one thing on her mind.

"Nic..." she whispered.

Once again, she could feel his lips caressing her skin, his hands roaming her body, his hard cock thrusting inside her, bringing her to ecstasy. Her breasts tingled and her clit thrummed with the memory of making love with Nic...of making love to a *dream*.

Carmen wiped her eyes clear of tears that had filled them again. There had to be more to her existence than mere dreams. She had to find a way to end her dreams of Nicodemus so she could go on with her life.

* * * * *

Early in the evening, customers slowed to a trickle at Legibles & Edibles, the book café where Carmen worked as night manager and she took her late break. Barely able to keep her eyes open, she fixed herself a cappuccino for the caffeine. She grabbed a handful of books on dreams from the New Age section to read later at home and settled in a corner booth.

Her friend, Jancy Holmes, usually dropped by on her way home from work and they would share a dessert. They both had crazy schedules. Jancy attended a few classes at the university and worked two part-time jobs. With Carmen working noon to nine, Carmen's late break was the only time they could spend together most weeks.

While waiting, Carmen sipped her cappuccino and thumbed through a couple of the books. She was surprised to find that sleep occurred in ninety to one-hundred-twenty minute cycles. All dreams occurred toward the end of the sleep cycle. If the dreamer woke during that time, complete, vivid recall was possible. The dream would seem very real, as though it had actually happened. Then in another volume, she found promising definitions of several words she was only vaguely familiar with—incubus and succubus.

Excitement skittering through her, she carefully set her mug aside. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Finally, something might make sense of her strange dreams! An incubus was a male evil spirit that had sexual intercourse with sleeping women and a succubus was the female equivalent who sexually preyed upon sleeping men.

Nicodemus as incubus explained why her dreams were sexual in nature. Yet she'd never sensed malicious intent from Nic. He admitted to being a spirit but he'd never

done anything that could be construed as evil. According to his explanation, he was just the opposite. His presence prevented evil from entering the real world.

Her fingers trembling against the paper, another word caught her eye—nightmare. Everyone knew what a nightmare was—a horrible dream—but another of the definitions surprised her. The word was a combination of “night” and “mare”. For the latter, a female horse was her first thought but the word derived from Old English. In this case, a mare was an evil spirit that caused frightful dreams of terror and anxiety and “nightmare” had evolved into the word to describe one of those frightening dreams.

Everything had to do with evil and nothing to do with guardians of dreams or Dreamscapers.

Carmen turned the page. The author went on to theorize that the concepts of incubus and succubus were currently known as night terrors. Some people awoke in the night, their bodies still paralyzed by sleep. They would feel pressure on their chests and be overcome with the sense of someone else in the room. They might even visualize an alien presence. Tests had showed this was a common phenomenon among humans, although not everyone experienced it. In the past, the imagined presence and physical sensations would be attributed to evil spirits or demons.

Her building excitement dissipated in a flash. When Nic came to her she wasn't awake, her body was not paralyzed with sleep and she never felt a foreboding evil from him. All she had ever felt was wanted and needed and, yes, loved.

“Sorry I'm late.” Jancy's apology broke through her disappointment. “Traffic was a bitch. Some asshole cut me off and I nearly ran into an eighteen-wheeler. Hey, are you awake?”

Carmen stifled a yawn, marked her place in the book and pushed the stack of paperbacks to the far end of the table to make room for Jancy's tray. “Didn't get much sleep last night.”

Jancy slid her tray in place then picked up the book from the top of the pile as she plopped down across from Carmen.

"Perchance To Dream," Jancy read the title aloud. *"A Symbolic Guide To Dreams and Nightmares.* Wow, you still having that same dream?"

"Not the same dream." Carmen sipped from her mug of cappuccino but it had grown cold. She had hoped the caffeine would keep her awake but she still felt fuzzy, as though she could nod off at any moment. "The same kind of dream though."

"And the hunk?" Jancy grinned mischievously. "You still dream about him?"

Carmen traced the pattern on the mug with her thumbs. She almost wished she'd never told her friend about Nicodemus. Jancy would never let her live it down.

Jancy leaned across the table and lowered her voice. "You still having wet dreams?"

Heat rose in Carmen's cheeks but she nodded.

"Does your dream hunk have a friend?" Jancy plunged her fork into a gooey chocolate confection. "That Viking I dream about when I'm between boyfriends hasn't showed up this time. It's been nearly three months."

Carmen had listened to Jancy talk about her dream lover when she started dreaming about Nicodemus but their dreams weren't the same. Jancy's hunk didn't talk to her about Dreamscape or protecting their world from demons. He just did the usual Viking things such as tie her up and fuck her until she screamed.

When Carmen realized their dreams differed, she didn't tell Jancy about the Dreamscaper stuff. She also hadn't told her the dreams occurred more frequently, almost every night now. "It wouldn't be so bad, except I don't rest. I only sleep for a few hours and when the dream ends, I wake up. Then I can't get back to sleep."

She couldn't bring herself to tell Jancy that on the nights she didn't dream about Nic, she'd wake up after a few hours sleep, worrying that she'd never dream about him again. She couldn't live with him but...oh, she couldn't live without him.

"Wait a minute." Jancy dropped her fork and dug into her purse. She pulled out a folded sheet of paper and handed it to Carmen. "Someone left a stack of these at the university the other day. I grabbed one for you. Maybe it'll help."

Carmen took the flyer and smoothed out the creases. Printed in a large font across the top was Mid-South Institute of Sleep and Dreams. Beneath was an address on a county road outside Memphis city limits. Below that, the pitch:

Volunteers needed to help in the research of sleep habits and dreaming. Please apply in person at the address above.

Could she? Would she have the nerve to tell strangers about her erotic dreams? Did she dare tell them about Dreamscape and Shadow Demons and planes of existence? Or would they just truss her up in a straightjacket and toss her in the loony bin with the rest of the psychopaths?

"What do you think?" Jancy stuffed a huge forkful of the dessert into her mouth.

"I think—" Carmen raked up a big glob of gooey icing and sucked it from her finger. "I think I might take tomorrow off and check it out."

She didn't have to tell them the craziness about Dreamscapers and demons. She could tell them she'd had a series of dreams in different fantasy settings with a recurring dream lover. She didn't have to elaborate.

She didn't have to tell them she was falling in love with a dream.

Chapter Two

A hard body molded to Carmen's. Strong arms lay along hers and long legs matched her steps as she danced. Middle Eastern music played softly in the background, the off-key zither a poignant counterpoint to the steady beat of drums and cymbals and the tiny bells jingling on her harem costume.

Her hips shimmied side-to-side, brushing the growing bulge of his cock, which was pressed against her rear. He slipped a hand over her right shoulder and the other under her left arm. His fingers glided beneath the silken material of her harem bra. When they touched the hard tips of her breasts, she gasped.

"Carmen." Nic's lips and tongue raked the tender skin just below her ear. "You are my temptation."

"And you are mine." She had sworn to let him go the next time he invaded her dream but he aroused her like no other lover had.

Nic lifted the bra and pulled it over her head then dropped it to the floor. He swung her around to face him. He wore no more than a shimmering loincloth and golden armbands around his biceps with a green jewel charm dangling from the center of each.

He dipped his head and surrounded one nipple with his mouth, his tongue raking the hard point. Desire coursed through her like molten lightning and she tugged at his loincloth until it dropped free. Her hand slid over his hot silken shaft and he groaned against her breast.

She went to her knees and took his thick cock in both hands. She wet the large head with swipes of her tongue, trailing down the underside until she reached his nest of curls, then took it into her mouth. Another groan sounded from deep within Nic's chest. She sucked him, taking as much as she could with each thrust of his hips, using her

tongue to stimulate the soft spot at the tip. With one hand, she stroked his tight sac, causing his thrusts to quicken.

His cock grew even stiffer and his body shuddered. Warm semen, tasting like peaches and cream, spurted into her mouth. In real life, she'd never swallow, but this was only a dream and the flavored cum was almost a treat. Perhaps next time she would imagine the tang of wild strawberries and white chocolate.

When his cock collapsed, he pulled her to her feet and lifted her into his arms. He laid her in the center of the bed and removed her harem pants, pulling them slowly off her hips and down her legs. He kissed one knee, then the other and trailed more kisses down her inner thighs, taking turns with each. She closed her eyes and waited with quivering anticipation as he neared her core.

When he reached her center, her pussy undulated against his mouth. His tongue caressed her, teasing every fold and crease of her labia, then circling her clit. She moaned, her head tossing side-to-side. When he took the engorged nub into his mouth, her inner muscles clenched and she fell over the edge of ecstasy, tingles of pleasure spinning throughout her entire body, to the tips of her fingers and toes.

He rode her down, his lips and tongue gently caressing her until her body settled. Then he moved up and gathered her into his arms, holding her close. Even if he were only a dream, she didn't want to ever leave him. Their lovemaking was more vibrant and *real* than anything she'd had with other lovers. They had been inept clods compared to Nic. He made her feel alive!

Something niggled at the back of her mind, something she should tell him. She finally let it go. It must not have been important if she couldn't remember.

However, she did think of something she could ask him. "It's said if you dream you're falling from a high place, like a cliff or building, and you hit bottom, you will die."

"False." His hand crept to her breast. He traced around her nipple and it tightened and puckered. "For most humans, dreams are merely nothing more than dreams. They

can relieve stress and anxiety. Or they can be an expression of your greatest fears or deepest desires. Even when I play in most humans' dreams, I become nothing more than a fleeting memory. You are different, Carmen. You are one of only a few humans who remembers me and recognizes me when I return."

She sighed and tried to concentrate on their conversation. His teasing her breast made that difficult. "What makes me different?"

"I do not know." Between phrases, he nibbled at her neck with tender nips and licks. "Just as you are more receptive to Dreamscape and me, there are others whose dreams I cannot enter at all." He abruptly pulled away from her and she turned to find him frowning in frustration. "I cannot protect them from the demons or other malevolent entities that might do them harm."

Carmen smoothed the furrows in his brow with one hand. She might as well play along with his delusions of reality. "You do the best you can, right?"

"Yes, I do." Pride filled his voice and his face brightened.

She decided to humor him. "Then that's really all that matters. No one, not even a Dreamscaper, can be everywhere and do everything."

"True. There are more humans than there are guardians to protect you. And many more evil entities than both combined." He seemed pleased that she had started to take him and his concerns seriously.

"Then let's not worry about it right now." Carmen rose and put her arm around his neck.

In apparent agreement, his mouth covered hers. His lips glided sensuously over hers, his tongue delving deeply and possessively. Desire spiraled through her once again and she fell back among the silken pillows, Nic's body covering hers.

Before she could spread her legs for him, he tensed and lifted his head, his golden eyes ablaze with an inner fire. When he pushed back to his knees, Carmen propped up on her elbows.

She didn't like the frown that marred his face. "What is it?"

He didn't answer her for several moments, merely shook his head and leapt from the bed. Striding to the center of the room, which could have been the center of the universe as far as she knew, his face raised as if testing the air by scent or taste. He once again reminded her of a tiger, though her dream scenario did not incorporate the jungle this time.

"Do you not feel it?" His voice, barely audible, vibrated with apprehension. "Something is happening...something is *wrong*."

Carmen scooted from the bed and went to stand by his side. "I don't feel anything different."

"My fault. I have given more attention to you than my inherent duty." He sounded desperate and fatalistic. "Now, it is too late."

Carmen laid her hand on his arm, surprised by the rigidity of his muscles. She fingered the jewel on his armband, smiling at him and trying to coax him into calming down. "This is my dream. You don't have any 'duty' except what I give you. Nicodemus, I officially absolve you from any task you think you should perform—"

He jerked his arm away from her touch and glared down at her, his golden eyes nearly orange in his fury. "You still do not believe me. Do not believe *in* me."

The charm had broken off in her hand and she looked down at it. Tears stung her eyes, blurring the color of the jewel. "You're only as real as a dream can be."

Why was her dream lover refusing to adhere to the script she wrote for him? She lifted her eyes and looked at him. When he saw her tears, he softened. His eyes no longer glowed and he reached to wipe the dampness from her cheeks.

"I am sorry, Carmen..." he began but the light began to fade and he along with it.

Carmen filled with the familiar sense of dread and loss and felt the tugging of the invisible wires connected to her limbs. Nic's touch turned cold and then he didn't touch her at all.

"What's happening now?" she cried.

"It's time for you to go." He stepped back, away from her.

She drew in a deep breath and nodded. The light around her grew fainter and everything lost color, vibrancy and substance. Nicodemus transformed into little more than shadow.

"Do not fight it, Carmen. Relax, let go. We will meet here again but I cannot say when."

Desperation filled her and she struggled to speak. She tried to reach out to him but her leaden arms refused to lift. Her eyelids drooped until they closed. "I love you, Nic."

The sound of his voice barely reached her ears as he disappeared. "I love you."

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Carmen's eyes sprang open and she bolted upright, gulping air as if she hadn't breathed for minutes. She saw movement out of the corner of her eye and turned her head but nothing was there. Then she caught it again—a black, blurry, shadowy thing that disappeared when she looked toward where she thought it to be.

It flitted from one side of her to the other for several seconds and she whipped her head back and forth, trying to see what it could be. At first, she thought Nic had moved through dimension and imagination and emerged with her into her world.

She started to rub her eyes, tangling the wires attached to round patches on her arms and hands, but her right hand was tightly clenched. When she opened it, a green jewel lay in her palm. She blinked at it uncomprehendingly and then her heart hammered at an alarming rate.

The flitting shadow could be explained as a leftover fragment of her dream, inspired by Nic's insistence that something was wrong. She could not explain away the jewel as easily. Perhaps the doctor or one of the nurses had dropped it among her bedding as they prepped her. She must have seen it and incorporated it into her dream. Then, somehow, her hand had closed over it while she slept.

Too many coincidences?

She dropped back onto the pillow, pulling at the patches stuck to her skin. Memories flooded her mind—her trip to the institute, filling out forms, the next day's call from the assistant, Ms. Rush, to set up an appointment, returning to the institute, being prepped for sleep—all the things she couldn't, for some reason, remember to tell Nicodemus in her dream.

Dr. Lillian LeSeur, dressed in a white coat and heels, strode into the room, a man and a woman following. The usually unflappable doctor was visibly flustered, though her voice was as crisp and efficient as ever, and not a red hair was out of place in the sleek French twist. "Johnson and Greeley will remove those. You can get dressed now, Ms. Tavarez-King. Ms. Rush will have forms for you to fill out and sign before you leave. Thank you for participating. Good day."

She had barely reached Carmen's bedside before she finished her dismissive speech, turned sharply on her heel and headed for the door again.

"Wait!" Carmen called.

Impatiently, Dr. LeSeur stopped and turned. "Yes, what is it?"

"Is this yours?" She held out her hand, the green jewel sparkling in the white hospital room. "I-I found it in the sheets."

Dr. LeSeur took a step forward, staring at the jewel, then one perfectly trimmed eyebrow arched derisively. "Hardly."

In that moment, Carmen made the decision not to tell her anything more. The doctor acted as if everyone and everything was beneath her. Carmen closed her hand over the jewel. "I thought—" One of the nurses pulled off the last patch and Carmen winced. "Don't you want to ask questions about my dream?"

Dr. LeSeur stared at her, eyes narrowed. "The forms, Ms. Tavarez-King. You'll answer questions on the forms. We'll be in touch if we need any further information."

"That's all?" Carmen rubbed her arm and neck. Her skin stung where the patches had been. "I thought there was supposed to be a series of tests?"

Reaching for the doorknob, Dr. LeSeur sighed in exasperation. "We only require a sampling at this phase in our research. Later, after we have correlated the data, we'll choose the subjects for further study in the second phase. Now, I'm needed elsewhere."

The doctor disappeared through the door before Carmen could frame another question. She asked both nurses if either of them knew who the jewel belonged to but they shook their heads. Carmen thanked the nurse who handed her the bag containing her clothes. When the nurses had gone, she got out of bed and started dressing.

A colossal waste of time, she decided. She was no closer to understanding why or how she had built such a vivid and convoluted series of dreams around a man who didn't really exist. Dr. LeSeur had grown excited when Carmen had talked about Nicodemus before they prepped her for sleep. Although embarrassed, she had decided to tell the doctor everything from their incredible lovemaking to how he was a guardian of dreams. Now, LeSeur barely had time for her.

Carmen shoved her feet into her shoes and slung her purse over her shoulder. Her time at the institute hadn't helped any more than reading the stack of books on dreams and nightmares. Nothing she'd read or learned here had anything to do with her wild dreams of Nicodemus or Dreamscape.

Maybe she just needed to see a psychiatrist. She looked at the teardrop jewel again then tucked it into her pocket. Maybe not.

Maybe she just needed to find a real man and have a real relationship. Then Nic would go away for good.

Sorrow filled her and she ached at the thought of never seeing Nic again.

In the hall, the male nurse waited for Carmen, led her to Ms. Rush's office and left her there after tapping on the closed door. Carmen debated whether to wait or just leave. If LeSeur couldn't be bothered to debrief her, why should she take the time to fill

out their forms? It might take months or *years* before they reached the second phase in their research.

Carmen needed help *now*.

By the time she reached the front desk and left her clip-on identification tag with the bored receptionist, Ms. Rush had appeared—a dowdy woman in complete contrast to the sophisticated LeSeur although they were both in their forties.

“Ms. Tavaréz-King? You forgot to fill out the forms.” Rush’s admonishing tone suggested that she knew Carmen hadn’t forgotten at all.

“No, I didn’t,” Carmen called over her shoulder as she left through the front door.

Chapter Three

Icy hands roamed beneath Carmen's nightshirt, arousing her and making her restless. Her body, reacting before she was fully aware and in control, alternated between moving away from and then drawing toward their touch. Her subconscious couldn't seem to decide if she enjoyed the strange contact or not.

One hand pinched and squeezed her breasts in turn while the other wedged between her thighs where hard fingers with sharp nails pressed into the soft, wet folds of her flesh. Once she became completely alert, she decided to go with whatever happened to her, trusting her own instincts about her desires and passions. She squirmed against the insistent fingers and spread her legs until the fingertips touched her burning clit.

Carmen breathed Nic's name on a moan and tried to reach for him but she could only move her arms a few inches. They were stretched up toward the corners of the mattress with some kind of binding around her wrists.

Tied up! Her eyes fluttered open and she looked to the right. Street light filtered through the panes of glass of her bedroom window. The thick, lined blackout drapes were open and drawn to the sides. At certain times of the year, the morning sun shone directly through the window, splashing its bright light over most of the room. On the days she wanted to sleep in, after a late night at the book café, she closed the drapes so the sun wouldn't wake her. She'd left them open because she'd planned to get up early to run the errands she'd put off the other morning and knew the sunlight would keep her from falling back asleep. It was funny how her subconscious incorporated all the details of her bedroom, down to the open drapes, into her dream.

Now, she looked at her arm and saw her right wrist bound with some kind of strap to the corner post of the headboard. She tried to move her left wrist but found it

immobilized in the same manner, tied with a strap to the other corner post. While bondage had played a small part in her fantasies, she usually imagined being tied to the mast of a pirate ship or chained to a vampire's dungeon wall—not her own bed. This fantasy seemed a little mundane compared to the others Nic had provided for her.

Suddenly, the hand pinched her nipple too hard and pain shot through her breast. Pain had *never* been included in any of her fantasies.

She winced. "Ow, Nic, that hurts. What are you doing?"

Looking up at the figure looming over her, she frowned. His silhouette differed from the Nicodemus she had always encountered before. Disappointment washed over her. Why had her subconscious recreated her own bedroom instead of the exotic locales as before? Why had she altered Nic, making him into a misshapen, disjointed creature instead of the sexy hunk who turned her on?

Did it really matter? Neither their surroundings nor his appearance meant a thing as long as they were together. If her inner self wanted to reconstruct Nic's form, she might as well play along. As long as it was still Nic inside the figure who touched her and teased her, it didn't matter what he looked like on the outside.

His hands continued to prod and explore her body. Although she much preferred the attentive lover, his rough handling wasn't unpleasant.

"I'm so glad you're here. I was afraid I wouldn't see you tonight." She wished she could touch him, run her hands over his brawny shoulders—or whatever he had that passed for shoulders this time—and bring him closer. Nic in her bed. Didn't that make up her ultimate fantasy? How many times had she daydreamed of a real Nic in her bed?

He made a sound, a cross between a laugh and a growl. "One of *them*, I am not. Touching your strange flesh would make you docile, I knew."

The abhorrent scream of his voice made her skin crawl and she gasped. She would *never* create a Nic who emitted such a horrible sound. She had given him a warm, husky voice that could arouse her with one whispered word. This being was not a Dreamscaper. He said he was not "one of *them*". She hadn't altered her dream lover at

all. He and the dream were different because the thing that fondled her was not Nicodemus. What else could it be but what the Dreamscapers guarded against—a Shadow Demon?

She yanked on her bonds but the straps held securely. She bucked her body and kicked at him but the Shadow Demon caught and pinned her spread legs to the mattress. The demon had moved and the light coming through the window revealed the hideous creature. Carmen's body went rigid, her breath catching in her chest.

Small, articulated plates formed his skin and long, pointed nails tipped his fingers. His triangular head, topped with curved horns, sat directly on his shoulders. Crimson eyes glowed in their sunken sockets and his slit of a mouth opened, showing discolored, shark-like teeth.

A long, serpentine tongue slithered out and raked across her cheek and throat. Carmen's jaw worked but she couldn't utter a sound.

"Nectar to me, your fear is," he purred while licking her body. The split tip of his tongue left silvery, slug-like trails of cold slime between her breasts and down across her ribs. When it reached her abdomen, the spasm in her chest broke.

She screamed and didn't think she would ever stop. She screamed until the effort seared her throat and she sounded hoarse and hollow. She finally stopped when nothing more than dry, broken sobs made her chest heave. Panic fueled her body and she thrashed against her captor though she knew she couldn't break her bonds or escape the demon's hold on her.

When his tongue dragged closer to her patch of curls, a woman's voice snapped from the shadows. "Uriah!"

She sounded vaguely familiar but Carmen's relief at seeing the demon's tongue withdraw overrode everything else, even curiosity, at that moment. She didn't have long to wait to find out the identity of who else was in her dream. The woman stepped into view around the foot of the bed. The glow from the window was enough to show her hair drawn away from her face into a severe French twist.

"Dr. LeSeur?" Carmen had thought she'd never see the woman again after her abrupt departure from the institute. Why had she incorporated the doctor into her dream and made her an ally to the demon?

LeSeur ignored Carmen's outburst. She leaned over the bed and grabbed Carmen's foot. Working quickly, she fastened a strap around Carmen's ankle and looped the other end around the bedpost. "This world will be yours, Uriah, when we bring the others through."

Something sharp and acrid churned in her stomach created by unbridled fear. No! This was all just a dream. It had to be! *I've got to wake up, I've got to wake up, I've got to wake up, I've got to –*

"Wake up! Wake up now!" The screams hurt her raw throat but she had hoped to shock herself awake.

Nothing changed.

LeSeur's cold laughter rang in her ears. The doctor was now at the other side of the bed, strapping down Carmen's left foot. "She thinks this is just a dream."

The demon Uriah laughed too, a nasty sound that made Carmen want to claw at her ears until she couldn't hear anything ever again.

"I have to wake up," Carmen said, the words breaking in her sore throat. She glanced at her bedside clock—5:07 a.m. If this was a dream and it mirrored the details of reality, the alarm would sound in about an hour and soon after, the first shaft of dawn would break through the window, spilling across her bed.

The alarm should wake her as it had done before, interrupting her dreams of Nicodemus. If she could keep the evil pair busy another hour, before they accomplished what they came to do, she would wake up. But what would she do the next night? And the next? She couldn't waste time planning her strategy now. She'd just have to take it one night at a time.

LeSeur had finished binding her ankles and stepped around the demon. Dressed in a black, skintight cat suit, as if on a midnight mission of intrigue, LeSeur draped her

body over the demon. Uriah seemed unaffected by the doctor straddling him and rubbing her pussy against the rough plates covering his thigh. LeSeur moaned and tossed back her head, her hips undulating faster and faster. With a shriek, she came in less than a minute. Almost immediately, she began humping him again.

He pushed her away with one clawed hand. "The bitch, you will drug. Your pleasure, then you will have."

With a moan of frustration, LeSeur opened a small black case lying on the edge of the bed. She pulled out a syringe, turned it upright, tapped it to free any air bubbles, then pressed the plunger until clear liquid squirted from the point of the needle. She turned to Carmen and grinned maliciously.

Carmen shook her head. If this were a dream, why would LeSeur have to drug her? If this were a dream, why hadn't Nic already come to her rescue? She shook her head again, trying to make sense of it all. Her dreams of Nic had seemed so real, she now had difficulty telling illusion from reality.

She looked around her room. Everything was as it should be, nothing odd or out of place except for the demon and the doctor. She couldn't pinch herself, the sudden, sharp pain waking her *if* she were asleep. Instead, she clenched one fist and dug her fingernails into her palm. Little bursts of pain shot through her skin but she didn't wake up. Maybe she wasn't asleep. Maybe this wasn't a dream.

Tears burned the backs of her eyes but she blinked them back. She looked at the doctor again. "What do you want?"

LeSeur, eyes heavy-lidded with lust, sneered, "Your dreams."

"No, you can't!" Carmen tugged at the straps holding her though she knew it was useless to struggle.

"Of course, I can. I'll do whatever Uriah wants." LeSeur seized Carmen's arm and brought the syringe near.

"Why? I don't understand any of this." Closer to hysteria than she wanted them to know, Carmen grasped at anything to delay the doctor.

"No, you don't understand, do you?" LeSeur glared at her with hate-filled eyes. "Through your dreams, Uriah's legion will be able to pass through to our world. I wanted it to be me, but it couldn't, could it? I only have the ability to shield the Shadows from the Dreamscape guardians while they're in my dreams. When Uriah first invaded my dreams, fulfilling my every need, I knew I wanted him in the flesh. I agreed to do anything to help him and, in return, he fucks me whenever and however I want it."

Carmen frowned. "Why me?"

"Why you? That is the question." LeSeur set the point of the needle against Carmen's skin. "You are one in a hundred million, Ms. Tavaréz-King. One of the precious few and the only one we've found in three years of using the institute and dream studies to search. You are a gateway between dimensions. While you are in the dream world, the gate is open. Uriah slipped through the day you were at the institute. Now, more will cross over through you. This is only a mild sedative to relax you so you'll sleep. Sweet dreams, bitch."

LeSeur stabbed the needle into her arm. The doctor didn't even try to be gentle and Carmen jerked from the sting. That told her for certain that this was reality and not a dream. LeSeur pressed the plunger, forcing the fluid into Carmen's system, then yanked the needle free.

She dropped the syringe and swung around to face the demon. Carmen watched as the doctor unfastened zippers, the crotch of her cat suit falling away in a flap of material. LeSeur pounced on the bed on all fours, spanning Carmen's legs, then arched her back, her bare ass twitching in the air.

"Now, Uriah. Fuck me now!" the doctor begged.

The demon didn't move but between the plates covering his groin, something stirred. Another serpentine appendage appeared, as thick as Carmen's wrist and ending in a bulbous purple head. His cock lengthened incredibly, stiffly crossing the space

between the standing demon and the kneeling LeSeur like a charmed snake several feet long.

Carmen blinked, her mind growing hazy. She fought the effects of the sedative as hard as she could. She focused on the two, finding the unnatural display disgusting and fascinating at the same time. LeSeur's screams of delight rang in her ears as the demon's cock drove into her. The doctor bucked frenziedly as his cock continued to pump into her with no apparent effort from the demon.

Carmen's thoughts became scattered and uncontrollable. She was relaxing, falling asleep. Then she thought of Nic and that calmed her somewhat. Nic would be there, in Dreamscape, and in her dreams. He would know how to keep the Shadow Demons from using her to enter reality. He'd know how to stop Uriah and LeSeur. He'd be there to save her and her world.

Carmen smiled and gave in to the sedative. Her last conscious memory was of the demon's crimson eyes watching her.

Chapter Four

Hot wind blew over Carmen, brushing her skin and ruffling her hair. She lay on her back and when she opened her eyes, she stared into pitch black. Nicodemus was her first thought. Where was he? Whenever she dreamed, he was always there, touching her, arousing her.

She tried to raise her arms, to move her hands in front of her face but something held them down. Before she could try to yank free, something slithered across her neck and another thing wrapped around one foot.

Carmen tried not to panic, but bound and virtually blind, a scream rose in her throat. She lunged upright and felt the bonds give. Clawing at whatever wrapped around her neck and arms, she looked down to find shredded black vines entangled with her fingers. The soft vines broke easily when she pulled on them. She opened her hands and let the pieces fall into the darkness.

With a start, she realized she could see her body and anything on it—the clinging vines and the flimsy nightshirt she'd worn to bed that evening. She was barefoot and she shook the last of the vines from her legs.

She inspected her hands and nightshirt but they seemed normal. It was as if her body emitted some kind of illumination, just enough for her to be able to see herself and nothing more. Everything else around her was as dark as a moonless night.

From out of the darkness, opaque shadowy blobs slammed into her body in several different places. She looked down, expecting to see shadows splattered on her nightshirt like bugs on a windshield, but nothing stained the material.

The wind shifted and sudden cold blasted from another direction. Frosty air whipped across her face and arms but didn't cause her to shiver or even break into goose bumps. It had no effect on her at all.

Dreamscape.

LeSeur and her demon consort had forced her into sleep. She dreamed but Nicodemus wasn't here to feed her fantasy. Could this darkness and shifting wind be Dreamscape in its raw state? A malleable plane, ready to form whatever the dreamer desired?

If so, then she should be able to conjure—or summon—Nic.

Carmen closed her eyes and concentrated on the image of Nic as she'd last seen him. She pictured his fall of silky black hair and tiger-gold eyes, his broad, muscled shoulders and his thick, rigid cock. She remembered how he'd made love to her.

Thoughts of him caused the heat of desire to rise within. Her pussy grew moist and her clit throbbed in anticipation. No, this wasn't the time! The inevitable response sidetracked her and her eyes flew open. She had to find him. *How* to find him in total darkness, she didn't have a clue.

She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted his name, the sound of her voice echoing as if she stood at the rim of the Grand Canyon and called into its dizzying depths.

What if she were standing on the edge of a black abyss? If she took another step or two in any direction, she could very well plunge into a bottomless pit of eternal darkness.

Could she die? Nicodemus had said no. Dreams weren't real and the old wives' tale about falling from a great height and dying wasn't true at all.

He'd also said most dreams were of a person's greatest fears or deepest desires.

If her greatest fear was stepping off into an abyss, then she would. If she could make her deepest desire override her greatest fear, she could bring Nic to her.

A dozen or more shadow blobs plowed into her. She staggered back but it was an instinctive reaction because she couldn't feel anything when they made contact. She had to ignore them and concentrate on Nic.

She whispered his name and closed her eyes, conjuring his image in her mind again. She remembered how he felt against her—taut muscles, warm skin, insistent fingers, rigid cock. He knew exactly what to do to please her and he did it well.

Carmen's breathing deepened and she moaned at the memory of him and what he did to her. She no longer thought of him as a mere figment of her imagination manifesting itself in a dream. Not of her world, he was nevertheless a real entity who had taken on a specific appearance to please her.

Now she had someone who wanted nothing more than to make her happy. Desire pumped through, making her nipples ache and her clit thrum. She wanted Nicodemus, wanted him more than anything she'd ever wanted in her life. She wanted his hands on her body and his cock deep inside her pussy. Wanted—no, needed—their bodies to meld and mold as if they were one whole instead of two separate parts.

Carmen pressed a hand to one breast and the other pulled at her nightshirt until the soft material was out of the way and her fingers buried in her wetness. She rubbed nipple and clit, increasing her arousal to fever pitch.

"Nicodemus..." She moaned his name, a mournful sound full of longing and desperation.

"Carmen!"

The sound of her name reverberated around her. She opened her eyes, her hands falling away from her body. The voice that had called to her did not belong to Nicodemus. The timbre wasn't as deep and rich although it wasn't an unpleasant sound, unlike the demon Uriah's voice.

"Who's there?" she shouted into the darkness.

She saw him then, a man with long blond hair flowing over his bare, broad shoulders. He wore only dark brown pants and boots. Muscles rippled over his taut arms and chest with each movement but the color of his skin was pale compared to the deep tan of Nicodemus.

He struggled with a thing like those that had flown into her. The shapeless blob, like an opaque shadow, fought to free itself. Their battle drove them toward Carmen and she watched in fascination and horror as the blond man attained a death grip on his almost invisible adversary. The form emitted a high-pitched squeal until the man wadded it into a ball, like a dirty piece of linen, and tossed it back in the direction from which they'd all come.

The man looked at her with tiger-gold eyes. He wasn't a man, of course, but another Dreamscaper, like Nic.

"Come." He held out his hands to her. "Nicodemus needs you."

Could this be a trap? What if that performance had been staged to convince her to go with him? What if the demons meant to lure her somewhere deeper into Dreamscape where she could never escape, allowing all of them to cross into the real world? LeSeur could keep Carmen in the dream state and alive indefinitely using intravenous feeding. Though it hadn't seemed to be a part of LeSeur's original plan, she would agree to anything for her demon lover.

"Who are you? Where is Nicodemus?"

"I am Leviticus. I am here to take you to my brother."

"Brother?" From what Nic had said, the Dreamscapers, as spirits, weren't born of a mother and father but spawned from a higher collective conscious. But then, wouldn't that make all Dreamscapers siblings?

Leviticus frowned. "It is a word you know, is it not? Nicodemus is my brother and my friend."

"Of course." Carmen wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly aware of the thin nightshirt she wore with nothing underneath. "I'm sorry. I didn't expect anyone else. I only dream of Nicodemus."

He smiled, emphasizing the beauty of his delicate, almost Nordic features.

"In the past, Nicodemus and I have played together in human dreams but it has been a long time." Then the smile fell from his sensuous lips. "The Shadow will tell the others and they might do something more to him. We need to go now."

Carmen hesitated, afraid of what this Dreamscaper might be planning. She didn't know him. How could she trust him? Looking around her, she didn't have much choice. She could wander in the darkness forever, stepping off into that abyss at any time.

"Where is he? Is he all right?"

"He is unhurt but the Shadows have trapped him." He grabbed her hands, unfolding her arms from around her body and taking her choice from her. "Hold on."

The darkness shifted around them, turning to shades of gray that tilted first one way, then another. She didn't fight him and held tightly to him until Dreamscape once again settled into place. All around them, boulders of varying shapes, sizes and hues littered the ground singly and in piles. Was this the real Dreamscape and the boulders the raw material of which dreams were made?

"Carmen!"

This time Nic called her name. Leviticus released her and she spun to find her dream lover standing in a large, rusty iron cage suspended in midair. Its round shape reminded her of a birdcage. She ran to him, wanting nothing more than to fling herself into his arms but the iron bars stood in the way.

The bottom of the cage was level with her waist and she thrust her hands between the bars. Nic knelt, caught and held them.

"Shadows have crossed over," Leviticus informed him. "I do not know how many."

Nic nodded. Then Carmen quickly told them about the institute, Dr. LeSeur and Uriah.

Carmen trembled. "Why are you locked up? Why can't Leviticus get you out?"

"The Shadows can shapeshift into any object or person if that object or person is desired enough. One of them transformed into you and trapped me here, pretending it

was one of your fantasies." He turned her hands over and kissed one palm, then the other. "Because I desire you above all else."

Carmen's heart melted. She expected the bars to dissolve and Nic to be in her arms but neither happened. She clenched her hands around his. "I want you more than anything too. But if your desire for me trapped you, why doesn't my desire for you free you?"

"It can but it must be pure desire, undiluted by fear, anger and all the other emotions spinning through you right now."

He was right. A whirlwind of emotions roiled within, from fear of Leviticus and the Shadows that had escaped into her world, to anger at LeSeur for putting her in this position, to bewilderment at Nic's entrapment. Her desire for him, a constant hum running beneath it all, wasn't strong enough to overcome them at that instant.

"There was a moment," Nic continued, "when I nearly transported. I felt myself drawn toward you but then the connection evaporated. That might have been when Leviticus found you. What were you doing at that time?"

Startled, Carmen's face flushed with embarrassment. She had pretended her hands were Nic's, stroking her most intimate places.

He caressed her burning cheek, the back of his hand cool to her warm skin. "Tell me."

She moved into his fingers, his touch calming her unease. "I-I was trying to...to bring you to me."

"It almost worked, whatever it was." Nic caught her chin and turned her to face him. "Can you do it again? There will be no interruptions this time."

"I..." Carmen glanced toward Leviticus, several yards away.

He peered vigilantly into the darkness, his stance suggesting he watched in case more Shadow Demons appeared. He stood far enough from them that he wouldn't overhear.

She turned back to Nic and lowered her voice. "I closed my eyes and imagined you were with me, that my hands were yours touching my body."

He smiled. "You almost brought me from this cage to you. You can do it again."

She shook her head, heat rising in her cheeks once more. How could she touch herself in front of Nic with Leviticus in sight? She would die of embarrassment.

Without warning, the cage jerked several feet higher. The screech of metal on metal reverberated around them. Nic dropped to the floor of the cage and thrust one arm through the bars toward her. She reached up as far as she could but still several inches separated them.

"The Shadows are toying with us. Carmen, you have to try again. It is the only way." Nic's soothing whisper instilled her with purpose and she drew in a deep breath.

If she didn't release Nic from the cage, she wouldn't be able to get free of LeSeur and Uriah and the Shadow Demons would overrun Earth. She had to stop Uriah because she didn't want anyone else to ever experience the loathsome touch of a Shadow Demon.

"I'll try." She shot a look at the blond Dreamscaper again but he had his broad back to them.

Carmen closed her eyes. She tried to picture Nic standing beside her but the image of him locked in the cage overwhelmed her. No, she couldn't allow reality to intrude! She had to save Nic to save herself. She tightened her eyes until she felt her brow furrow and again tried to call up Nic, free of the iron bars that trapped him.

"You are trying too hard. Relax." Nic's voice washed over her. "If I could be with you, I would hold your breasts. Put your hands over your breasts, Carmen."

She took another deep breath and did as he told her. She felt the warmth of her hands through the thin nightshirt. The light pressure of her palms caused her nipples to grow hard.

Nic's hands.

"Rub those pretty rosebuds between your fingers and thumbs." Nic's command sent a thrill of excitement through her. She pinched her nipples and the thread of arousal between her breasts and her core thrummed with heat.

Nic's fingers.

"Slowly run your hands down your body, along every curve." Nic's voice had grown hoarse with his need.

She quivered, wishing she lay on a bed with Nic beside her. She moved her right hand over her ribs and followed the curve of her waist and hip, then pressed her palm to her thigh.

"Now, put your hand under your clothing."

Her clit throbbed, ready for her to ease the sweet ache. Her fingers inched up the soft skin of the inside of her thigh. Her legs parted and her inner muscles clenched in anticipation. Her fingertips brushed the edge of her curls.

"Stop!" Nic sounded desperate.

She jerked her hands away from her body and her eyes flew open. "What's wrong?"

"This is not the way. You are too aware that I am not the one touching you." He seemed almost in pain but Carmen looked him over. Nothing had changed except the size of the bulge in the front of his pants.

If the cage hadn't moved out of her reach, Nic could help her climb up to him and he would be the one to tease her body. She crossed her arms over her breasts and shifted her legs together. Her sensitized skin tingled with unfulfilled longing. She didn't think she could do it again. She was much too self-conscious.

Nic knelt and leaned down as far as he could. "I have an idea, if you agree. Remember, Carmen, it is the only way."

She nodded. "What is it?"

"Allow Leviticus to touch you." Nic's ragged voice shook with his unreleased need. "Imagine his hands are my hands, his lips are mine."

Carmen hugged herself tighter until her nails dug painfully into her skin. She didn't want another man—even a dream spirit—touching her. She only wanted Nic. "No, Nic, I—"

"It is the only way." His reminder sent a chill like ice water spilling down her spine and she shivered. If she couldn't save Nic, then Nic couldn't save her and her world.

"I only desire you," she whispered. Frowning, she looked up at him.

"If there were another way, I would not ask you." His gaze turned toward Leviticus.

"I don't want to but if you're sure there's no other way..."

As if answering a silent summons, the other Dreamscaper approached the cage and looked up at Nic.

Something unspoken passed between them. When Leviticus nodded, Carmen bit her lip in frustration. How much had Nic told him? She didn't like not knowing exactly what he'd said. Had he given Leviticus intimate instructions about how to please her? Or would Leviticus automatically know, just as Nic had known the first time he'd occupied her dream?

"The Shadows have stopped coming," Leviticus announced aloud. "I have not seen another since the one I banished before bringing Carmen to you."

"Good." Nic's eyes shifted to her. "Leviticus understands what he is to do and what you are trying to accomplish."

Carmen glanced at Leviticus, then back to Nic. The situation unnerved her but she had no choice. She took a deep, steady breath and tried to relax her body.

She had survived the demon's disgusting pawing. Leviticus' touch, while unwelcome, should not be repulsive. Even so, she felt as if she were being sacrificed for

the greater good. In the end, Nic would be the only one in her heart and *that* was all that mattered.

I love you, Carmen. Nic's voice glided through her mind, a sound as ethereal as a wisp of mist. Had he really spoken to her telepathically? If so, could she reach him that way too?

Carmen concentrated and let her love for Nic flow like liquid silk through her entire being, calming her nerves, yet arousing her at the same time. When the moment felt right, with every cell in her body aglow with her feelings for Nic, she sent her own message to him. *I love you, Nic!*

The sounds seemed to travel along a silver thread connecting her mind to his but when the words reached him, the thread dissolved instantly. She blinked in wonder when he nodded at her and grinned as if amused by her astonishment at what she'd done. Perhaps with practice, she'd be able to communicate telepathically whenever she wished.

A cloud of sorrow eclipsed the joy in her heart. When she freed Nic and he and Leviticus told her how to banish Uriah and the other Shadow Demons that had escaped into her dimension, she would have to let Nic go just as she'd planned. As much as she loved and wanted him, Dreamscape was his world and chasing Shadows his duty. He couldn't cross over to hers and she couldn't spend the rest of her life in her dreams. She *had* to move on as painful as it would be.

"Whenever you're ready, Carmen." Tender concern filled Nic's voice.

Leviticus watched her, awaiting her consent.

Though it had seemed like an hour had passed since she'd pulled the black vine from her limbs, she knew dreams lasted mere seconds or minutes in real time. Even so, LeSeur and Uriah would grow suspicious when no more Shadow Demons crossed over. She had to do it now or risk LeSeur waking her physical body to find out what had happened.

Carmen licked her lips and nodded once at Leviticus. As he stepped forward, hands reaching for her, she closed her eyes and thought of Nic.

Chapter Five

A hand made contact with her arm and Carmen jumped. He didn't paw at her but she was nevertheless startled. The pressure was tentative, not possessive, the tips of his fingers barely grazing her skin.

She wanted to shrink away from him but forced herself to remain still. She had to do this to save Nic. She had to allow Leviticus to rouse her desire and make her forget anything and everything except her need for Nic. She swallowed hard and licked her dry lips.

Leviticus placed his other hand on her too. One rested on each of her shoulders. They squeezed gently as if to reassure her. Tears stung her eyes but she refused to cry. She couldn't let Nic see her misery. She was afraid if he knew how much turmoil churned through her, he would stop the blond Dreamscaper. If they did end their sex play, all of them were doomed.

Nic. She had to think of Nic, not Leviticus. She drew a deep breath and conjured Nic in her mind. Nic as he'd been in her jungle dream. His long, muscled body covered in a sheen of fine sweat caused by the tropical humidity. He had run his hands over her much like this, sprinkling kisses —

Lips brushed the skin at the base of her neck and a shiver ran through her. Could Leviticus read her mind or her emotions? Even before the silver thread connected them telepathically, it had seemed as if Nic could at times. Nic would know what she wanted almost before she did. She tilted her head to the side, her hair falling out of the way, for more kisses.

His lips trailed along her neck and shoulders and his hands ran down her arms then over the curves of her body. As his kisses started down her arm, his hands reached

the hem of her nightshirt. His fingers slipped underneath, pulling up on the material. He retraced his path, his palms now on her naked skin.

She broke out in goose bumps. She tingled and she burned. Her physical yearning, flaring hot in the pit of her belly, surpassed the need that had driven her to accept this situation. It was wrong, so wrong.

When he reached her crossed arms, he tugged.

She reluctantly unfolded them and held them over her head. The nightshirt slid free of her breasts and arms and she felt vulnerable, exposed for the whole world—or the whole of Dreamscape—to see. This was far different from the intimacy of her dreams with Nicodemus.

Leviticus' hands skimmed down her outstretched arms and along her sides, coming to a halt at her breasts. His fingers slid beneath, cradling them and rubbing her nipples.

Electric shocks sparked from her breasts to her pussy. Her body recoiled, backing her against Leviticus, skin to skin. His heat engulfed her from shoulder to calf and tears threatened again. How could her body betray her love for Nic?

The thin silver thread pierced her mind and Nic's voice flowed through. *I am here, my love. You cannot betray what we share. With Leviticus' hands, I touch you. With his lips, I kiss you. With his body, I yearn for you. All entities in Dreamscape are connected, are one.*

Understanding came in a flash of crystal clarity. The closest example she could conceive was to compare it to a hive, although they were not commanded by a leader, such as a queen bee. They were all of one consciousness, yet separate enough to take on the appearance and characteristics of individuals when they wanted to. And be entrapped in a cage without the others being able to free them too.

Close enough. Nic confirmed her thoughts.

By giving Leviticus access to her body, she was letting Nic make love to her too. Leviticus *was* Nic in spirit, if not in fact.

Yes, Carmen. Relief at her comprehension and acceptance mellowed his voice, although she could still detect the undercurrent of his need and desire. *You cannot betray*

me or our love. You are not unfaithful. I will not come to despise you for enjoying another man's touch.

Amazement swept through her. He voiced the objections that disgraced her but that she could not admit, even to herself. He knew her heart as well as or better than she.

Leviticus is not a man, not as you perceive a human male. Nic's whisper flowed into her mind, soothed her like a balm on her soul. He is spirit. We are spirit and we are one.

Understanding and acceptance freed her. She sent the full force of her feelings for him cascading over the silver thread of their bond. *I love you, Nicodemus.*

In return, a tidal wave of emotion—love, desire, honor and trust—from him spilled through her, filling her with joy. *And I love you.*

Leviticus, she sensed, was privy to this exchange and he became more aggressive. He moved closer to her, his stiff cock prodding her from behind. His hands fondled her body, teasing, stroking, caressing. No, not Leviticus—Nic!

He swept her up into his arms and laid her on something soft and giving. Her hands touched what felt like a mattress covered in the softest cotton. He lowered his body over hers, his mouth covering one breast, then trailing to the other.

Carmen lost herself in the sensations. *Nic* kissed her nipples, igniting a fire deep inside her. *Nic* traced the undercurve of each breast with his hot tongue, causing her limbs to quiver. *Nic* held her hip and razed his cock over her triangle of curls, sending a shudder through her.

Nic. No one else, only *Nic* could rouse her to such heights...

Hands touched everywhere on her body—teasing her nipples, caressing her hip, stroking her pussy. One hard cock pressed into her backside and another, hot and rigid, nudged her thigh.

“Carmen...” *Nic's* breath tickled her ear as he murmured her name. He wasn't a disembodied voice inside her head connected by a thin silver thread. She forgot the other Dreamscaper and her eyes fluttered open.

Nic lay beside her, looking down at her.

"You're here," she said breathlessly. "Nic, you're free!"

"Yes, my love, I'm here." His tiger-bright eyes were afire with his passion for her.

She groped between their bodies, sliding her fingers along his thick, hard length. His hips pushed his cock deeper into her grip and his mouth descended on hers. His hand left her pussy and raked into her hair, bending her head back as his lips possessed hers and his tongue swept through her mouth.

The kiss weakened her but heightened her arousal. Blood pounded in her engorged clit, aching for relief. She was ready to spread her legs for him when Leviticus' grip tightened on her hip.

Leviticus' cock slipped into the juncture where her thighs met her pussy. Carmen's instinct was to pull away from him, now that Nic was here. She fought the urge. Leviticus had helped her to focus on her desire for Nic and free him. It would be unfair to ignore his need and deny him release.

Carmen held still and clamped her thighs tightly together, allowing Leviticus to fuck the makeshift channel. She shuddered as each thrust of his erection rubbed her swollen labia. She tried to disregard the sensations but her throbbing pussy didn't care where the stimulation originated.

Nic deepened the kiss. His tongue teased hers, his lips sliding over hers. He removed his hand from her hair and cupped her breast, thumbing the hard point of her nipple. Her hips surged forward and back, matching Leviticus' rhythm. Her hand massaged Nic's cock at the same frenzied tempo.

At the brink of implosion, Carmen didn't know how long she could hold back. She didn't want Leviticus to be the one to bring her to orgasm. Though she understood that in many ways Nicodemus and Leviticus were parts of a greater whole, she wanted only Nic! But her body had no such preference. She trembled and quaked and her hips jerked fiercely with each stroke.

When she thought she could hold back no longer, Leviticus thrust his cock deeply between her thighs. His body stiffened behind her and his fingers dug into her hip. He groaned, a guttural sound that vibrated in the air. Then his hand loosened and fell away.

As soon as Leviticus moved from behind her, Nic rolled her onto her back. Her legs opened for him and he nestled between them. She wrapped her arms around his neck, reveling in the feel of Nic in her embrace. His cock plunged deep and hard and she bent her legs around him, her hips heaving up to meet his. It took only a few thrusts to send her spiraling over the edge.

Spasms racked her body, points of heat ricocheting through her limbs and she cried out, a mewling sound of release and relief and pure joy. Nic's body seized against her and his sounds of pleasure mingled with hers.

Then he collapsed against her. She threaded her fingers through his silky black mane and kissed his sweat-damp skin. Her Nic. She loved him so, loved how she felt while entangled in his arms. He wanted her, needed her, loved her unconditionally. How could she ever let him go?

But how could she live the rest of her life only in her dreams?

* * * * *

Dressed again, Carmen looked around her. Leviticus had done away with the bed but the cage still hung ominously from its chain. Nicodemus and Leviticus, also clothed, stood nearby. She looked at Leviticus but felt no differently toward him than she had before. She had only just met him and barely knew him. Perhaps if they'd known each other longer or had been friends, she might have been overcome with embarrassment or anxiety or sensed tension between them. She was glad she felt almost nothing.

Nic took her hand in his and gently squeezed. "Thank you."

She looked into his tiger-bright eyes and felt no shame with him either. She had done what she had to do to free him. She smiled, wishing they could share one of her

fantasies but there wasn't time. Something had to be done about Dr. LeSeur and the Shadow Demon. "I could wake up at any moment. Tell me what I need to do to stop the demon."

Nic's hand tightened on hers and he and Leviticus exchanged glances. He lifted her hand and brushed it with his lips. "You have a special gift, the ability to allow spirits to enter your dreams and easily cross over but you have no power to banish the demon."

She shook her head. "There must be some way. Otherwise, I'll be at their mercy and so will you! They could harm me if you don't allow the Shadows through."

"Only Dreamscapers can banish demons." Leviticus, with one eye on the darkness that surrounded them in case more Shadows appeared, took a few steps around them. "Humans are no match for the Shadows."

Carmen frowned. "You two can't cross over because if you do, you can't come back to Dreamscape. I-I'll escape from them and hide. I just don't know how long—"

"No, Carmen." Nic's golden eyes had turned dark with determination. "Uriah is not the only demon in your world. As long as one demon resides there, no human is safe. I will cross over."

"But you can't come back," Carmen whispered.

"True, I will not be able to return to Dreamscape." He released her hand and stared thoughtfully into the darkness. "This is my penalty for neglecting my duty as guardian."

She had wanted him to be real for such a long time and now that her wish was coming true, guilt swept over her. This was all her fault! She hadn't been able to let Nic go. If she had demanded that he stop invading her dreams, he would have done so. Then he would have been attentive enough to Dreamscape to stop Uriah from crossing over in the first place.

"I will cross over through you." He turned to face her but he was looking at the blond Dreamscaper. "Leviticus will be here to ensure that Uriah and any other Shadows I send back are banished to their realm."

"No, I go with you." Leviticus stepped back and stood beside Nic. "We do not know how many Shadows have escaped into the human world. Hundreds of Shadows might have crossed over before I found her."

Responsibility for the situation still gnawed at her but she couldn't let it prevent her from helping as much as she could. "No, there weren't that many. Only a few of those blobs came through after I woke up in Dreamscape."

Leviticus shook his head. "When you first enter Dreamscape there is always a period of time when you are unaware, until the dream begins."

Carmen bit her lip. "So I could have been in Dreamscape for a long time before I became conscious?"

"Yes." Nic frowned at the thought. "We don't know how many Shadows might have crossed over in that time."

"There could be more than enough for one Dreamscaper," Leviticus said. "I go with you, Nicodemus. The others know what is happening. They will banish the demons we send back."

Nic didn't seem happy with the decision. "Are you certain this is what you want? Neither of us will be able to return to Dreamscape."

Leviticus smiled. "I understand now why playing in human dreams is discouraged. I am fascinated with the human world they weave around us. There is a woman... I haven't played in her dreams for some time because I was trying to separate myself from her. But I long for her."

Nic scowled. "She may not want you when you find her. What humans dream, even their deepest desires, is not necessarily what they want in their real world."

The smile dropped from Leviticus' face and he was silent a moment. Then he nodded. "Still, it is what I want. If I stay here, I will never know."

"Very well." Nic turned to her, placing his hand on her cheek. "We will enter through you the same way as the Shadows. We will not hurt you."

Carmen nodded. "I understand."

His mouth slanted over hers and shockwaves of desire rushed through her. Amazed at how swift and urgent her need for him arose after just having made love with him, Carmen deepened the kiss. She didn't want to let him go. Everything was about to change and she wasn't sure it was for the best. When Nic went into the real world, he would want to explore and experiment with what was out there. Where did that leave her?

He said he loved her but that was here in Dreamscape. The real world would be an entirely different matter. Would he leave her as everyone else had? After that, she would be alone again and wouldn't even have her dreams to look forward to.

Carmen felt a tug inside her, a sense of dread washed over her, then her body jerked, nearly bending double. Nic caught her before she hit the ground. He laid her down carefully.

"Carmen, what's wrong?"

Her body spasmed again. Nic went gray then blinked back to vivid color. "They're waking me up!"

"Leviticus, we must go." Nic stood up beside Leviticus.

White light swirled around them then coalesced into two blinding white orbs. They darted around each other, as if drawn to unite but pulled apart at the last moment. One slammed into her chest and then the other, leaving her alone in Dreamscape.

She lay still, wishing she knew how to wake herself. Another tug on the wire and she relaxed. If she did nothing perhaps her real body would finish the waking process that LeSeur and the demon had started.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a blur of motion, of black on black. A Shadow Demon! They must have sensed the Dreamscapers' absence and planned to take advantage of the open gateway.

The image of a white picket fence with an open gate sprang into her mind. A trellis, covered in a profusion of flowers, arched over the gate. Why had she been given this ability? And if she had been given the talent of an open gate, why shouldn't she be able to shut it?

More black blobs joined the others. They flitted around her like black flies converging on a honeycomb. Why didn't they cross over? Unless they knew Nic and Leviticus had crossed over and didn't know what waited for them on the other side.

She tried to keep up with the darting blobs but they were too fast. The picture of the open gate persisted. What if she shut it? Surely, if a gate could be opened it could also be closed.

She took a deep breath and concentrated. At first, nothing happened but then the gate moved, slowly at first. It quickly picked up speed and shut with a resounding clack.

Another pull, harder this time, caused her eyes to open. Several other Shadow blobs had joined the first and they grew bolder, staying in her line of vision instead of hovering on the fringes.

One made a dash for her, flying straight toward her chest. Instead of disappearing into the front of her nightshirt, it bounced back with a squeal of pain. The others tried, one at a time, but each of them rebounded backward, its horrible cry piercing her ears.

The sounds must have drawn the attention of other Dreamscapers because haloed orbs of brilliant white light shot into view, chasing the black blobs away from her.

She had closed the gateway! No longer would she be at the mercy of the Shadow Demons. The ability came too late to save Nic and Leviticus but she would never be used as a pawn again.

The orbs and blobs began to dim, squeaks and yelps fading to muted sounds. Then one last tug on the wires sent her careening through the veil from one dimension to the other.

Chapter Six

Carmen's eyes popped open. Electric lights of blue, red and yellow arced in jagged bolts across the ceiling of her bedroom. The sizzle and crackle of raw electricity echoed in her ears and the acrid stench of sulfur stung her nostrils. She tried to sit upright but the straps still attached to her wrists and ankles didn't allow much movement.

She craned her neck and blinked against the glare of colored lightning crawling over the ceiling—the walls, floor and furniture too. In the far corner, the demon Uriah held Nic by the throat and pressed him into the juncture where walls met ceiling. Demon touching Dreamscaper generated the electrical charges dancing across all surfaces of the room.

"Stop it! Leave him alone!" Empowered by her ability to repel the Shadow blobs, she thought she might have some effect on this demon too. But she couldn't hear the sound of her own voice over the noise. The only way she knew she had screamed was by the pain in her still-tender throat.

A quick glance around the room revealed neither Dr. LeSeur nor Leviticus. What could have happened to them? Why had Leviticus left Nic to fight the Shadow Demon alone?

Carmen pulled at her bonds but they held firm. She concentrated her efforts on her left hand, trying to slip it free. The bones and muscles of the widest part of her hand were squeezed painfully until she cried out—another sound she couldn't hear.

She looked wildly around the room again but still saw no sign of LeSeur or Leviticus. The bedside clock caught her eye and the red, digital numbers surprised her—after seven. Over an hour had passed since the alarm should have rung. The tiny red dot that indicated the alarm had been turned on, was dark. The doctor must have

shut it off so the blaring tone wouldn't awaken her. They had gained time while she lay trapped in sleep.

The primary-colored arrays had lessened and the noise had eased. The demon still held Nic in the corner, choking him. Nic gripped Uriah's arm but he seemed to have no effect on the demon at all.

Carmen gasped when she realized why the charges grew less intense—Uriah had begun directing the flow toward himself, the plating of his skin absorbing the energy. He was draining Nic's life force!

She redoubled her efforts to free her left hand and screamed for Leviticus at the top of her lungs. Just as she was sure the demon had sucked out the last bit from Nic, Leviticus burst into the room.

He moved at warp speed, a blur of flowing blond hair and fair skin. Without hesitation, he climbed the demon's back and grabbed the arm that held Nic.

Uriah's free hand shot up, catching Leviticus by the nape of his neck, and the Dreamscaper's back bowed with the force. Another lightshow of red, blue and yellow flashed across the ceiling, walls and furniture and just as abruptly died. Apparently, Uriah had more control now that Nic was subdued.

With both Dreamscapers in the clutches of the Shadow Demon and being drained of their energy, Carmen had to do something. She yanked on her left hand again and again until the excruciating pain of skin scraped raw made her nauseous and she felt something warm trickle down her arm. Blood!

She twisted her hand side to side, lubricating the strap with her blood. She closed her eyes, pulling as hard as she could and arched her back with the effort. Her grunt of exertion escalated into a screech of agony. Pain jolted through her shoulder and then her arm flew free.

Tears of instant relief filled her eyes but she didn't take time to wipe them away. She fumbled with the strap on her right wrist, ignoring the smears of blood and raw skin. When it was loose, she unfastened her ankles and scrambled from the bed.

The sight of the radiant plates of the demon's skin stopped her cold. What could she, one human, do to stop him when two powerful Dreamscapers couldn't? She had no powers, except the ability to open and close the gateway between her world and Dreamscape. How could that help Nic and Leviticus?

Nic... Her gaze locked on his face, now the color of cold ashes. He struggled but his sluggish movements proved ineffectual. Leviticus moved to grip the demon's hand at his neck but his attempt to overpower Uriah was as useless as Nic's.

Then something bent and burnt pricked her mind with a blast of static and Nic's voice skidded through the white noise. *Window.*

Before she could respond, asking him what he needed her to do, the damaged silver thread began to siphon off her energy. A lightning bolt of pale blue materialized between them and her legs turned to gelatin. She reached for the bedpost to remain upright and a surge of energy in the form of another bolt half as large as the first, struck from Nic to her. Nic broke the connection and withdrew, the blue charge dissipating instantly.

She drew a ragged breath, not sure exactly what had just happened, and steadied herself. What could he have meant by "window"? Frustrated, she whirled and nearly lost her balance. She held to the post and studied the window.

The blackout drapes were drawn tight, not one small ray of light came through the thick backing of the fabric. She knew she'd left them open last night. When she'd been awakened by the demon's hands on her body, she'd seen his hideous countenance by the glow of the street lights through the panes of glass. Either LeSeur or the Shadow Demon had closed the drapes. Why?

The same reason she would close them and Nic directed her to the window—sunlight. A Shadow Demon was just that, a creature of shadow and darkness. Sunlight might destroy him or weaken him enough so that Nic and Leviticus could finish him off.

Carmen staggered forward and, grasping the cord, yanked the drapes wide open. Sunlight poured across the floor and halfway up the demon's back. Where the light touched plating, the neon glimmer winked out and tendrils of smoke curled upward.

The Shadow Demon screamed and Carmen clamped her hands over her ears to muffle the dreadful sound. His torso went rigid and his grip loosened on both Dreamscapers simultaneously. Leviticus slid to the floor but Nic used the walls for support and remained upright. He lifted one foot and smashed it into the demon's midsection.

Leviticus rolled out of the way as the demon toppled over, crashing to the floor. Carmen felt the structure of the building shudder under her feet. She was surprised the demon hadn't fallen through to the apartment below.

Sunlight bathed the demon, horn to hoof. The last of the lighted plates winked out and started to smoke. His wails of agony reverberated throughout the room, faded to mewling sounds and then fell silent. His huge bulk shriveled to a fraction of his normal size.

Carmen stared at what was left of the demon, expecting it to become soft and pliable and opaque and try to escape.

When it remained hard and lumpy and the last wisp of smoke vanished, Carmen stepped around the remains on shaky legs and went to Nicodemus.

He sat on the floor, long legs stretched out in front of him and his back to the corner. His eyes were closed and his head leaned against one wall. For a moment, she thought the sunlight had come too late. And in that moment, her heart juddered in her chest, skipping a beat and filling with grief.

Then his chest rose and fell and she crouched beside him, tears of stunning relief burning her eyes. She laid a hand to his cheek. Some of his color had returned but his skin felt clammy to her touch. Still, he breathed. That was enough to keep her heart beating and turn bitter grief to sweet joy.

She turned her head to look for Leviticus. The blond Dreamscaper lay curled on his side near the bed. She held her breath and waited for the rise and fall of his chest to indicate he too had survived. When the slight movement came, she breathed with him.

Carmen turned back to Nic and called to him softly. "Nic. Nicodemus, can you hear me?"

A moan was her answer but satisfied her. She didn't try to reach him with her mind, fearing the connection would sap too much of his energy. She talked to him in whispers, letting him know she was there and encouraging him to rest and rebuild his strength.

Leviticus regained consciousness first. Although glad to see him open his eyes, sit up and smile at her, she couldn't help but feel anxious about Nic. The demon had held Nic a greater length of time and stolen more of his energy. While it made sense that Nic would recover last, she desperately wanted to see his tiger-bright eyes full of his love and desire for her.

Leviticus crawled closer, still weak from the ordeal. "Is he... Is he alive?"

"Yes." She felt Nic's forehead but that told her nothing except he wasn't feverish. "Is there something I should do for him? And you? Are you all right?"

"I am...mending." Leviticus pulled himself to a seated position and leaned against the wall. "Something has changed."

Carmen frowned. "What do you mean?"

Leviticus shrugged. "I am not sure except that I, and Nicodemus, as well, now carry part of the Shadow within."

The implication frightened her. What if they eventually morphed into Shadow Demons because of their contact with Uriah? Even if she could find a way to send them back to Dreamscape, and could bring herself to do it, how could she ever hope to banish all the other Shadow Demons that had crossed over? Who would believe her story and help her?

Nic's hand covering hers brought her out of her horrible thoughts.

"Nic," she breathed on a rush of air.

"Leviticus does not mean we will become Shadow Demons," he explained as if he could read her mind. Perhaps he could because of their physical closeness, though she hadn't felt the silver thread linking them. "There was an exchange of energy. Compare it to breathing. To draw in the energy is like inhaling. But to inhale, one must also exhale. With enough time, he would have taken more than he gave until he had it all but you stopped him with the light of your sun."

His lids opened and his golden tiger eyes held her in their warm gaze. All fear and anxiety left her.

"And you, Carmen." He moved her hand to his lips and placed a kiss in the center of her palm. "Your arm is bloodied but there is no injury."

Carmen looked at her wrist. Worry for Nic and Leviticus had overwhelmed her and she hadn't noticed that it no longer stung and throbbed. She stared at it in wide-eyed amazement. Blood streaked her arm from wrist to elbow but her skin was no longer scraped raw. It had healed completely in mere minutes.

"When our minds touched, you were connected to Uriah, as well. He took but he also gave before I severed the connection." Nic shifted, sitting up straighter. Most of his color had returned and he sounded stronger.

Leviticus stood, shaking out his limbs. "It was not the most pleasant way to enhance our abilities but it will help in seeking and banishing the other Shadows."

Nic shook his head. "It may not last."

"Or what we have may grow and evolve." Leviticus held out both hands to her and Nic.

Nic allowed Leviticus to help him to his feet and Carmen did the same. She looked down at her left hand. Not even a scratch. "What about me? I'm human and I have something from a demon inside me. How will it affect me?"

Nic and Leviticus exchanged glances.

"We do not know how it will affect any of us." Nic took her left hand into his. "Leviticus and I will be here to help you."

Trying not to panic, Carmen bit her lip and squeezed his hand. They were as new to this as she was because everything was different from Dreamscape. She looked at the blackened lump that had been Uriah. "What happened to Dr. LeSeur?"

"The woman?" Leviticus frowned. "She ran as soon as we subdued the Shadow. Nicodemus had him under control so I went after her. We would not have hurt her but we had to know what she knew and how many demons had crossed over. In this human body, I could not sense her location. I returned when I heard your call for help."

"She won't give up." Carmen recalled the doctor's sexual enjoyment of the demon and knew she would not easily do without it again. LeSeur would accept another demon into her dreams and make the same bargain as she had with Uriah. "She'll try again with another Shadow Demon now that Uriah is dead."

"He is not dead." Nic nudged the lump that had been Uriah with the toe of his boot. Softer than it looked, the surface sank in and bounced back, like rubber. "If we do not send him back to Dreamscape, he will recover during the night when shadows thrive. When twilight falls, he will become as the Shadows you saw in Dreamscape. Then we can send him back."

* * * * *

Carmen watched as the Dreamscapers moved the lump into the utility room. They assured her he wouldn't recover even in the darkness of the windowless room. The damage was so great the demon would need time to mend. Then she told them how she'd closed the gate so no more Shadows could cross over through her.

Nic swung her into his arms and kissed her. "It is wonderful that you have embraced your ability and you are learning to control it. I hope Leviticus is right and

what we gained from Uriah enhances our powers instead of destroying us. The ability to generate new skin growth rapidly may be only the beginning."

Again, Carmen looked at her left hand while hugging Nic. She had washed away the blood. The pain and scraped skin were only memories. Her hand looked exactly as it had before, down to the faint scar that had happened to her at age nine. She was still reeling with the thoughts of what might come about—good or bad—because of the demon's transference.

"You know her?" Leviticus asked.

Carmen turned around to see what he was referring to. He held out a framed picture he'd removed from the wall. "That's my friend Jancy Holmes. We went to the Mid-South Fair last year and had some pictures made in a photo booth. Why? Do you know Jancy?"

Leviticus ran his finger over Jancy's face. "I have played in her dreams. I tried to stay away but...she is why I wished to cross over."

"You're the Viking?" It seemed incredulous to Carmen that he was the man Jancy dreamed about.

Leviticus smiled fondly at the photo. "She called me Viking, yes. I enjoyed playing out her fantasies."

Carmen laughed. "Jancy will be thrilled to find out you're real. She mentioned that you hadn't showed up in her dreams lately. She has missed you."

"I have longed for her as well. I tried to stay away because there was too much pain here." Leviticus placed his hand in the center of his chest. "I wanted to be with her in the same way Nicodemus longed for you. I wanted to banish demons and help my brother but I intended to find Jancy too."

"I'll see her this evening." Carmen drew in a deep breath. "I'll explain things to her. As soon as I can convince her I'm not as crazy as a betsy bug, she'll be thrilled to find out you're real. And maybe she can help us too."

Leviticus took the picture with him into the kitchen. He'd found the concept of consuming food fascinating. What she hadn't told him was the bodily function of eliminating waste. That, he probably wouldn't find as interesting.

Carmen looked up at Nic. "What a coincidence! I wonder what the odds are that our best friends would already be acquainted in Dreamscape."

He looked thoughtful. "There are no coincidences. We were brought together for a purpose—to dispose of Uriah, stop his human helper and find and banish the other Shadows that crossed over. That Leviticus has played in your friend Jancy's dreams only means that Jancy will be able to help us too."

"What do we do now?" Carmen asked, wondering how they would ever begin to look for Dr. LeSeur. She would not return to the institute and she would be long gone from the place where she'd lived while in the area—wherever that might have been. Perhaps their exchange with Uriah would help them to eventually find LeSeur.

Carmen started to say as much to Nic but his mouth closed over hers instead, taking her breath and making her forget what she'd meant to say. His lips moved on hers hungrily, as if he couldn't get enough of her taste. Carmen felt the same way. Her dreams had been as realistic as possible but they'd only been dreams.

Nic broke the kiss long enough to whisper, "I know exactly what we can do now."

His hands slid down her backside and caught the backs of her thighs, heaving her up until her pussy made direct contact with the bulge in his pants as he wrapped her legs around his hips. During their ordeal, sex had been the last thing on her mind but now the thought consumed her with an electric fire that raced through her body in the same way the charges from Nic and the demon had sped across the ceiling. She draped her arms around his neck and sweetened the kiss.

Her dream had come true! Real sex with a real Nicodemus. He would make love with her in her bed and be beside her in the morning when she woke up. She would never have to be alone again.

Carmen undulated her hips against his stiff cock as Nic carried her into the bedroom. Laying her on the bed, he peeled off her nightshirt. He quickly undressed and joined her, his legs entangling with hers.

He sighed contentedly. "It feels...different. In Dreamscape, this body was a fabrication. I felt the sensations but...there is no way to describe the difference. This is better. This is real."

Carmen spread her legs and he settled between them. The tip of his cock barely brushed her, teasing her pussy lips and swollen clit. She gasped with the thrum of excitement that coursed along her nerve endings. His lips surrounded one nipple and suckled gently, exacerbating her need. She writhed against him, trying to enclose his cock in her wet depths.

With one stroke, he went hard and deep and Carmen cried out her pleasure. She bent her legs over his hips and held him, grinding her pussy around his cock, her clit making contact with him. Fierce tremors rippled through her as he plunged in and out and in again, so deep she thought she might shatter from the force. And then she did splinter, ecstasy consuming her to her very core.

Spasms of release made Nic shudder, lost in his own rush of pleasure. He grunted and his body twisted, delving as deeply as he could to spill the last drop of cum inside her. Then he relaxed against her, sliding from her to rest beside her. She snuggled in the crook of his arm and raised her head for a kiss. His lips slipped over hers, sealing their love as their heartbeats returned to normal.

"I'm so glad you're here," she whispered.

"I am glad too. From the first time I played in your dreams, I wanted to be here with you." He sighed. "Leviticus and I have much work to do, finding the Shadows and banishing them and we have to adjust to this world of yours. Still, I look forward to the time I will spend with you. I love you, Carmen."

"I love you." She placed a quick kiss on his lips. "I'm glad you're here. But what will happen in my dreams now? Will other Dreamscapers invade my dreams like you did?"

"Perhaps." He caressed her cheek and smiled, as if reveling in the feel of her. "But they will not make love to you as I did. They know you are mine. Your dreams will be nothing more than a way to relieve the stress and anxiety of the day. If you make love in your dreams—and you will because it is the way of human dreams—they will be conjurations of your imagination, not Dreamscapers."

Nic held her close. She felt the beating of his heart and the smooth texture of his skin. His warm lips closed over hers.

The man of her dreams was real...at last.

About the Author

Lani Aames resides in west Tennessee with her family and a clowder of cats. She is multi-published in a variety of subgenres of erotic romance, and also writes romance as Lanette Curington. For the latest updates, visit her websites.

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