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IRREPRESSIBLE FORCE

Michele Zurlo



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EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

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IRREPRESSIBLE FORCE

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With deep gratitude,

Michele Zurlo

DEDICATION

Thanks to Laura for telling me to stop re-envisioning the plot.

Thanks to Monika for helping with the Spanish. *Eres una fuerza que no debe tomarse ha la ligera.* You are definitely a tornado, *chica*!

IRREPRESSIBLE FORCE

MICHELE ZURLO

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Chapter 1

Present

“It’s all right, Mary. You don’t have to be afraid.”

Emmaline’s assurances fell on deaf ears. Literally. The ghost to whom she spoke had lost her hearing after a fever when she was just a little girl. Though her ghostly form shouldn’t have suffered from any bodily defects, Mary carried her disability with her in the form of a refusal to respond to the spoken word.

The apparition sat at the end of the sofa, her shoulders slumped in defeat and her stringy hair obscuring half of her face. If she had the ability to cry, Emmaline had no doubt tears would be streaming down the woman’s cheeks. As it was, her expression was pitifully bereft.

Turning to the living person in the room, Emmaline indicated the space the ghost occupied. “Can you sign that for me?”

Nearly transparent, the woman’s image flickered. She looked toward Eric, a fifty-something man with a square jaw and a short neck. He owned the home with the ghost problem. He had contacted Emmaline via her website earlier that month. His emails indicated that he had followed the protocols listed in her website’s FAQ for ridding a home of a spirit, yet his ghost continued to roam at night, making noises and knocking down objects.

Emmaline had fit Eric into her schedule because he was on the way to her next destination, not because his case was interesting or urgent.

Eric taught deaf children, so he knew sign language. He made the signs with his hands and arms to assure Mary she was safe.

“You don’t have to stay here.”

Emmaline looked toward Eric expectantly. She was tired, and she was both dreading and looking forward to her destination. It had been months since she had seen her best friend, his wife, and their brand-new baby boy.

Eric shook his head, refusing to sign that message.

“Eric, you need to tell her to leave or else she’ll never be gone.”

“Mary can stay. We just want her quiet when the kids are asleep.” Eric wrung his hands together.

Suppressing a growl, Emmaline parked her hands on her hips. “Then sign that.”

She didn’t have the temperament for this crap. Situations like this made her miss Matt and his easy manner with all kinds of people. This entire case would have been so much easier if Eric had told her all he wanted to do was to quiet down the ghost. If Emmaline had known, she could have assured Mary that nobody wanted her gone and the apparition wouldn’t have played hide and seek for so long.

Usually, her clients were the ones at a loss. Emmaline’s abilities to see and hear ghosts had emerged when she was a teen. Aunt Emma, who really was her mother’s aunt, was the only other person in the family who had understood exactly the future Emmaline faced. The skills she now used with confidence and conviction were courtesy of Aunt Emma’s patient teachings.

The trust fund she left helped, too. Emmaline didn’t charge her clients for her ghost hunting services, not even for travel expenses. She just made sure to invest wisely to keep the cash flowing.

The problem resolved, she took her leave from Eric and Mary and headed to a nearby hotel. She had been awake trying to talk to Mary for most of the night. Thank goodness Eric knew sign language. The ghost couldn’t have chosen a better family with which to reside.

Her eyes closed the moment her head hit the pillow.

Though technically a vacation, tomorrow was going to be a long day.

* * * *

The thick forest of trees lining the road cleared abruptly, revealing the hidden parking garage Maria Curry and Blade Sanchez, sibling owners of the Paradise Island Ranch, had to build after the first time Emmaline had visited. It was small, as far as parking garages went, extending only three levels into the sky. It looked out of place, surrounded on four sides by nothing but forest. A series of small signs pointed the way to the paths that would lead guests to the resort; otherwise they would end up lost in the woods. No sounds and no smells hinted the way to civilization.

Emmaline parked on the first level in the section reserved for the family. It was nicely shaded and low to the ground. The location of the family parking section was a thoughtful gesture on Matt's part. Now that he was married to Maria, Blade gave Matt a voice in the running of the ranch. Matt knew how much Emmaline hated heights of any kind. Blade knew about her weakness, too, but that wouldn't be enough of an incentive for him to consider it when assigning parking spaces.

Blade had fought its construction for as long as he could. He hadn't wanted to use much surface area to store cars. He had a special dislike of non-equine transportation. Maria had finally convinced him by using the logic that guests had to get there somehow. They couldn't function as a ranch-resort without customers.

Emmaline stopped on the path, taking a moment to look around and appreciate the beauty of the saplings rising against a backdrop of older trees. So many trees had been damaged from the digging of the supports for the parking structure. Blade had selected replacement trees that would root deeply because he hadn't wanted to undermine the concrete support structure and have to bring back all that heavy equipment again.

Blade. Could she sigh any louder? He wouldn't hear her. If he were standing next to her, he likely wouldn't hear her. He had perfected not hearing her. It was her own fault. She'd been callous with him. She'd been hurt by another man and she had taken it out on Blade.

He wasn't exactly innocent in all of this, but Emmaline had set the tone of the relationship from the beginning. If she wasn't enjoying it anymore, that was her problem. Blade was certainly finished playing her games.

The ghost she had goaded into action in front of the entire crowd at their annual New Year's Eve celebration eighteen months ago had earned

Paradise Island Ranch Resort a reputation as one of the most haunted places in Georgia. People came from all over the world with the hope of seeing something mysteriously move or, more significantly, an apparition materialize.

Emmaline hoped the ghost continued to live up to the docility she had recently displayed. Matt had assured her that it had been quiet since then.

This visit was different. When she had left Paradise Island eighteen months ago, she had also left without Matt, her best friend and spirit-talking partner. Matt had fallen in love with the very sweet and very beautiful Maria. Their love affair began months before they met, though Emmaline hadn't known their phone conversations had been about anything more than ghosts.

Emmaline had been sorry to lose him, but she couldn't help but be happy for him as well. When his wife had died after a horrific battle with cancer, Matt had been devastated. He hadn't so much as looked at another woman until he met Maria. Emmaline liked to see that sparkle back in Matt's eyes. Marital bliss suited him.

Four months ago, Maria had given birth to a handsome little boy. Dashiel Curry had stolen Emmaline's heart the moment she laid eyes on him in that antiseptic hospital room. Before Dash had been born, Emmaline's visits were few and far between. She often flew Matt and Maria to Michigan to see her, or she met them somewhere else for a vacation. That way she could avoid Blade and the inevitable uncomfortable silences and raging arguments that sprang up between them.

She did like the angry sexual encounters she couldn't seem to stop having with him. Their fights inevitably ended with incredible sex and deafening silence. The silence had once been a blessing, but now it hurt something fierce.

Goodness, how she wished they had parted on better terms. She had no idea how to mend the shattered fence between them. Try as she might, she could only seem to hack it into smaller pieces.

She left her bags in her car, fully intending to send Matt back for them. If they were going to insist that no cars were allowed past the parking garage, then they were going to have to take care of transporting her luggage to the tiny "town" that made up the resort part of the ranch. Emmaline never understood how they got away with calling it a resort. The only activities

they offered regularly were horseback riding, hiking trails, and swimming at one of several chlorinated pools. Adventurous guests might stumble upon a number of hidden ponds on the property, but nobody went out of their way to point those out.

Yet even before it had gained a reputation for being haunted, they never had a problem filling the rooms, especially around New Year's and the Fourth of July, when they put on celebrations so large that the entire town of Goliath, which abutted the resort on the far end, closed down to attend. Since Emmaline's historic visit, the entire town turned into one giant rooming house at those times to accommodate the tourists. Sam's Samwich Shop even created a special menu renaming all of the offerings with spooky, alliterative phrases like "Screaming Caesar Salad" and "Ghoul's Eyes Eggs."

A week before the end of June, they were booked solid. Emmaline ran into guests almost as soon as she emerged from the wooded path leading from the parking garage to the town. She knew it was no accident that the garage was as far from the stables as possible. Blade originally hadn't improved the road because he didn't want people driving on the property, insisting that horses were the only acceptable mode of transportation.

Having been thrown from horses both times she had attempted to ride, Emmaline shivered. She knew that tradition hadn't changed. If anything else, Blade would have clung to that rule all the more just to spite her. Matt had learned to ride and to speak a rudimentary Spanish while he was here. Both Maria and Blade slipped into Spanish when they were alone or upset. Given Maria's rollercoaster of hormones during her pregnancy and Blade's quick temper, Matt felt it was in his best interest to learn.

It was near dinner time, so Emmaline went directly to the kitchen of the Dining Room, which was Maria's domain. It wasn't just a room, but an entire house, though they called it a room anyway. Emmaline reasoned that Dash would be there with his mother since the construction site where Matt was probably located wasn't safe for children.

The Dining Room was empty and, as she passed through it, her eyes lingered at the table where she'd first encountered Blade. He had sat across from her, undressing her with his eyes and making no move to hide or temper his interest.

The sounds of voices and the harsh clanking of pans escaped from behind the closed door. Emmaline pushed it open carefully, in case someone was standing behind it. The kitchen bustled with activity. Maria stood in the center of it all, regal as a queen, directing the flow of action. At five-foot-ten, she easily towered over Emmaline's short stature. Her beautiful, creamy tan skin was darkened even more from the sun and her dark brown hair curled slightly from the heat of the kitchen.

Maria saw Emmaline the moment the door opened. "Emmaline!" She hurried over to hug her husband's best friend. "I was wondering when you'd get in."

"I'm not too late, am I?" Emmaline was scheduled to arrive closer to lunch time. "I stopped in town to pick up a few things. I was recognized."

"Of course you were," she said. "You're a legend around these parts."

"I didn't do anything." Really, she hadn't done more than provoke a ghost into revealing herself in front of the entire town during the fireworks heralding the New Year. The ghost was the one who had attacked her—more than once.

"No one's been able to get her to reappear since then," Maria said. She lifted the lid of a nearby pot and stirred whatever was simmering inside. "Some people are upset about that, but not me. Not after she tried to smother me. I think it helps that Blade hasn't had any women around."

Emmaline knew Maria said that for her benefit. Blade had fallen for Emmaline during her brief sojourn and had been very upset when Emmaline hadn't returned his affection quite the way he wanted.

She felt guilty for hurting him like she did, but she had been candid about her intentions from the moment they met. She had been fresh from a failed engagement that ended the day before the wedding was to have taken place. Emmaline didn't think it would have been fair for Blade to settle for what was left of her heart. Both Matt and Maria harbored the hope that things would change after enough time had passed.

"Well, she doesn't like competition," Emmaline said. After all, she had used Blade's affection for her to goad the ghost into action, never once stopping to consider that Blade's feelings were real. "I'm sure that'll change soon."

Maria said nothing, but her look was hopeful. Emmaline was about to quash Maria's hopes when a squeal sounded from the corner of the room.

She looked toward the sound to find Dash in a playpen, squirming and thrashing in his discontent.

Maria's face brightened. "You're just in time. I see somebody finally woke up from his nap." She went over to her son, cooing at him in that special way mothers do. He stopped squealing and laughed excitedly. "Your Auntie Emmy is here."

Emmaline winced at the use of that name. Blade was the only person who had ever used it. In fact, besides Matt, he was the only person who had ever shortened her name.

Maria fussed over Dash for a few minutes and then motioned for Emmaline to follow her into another room so she could feed and change him. The two chatted, catching each other up on all the new developments since Emmaline had last visited four months ago at Dash's birth.

Then Maria handed Dash over to Emmaline. "Can you take him home? I'll be along in a little while. We're having a family dinner tonight, just the five of us."

Math had never been one of Emmaline's strong suits, but she knew that meant Blade would be joining them. Anticipation and fear twisted in her stomach. Suddenly, she wasn't so hungry. "Does he know I'm here?"

Maria shrugged. "We don't discuss you."

"That's not nice to do to him."

She felt a little uneasy. Maria's admission had been a bit brittle, but that wasn't the only reason for the queasy feeling in her stomach. Pictures of the way Blade's eyes darkened and the way his full lips pressed together when he was angry came to mind. Blade's volatile temper didn't scare her as it did most people. Perversely, she found his anger titillating.

"It's his own fault." She shooed Emmaline and Dash out the door. "I'll be along as soon as I've finished up here."

Emmaline did as she was told. It was a good thing she'd packed a vibrator. Even if she didn't manage to piss off Blade, spending the evening looking at him and hearing his voice was going to be hell. Even if he sat in a surly silence and glared at her, fantasies of him acting on that suppressed emotion would haunt her sleep.

Hopefully Matt would be home when she got there and she could send him to bring her things. She covered the short distance between the Dining Room and Maria's house in no time. The door was unlocked as always. She

went in and made herself at home, parking her bottom on the living room sofa with every intention of having a fulfilling conversation with Dash, who had cooed happily the entire way home.

She had him on her legs, supporting his head with one hand while the other shook colorful plastic keys in front of his face, when Matt came in.

“Em, you made it. I took an extra long lunch to wait for you.” His tone was accusing, but his eyes smiled.

“You should have called me. I would have been happy for the excuse to get going.” She carried Dash over to Matt, who held out his arms for his son and kissed Emmaline on the cheek. “You didn’t tell me to avoid town.”

Matt’s smile grew. “I would have liked to see that.”

“They want me to tell their fortunes or contact dead loved ones.”

“You could make a fortune, you know.” He settled his long frame on the couch where Emmaline had been sitting. She sat next to him, arranging herself so that she could have a clear view of Dash, who captured a fist full of Matt’s short hair. Matt freed his hair and turned toward his son, showering his face with light kisses.

Emmaline watched the two of them for a minute. After Matt’s first wife had died, she doubted she would ever see Matt this way again. If she hadn’t already loved Maria for her open-armed friendliness and big heart, the fact that she gave Matt this new chance at life would have been enough.

Matt was definitely a catch. Besides being an all-around good person, he was smart and sexy. His fair hair and blue eyes were the perfect foil for Maria’s darker beauty. Dash was a little too young to see any of Matt in him. His skin was already bronzed from the little time he spent in the sun and the little fuzz of fine hair on his head was pitch black.

Emmaline swallowed. She was reluctant to broach the subject that needed to be discussed, but she was determined to do it anyway. “Maria tells me that Blade doesn’t know I’m here.”

Matt shrugged. “I don’t know. He hasn’t said anything – but then, he wouldn’t.”

“Have you been arguing again?” She hated to be the subject of their disagreements. While she had no problem disagreeing with Blade, she didn’t like to drag innocent bystanders into the mess.

“No. Maria won’t let us.” He settled back, holding Dash against his chest.

Emmaline raised an eyebrow. "Since when does he listen to Maria?"

"He usually listens to Maria. You know, when you're not here, he's quite pleasant to be around." The look on Emmaline's face must have been fierce because he backpedaled. "I didn't mean that the way it came out, Em. I only meant that for some reason, you push his buttons."

"I don't want to ruin anyone's holiday." She abandoned her hurt feelings and chewed at a nail until Matt batted her hand away from her mouth. She knew she pushed Blade too far. She couldn't seem to help it. One minute she was fine. The next thing she knew, she wasn't resisting the pull of pleasure she got from saying and doing things that made him angry, especially when he wore that expressionless mask that hid anything he might be thinking or feeling. "Maybe I shouldn't stay the full two weeks?"

"Of course you should. He'll be busy anyway. He has his hands full with all those horses. He's providing a home for a bunch of abused and neglected horses they found at some ranch a couple counties over. They're a handful and he won't let most of the help near them." He squeezed her hand. "Just be nice, okay?"

Absently, she nodded. She wasn't sure whether she was relieved that Blade would be too busy to pay her much mind or upset for the same reason. Changing the subject, she nudged Matt's arm. "It's my turn to hold Dash."

"Matt," Maria called from the doorway, "Emmaline came half way across the country to see Dash, not you. Let her hold him."

Reluctantly, Matt obeyed the voice of authority.

Maria's expression softened as she watched her husband kiss Dash on the forehead. "Come help me in the kitchen." Her tone was a little suggestive, so when she invited Emmaline to come along and keep them company, Emmaline declined.

She was lying on the couch with a sleeping Dash on her chest when Blade came in. Her eyes were closed and she was half asleep, but she was aware of much more than just the little one resting against her heart.

* * * *

Blade stood in the doorway, watching her. He had known she was coming. While Matt and Maria had refrained from discussing it around him, he had heard enough in the snatches of halted conversations to know. Of

course she would come. Matt was her best friend, and she had also become close to Maria. She wouldn't avoid her friends just to stay away from him.

After all this time, she still took his breath away and made his heart beat painfully. His eyes lingered on the shapeliness of her legs where the short cutoff denim ended, then traced a path upward past Dash, asleep on her light pink tank top with his cheek resting near her neck and one hand resting on her breast.

He had never envied a baby so much. If things had turned out differently last time, it might have been his child snuggled against her like that. Then he would have no hesitation in going over to her and awakening her with a kiss. She would blink, sleepily shaking away the aftereffects of her nap, then she would smile, and that special smile would be for him alone, and she would pull him closer.

He longed for the taste of her lips far more than he should. He had seen her only a handful of times in the past year and a half. Each time, they argued, fighting viciously. Each time, he found her later when she was alone. Each time, he had flung her to the couch or to the bed or against the wall. He snatched hard kisses and he pushed himself into her. She responded to his brutality, opening to his anger in a way she had never opened to his kindness or his affection.

He had known she was hurting. He would have had to been blind not to see it. Part of him had wanted to kill the bastard that hurt her, but a larger part of him was intensely grateful she hadn't married him.

Unfortunately, she hadn't been ready to accept anything he had to give and then he had done the unforgivable.

Suddenly self-conscious, he wiped the longing from his face, replacing it with a carefully neutral expression. She was merciless enough when he didn't provoke her. He didn't blame her. As many times as she had claimed it was the ghost who had hit her, he knew better. It was his hand that had done the deed. He had never before been physically violent, especially not with a woman. He might lose his temper and yell, but he had never raised his hand to anyone before that night or since.

Truth be told, he had no memory of doing it, only of the shock on her face, the disbelief in her eyes as she lay on the floor in her deep rose ball gown, looking up at him in the semi-darkness. He could still see the

handprint crossing the left side of her face and the blood smearing across her lip where it had split open.

He wanted to believe her when she cornered him later and explained that the ghost had used him to attack her. The damage to her face had mocked him with every word she spoke. He couldn't find it in him to share her deep conviction that he played no part in the act because deep down, he had wanted to hurt her the way she had hurt him.

* * * *

Emmaline became aware of another presence in the room. She knew Blade had been there for some time, but she hadn't moved. She wanted him to say something first. She knew if she broke the silence, she would say the wrong thing, like she always did, and drive him away. Matt had asked her to be nice. Implicit in that request was a plea for Emmaline to observe the rules of the cease-fire. Blade was part of his family now, and Emmaline had to get along with him in order to preserve the peace.

No, this was something else.

Automatically cradling Dash's tiny head, she sat bolt upright, newly alert. A coldness passed through her and she heard laughter. Rosalie, Blade's ghost, was in the room with them. For a year and a half, she had been dormant, but now she was back. This wasn't what she was looking to deal with on her vacation.

Shivering, she fixed Blade with a questing gaze. "Did you hear that?"

Without changing his stony expression, he nodded. It was a short, curt movement that betrayed absolutely no emotion.

This couldn't lead anywhere good. She rubbed at her eyes, wanting that damn woman gone.

Looking down at Dash, she saw that she hadn't disturbed the sleeping child. "He's a sound sleeper."

"Yeah, he is." Blade's low tones filled the room and sent a pleasant chill down Emmaline's spine. He crossed the room in far fewer strides than Emmaline would have ever been able to manage. Bending over Dash, he added, "He can sleep through anything."

Emmaline inhaled the scent of leather and horses that mingled with the essence that was uniquely Blade. His face was so close to hers. She wanted

him to turn his head and kiss her, bypassing the conversational parts of greeting one another that would only go horribly wrong. One last breath and she offered the baby to his uncle. If he stayed close to her much longer, she would throw caution to the wind and do something to really piss him off.

Without a word, Blade took Dash from her arms and sank into a nearby rocking chair. Emmaline fingered places on her arm and near her collarbone where he'd inadvertently touched her. They still tingled. She watched them together somewhat wistfully. She had just turned twenty-nine and the ticking of her biological clock was loud enough to make her lament not taking him up on his offer of something more than an affair between them.

Frowning, Emmaline wondered if she could even call it an affair. Their intense sexual encounters had been wild and exciting and exactly what she had wanted. Then.

Now...she didn't know. Looking at him, at his lithe, muscular body and his handsome, softly angular face, she could see what she had let pass by. And it was more than just his physical beauty. He was kind and strong and thoughtful. He was a generous lover.

She hadn't given him what he wanted, but he had certainly fulfilled her expectations. Was it regret and guilt that made her feel this way, or were these long-buried emotions rising to demand she do something about them? Still, the voice in her head warning her away niggled at her.

"You don't seem surprised to see me," she said quietly. "I'm sorry they didn't warn you I was coming."

Blade shrugged noncommittally. His smile was for Dash, but it affected her just the same. Dash's fist snagged a strand of the midnight hair that fell to his uncle's shoulders. "I knew you were coming. Maria's been cleaning and re-cleaning this place for the past week, and she's sent Matt to town nearly every day. Apparently, you're allergic to anything that might indicate a baby lives here."

Smiling, Emmaline said, "She shouldn't have gone through so much trouble."

Again, he shrugged. "I know better than to get in her way." Shifting Dash to his other arm, he looked directly at Emmaline for the first time. "You don't seem surprised to see me, either."

"I knew you were here. I didn't want to say something to upset you." She hoped to set him at ease by acknowledging her biggest fault right away. "I was waiting for you to say something first."

The temperature around her dropped suddenly. She could see her breath when she exhaled and she could tell from the expression on Blade's face that he could see it as well.

Blade exhaled sharply. "It amazes me that we've had no activity in this house for eighteen months, and then when you show up, it starts again."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "This is the first time it's happened to me since then. Well, here anyway."

"Is there any chance you brought this one with you?"

What amazed Emmaline was how well his face hid his thoughts, betraying not a hint that he felt anything at all. "I think I'd know if I had a passenger in my car."

Emmaline closed her eyes to concentrate. "Rosalie?"

Again, she heard light laughter, but not the kind that indicated amusement.

"Rosalie, I know you can answer me better than that. Talk to me, Rosalie."

A wind blew through the room, ruffling the pages of a magazine on the coffee table. It wouldn't have been remarkable, except the air conditioning was running, so all the windows were closed.

Blade remained silent, watching her. That stoic expression didn't slip.

Emmaline stood. "You can do better than that."

She walked toward the center of the room, away from Blade and Dash. She didn't want Rosalie near the baby. "I've done some research on you," she continued. "I know about your husband."

The force of the blow knocked her back a step. It hadn't been concentrated anywhere, like a fist might have been, but instead it hit her like a transparent wall. Only Rosalie hated her enough to muster up that much energy. Emmaline and Blade watched as the mirror on the wall near the door fogged over to reveal Rosalie's message.

You can't have him.

Emmaline's jaw dropped open. "What makes you think I want him? Or that he wants me? Or that you could stop us if we wanted to be together?"

Blade stood, his façade cracking just a bit. "Emmy, stop provoking her."

"I need to know it's her," Emmaline said. "Or if you have a whole harem of ghosts falling for you." She ignored the intimacy implied by his use of the nickname only he called her. The tugging at her heart was a little more difficult to push aside.

Matt came in from the kitchen before Blade had a chance to respond. He looked from Blade to Emmaline, and then he saw the mirror. Immediately, the apprehension in his expression morphed. His mouth set in a grim line and his face darkened. "What is going on?"

Emmaline bit the inside of her lip. She could count on one hand the number of times Matt had actually been angry with her. Summoning her courage, she looked him directly in the eye. "Blade and I had a friendly conversation. Well, at any rate, we haven't had a fight yet. Rosalie isn't pleased. I think she likes it when we fight."

The writing faded and with it the feeling of another presence in the room.

The tension left Emmaline's shoulders. She hadn't been aware of how badly she was clenching her muscles until then. "She's gone."

Matt's jaw set in a firm line and his eyes were blue steel. "Let's eat. We'll discuss this later."

Emmaline reached out a hand to him. "You're mad at me?"

"I told you to leave it alone." He kept his voice low.

She answered quietly, trying to navigate the line between upsetting him more and making him understand. "You know I can't do that. I need closure. Whether you like it or not, last time was hard for me. For all of us. I think we deserve answers or some sort of explanation."

"She didn't invite this," Blade said. "It didn't start until after I walked into the room." Emmaline was surprised he was sticking up for her.

Matt held his arms out for Dashiell. "Dinner's ready."

They stared after him as he turned and left the room without another word.

"He's afraid," Emmaline said in answer to Blade's puzzled expression. Family was precious to Matt. She knew he didn't want anything happening to them, and she knew the source of his fear but left that unsaid.

"I think he was hoping this would just be a vacation for you." Blade's voice was subdued. The vibrations closed the distance between them, even

though Emmaline had to strain to hear him. “We were all hoping nothing would happen.”

She tried to refuse the guilt, but she wasn’t successful. Wordlessly, she followed Matt down the hall and into the kitchen where Maria was setting the last platter on the table.

Tonight’s theme was Mexican. Strips of flavored steak and chicken filled one platter. Grilled peppers and onions shared space nearby. Bowls of shredded cheese, lettuce, Spanish rice, and sour cream decorated the remaining space.

Matt and Maria sat on one side of the table with Dash between them. He bounced happily in a seat, grabbing inexpertly at colorful plastic and stuffed toys hanging from a bar over his head.

Emmaline took the seat next to Blade. She hated eating with him. Either she was seated next to him and hyperaware of how close he was - or how close she wished he was - or she was forced to sit across from him, which put him directly in her line of sight. Either way, Maria’s delicious meal lost its allure.

Blade grabbed a flour tortilla and filled it with the fixings he liked. He passed the plates and bowls to Matt, who accepted them without comment.

Maria glared at Blade. Emmaline knew she was biting her tongue to keep from reprimanding him for his lack of manners. It wasn’t a lack in his upbringing that had him neglecting Emmaline. If she were any other guest, he would be passing the food in her direction.

This was the kind of little thing that usually set Emmaline on the path of retaliation, leading directly to an ugly confrontation. While she fully took responsibility for the way she poked a sleeping bear, there was no way he was an innocent party. Not anymore.

She squelched her desire to do or say anything to set him off. Given the spikes of frost shooting from Matt’s eyes directly into her heart, it wasn’t difficult. She snagged a flour tortilla and built a fajita on her plate.

Blade scooted the cheese and sour cream closer to Emmaline.

She accepted the peace offering with a small smile.

“So, how was the drive?” Maria’s warm tone stood out in direct contrast to Matt’s icy demeanor.

Emmaline didn't feel much like talking. Matt was one person with whom she never fought. Part of her wanted to crawl away and lick her wounds. "It was fine."

The sound of scraping spoons and glassware thudding on the wooden table interrupted the heavy silence. Dash's happy squeals made up the entirety of the conversation. Emmaline barely touched her food.

Maria tried again. "What did you think of the new road?"

Most of the responses that came to mind were direct or indirect digs at Blade. Maintenance of the grounds was his department. Emmaline liked fighting with Blade. She liked making his eyes flash. She liked pushing him. She wanted to see him lose his temper. She wanted to crack the cold remoteness he affected whenever she was around.

She opted for simple peace. "I liked it."

When the silence fell again, Maria shot a look to Matt. Technically, Emmaline was his guest. He usually participated in the conversation, but he wouldn't even look at Emmaline. The tension between the pair was palpable.

Finally, Maria's patience reached its end. "What is wrong with the two of you?"

Exhaling sharply, Matt said, "We'll discuss it after dinner."

Maria threw her cloth napkin on the table and pushed her plate away. "Well, the two of you have ruined my appetite. Dinner is over." She snatched the barely-touched plates in front of Emmaline and Matt. Blade had no trouble finishing his meal, but Maria ignored his empty plate.

After she stormed from the room, Matt leveled a look at Emmaline. "Trouble has a way of following you around. Maybe you shouldn't have come."

Stung, Emmaline didn't reply. Trouble didn't follow her around, not usually. She didn't know what to say to something like that.

"She couldn't have known this was going to happen." Blade's voice vibrated through her aching chest. "She's been here before and nothing has happened."

Matt shook his head. "You and your sister, Caroline, went to Vermont. You researched the house and the ghost. You stirred her up again."

"We were in Vermont for something else," Emmaline said hotly. She and her sister had taken a ski vacation the previous winter. Stover just

happened to be a great place to ski and snowboard. They had also spent time in Vale and Switzerland. “Researching something doesn’t stir it up. You know that.”

The disgusted expression on Matt’s face didn’t so much as twitch. “Whether or not it was intentional, you’ve done this. This entity has already tried to smother Maria and it has done some damage to you as well. I don’t feel comfortable with you staying here, not with Maria and Dash under the same roof.”

Though she understood his fear and his reasoning, Emmaline felt as if she’d been punched. Without another word, she left, stopping only in the living room to grab her purse and keys.

Chapter 2

Eighteen Months Ago

The canopy of the forest was so thick, it nearly blocked out the sun completely. The black Fusion bounced and rocked its way over the washboard ruts in the unkempt country road, jarring her head painfully against the headrest, and not for the first time. Emmaline swore. If this resort was upscale, she had yet to see evidence that any of the substantial income was spent improving the private road that led to it. She didn't see how they could stay in business. This was less a road and more of a suggestion.

Maria had warned her that the road wasn't in the best shape. "My brother is in charge of that end of the business," she had explained. "But he sometimes doesn't see past the horses."

That tiny bit of caution had not prepared her for this. To make matters worse, her partner in crime, Matt Curry, was already cranky from a lousy night's sleep in a sub-par motel. "First, you fail to make reservations. Now, you're trying to kill my already aching joints. What have I done to deserve this, Emmaline?"

Matt was every woman's dream. Short, neatly clipped blond hair topped his broad-shouldered, six-foot frame. Matt never missed an opportunity to spend time at the gym. Emmaline knew for certain he could bench press her. He had done it before, achieving fifty repetitions before she called a halt to the proceedings and paid up. The bet had been that she would give in before he did. Truthfully, being raised and lowered like that hurt where his hands had dug into her thigh and rib cage. The bruises had lingered for nearly two weeks.

The rest of Matt was as neat as his hair. He was always impeccably dressed. Today he wore loose-fitting jeans that hung low over his hips and a black designer t-shirt that was tight across the shoulders and arms.

The clincher was his eyes. Highly intelligent, humorous blue eyes smiled out from a face that was perpetually jovial, except for when he wasn't. Right now, he wasn't in a good mood.

Exasperated, Emmaline snapped. "I didn't get much sleep last night either. You hog the bed."

He gave attitude right back. "I can't help it if that hole-in-the-wall place didn't have two beds. Or better yet, two rooms. You're no angel to room with, either. You take forever in the shower."

Emmaline wasn't offended by his statement. She did take forever in the shower. Her sigh wasn't one of regret or apology. "I'm sorry about last night. I thought we'd be able to get here in plenty of time. I didn't count on getting lost or on the fact that the road to this place is hidden and unmarked. That, in and of itself, screams 'haunted.'"

Matt made a sound of warning. "You can't pre-judge a place."

"I think they're already aware it's haunted. Guests have left in the middle of the night. Maria has seen things levitate in the kitchen." Emmaline stopped, realizing the redundancy of her explanations. "Why am I telling you this? You've talked to her far more than I have."

He tsked again. "You know that doesn't always mean anything. More often than not, people make these things up. And most of the other stuff is easily explained away." He bestowed a bright smile on Emmaline. "That's why you have me."

That was true. Emmaline might have the ability to communicate with spirits, but Matt was the one with knowledge of how things in a house or building were put together. He could explain to a homeowner how leaving open cans of turpentine lying around in the attached garage, or anywhere else, caused hallucinations, or how the pipes in the basement made the odd sounds they heard. Together, they had saved anxious homeowners from having to move and pointed them in the right direction for repairs to their plumbing or heating systems.

As they rounded the next corner, the road opened up to reveal the main grounds of the resort. Emmaline thought calling a ranch a resort was stretching things a bit, but when she saw the compound, she changed her

mind. To the left of the road, a gigantic, modern stable, surrounded by gated yards of varying size, swallowed half of the available space. To the right, Emmaline could see several large houses in the open area and several smaller houses trailing off in a line where the woods began again.

The houses varied in style, from old world Southern to frontier Western to downright Victorian. Emmaline stared at them for the longest time. She loved houses, especially old ones. Even if they weren't inhabited by spirits, they had personality and a vitality she absolutely loved. The collection of such differing styles of houses somehow worked.

She wondered how this resort functioned. There wasn't an oversized, centrally-located building that might house a spa, gym, or any of the other amenities people expected when they paid through the nose for a resort vacation. It didn't look like anything she had ever seen, and she had been to some very swanky places.

"Do you know where the main house is?" Matt asked, shading his eyes against the disappearance of the forest gloom.

Emmaline shook her head. "I guess I'll follow the road toward the houses. That first one might be the main building."

It was nearly noon. They had left the motel at eight, but it had taken them a long time to find the road that led to Paradise Island and an even longer time to navigate that blasted road. Matt rolled down the window to let in the Georgia winter heat. Native Georgians might have found the forty-degree temperature a little cool, but to Emmaline and Matt, it was a slice of heaven in the middle of a bitter Michigan winter. The temperatures they had left boasted highs in the mid-teens.

As she got closer to the houses, which were situated on both sides of the street, almost like the main street of a little town, she heard the majority of the noise coming from a light tan, western-style house with a wide porch spanning the front and curving around both sides. Rocking chairs, most of them occupied, lined the generous porch. Double doors were centered in the middle, while single doors greeted the ending of the wraparound porch on either side. "I think that's our safest bet."

She stopped the car near the point where the lawn began. There were no markings on the street to indicate where she should park and there were no other cars in sight. Sliding from the car, she stretched, bending nearly backward in her attempt to work the kink out of her lower right side.

“Circus tryouts aren’t until next month.” A voice that was deep, melodic, and highly amused floated down to Emmaline as she resumed a normal standing position.

She followed long, denim-clad legs up to narrow hips. He held his black Stetson in his hands, blocking her view of whether the loose jeans tightened to show off his natural endowments or hung low on his hips and teased the imagination.

Her eyes traveled upward. She could tell he was broad-shouldered, but his loose cowboy shirt hid the details of his physique. Emmaline was willing to bet he was a playground of ripples and waves. Uncharacteristically, she felt an itch in her fingers and had to stifle the urge to run them over him to see if her guess was true. His rich, jet black hair fell to his shoulders and brought out his eyes even more. The itch intensified.

The face that went with those eyes nearly prevented her from replying. Strong, high cheekbones accented sparkling brown eyes that, together with his coloring, indicated Mexican ancestry. His full lips were curved in a sensuous grin that matched the light in his eyes and the mirth in his voice. He was tall, easily two or three inches taller than Matt.

It took Emmaline a minute to realize she was staring open-mouthed at him while he stoically but slowly took in the details of her appearance with an amused grin that didn’t waver. She forced herself to snap out of it. “I’m looking for Maria Sanchez.”

“Then you’ve come to the right place,” he said with a slight Georgia drawl. He might live here now, but he hadn’t been raised there. “But at the wrong time. Or the right time, depending on how you look at it.”

“How’s that?” Emmaline asked. By all accounts, her timing was looking pretty good.

“Maria is inside, but it’s the lunch rush, so she’s busy.” He came down the last few steps to stand in front of Emmaline. “If you’re hungry, you got here just in time.” He extended his hand to her. “I’m Blade Sanchez. I own a portion of this ranch, so if you have business with Maria, you can run it past me. I can’t guarantee answers, but I’m willing to give it my best shot.”

Emmaline extended her hand, expecting him to shake it. Instead, he lifted it to his lips, letting them graze her knuckles. His hand was warm. She could feel the strength in it. Her heart beat faster at the thought of what

those hands might feel like running over the places where her skin was more sensitive.

“We’ll wait.” Matt’s answer came from the other side of the car and broke through the haze that had settled around Emmaline. “She told us not to talk to you.”

Emmaline turned around, suddenly remembering she wasn’t alone, and fixed Matt with a puzzled glare. “She did?”

“She did.” He came around the car and extended his hand to Blade. “Matt Curry.” Blade shook Matt’s hand firmly, testing Emmaline’s companion in an overtly masculine manner that had Emmaline rolling her eyes.

Matt must have passed because Blade let go without changing expression. “She’s expecting you? She didn’t say anything to me.” He turned his gaze back to Emmaline. “I didn’t catch your name.”

When clients kept things quiet, it was usually because they didn’t want people to think they were crazy for thinking their house was haunted. Maria must have had reason to keep this from her brother. She smiled. “Emmaline Force.”

Blade looked from Emmaline to Matt and back again, a question simmering in his eyes that he didn’t put into words. He smiled, putting on his company manners as he slid his wide-brimmed black cowboy hat on his head. “Then let me show you the best place in town to eat.”

The inside wasn’t what Emmaline had expected. From the outside, it looked like a single-story square house, the kind with plenty of room inside for a family of four, but not for many more. Instead, she found that most of the inner walls had been removed to make a huge room. Long tables ran the length of the room, while smaller, more intimate tables dotted the periphery. Most of the people sat at the long tables, making a cacophony of noise while the wait staff sauntered around the room, casually placing plates in front of people and clearing away others.

Blade led them to a table for four. He watched as Matt sank down with his back toward the wall. Throwing a look of annoyance at Matt, he pulled out a chair for Emmaline. She smiled in thanks.

“Mexican or American?” asked Blade.

Emmaline tilted her head to the side. Was he asking her to guess his ethnic heritage or asking hers? She never thought the straight brown hair

that framed her round face, brown eyes, and pale skin make her look anything other than Irish. "Pardon?" she asked.

"Maria only makes two kinds of food for each meal, Mexican and American. She throws in something with a fancy French name every once in a while, but not today."

Matt cleared his throat. "American. Too much Mexican gives me heartburn." In response to the look Emmaline gave him, he added, "We had Mexican last night."

Emmaline looked up at Blade. "Have you eaten?"

"I have."

Disappointment was something she was used to feeling around men lately. "I'll have whatever you recommend."

Blade left and disappeared through the kitchen door. Emmaline watched him go in silence, noting that he looked as good from the back as he did from the front.

"Do you think you could drool over each other a little more? I don't think I caught enough to bathe in."

Emmaline drew her brows sharply together. "You don't have to be rude."

"Rude? Me?" He shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. "I may be a guy, but I'm not going to run around pulling out your chair or opening doors for you. I happen to be in a position to know you can do all of those things for yourself. And I have no interest in getting into your pants."

A waiter set down tall, cool glasses of lemonade topped with fresh lemon slices. "Thanks," Matt said. "These look good."

"They are. You should try them with a little whiskey. Or a lot." The young man smiled.

"I'll take that under advisement," Matt laughed. As the waiter walked away, Matt turned his attention back to Emmaline. "Now, if you want me to open a jar or reach something on a high shelf, I'm your man."

"That's not what I meant. You're being almost openly hostile to him. He owns half of this place. He's not the person you want to piss off the first day we're here."

Matt opened his mouth to say more, but Blade returned just then with two plates piled high with food. In front of Matt, he set down a huge hamburger with all the toppings and a side of home fries. The plate he put in

front of Emmaline had foods she recognized, but in a combination she didn't. She dug into the Spanish rice first. Flavors she never dreamed danced on her tongue.

"Wow. This is good. Maria made this?"

Blade smiled. "Nobody cooks better than Maria."

"Except you." Until she spoke, Emmaline hadn't noticed the approach of a woman who seemed to be a feminine replica of Blade. She was perhaps six inches shorter, but that still put her half a head over Emmaline. Her hair was quite a bit longer, reaching her half way down her back in soft tresses that framed her beautiful face and the curve of her breasts where it fell down the front. Emmaline knew this had to be Maria.

He pushed her away. "Shush, woman. I hate cooking."

"You do not." She smiled indulgently as she batted his hands away.

Blade wrinkled his nose and still managed to look charming. "I'll cook for myself, even for you, but not for a hundred people. I don't know how you do it."

But Maria had already dismissed him. Emmaline guessed it was a conversation they had reenacted a hundred times. She smiled brightly at Emmaline and Matt before sitting down in the empty seat next to Emmaline. "Blade, my dearest little brother, can you supervise cleanup and changeover?"

Blade sat down in the remaining seat, arranging himself so that he had an unobstructed view of Emmaline. He stared openly. "I'll stay," he said. "You've awakened my curiosity."

She sighed heavily. "Then you'll sit there quietly and listen. The second you turn into a smart-ass, I'm booting you out of my Dining Room."

"Yes, ma'am." He topped it off with a lazy salute.

"And take off your hat," she added. "Where are your manners?"

Blade obediently removed his hat, setting it somewhere beneath the table without removing his steady, penetrating gaze from Emmaline.

Maria turned back to her guests. "Sorry about that. He spends so much time with the horses, he forgets how to act around people."

Emmaline smiled uncertainly, squirming under Blade's intense scrutiny. She wished that he would stop looking at her as if he knew exactly what he'd find underneath her knee-length skirt and her light green shirt. It made her tingle a little too pleasantly between her thighs.

“You must be Emmaline,” Maria said. “I am Maria. You’ve met my little brother, Blade. I must warn you that he won’t like the reason you’re here. He’s been ignoring and denying things for the past three months.”

With a scowl, Blade leaned forward, all humor and flirtation forgotten. Emmaline regarded him thoughtfully. She had met many skeptics in her life. They were one of the reasons she didn’t tell most people she could talk to spirits. They tended to look at her like she was insane or a con-artist. She didn’t know which was worse.

The main reason she liked helping people the way she did was that when they finally called her in, they tended to trust what she said. Though she had a website, she didn’t advertise and she didn’t take every job. Someone with a problem would have to dig a bit and do their research in order to stumble upon her name. Still, she had been required to prove herself a number of times. This time would have to be one of them.

“This isn’t about that ghost crap, is it?”

Maria didn’t have to answer. Her face gave it away.

“Christ, Maria! Grow up. Ghosts are fiction. They don’t exist. You have always had an overactive imagination.”

They argued in a rapid Spanish that Emmaline couldn’t have followed if she wanted to. Judging from the expressions on their faces and the way the wait staff made themselves suddenly scarce, she knew it couldn’t be good. They both jumped to their feet. The remaining guests cleared out. Fascinated, Emmaline watched the exchange.

Blade’s fists clenched at his sides. He used the advantage of height to try to intimidate Maria, but it wasn’t working. Emmaline suppressed the urge to laugh. His bronze skin was suffused with a ruddy undertone and his mouth twisted around his words. She wondered if he would look like that in the moment before an orgasm. The tingling in her thighs moved deeper and she had to concentrate to control her breathing. She was going to need fresh panties after this.

Maria wasn’t nearly as angry as her brother. Her voice was raised with emotion and her gestures were controlled as she pointed a finger at Blade. Emmaline could tell she was trying to get him to see reason, to understand her need to have definitive answers.

Blade was having none of it. Ignoring Matt completely, he looked contemptuously at Emmaline, said something final, and stormed out.

Emmaline wondered what he had called her. She knew one Spanish swear word for something one might call a woman, but he hadn't said it.

"Once again, I must apologize for my brother's behavior," Maria said, slipping back into her chair. It was obvious she wasn't the sort of person who enjoyed arguing, but she also wasn't the kind of person who avoided confrontation either. Emmaline respected that.

"Don't worry about it," Emmaline said, waving a hand dismissively. "A little skepticism is a good thing. We never assume a place is haunted. If Blade has doubts, that's okay."

Maria nodded, but Emmaline could tell her fight with Blade bothered her. "I don't know how we go about doing any of this," she admitted. "I don't know how long you plan to stay or what kinds of things you do. I mean, other than what Matt told me on the phone."

Matt nodded calmly. "I gave you all the details I could. Each case is different. How about you help us get settled and then give us a tour of the places where you've experienced the most activity?"

Standing slowly, Maria said, "I need to take care of some things in the kitchen first."

"Take your time," Matt said. "We haven't finished our lunches, anyway."

The smile Matt flashed at Maria was soft and encouraging, though brief. By the time Maria disappeared into the kitchen, Matt had scarfed half of his burger.

"Don't eat the onions," Emmaline warned. "You know I can't concentrate when you stink like that."

"Yes, ma'am," Matt said, expertly mimicking Blade's soft accent and mock salute.

Emmaline laughed. "So, what do you think? About a week?"

"If we find anything, it could take a week." He stopped to take a long drink of the lemonade. "It could take longer. Or, this is all in her imagination and we're out of here in three days."

Over the years, she and Matt had developed procedures for finding out whether or not a place was haunted. One of the things on which Emmaline insisted was to give a place three days of inactivity before they moved on. She also insisted on being in a place at the times when others experienced the most activity. Ghosts weren't always active at night.

"I want you to take notes," she said. "I'll want to interview any guests who have seen anything."

Matt looked at Emmaline askew. "You think she's going to reveal the reason we're here? It might not be good for business. I mean, some people will be intrigued, but others will just think she's nutty."

She swallowed before answering. "I think the staff knows enough and some of the guests overheard Blade when he yelled the word 'ghost.' Rumors will get around and people with experiences will seek us out."

A thoughtful expression took up residence on Matt's face. "Aren't you worried about this? We've never done something like this with so many people around."

"It should drop off after New Year's Day," she reasoned. "That's in four days. Maria said they usually close down for January."

Dread crossed Matt's face and his mouth fell open. "You're not seriously planning to stay for a whole month or more, are you? I do have a life and I'd like to get back to it sometime soon." He pushed his plate, which contained only uneaten onions, away and sat back in the comfortable chair. "If you want to get into that boy's pants, Em, I don't think it'll take you that long."

A hot blush began at Emmaline's neckline and quickly spread upward. "That isn't on my agenda for this job."

"Like hell," Matt laughed. "I'm surprised the two of you didn't strip naked on the porch. I don't think I've seen you so smitten in..." He frowned, thinking. "I don't think I've ever seen you struck stupid like that. It's a good thing you finally realized how wrong Rick was for you."

Emmaline pushed her plate away as well, more than half of the food uneaten. Blade had piled the food high. He had easily given her enough for several meals. "I don't think he has that high of an opinion of me right now."

Before Matt could reply, Maria came back out of the kitchen. "Let's get your things from your car and then I'll have one of the servers put your car away."

"Away?"

"We don't use automobiles at Paradise Island. If you want to go somewhere, we have plenty of horses." Maria said this with a pleased smile.

Emmaline's stomach dropped. "I won't be expected to actually ride the horses, will I?"

Maria cocked her head to the side. "You can walk, if you'd like. Though if you want to go on one of the trails, I recommend riding."

It looked like Emmaline would be walking everywhere this week. That was okay. She could live with that. There was no way in hell she was getting up on a horse. Her trepidation at the idea must have shown in her face.

"You don't ride?" Maria's tone seemed to indicate she thought everyone learned to ride, that it was a rite of passage, like learning to crawl or walk.

"I don't ride," Emmaline confirmed. "But I do jog." She made it a rule to not reveal her intense fear of heights the first day she met someone. She also didn't mention that she had been on a horse before. Twice. Both times, she had ended up on the ground with the wind knocked out of her. Once she had severely twisted her ankle.

Her parents had insisted it could have been worse. She could have broken it. Having suffered a broken arm from her one attempt to climb a tree, she reasoned that a broken ankle would have been less painful. She was laid up for nearly two weeks at the height of summer vacation with that blasted thing. At least a cast meant she could have walked. A waterproof cast would have allowed her to swim.

Brightening, Maria said, "Blade gives lessons. Perhaps if you take them, he might learn to accept your presence here."

All told, Emmaline preferred Matt's ideas about how she might progress her relationship with Blade to Maria's. Having sex with him posed far less danger of falling, and even then, it was likely that something soft, like a bed, would catch her.

"That won't be necessary." She said it as politely as she could.

In less than half an hour, Emmaline was unpacking her suitcase in a room she was unfortunately sharing with Matt. It was the site of the most recent activity.

At least it had two beds.

Maria stood in the door and apologized profusely for the shortage of rooms. "It's the height of the tourist season. Things will die down soon. You can always stay at my house. Or if you don't like that idea, I'll have open rooms on the second. I promise I'll move you out as soon as I can."

“Don’t worry about it,” Emmaline assured her. “Matt and I have shared a room before.”

“It’s a good idea to be where the ghosts are for purposes of ghost hunting,” Matt added before disappearing into the bathroom.

“I’ve had activity at my house,” Maria said.

“But not in months.” Emmaline knocked on the closed door. “Matt, are you almost ready? I’d like to get started.”

The plan was to wander the town and memorize the layout. Emmaline wanted to put a visual to the activity reports Matt had compiled from his numerous conversations with Maria.

“Give me a minute, woman.” He sounded more annoyed than anything else.

Emmaline had no sympathy for him. That morning, he had pounded on the door every two minutes until she emerged from the shower. She grinned at Maria. “He’s being nice because you’re here. Usually, he tells me to go to hell.”

Once Matt rejoined them, they wandered down the first street, ogling the vastly different styles of guest houses collected in one place.

The second street, where the large, open dining house was located, contained two homes set off to the south. The first, Maria’s, was nearest to the Dining Room. It was a typical southern home, with wide porches stacked on top of each other running the length of the entire house. It was painted white and had a beautifully landscaped yard in front. The back opened to a large garden that extended the width of the yard and continued into the back yard of the Dining Room. It was easily the most friendly, welcoming house in the entire ranch. Emmaline smiled at the fit. Maria was easily one of the most friendly, welcoming people she’d ever met.

Maria beamed as she showed her house, especially once they made it to the gardens. “The majority of the vegetables and fruits we use in the kitchen are grown right there. We have extensive orchards farther to the south. Actually, we’re almost fully self-sufficient here. We don’t advertise it, but we make our own electricity from the waste this place generates. When the town loses power, which happens frequently during storms, we don’t.”

Emmaline had heard of that sort of thing before, the ultimate in green energy. The horses and the guests must generate plenty of electricity.

“Blade engineered all of it,” she added. The pride in her voice could not be missed.

The final house on the street, set even farther away, was a beautiful Victorian. Emmaline’s breath caught. Of all the types of houses, this was her favorite style. She always promised herself that when she settled down, it would be in a Victorian home. The problem she encountered was that there weren’t very many in Michigan in places she wanted to live, and she wasn’t ready to leave the state, cold winters notwithstanding.

She could tell it wasn’t quite ready for guests because it was in an obvious state of reconstruction. Scaffolding obscured much of the outside, but it would be incredible once it was finished. Something about the house pulled her to it, reaching out to capture her. Intrigued, Emmaline opened the tiny white gate with every intention of going closer.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Maria’s warning caught Emmaline by surprise. She raised a questioning brow. “Why? Is this where you’re getting the majority of your activity? Remodeling often disturbs spirits. It’s quite common.”

Maria shook her head. “I have no idea if there is any activity in that house. I warn you because it’s Blade’s house. He expressly warned me to keep the two of you away from his house and his stable.”

Emmaline frowned, but she said nothing. Matt caught her look and worked to divert Maria’s attention. “Where do you get the most activity?”

“The room I gave you is currently the most active.” Maria looked down guiltily. “The Havertys left suddenly last night. They claim they haven’t had a decent night sleep since they got here three days ago.”

This caught Emmaline’s attention. She had asked for the room with the most recent activity, but Maria hadn’t yet divulged the details. “What did they say? Be specific.”

Maria shook her head, pursing her lips bitterly. “I feel so stupid for having you here. Blade says it’s because these houses have old pipes or something like that, but we’ve had everything inspected. We had to, you know, this being a resort and all. These houses are either authentic or accurate reproductions. We transported a few of them from other states. They’ve all been remodeled and everything has been updated.”

That caught Matt’s attention. He made emphatic notes in his notebook, underlining something with a vicious intensity. Emmaline knew he was

dying to get into crawl spaces, cellars, and basements. “Can I look through your paperwork on the houses? I’d like to see schematics and things. Also, for anything you’ve remodeled, I’d like to see before and after photos.”

Maria nodded. “Blade would be the one to ask. I don’t know if he’ll cooperate, but I’ll do my best to encourage him.”

Emmaline nearly laughed at Maria’s tone. It was obvious she still treated him like a bratty little brother. Given his behavior this afternoon, Emmaline wasn’t sure the description was inaccurate.

“But you were asking about what the Havertys said.” Maria sighed, and then she parked herself on one of the low benches lining the street.

Emmaline sat next to her and placed a reassuring hand on Maria’s arm. “I’m listening.”

Matt folded himself onto the bench on the other side.

Maria blew a stream of air in a long sigh. “The first night, they complained about the pipes. They were too loud. They were knocking together. They asked if they could switch rooms, but we’re booked solid.”

Maria had been staring at the ground, but now she looked up to meet Emmaline’s eyes. “We do a spectacular fireworks display for New Year’s. People come from miles around to see it. Of course, we don’t let them drive here. We can’t have that many cars on the property. Blade’s orders. He has his reasons, and when he explains them, they’re good ones, but I can never keep that end of the business straight. I’m not one for remembering environmental stuff. Blade is responsible for the grounds.”

Emmaline nodded sympathetically, though she had no idea why cars were forbidden at Paradise Island. It’s not like it was a real island, like Mackinac, which banned all motorized vehicles. The only reason it could possibly be considered an island was because there was absolutely nothing around for miles.

“Will your husband be joining you for New Year’s? You really must stay with me in that case.” Maria’s offer was heartfelt and Emmaline knew why she thought Emmaline was married.

The last time Emmaline had spoken to Maria, she had shared plans for her wedding and for spending the holidays with her family. That was the reason she and Matt hadn’t come earlier.

“I’m not married,” Emmaline said. “We didn’t go through with the wedding.” It hadn’t been the first time Rick had cheated on her.

"I'm sorry," Maria said.

"I'm not." Emmaline smiled that kind of smile that discouraged continuing the conversation. Maria's sympathy was genuine, but Emmaline didn't have the patience for it. Part of the reason she was so excited about this investigation was because she wanted something to take her mind away from the fiascos in her personal life. "Did anything else happen to the Havertys?"

"The second night, they kept calling Marnie, the housekeeper for that house. Every house has one housekeeper on duty at all times."

Emmaline nodded encouragingly. She had already met the plump housekeeper, who was as friendly and as helpful as she was round. "What did they need from Marnie?"

Maria gestured toward the house in question where Emmaline and Matt were staying. It was quite large, Georgian in style, stretching three stories high. The halls were wide and the rooms were spacious. "They complained about the other guests running up and down the hall. You'll notice that your room is at the end of the hall and that there are three other rooms there."

Emmaline extrapolated that the other guests were sleeping in their rooms and that no one was in the hallway. "Did the other guests hear the noises?"

"The couple next to you said they did. Last night, the Havertys said their things had been moved around. Of course Marnie never touched their things. She's worked the ranch since my uncle ran it. There's almost no one I trust more than her."

A tear dropped from the corner of Maria's eye. "They insisted on a refund and left at about midnight. Blade doesn't think it's a big deal. He was happy to see them go, what with the way the teen girl kept hanging around the stable bothering him. She had one horrible crush on him and he has no patience for that kind of thing."

Emmaline bit her lip to stop an inappropriate giggle. The picture of legions of teen girls following Blade around with lovestruck expressions was easy to picture.

Maria sniffed. "This is the fourth big incident since October. I'm at my wit's end. We've had smaller things, of course. Most of the guests don't think of ghosts when they're complaining of noises, but I've already explained this to Matt."

The possibility of a pattern occurred to Emmaline. Hauntings often followed some kind of natural cycle, but finding which cycle often proved to be difficult. It wasn't an exact science. "Do you have any kind of diary or record that you've kept about what happens, where, and when?"

Maria shook her head, still sniffing. Matt handed her his handkerchief. He was the only person beside her great-grandfather that Emmaline had ever seen carry a handkerchief. He had bought Emmaline a set one time, touting their environmental value. She had them, but she didn't know what to do with them, and she never had them in a moment like this.

"It didn't even occur to me that we had ghosts until right before Halloween. I know it's cliché, but things got really bad that night, and I swear I saw someone in my room. I think she was trying to suffocate me. I screamed and Blade came running, but no one was there."

Emmaline remembered Matt saying something about Maria's younger brother living in her house. It must be easier to stay there while he finished restoring the Victorian.

Matt rubbed a sympathetic hand on Maria's back as she dabbed her eyes and blew her nose. "That's about when you called us." He gave Emmaline a meaningful look.

"Yes and you said you could come out after the holidays and the wedding." She wadded the handkerchief in her hand, worrying a clean corner of it with her fingernail. "I'm sorry about your wedding."

"I guess I owe Blade an apology," she added after a pause.

"We're here now." Emmaline ignored the part about the wedding, but she did wonder why Maria owed Blade an apology. "We won't leave until we figure out what's been going on here, okay?"

"Can you fix the problem?" Maria looked down at Emmaline hopefully. "You never said you could fix the problem."

"We can try," she said. "Every situation is different. That's why we never deal in absolutes."

"Well, I'll do whatever I can to help."

Emmaline stood up. She had never been comfortable around people who were crying. It was another reason she and Matt made such a great team. He was definitely the more sensitive and sympathetic person. "We can have a list for you in the morning. Matt's list will likely include information related

to the building designs and any construction done on them, as he said. We'll be particularly looking for things from the last six months."

"Blade will have all of that information. It's really his area. That and the horses."

The sexism inherent in their division of labor was not lost on Emmaline. Matt's eyes widened in alarm. He knew where she was going with her next comment before it was out of her mouth. He tried to stop her with a look of warning, but he failed. "So, he takes care of the business and the outside things and you're stuck in the kitchen."

Maria gazed up at Emmaline, her mouth hanging open in shock. Frost dripped from her response. "Actually, I take care of most of the business aspects, especially the financial end. Blade supervises the construction, remodeling, and upkeep of the structures, and he takes care of the horses. He likes what he does, and I like what I do."

Used to the taste of foot, Emmaline whipped out her contrite smile. "Sorry."

"You'll have to overlook some of the things Emmaline says," Matt cautioned. "She does know what she's doing when it comes to otherworldly apparitions though. There's nothing to make you sit up and take notice like a woman who holds conversations with the dead."

* * * *

After dinner, they said good night to Maria and retired to the room to await ghostly activity. Matt finalized his list as Emmaline sat on the edge of the bed and tried to contact the spirit.

She got nowhere.

Matt stuck his list inside Emmaline's jacket pocket and handed the coat to her. She took it from him without rising. "Thanks?"

"I thought you could use deliver these to Blade. You could use your feminine charm to help him overcome his skepticism." He stood back to look her over. She knew what he saw.

She had a medium build, which she kept healthy and strong by running religiously. He had tried to get her into the gym a few times, but she was bored by the repetitiveness of an indoor workout.

Her brown hair fell to her shoulders in gentle waves. Highlights and lowlights, an effect on which her hairdresser insisted, added depth to her color. They drew attention to her light brown eyes and the coral pinkness of her lips. She hated the roundness of her face, but not enough to have plastic surgery, which she could easily afford thanks to her Aunt Emma's legacy.

"What?" She had no idea why he was staring at her. Did he really expect her to seduce Blade into compliance? Now he was looking at her as if his dinner might come back up. "Are you upset that you asked me to seduce a man to get his remodeling schedule?"

Matt sighed. "I didn't say anything about sleeping with him. Just flirt a little bit. It'll do you both some good. You had no problem doing it this afternoon."

"I couldn't help it," Emmaline grumbled. Okay, maybe having sex with him was on her mind and not Matt's. The man was incredibly sexy and just looking at him made her wet. She stuck her hand in her pocket and pulled out the list. She had every intention of apologizing for jumping to conclusions when she saw the condoms he stuck in her pocket. She held them up and looked at him accusatorially.

Matt held up a hand to stop the diatribe he knew was coming. "I said 'flirt,' you said 'seduce.' I thought you might want to be prepared for either eventuality."

Emmaline rolled her eyes and stalked from the room without asking Matt why he had been looking distastefully at her outfit. She was wearing the same skirt she had been wearing earlier. The only thing she changed was her top. The thin material didn't hold up to the evening chill like her high-collared sweater did. If he thought she was going to show a little cleavage to get him those plans, he was mistaken. It might be a pain in the ass to walk around and try to spot all the recent repairs, but he could do it. The housekeepers no doubt knew what had been fixed and when.

She went to the Victorian home that still pulled at her with a surprising force and knocked on the door. No remodeling had taken place during the day. Emmaline figured he must work on it after hours. There was no answer. She followed the narrow path around to the back to see if lights were on in the rear of the house. It was completely dark. Not even a porch light would welcome him home tonight.

"He's still at the stable."

Emmaline jumped straight in the air before whirling around to find Maria stifling a laugh behind her. She held her hand to her heart, trying to calm it.

Maria held up a paper bag. "He missed dinner. Do you think you could take this to him?"

Nervous, Emmaline stammered. "I-I-I was going to ask him for a list of the updates done to the houses in the last year."

Maria released the laugh. "I didn't mean to scare you. I saw you head this way and I thought you might be brave enough to try to talk some sense into my brother."

Shrugging, Emmaline said, "Even if he doesn't believe in ghosts, he can't object to Matt checking the plumbing and heating, can he?"

Wearing the look of a martyr, Maria shook her head. "Oh, but he can. Blade has a temper. He's not violent. I mean, he might take a swing at Matt when it comes down to it, but only if Matt started it. It's a good thing you're going and not poor Matt. But it does take him quite awhile to get over something. He was really pissed off this afternoon. Don't sit there and take it. Don't be afraid to yell back."

That last piece of advice echoed in Emmaline's head as she picked her way through the dimness of the abandoned stable. It was after ten, so the fact that nobody was around didn't surprise her. She wondered why Blade was still there.

Some horses neighed at her as she passed, but most were sleeping. Emmaline approached the only door with light coming from it with more than a little trepidation. She expected him to be angry and for him to yell at her. She didn't expect to see him standing in front of a large oak desk with his back to her and his nose buried in a book, gently rocking from one foot to the other.

She took a minute to watch him, admiring the same view she had watched disappear into the kitchen to fetch lunch. He really was superbly built. Her fingers flexed, unconsciously wanting to dig into the flesh underneath his jeans. Minutes passed and still he didn't turn around. She made a small noise, but still there was no response. Then she noticed the plastic-coated wires leading to the ear buds in his ears.

* * * *

Blade tried desperately to concentrate on his book. The music wasn't distracting him, but the pictures of Emmaline that kept popping into his head sure did. He was trying to read Oscar Wilde, whose heavy prose never failed to make him drowsy, if only he could focus on the words.

Now her scent invaded his nose. Disgusted with his lack of control, he threw down the book and leaned against the desk. Damn that woman! How dare she come there looking so incredibly delicious and take advantage of his sister? Maria was one of the sweetest, most trusting people Blade had ever known. Even when life had dealt them nasty blows, first with their mother's death, then by taking their father and uncle in the same horrific car accident, Maria had not changed.

Blade had. He had only been seventeen at the time, and the disillusionment that was his adulthood had begun. His temper grew worse and his patience all but disappeared. He lost the ability to tolerate many things. It was one reason he let Maria handle the face-to-face with the guests.

The only thing he had patience for was his horses. And children. He gave lessons to children with no problem, but adults were another story. He let his crew handle them. Too many times he had lost his temper and shouted at an adult. That spooked his horses, so he took steps to avoid those situations.

Perhaps that was why all of his relationships had failed. His temper invariably got the better of him. He had scared off more than one woman that way. He had never hit them, but in his better moments, he could admit that his rage was a scary thing to watch. He couldn't imagine what it might be like to be on the receiving end.

The scent was stronger now. Sweet and clean, with a hint of roses. It was driving him insane. He knew it had been a while between women, but still, he had never reacted so physically to a woman before. If the street had been deserted, he would have shoved her up against that car and fucked her then and there. He was reasonably sure she would have let him.

Then that blond man, Matt, had spoken and shattered the fantasy. Blade bit his lip, uncertain as to their relationship. There hadn't seemed to be anything between them, but that didn't mean there wasn't. Maria had said she was recently married.

With a sigh, he pulled the tiny headphones from his ears and rounded the desk to throw everything in a drawer. That's when he saw her standing in the doorway watching him.

She smiled.

His eyes roamed her body slowly. She had thrown on a sweater and jacket, but she was wearing the same tight skirt that hugged her thighs and fell to the knee. She wore it well. He thought he had caught a glimpse of thigh-highs earlier when she stretched like an acrobat in front of him, and as that single thought reasserted itself, so did the hard-on he'd been fighting all day.

"I see Maria failed to give you my message." It came out much harsher than he intended, but then his original message had been harsh, even if Maria had cleaned up the language he had used. He scowled for good measure.

* * * *

Was it wrong that his scowl made her pussy clench in anticipation?

Emmaline had been leaning against the door frame. She pushed off and moved to stand across from him. She raised the paper bag as a peace offering. "You skipped dinner." She had looked for him every time the door opened until Matt made her switch places with him so she wouldn't have to turn around to see.

He looked her up and down hungrily. "I don't want what's in the bag."

Her breath caught and her panties were soaked. Emmaline refused to look away. She took her other hand out of her pocket and dropped the condoms on the desk. His eyes followed them down. She saw the blood drain from his face. Anger flashed in his eyes, warring with desire. They were smoldering when they rose to meet hers again.

"I think you should leave," he said with a quiet that didn't hide his resentment.

"Why?" She removed her jacket and draped it carefully over the hook next to the door, which she closed and locked. She wasn't afraid of him. On the contrary, she was even more aroused by the emotion that glittered in his eyes and flushed his face. "I want you. You want me. It's that simple."

Those lush lips pressed together. "Aren't you married?"

Emmaline shook her head. She wasn't going to explain.

Without a word, he rounded the desk and pulled her roughly to him, kissing her with a nearly bruising force. Emmaline melted against him, digging her fingers into his arms as she returned the kiss with equal intensity. It was a forceful kiss, stroking the flames of her desire as his tongue wrestled with hers. With a deftness she had never before possessed, her hands ran down the column of buttons on his shirt. She needed to see what was underneath.

He set her away from him and held her at arms' length before she could spread his shirt open. Her chest heaved, gasping for air in the aftershock of the kiss, and desire clouded her vision.

His anger had not abated, but she could see that desire had won the fight within him. "This is your last chance to leave," he panted. "I'm warning you now that I won't be gentle with you, not with the way you're taking advantage of my sister's fears. You're using her, Emmaline, and I will use you even more harshly."

Emmaline's response was a slow, sensual smile. She had always craved a lover with this kind of spice. Though his perception of her was false, she made no move to correct him. Perversely, his anger and air of danger had turned her on from the beginning. She knew she was playing with fire and she loved every second of it. Grasping the bottom of her sweater, she pulled it over her head and tossed it on the small leather sofa in the corner of the room, all the while teasing him with her self-satisfied smile.

Blade regarded Emmaline with a mixture of amazement, lust, and irritation.

She stepped closer to him and placed her fingers on his tight stomach, a sliver of which was visible above the low rise of his jeans. She saw that he was half-erect, but she ignored the urge to slip her hand down his pants to prove how much control she had over him. Instinctively, she knew she had to tread lightly until he was completely gone.

From the first moment she saw him, she had wanted to see if what was under his shirt was as tantalizing as she imagined it to be. There was nothing tentative about her touch as she dragged her fingertips across his skin, stroking upward as his muscles flexed underneath. His shirt didn't move out of the way enough for her to see all that she wanted to see, but she contented herself with this touch. The rest would come later.

Blade let her touch him, powerless to stop her. Emmaline licked her lips in anticipation as his flannel shirt slowly separated, displaced by her exploration. Breathless desire and anger turned to desperation. When he turned her around to face the large antique oak desk that dominated the room, she knew he was going to take control.

She leaned against him, arching her back to feel the burn of his skin against hers as his hands sought her breasts through the delicate lace of her bra. She turned her head to meet his lips, which had softened suddenly. The unexpected tenderness was her undoing.

His hands moved down, stroking her stomach and waist above her skirt. Instead of removing it, he bent to run his hand up the stocking that covered her leg, pulling the hem of her skirt up slightly as his hand was swallowed by the soft material.

He groaned into her mouth when his fingertips found the smooth flesh above the lacy tops of her thigh-high stockings. His hand moved to her inner thigh, and he touched her wetness.

Emmaline nearly laughed as his erection grew against her lower back. The urge was cut short as he suddenly yanked at her panties, tearing the threads that held the swatch of silk and lace together. He tossed them on his desk and grabbed her wrists. In one swift motion, he bent her over the edge, pressing her hands to the polished wood.

He leaned over her, caging her with his body. One hand pressed against the curve of her ass, stroking and squeezing and holding her against his hardness. "Hand me the gloves," he said. His voice was nearly a whisper and she barely heard him over the sound of her own heavy breathing.

She thought he meant to fuck her from behind, but when her hand closed over the plastic of the condom's package, he growled. "No, the gloves."

Raising her head in confusion, she noticed a pair of pale yellow leather work gloves sitting on the far corner of the desk. She leaned forward, stretching to avoid removing the lower half of her body from his grip. The material was far rougher than she would have imagined.

He unhooked her bra, letting it fall to the desk.

She heard the plastic snap as he pulled the brand-new gloves apart, and then his hand was back on her thigh, sheathed in the rough leather. She

moaned in anticipation when she realized what he meant to do and cried out when the roughness parted her most intimate lips to scrape her clitoris.

She knew that if she moved her hands from the desk, he would stop. His finger rubbed against her, working its way through the thick wetness that had been there since his first scowl. She moaned and arched against him, begging for more.

He didn't disappoint her. He was in control. He would make her come when he wanted and she had no say in the matter. Emmaline wanted this. She wanted his intensity and his anger. She had known he would be rough with her even before he had growled his warning.

He pressed against her harder, adding a second finger and his thumb to pinch her swollen nub. When she began to move rhythmically against his hand, he wrapped his arm around her waist and held her tightly against him, prohibiting her movements.

She bucked in protest and his name slipped from her lips. She knew he wanted to hear her beg, to hear her say his name when her voice was thick with desire.

He slid two fingers inside her, pushing hard to force the leather through the cream that was barely enough lubricant. The friction brought heat she never dreamed. Emmaline moaned, long and low. The rough leather of his glove kept her lips open, letting his palm rub against her clit while his fingers plunged deeper and deeper, moving in circles that elicited animal cries of pleasure from her.

She wanted to move her hips, to thrust against him, but he held her still, controlling every sensation rippling through her body. A whimper escaped.

Finally, he released her waist. "Come for me, Emmaline." His voice was as rough as the glove, scraping her desire.

She rode his hand, climaxing as he commanded. He ripped the glove away before she stopped convulsing around him.

The waves were just beginning to subside when Emmaline felt herself being turned roughly around and crushed in Blade's arms while he planted a searing kiss on her lips. His tongue plundered her mouth, licking and sucking and nibbling at her lips, creating need where she had only moments before been satiated.

Both hands released her, but he held her to him with his mouth. Emmaline smiled into the kiss when she realized he was removing his belt.

As incredible as the foreplay had been, she wanted to feel him inside her. She wanted to ride him until he was completely lost. The belt slid from the denim loops with a swish.

Emmaline tugged at the fabric around the buttonhole at the top of his jeans. He captured her arms by the wrists, bringing them behind her and breaking the kiss.

At first she didn't understand. She struggled against him because she wanted free hands to touch him.

"I'm going to make you beg," he said. The vibrations made their way from his chest to hers as the meaning penetrated the fog of desire surrounding her senses.

She was quick with a response. "I've already begged." She had said his name. It could have been a plea or an exclamation.

His chuckle was on the sinister side.

Emmaline stiffened. Excitement coursed through her veins. Moisture surged. She nearly came just from the way he held her prisoner and announced his intention. Fear edged it, but it was of the reckless variety.

She had fantasized about this. She had even asked Rick to play games like this with her, but he didn't have the mental or physical strength required to be cruel in all the right ways. Emmaline wasn't one to cower or to take what he dished out. She was a fighter. The one time he had bound her wrists to the bedposts, the element of danger had been missing. The experience had been anticlimactic.

Blade's lips pressed against hers, taking the kiss that belonged to him. "By the time I finish with you, Emmaline, you'll know the difference between asking and begging." The zipper on the side of her skirt made a sound, and then the fabric slid down her legs to pool on the floor.

"Blade." She wasn't sure about this. She wanted it, but she didn't truly know what was in store.

He pushed her into an upright, wooden chair. Stumbling back, she sat down hard, the bottom of the chair spanking her ass. "I'm not going to hurt you, Emmaline. I'm just going to torture you."

The belt in his hand had somehow wrapped around her wrists, imprisoning them together. Blade disappeared behind the chair, arranging her arms so that the wood slats and the belt worked together to prohibit movement.

Emmaline jerked against her bonds, testing them and testing Blade's resolve. She found both firm. Rick hadn't made it far beyond this before he gave in to her demands.

She turned her head to find him. He leaned over her, jerking her legs apart. His hand landed on her mound, smacking her pussy hard. A shockwave of pleasure splashed through her body. Emmaline jumped, an instinctive reaction, and tried to close her legs.

"Face forward," he said. The growl and the gruff persona were gone. His direction was calm and assertive, as if he were commanding a trained horse.

Emmaline bristled under the bonds and the submissive role. She tilted her head back to look up at him. The beginning of a smile curled the corners of his lips. Raw desire lightened his dark brown eyes. She not only disobeyed his spoken rule, she disobeyed an unspoken one to question him. "Why?"

Blade dangled a cloth in front of her eyes. For a millisecond, Emmaline saw it. She wondered where he had been hiding a bandana, but not what he planned to do with it. The light disappeared. If she opened her eyes, she could see a glimmer reflecting from her cheeks, but she couldn't make out specifics.

He secured the knot behind her head and smacked her pussy again. Her clit took most of the force of the blow. She jumped again and a low moan escaped from between her lips. No one had ever done that to her. She wanted him to do it again.

She felt him in front of her, kneeling. Hot hands pulled her ass forward to line her exposed pussy with the edge of the chair. Cold leather straps closed around her ankles, securing them to the legs of the chair. More straps bound her knees to those legs, forcing her open to him.

Another smack tested the bonds. She was unable to close her legs, to deny him access to her most intimate places. Emmaline gasped. Bound and blindfolded, she was at his mercy. Cream flowed between her legs. She couldn't recall ever wanting a man this much.

"Blade? You never said why I..." The empty glove landed between her legs. The sharp sting of the leather took her breath away, breaking off her words. Every nerve ending she had between her legs was on fire and

sending signals throughout her body. “Oh, God,” she moaned. “Do that again.”

Did she imagine his chuckle?

His lips brushed against hers. “You don’t give the orders, Emmy. Right now, you belong to me. Your body is mine, Emmy. Mine to play with. Mine to bring to the brink of orgasm again and again and again. I hope you have stamina, Emmy, lots of it.”

No one had ever shortened her name like that. She liked the way he said it. If it had been anyone else, she might have bristled under the unwanted familiarity. But this didn’t count. This was just a fling with all its false and temporary intimacies.

“Say it,” he whispered into the sensitive skin beneath her ear, sending shivers up and down her spine. “Tell me this body is mine to play with. Ask for it, Emmy. Ask me to torture you.”

She didn’t want to ask. She didn’t want to give in like this. It was too quick. But, oh, she did want to feel the sting of his palm and of his glove against her clit. She was sure she could orgasm with only a few more well-placed blows.

His lips continued to trace paths along her neck, to her breasts, and back up to her neck. He brushed against her, trailing need wherever he touched. “You want it, Emmy. Ask for it.”

Heat tingled from his fingertips to the tender underside of her breast. She wanted to feel the heat of his mouth around her nipple.

“Yes,” she said. “Please.”

He moved away, taking his heat and the promise of more with him. “That’s not good enough.”

Several heartbeats passed. Emmaline didn’t know how much shock showed on her face. He wouldn’t just stop everything if she didn’t beg, would he? Was he really so ruthless? Her breasts ached at the thought. She wanted a ruthless lover. She wanted someone who could make her forget the last three years with Rick, who could take her completely out of her head.

Desperation drove her to it. The words tumbled out haltingly. “My body is yours to play with, yours to torture. Please don’t stop.”

Strong fingers dug into her hair, winding through the long strands to tilt her head back. He claimed her with his lips, sucking on the bottom one

before his tongue forced its way inside. Emmaline moaned, flourishing under this rough treatment.

She tried to lean into him, to stretch her body to brush against his, but she was bound too well. His mouth moved, nibbling a path along her jaw to nip at her earlobe.

Mews of pleasure sounded in her throat. "Yes," she said. "Like that. Touch me like that."

His mouth was gone again, but his body stayed close. Emmaline's ability to sense spirits was not limited to the formerly living.

"Why did you stop?" This was becoming exasperating. Was this what he meant by torture? She frowned. "Blade?"

"We'll have to find something better for that mouth to do."

He sounded amused, not angry or annoyed. That worried her more than anything. He came closer, standing over her. Something soft traced her lips, smearing moisture like lipstick. The musky, masculine scent of his arousal had her mouth opening reflexively. Her tongue darted out to lick away the drops of pre-come from her lips. The slanted tip of his erection pressed against her mouth.

"Open, Emmaline. Show me that mouth of yours knows how to behave."

No more urging was needed. She sucked him hard, drawing him as deep as she could take him. He was so very long. She wished she had her hands free to wrap around his base and fondle the sensitive sac. The tables would definitely be turned if she had her hands free.

The only sound that issued from her was a contented moan at the back of her throat. The hand that gripped her hair earlier was back in place, holding her where he wanted as he thrust into her mouth.

Emmaline used her tongue to caress him as she clamped her lips tight and sucked him to the rhythm he set. Moans and grunts drifted down to her ears, telling her that Blade liked what she was doing to him. The walls of her vagina clenched around nothing. Juices trickled in anticipation. Would he come in her mouth or would he switch positions?

The sounds of pleasure came faster and closer. The hand in her hair tightened its grip, holding her still. She never thought she would like having her hair pulled like this. In the realm of her imagination, she never thought

of it as a dominant or an erotic act. The way Blade executed the move, it was both.

Hot liquid shot to the back of her throat. Emmaline swallowed, her throat contracting rapidly. When he tried to withdraw, she sucked harder, wanting that power back. With a chuckle, he slid a finger into her mouth, breaking the seal and her hold over him.

He rewarded her with a kiss, and then he stuffed a wet cloth into her mouth. The musky flavor of it reminded her of... Those were her panties. She tried to spit them out, but a strip of leather circled her head, trapping the scrap of silk inside.

“Your mouth is your best asset and your worst enemy.”

The words floated to her from the vicinity of her stomach. His hand rested just above her knee, caressing upward. His thumb traced circles on her inner thigh. If she hadn’t been gagged, Emmaline would have definitely responded to his pronouncement with some venom of her own.

Her mouth was a weapon. This wasn’t the first time someone had noted her quick temper and unfiltered retorts that didn’t always serve her best interests. This was the first time anyone had gagged her. Perhaps Blade knew what he was doing.

She relaxed, concentrating on the firm feel of his hands traveling up her body. He paused to tease her nipples. She had no idea what he was thinking or feeling. She didn’t know the expression on his face. This was unfamiliar territory.

“Just feel,” he said, as if he knew what turmoil threatened just below the surface. “Enjoy this, Emmy. We’re coming to the part where you learn to beg.”

With panties in her mouth? The device that kept her from saying something stupid also kept her from saying anything he might actually want to hear.

He pinched her hardened nipples. Electricity shot from there to her core. A muffled moan barely made it past the fabric in her mouth. She jerked away from his touch, a reflex in opposition to what she actually wanted.

Fear of pleasure was deeply rooted inside her. She wanted this, but she didn’t want to form a bond that couldn’t be broken. She wouldn’t be emotionally vulnerable again. If she hadn’t been tied down, she would have run.

Then the moment passed. She remembered that he didn't even like her. This was the safest kind of sex she was going to find.

Leather stung her clit, ripping her mind away from her thoughts and focusing it on more immediate concerns. She whimpered. Had that been a punishment for flinching away from him or a reward for the great blowjob?

Two blows followed in rapid succession. White-hot pleasure uncoiled just below the surface. That swollen nub needed only one more to burst. She arched toward him, waiting for it to fall again. She moaned, straining with need.

Nothing happened.

She wiggled her hips, scooting forward on the chair as much as she could, which wasn't far because he had bound her thighs into place. Frustrated, she wiggled her shoulders and jerked at the leather belt pinning her wrists together and holding them prisoner. Angry sounds poured from behind the makeshift gag.

Between her legs, Blade's chuckle preceded the flow of cool air. The bastard was cooling her down. The possible orgasm receded. Emmaline protested as vocally as she could, which wasn't saying much.

Wet heat closed over something that had grown cold. His tongue licked from hole to slit. Smooth, gloveless fingertips pulled her abused lips farther apart. The hot tongue traced paths, tasting every inch and lapping at the returning juices.

Emmaline's sigh wasn't muffled. She strained at her bonds again, wanting to reach between her legs and twine her fingers through his long, black hair. More than wanting the feel of those silky strands between her fingers, she wanted to hold him in place. She knew he wasn't going to let her come, not yet.

Still, she raced to that point, thrusting against him and hoping to reach that crest before he knew, when it was too late for him to stop her.

She wanted to close her legs around his head, to trap him. Tension returned, coiling lower and lower. She was wound, a spring needing release. She squirmed, fighting the leather straps holding her in place. Just one more touch. Just one more second...

He was gone and that delicious heat with him.

Emmaline whimpered.

Blade didn't make a sound.

She knew he was there, kneeling between her legs, watching her frustrated fight. Was he amused? Were the corners of his lips lifted in a satisfied smirk? Did he regard her with intense interest? Was he coldly measuring her reaction? Was he aroused? Did he want her again? Would he untie her and bend her over the desk to take what they both wanted, or would he loosen the gag and use her that way?

Her body squirmed. She didn't have the ability to hold still, to wait for his torture to begin anew. If he did this to her again, if he took her to the brink and left her hanging, she didn't think she could handle it.

Hands caressed her skin, stroking her thighs and her stomach. The gentle touch calmed the storm raging inside. He wouldn't be too cruel, would he?

A hand reached behind her head, fumbling with one of the ties there. "Don't say a word, Emmy. You won't like the consequences."

The strip of leather holding the gag in place slackened. The cloth in her mouth disappeared. She breathed through her mouth, gulping deep breaths in the desperate hope she could calm herself that way.

His lips closed over hers. The kiss stole the last of her will. His tongue plunged inside, claiming what was truly his. At the same time, the fingers of his other hand retraced the paths his tongue had made. He rubbed and pinched her clit.

Emmaline whimpered, caught between wanting to demand more and the desperate fear he would stop if she said anything at all.

One finger entered her weeping vagina, thrusting inside with a frustrating indolence. The memory of his cock in her mouth made another whimper escape. She wanted to feel him inside her. She wanted to ride him until she collapsed from exhaustion. Given the way he had played her body already, that might not take too long.

He felt good inside her. Maybe, if he hadn't already pushed her so hard, she might have enjoyed the foreplay a little more. This wasn't going to lead anywhere. She wasn't going to come this way and not only because he wouldn't let her.

Still, she made a desperate sound of protest when he withdrew his finger.

The straps binding her knees loosened first. Her ankles were free next. The blindfold disappeared. Light temporarily blinded her. She blinked up at him, studying his expressionless face.

He couldn't be finished with her.

"Blade." The whispered word was a plea. "Please don't stop."

Wordlessly, he disappeared behind her. She turned her head, but her arms were still bound behind her back, inhibiting her movements.

"Blade, please. Please don't stop." The belt holding her wrists in place loosened and dropped away. The belt buckle clattered to the wooden floor. Panic set in. Emmaline didn't move. She didn't want to do anything to upset him. "Please."

Tears pricked behind her eyes. She blinked rapidly, determined to not show this weakness to him. She wanted him with a need she'd never felt before. It was a need he had created, a thirst only he could quench.

He separated her wrists, moving her arms to the front of her body. Her muscles, stiff from being stuck in one position so long, protested. A small cry escaped. "Blade."

He pushed her forward. Her bottom was already perched on the edge of the chair. She sat up straight, willing to follow any of his directives if only he wouldn't send her away.

Strong hands kneaded the sore muscles of her back and shoulders.

It felt good, but it wasn't the need Emmaline wanted fulfilled. She couldn't care less about some sore muscles. "Blade, please." The desperate voice was one she didn't recognize.

He leaned forward and brushed a kiss onto her cheek. "Congratulations, Emmy. You've learned to beg."

The caustic comments that normally would spring to mind in such an occasion failed to appear. She had begged, and she would continue to do so until he gave her what she needed.

His hands left her body. She didn't protest the loss. She held her breath and didn't move, hoping he had more in store for her.

When he appeared in front of her, he was fully dressed. As she watched, he loosened the top three buttons of his flannel shirt before pulling it over his head. He threw his shirt on the back of the chair behind her. His chest was everything she had imagined.

Her hands itched, but she kept them on her thighs where he had put them.

Next, he lowered his pants, exposing his erection to her view. She hadn't seen it before, but she knew the size and texture intimately. His cock was as long and well-built as the rest of him.

Emmaline licked her lips, hoping that if he was going to put his cock in her mouth, he would have the heart to put her pussy in his.

He held out his hand. Rising, she reached for him. He slapped a foil packet into her palm. "Put it on me."

She tore the condom's wrapper with her teeth and knelt to do as he instructed. His muscles jerked and twitched as she gently unrolled the condom along his shaft and pinched the end to create a pocket for his ejaculate. He peered at her from behind eyelids heavy with desire. Need was now clearly marked on every inch of his body.

Emmaline watched Blade's face with a satisfaction she had never before known. Now she knew the effect she had on him and she luxuriated in the heady rush of power. She kept her stockings on, knowing they excited him, and stood before him, unmoving, letting his eyes drink in the sight of her.

Crossing the room, Blade sat heavily on the leather sofa. He held his hands out, catching her waist as she straddled him. Emmaline couldn't bear to wait any longer. She guided him into her, coming down hard to envelop the full length of him. She moaned in pleasure, but did not move, taking a moment to appreciate the fullness inside.

His hands slid up to stroke her breasts and his mouth closed over hers. He moved her hips sharply against him until her fingernails dug into his shoulders and scratched at his back. Emmaline's orgasm was almost immediate, but Blade gave her no rest. He lifted her time and again, letting her fall along the throbbing length of him.

She was in the throes of pleasure. She convulsed around him. He pushed her higher and higher. In one swift motion, he reversed their positions and Emmaline found herself lying against the soft leather of the sofa while Blade plunged into her with savage need. Instead of subsiding, her orgasm grew, exploding inside her. The world went black and she heard a scream as she dangled from the edge of consciousness.

When she became aware of her surroundings again, she realized he was still inside her, that he had collapsed on top of her. His breathing was ragged

and his body hadn't stopped convulsing. Gently, she stroked his hair, running her fingers along its soft length where it fell over his shoulders, until they both stopped shaking.

* * * *

Blade didn't move. The feel of her hands running through his hair and of her warm body pressed against his took him to a place he'd never been before. After this moment of bliss, he wasn't looking forward to reality's return. He resisted when she shifted to push at his hips, signaling him to withdraw from her.

"Blade?"

He responded to the question in her voice with a sigh disguised as a growl. The sex had been incredible, but he had no right to keep her there with him. What they had done was about hormones and anger. He didn't know what her relationship was with Matt. He could have sworn Maria had referred to him as Emmaline's husband. Anger welled in him again. How could she belong to another man?

Lifting his head, he took in the curl that had crept into her light brown hair. He wondered if he could make it even curlier. "Why does my sister think you're married?"

She stiffened and pushed at him. The hands on his hips were insistent. The force she used was surprising coming from someone so tiny. "Let me up."

Her tone was as stiff as her body. Reluctantly, he withdrew and knelt between her legs. She scrambled to her feet and snatched her skirt from the floor. "I'm not married," she said. "I'm not engaged. I'm not involved with anyone."

The words were barely a murmur, but he heard her clearly. He was relieved and offended at the same time. The implied message was clear. Not only wasn't she involved with a husband, fiancé, or boyfriend, she wasn't involved with him. After the incredible evening they had shared, they were still strangers.

She leaned down next to him. The light scent of roses mingled with sweat and musk, brushing against his senses and bringing back his desire.

She snagged her sweater, tugging the sleeve from beneath his leg, and slipped it over her head.

He should have been happy she didn't expect more. Most women would expect more. The heel of his hand pressed absently against his chest, rubbing at the sudden ache. Did he want more with this little spitfire?

Reality crashed back in. This woman may be a tigress in bed, but she was taking advantage of his sister with an insane scheme. Belatedly realizing that his pants were stuck around his ankles and that he hadn't removed his boots, he stood and righted his clothes.

Emmaline sat in the chair at his desk, fully dressed. She leaned down to adjust her stockings.

He frowned at her apparently blithe manner. "So, was a quick fuck the reason for your visit tonight?"

Emmaline laughed without looking up at him or acknowledging the derision in his voice. "Honey, if you were quick, I would have left hours ago."

Blade disposed of the used condom and finished zipping his pants. He found his belt on his desk next to her ripped underwear. He held them up. "Do you want these?"

Amusement danced in her eyes as they met his. He was torn between the need to keep her near and the anger that made him want her out of his life forever. "I think they're a little beyond repair."

He fingered the material. "Silk?" He turned them around to study the label. "And expensive." He hadn't thought to look when he was fumbling around for a gag.

"I have more," she assured him. "Though if you want a repeat of what happened tonight, I might just run around with no panties on whatsoever."

Blade bit the inside of his lip to keep from responding to her suggestive comment. "Are you going to expense these to Maria?"

Emmaline finished straightening her stockings and stood up. She gazed at him uncomprehendingly. "Am I going to what?"

"Expense them. I'm sure Maria is paying your expenses, in addition to whatever you're charging her for your services." He was impatient with her game. She was bright enough to follow the question. "How much is she paying you, anyway?"

Exhaling sharply, the light hue of Emmaline's brown eyes darkened. "Maria is providing food and lodging while we're here and that's only because you're in the middle of nowhere. Matt and I usually stay at a hotel, which we pay for ourselves."

His eyebrows drew sharply together. "But what is your fee for coming here?" he pressed. He remembered the Michigan plates on the car. "You came a long way. How much makes it worth your while?"

Her face darkened, flaming with color as her temper boiled to the surface. It was as quick as his. Perhaps this was the source of the sparks between them. She snapped at him. "I charge no fee. No money has exchanged hands, nor will it. I'm here to help Maria. That's all."

Blade stared at her. How could that possibly be true? Even if she wasn't a fraud, a trip halfway across the country had costs in terms of time and money. How was she compensated for both?

She grabbed her jacket and jabbed her arms into it. A wad of paper sailed across the room, hitting him dead center in his chest before bouncing to the floor. "This is why I came." She yanked the door open and stormed out.

Blade's eyes lingered on the door for the longest time. Had he misjudged her? Why hadn't she set him straight before she had sex with him? Snapshots flashed in his head. Every single time she had seen him lose his temper, she had stared at him. Her lips had parted. Her pupils had dilated. Her breathing had sped up.

All were classic signs of fear. However, the expression on her face had been exactly the same when she teased him and dropped those condoms on his desktop. He sank into the chair behind his desk she had so recently vacated. His display of temper turned her on. He didn't know how to take that. There was something about her unexpected reaction that took the wind out of his righteous sails.

He fingered the scrap of silk he still held in his hand. It was as soft as her skin. With his other hand, he reached down to retrieve the balled-up paper. Smoothing it out, he found a list written in a distinctly masculine style.

Scanning the list, he frowned. They wanted a list of repairs done on each house? No. They only wanted information on the houses where ghost

sightings had been reported and only those repairs begun or completed when those sightings had occurred.

Well versed with the theory that remodeling stirred spirits, Blade closed his eyes. They were looking for causal links. Each item on the list made perfect sense.

A gust of wind swirled through his office. The drop in temperature didn't faze him. "Knock it off, Rosalie. This one isn't going to run from you."

Maybe Emmaline and Matt could get rid of this ghost. She was a pain in the ass on her good days. She provoked his temper something fierce on the bad ones.

All in all, he was tired of her.

Chapter 3

Present

Emmaline angrily swiped at the tear that threatened to fall. Memories of the cruel teasing of some of her classmates haunted her. She had tried to keep her special abilities from them all, knowing how merciless they would be when they found out she was different. Some had taunted her to her face, calling her a freak or a liar. Others reported her to the counselor as a candidate for intense psychiatric counseling. Most of them avoided her.

Matt had never laughed at her. He had never been fazed by her at all.

She could count on one hand the number of real friends she had. Since gaining some notoriety in the paranormal community, there was no shortage of people who believed in her, but friends were still a rare commodity. Losing Matt would be unbearable.

She was nearly to the end of the block before she felt a hand on her arm. Slow tingles spread from the point of contact, radiating outward pleasantly. From the way her body reacted, she knew it wasn't Matt. How Blade still managed to affect her this way, after all these months, was beyond her. Yet here he was, and if he kissed her just now, she wouldn't be able to stop herself from kissing him back.

"Emmy, wait."

The sun had just begun to set, casting everything in unexpected shadows. She stopped and studied the ground, knowing that the pity in his face would be her undoing.

"He's going to regret this in the morning when things have calmed down."

She smiled sadly. "That doesn't mean he's going to change his mind. I can't say I blame him. If I feared that something might happen to my child, I would do the same thing."

The hand on her arm slid to her shoulder, the skin-to-skin contact sending signals through her body, invitations that weren't real. "All the same, it's late and you've had a long day. I know you're tired and likely hungry."

"There's always something open near the freeway. As long as they have strong, hot coffee, I'll be fine." She sighed, looking toward the end of the street where the path to the parking garage appeared as a dark gap in the trees. "I guess it's a good thing I left my suitcase in the car. Less to carry back."

"Stay with me tonight."

She knew he wasn't implying anything. Ironically, part of her was regretful. Studying the pink skyline above the trees, she didn't immediately reply.

Blade must have heard the indecision in her silence. "You're tired, Emmy. A good night's sleep will put this in perspective for both of you. I've finished remodeling my house. Nothing is decorated, but I do have furniture in the guest room."

Truthfully, the offer did pique her interest. Seeing the inside of his Victorian home was a pleasure he had denied her. She couldn't resist a jab along those lines. "What happened to, 'Stay the hell away from my house?'?"

Finally turning to face him, she saw his face return to the hard, remote expression he always seemed to wear around her.

"I've changed my mind." The hand on her shoulder steered her back in the other direction, toward his house. "Come on. I'll make you a sandwich. I hope you like peanut butter and banana."

She peered up at him. "I've never had peanut butter and banana."

His hand dropped away as she fell into step beside him. Emmaline fought the urge to reestablish contact.

"You're missing out."

The walk to his house was short. The setting sun cast his house in purple shadows. Having seen the finished product in full sunlight, Emmaline knew it was a dusky blue. Now that she was closer, the siding didn't look quite right. Reaching out, she ran one finger next to the door.

"Vinyl?" She thought he had been doing an authentic restoration.

“Wood rots,” he said. “And it needs to be painted every year. I’d rather spend my time with the horses.”

Of course he would. Blade had graduated from school with his doctorate in veterinary medicine at the tender age of twenty. Most people in his life expected someone of his gifted intellect to go into research. They expected him to find a cure for cancer or to negotiate peace in the Middle East.

But Blade’s heart was with horses. He not only kept healthy horses for the ranch’s guests, he rehabilitated abused and neglected horses.

She didn’t see much of the inside. He herded her to the kitchen without turning on any of the lights. The entryway might have been two stories tall, but Emmaline wasn’t given enough time to focus her eyes in that direction.

Blade flipped on the kitchen light. “Sit.” He indicated a small rectangular table set cozily in front of a bank of windows overlooking one of the paddocks.

He set to work, fishing in the appropriate cupboards and drawers for equipment and ingredients. The kitchen had all the awkward silence of a blind date where both parties found themselves tricked into being there.

Emmaline watched him work. His movements were simple and graceful. He exuded strength. She lusted after his body and his attention. She groped for a safe subject.

“Matt told me you got some new horses.”

“Yeah,” he said, spinning the lid of the peanut butter jar closed with one finger. Did she imagine the relief in his voice? “The police removed eighteen horses from a ranch on the other side of the county. I was able to take twelve.”

The plate he set in front of her contained one sandwich on multigrain bread and an apple that he had cored and sliced into wedges. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

She eyed a half-circle of sliced banana peeking out from the edge of her sandwich. “They keep you busy?”

“Busy enough.” He took a bite of his sandwich and washed it down with ice water. “Just take a bite, Emmaline. You’ll like it.”

The flavor was interesting, definitely one of those things that had to grow on a person. It was sweet, which is exactly what she needed right then. Comfort food. “Not bad.”

“Most of them have responded to therapy. They like being fed regularly. I think eight of them will become trail horses. They’ve formed attachments with me and with some of the hands.”

Emmaline ate and listened as he warmed to his subject. She made appropriate sounds when he paused and waited patiently as he chewed his food.

“Three were beyond saving. I couldn’t get any of them to eat. I had to put them down about a week after they’d been here.” He tried to hide the bitter twist to his words, but the topic was too raw.

Emmaline’s heart went out to him. Before she knew what she was doing, she reached for him.

He looked at the place where her hand curled around his. “I wasn’t hitting on you.”

Emmaline snatched her hand away and stood up. She hadn’t meant the affectionate gesture that way. She took refuge behind a prickly exterior. “Are you going to give me a tour of this place, or do I have to go snooping around alone?”

He gathered their plates and dumped them in the sink. “It’s not finished.”

“You said you were done remodeling,” she reminded him.

“But it’s not decorated. It’s bare drywall everywhere.”

She leveled a stern gaze at him. Why was he so reluctant to let her see his house? “Do I have to be a ghost before you’re going to let me look at your house?”

“Would you really haunt me, Emmy?” The suggestion of a smile flashed across his face.

She took a chance and returned the smile. Maybe it would lighten the mood. “I might. This would qualify as unfinished business.”

“Unfinished business?”

“I’ve been through every structure on this property except your house.”

It was brief, but his smile was real. “I did tell you to stay away from the stable.”

“And yet, I didn’t.” Good and bad memories were associated with her failure to stay away from the stable. It was the place where things had gone so right and so horribly wrong.

“Give me your keys,” he said, holding out his hand. “I’ll get your bags while you look around.”

The tension that wouldn’t leave vanished with Blade. The house was quiet and peaceful. She wandered from the kitchen and through the pantry to the living room. The rooms were large and high-ceilinged, bare and breathtaking.

She found a music room with a baby grand piano and wondered if he knew how to play. It was likely he did. Maria had once remarked that when Blade decided he wanted to know something, he studied it until he was comfortable that he knew all there was to know. She fingered the keys. Stray chords from the lessons her mother had forced upon her drifted to the front of her memory.

Upstairs, she found four bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a common room. Judging from the size of the bathrooms upstairs, she guessed they had been converted from a smaller bedroom. His bedroom had an adjoining bath with a large, luxurious tub that had her rethinking her plan to leave in the morning.

She knew Blade rose early and went directly to the stables. How would he know if she took advantage of his amenities? Even if he found out afterward, what could he do about it? Yelling at her didn’t produce the reaction he wanted and she would likely enjoy any attempt at discipline.

The door opened downstairs. Blade’s trip to the parking garage had been quick. “Emmaline?”

She hurried to take her bags from him. Pausing on the stairs, she looked over the rail to drink in the sight of him. He stared up at her with a suitcase and two bags slung across his broad shoulders. In the scant light, his skin was a deeper shade of brown. The angles on his face sharpened and the look in his eyes was as unreadable as always.

He shifted under her scrutiny.

“Thank you.” As she came down the stairs, she held out her hand for something to carry.

“I got it.” His hand tightened on the handle of her suitcase. “Did you find a room you like?”

He was always the gentleman, even when it was clear he wished he wasn’t stuck in a situation. She smiled. “I found a bathroom I like.”

“They lack beds,” he warned. “But you can sleep there if you want to.” He hoisted her suitcase and she followed him up the gently curving staircase. Pausing at the room next to his, he said, “I thought you might like this one.”

It was a beautiful room. Like his, it faced the front of the house, which meant it was dominated by the rounded corner with nearly floor-to-ceiling windows. The sparse furniture was solid cherry, curved and filigreed to mark it as a woman’s room. She thought the room would look nice decorated in rose and heather green.

The other rooms lacked furniture, so his question had been a mere formality. He set her suitcase on the bed and dropped the two bags on the nearby dressing table. “The bathroom next to this room probably isn’t the one you wanted, but it should meet all of your basic needs.”

Emmaline knew he was trying to keep his tone light, but she heard the underlying apprehension. She resisted the urge to goad him. Barely. “It’ll be fine.” She studied the two bags on the vanity. She could have sworn she only brought one. She crossed to the table and picked up the smaller canvas bag. “Where did this come from?”

“Your trunk.”

Frowning, she opened it and looked inside. Handcuffs, restraints, whips and various other sex toys were nestled inside. Too late, she felt Blade near, looking over her shoulder.

He pulled out a cock ring, still in its wrapper. “You came prepared.”

She snatched it from him, threw it in the bag, and zipped it closed. “I forgot I had these.” Embarrassed, she dropped it to the ground and kicked it under the vanity.

Blade’s eyebrows rose in a gesture of amused disbelief.

“They were a wedding gift from my sister, Caroline. I—she—I was going to give them back, but she said they weren’t returnable and that I should keep them.” She hated when she stuttered. Why were they still in her trunk? Had she really been traveling around with those things for over a year and a half? Looking at the bag, she realized it had been in her trunk so long that it had become part of the scenery, like the candy wrappers at the bottom of her purse.

Blade’s lips curved slowly. “Caroline sounds more adventurous than you. Maybe I should invite her for a visit.”

All embarrassment vanished. Cold, hard anger surged through her, and his mask slipped back into place.

“Get out.” She forced the words through her teeth. Caroline had given her the toys in an attempt to spice up her lackluster sex life with Rick, who had accused her of being a frigid lover. It was one of the very few things she had confided in Blade. He had thrown her ex-fiancé’s words at her once before. He had pushed her over the edge. It was a sore point with her and he knew that.

“Emmy.”

There was no emotion in his voice. She searched for something—regret, apology, chastisement—anything.

He blinked and looked away before nodding and leaving her alone.

She resisted the urge to give in to tears. He hadn’t tried to argue with her. He hadn’t thrown her to the bed and made her writhe under his body as only he could. The day had begun badly and ended badly. There had been some good moments here and there, but nothing to make up for the rest.

Sleep finally took her away from her worries, but only for a few moments. She awakened to a loud thump. Reaching over to turn on the lamp sitting on the bedside table, she found her other bag had fallen from the vanity. Emmaline threw back her coverlet and got out of bed. She hadn’t left it in a precarious position. It would have taken effort to push it off the table.

“Rosalie?”

The damn ghost was the only one she had ever met who refused to have a conversation with her. Instead, the most Rosalie had ever done verbally was hurl accusations, threats, and warnings. Emmaline hadn’t known why Rosalie had taken a dislike to her, but now that she and Caroline had done some research, she had some ideas. Unfortunately, they all centered on Blade.

She righted the bag, but left it on the floor. “Rosalie, I’m leaving in the morning, as long as you let me get some sleep.” Using only the dim lamplight, she looked around the room for a sign of the wayward spirit. She looked toward the dark windows, which lacked curtains or shades, and when she did, a coldness passed through her, dissipating slowly.

Shivering, Emmaline put on the one sweater and the one pair of flannel pajama pants she had packed and climbed back under the covers, curling into a ball to conserve the little body heat she had left. Summertime in

Georgia shouldn't require warm clothes. She had packed winter pajamas with the hope she wouldn't need to use them. Damn that ghost! It wasn't the first time she'd done it to Emmaline or even the second. Rosalie seemed to derive real pleasure from causing Emmaline's body temperature to drop.

She didn't know how long she lay awake, but dawn came much too early. Pulling her covers up over her head helped a little, but his house faced east and the strong morning sun lit the underside of the colorful coverlet like a kaleidoscope. The scent of fresh coffee convinced her to stop trying. She resolved instead to stop at a hotel early that evening to catch up on her sleep.

Freshening up didn't do much to dispel the puffiness around her eyes. She didn't hear any sounds in the house, so she probably wouldn't run into Blade before she left. Still frosty, she didn't change her clothes, but went directly to the source of the promising smell.

This was one of the times she appreciated someone having glass-fronted cupboards. Personally, she cringed at the idea. She didn't keep her cupboards neat enough to have people looking inside. The mugs were on the top shelf. She checked off another item to hold against Blade. Tall people didn't think about the problem of the top shelf. Emmaline only put things she knew she'd never need, like the deep fryer a grateful client had given her, on the top shelves.

She stood on her toes and reached as high as she could, knowing all along it was a useless effort. She was about to drag a chair over when she felt Blade behind her.

Wordlessly, he grabbed a mug and set it on the counter, then poured coffee inside.

"You don't have to get up, you know. It's early."

"You don't have shades on your windows."

The conversation was forced and tense. Emmaline drank her coffee black.

Blade tried again. "Are you hungry?"

"I'll get something at the Dining Room before I leave." She searched the black depths of her drink for something: inspiration, understanding, courage, and who knew what else. "Your girlfriend wasn't very nice last night."

"Rosalie?" The exasperated sigh communicated his wish that Emmaline wouldn't refer to the ghost as his girlfriend. It was an old argument that

would lead to a fight. After her night, Emmaline was spoiling for a nice, juicy argument with Blade. “What did she do?”

“She knocked my bag onto the floor and she kept the room extra air-conditioned.”

“At least that explains why you’re overdressed.” He grabbed his hat and put his mug in the sink. “If you’re still cold, step outside. July in Georgia will take care of any chill.” He left through the back door before she could respond.

Emmaline was reflecting on what an unfeeling ass Blade was when the door opened again. She figured he forgot something, so she didn’t turn to acknowledge him.

“Emmaline?” It was Maria’s voice.

She turned then. “Maria. I was going to come see you before I left.”

The confident demeanor that was such a part of Maria was curiously absent. She was fighting tears. “I’m sorry about Matt. I don’t know what’s gotten into him lately.”

Emmaline waved away her concern. “I’m okay. I understand. She bothered me last night as well, so I guess it’s me she objects to. Not a surprise. Things will quiet down when I go.”

Maria opened her mouth to say something, but her words halted before they came out. She frowned, thinking, and then she sighed. “At least stay through lunch. You can spend the morning with Dash. It’s a really nice day. I’ll make you a picnic and you guys can just hang out.”

She considered Maria’s offer. She did want to see more of the little guy. It was the closest she would probably come to having a baby of her own. “Let me get dressed,” she said. “I’ll meet you in the Dining Room?”

True to her word, Maria had a blanket spread near the gazebo in the garden so that Emmaline could play with Dash, but still be close enough so that Maria could come out and feed him when he was hungry. Emmaline pushed aside all of her worries and concentrated on Dash.

He smiled and cooed at her and grabbed her hair in his fists. She smiled and cooed back and disentangled her hair. At least one man on the ranch was happy to see her.

Before too long, Matt’s long shadow fell over her. “Can I join you two for a little while?” He sat down without waiting for an answer. The awkward silence never got a chance to get going. “Look, I’m sorry about

last night. I overreacted. I think. I'm not just afraid for Dash, Em. You have to know that. The last time you went up against this entity, you didn't come out of it unscathed."

She tried to keep any sign of bitterness from her voice. "You would prefer I never visit here again?" She searched his light blue eyes. "Where does that leave us?"

Matt picked absently at a blade of grass. "I'm sorry about all of this. I thought she was gone. I've had priests in here, blessing and banishing everywhere. We haven't had activity of any kind since that night."

Emmaline leaned forward. "I know things about her, Matt. She's not evil. She has issues, granted, but I don't think she has malicious intent."

Matt regarded her as if she'd grown another head. "She's threatened you. She's warned you away. She's knocked you down by herself and with other objects, namely Blade's fist."

"It was an open-handed slap," she said. She knew Blade was still beating himself up over that, even though she'd assured him he was only a vessel, an unwilling accomplice. The proof that her cheek was icy afterward, not hot, hadn't swayed him. He had drowned his sorrows in a bottle of whiskey, and until last night, that was the last time he had even pretended to have feelings for her.

"It doesn't matter, Em. You're the only person to whom she's openly hostile."

"Matt, I think I can--"

"I don't want you in harm's way," he said. He ran a hand through the blond hair he had allowed to grow nearly to the bottom of his ears. Matt had always kept his hair clipped close to his head. This was Maria's influence. Emmaline heartily approved. "And I don't want Maria or Dash or even Blade in harm's way either. The four of you are my family now. I couldn't bear to lose you."

He held his arms out for Dashiell. Emmaline disentangled her hair from his tiny fist and handed him over. Dash cooed and waved his fists at Matt.

"I don't want you to leave, either. I'll find a room for you, okay?"

"You don't have to do this, Matt. I understand why you wouldn't want me here."

He exhaled sharply and looked at Dash. "I need you here, Em. I could use a friend right now. Just don't leave, okay?"

She heard his fear and sadness. The last time Matt sounded like this was when his wife Lili had been hospitalized for the first time. She knew something else was wrong. He would tell her eventually.

“I’ll stay, Matt, but you should know Rosalie isn’t planning to leave me alone. You don’t happen to have an electric blanket, do you?”

He laughed, well aware that talking to spirits frequently left Emmaline cold and tired. It was as if they drew their energy from her. There had been many times he had wrapped her in a blanket and held her until she stopped shivering. There had also been times he forcibly dragged her from a haunted location because her lips had turned blue.

He frequently voiced his concern that she was traveling solo. He accused her of not having the sense to get out of a situation when she thought she could do some good, even at the cost of her own health. Rosalie was simply a case in point.

They talked of nothing much for a little while. Emmaline knew Matt wanted to talk to her about serious issues, but she knew he would wait until he was sure they wouldn’t be overheard.

When Dash fell asleep, Matt took him home, promising Emmaline he would return the baby after he napped and Maria had fed him. “You probably have a few hours, Em. Why don’t you find something to do? You can go for a jog if you want, but let Blade know first. The trails are usually pretty booked.”

She hadn’t run in two days. That option appealed to her the most. She used to run at least five miles a day, often more. Her running habits had suffered, and for that she felt guilty. After Matt opted to stay behind, she fell into a little depression. Barely a day had gone by in eight years that she hadn’t seen him, and now he was living half a continent away.

She returned to Blade’s house and changed. Rosalie’s ghost was nowhere to be found, but she changed into shorts and a sports bra quickly anyway. There was no sense in tempting fate.

The run felt good, but it gave her too much time to think. She and Caroline had found evidence of the ghost’s life within hours of arriving in the town where Blade had found the house. Rosalie Edmunds had been a prominent member of the tiny Hillcrest, Vermont community when she’d married one of the most sought-after bachelors on the eastern seaboard more than one hundred years ago.

By all appearances, they had an idyllic life. They had homes in several states and a villa in the south of France. They traveled extensively. The local paper was full of mentions of them coming back from some exclusive or exotic trip.

The photographs were what tipped the scales for Emmaline. Rosalie Edmunds was easily one of the more beautiful women of her time. Then, suddenly, Emmaline had stumbled across her obituary. The description had been cleaned up quite a bit, but as far as Emmaline and Caroline had been able to tell, Rosalie had been beaten to death. No suspicion was cast on her grieving widower, Jonathan Edmunds, who appeared in a number of somberly posed photographs, even though rumors about his myriad affairs filled the gossip section of the scandal sheets.

Soon afterward, neighbors reported strange noises coming from the house. Jonathan Edmunds was married again within the year, but his wife left within six months. He divorced her and never remarried.

Emmaline thought that Rosalie somehow imprinted on Blade, though photographs of Jonathan Edmunds showed him to resemble Matt more than Blade. She didn't know if she reminded Rosalie of one of her husband's lovers or if Rosalie objected to her occasionally sexual relationship with Blade. Did she think Blade was her husband, or had she targeted Blade, deciding he belonged only to her? She had a million questions for Blade, but she knew he wouldn't answer them.

She cut her run short. None of these thoughts were new. She and Caroline had discussed theories ad nauseum, with no answers forthcoming. And now it seemed Matt didn't want to hear about it, either. Disheartened and a little perturbed, she stopped in at the stables.

She hadn't checked in with Blade before her run, as Matt had directed. Company on her runs had never bothered her, but some of the horses had seemed a little surprised. She meant to ask if there was a better time in the day for running.

Blade was busy with a horse that seemed to want nothing to do with him. Emmaline watched from the other side of the fence. A gentle breeze brushed her shoulders. She lifted her arms to rest them on the top rail. The low bass of Blade's soothing tones washed over her, making her ache with the need for him to talk to her with that kind of care.

The horse whinnied and shied away, prancing and tossing her head. The motion called attention to the fact she was blindfolded. Emmaline frowned. She wouldn't want anyone talking to her or touching her while she was blindfolded. Well, not unless she was also tied to a chair.

She watched until she felt a presence beside her. Turning her head, she looked up at the man. He was average height, perhaps 22, with a friendly, open face framed by brown hair that poked out from under his wide-brimmed hat. His startling clear blue eyes were his most prominent feature.

"Can I help you with something?" he asked as he lifted his hat in greeting. "Are you a new guest?"

Emmaline turned to fully face him, wearing one of her brightest smiles. "No. I'm a friend of the family. I'm visiting for a couple of weeks."

"You ride?"

She shook her head. "Horses don't like me."

"I find that hard to believe." His eyes flickered to her breasts and back, a subconscious gesture that amused Emmaline more than anything else. Horses didn't care about the size and shape of her chest. "Have you had lessons?"

"I did try a lesson once, but it didn't work out. The horse threw me in about ten seconds. I'm pretty sure she laughed at me afterward." Emmaline's tone was light, and she couldn't help but to keep smiling at the friendly man next to her. His good humor was downright contagious.

"How long ago was that?"

Emmaline laughed. "I was eight, I think. I did give it another try the next day, but the same thing happened, only this time with a different horse. I took up running instead. Unless I'm running over an earthquake, the ground doesn't throw me."

He had the look of a hardened horseman. Like Blade, he probably believed she could ride if she really wanted to. They were likely right, but the horse wasn't the problem. The deathly fear of heights took care of any inclination she might have had to try again.

"I didn't catch your name?"

"Emmaline Force."

His grin widened. "Ah, so you're the famous Emmaline Force."

Her reputation around those parts was legendary. Provoking a ghost to frenzy in front of the entire town during the New Year's fireworks display

definitely made her a household name. "I don't live up to the hype," she warned. "I'm sure what you've heard has been greatly exaggerated."

"I heard you were pretty," he said, tilting his head to the side. "You definitely live up to that hype."

She knew he was flirting, but she couldn't seem to discourage him. It was nice to talk to someone who seemed to enjoy her company. "You certainly know the right things to say to a woman who has just run five miles. What's your name, cowboy?"

"Alex Reznik." He took Emmaline's hand in his, raising it to his lips to kiss the back of her knuckles. Definitely a cowboy move. "At your service."

A shadow fell over her. "Alex, don't you have some work to do?" Blade's gruff voice intruded on their conversation.

"Uh, yeah. Sorry." He turned back to Emmaline. "It was very nice to meet you, Emmaline. I hope to see more of you around."

More to piss off Blade than to encourage Alex, Emmaline waved a hand in Blade's direction, fanning the air as if she was removing a bad odor. "Oh, Alex, don't pay attention to Blade. He's upset that his horse doesn't like him."

"Verity doesn't like anyone. She was neglected, so she's not used to people. We're trying to rehabilitate her," Alex said.

"She doesn't need details." Blade's words resembled a growl more than a sentence.

Alex tipped his hat at Emmaline and left quickly. She watched him go for a moment before turning back to Blade. "You're grumpy today."

Without changing his expression, he turned and walked away. Emmaline ducked through the rails of the fence to follow him.

He whirled on her. "What are you still doing here? I thought you were leaving today."

Emmaline responded to his stoic expression and the disdain in his voice with anger of her own. "I thought I'd get in a riding lesson or two before I go."

"We're booked."

"You don't look busy to me."

"I don't give lessons."

"But you do."

"Not to adults."

“You offered to give me riding lessons,” she reminded him. He’d done things to her on a saddle. Technically, it wasn’t on a horse at the time, but it did involve a form of riding. She knew that was the first image that came to his mind, but it wasn’t the one she meant.

His expression remained the same throughout their exchange. “You’re mistaken.”

Emmaline stepped closer, not stopping until she was inches away from him.

Blade watched her through wary, shaded eyes. It was obvious she was up to no good.

Reaching up, she fingered the buttons on his shirt. “No, Blade. I remember it perfectly. We were on Gracie and you were taking me to town to get a dress for your New Year’s party. You do remember the party, don’t you? It put this place in the Most Haunted Places in America tourist guidebook.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw, the movement too fast for Emmaline to know if it was real or imagined.

She traced her finger on a path around several of his buttons, working her way lower. “You offered to teach me to ride. I wasn’t sure at first if you meant you or the horse, since you were fondling my breasts at the time, but you did eventually clarify your offer. I believe you meant both.”

This time, she did see the twitch. She brought her hand up to run her fingertip along his jaw and leaned even closer. Her breasts grazed his shirt and she could feel the heat of him through the thick material of her sports bra. “Did you want to touch them again? Maybe it’ll refresh your memory.”

His only reaction was to narrow his eyes slightly and turn his back on her.

Immediately contrite, Emmaline reached for his arm, stopping him before he could take a step. “Blade, don’t go. I’m sorry.”

He didn’t move for the longest time. The tense muscle under her hand betrayed the struggle he was having with his fury, a fury he would hide from her. His mask, if it had altered at all, had slipped back over his features before he turned to look Emmaline squarely in the eyes. “I’m sorry about last night. I understand why you’re upset, but I don’t know why you feel the need to say things like that to me.”

Because he pissed her off. He did it effortlessly, and she reacted horribly each time.

Emmaline searched his face for something, anything, that might indicate an emotion, but she found nothing. Her voice was low and strangled when it came out. "I hate when you're like this. I find myself saying just about anything to get some kind of reaction from you."

He frowned. At least it was something. "You hate when I'm like what?"

She flung her arms wide. "This! I hate when you're like this! That frown is the only facial expression I've seen you make in over a year. Even last night, when you were being so sweet to me, there was nothing. Nothing on your face, nothing in your eyes. Do you have feelings, Blade?"

She'd take his anger, anything to show he cared.

Not one muscle in his face moved. "I don't want to discuss this with you."

Stung, Emmaline stepped back. She didn't bother to hide her hurt. "No, of course you don't. Why would you possibly want to discuss anything with me?" Though her voice was brittle, she forced herself to finish. "Last night you made me forget how much you hate me. I won't make that mistake again."

She turned to walk away before the tears could start. How could she be upset by him? Nothing he said or did was a surprise. He made his feelings perfectly clear.

She didn't get very far before she walked into Verity. She had been trying to go around the horse, but Verity had other ideas. The horse was blindfolded, but she knew where Emmaline was and headed her off, blocking her path to the fence. She nuzzled against Emmaline's shoulder, seeking to comfort her and be comforted in return.

Emmaline reached up and stroked Verity's muzzle and her neck. The ginger-colored horse gently nipped the shoulder strap of Emmaline's bra. "Hey," Emmaline said. "I think we should get to know one another before we start any of that."

Suddenly changing her mind, Verity backed away. Emmaline felt Blade's hand on her shoulder. "Did she hurt you?"

Without turning around, Emmaline said, "No, that's your department." She shook his hand off and made a move to walk away.

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.” He lifted his hat and ran his hand through his hair, moving it away from his face. He swore under his breath. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

Braving his lack of anything again, Emmaline faced him. “How about your friendship? I know I hurt you, and I’m sorry for that. But can’t we move past it? It was more than a year ago. Like it or not, you and I aren’t going to part company any time soon. Matt has changed his mind about me leaving.”

He stared at her for a full minute, which was too long. Emmaline was gone before he could put words together for an answer. The pain inside wasn’t going away and it was much more difficult to bury when she was face-to-face with him.

* * * *

He watched her walk away, still uncertain. He knew what she wasn’t saying. He knew she was hurt that he hadn’t taken the bait and fought with her. He hadn’t wanted to say the horrible things he knew he would have said if he had stayed in her room. He was tired of having angry sex with her. He wanted to make love to her slowly, to revel in her scent and the feel of her skin against his.

When he took her fast and hard after one of their arguments, minimal clothing was removed. Because he couldn’t seem to find an attraction for other women, these brief, intense encounters were all he had allowed himself since the day Emmaline walked out of his life. He was tired of living this way. He wanted more.

Verity made a noise at him, no doubt censuring him for his lack of response. “You like her, don’t you?” He took a step toward Verity, but she shied away. “It figures. Difficult woman, difficult horse. The two of you make quite a pair.”

Chapter 4

Eighteen Months Ago

The clock in the common room chimed one as Emmaline tiptoed up the stairs. With any luck, Matt would be asleep and she wouldn't have to face his cocky smile. Some things were best faced in the morning, and Matt, when he was full of himself, was one of them.

Instead of heading directly up to her room, Emmaline took a detour through the house, which was one of the smaller ones, with only six rooms for guests. Earlier that day, Marnie, the housekeeper, had given her a tour, pointing out the hot spots for activity. Besides the room Emmaline was sharing with Matt, the tiny kitchenette in the rear of the house had been the location of several reported sightings.

There was no chair in the closet-like room, but she didn't feel the need to turn on the light. Emmaline leaned against the counter and closed her eyes. She meditated to clear her mind. Auntie Emma had taught her that the best time to hear a spirit was when one's mind wasn't cluttered with anything else. That was why most people reported experiences that woke them from their sleep or things that happened in quiet moments when they were awake.

Unbidden, the image of Blade looking down at her with a face full of desire, his black hair falling gently forward to curtain them away from the world, popped into her head. Quickly, she shook it away. Distractions now could cost her first contact. She didn't know how long she stood in the center of the kitchen, gently swaying in her tired attempt to stay awake and calm. Then she felt something.

At first it was a presence, weak and tentative. She sensed fear. "It's okay," she said gently, reassuring the spirit. "I mean no harm. I only want to talk to you."

More time passed, whether seconds or minutes she couldn't discern. The presence hovered nearby. Emmaline felt a coldness on her hand and then it was gone. She opened her eyes and looked around the dim room. She was alone.

Satisfied at having established that something was going on, Emmaline headed up to bed. She turned the lock as quietly as possible and slipped into the bathroom, where she discovered the pajamas that Matt had left for her on the vanity. Sleepily, she smiled at his thoughtfulness. He was the last thought on her mind when her head hit the pillow and she instantly fell asleep.

The world was shaking. Buildings crumbled under the force and people ran screaming in all directions, like one of those ridiculous scenes in a fifties era horror movie. Emmaline bolted into a sitting position, emerging from her dream to find Matt sitting on the bed next to her sporting a wide grin.

"What are you doing?" She rubbed at her eyes, irritated at the interruption. Whatever she had been dreaming about before the earthquake was forgotten.

"I thought you'd want to get in a run before lunch," he said. "You didn't get one yesterday and I know how that bothers you."

She stretched and threw back the covers, her feet already feeling the miles disappearing under them. Grabbing her running clothes, she disappeared into the bathroom to change. "Did I miss breakfast?"

Matt's answer followed through the half-open doorway. "Yeah. I didn't want to wake you. Do you know what time you came in?"

"I think I got to sleep around three," she called. "I made contact in the kitchen."

"With who?" Emmaline heard the subtle mockery in Matt's question.

She pushed the door open with her foot to get it out of her way. "I don't know. He or she didn't talk to me. I felt someone near. They were afraid, so I tried to reassure whoever it was that I meant no harm." She splashed cold water on her face before pressing it into a towel.

Matt came to stand in the open doorway. "Is that all?"

"I was touched on my hand."

He raised one eyebrow. "That's significant. It means that the spirit is a little stronger than most, right?"

“Yes,” she confirmed. “I think I should be able to get a conversation going fairly soon. I’m excited.”

Matt screwed up his lips in thought and turned away as she changed into her jogging clothes. “Were you alone?”

“Completely.”

“So, to completely change the subject, how did last night go?”

She pulled her hair back into a ponytail before answering. “I don’t know if he’s going to give you the things you want, but I’m leaning more toward ‘likely’ than not.”

“Did you impress him that much?” She could tell he was biting the insides of his cheeks to keep from smirking too much.

“He thought Maria was paying us. He thought we were taking advantage of her fears.” She pushed him away from the door frame so she could use it to stretch for her run.

“But you set him straight.”

“I did.”

Matt leaned against the wall and folded his arms over his chest. “Come on, Em. You were gone far too long for such a simple conversation. Stop holding out on me.”

She smiled up at him with a heart full of mischief. “I’ll give you all the details if you run with me.” When he hesitated, she added, “There’s no gym here. Your only other option for exercise is to ride one of the horses. Something tells me you won’t get the details you’re craving from the horses. They didn’t see a thing.”

* * * *

Blade had watched the house for a long time, waiting to see the light in the room he knew was Emmaline’s. After a while, when the light failed to appear, he left, frowning into the darkness and wondering if she would try to talk to the ghost before heading to bed. He was drained and he was amazed that she still seemed to have energy. He thought so much about what he wanted to do with her seemingly endless supply of energy that he had been forced to seek the relief of a cold shower before he crawled under his covers alone.

He didn't regret not asking Emmaline to come back with him and share his bed. He meant what he said when he told her to keep her ghost nonsense away from him and his house. He was handling Rosalie the best he could.

The dream came that night. It was the first dream that didn't seem like a dream. The colors were vivid and real. In it, Emmaline lay sprawled on the cement floor of the stable. Though it was night, brilliant colors lit the outside, casting her face in blues and greens and reds. She wore an evening gown, a full-skirted number that dipped between her breasts and made him want to bury his face there.

The tiara on her head was askew. She looked charmingly disheveled. Under other circumstances, he might have snatched her up, lifted her skirts, and made the most of the fantasy.

The look on her face arrested any sexual impulses he might have had. She stared up at him in shock. As he watched, her pale cheek reddened with the imprint of a hand. His hand. Blood dripped from her split lip. He stared down at her, repulsed by what he had done.

Waking in a cold sweat, Blade shook away the image. It was a dream. He had lost his temper before, but he had never raised a hand in anger.

In the morning, he decided to grant Matt access to his records. It might speed up their investigation and get them out of there that much faster. He felt no urgent need to keep her around. With his track record for driving women away and her equally short fuse, an affair full of wild, hot sex was all he wanted from her while she was there.

He was on his way to find her when he noticed her standing on the path in front of Maria's house, deep in conversation with his sister. She looked so very small as she smiled and laughed at something Maria said. He recalled that the top of her head only reached the bottom of his chin. Just by looking at her, he never would have guessed what a spitfire she was in bed.

She wore sweatpants and a tight shirt. Both clung to her deceptively soft curves. He wanted to peel the fabric from her skin and tie her to his bed. She had squeezed him tightly between those thighs the night before. He wanted to watch the shapely muscles dance as they fought the restraints.

And those breasts... She had breasts made for licking and sucking, for grasping in his palms and for pressing against his chest as he moved deeper inside the warmth and wetness between her legs.

His stomach tightened and his pants seemed to have shrunk.

* * * *

“Christ. Could he be any more obvious?” Maria wrinkled her nose in disgust, but she seemed more amused than anything else.

“I don’t know.” Emmaline couldn’t stop the grin or the heat from rising to her cheeks. “It’s better than him staring at my chest when he thinks I’m not looking.”

Maria snorted. “At least he leaves you some clothes that way.”

Emmaline bit the inside of her cheeks to keep a wider grin from her face, but her smile still leaked out the left side of her mouth and she felt the sparkle in her eyes. He wore something similar to what he had been wearing the day before: jeans and a flannel shirt, this one red. She didn’t think she’d find him so attractive this morning, but she was wrong. If it was possible, he was even more alluring in the light of day.

Dismissing Maria’s concerns, Emmaline gestured to the box Blade held casually under his arm. “Is that a gift for me?”

“No.”

“Have you decided against helping us out?” She kept her tone carefully neutral, knowing the words were enough.

“The request was from Matt. You were merely the messenger.”

Emmaline held out her hands in expectation. “I’ll take them to him.” Instinctively, she knew she needed to find out more about the history of these houses before she would be able to get the ghost or ghosts to actually speak to her.

Blade made no move to hand them over. “Where is he?”

“He’s taking a shower. I made him go for a run with me.”

Maria raised a brow. “I can’t believe you’re cooperating, *hermano*. I thought you’d be much more stubborn.”

“The faster they work, the sooner they can leave.”

Maria’s eyes flashed the same way they had the day before when the two of them had an argument. While Emmaline didn’t mind watching Blade getting upset, she didn’t like seeing Maria upset any more than she already was.

She fixed an amused expression on her face and strove for a teasing tone. "And here I thought you were beginning to warm up to me. Why don't you give me the box and I'll take it to Matt? We'll get started right away."

Blade's eyes wandered slowly up and down Emmaline's smaller frame. Any clothes left on her body in his mind were definitely gone. "It's a little heavy. I'll carry it."

Maria exhaled heavily, the sound verging on a growl. "Emmaline, I must apologize once again for my brother's lack of manners."

Emmaline held up a hand. "It's fine. I'm not offended. He'll warm up to me eventually."

She looked at Blade as she spoke, but he looked away. Indecision flickered across his features, and she wondered if her parting words from last night had made any difference in his attitude.

"Thanks for lunch, Maria. I'll take Blade to Matt and then Matt and I will get to work."

Emmaline winked at Blade and headed back to her room. Blade followed, walking beside her in complete silence. She didn't know why his mood was black, but she didn't care. All she wanted were the records so Matt could do his thing, which he did very well. She was making tentative plans in her head for how she might go about soliciting a response from the presence she had felt last night when Blade's impatient voice cut through her thoughts.

"You're mad at me."

She looked up at him in surprise, but didn't respond.

The expression on his face when he looked down at her was sullenly hostile. "You have no reason to be mad. I made my feelings about all this ghost crap perfectly clear. The faster you leave, the faster Maria can put this behind her."

Calmly, Emmaline pointed out the obvious. "You do realize, do you not, that if Matt and I can't help Maria, she will call in a string of ghost detectives who will actually charge her for their services, and she won't stop until she finds peace of mind?"

His scowl was response enough.

"Look, last night was fun, but that was all it was. I don't expect anything from you and I hope you don't expect anything from me. I'm not at a point in my life where I'm looking for a relationship or anything remotely

resembling one. Now, I think you'll find that box much easier to carry if you drop that chip on your shoulder." They had arrived at the house. She paused with her hand on the doorknob. "That said, I think someone should have told you long ago that you can catch more flies with honey."

"You're not a fly," he grumbled. "Are you going to open the door for me?"

"It's a figure of speech." Sarcasm reared its ugly head. Emmaline nearly bit her lip. She needed to take her own advice some of the time.

"It doesn't apply to you." He set the box on the porch and grasped her chin with his thumb and forefinger, forcing her eyes to meet his darker, stormier ones. "I think vinegar did the trick quite nicely with you. Something tells me you're not into honey."

A muscle twitched in Emmaline's jaw. She didn't care for the proprietary way he treated her in public. "That same something tells me you're all out of honey."

"Meet me in the orchard after dinner and I'll show you what I can do with honey."

The color drained from Emmaline's face for a split second, and then her cheeks were flaming. Why did he have to have such a naturally sexy voice? It sent shivers up her spine when he spoke. How did he vacillate so easily between prickly and sexy?

"I'll be working after dinner tonight." She jerked her chin from his grasp and opened the door. "Are you coming, or can I carry it myself from here?"

Blade's jaw set hard. "Stay out of the stable."

Several incidents had been reported as happening in the stable. Though she hadn't sensed a presence there last night, she hadn't exactly been paying attention. "I need to investigate the stable."

"Stay out of my goddamn stable."

He wasn't going to argue. Emmaline stayed silent, afraid if she spoke she would say something that would make him change his mind about giving Matt the box of documents.

Matt was fully dressed and rubbing a towel on his head when she came in the room.

Blade looked around. "Where do you want these?"

Emmaline dismissed them both and disappeared into the bathroom. A hot shower was just what she needed to help her relax. Blade was an intense person, the kind that made her have to be on guard at all times. She sensed he wasn't like this with everyone. The sparks and the tension, of both the positive and negative varieties, were not in short supply when they were together. The warm water washed away her sweat and her stress.

When she finished, she wrapped herself in a towel and congratulated herself on her timing as she heard the door close and the inside lock click into place. She bent over and closed her eyes, flinging her hair upside down to dry it. The loud hum of her hairdryer filled the room.

She flipped back up and turned, cheeks flushed, to find Blade casually leaning against the door frame. Her heart beat at the unexpectedness of his appearance. "Where's Matt?"

"I suggested that Maria's dining room is seldom used and that he would be able to spread out all those files there where nobody would disturb them or him."

Emmaline looked Blade up and down without changing her guarded expression. "Why didn't you just ask him to leave so we could have sex? Now he'll be gone all day."

Surprise replaced the collected cool on Blade's face. "You told him we slept together?"

"No, I told him you were an amazing fuck. I see no need to sugar-coat it."

Blade took a step closer, which landed him inches away and forced Emmaline to drop her head back to look at him. "No, you don't, do you?"

Danger glinted in his deep chocolate eyes. Heat rushed to her core and tingled between her legs.

He reached out. One finger hooked under the place where one edge of the towel tucked behind the other to hold it up.

Anticipation made her breathing rapid and shallow. Somehow, she had goaded him without trying. She liked this wild, dangerous edge to him.

A tiny tug. The towel dropped to the floor, not bothering to slide to the ground in a slow, sensual seduction. Blade pushed her back a step. His gaze wandered over her naked body. No thigh-highs, no lacy bra shielded any part of her. Fully exposed, he fucked her with the promise in his eyes.

One hand shot out, winding in the hair at the nape of her neck and pulling her body against his in a motion so fast she didn't have time to figure out what he planned to do. A cry of protest whooshed out of her. She blamed the impact of her chest slamming against his for the forced exhalation, but she knew Blade wouldn't recognize the distinction.

"A little late for that, Emmy, don't you think?" He pulled at her hair, tilting her head back to expose her face to him.

"I—You surprised me." Did he mean to make her beg again? She had no doubt he could do it, and she had no doubt she would do it.

She wanted his kiss, but he denied her. Turning her so that her back was against his chest, he held her tightly against him. The mirror above the sink reflected the image of a naked woman with wide eyes and a fully-clothed man with a hard, inscrutable expression.

His deep bronze hands closed over the swell of her hips, standing out in distinct contrast to the pale, sensitive skin beneath. One migrated up and over her stomach to cup a breast. His fingers brushed gently against the underside. Emmaline took a tremulous breath.

One rough thumb flicked over her nipple. It tightened, pebbling and sending signals to her pussy. She licked her lips. "Blade?"

"You waited until we were finished last night to set me straight about your arrangement with Maria." A forefinger joined the thumb, rolling and pinching her sensitized nipple. "I think you like making me angry."

Yes, she did. She liked the intensity. She liked knowing he wasn't pretending to feel something he didn't feel. She liked the rawness of his emotions and the fact he didn't hold back.

She met his eyes in the mirror. He wasn't angry. How could she poke a bear enough to stimulate him, yet refrain from crossing the line that would chase him away? "Too many people step around your temper. I think you like being angry."

His other hand came away from her hip, crossing her body to subject her neglected nipple to the same pinching and pulling that made moisture drip down her thighs. "Sometimes it's less complicated."

Emmaline knew exactly what he meant. Anger was a simple, straightforward emotion. She preferred it to just about anything else at this point in her life. But his anger didn't match hers, not yet. He wasn't drawing

from the same vast reserves of hurt and disillusionment. She couldn't resist a sarcastic response. "You are the epitome of the angry white man."

"Oh, baby," he said, affecting a Mexican accent. "I'm not white. I'm one hundred percent the Latino lover you've always craved. Sending away your roommate all day was part of my master plan."

Spanish words whispered through her consciousness. She had no idea what he said, but his tone and the way his tongue rolled across the syllables made her knees tremble. She imagined he was describing what he planned to do to her.

His lips joined the vibration of the words, working their way down her neck and across her shoulder. His hands abandoned the intimate work on her nipples to knead the soft globes of her breasts.

Emmaline fought the urge to close her eyes, to focus the sensations. She watched him in the mirror. His entire demeanor was different. He wasn't the least bit angry. The force driving him was pure lust, and he wore it well. The breath she took was deep and shaky. "Your master plan?"

Teeth grazed her shoulder. He nipped her gently. His right hand wandered down her body, his fingers disappearing into her folds. Emmaline gasped and widened her stance.

"I'm going to tie you to that bed out there and give you orgasm after orgasm." His finger found her swollen nub, pressing and stroking it as if he had all the time in the world to stimulate her there. "I'm going to touch you like this." His eyes dropped to watch the way he touched her.

This was working. Tension coiled low in her abdomen.

"I'm going to lick you and suck you and fuck you, Emmy." Two fingers slipped inside. "I'm going to pleasure you until you pass out."

She lifted a brow. "Why, Mr. Sanchez, I do run marathons. I have great stamina. I think I can outlast you." Heavy breathing punctuated her words.

"*Doctor Sanchez*," he corrected. "In addition to being Latin, I'm in my sexual prime. I just turned twenty-five."

Which made him three years younger than her. *Doctor?* "You're a vet?" Given that he was in charge of the horses, being that kind of doctor made sense.

"Yes." The fingers inside her slid out. He raised his hand to her lips. "Taste yourself, Emmy. You taste like heaven. I dreamt of licking you. I woke up longing to taste you again."

Nobody had ever suggested such a thing to her before. Until last night, nobody had ever slapped her pussy, either, and look how well that had turned out. In slow motion, she opened her mouth and sucked his fingers inside. She wouldn't call her taste heavenly, but it was interesting and very provocative.

Something nagged at her. He and Maria had owned the ranch for four years. When had he gone to veterinary school? The math didn't add up.

He pulled his fingers out of her mouth. Taking her wrists in his hands, he bent her over the bathroom counter and positioned her hands for leverage. His hands were on her hips, rotating them forward to open her to him. He loosened his belt and lowered his pants. His erection sprang out to press against her backside.

This was going to bother her. "Blade?"

"Shhhhh," he said, running a long finger over her lower lip. "I didn't bring a gag and you aren't wearing underwear."

Emmaline's brain didn't have an "off" button. Foil ripped. She turned her head to ask again, but he had other ideas. Grabbing her hair at the nape, he pulled her head back while pushing down between her shoulder blades. In the mirror, she could see the open position he wanted her to maintain.

This position wasn't new to her. She had enjoyed it before, but never quite like this. Blade didn't need anger to affect the intensity she craved from him. The promise in his eyes quieted her questions for now.

She felt his tip at her entrance and she swelled for him, pressing back to open herself even more. He entered her slowly, savoring every inch.

When he was completely inside, he paused. One hand stayed on the small of her back to keep her from moving. The other reached around to find her clit.

He worked her that way, pumping into her slowly from behind while he fingered her folds in front. The heat burned. She wiggled to get away, to move closer, but he was bigger and stronger. Cries escaped, loud and long. Had she made this much noise the night before in his office?

She crested, shouting his name and a convoluted mess of curses and praises.

He chuckled. The hand on her clit fell away. He gripped her hips hard and increased his pace. Through passion-blurred vision, Emmaline watched

his head fall back. The cords on his neck stood out. She wished he was naked or at least shirtless.

Her vaginal walls weren't given a chance to relax. They throbbed around Blade's cock, milking him, but he refused to give in. Words fell from his lips. She recognized her name and a few others, like *bonita* and *buena*.

"Oh, God," she gasped. Another orgasm loomed. Already, her insides were liquid. Her arms trembled. Only the thought that the counter would hurt if she slammed against it kept them from giving out.

"Ay. *Dios, chica*," he agreed, grunting more praises in Spanish. "*Un poco mas*. Don't fight it, Emmy. Let it come. Let it take you away. I'll catch you."

She had been fighting it. Something about having an orgasm this large with another person was too revealing, too intimate. This was a part of herself she had never shared before, something she denied herself.

But Blade wasn't waiting to prey on her insecurities. He said he wanted to pleasure her until she passed out, like it was some kind of macho challenge that had nothing to do with her. Blackness dotted the periphery of her vision. She was close, so close to both coming and fainting. Scorching heat shot through her limbs, leaving them cold and numb. Still, she fought it.

His hand smacked against her pussy, startling her away from her fears. In that moment, she came, crying out so loud she had no doubt every guest in the house heard it. Blade's shout joined hers. With one final thrust, he froze. Though he wore a condom, she felt the force of his semen trying to break the latex barrier.

Emmaline's knees gave out. Her thighs didn't have anything left in them, either.

Blade caught her, just as he promised. His arms came around her, and he turned her, cradling her head in one palm and holding her against him with the other. His forehead sealed to hers. His breath fanned her face.

As the tremors stopped, his lips found hers. Insistent kisses demanded more. When his lips moved to explore her neck, a giggle escaped. What was it about an earth-shattering orgasm that made her ticklish?

"Sensitive?" The pressure of his lips increased. Teeth nipped at her collar bone.

“A little.” Enough strength returned to her limbs. Her fingers were clumsy when she attacked the buttons on his flannel, but she didn’t care. She wanted to touch his chest.

The moment her skin made contact with his, she felt his erection press against her thigh. He laughed at her surprise. “Sexual prime, baby. It’s good for both of us.”

She wasn’t about to let evidence of his returning desire interrupt her exploration. There was nothing tentative in the way she caressed from his shoulders to his tight abs. “I thought men peaked at eighteen.”

His lips captured hers, teasing her tongue and her lower lip. He definitely wasn’t past his prime in the kissing department. “Latino men enjoy a long run at the top. I’ll still be this much of a stud when I’m fifty.”

Emmaline laughed. “You must get a lot of action with a line like that.”

She didn’t expect him to respond.

Lifting Emmaline, he guided her legs around his waist while deftly hiking up his pants. The rough denim rubbed against her core, igniting her again. “Let’s get you to bed.”

He fell onto the mattress with her, catching most of his weight on his elbows. She wanted to feel his full weight on her, pressing and possessing, but Blade was in control. One hand slipped between them to close around her breast.

Emmaline closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation until that niggling thought popped back into her brain. “Blade, how could you possibly have been a veterinarian for four years if you’re only twenty-five?”

Instead of answering, he kissed her. She pushed at him, demanding an answer. He captured the hand she pressed to his shoulder. Bringing it to his lips, he kissed the backs of her knuckles before turning it over to feast on her palm. “I’m going to kiss every inch of you, Emmy.”

“I’d like it if you answered my question first.”

“It bothers you.” Dropping her hand, he leaned back to look at her. His hands threaded through her hair. He caressed her temple with a thumb. “How about I give you my résumé later? I only have another hour to live up to my promise. I have a group of kids coming all the way from Macon for a riding lesson.”

His hands moved outward, fanning her hair away from her face. One hand returned to travel from her shoulder to her palm, pushing her arm above her head. Velcro ripped and cold nylon closed around her wrist.

Startled, Emmaline looked toward the headboard. Blade used the distraction to bind her other wrist. She pulled against the restraints. He did say he was going to tie her to the bed.

Lava pooled between her legs. Memories of what he had already done to her when she was in this kind of defenseless position rushed back to heat her everywhere. "Did you lock the door?"

His wicked grin told her nothing.

"Blade!"

He ran his hands down her arms, down her chest, and across her stomach. Kneeling between her legs, he continued down. More Velcro ripped and nylon restraints closed around her ankles. She couldn't close her legs.

Something in her face must have given him pause. He leaned over her, brushing hair away from her face. "Of course I locked the door, Emmy."

The kiss he gave her was too gentle. She didn't want tenderness.

Then he reached to the bedside table. Her eyes followed his movement. She had no trouble recognizing her vibrator. "You went through my suitcase?" Strangely, she didn't feel violated. If Matt had gone through her things, she would have lit into him.

In lieu of an answer, he pulled a folded bandana from his back pocket. As he tied it over her eyes, he said, "You think too much, Emmy. Just feel. Enjoy the way I'm going to use your body."

"But..."

A sharp swat between her legs stopped that train of thought. God, she liked it when he did that. Two more followed in rapid succession. She was close to coming again. "If you don't stop talking, I'll go back into your suitcase, get a pair of your very expensive underwear, and gag you with them."

He slipped the tip of the vibrator into her sopping channel. No lubricant was necessary. Emmaline loved this vibrator. He positioned the curved pad jutting from the base against her clit. The cord attaching it to the controller rested across the top of her thigh. The vibrations started.

His hot tongue closed around her nipple. He sucked at her, alternating soft pulls with sharp nips. Teeth scraped across the aroused peaks. Her vagina contracted, pulling at the toy, urging more pressure.

She wiggled her hips, thrusting against air. "Blade, I need..." More pressure. She needed to come. The low setting felt good, but it wasn't going to take her where she wanted to go. However, she was new to these kinds of games. She was no stranger to telling a lover what she wanted him to do to make her come, but did Blade require more begging? Did it turn him on?

Strong, firm lips teased their way up her neck. Large, sure hands traced paths up and down her thighs. Emmaline moaned and tried to turn her body into his, but the restraints held her in place.

"What do you need, Emmy? Tell me."

The vibrator needed pressure behind it in order for the clitoral stimulator to be of any use. "I don't know your rules, Blade. I've never played bondage and submission games before."

"This isn't a submission game." Except for the one place she wanted them to be, his hands were everywhere his lips weren't.

She was going to implode. "Then why am I tied up and about to beg you to make me come? I've read erotica before, Blade. I have an idea of how this works."

He stopped touching her. Lifting the blindfold from her eyes, he leaned over her, his expression thoughtful and serious. "I'm not looking for a sex slave, Emmaline. You enjoy being tied up and you enjoy having a lover who knows how to treat you with respect outside of the bedroom and still give you what you crave between the sheets. This whole feminist movement may have given women more autonomy and control, and that's a good thing, but it also robs you of your primal need to know the man between your legs is strong and vital and a worthy mate for you."

Emmaline gasped, but not at his psychosocial assessment of gender relations. "I'm not looking for a mate."

"You're looking for a good fuck. That's the feminist thing." He held a finger to her lips to quiet anything she might have said. "I'm okay with that. Like I said, I want to make you come until you pass out. But you have a problem giving up control. I don't know what was wrong with your previous lovers, but I'm going to take that control away from you and make sure you get what you need."

He'd said a mouthful. It was going to take Emmaline some time to sift through his views before she decided whether or not she agreed with them. Her tongue darted out, wetting her upper lip. His eyes followed the move. The seductive fire was relit.

"I just want to come, Blade. I need to come." She pulled at the restraints. If he wouldn't rub her clit, she would do it herself. She had no problem with masturbation. It had become her primary source of orgasm. "Now."

He pulled the bandana from under her head. His lips mashed against hers, sucking her tongue into his mouth. He took the kiss he wanted, leaving her no choice but to let him have it. She forgot about the throbbing between her legs and the way her pussy wept with need. This forced surrender flew directly in the face of what she thought he had said about wanting her submission.

The pressure between her legs increased. While he didn't change the setting on the toy, he pumped it into her. She thrust against it with the limited movement the restraints allowed. Cries escaped from her throat, but he swallowed them whole.

The kiss deepened. His tongue invaded her mouth, licking her teeth and the soft palate and claiming everything in between.

She was close, so close. The sounds she made were desperate. He slid the control to the highest setting, still thrusting it in and out. If he had just pushed it into her and held it there, the orgasm would have been fast and hard. Maybe he knew that. This way was slower and more intense. Waves washed over her, lapping gently as she came.

He thrust faster. She moved, trying to escape the additional stimulation. He was doing it again. He demanded a complete surrender. The man was a liar. He knew what to say to shut her up, but he didn't live up to his word. He did want her as his sex slave. He wanted to own her, to own her pleasure.

She bucked against him, fighting his control and the kiss that wouldn't stop.

All of a sudden, he stopped. A low growl vibrated from his chest to hers. His eyes narrowed, his nostrils flared and his skin suffused with red. Emmaline wished she was still blindfolded. He was pissed.

"You're fighting me."

That dangerous edge she sensed earlier, the one he had displayed the night before, was back. She lost her battle. With a loud cry, she crested, her hips lifting from the mattress.

Using short, quick strokes, Blade thrust the toy into her, prolonging the waves.

Emmaline rode that wave, balancing in a maelstrom until she slid to shore. She opened her eyes to find his anger fresh and undiminished. "You can stop now," she said. "I'm too sensitive. It's...I..."

Oh, he couldn't do this. She felt her primal nature emerging. She had been there once before with Rick, before she knew he was ever unfaithful. That was the last time she had given so much of herself to a lover. In his ignorance, Blade barreled through those barriers without a second thought.

He moved his hand away from the vibrator and inched the speed down a notch. Next to her, weight shifted. Blade stood, shedding his clothes in a slow striptease. Riveted, Emmaline watched him unbutton and unzip. The lines of his obliques disappeared into his boxers, pointing the way to the erection that hadn't subsided.

Cream rushed to a pussy that clenched around the vibrator. The black hair that hung to his shoulders and the dusty brown skin combined with the confidence he exuded in a display of sensual perfection.

Moving to the foot of the bed, he peeled away the Velcro holding one ankle. He lifted her foot, caressing from her calf to her thigh and back down. His lips closed around her smallest toe. At the same time, he jerked the cord of the vibrator, pulling it from her completely.

Juices flowed from her and her vaginal walls clenched around nothing. Emmaline moaned, protesting the loss.

He smacked her pussy three times in rapid succession. Her hips jerked, wanting to follow him, but she had no leverage because he held her foot in the air.

Teeth scraped her toes. Electricity shot from there up her leg. Emmaline had never been partial to feet before. It had never occurred to her that she was walking on such a huge erogenous zone.

Blade sucked her toes, savoring each one in his mouth as he stroked his cock with one hand. Mesmerized by the tableau in front of her, Emmaline watched. She wanted her hands free so she could masturbate. The localized

insistence the vibrator created in her pussy was gone. Now her entire body felt the effects of his attention.

A rip in the Velcro and he released her other foot, giving it the same attention. Emmaline moved her free leg to squeeze her thighs together as much as possible.

Engrossed in what he was doing to her toes and her leg with his caresses, Blade hadn't seemed to be paying attention. With a low growl, he spread her thighs. "Don't hide that pussy from me, Emmaline. It drips for me." Reaching down, he swiped away some of her moisture and spread it over his hardness. His hand stroked from the base to the thick, purple head. He used her juices as lubricant. She dripped for him all the more.

She pulled at the restraints on her wrists. How strong could Velcro really be? He'd removed the ankle restraints easily enough. Delicious sensations pinged through her body, robbing her of strength. Focusing her energies, she pulled harder.

The bed dipped between her spread legs and his weight was on her. His hands pinned her arms in place. "Emmy, you're going to hurt yourself."

"I have to touch you," she said. She heard the plea and the desperation in her voice. "Or I have to touch myself if you're going to make me watch you." She thrust against him, rubbing her greedy clit on the hardness positioned through her slit. He was too long for her to be able to roll her hips and capture him. And he wasn't wearing a condom yet.

His lips closed over hers, stealing her breath and robbing her of her will. "I'm going to make you come, Emmaline. It's going to hurt a bit at first because I know you're going to fight it. I'll need you to relax. I'm going to make you scream until you pass out."

She didn't know what to say to that. If he was going to spank her pussy, then he was welcome to it. The stinging slaps brought exquisite pleasure. Mute, she nodded.

Blade knelt between her spread thighs. Fingers traced patterns through her thick wetness, moving the moisture into her crack. He pushed her legs up and apart, baring her to him.

She watched, enjoying the erotic caresses and the intense resolve on his face. The caress grew longer. He wandered into virgin territory. She clenched, her legs drawing together involuntarily.

He pushed them back apart. "Relax. I didn't find any lube in your suitcase. I need to get you wet."

Before she could ask or protest, he sank one finger into her anus. She yelped at the intrusion and pulled at her restraints. The action only pushed him further into her. The burning and the stretching exploded in a symphony of sharp pleasure. Emmaline gasped. Her muscles clenched, holding him inside.

With his other hand, Blade stroked her clit. Spanish words rolled from his tongue.

"I have no clue what you're saying," she panted. "But I like the way you say it."

He chuckled and shoved another finger inside, fucking her with slow thrusts as he circled her clit at the same lazy pace.

Emmaline pumped her hips, keeping time with him. "Oh, God," she said. "I'm going to come. Jesus fucking Christ, Blade! How did you know?"

The fingers withdrew. Emmaline whined in protest and was rewarded with a series of smacks to her pussy. If he was going to keep disciplining her like that, there was no way in hell she was going to stop making those noises.

He reached for the vibrator.

"No!" Her protest was sharp and heartfelt. "I want you inside me, Blade. No more games."

She tried to close her legs, but he was in the way. She tried to roll to the side, but he held her down with a strategic hand on her abdomen.

"What the hell good is having a Latino lover in his sexual prime if he won't put his dick where it's supposed to be? Are you afraid of me, Blade?"

He glanced up at her and back down, an amused curl to his full, sensual lips.

Emmaline followed his gaze, stopping at the dark hand on her sun-starved stomach. Something about the contrast felt so right, but she didn't have time to explore that avenue of thought. The tip of the vibrator nudged against her sphincter.

Remembering the way his fingers felt, she relaxed. He didn't ease it into her. One hard shove and he buried it to the hilt. Her body bowed, bearing down on it, wanting more.

Her mouth rounded and her eyes rolled back into her head. Oh, the burn was sharp and sweet. Blade turned the vibrator to its lowest setting.

Foil ripped. His tip nudged her opening. With excruciating lassitude, he entered her. The fullness was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. He said things, in English and in Spanish, but she understood nothing.

When he was completely buried, he stopped.

"Don't," she said, lifting her hips gingerly. She didn't know how to move with the gentle hum filling her ass. Between that, the feel of his cock, and the feel of his body against hers, it was too much to process. She wanted it all. "Don't stop."

He needed no more urging. His thrusts were frantic. Passion suffused his features. He gave all he had to her. Emmaline was floored by this gift from a virtual stranger, especially when he was the first man to ever look at her as if she was all that mattered.

The orgasm came quickly. Emmaline arched, her body stiffening, unable to move.

Reaching up, Blade peeled the Velcro to release her arms.

The waves spread, pummeling her harder and harder, or were those Blade's thrusts? She knew from prior experience that he wasn't finished with her. He wasn't going to come and he wasn't going to stop until he achieved his goal.

His control was amazing.

Orgasm melted into orgasm. Emmaline had no control over her body or the pleasure washing through her, stretching in an endless tide. She focused on his handsome face.

Sounds came from a long way off. Words mingled with cries. She didn't recognize the voices or the words. Her body writhed under his, bucking violently.

At last, he stiffened, crying out and collapsing on top of her.

Emmaline didn't pass out, but she was damn close.

The vibrator in her ass disappeared. The wonderful fullness left. Her body trembled uncontrollably. A sob escaped.

Hands stroked her arms and smoothed her hair away from her face. Lips kissed her temple and forehead. Blade enfolded her in his arms and murmured to her softly. Her cheek pressed against his chest.

"You are so passionate, *querida*. So wonderfully responsive.

Rational thought returned. Intense sexual experiences were known to tap into deep emotion. That's all that happened. Emmaline composed herself. "I take back what I said earlier."

The soothing motions of his hands didn't stop. "What did you say earlier?"

"You're not afraid of me. But you are a liar."

"Yes," he agreed. She felt his smile against her forehead. "You haven't passed out. We'll have to do this again when I have more time."

"I meant about the sex slave thing. You do want me to submit to you. You made me do it." She wasn't resentful. If anything, this turn of events puzzled her.

Shifting their position, he tilted her chin up with his thumb and forefinger. His dark brown eyes were somber. "Make no mistake, Emmaline Force. I do not require that you to submit to me, only to the pleasure I give to you. You see the distinction?"

She did see the distinction. He had also surrendered to the pleasure. Her response was interrupted.

Danger.

The word hung palpably in the air. Emmaline froze and sat up. Slowly, she turned, scanning the room for the source of the voice. More often than not, she heard spirits rather than seeing them. Even when she prepared herself, it was still disconcerting to hear a disembodied voice floating at her from nowhere. Aunt Emma warned her to always respond. So many people couldn't hear spirits that they gave up easily.

As compassionately as possible, she said, "Danger? What does that mean? Are you in danger? I won't hurt you. I want to help you."

He dreams of hurting you.

Blade sat up as well, watching Emmaline with unchecked curiosity. Her eyes scanned the room rapidly, stopping on nothing.

"Do you mean Blade?" She had so many questions, but she knew she had to proceed slowly.

The dark man.

She pointed to Blade. "Him?"

Something touched her, tugging at her hand. It was cold and emanated fear.

“Emmaline.” Steel edged Blade’s voice. He had said he didn’t believe in ghosts.

She motioned for him to be silent. “What is your name?”

Emmaline.

“That’s my name. What is your name? What were you called when you were alive?” She hoped the spirit knew it was dead. It seemed to be that of a woman, a very frightened woman.

There is hate in him. He will hurt you.

Curiously, she looked at Blade. He was livid. “He is angry,” she conceded, puzzled as to his quick change in emotion. “But he won’t hurt me.”

You must go before it is too late.

The coldness enveloped her, banishing any lingering heat from her encounter with Blade. She shivered uncontrollably. Her teeth chattered when she spoke. “Tell me your name.”

The spirit whirled around her, sucking every bit of heat from her body. She felt as if she had been thrust naked into the bottom of a deep snow drift.

“Enough!” Blade’s arms closed around her. “Rosalie, I warned you. Leave her alone.”

The presence vanished. She tried to ask the spirit to stay, but she was shaking too badly to speak again.

“Damn it, Emmy! What the hell are you doing?” He picked her up and put her underneath the rumpled covers on the bed, holding her close. He rubbed at her, trying to banish the ice that had become her skin. “You’re freezing.”

“Sh-Sh-She’s a-a-afraid.”

He pushed her face into his neck. “You’re so cold.”

Emmaline waited for the shivering to subside before she pulled her face away from him. “You know her name.”

Fear, uncertainty, and concern marked the planes of his face. “Yeah.” His lips pressed together, forming a white line.

“And you can hear her.”

“And sometimes I can see her,” he added. “She came with my house.”

“Blade, how could you lie about this? How could you tell Maria this was all in her imagination when you know for a fact you have a ghost haunting here?” Incredulity made her voice shrill.

"I don't want her to be afraid. I had it out with her after she attacked Maria. She's been harmless ever since." His arms tightened around her. "I don't want you pursuing this matter."

She shoved against him, but he didn't move. "Whether you like it or not, you have a ghost here. My job is to talk to her, to find out why she haunts this house, if she's the only one, and to see what I can do about sending her or them on their way."

He captured her hands and pressed them to the mattress. Shadowed by his dark hair, his face was an unyielding mask. "As far as I can tell, there is only one ghost. I have it under control."

Emmaline stopped struggling against him. Given his earlier lie, he lacked credibility. "She said you dream of hurting me. She said there is hate in you and that I should leave before it's too late."

Shock replaced the hardness in his face. He released her arms and rolled away to sit on the edge of the bed. She sat up and touched his back, running her hand along the length of it reassuringly.

"Blade, I didn't say those things. I don't know why, but she's afraid of you."

His laugh was humorless and short. "Most people are afraid of me, especially once they see my temper. You make it a joke."

"Your anger?"

"Yes." He put his hand over his eyes. "Most people don't push my buttons. Most people aren't aroused by my anger." He pushed away from her, standing to pull on his boxers and jeans. She had to strain to hear his next words, which were quiet and pain-filled. "I did dream of hurting you."

Emmaline scrambled out of bed to dress, feeling suddenly self-conscious. It wasn't every day a man took her to heaven and then confessed to having violent dreams about her. "Why?" she asked without looking at him.

Why did she feel betrayed?

He didn't answer. The click of the door closing behind his retreating figure effectively ended their conversation.

Chapter 5

Present

Emmaline successfully avoided crying over her ridiculous encounter with Blade. What was wrong with her? Why did she care how he treated her? He wasn't behaving any differently than he had treated her since that New Year's Eve party. She ran up the front steps of his white and blue house, briefly entertaining the desire to paint it a lovely shade of pink, and yanked open the ornate front door.

Upstairs in the hall, she hesitated between turning right, which would take her to her room and the guest bathroom, or left, which would take her to that incredible whirlpool bathtub. Blade never got home before dinner, so she had several hours before she needed to be out of his house. There was no doubt in her mind that his offer of a room had expired. Well, if Matt wanted her to stay, he was going to have to let her stay at his house. After all, he liked to brag that every room at the resort was booked solid for the next year.

She cleaned out the tub, which was covered with a thin layer of dust. It obviously hadn't been used in a while. While it filled, she went back to her room and gathered her things. One thing she preferred about Maria's house and all the guest rooms was the fact that the bathrooms were stocked with bathing products. A search through Blade's cabinets revealed nothing, not even Epsom salts.

Emmaline washed her hair first, then turned on the whirlpool jets and settled in, mentally listing the things needed to make this an ultimate bathing experience. Perhaps she would send him a gift basket with a neck pillow and different kinds of bubble bath in it. She leaned into the jets behind her and rested her head against the rim of the tub. It was definitely made for someone taller than she. Maybe include some sort of seat...no, that made it

seem like the basket was for her. A gift like that would only make him mad when she wasn't around to see it.

When her skin turned into a pink raisin, she reluctantly shut off the jets and emerged from the water. She took her time with her toilette, dressing with care.

Then she shoved everything into her bag to take it back to her room. She fully anticipated having to drive tonight, so she had chosen a comfortable skirt and a loose, flowing shirt that would move and breathe during the drive. And if she drove until she was too tired, then she could lose the skirt and sleep in the shirt. While Matt didn't want her to leave, she suspected he hadn't changed his mind about letting her stay near Dashiell with Rosalie's ghost on the warpath.

Rounding the corner that would take her into the bedroom, she saw Blade sitting on the corner of his bed with his hands folded and resting on his lap. He jumped up when he saw her. "Emmy."

"I'm leaving," she assured him without stopping. "You don't have to worry about me being in your house anymore."

"We don't have any open rooms."

She would be glad to be gone. She continued to the guest room and grabbed the handle of her suitcase. Everything was ready to go since she hadn't unpacked. Her eyes fell on the extra bag, still sitting underneath the vanity next to the window seat.

She took a deep breath, added the bag to her shoulder, and carried everything from the room. Blade stood in the hall, blocking the stairs with his lanky body and forcing her to stop and look at him.

"I talked to Matt."

She put her bags down and crossed her arms over her chest in a purely defensive gesture, waiting for him to finish. Part of the reason for her silence was that she didn't trust herself to talk to him. Either she would say something completely stupid to set him off or she would say something completely pathetic, maybe confess she was in love with him, and end up in tears.

"I told him you could stay here."

Emmaline blinked at him. "Why?"

He came over to her side of the hall and sat on the windowsill next to her. Light filtered through the strands of his hair, glowing with a paler shade

of dark brown. Emmaline ached with wanting to run her fingers through that thick mass to explore this backlit effect. In her mind, an image flashed of her standing between his legs. His thighs would brush hers and his hands would rest on her hips because he wouldn't be able to refrain from touching her. When he had enough, he would draw her closer, wrap his arms around her, and kiss her tenderly.

Abruptly, she shook away the image. The longing wasn't so easily purged. She rubbed her hands over her arms, but it did nothing for the pain of being close to someone in proximity, yet so far apart in all other respects.

"I don't know what Matt has told you, but he and Maria are having some trouble adjusting to the recent changes in their lives. Having a child has changed the dynamic of their relationship. It's nothing they can't work out, but having you there would put more of a strain on them, which you wouldn't do on purpose, I know. It would be an unintended consequence."

It was more than he'd said to her at any one time since their estrangement. His comebacks were usually a single sentence, and anything he had said during their brief bouts of sex consisted of growls to move clothing out of the way. Emmaline bit back a sarcastic retort.

She repeated her question. "Why?"

"Because you wouldn't have meant it."

She wondered if he intentionally misunderstood her question. Deciding to give him the benefit of the doubt, she said, "I meant, why would you agree to allow me to stay here, given the fact that you very much dislike me?"

He breathed deeply, thinking. Emmaline tapped her foot impatiently. He reached over and put a restraining hand on her arm. "Give me a minute. I don't want to say this wrong."

"You have an IQ over 160. How could your brain work so slowly?"

Perturbed, he glared at her. "It's not that I don't know what I want to say, it's that I'm not sure how you're going to take the various ways I could phrase my sentiments."

"Just say it." She snapped at him. His hand on her arm was warm. It sent her senses into overdrive, and she desperately wished she didn't feel so desperate. "Stop overanalyzing everything."

His mouth twitched, but Emmaline couldn't tell whether it was in amusement or if he was displeased. "I don't hate you. Maybe I took too long

to let things go. Maybe you haven't let it go, either. Every time I see you, you make a point of doing or saying something to piss me off. I got in the habit of looking like I'm ignoring you."

He stood, stretching his legs and turning to look out the window. "I've never ignored you. I remember every single thing you've ever said to me. But, Emmy, when I let you know you're getting to me, you go in for the kill. It's like you're not happy until I've completely lost my temper and I'm yelling and throwing things."

Throwing things like her body against a wall. Her pussy clenched in anticipation.

"I don't like the way we treat each other."

"It sounds like you have even less reason to let me stay here." Emmaline's voice was quiet, reserved. He was dead to rights in his estimate of her motives. She made a point to piss him off every single time she saw him. She had no idea how to respond.

Now he looked her in the eye. "You said you wanted my friendship."

Uncertain where this was heading, she nodded.

"We can't be friends unless we change the way we interact with each other. You can't bait me like you do."

"Okay. Then you can't shut me out anymore, Blade. I don't know why, but I'd rather face you at your worst than when you do that." She held his gaze until he nodded. If she was going to forbid his only defense mechanism, then she needed to make sure she didn't give him a reason to use it.

Blade opened his mouth to say something, but a loud creak, followed by a terrific crash startled them both. By the time Emmaline made it to the bottom of the curving staircase, Blade was already assessing the damage.

The walnut hutch lay partially across the matching dining room table. Splinters of wood and broken glass mixed in with the fragments of the crockery that had been on display in the hutch. Emmaline helped Blade right the heavy piece of furniture. Most of the items that had been stored in the cupboards along the bottom were still in their boxes, so they were unharmed. However, every single dish he'd artfully arranged in the glass-fronted cabinet was nothing more than a pile of shards.

Emmaline hadn't noticed much in the dining room the previous evening. It seemed a seldom-used room, and she had been more interested in the

architecture of the house than the furniture within. She picked up a piece of delicately flowered china.

"It was my grandmother's." The quiet way Blade said the words spoke volumes.

"I'm sorry," she said. She rested a tentative hand on his stiff shoulder, wanting to offer him more comfort, but knowing he wouldn't accept it. "Maybe it's not a good idea for me to stay here."

He shook his head, but he didn't look at her. His eyes moved over the mess. "You didn't do this."

Emmaline closed her eyes. "We both know she was quiet until I got here. For whatever reason, she objects to me."

"She objects to us." His fists clenched and unclenched. He was powerless. There was no way to control a ghost bent on destruction.

He left the room briefly and returned with an empty cardboard box. Emmaline crouched next to him and helped pick up the destroyed plates, bowls, and cups. "Like you said, you're not going anywhere. She's going to have to get used to you as well."

"I think I know why she's doing this."

Blade held up a hand, a mutinous expression on his face. "It doesn't matter why she's doing it. She can't continue to behave this way or I will torch this house." He lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "Do you hear me, Rosalie? If you break anything else, I will burn this place to the ground. Where will you be then?"

Emmaline looked at him curiously. "She's not bound to the house."

"It anchors her. It's where she always comes to rest. She's never gone for long."

Emmaline's jaw dropped. Her actions halted. Though he had lied about Rosalie before, Emmaline hadn't suspected he had been lying about Rosalie's docility this time. "You said there's been no activity for the past eighteen months."

"I lied."

Obviously. "Why?" It wasn't like he had anything to gain from keeping this from everyone.

He exhaled impatiently. "She's been around, but she hasn't done anything, not really. Mostly, she hangs around here. Sometimes she makes noises or drops the temperature, but not much and not often. I figured if I

was the only person she was bothering, then no one else needed to worry about it. Especially Maria. She and Matt have been so happy. And now they have Dash. I didn't want her to worry needlessly."

The reason he had come to her defense last night when Matt had accused her of stirring up activity became clear. He had known Rosalie hadn't gone away. She resumed picking up the mess. "Is this why you haven't had any women here?"

Now he stopped, staring at the shard he held. "Who told you that?"

Maybe she shouldn't have said that. Emmaline squirmed uncomfortably for a second before deciding to obfuscate. "So you have had women over. How has Rosalie behaved when they were here? Is it just me or does she try this kind of thing whenever you have female companionship?"

This time when the muscle on his jaw twitched, she knew it was because he was upset. Whether he was angry with Emmaline or Rosalie was unclear. Perhaps he wasn't pleased with either of them.

He used half of a plate to scoop up smaller fragments. "I haven't brought any women here, but I have dated." His tone and his posture were defensive.

"I assumed as much," she said. "I was just wondering if she was like this with any woman in your home or if she saved her tempest for me."

"She saves it for you."

A large part of her was glad he hadn't brought women to his house. If Rosalie was still targeting Emmaline, that meant Blade wasn't serious about any of the women he dated. While Emmaline knew she had missed her chance with him, she couldn't bear to see him with anyone else.

The box was full, so Blade produced another.

Emmaline cleaned up the rest of the mess in a thoughtful silence, while Blade shot her apprehensive glances.

Rosalie was fixated on Blade. Did she consider him to be her unfaithful husband and Emmaline to be one of the myriad women he had thrown in her face? Did she know the difference between Jonathan Edmunds, who had died sometime in the nineteen thirties, and Blade, who looked and behaved nothing like her late husband?

"You scare me when you do that."

The unexpected comment pulled her from her musings. She looked more closely at the sharply pointed rubble in her hands. There was nothing

to indicate she wasn't being careful in the way she handled the china. "When I do what?"

"When you look like you're coming up with a plan. Your last one didn't work out so well."

"No," she agreed. "I thought I'd be able to manipulate you better than I did."

"Manipulate me?" His chuckle was low and quiet. "That's honest, at least."

She swept up the last dusting of shards and tossed them into the second box. "I think we can resolve this problem if you cooperate with me."

He shook his head. "No, Emmy. Don't do this. You're here on vacation. Enjoy your time off. Go jogging, sleep in late, play with the baby, swim, learn to ride a horse, but leave the ghosts alone."

Her temper frayed. "Blade, she's not going to leave us alone. Look what she's done to your grandmother's china. This can't be repaired. It's gone forever, and even though you're trying to hide it, I know this upsets you."

"It's just a bunch of plates and bowls. I can buy more." He avoided looking too closely into the boxes. They each hefted one. Emmaline followed Blade out the back door.

She exhaled her frustration. "And more and more and more. You have only two options. You can find out what holds Rosalie to this plane of existence and help her move on or you can let her dictate your life to you."

"Aren't you being a little melodramatic?" He threw the question over his shoulder.

"She's going to act like this any time she feels like you might stray from her. Seriously, Blade, are you going to become a hermit? What if you meet someone you want to share your life with? Rosalie isn't going to take kindly to that kind of threat. She's an intelligent being. She's thoughtful and deliberate. It would only be a matter of time before she attacks the woman you love." Which wasn't Emmaline. For some reason, that stabbed.

He hefted his box into a dumpster and took the second box from Emmaline. "Emmy, please don't take this the wrong way, but your theory is flawed. How can she see you as a threat?"

"We slept together. How can she not?"

The second box hit the bottom of the metal receptacle with a crunch and a clang. “What we’ve done together won’t make it into the true love hall of fame.”

His words were true and his tone wasn’t at all accusatory, but Emmaline winced anyway. She walked the short distance back to his house, but stopped short on the back steps. Blade nearly ran into her, but backed down when he realized she’d stopped. When she turned to face him, she was almost eye-level.

“She knows you find me attractive. She gets into your dreams, into your mind, so she likely knows most of your thoughts. Maybe she objects to you picturing me naked.”

Blade opened his mouth to protest, but closed it without squeaking a word. A slow blush started in his cheeks.

He didn’t have to say anything. She knew his questions. “I knew you were there in the living room at Matt and Maria’s before you said anything. I sense presences, Blade, corporeal or spiritual. I knew you were there the moment you walked in, but I didn’t say anything. I wanted you to make the first move. I didn’t trust myself to not say something wrong and designed to drive you away so that I didn’t have to look at you and feel guilty for the way I’ve treated you.”

He took her hand in his. “Emmy.”

She held up the other hand, bracing it against his chest. Sparks flowed through her at both points of contact. She wondered if he felt them, too. “All you did was look at me. You don’t stand there and stare at someone whose appearance you find displeasing.” Lifting her other hand away from his, she continued. “Then I felt her and she wasn’t happy. Last night, she knocked my bag down. I told her I was leaving in the morning, and except for keeping the room a little chilly, she left me alone after that. I’m surprised she didn’t bother you.”

“She never comes in my bedroom.” He made no move to back away from her or to brush her hand from where it rested on his chest. “I don’t know why she avoids that room, but it’s the only one she’s never come into.”

“I have ideas about that, but we can’t discuss them where she might overhear. As I said, she’s intelligent, sentient. She will hear anything we talk about and react accordingly. That’s part of where I went wrong last time. I

underestimated her intelligence and her determination. That's not a mistake I'll make twice."

"All this so you can sleep over at my house?"

Emmaline couldn't tell if he was amused or hovering on the edge of a tempest of his own. She pulled her hand away, suddenly self-conscious about the way she was touching him. "She holds you prisoner. Part of this is my fault. I owe you some peace."

He stared at something on the ground and rubbed his palms on his jeans. "I don't want anything to happen to you. Losing my grandmother's china is upsetting, but it's not the end of the world. If you were hurt, or anyone else for that matter, I don't think I'd handle it quite so well."

She refrained from reading into his admission. They were friends now. "Will you at least listen to my ideas?"

"I can't promise you anything, but I know you're going to do something crazy and probably stupid whether or not I agree to help you."

A long, slow grin lifted her lips. "Perhaps you know me better than I thought."

Emmaline sent him up to take a shower while she finished sweeping and vacuuming the floor. They were due for dinner at Maria's in half an hour and Blade still smelled like horses and sweat. He came down in cargo shorts and a loose, stylish t-shirt bearing Paradise Island's latest logo. Emmaline looked him up and down curiously. He looked as if he was fresh from the pages of a fashion magazine. Once again, her fingers itched to touch him.

He fidgeted under her perusal. "What are you staring at?"

Emmaline recovered enough to say, "I've never seen you wear anything but your cowboy uniform." Plain t-shirts, flannels, and jeans. Always jeans.

He frowned down at his outfit. "You don't like it?"

"No, it's...I...You look..." Damn sexy. The shirt and the shorts tightened in all the right places, accenting the ropes of muscles twining their way along his limbs and torso. She didn't want to say that out loud. After all, they were finally getting along. "You look fine. You threw me for a second. I didn't think you had any other kinds of clothes."

"I have a suit and tie, but it's a little warm outside."

She caught his humor and smiled. "Were we supposed to dress up?"

He looked her up and down. "You're wearing a skirt, Emmy."

She shrugged. "I wear skirts all the time. I have nice legs."

His eyes lit in agreement, but he said nothing. Instead he motioned toward the door. "Let's go before we get into an argument." *Just so we can have sex.*

Emmaline heard the unspoken qualifier in his statement. While she would love to feel him against her and inside her, she wanted him on different terms. She followed him out of the house. Before they knocked on Maria's door, she laid her hand gently on his arm.

Emotions flickered through his eyes as he stared at her hand. At last, he lifted his gaze to her face.

"You do look nice, Blade. I really mean that."

The way he looked at her made her catch her breath. For a moment, she thought he was going to kiss her. Then he turned and knocked on the door.

Maria answered. She raised a brow at Blade. "You're dressed..."

Behind Blade, Emmaline frantically shook her head, warning Maria to not tread that path. Maria caught the message in time. "You look nice, both of you. I should have changed, too."

"You look fine," Emmaline said as she moved past Maria and into the house. "But tired. How about if Blade cooks tomorrow night? He's due for a turn."

Blade threw a reproving glance at Emmaline over Maria's head, which was a feat all by itself, given the height disparity.

She ignored him. "You once said Blade was a better chef than you. I'd like to see him prove it."

Maria tensed, probably waiting for Blade's temper to explode. Emmaline's tone might have been teasing, but Blade had a long, vocal history of objecting to her teasing.

"Fine," he said. "I will, but you have to help."

Emmaline lifted a shoulder in careless agreement, but she didn't say anything because Matt came in just then.

He pressed a kiss to Maria's cheek. "I think you'll find Em more of a hindrance than a help in the kitchen."

Left to her own devices, Emmaline generally used the microwave or ordered out. That didn't mean she was inept when it came to the kitchen. "I'm not that bad."

Blade smiled. "We'll see."

Matt spread his hands wide in Emmaline's direction. "I'm sorry about not bringing Dashiell over this afternoon. He woke up only long enough to eat. He's asleep right now." He cast a nervous glance in Maria's direction. "I think we're in trouble tonight."

Emmaline drew her brows together at Matt's uneasy demeanor. Blade's reasoning for keeping her around had been because he thought Maria and Matt were having problems. "That's okay. I'm not upset about that. I'll be here for two weeks, so I'll have plenty of time with him."

"Great. Now that we've cleared that up, let's go. The food is getting cold." Maria hustled them off in the direction of the kitchen. "If you don't mind, I thought we'd do things a little less formally today and eat in the kitchen." Her tone didn't leave room for arguments.

When they entered the kitchen, Emmaline saw signs everywhere of the stress Maria was feeling. She said nothing and she made a concerted effort to avoid staring at the dishes piled on counters that were normally spotless.

Though she was quiet, Maria seemed on edge, poised to go off at any time. By silent agreement, neither Emmaline nor Blade made mention of Rosalie.

Emmaline was just finishing the last bite of peach pie when Maria pushed back her chair, scraping it across the wooden floor. She crossed her arms and projected fury in all directions. "What the hell is going on?"

Taken by surprise, Emmaline stared at Maria. With respect to the food and the conversation, dinner had been pleasant. Blade and Matt stared as well.

Finally, Blade spoke. "What are you talking about?"

She folded her arms across her chest and spat fire from her eyes, singeing both Emmaline and Blade. "The two of you haven't so much as looked cross-eyed at each other the entire night. Has the world come to an end or has Matt warned you to be on your best behavior because I haven't been myself lately?"

Without waiting for a response, Maria turned her venom on Matt. Her dark eyes flashed and her cheeks flushed crimson, turning her skin a very becoming shade of cinnamon. She pushed her chair back suddenly to stand. It fell, hitting the floor with a resounding thud, but nobody paid attention to it. Maria jabbed a finger in Matt's direction. "I don't need you to go around

behind my back and tell people how to act. I don't need to be treated with kid gloves."

Tears spattered down her cheeks. She ran from the room.

Matt's head drooped and he put his hand over his eyes. Blade stared open-mouthed at the empty doorway.

Emmaline took in the helpless expressions on both men's faces and rose from the table. She found Maria upstairs, sobbing into her pillow. Tactfully, Emmaline closed the door. She sat on the edge of the mattress next to Maria and smoothed her hair back.

They stayed like that until Maria calmed. She stared, glassy-eyed, at the ceiling, not bothering to dab her eyes or blow her nose with the tissue Emmaline set on the bed next to her.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

Emmaline bit her lip. She wasn't sure how far she should push Maria. Her friend's pain tore at her heart. She wanted to help her. "Is there someone else you want to talk to? I could drive you anywhere."

"No."

"Maria, I think you should talk to someone. If you don't feel comfortable with me, then there must be someone you trust."

The sobs started anew. "If I say anything to you, you'll tell Matt and there are some things I would rather he didn't know." Her words were difficult to discern, coming through the tears and the heaving breaths like they were.

"I'm your friend, too." Emmaline reminded herself to not be offended. Her friendship with Maria was new and not as strong as her friendship with Matt.

Maria sat up and regarded Emmaline through puffy, red eyes. Misery lined her face. "But you've been his best friend for ten years. I know you and I will never be that close."

Emmaline felt a pang in her heart. "I hope that's not true." She scooted the box of tissues closer to Maria. "Look, nothing you tell me is going to leave this room."

Maria took some time to get her breathing under control before answering. Her long, soft black hair curtained her face. "Are you sure? I don't want to put you in an awkward position."

"I'm sure. If Matt finds out anything you say to me, it will be because you told him, not me." Matt wouldn't expect Emmaline to break a confidence like this.

Worrying the creases in her jeans, Maria considered the offer. "I don't think Matt's in love with me anymore."

Emmaline's eyebrows rose in surprise. "What makes you think that?" If anything, Matt appeared to be more in love with his bride than ever before.

"He's different now. It's like he thinks I'm fragile and he can't touch me or let me do anything that might break me. He's always checking up on me at work. He tries to limit the amount of time I work. If I stay up 'too late,' he tells me to go to bed. If he thinks I'm not eating enough, he'll remind me I'm eating for two." She stopped to blow her nose.

Emmaline waited for her to continue. She knew Maria needed to get it all out.

"He treats me like a child, not a wife. I can't remember the last time he even tried to kiss me. Our sex life is nonexistent, even though the doctor gave us the green light more than two months ago. He wouldn't even make love to me after the second trimester. I think my size turned him off and I think he still doesn't find me attractive because I haven't lost all of the weight I've gained."

Personally, Emmaline thought Maria looked wonderful and she knew Matt thought so as well. She wondered why Matt was living a celibate life when there was no need.

"Has he said anything to you?"

Emmaline shook her head, and then realized Maria was crying into her tissues and couldn't see her. "Nothing would substantiate anything you've said. Maria, have you talked to Matt about this? It's obvious the two of you are having problems. I think if you talked to Matt about it all, you might find that most or all of your fears are unfounded. From where I'm sitting, I see that Matt adores you."

Maria popped up suddenly and paced the length of the room. The bereft woman was gone, replaced by someone bitter and brittle. "That's the problem. He adores me. He puts me on a pedestal. I'm not human anymore. I'm not his wife. I'm an object, a thing he has to watch over." She stopped suddenly and fixed Emmaline with a look that was nearly a glare. "Do you think he regrets marrying me?"

Emmaline didn't hesitate. "Not for a second."

Steely resolve squared Maria's shoulders. "I've been dying to ask you something for the longest time, but I haven't had the courage before."

Emmaline cocked her head to the side uncertainly. "Okay," she said slowly. She hoped the topic wasn't veering to her relationship with Blade.

Her lips trembled, but she managed to keep her voice steady. "Have you ever slept with Matt? I mean, was there ever anything between the two of you?"

"No. Why?" Emmaline asked the question carefully. She thought Maria knew everything there was to know already.

"He was dating his first wife when you met him, right?"

"Yeah." Maria's rapid-fire spitting of questions put Emmaline on edge. Emmaline struggled to not show any emotion that might upset Maria.

"She didn't mind your friendship with him?"

Emmaline tucked her legs underneath her. "I was her friend, too."

"She wasn't jealous?"

Ah, the heart of the matter. "Are you jealous of his friendship with me?"

Maria stopped to stare out the window at the sun as it began to dip below the horizon, streaking the sky with all kinds of beautifully sad colors. Her answer was so soft Emmaline strained to hear it. "Sometimes. When the two of you are together, you sometimes act as if nothing else exists. You have all these looks and signals. You can have an entire conversation without speaking."

They could. They often did. That happened with people who knew one another well and had been through hell and back together. "You've only known him for a little over eighteen months, including the time you spent getting to know each other over the phone. Is this why you don't want me staying here? You think some latent attraction is suddenly going to spring up between Matt and me? Because I can guarantee it's not going to happen. He's the brother I never had."

Maria sank down into the rocking chair next to the window and put her head in her hands. Her shoulders shook with new sobs. Emmaline moved to perch on the arm of the chair, guiding Maria's head to rest on her lap.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Maria wept. "Everything was fine and then I got so mad at all of you, especially poor Matt. He puts up

with so much from me. And now I can't stop crying. I feel so incredibly stupid."

Emmaline stroked Maria's back. "You go ahead and cry until you're finished. I'm not going anywhere." She held Maria for more than an hour, listening to her talk about all the unexpected and unexplained emotions she was feeling. Finally, she reached a calm place and the room was silent.

"Have you talked to your doctor about this?"

"Why would she care?"

"I don't think you're alone with the way you feel, Maria. My cousin's wife went through something very similar last year after she had her baby. Apparently it's more common than you know and there is help out there."

Maria sat up and appeared to consider the suggestion, but she said nothing about it. She dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose. Then she pinned Emmaline with a curious look.

"To completely change the subject, what's going on with you and Blade? I don't think I've ever seen the two of you get along so well. Even sleeping together didn't seem to do anything but make the silence uncomfortable. Or Blade would disappear altogether."

Emmaline blushed sheepishly at Maria's accurate description. "We decided to be friends."

Maria's disbelieving stare was interrupted by a knock at the door. Emmaline was immensely relieved. This wasn't a conversation she wanted to have, not when her feelings were still so unsettled.

The door opened and Matt poked his head inside. "Honey, I'm sorry to bother you, but Dash is hungry."

Maria motioned him inside. Blade followed Matt into the room, the question in his eyes directed toward Emmaline. She met his question with a smile, signaling that things were improved. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Are you about ready to go?" he asked as she moved to let Matt get in closer to Maria. "It's late."

Emmaline turned back to Maria. "Call if you need me. I'll leave my cell on."

Tears brimmed in Maria's eyes as she looked at Emmaline. "You don't have to stay at Blade's. You can stay in your room here."

"She's fine," Blade said. "Anyway, all of her stuff is at my house."

It was Matt's turn to raise a brow at Emmaline.

She wasn't going to answer his unasked questions. Besides, she both wanted and needed to be closer to Blade. Maybe he wasn't hers. Maybe he would never be hers. That didn't mean she couldn't dream. "Blade's right. It's late and it's just easier to stay there. Think about what I said, Maria."

Maria nodded, but it was the reluctant kind that never seemed to produce results.

Emmaline followed Blade to his house, lost in thought.

In the upstairs hall, Blade clamped a restraining hand on Emmaline's arm, preventing her from entering her room. "What's going on with Maria? You were with her for a long time."

"You already know she and Matt are having problems." His hand was warm on her arm. She wished he would touch her in more places. She wished he would draw her into his arms and kiss her the way he used to.

"Emmy." Insistent with a side of exasperation. She drove him there so quickly. "She won't talk to me."

Maria and Blade had always been close. Though she was only four years older, Maria had filled in as the mother figure when their mother died. He was hurting right along with Maria.

She closed her hand over Blade's, giving it a light squeeze she hoped came off as reassuring. She wasn't going to break her word to Maria, and that included not sharing her worries and secrets with her brother. "She talked to me. It's a start."

His face darkened. Her heart beat faster. How she missed his temper. A brief vision of him throwing her over his shoulder and tying her to his bed flashed in her mind.

But he wouldn't do that. He wouldn't so easily destroy the fragile friendship they were trying to build. Before he could say a word, she lifted a hand to his cheek. "She's my friend, Blade. You can't expect me to share things she doesn't want shared."

He stared at her for a long time. Emotions played across his features, a sight he had denied her for so long. "I just want to help her. I can't stand seeing her like this."

"Neither can I."

His nod was brief. He squeezed the hand she hadn't removed from his face and dropped it to her side. "Goodnight, Emmaline."

It had been an emotionally tiring day. Emmaline was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

A scratching sound awoke her. She glanced at the digital clock to check the time. Two fifteen. She mumbled a quiet plea for Rosalie to hush and went back to sleep. The next noise came minutes later, but Emmaline could no longer see the clock, since that was the next thing Rosalie moved. She lay there while Rosalie scooted items around and made random noises, hoping she'd tire herself out sooner rather than later. At three thirty, Emmaline grunted her exasperation.

Climbing from underneath the comforter she'd pulled around her to combat Rosalie's penchant for stealing her body heat, Emmaline went in search of a quiet room. However, Rosalie followed her from room to room. While she didn't break anything, she made enough noise to keep Emmaline awake. It was after four when Emmaline remembered that Blade's room was the only one Rosalie wouldn't enter.

Reluctantly, she turned the knob to Blade's door without knocking. She threw her comforter and pillow on the settee along the wall across from the bed and went over to let him know she was planning to sleep there. His face was obscured by the dark, but enough moonlight streamed in from the unadorned windows in the front of the house so that Emmaline could see he wasn't wearing a shirt. She admired the way the silver light highlighted the dips and valleys delineating his considerably well-muscled chest before shaking herself out of her trance.

"Blade," she whispered. He didn't stir. She touched his shoulder lightly and said his name again. He was a sound sleeper. She knew this. Maria had told her during some conversation when the topic had been relevant. Emmaline had never actually slept in a bed with Blade. Tentatively, she shook his shoulder, trying to rouse him as gently as she could.

Without warning, he reached up and grabbed her, pulling her across his body as he rolled on top of her and pressed his lips to hers. Shocked, Emmaline didn't react. Blade moved his lips over hers lightly. Little waves of pleasure spread through her, dousing any inclination she might have had to stop him. His hands moved up her arms and down her sides, stroking the flame of her desire even further.

Then his mouth left hers, moving across her cheek and down her neck. She arched closer, threading her fingers through his hair and moaning

faintly as his hand closed over the swell of her breast. He rested the weight of his head on her chest, not moving.

Emmaline frowned at this unexpected halt. "Blade?"

No answer.

She pushed at his shoulder. "Blade?"

Still no answer. Bemused, she realized he was asleep. He probably hadn't been awake at all. He hadn't said a word the entire time she'd been in the room. She shoved at him, trying to get him to roll over, but he didn't respond. Giving up, she flipped the edge of the sheet over her legs and fell asleep with him still half on top of her. She felt warm and safe and wanted, even if that last part was a dreamy delusion.

Sunlight streamed into the room, but it was the fluttering of his eyelashes as they opened against the side of her breast that woke her. The shirt she wore had shifted during the night, partially exposing her chest.

He raised his head and stared at her, mystified.

She smiled in reply. "You are one sound sleeper."

He sat up, lifting the rest of his body from her. Welcoming the new freedom of movement, Emmaline stretched and yawned.

Blade unabashedly watched her breasts strain against the light material that covered them. He sure as hell wasn't looking anywhere else.

"What happened? How did you get here?"

Emmaline rolled over and pulled the covers up to replace the warmth that left when he moved away from her. "Your ghost is against the idea of me sleeping. I came in here to see if I could sleep on your settee, but you pulled me into bed with you, felt me up, and then fell asleep. If you ever were awake."

He frowned. She couldn't see it with her eyes closed and her back turned, but she could feel it. "I did what?"

She grinned, but didn't open her eyes. "Most people who do strange things while they're sleeping just walk or talk. I've never heard of this before. Is this something you've always done?"

"Emmy!"

Hearing the desperation in his voice, she reluctantly rolled toward him and opened her eyes. Damn, he was sexy with his hair messed up like that. "What?"

“Be serious.”

“I am. Can I go back to sleep? She kept me up for more than two hours before I ran for cover.”

He winced. “Do I owe you an apology?”

Emmaline smiled. “No, Blade. You don’t.”

“You said I... That I... touched you inappropriately.”

“No, I said you felt me up. You kissed me, quite well for someone who was asleep, then went to sleep on top of me. I’d like to think it was the fact that you weren’t awake in the first place and not the fact that you found me exceptionally boring that caused you to do that.” Plus, it made the whole incident funny instead of something disturbing she would have to think about later, a rejection she couldn’t handle.

“I’m sorry, Emmy. I had no idea.”

“Well, that’s less bruising to the ego.” She turned her back to him and curled up under the covers.

“You’re not mad at me?”

“No, Blade. I’m just tired. If you don’t mind, I’d like to sleep here.” She closed her eyes.

* * * *

He left her alone to sleep, heading to the walk-in closet to gather his clothes, then to the bathroom to change. How was she not mad at him? He shook his head, perplexed by the fact that she seemed more amused by his unconscious behavior than upset.

So far she seemed to have meant the cease-fire between them. He hadn’t intended to push the issue. However, there was one thing on his mind besides wondering if she had kissed him back.

The favor he wanted to ask would have to wait. She was sound asleep when he emerged from the bathroom and he couldn’t bring himself to wake her. Instead, he left a note next to the coffee maker.

* * * *

A soft weight sinking into the mattress next to Emmaline woke her. She opened her eyes to find a tiny fist waving dangerously close to her face.

“Dash!” She leaned up to look down at him.

Matt’s larger form cast a shadow in the bright sunlight so that she couldn’t make out his features. “Since he slept so much yesterday, I thought you’d like to see him when he was actually awake.”

Her answer was in the affirmative. “Let me throw on some clothes.”

She hurried to her room. The mess that greeted her brought Emmaline to a shocked halt at the threshold. Rosalie had rained her clothes down on the room chaotically. Shirts, skirts, and shorts were scattered all over, covering nearly every square inch of available space. She spied a bra and several pairs of underwear hanging from the ceiling fan.

“Fucking bitch!” She couldn’t stop the curse any more than she could control the volume. Matt rushed from Blade’s room. He pushed Emmaline out of the way. His eyes darted about the room. “It looks like Rosalie unpacked your clothes.”

Emmaline took a few tentative steps into the room. The surreal sight made her feel like she was floating instead of walking. That changed when she stubbed her toe against her suitcase. It was completely ruined. Rosalie had torn it open through the top to access her clothing.

“You could have used the zipper!”

Color drained from Matt’s face. “Dash!”

Emmaline put a hand on his arm. “He’s fine. She stays out of Blade’s room. Help me clean this up and move my things in there.”

Matt hesitated before reaching for the higher items. He moved quickly. “Is that why you were in there?”

“Of course. Why else?”

He shrugged. “You were getting along so well last night. I didn’t even look for you in this room.”

“So that means we’re sleeping together?”

Again, he shrugged. “I saw the looks you threw him when you thought no one was watching, not that it was any different from what you normally do. You were getting along so well, I didn’t think you would come back here and do one of those fight-and-fuck things you guys usually do.”

The temperature in the room suddenly dropped. Emmaline and Matt could both see their breath when they exhaled. “You need to stop talking about Blade and me.”

“Why?”

Whore. The word hung in the air, stopping Matt in his tracks. Emmaline wasn't surprised. If anything, she hurried her pace. If Rosalie could push over an entire cabinet filled with dishes, there was no telling what else she could do.

"That's why." She piled her clothes in Matt's arms and sent him into Blade's room. For some reason, and Emmaline was grateful for whatever it was, Rosalie hadn't opened the bag with her toiletry products or the one with the sex toys. She slung those over her shoulder and followed Matt out of the room.

Emmaline played with Dash while Matt folded her clothes and piled them on the couch. "You don't have to fold my underthings," she said. "I won't be offended."

"I've done it before. And I have a wife." Under his breath, he added, "Though if things keep going the way they are, I might not have a daughter."

"Care to elaborate on that statement?"

Matt tossed the rest of her clothes into a pile and took a seat on the bed next to Emmaline. "You spent a fair bit of time with Maria last night."

Emmaline kept her tone light to keep Dash entertained, but her words were not. "I think she's depressed. Have her talk to her doctor."

"How can she be depressed? I've been as thoughtful and supportive as I can be. I try to make sure she gets enough rest and that she's not too stressed. I take care of Dash most of the time, which I love doing. Sometimes I think she's happy about that, other times, I think she hates me."

"It's not about you or Dash. It's hormonal. I told her to talk to her doctor, but I don't think she's very willing. I think she thinks she's a bad person for feeling the way she does, and I know she hates the way she treats you." Emmaline looked up at Matt, letting him see her concern. "She needs help. I'm willing to take her if she doesn't want to go with you. Or I can fly in a specialist." A loud thump sounded from the hallway. "One who isn't afraid of ghosts."

Dash waved in Matt's direction and worked to make a squeak. Matt encouraged his son and chatted back. In the midst of praising Dash's coordinated kicking and arm waving, Matt continued questioning Emmaline.

"So, what's going on here? Was I right to kick you out?"

Emmaline laughed. "I think so. I found out some things about Rosalie's life when she was alive." She outlined the facts and the stories she and Caroline had uncovered. "I think she's fixated on Blade and sees me as a threat."

Matt thought about it for a minute. His eyes narrowed as he mulled and rejected ideas. "It doesn't make sense. Why would she do things to drive you into his bedroom?"

"I don't think that was her intent," Emmaline said. "I think she was trying to get me to leave. Have you seen the dining room?"

"I wasn't going to ask."

"Why not?"

"I thought maybe you and Blade had it out in a big way yesterday and that's why you were on your best behavior. Though, you two usually ignore one another after you have sex."

Emmaline winced. She knew Matt was aware of the unhealthy way she and Blade handled the intense emotions that sprung up between them, but he had never before put it into words. It was one of those things they didn't talk about. "No. We decided to put the past behind us and be friends. That was Rosalie's response to our truce. Nice, wasn't it? She broke every single piece of Blade's grandmother's china in that cabinet."

Matt's mouth formed an O. "How mad was he?"

"He wasn't mad at me, but he did threaten Rosalie with burning down the house. Matt, I need to resolve this for him. She's holding him prisoner. He knows he can't bring women home."

"That's because he's still carrying a torch for you."

God, she hoped it was true. She hoped it explained his bizarre behavior in the wee hours of the morning.

Dash began to fuss. Matt stood up, slinging his son over his shoulder. "I think he's getting hungry. I'd better get him to Maria."

Emmaline walked him to the door, where the smell of coffee wafted toward her, inviting her into the kitchen. "I'm going to go for a run and get some lunch. I'll stop by later."

Matt bounced Dashiell against his chest, patting his butt to keep him calm. "Em? Go easy on Blade. If you don't have real feelings for him, leave him alone, okay?"

She bit her lip as she studied the floor. She did have feelings for him. The way he made her feel when he touched her was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. It was more than simple attraction or desire, both things with which she was familiar.

At first, it had only been raw sexual desire. But in the past year, as she had watched how he was with everyone except her, she began to know him as a person. The guilt she felt was real regret for the way she used him and then kicked him aside when he wouldn't put up with it anymore.

But he had forgiven her, hadn't he? Time would tell. She wouldn't make the first move until she was sure he returned her feelings. Finally, she nodded. "I'll be good."

Chapter 6

Eighteen Months Ago

Emmaline didn't see Blade for the next several days. He seemed to go out of his way to avoid her. After their last encounter, she wasn't sure she wanted to see him either, except that just the thought of him sent shards of desire shooting through her.

She toured each of the houses and found no paranormal activity at all. It troubled her that she had not been able to make contact with the frightened spirit again. She hadn't been able to investigate the other houses thoroughly, as they were still occupied with guests.

"We shut down for the month of January," Maria assured the pair over breakfast that morning. "You can have complete run of the ranch then."

"Except for Blade's house and the stable," Matt amended. He loaded his fork with hash browns, golden and dripping melted butter. "He made that very clear. He didn't bother to include information about his house in any of the documents he provided."

Matt and Emmaline had moved into Maria's house. She had extra rooms, so they didn't have to share, and Matt had scattered his research all over the dining room and the den. Matt found out that Maria's house was the original house on the property when it had been a ranch that only bred and boarded horses. In his eyes, that made it the most interesting location for miles.

Maria joined them in the den later while Matt and Emmaline pored over the documents Blade had provided. "This place originally belonged to our uncle, but he died about seven or eight years ago. With no wife or children, the ranch came to Blade and me."

"It's a family business, then?"

"It is now. Blade and I turned it into a resort. It wasn't always open to the public like this. We lived here when we were little, but then we moved to Michigan when I was about twelve. I think Blade had just turned eight."

Emmaline returned a folder to the box and took another out. "That must be why he has such a light accent. More of a suggestion of an accent than an actual Southern accent."

"Yeah, well, he was the reason we moved."

"He didn't get along with the kids at school?" Matt's tone was teasing and Maria took it as such.

"I'm not surprised he didn't tell you." Maria's smile equaled that of any proud parent. "He's gifted. Mom always said she knew he was smarter than the rest of us, which annoyed me to no end. She always said he was going places." The smile turned stale and vanished from her eyes. "She died within a year of us moving. She never knew he graduated early. I'm four years older than him and he graduated high school with me, which sucked for him. He was tall and gangly as a senior. He hadn't even started shaving. The kids either ignored him or made fun of him."

The math made sense at last, as did his unwillingness to answer her question. His IQ made him feel like an outsider as much as her ability to see and speak to ghosts did the same to her.

"I think sometimes that Blade feels like he lost all the important men in his life at the same time. Our father and uncle died in the same accident. That's when Blade and I ditched everything and moved back to Georgia. Well, I moved first. Blade finished his last year of vet school, and then he joined me. I can't believe it's been six years."

Matt and Emmaline were silent, letting Maria lose herself in her sad memories. Emmaline put a sympathetic hand on Maria's shoulder.

Maria emerged from her melancholy with an apologetic grimace. "I didn't mean to bring everybody down."

"That's all right," Matt said. "I like hearing you talk about your life."

Emmaline had no idea where Matt planned to go with his soft declaration. To save them all from something embarrassing, she changed the subject. "So, what's there to do in the middle of nowhere on New Year's Eve? You mentioned some sort of a party?"

Maria gave her a curious look. "I thought you knew."

"Knew what?"

Matt slapped a hand to his forehead. "Oh, crap. I forgot to tell you."

"What?" Emmaline's temper was already frayed from her inability to contact the spirit. She didn't need more drama.

Maria answered. "We have one heck of a party here. People come from miles around. We have a huge dance. We have a DJ and a couple of the local bands who'll play. Right at midnight we put on a humongous fireworks display."

"That sounds like fun," Emmaline said. It would be nice to blow off some steam at a party. Then Matt dropped the other shoe.

"It's a costume party."

Emmaline stopped short. "You knew there was a costume party and you didn't tell me? Did you bring a costume for yourself?"

The guilty look on his face was answer enough. She turned back to Maria. "Not everyone dresses in costume, right?"

"Actually, they do. It's not like you can't come if you don't have a costume, but you'll definitely stand out. I'd loan you something of mine, but something tells me nothing I have would fit you." Maria glanced between the two of them. She was easily six inches taller than Emmaline and proportionally larger.

With a sigh, Emmaline dropped her attention to the folder in front of her. "That's okay. I'll think of something."

She and Matt stopped working early, so Emmaline decided to go on an extra long run. Things were not going her way and she felt a huge dose of self-pity coming on. She didn't have patience to deal with something like that and exercise always worked to clear her head.

The riding trails made excellent jogging paths. Unlike the private road that led to Paradise Island, they were meticulously maintained. Emmaline had explored several of the trails in the last few days. Today, she chose one she hadn't previously tried. The trail marker said it was a twenty-mile path. She was up to the challenge.

She had only passed twelve of the brightly colored poles that marked the miles when the trees opened to her right, revealing a beautiful clearing. Impulsively, she slowed her pace and cut across the clearing, where the crushed grass revealed that someone else had recently explored there. Just where the trees narrowed on the other side, she caught a reflected sparkle.

She pushed through the taller grasses there to find a pool of water. She would have called it a pond, except it was crystal clear.

It must have a source. She walked around to the other side, but she was unable to find anything feeding into it. A large, flat boulder jutted out three-quarters of the way around the pool. Emmaline climbed the series of smaller stones until she was on top of it. She shaded her eyes at the sunlight glinting off the pond. The view was breathtaking. If she were a ghost, this was the kind of place she'd choose to haunt. She settled herself on the rock, abandoning her plans and all of her problems.

The sun moved in the sky, climbing higher as the last vestiges of morning disappeared. Emmaline lay down on her stomach and cradled her head on her arms, falling asleep to the soft sounds of this hidden Eden.

Later, when she opened her eyes, the sun was lower in the sky and a lone horse drank from the water opposite her. She raised her head, wondering if anyone was missing a horse. It was saddled, so it had to belong to someone. The scrape of a boot on the rock behind her answered her question. It was Blade's horse. She turned toward the sound, if only to make sure it was him and not some wayward guest, but said nothing.

Blade sat cross-legged next to Emmaline while she stared out over the water. She might have imagined it, but she thought they were sitting in companionable silence.

Finally, he spoke, his words quiet. "When I was about four or five, I had a dog, a chocolate lab. Her name was Loki. Technically, she was Maria's dog, but she loved me the best. I used to bring her out here nearly every day. We'd swim until we were tired and then dry out up here on this rock. After we moved, we'd spend summers down here, Loki and I."

A rock sailed over Emmaline, disappearing into the depths of the pool. "We had to stop swimming after my mom found out what we'd been doing. She freaked out about me swimming alone. But what she didn't know was that this place was magical, that there was no way anything bad could happen here. After she died, I would come out here and pretend like she was still alive, waiting for me to come home so she could check my hair and my shorts for evidence I'd been swimming."

Emmaline picked her way through the thoughts swirling in her head. The first thing that occurred to her was that his story must have worked

beautifully to get him laid. It was a peaceful, romantic spot. Add a heartfelt, tear-jerking story to the mix and something was going to happen for him.

She didn't think that was his aim. After all, she had already established that she didn't require courting or romance. The only other explanation was that this was an olive branch. She turned her head to look at him. "Does this mean you're speaking to me again?"

He looked down, examining his hands with an uncharacteristic bashfulness as he thought. His voice was nearly a whisper when he spoke. "I don't want to hurt you."

Emmaline sat up to face him. "Blade, it was only a dream. You're feeling guilty for something you haven't done."

He shook his head. "You don't understand. It wasn't a dream, not really. I mean, I was asleep, but it was so real. I saw my hand print on your face. Your lip was cut and you were bleeding." He swallowed, looking away from her. "The worst part is the look in your eyes. You're on the floor of the stable and you're looking up at me with a mixture of pain and disbelief and fear in your eyes."

He scratched at his chin. "I think the fear was there before I hit you."

She reached out and took his hand in hers. His description was disturbing, but it was just a dream. "Look at me."

After a long moment, he let his eyes meet hers. "And I know I did it to you."

"I'm fine. None of this happened. It was only a dream. A disturbing dream, true, but still just a dream. I think if it didn't upset you so much, I'd be worried. You have to let it go."

Again, he shook his head. "You don't understand. It's not a dream. It's a vision. I've had it every night since you've come here. Every night, it's exactly the same. And I think 'volatile' was the kindest way I've heard my temper described."

Emmaline smiled at his description of his temper. She, for one, found his volatility highly erotic. "I'm not afraid of your temper, Blade."

She could tell he wanted to say something. He struggled with the words, but they didn't come. Finally, he tugged at her hand. "Ride with me."

The invitation wasn't his original intention.

"That's not necessary." If he thought she was getting on a horse, he was mistaken.

“Maria told me you don’t have a costume for tonight. I waited for you to get back from your run, but when you didn’t show, I came looking for you. I thought I’d take you to town to get a costume.”

Emmaline considered his offer for as long as it took her to come up with an alternate plan. “How about I meet you back at the ranch in about an hour? We can take my car.”

Blade laughed. “It’ll take hours if we do it that way. We can be to town in less than a half hour on horseback.”

“I don’t ride,” she confessed. “I mean, I’ve tried it before, but it never works out. I always seem to fall off.”

He stood up, hauling her to her feet with him. “Matt already clued me in to your greatest fault, so I only brought Gracie. You’ll ride with me.” He took her arm to help her over the rocks and guide her to the other side of the pond.

Her greatest fault? She could name at least five that were far worse, starting with the fact that she had no compunction about using his body for her pleasure and had every intention of walking away from him when she finished with this case. “Really, Blade, this isn’t necessary.” She wasn’t afraid, exactly. Not yet, anyway. They were getting closer to the horse, whose height seemed to increase upon their approach.

She pulled back as they neared Gracie. He murmured words of encouragement in her ear.

Emmaline wasn’t listening to him. She was trying to imagine how she might get up on such a large creature. The horses she had tried to ride as a child, she realized, were ponies. The smell of horses didn’t bother her. The scent of them seemed inextricably linked with Blade, which she found comforting and disconcerting all at once. It seemed her two biggest fears were of heights and intimacy, both of which Blade offered. She couldn’t think of a worse match than the two of them.

He didn’t give her time to think. He hoisted her onto the saddle and hopped up behind her before she could form the words to protest.

Several mile markers disappeared before Emmaline relaxed enough to realize she hadn’t brought money or credit cards with her. She hadn’t even brought her cell phone. It was a way out of this nightmare. “Blade, my purse is at Maria’s house.”

"It's in the saddlebag," he assured her. "Matt even put a change of clothes in there for you."

"Are you going to stop so I can change?" She had visions of never getting back up there again.

"Nope."

"I'm dressed in sweats," she protested. "I look like a scrub." She didn't want to think about how she smelled. Could he discern her odor over the scent of sweat and horses rolling from him?

"You look cute." She heard the amusement in his voice. "Besides, I know if I let you down, I'll never get you back up. Gracie might take it personally."

"I have nothing against Gracie. I'm sure if she could have her say in the matter, she'd be happy not to have two people on her back." And the feel of him pressed against her back with his arms encircling her was entirely too intimate.

He lowered his head to breathe his words into her ear. "Then maybe I'll take it personally."

"Not at all," she said. "I've never minded having sex with you. I quite enjoyed it both times."

His low chuckle vibrated pleasantly into her back. "You do like the sex," he agreed. "But you're not one for cuddling afterward, are you?"

She stiffened even more.

"Relax," he said, his accent softening his vowels and adding a subtle sensuality to his voice. He put one hand on her thigh, slowly moving it upward until it cupped her breast. "Does this make you feel better? How about if I tell you I only wanted to get you up here so that I could turn you around and fuck you to the rhythm of the ride? Does that mollify your fears?"

She knew he was playing with her, mocking her, but his touch wreaked havoc with her nonetheless. Without considering the meaning of her actions, she leaned into him, arching her back and throwing her head against his shoulder. He slipped his hand under her shirt and his grip on her breast tightened as he kneaded her tender flesh.

He wound the reins around the pommel and used his other hand to turn her head toward him. The lids of her eyes, heavy with desire, drooped. He could have had her. She would have willingly turned and straddled him.

Instead, he released her breast to cup both of his hands around her face, and he kissed her with tenderness and passion.

Shock coursed through Emmaline's system. She tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her. He slid long fingers into her hair to hold her still. His lips grazed hers, gently moving over them before settling in firmly. He ran his tongue along her bottom lip, seeking entry. He assaulted her senses. The masculine scent of him filled her. His hands caressed her and his body held her close while his tongue tasted her, demanding more than she wanted to give, draining her will until she gave it anyway.

They rode along silently after that. Blade held her close with one arm, twining his fingers with hers in a gesture of intimacy he had to know made her uncomfortable. Emmaline didn't pull away. She was trapped in his arms and she didn't see a way out.

Damn him! Why couldn't he be happy with the way things were between them? She hadn't come here looking for another relationship that was doomed to fail. Hadn't she made enough bad decisions where her love life was concerned? Why couldn't they just enjoy each other's bodies and leave it at that?

Blade, it seemed, was all too aware of her unhappiness. "Emmy?"

"I have something to tell you."

She closed her eyes. "Blade, don't. I just got out of a serious relationship. I'm not looking for that again. I'll sleep with you, but that's all."

He hesitated, his thumb playing gently over the back of her hand. "Tell me about it. Maria said you were engaged. Why did you call off the wedding?"

For a second, she debated refusing to tell him anything. Then she realized that he wasn't going to let her off so easily. "Rick cheated on me with his sister's best friend. I came home early from somewhere and I found them together in my bed. When we argued about it, he told me it was my fault because I'm so frigid."

Blade laughed. He had to have heard her hurt and the bitterness, but he laughed anyway. She pressed her lips together, a prelude to releasing a tirade in his direction.

"Frigid? He said that? I can't imagine. You're an amazing lover. It must have been him."

Emmaline shrugged. This wasn't a topic she wanted to discuss. "What can I say? You bring out the beast in me."

He kissed her neck, sending flutters down her spine. "Why on earth would you agree to marry someone who didn't excite you sexually?"

She watched another mile marker disappear behind them. "It wasn't like that at first. After he cheated on me the first time, I held back a little. As time passed, I held back more and more." She shook her head. "Maybe, deep down, I knew he hadn't stopped."

"You stayed with him after you found out he was cheating on you? Why did you agree to marry him in the first place? People like that don't change."

Emmaline breathed deeply. This was more difficult to talk about than he realized. She was still numb and licking her wounds from Rick. "I guess I thought things would change after we were married. I'd lie next to him in bed and masturbate while he'd drift off to sleep. I don't know that he ever noticed."

Blade groaned into her hair. "I'd love to watch you touch yourself. I wouldn't be content to just watch, though. I'm glad you aren't married, Emmy. It's been hell staying away from you for the past few days. I couldn't imagine having to keep my hands to myself around you all the time."

Emmaline laughed bitterly. Why hadn't she met Blade when she wasn't an emotionally barren wasteland? "I don't think you and I should sleep together anymore."

"Why?"

"Because you expect more from me than I can give you." He stiffened behind her. "I didn't come here looking for a relationship. I only came in search of a ghost."

Blade forced himself to relax. She was all too aware of his struggle. Finally, he used her last statement to change the subject. "Funny you should say that."

"Why?"

"Because I think the ghost is in love with me."

Emmaline laughed. "In love with you?"

"It's not funny." He sighed. "I had hoped by ignoring her, she would go away."

"That works sometimes."

“Not this time. I found the house in Vermont. I went there to see a man about a horse. You know how the old story goes.” He laughed at the joke.

It must have been a horse-owner thing. Emmaline glanced up at him. “I must have fast-forwarded through that one.”

He stared at her with a mixture of exasperation and acceptance. “I fell in love with the house.”

She couldn’t stop the sarcasm that dripped from her voice. “Did things not work out with the horse? Wasn’t she your type?”

One harsh exhalation. “I should stop this horse now and tan your backside.”

Emmaline giggled. If she weren’t on a horse, that comment might have made her wet. “I might like that. Would you spank my pussy, too?”

Exasperation won out. He growled. “I had the house moved here. I started restoring it about three months ago. That’s when little things began happening. I heard noises that I couldn’t explain. I would turn my back or pack up for the night and my tools would move or disappear. Cupboards and boxes would open by themselves.”

Seriousness defined Emmaline now. She was all business. “You’re sure you didn’t forget where you put things? I frequently lose my car keys, yet they’re always where I put them.”

Did she imagine the fond grin? It flashed too fast, and her neck hurt from looking back at him. “Maria makes fun of me for how neat I keep things. I know where all of my tools are. I always put everything away before I head up to bed. But something was going through my things and reordering them.”

Meticulous. She had no trouble believing that about him.

“One night, I heard glass shattering. It was loud. It sounded just like it does in the movies. I went downstairs to find every single glass item in my kitchen smashed on the floor. I don’t live there full time. I eat most of my meals in the Dining Room or at Maria’s, so there wasn’t a lot, but it was still freaky.”

Emmaline nodded. “It’s natural to be afraid, especially when you don’t know what you’re dealing with.”

“I lost my temper.” The ire was still in his voice.

She had no problem picturing his face growing ruddy and his lips thinning into a scowl. He must have looked damn sexy. That’s probably

when the ghost fell for him. Emmaline bit her lip to keep from making a flip reply like “shocking” or “no way.”

“I called her names. Bad names. I accused her of being a coward. I didn’t say it this nicely. I threatened to burn the house down.”

“She broke your stuff. I’d let loose with a few colorful words in your shoes.”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t wearing shoes. I ended up with cuts on the bottom of my feet.”

“Ouch.” Emmaline’s sister, Caroline, had kept a very messy room growing up. Emmaline once ended up skewering her foot on one of her sister’s metal toys. It hurt like hell and the doctor made her get a tetanus shot on top of that.

“She materialized, right there in front of me. She was wearing a turn-of-the-century dress and she was decked out in some high-end jewelry. Her hair was up in a loose bun-looking thing. I didn’t really get a back view. She looked like she was ready for a night on the town.”

Emmaline was impressed. Spirits usually manifested as shadowy apparitions, especially to people who didn’t have her abilities. Emmaline was used to seeing them in that kind of detail. To her, the shadowy figures were those who weren’t quite in this world. They couldn’t interact with living people. They were often present at residual hauntings where the same things happened over and over without apparent rhyme or reason.

“It looked kind of like she was crying. It never occurred to me that a ghost could cry. She apologized. She said she didn’t want the house destroyed. I told her that if I ever saw her again, I’d burn the damn thing to the ground. It was quiet for about two weeks, and then I heard Maria screaming one night.”

That was night the ghost tried to smother her. That was the event that prompted Maria to search out Emmaline and Matt. “You feel guilty about it,” Emmaline said.

His lack of response was answer enough. “We’re almost there. I’m going to tie up Gracie here. She doesn’t like the noise of city life too much.”

Emmaline looked around her and only saw more trees, but then she heard the sounds of people and cars in the distance. Blade dismounted and reached up to help Emmaline down. Terra firma felt wonderful under her

feet, but it took her a few steps before she could walk normally. She wondered why Blade wasn't perpetually bow-legged.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Blade posed the question as he pointed out the rest of the path through the woods.

"At least I didn't fall off."

She felt the pressure of his hand on her lower back as he guided her where he wanted her to go. The proprietary move appealed to her innate femininity. She accepted his touch, straightening her back and moving closer in case he was of a mind to let his hand drop away.

"I'll give you lessons while you're here."

"That's not necessary," she said. She meant it. Riding lessons were not on her to-do list and she couldn't picture a scenario where that might happen.

"You can learn with the right teacher."

"You're not exactly known for your ability to be patient." The trees ended abruptly. Paved streets and buildings appeared out of nowhere. It was a quaint downtown community, with none of the blight of big chain stores.

She smoothed back her hair and straightened her clothes. On the surface, she didn't look bad. However, she didn't need to do a test sniff under her arms to know she wasn't fresh.

"You've heard the rumors?"

"I've met you."

Blade rolled his eyes. "Emmy, you push my buttons on purpose because for some reason it turns you on. If you can refrain from doing that while I'm teaching you to ride, we'll be fine."

"And if not?" It was an honest question. Pissing him off was not only fun, but it kept him at an emotional arm's length.

"Then I'll take you into my office and blow off some steam. I have a nice leather sofa that can come in very handy should the need arise and a few leather straps should keeping you in one place prove difficult."

Emmaline laughed. "With an offer like that, I don't know how I can say no."

"And yet I sense a refusal."

"I don't want you to think this thing between us is going to develop into something more." Three days ago, she hadn't really cared if he ended up hurt or not. Actually, she hadn't thought he would become emotionally

involved at all. If he kept going like he was, then he was going to end up hurt. Damn the man. Why couldn't he accept what she offered and let it go? It was irritating.

They walked down the street. Emmaline had no idea where they were going, but Blade knew the town well. Despite her concerns, she was enjoying her time with him. The easy atmosphere of the town relaxed her.

As they wandered along companionably, heading to the costume shop, Blade related some of the town's history. Emmaline was impressed that such a small town had a costume shop.

Though the pressure and exact location varied, his hand had yet to leave her back. Blade ran his fingertips up and down her spine. "It's only a costume shop during Halloween and the resort's annual New Year's party. The rest of the year, it sells regular clothing."

"What are you going to be?" Emmaline asked. "A cowboy?"

The corner of Blade's mouth lifted in a knowing grin. "You like cowboys?"

"Not usually. Most of the men I date get regular manicures."

The smile dropped from his face. "You're serious?"

She nodded, smiling devilishly. "I have recently found that I don't mind cowboys so much. They're tough and they have stamina."

"Don't you forget it."

"Seriously, what is your costume?"

Mischief curved his lips. "You'll know it when you see it."

"How can I get a matching costume if you won't tell me what you are? Oh!" Emmaline stopped suddenly. A dress in the window of a boutique caught her eye. It was black and elegant and hugged a woman's body in all the right places. "That's what I'll wear."

"That's an evening gown," he observed. "What is it you plan to be?"

"A princess," she announced triumphantly. "I'll get a tiara, full length gloves..." Her voice trailed off as she mentally planned her outfit. "It's perfect."

He tried to pull her away from the window. "Emmy, be reasonable. That dress costs at least five hundred dollars, probably more. I don't know how you make money, but it isn't hunting ghosts."

She narrowed her eyes at him and exhaled loudly. "I didn't ask you to buy me a dress, Blade. You brought my purse for a reason."

"That's not what I meant," he said.

"Blade!" An unfamiliar, honeyed voice called his name.

Emmaline leaned forward to peer around him. She watched as a gorgeous, leggy blonde sauntered toward them, her opposite in every way. Where Emmaline was short and curvy, this woman was tall and willowy, much like Maria. She seemed carefree and lighthearted, emotions Emmaline could no longer remember. She appeared to be in her early twenties.

Blade winced. His hand tightened on Emmaline's lower back, his long fingers sliding around to grip her waist. She let it go for now. This woman was obviously someone with whom he had a history, and he seemed to need the emotional support.

The woman batted thick, mascara-laden lashes at him. A hand perched on the skirt of her entirely pink outfit. "Blade! Fancy seeing you here. I thought you'd be all busy getting ready for the party tonight. You know, cracking the whip over all those poor boys' heads?"

"Hello, Lola. How have you been?" Blade kept his tone carefully neutral, but Emmaline heard history in what he didn't say.

"I can't complain." Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "You just wait 'til you see my costume tonight. It'll knock your socks off."

Emmaline could tell by the woman's petulant attitude that she was Blade's ex-girlfriend. "Hello," she said pleasantly. "We haven't met. I'm Emmaline."

Lola gave Emmaline a dismissive appraisal. "Well, well, well. If it isn't the lady who talks to ghosts."

"Where did you hear that?" Blade demanded.

"Some of your guests have been to town. It seems you bought yourself a ghost with that stupid old house you insisted on having moved all the way from Boston. Sugar, I told you to build a brand-new one, but you didn't listen." Lola twirled and untwirled one strand of her long, blonde hair around her finger as she spoke.

"Vermont," he corrected.

Dismissing him completely, Lola turned back to Emmaline. "You're Blade's new girlfriend, then?"

"No," Emmaline said. She was unwilling to elaborate.

Blade's foreboding expression quelled the lesser woman.

Lola fidgeted under Blade's glare and Emmaline's coolness. Her smile attempted bravado. "I'll see y'all tonight. Look for me. I'll be wearing pink."

Emmaline watched Lola walk away. "Maybe I'll get a pink dress." She smiled up at Blade, batting her lashes, and affected her best Southern drawl. "Y'all like a woman in pink?"

He struggled to not laugh.

"I bet she's downright pretty in pink. Isn't she?"

Leaning down, he brushed a kiss across her lips. "I've seen her stark white. She's terrified of my temper."

"Why? You're cute when you're mad." She reached up to pinch his cheek playfully. "That's where you went wrong with Rosalie. She saw the way your cheeks flush and your muscles flex and decided she had to have a taste of you."

He watched her through those thick, long lashes. It should be criminal for a man to have lashes like that. "Is that what you did, Emmy?"

"No," she said. "I wanted you from the moment you first undressed me with your eyes. It's a pretty simple case of lust at first sight." She licked her lips. "Second sight, too."

He said nothing, and the fathomless brown eyes that stared at her with an uncomfortable knowledge revealed nothing about what he was thinking.

"Now can we go into the store? I have to try on that dress." She had to change the subject before one of them said something cold or heartfelt. Likely, she would say something cold and he would say something heartfelt. For some reason, pissing him off didn't appeal to her right then and there.

After holding the dress up to her in the fitting room, she decided against it. The idea of trying it on in her current unshowered condition turned her stomach. Instead, she bought another dress without letting Blade see her in it, and then she dragged him around the two streets that made up the downtown area. She searched for the perfect tiara, gloves, and shoes. He finally put an end to her shopping by steering her into a tiny diner.

"I'm starving," he said. "How about an early dinner? We should have enough time to eat and get back to the ranch in time for the party."

The prospect of riding back to the ranch on a horse did not appeal to Emmaline. "How about you reintroduce me to that girlfriend of yours and I can hitch a ride back with her?"

Blade raised one eyebrow. "Lola won't take you anywhere."

"Why not? It couldn't have ended that badly. After all, she's still carrying a torch for you."

"Bite your tongue, woman." He pulled out a chair for her. "Besides, she thinks you're my girlfriend."

A look of distaste crossed Emmaline's face. "I told her I wasn't."

"You lack believability."

"She doesn't even know me."

"You talk to ghosts. Around here, that's considered crazy." Exasperated, Blade said, "Let's change the subject. How about we avoid talk of ghosts or relationships?"

Emmaline raised a brow. "What does that leave us to talk about? I know nothing about horses except that they don't like me riding them."

"Tell me about you," he said. "Where did you grow up?"

"Troy, Michigan. Heard of it?"

"Yeah," he said. "I graduated from high school in Ann Arbor and I went to Michigan State for vet school."

"We were practically neighbors." If living half a state away counted. "Of course, I'm older than you, so we wouldn't have crossed paths."

The waitress brought their meals. Emmaline bit into her grilled cheese and tomato sandwich with relish. The only thing it lacked was some crispy bacon.

"How much older?"

She dusted crumbs from her lips with a napkin. "Never ask a woman her age, Blade." Before he could do anything with his scowl, she smiled. "My parents still live in Troy. I think my dad likes living in a city whose major road is named Big Beaver."

Blade choked on a fry.

"I'm close to both of my parents, John and Adeline, as is my sister, Caroline."

He stared at her. She knew that look. He was wondering what parts were truth and which were fiction.

"Go ahead and laugh," she said. "I was named after my Great-Aunt Emmaline. I think that presented a pattern and that's how Caroline got stuck with a 'line' name."

He smiled, but he didn't laugh. The smile was enough to melt her insides. She was going to have to toughen up if she was going to come out of this unscathed.

"It's a good thing you don't have brothers. I don't think there's a boy's name that falls into line with your parents' pattern."

Emmaline laughed. For the first time in a long, long time, she was having fun with a man who wasn't Matt. The thought both calmed and frightened her.

He held her hand as they walked back to Gracie, and she ignored her conflicting emotions.

She waited until they were well underway before asking him to continue his story. It took her that long to convince herself to calm down.

"There's no more to tell," he said.

"What kind of history does the house have? Why do you think the ghost is in love with you?" Though she had no problem teasing him about it, she had yet to hear a good reason for believing in a ghostly crush.

"I don't know. I know it's about a hundred and fifty years old and when I'm finished restoring it, it will be even more incredible than it already is."

Emmaline made a mental note to ask Caroline if she'd travel to Vermont and look into the history of the home. Or she'd send Matt. She needed some way to provoke the spirit, and having an intimate knowledge of their personal matters had never before failed her. "I just don't see how you think she's in love with you. I can see that she's afraid you'll do something to the house or that she's afraid of you. Don't you think you're being a little dramatic?"

Blade exhaled sharply. "I fought with Maria. That night, the ghost tried to smother her."

"That doesn't prove anything. You can't put a reason on something like that without proof." She disdained ghost experts who took things at face value. If she could find out who the ghost was, then she could speculate as to her reasons for haunting. However, it would only be speculation. If the ghost would talk to her, then she could be sure of her reasons for lingering and for haunting.

"Any of the guests who've complained have been either directly or indirectly involved with me. For instance, that Haverty girl, Jessica. She followed me around the stable like a lost puppy until I kicked her out. She

tried to schedule lessons with me. She would wait until I showed up at the Dining Room to eat. I think she skipped meals when I didn't show up."

Emmaline twisted to face him. "You skipped meals to avoid her?"

"No. I have a house with an almost-finished kitchen and I can cook. Or I can use Maria's kitchen. I don't always eat at the Dining Room."

There was something he wasn't saying. She needed to draw him out more. "Maria said you were a very talented cook," she said, settling back against him.

"At any rate, Jessica cornered me in the tack room and tried to kiss me. I put a stop to it immediately. They checked out the next morning."

"She was embarrassed by her behavior?" Emmaline couldn't imagine kissing someone who was so obviously rejecting her.

"They described the same ghost."

"Coincidence," Emmaline said.

Blade gritted his teeth. "It wasn't the first time."

That gave her pause, but only for a moment. Was she really surprised that women threw themselves at Blade? "But that doesn't mean..."

He cut her off. "When have you been able to make contact with her?"

Emmaline shook her head. "She's been hiding. I felt her that first night and then again in my room when you were there. It's been quiet since then."

"She only comes out after you've been with me."

Something occurred to her. "She's left the other guests alone. She's focusing in on me." She had been teasing him earlier. She didn't necessarily believe the ghost had a crush on Blade, but she did see the connection. Emmaline sensed fear from the ghost, not love. If Blade threatened to burn down her house, the house to which she was tied, then that would be reason enough to haunt and to focus in on anyone to whom Blade had an emotional connection.

She didn't believe the ghost could differentiate between love, hostility, anger, hate, or sexual attraction—only that she could sense heightened emotional energy. Otherwise, the ghost wouldn't have seen both Maria and Jessica Haverty as a threat to Blade's affections.

"Let's make out in the stable tonight," she suggested, wanting to try out her new theory on how to provoke the ghost.

Blade started. "I think it's a bad idea for me to see you tonight."

Emmaline sighed. "I thought we'd test out your theory that Rosalie wants you."

His arms stiffened around her. "I don't want to put you in danger."

"I'm not afraid of a ghost," she laughed. "They've been a part of my life since I was twelve."

He tightened his hold on her.

Emmaline let him hold her without squirming. She sensed his reticence and resolved to use her powers of seduction to lure him to the stable. She knew that if she stopped him from touching her now, he would avoid her for the evening and her chance for provoking the ghost this night would disappear. A twinge of guilt bothered her, but she brushed it aside.

She changed the topic, chatting companionably with him for the remainder of the ride back. When the path opened up, Blade leaned forward as he urged the horse into a gallop. Emmaline's heart sped up dangerously. She clung to him, her confident demeanor shattered.

He pulled on the reins, stopping Gracie suddenly. "See that wasn't so bad, was it?" He dismounted and held out his hands to help Emmaline down.

She didn't need a mirror to know her face was white. Cold sweat dripped between her breasts and fear tasted metallic in her mouth.

Pulling her from Gracie's back, he hugged her close until her heart rate returned to normal. "I'd never let you fall, Emmy."

With her wits returned to her, Emmaline pushed at him, putting distance between them to she could look up at him. "Save me a dance tonight?"

His eyes flickered from her eyes to her lips. "Only if you save me a kiss."

Heat crept into her cheeks. She had meant to flirt with him, but he was leaving her feeling more flustered than she should. The last part of that ride had shaken her too much. She hoped her tone was teasing. "I'll see what I can do."

It must have worked. He opened his saddlebag and pulled out her dress. The opaque plastic sleeve protecting it slipped, exposing it to his view. He froze. "This isn't the dress from the window."

Emmaline smiled. "You weren't supposed to peek. I wanted it to be a surprise, especially because you won't tell me what your costume is. Believe me, this dress is much better for a princess costume."

Color drained from his face. "Don't wear this tonight."

The teasing light disappeared from her eyes. She knew what he wasn't saying. This was the dress from his dream. "I think you underestimate yourself too much." She took the dress from him and grabbed the bag with her other things.

He didn't face her. "I think you overestimate me."

"You're not a violent person."

"Not yet."

She put her hand on his cheek and gently urged him to look at her. "If you think I'm going to stand there and let you hit me, you're wrong."

In a swift movement, she hooked her foot behind his knees and laid him flat on his back in the hard-packed dirt. "I'm perfectly capable of defending myself." She grinned at him before sauntering away with an extra swing in her hips.

She glanced back to see him sit up and watch her walk away. She made sure the view was worthwhile.

Emmaline made a beeline for Maria's house. She needed to tell Blade's story to Matt and to call Caroline. It puzzled her that he had insisted to Maria, to them all, that there was no ghost when he knew perfectly well there was one. What was he hiding? She wasn't under the illusion that he had told her everything. But she hadn't pressed him further because she recognized his need to do this on his own terms. He was afraid of more than a ghost that may or may not have a crush on him.

She burst into Matt's room excitedly, without knocking. The sight that greeted her made her wish she had knocked. Matt held Maria in his arms and neither was wearing much in the way of clothing. Or maybe her mind put clothes on them in places she never wanted to see. She didn't analyze it. If she had come in quietly, she could have left before they saw her. Unfortunately, it didn't happen that way.

"Oh, crap. I'm sorry. I'll come back later. Or better yet, stop by when you're finished. No rush." Knowing full well that her face and neck were flaming red, she fled, closing the door behind her. She went to her room, thankful it was across the wide hall and not on the other side of a wall that could only be too thin.

As she showered and dressed for the party, she calmed down a bit. She wasn't upset that Matt was sleeping with Maria. It was an unspoken rule that

they didn't get involved with clients, but she had broken that rule first. On the contrary, it was a good thing. Since Lili had died from cancer three years earlier, he hadn't looked at another woman. It explained why he had brought condoms with him to Georgia.

Once she connected the pieces, she was surprised she hadn't seen it earlier. Not a day had passed that Matt hadn't been on the phone with Maria. As the date for their visit approached, he had begun e-mailing and texting her as well. This was the first case in which he had taken the lead and Emmaline was too wrapped up in her own heartache to notice her best friend was falling in love.

Much later, a knock sounded at the door as Emmaline struggled to do something elegant with her hair. There wasn't a convenient salon with a stylist to fix it for her. Beyond the ponytail, she had never learned to do anything other than wear her hair down. "Come in," she called.

Emmaline had expected Matt, but Maria appeared instead. She closed the door behind her and took deep, hesitant breaths.

Emmaline recognized her unease and spoke first. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm used to finding Matt alone."

Maria shook her head. "I'm the one who should apologize. Please don't be mad at Matt. It wasn't his fault."

Emmaline stopped playing around with her hair and gave Maria her full attention. "I'm not angry at either one of you. Matt is special to me. It's been too long since he's been truly happy. I like you, Maria. I'm delighted for the both of you."

Maria smiled. "Matt said you weren't the type to throw stones. I'm not sure what he meant by that, but I can see that he was right about you not being upset."

She came closer. "That's a nice dress. Here I thought you would come back with an actual costume."

Emmaline's dress was an elegant, deep rose gown. The bodice dipped low, revealing the swell of her breasts, and the full skirt flared to her ankles. "I thought I would go as a princess. It's been a long time since I've felt like dressing up."

Maria pushed Emmaline down onto the stool in front of the dressing table. She combed Emmaline's hair back with her fingers, twisting and

testing various looks. “You can’t wear your hair down with a dress like this.”

Sighing, Emmaline agreed. “I can’t seem to find anything to do with it.”

“Let me see what I can do.” Maria played around with it for a while longer. “What do you have for me to work with?”

Emmaline shook her head. “I didn’t pack anything except for some hair ties and a clip. It’s not even a nice clip. It’s just one I use to get my hair off my neck.”

“Let’s go into my room. I have tons. We’ll get you fixed up good.”

Emmaline followed Maria across the hall. Most of the house sported beautiful wood flooring, so Emmaline was surprised to feel a deep plush under her feet when she stepped into Maria’s room.

“I can’t stand bare floors in the bedroom,” Maria said. “When Blade gets done with his house, I’m going to have him carpet this entire floor. But don’t say anything. He doesn’t know about my plans yet.”

“My lips are sealed.”

Maria motioned to a padded bench in front of her vanity. “Sit.”

Emmaline obeyed. “So, did this thing between you and Matt start as a long distance relationship?”

Maria dragged a brush through Emmaline’s long brown tresses. Her face lit as she talked about Matt. “I’d always laughed at people who said they met someone long distance and they fell in love. Then it happened to me.”

Emmaline watched as Maria lifted and moved strands of hair, sweeping it into an elegant twist that cascaded down her back in a riot of soft curls.

She also watched Maria closely. If Matt was serious about her, then this woman might be a permanent addition to her life. Did that mean she wouldn’t be able to leave Blade behind when she left here? If Matt and Maria ended up getting married, then she would definitely see Blade at the wedding. And if they lived here, which seemed logical since Maria’s business was here, then she would run into him whenever she visited. She didn’t know how she felt about that.

Maria disappeared into her adjoining bathroom to change. She emerged in a multicolored, multilayered skirt that floated down past her knees. Her flowing shirt was equally colorful, and her deep red head scarf brought out the fire in Maria’s eyes.

"I hope Blade wasn't a bear this afternoon. He wasn't too pleased when I asked him to take you shopping, but he wasn't willing to take over the baking so I could run you to town."

"He was fine." Emmaline knew the real reason he had been avoiding her. "It was fortuitous that you made him come. He told me some interesting things about your ghost."

"The ghost he doesn't believe exists?"

"The ghost he's met. The one who broke all his dishes."

Maria froze in shock and disbelief. "He said that?"

"He admitted to seeing and threatening the ghost. He thinks she's in love with him." Emmaline related the entire story to Maria, reasoning that Maria was her client and deserved to know information relating to the case. And if it pissed off Blade a little bit in the process, it was a bonus. She didn't know why she felt the need to upset him that way. Perhaps if he was angry, he would stop having tender thoughts about her.

She left off the part about Blade yelling at the ghost while covering Emmaline's naked body with his.

When the three of them left the house together, the party was already underway. Matt wore his Halloween costume, and so he went dressed as a much more handsome Sam Spade than Humphrey Bogart had been. Maria's colorful outfit identified her as a gypsy fortune-teller. She looked stunning. Matt didn't peel his eyes away.

Emmaline's elegant costume attracted immediate attention.

"Why am I not surprised you came up with something like this on such short notice?" Matt stared at her tiara. With obvious effort, he refrained from commenting. "Aren't you glad I didn't tell you about it earlier?"

Emmaline nailed him with a glare. "Why on Earth would I be glad?"

"Because you know you would have spent the last month agonizing over your outfit and the last four days wondering if you made the right decision. Now you don't have to think about it. You're welcome." He took Maria's hand in his.

"You do look spectacular," Maria agreed. "I bet you won't be able to rest once the music starts."

The party was being held in the big field in front of the stable. A pavilion had been erected and a band was setting up under it. Colorful lanterns had been strung everywhere, lending it a decidedly festive air. A

nearby tent held food, and tables were scattered around the perimeter of the grounds. Booths had been set up by local businesses, boasting things like face painting, jewelry making, and fortune telling.

Emmaline was impressed with the transformation. “How long does all this take to coordinate?”

“About a month. We have to limit the number of vendors,” Maria explained. “And we don’t let anyone charge for their services. We have a donation jar at each booth and we donate to a different charity every year. This year we’re doing a local charity that pairs abused and neglected kids with abused and neglected horses.”

Partygoers mobbed Maria, each clamoring for a minute of her time. Matt and Emmaline wandered around, taking in the myriad booths and the huge bandstand that hadn’t been there that morning.

True to Maria’s prediction, as soon as the band began to play, Emmaline had a steady string of men waiting to dance with her. When the first band finished, she went looking for Matt. She still had not told him about Blade’s revelations. She found him near the food tent, waiting for Maria. Without considering why she was doing it, she omitted any mention of Blade’s vision from her narrative, as she had done with Maria.

“It’s an interesting theory,” Matt agreed. “But we’d need to test it out.”

Emmaline nodded. “That’s my plan.”

“What is?”

“Lure Blade to a secluded spot on the grounds and see if I can use jealousy to provoke the ghost into showing up.” Emmaline looked around. “I was thinking of trying for the stable, since it’s the closest thing.” She wasn’t sure that it would impact Matt’s opinion of the matter if he knew about Blade’s vision. A pang of guilt washed through her, but she quickly squelched it. There were plenty of important things she didn’t tell Matt. She just couldn’t think of an example that matched the gravity of this situation.

“You want me to keep an eye on you and be available if she does?”

“Yes,” Emmaline said. “That *is* why we’re here.” She sighed. “Except I haven’t seen Blade. I think he’s avoiding me.”

The second band started up. One of the more persistent men headed toward Emmaline, pausing only slightly at the sight of Matt. Recognizing the caged look in her eye, Matt swept her off to the dance floor. “You

shouldn't have worn an outfit like this if you didn't want to attract attention."

Emmaline sighed. "This is why I won't be thanking you any time soon."

"Maybe you're looking to make someone else jealous."

Raising one eyebrow in challenge, she asked, "Like who?"

"Like someone who has ignored you for the last three days."

"He hasn't ignored me. He's avoided me. You can't ignore someone you're avoiding."

Matt threw back his head and laughed loudly.

Emmaline didn't see Blade until nearly midnight. She was standing behind Maria and Matt, hiding from the crowd, when she caught sight of a tall, finely sculpted figure standing near the stable, away from the festivities. Although she could only see his outline, she knew it was him. He didn't seem to see or hear her as she walked slowly and uncertainly toward him.

"Now will you tell me what your costume is?"

He jumped at the sound of her voice. All color had drained from his face. His voice was subdued when he answered and he studied the ground near his toes. "Guess."

Emmaline looked him over carefully. He was dressed in head-to-toe black. His pirate shirt billowed in the gentle breeze, settling into his breeches. They were the kind that laced up the front and left little to the imagination. His boots rose above his knee and he wore a mask around his head that only covered his eyes. His black hair was tied back at his neck. "A man in black? A pirate?"

"*The Man in Black*," he corrected. "The Dread Pirate Roberts."

Her eyes sparkled in remembrance of her favorite childhood movie. "I guess our costumes do match after all."

"Shall I kidnap you, then?"

"I've already dumped the fiancé. I'm willing to bet he won't come looking for me."

"His loss." He turned toward her. "You look incredible."

Emmaline stepped closer, uncertain as to how far she could push him and how far she wanted to push him. "I haven't seen you all night."

"I've been avoiding you."

At least he was honest. She tried for a flirting grin. "Was it something I said?"

All humor fled his features, and his teasing tone vanished. “Emmy, don’t play games. This isn’t fun for me.”

“You think this is fun for me? The only two people I know are busy sucking on each other’s faces. It’s been a lonely night.”

He laughed quietly and kicked at the dirt. “So Matt finally made his move. I wondered what he was waiting for.” He stuck his hands in his pockets and shook his head. “You haven’t lacked for companionship.”

She couldn’t stop a grin from stretching her lips. “You’ve been watching me.”

He kicked at the dirt a few more times and fidgeted with his hands before giving up to lean against the split rail fence. “You’re hard to miss.”

His black outfit helped him disappear into the dark night shadows. She held her hands up to him, arms wide and inviting. “Would you like a turn?”

Blade looked down and away, conflicted. Then he pushed himself away from the fence. Without a word, he slipped his arms around her, resting his hands on the small of her back. The tempo of the music moved faster than Blade. He set his own rhythm. With a gentle pressure, he pushed her head to rest against his chest and he buried his face in her hair, holding her close.

Emmaline didn’t resist. She fully expected him to continue to banter with her and she found it disconcerting when he did not. She couldn’t remember the last time she had let anyone hold her like this. Things had been worse with Rick than she had wanted to admit.

Blade’s arms cocooned her, making her feel safe and cherished. Something tender unfurled inside her. It created panic, but his arms kept it at bay. When the short song ended, the band’s singer began the countdown to midnight. Emmaline put her hands on Blade’s chest and pushed away from him. He let her, but only enough to tilt her head back. Ignoring her stark fear, he gently lowered his lips to hers in a kiss utterly devoid of passion, but full of feeling.

Emmaline was held prisoner in his arms, unable to move or think. She hadn’t expected this from him, hadn’t wanted this from anyone. Shaking uncontrollably, she surrendered, returning the kiss against her will with equal feeling, all the while ignoring the keening protest in her head.

When it ended, he lifted her against him and buried his face in her neck. She squirmed in protest, but he ignored it. When he spoke, his voice was tight with suppressed emotion. “You never let me hold you, kiss you, touch

you as a lover might. I've been watching you, wondering if it was only me, only my touch you don't want. You know what I realized? It *is* only me. I watched while you let any stranger hold you close. I watched while you let Matt hold you close. You never once shrank from his touch or his embrace, no matter how close he got to you. Why can't you accept affection from me? Why do you want only my anger? Why do you want me to use you and throw you away?"

Emmaline went still. She hadn't wanted this. What kind of a man doesn't appreciate sex with no strings attached? "I told you I didn't want a relationship."

"And yet, here we are."

"This isn't a relationship. We barely know each other."

"We know each other better than you think." He released her slowly, reluctantly. "I know you had your heart broken. I'm sorry you got hurt, but I can't be sorry you didn't marry him. I won't let you go on fooling yourself and denying me what is mine."

Ignoring the unwanted tears threatening beneath her eyelids, Emmaline took one step back. "You son of a bitch." She whispered hoarsely, too upset to control her voice. Without waiting for a response, she turned and fled.

It was difficult to run through hard-packed dirt in a full-length dress and heels. There was no effective way to keep the full skirt and the layers of underskirts from tripping her up, so her flight was completely lacking in grace. She rounded the back of the stable and ducked inside. She ran through the short maze of storage and tack rooms, emerging on the other side. The door to the front of the stable was clearly in sight when iron bands closed around her. The deafening roar of her fear and the loud beating of her heart prevented her from hearing him follow. She desperately struggled for freedom.

"Emmy, calm down." He said the words quietly near her ear.

Her hysteria rose. "Don't call me that! Let me go!"

"Be reasonable." He did let her go, positioning himself between her and the door.

Fury took over, a fact for which she was immensely grateful. "Reasonable? You want reasonable? How about a dose of reality? I've known you for three days. You've avoided me for most of that time. Just

because we fucked a couple of times doesn't mean we know each other. It just means I find you attractive and you're a stallion in the sack."

"Emmy, today was perfect. Don't denigrate that. I loved just being with you, talking, laughing, having dinner, all of it. We work together, you and I. You may not want to admit it, but you can't deny you had a good time today."

She crossed her arms over her chest. Her words were desperate, but she thought she hid it well. "I'm sure you thought riding a horse to town and doing a little shopping is enough time and conversation to find a soul mate, but I assure you, it isn't. All I know about you is that you're spoiled, controlling, and deceitful. You throw temper tantrums when you don't get your way. You lied to Maria about seeing the ghost, and to Matt and me. If there was any bonding today, it was you bonding with your damn horse, which, by the way, I *hated* riding."

Her cold analysis washed over him. He blinked in shock.

"Wow. It all makes sense now. This is why he called you frigid."

Appropriately, the temperature suddenly dropped to below freezing.

Without thinking, Emmaline's hand flew through the air and a resounding crack filled the space around them. She was too angry to regret smacking him and she didn't even see his hand as it returned the favor. The stinging blow knocked her to the ground.

Dazed, she peered up at him in the semi-darkness. Even with the lack of light, she could see the blood drain from his face. He looked at his hand as if he'd never before seen it. Shaking his head numbly, he backed away and ran, disappearing the way he had come.

Emmaline didn't move. She was too stunned. This was his vision come true. She already knew she was wearing the dress, and now she tasted the saltiness of the blood on her lip and inside her mouth.

"Emmaline!" Matt had come in from the front door. His handkerchief was pressed to her lip before his presence fully registered in Emmaline's consciousness. "What happened?"

"I... Blade..." She put her hand to her cheek. It was cold when it should have been hot from the blow. "That damn ghost hit me."

Laughter echoed through the stable. The nickering of horses answered the otherworldly sound.

I told you he would hurt you.

Matt helped Emmaline to her feet while he kept watch for the apparition. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"He didn't do this to me. You did. You used him to do this." Emmaline spun in a slow circle. "Show yourself, you coward. Or are you too afraid to face me?" The fear she sensed from the spirit had vanished. Pure malice remained.

He belongs to me.

"You're dead. He's alive. Even if you were alive, he wouldn't want you. Not the way he wants me."

Matt pulled Emmaline closer to him and whispered in her ear. "Do you think this is wise? She just laid you flat. She sounds like she's only getting started."

"This needs to end now. She can't go around terrorizing people. Especially me." Emmaline had never lost to a ghost before. To be fair, this was the first haunting she'd ever investigated that had turned violent. Most were residual hauntings where the ghost had no idea anyone else was there. Several had been intelligent hauntings, but those spirits had been amiable. She wadded the handkerchief and handed it back to Matt. "I don't have pockets."

You cannot have him.

It seemed Blade was partially correct when he said the spirit was in love with him. While she wasn't exactly in love, she was definitely fixated on him. "Show yourself," she demanded.

A strong wind whipped through the stable and blasted the door open, knocking it loose from its hinges. Emmaline chased after her and Matt followed close behind. The wind blew through the crowd, clearing a path in the middle with the force of it. Midnight had come and gone and the fireworks had begun.

Maria came toward them, but stopped suddenly when she caught sight of Emmaline.

Blood trickled down her chin and stained her dress.

Maria clapped a hand over her mouth in alarm. She asked Emmaline something, but the wind carried her words in the opposite direction.

Abruptly, the wind reversed. It concentrated its force on Emmaline, barreling toward her. She braced herself, as did Matt, but it bowled both of

them over. They were as insignificant as tumbleweed on the open prairie. She fell onto the hard-packed earth, but sprang right back up.

“Show yourself!”

Sensing the presence behind her, she turned slowly. The woman was just as Blade had described, except she’d changed her clothing for the occasion. She wore a fancy, floor-length black dress with an intricate sequin design and her hair was piled on top of her head in an ornate style popular in the early nineteen hundreds. It framed her face, making her eyes appear large and accenting the fullness of her lips.

The harsh set of her mouth and the hardness that glittered in her eyes negated the beauty of her features and dress. *He will never leave me. He will be mine forever. You will not have him.*

Emmaline raised one eyebrow and put her hand on her hip. “I’ve already had him, several times, and in ways you never can.”

The only sound was the distant pop, crackle, and hiss of the fireworks and Maria’s sharp intake of breath. The ghost floated closer. Emmaline stood her ground and Matt stood right behind her. The ghost disregarded everyone except for Emmaline.

He might give you his body, but you will never have his soul. I am his wife. He will never leave me. You are nothing but his whore.

Emmaline knew the amount of fury driving the ghost had to be substantial. Conversations of this length and shows of strength of this magnitude were virtually unknown. She hoped the spirit would blow herself out of existence. “You’re fooling yourself if you think you can win this game.”

Laughter again. *I have eternity. I will be young and beautiful forever. Already your beauty is fading. When you are nothing but a bag of bones, I will still be here with him.*

This time, Emmaline laughed. “Using your logic, so would he. Or hadn’t you noticed that he’s getting older as well?”

Pieces of the ghost floated off, whirling with greater and greater energy until she was a tempest that encompassed the entire field. Guests and partygoers both gawked and ran for cover. Matt grabbed Emmaline, dragging her over to Maria, who hadn’t moved. He wrapped his arms around them both, yelling ineffectually at Emmaline.

Wind whistled around her head, carrying the sound away. She couldn't make out a word he said.

Then she was gone, the maelstrom vanishing as gradually as it had begun. Little by little, people poked their heads out from wherever they had sought cover.

"Damn it!" Emmaline said. She shook Matt's restraining arm away and stomped her foot. "Where the hell did she go?"

The silence was effectively broken by her statement. Soon, the noise crescendoed in a rush of panic, disbelief, and fear.

"I can't believe you just had a cat fight with a ghost over a guy," Matt said. He brushed dirt from his suit and plucked uprooted grass from Maria's hair.

Maria gathered her wits and headed over to the bandstand. Grabbing a microphone, she admonished the crowd to quiet down. "There's nothing to worry about," she said. "She's gone and everyone is all right."

"What the heck was that?" yelled a voice from the crowd.

Maria's Georgia accent thickened as she spoke to the crowd. "Darling, that was a genuine ghostly spirit who has a crush on my baby brother."

Emmaline hadn't moved. She scanned the horizon with her eyes and reached out with her extra senses, searching for her foe.

"You should go up there and reassure everyone," Matt whispered. "After all, you're the expert." He gave her a helpful shove in that direction.

Emmaline pushed hair out of her eyes and squared her shoulders. "Oh, all right." She had other things, more important things, to do, but she could see from the nervous glances people threw in her direction that she wasn't going to be able to just disappear from the scene. She hustled over to the bandstand to join Maria.

"This is my very good friend, Emmaline Force. She's a spirit-talker, so pay attention." Maria handed over the microphone.

Emmaline's dress was torn and soiled. Her hair had tumbled down from the beautiful coif into which Maria had so carefully arranged it. The delicate wrap that had floated around her shoulders was long gone, but the tiara hung, tangled intricately in her once-elegant hair.

"The spirit is gone. Nothing more is going to happen tonight."

“How do you know?” The question was shouted from the crowd. It wasn’t an unreasonable question, but Emmaline was short on patience. She needed to find Blade. She needed to tell him it wasn’t his fault.

“Besides the fact that I can sense that the spiritual energy is gone, what the ghost did takes a tremendous amount of energy. She’ll need to gather her strength for a while. I’m not saying she’s gone forever, just that she’s gone for now.”

Other questions were shouted at her, but she ignored them.

“Thank you and please enjoy the rest of the party. I really need to freshen up.” How could they argue with that? One look at her would leave no doubt she had been the focus of that windstorm.

A large, pasty-faced, middle-aged man stopped her as she stepped down from the bandstand. “I need your help,” he said. “I can pay you.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t talk to you right now.”

He grabbed her arm roughly. “I’m in a lot of trouble and I need you to contact my father. He’s been dead for two years and I need to know where he hid his will.”

Emmaline stared him down until he released her arm. “I don’t work for money and I don’t initiate contact with spirits. I only speak to those who are already here. There’s no sense in bothering the dead when I can let them rest in peace.”

She flounced away. The crowd shifted, moving around her as if accidental contact might make the ghost come back. She found Matt and Maria fairly quickly. She grabbed Matt’s arm with both hands. “I need to find Blade.”

“What happened to him?” Maria asked.

Matt looked over their heads, using his height to search the crowd for an even taller man. “He was with you in the stable. Where could he have gone?”

Emmaline answered Matt first. “I don’t know. We had a terrible fight and he left. I don’t know where he went.”

Maria’s jaw dropped. “He left you alone with her? After what he said about the ghost being in love with him?”

“Please,” Emmaline said. Why was she the only person who seemed to feel an urgent need to find Blade? “I have to find Blade. He thinks he did this to me.”

Maria's eyes narrowed. "He thinks he did what to you?"

Emmaline exhaled sharply. "He thinks he hit me. He's devastated."

"Why would he think that?" Maria brushed Emmaline's hair away from her face and examined her swollen cheek.

"Because she used his hand to do it. Maria, where would he go?"

But Maria had already turned on her heel. Her colorful skirts, muted in the dim light of the remaining lanterns, swished with the rhythm of her sharp steps.

Emmaline and Matt followed her to Blade's house. Maria flung open the front door and flipped on the lights in his foyer. "Blade!"

Remembering Blade's admonition to stay out of his house, Emmaline opted to wait outside. "Maria, don't be mad at him. He didn't do anything."

She clenched her jaw and shook her head. "I know his temper. This was only a matter of time."

Stunned, Emmaline appealed to Matt, but he shook his head at her before she could utter a single word. "I'm with Maria on this." Matt disappeared into the house behind Maria. Her colorful skirt swished in her wake.

The house was too quiet. There was no way he was inside. Emmaline stepped back, and that's when she heard a thump and some muttered swearing coming from around the corner of the veranda. In the dim light that streamed through the living room and out the side window, she saw Blade seated in a wooden rocking chair. He lifted a bottle to his lips and drank deeply.

Emmaline knelt down in front of him and took his hand in hers. His eyes revealed the tortured soul within. The smell indicated whiskey. "Blade, give me the bottle."

He pulled his hand from her grasp and shoved it away. "Go away, Emmy. You don't want me, and I'm dangerous around you." His words were barely slurred, though the bottle was more than half empty.

"You didn't do this to me. It was the ghost." When he didn't react, she continued her entreaty. "Touch it, Blade. My cheek is cold. If you had done this, it would be warm. This is an otherworldly injury. A professional hazard."

Without moving more than necessary, he transferred the whiskey to his other hand and did as she asked. Using the same light she used to see him,

he lifted her hair and caressed her cheek. The swelling on her cheek thumped painfully. "That's going to leave a bruise," he whispered, touching her cheekbone and her lip. "Here and here."

"You didn't do this, Blade. You were right about her, sort of. I don't think she's in love with you, but she's definitely obsessed. She used you. She wants to keep you for her own. If you let her get away with this, she will keep you here, alone for the rest of your life."

"I hardly think you care about whether or not I'm alone." He shook his head.

Emmaline bit her lip. The pain he felt was more than guilt over slapping her. The callous words she flung at him had done the job. She had broken his heart. Guilt didn't taste good, but she couldn't feel something for him that she didn't feel.

"Blade, I'm not the right woman for you, not right now. But that doesn't mean I want you to suffer. You will find someone eventually who will love you the way you love her. When that happens, this ghost will do everything she can to destroy your happiness. You can't let her do this to you."

He stood abruptly, swaying dangerously and stumbling against the side of the house. "Go home, Emmy. I'm done with you."

She appealed to him one last time. "Blade."

A mask slipped over his features. The pain disappeared from his eyes and Emmaline couldn't discern anything but hardness in his face. Without another word, he walked away from her much more steadily than she thought possible.

She sighed after him. While she regretted hurting him, she knew she wasn't ready for another relationship. She couldn't find a place inside herself that wasn't still reeling from Rick's betrayal.

Blade had been a nice diversion, but now that was over.

Chapter 7

Present

Emmaline found the note Blade left by the coffee maker when she came back from her run. She showered and changed. With more than a little trepidation, she pulled on the jeans he had asked her to wear. She desperately hoped he hadn't decided to give her riding lessons. She snagged a toaster snack from his cupboard and headed over to the stable.

She scanned the various corrals outside the stable, but she didn't see Blade anywhere. She noticed there was no shortage of tall men in cowboy hats in this part of Georgia, which she hadn't expected. She went inside for the first time since Rosalie had blown the door from its hinges. The splintered wood had been completely replaced, as had the door. No trace remained of the damage Rosalie had caused.

Alex was the first person she saw. He turned at the sound of the door opening and a wide, welcoming smile lit his face. "Emmaline! I didn't think you'd brave this part of the resort two days in a row."

Emmaline smiled in response. "Hello, Alex. How are you?"

He finished coiling the rope in his hands and hung it on a nearby hook. "Great now that you're here. Don't tell me you've come to see Blade again?"

"I have. Do you know where he is?"

Alex shook his head. "He's not in the best mood right now."

That puzzled Emmaline. She would have thought his mood would be improved. "Did something happen this morning?"

He shrugged. "I've only been here a couple of hours. He was in a bad mood when I got here. I don't know what set him off, but they say it doesn't take much."

Emmaline waved away Alex's concern. "Blade doesn't lose his temper without a reason."

"I don't know about that. He's been unpredictable for a couple of weeks now."

That was probably when he found out she was coming to visit. "I'm sure it's not that bad."

Alex came closer and dropped his volume. "I saw you guys arguing yesterday. Everybody did."

Emmaline met his clear blue eyes with a little bit of annoyance. "So what? Blade and I disagree once in a while."

"That's not what I heard." He put his hand on her shoulder. "Look, if you need help, I won't be far away."

She shook his hand away. "You need to stop listening to rumors. I'll admit he and I have had some pretty bad fights, but he's not a monster. He's kind, thoughtful, and passionate."

She nearly bit her tongue on that last adjective. She meant he cared deeply about the things that mattered to him, but she knew from the look in Alex's eye that he took it to mean much more than that.

"Don't you have work to do?" Blade's voice was just as gruff as it had been the day before.

Emmaline turned. She hadn't heard the door open behind her. Then she saw the door to his office was open as well. She hoped he hadn't heard their conversation, though it would account for his temper now.

Alex nodded briefly in Blade's direction. "It was good to see you, Emmaline. If you need anything at all, you let me know, okay?" He shot a warning look at Blade before returning to his duties. Implicit in his farewell was a reminder that he'd be close in case she needed help.

When he was gone, Blade turned dispassionate eyes upon Emmaline. "I didn't think you were coming."

She smiled up at him. "Is that why you've been grumpy all morning? Your note didn't specify a time."

He looked at something over her head. "I thought maybe you were a little more upset with me about last night than you admitted."

Emmaline reached up and touched his face lightly. She longed to remove his hat, but she didn't want to push her luck. "I thought we weren't going to do this anymore."

With obvious reluctance, he looked back down at her. "Do what?"

"If you're mad at me, then be mad at me. But don't hide your feelings behind this mask of yours and pretend it doesn't matter."

Slowly, his features reconfigured and she could see his nervousness. "Are you upset about last night?"

Her eyebrows knit together. "No. I told you I wasn't mad. I think it's an unusual quirk you have. If I was angry about it, I wouldn't have waited until morning to tell you, Blade. You know me better than that. I would have made you wake up so I could tell you exactly how upset I was. Now will you stop worrying about it? We have other problems."

He blinked at her as the wheels turned in his head. His indecisive expression turned to puzzlement. "We do?"

"Yes." She looked around. The door behind Blade led to a hallway housing several rooms he kept for various purposes, including his office. Several groomers were working in the stable nearby. "If we went into your office and closed the door, would anyone be able to hear our conversation?"

"No."

That settled the question of whether or not he had heard her conversation with Alex. She didn't want him to get into trouble for being concerned about her well-being. She could well imagine the rumors he'd heard. Most people held their breath when they saw Blade and Emmaline together. Usually, it was only a matter of time until one or both of them blew up.

Those who had been around longer remembered the bruised and stitched cheek she sported for a week after the infamous New Year's Eve incident. Both Maria and Matt had lit into Blade for his violent temper, not believing Emmaline when she had insisted that Rosalie was to blame. That fight had been overheard by more than a few workers.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him into the room where he'd given her an orgasm that had nearly made her pass out. She closed and locked it behind her. Then she sat on the leather sofa that hadn't moved since the first and last time she'd been there and patted the seat next to her.

He obeyed her silent order. "So, what is this problem we have?"

"You didn't happen to peek into the guest room before you left, did you?" When he shook his head, she outlined the events of the morning.

He lifted his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. "I didn't even think to look." He tossed the hat to the large oak desk that dominated the room.

"I'm going to need a new suitcase before I leave." She chewed at her cuticle until Blade reached over and closed his hand over hers. "Except now if I leave, she'll think she's won."

A wry smile twisted his lips. "I can't believe you're fighting over me with a ghost."

Her smile was cynical. "Men are so full of themselves. You sound like Matt. I'm not fighting over you, Blade. I'm fighting *for* you."

"I don't need someone else to fight my battles."

"Fine. Then I'm fighting because nobody tells me what I can and cannot do."

He laughed. "That sounds more like you."

What was it about his laugh that set butterflies free inside her stomach? Their eyes met and she thought he was going to kiss her. The warmth that had begun early that morning returned, anticipating him. He let go of her hands and leaned against the back of the sofa instead.

Emmaline tried to not be disappointed.

"I assume you have a plan?"

"Not yet, but I'm working on it."

He brought his arm up to rest casually along the top of the sofa. "What does Matt say about all of this?"

Emmaline shrugged. "I don't want to bother him with this. He has so much on his plate already."

"So you won't be bothering Maria with this either?"

She shook her head. "This is really your problem and mine because I'm staying at your house. I don't see a reason to complicate things more." Not to mention she was supposed to be there on vacation. She shifted to face him more fully. "So why did you want me to come all the way down here wearing jeans? I'm not getting on a horse."

His chuckle and the corresponding sparkle in his eye was the kind that meant he knew he'd eventually get her on a horse, but that he knew it would take some time to accomplish. "You don't actually dislike horses, do you?"

Sighing deeply, Emmaline rolled her eyes. "It's not the horse, it's the distance from the ground."

Blade grinned. "So you'd ride a short horse?"

“Spit it out, cowboy. I’m thirty seconds from bolting out that door.”

His eyes darted between her lips and her eyes, but he didn’t make a move to kiss her. “I’d like you to help me with Verity.”

“Verity?” Emmaline wasn’t thinking of yesterday or of horses.

“You met her yesterday.” He rose slowly and paced the room, a defeated man. His attention had definitely shifted. “I’ve tried everything I know to get her to trust me. You come along and completely ignore her. Of course she takes right to you. After you left, I tried ignoring her. I had nearly every hand I have working here try to ignore her. She wants nothing to do with anybody.”

Emmaline sat forward, a frown creasing her forehead. “This is the one who bit me?”

“She nipped at you. If she’d bit you, you’d know it.”

“In your world, this is what horses do when they like someone?”

“The fact that she came to you at all means she likes you more than anyone I’ve had near her in the last two months. Emmy, I’m desperate. If I can’t get her acclimated, I’m going to have to put her down.”

Emmaline hadn’t considered that possibility. “But why can’t you just leave her alone and let her go about her business in peace? Do you really need another trail horse?”

He waved his hand dismissively and put on his hat. “She’ll never be a trail horse. I doubt anyone will ever be able to ride her. Horses are gregarious animals. Not only does she refuse to have anything to do with humans, but she won’t interact with the other horses. Plus, she’s living in constant fear. I have to sedate her in order to groom her. She refuses food unless we trick her into eating. I’ve reached the end of my options here.”

Emmaline stood, looking toward the door.

“Emmy, please. You don’t have to ride her, just hang out with her. Let her smell you, hear your voice.”

“And then abandon her when I leave at the end of next week?”

He frowned. “Let’s take it one day at a time.”

“I have an appointment in Spain one week from Monday.” She went over to him and put her hand on his arm. “Blade, is it fair to do this to Verity? Am I wrong in thinking that you want her to bond with me in the hope she can generalize that trust? Won’t that still mean her greatest bond is

with me? I don't live here. I plan to visit several times a year, but it's not the same thing."

"There's no guarantee this will work in the first place," he said. "You could be worrying about nothing."

He *knew* she wouldn't refuse. She had made a career out of running around helping people in need. Surely she wouldn't turn down a poor, abused horse? With a graceless sigh, she gave in.

Emmaline followed Blade outside to Verity's exercise yard. He opened the gate, but didn't go inside. "I think you should do this without me."

"I don't know what I should do," she cautioned.

"Talk to her. Touch her. Oh, here," he reached into his pocket and pulled out several cubes of sugar. "The way to a girl's heart is through her stomach. Go on. I'll be right here if you need me."

Sugar. In his pocket. She'd hate to see the pile of ants in his laundry room.

Taking a deep breath, she headed over to where Verity was standing tensely, waiting with a blindfold around her eyes. The horse whinnied and took a step back. "Don't you remember me?" she said gently. "You comforted me yesterday when Blade was being such a jerk. I came to return the favor. Do you want to tell me all about it?"

Verity snorted and pranced a few steps away. Then she stilled, suddenly calm. It was as if someone had flipped a switch. She ambled over to Emmaline and pushed against her hand, which was still curled around the sugar cubes Blade had pressed into it. She opened her hand and let Verity eat all three of them. She patted the horse's muzzle and neck while she chewed.

"If you keep eating like that, you might not have teeth left," Emmaline admonished. "How about I bring you some apples next time? Those have to be better for you than a handful of sugar."

Verity pressed her head against Emmaline's. Emmaline didn't know if Verity was trying to hug her or knock her over, but she brought her arm up to hug the nervous horse. She didn't know how long she spent in the yard, talking to Verity and petting her. Then suddenly Verity was gone, having bolted to the other side of the yard. Emmaline stared after her in amazement until she felt Blade behind her.

"She's afraid of you."

"I know," he said as he rested his hands on her shoulders. "You were amazing."

"She must know I have no intention of ever riding her."

"She knows something."

Emmaline turned to frown up at Blade. "I wonder why she's so afraid of you. I know you well enough to know you'd never do anything to intentionally spook her."

He shrugged as he stared over her head at the reluctant horse. "She reminds me of you. I never intentionally spooked you, either."

No, he hadn't. He had scared her with things that would have made any other woman fall into his arms. She had panicked and run as far as she could in the opposite direction. "Maybe you have to let her do this in her own way, in her own time. Don't put her down, Blade. She's been hurt and she's afraid of being hurt again. It's not like you to kick a girl when she's down."

Blade considered her words, knowing she was talking about more than the horse. "Do you think you could try to groom her?"

"See, now you're speaking a foreign language to me. You might as well say it in Spanish. I'd understand just as much."

His eyes were suddenly serious. "*Estoy enamorado de ti.*"

She smiled, having not understood a word. "Wow. That sounds downright seductive."

His half smile didn't reach his eyes. "How about I teach you on Gracie and then you can try it on Verity?"

In the end, Verity let Emmaline groom her for only a few minutes, but she did eat a goodly amount. Emmaline came away feeling as if she'd failed, but Blade assured her she had accomplished more in one afternoon than anyone had been able to do the entire time she'd been there.

She visited with Dash before stopping back by the stable, where she slipped in unannounced and finished grooming Verity in her stall, chattering at her the entire time. Without stopping to consider anything, she removed Verity's blindfold and let the horse see her. At first, Verity was startled. Then, when her eyes grew used to the light, she calmed immediately to the sound of Emmaline's voice and her reassuring touch.

When the horse focused on Emmaline, a shock of recognition ran through her body. Only twice before had Emmaline ever looked into someone's eyes and recognized what she saw in Verity. "You can see

spirits, can't you? You can see her following Blade around like a jealous stalker. Is that why you shy away from him?"

Verity answered in her own way, then rested her head on Emmaline's shoulder.

"I'll fix this, Verity. I will do my best to fix this."

Suddenly, Verity backed away. "Fix what? You shouldn't have removed her blindfold. She panics, even when no one is around."

Emmaline studied Blade, and then she looked beyond him. She saw nothing, but she knew Rosalie was near. Whatever her plan, Emmaline knew she couldn't share it with Blade without Rosalie hearing. She'd become so accustomed to sensing the presence of a spirit around Blade that she hadn't stopped to consider the magnitude of what it meant. Even if he burned down the house, Rosalie would remain with him. But how to separate her from him?

At times like this, she wished Aunt Emma was still alive so she could talk to her. Aunt Emma knew far more about their gifts and about the spirit world than she had shared with Emmaline. She had been fond of telling Emmaline that some things were better learned through experience. Well, this was one experience where Emmaline needed guidance and she had nobody in her life who could help her.

For the first time, Emmaline seriously considered trying to initiate contact with a spirit. Until now, she'd been a passive participant. For years, people had asked her to actively try to contact the souls of their deceased loved ones, but she'd refused. Was it really out of respect for the dead or did it stem from her own fear of failure?

Without a word to Blade, Emmaline put Verity's blindfold back around her eyes. She murmured comforting words before stepping out of the stall.

"I'm surprised to see you back here," he said tentatively. "The two of you seem to like each other quite a bit."

"You were right," Emmaline said. "She's a kindred spirit. She's like me in many ways. But there is one important distinction."

"She's a horse and you're not?"

Emmaline laughed. "That, too." She shook her head at the lameness of his joke. "She's afraid of Rosalie and I'm not."

Blade drew his black brows together in perturbed confusion. “But Rosalie is nowhere near me. She’s only come to the stable that one time, when she attacked you.”

She linked her arm through Blade’s. “I’m glad to see you’ve finally accepted that you didn’t hit me. However, you’re wrong if you think Rosalie isn’t with you. She might stay out of your bedroom, but she doesn’t leave your side otherwise.”

“You can see her now?”

Emmaline shook her head. “But I can sense her. And I think Verity is more sensitive than me. I think I’ve developed a bad habit of ignoring Rosalie. That’s got to stop, especially because she’s put me on her ‘must destroy’ list.”

As they walked back to Blade’s house, Emmaline didn’t let go of him, and he made no move to encourage her to do so.

Maria and Matt were fighting when they arrived for dinner. They had called an uneasy truce while Emmaline and Blade were there, but it didn’t last the entire time. Their guests gracefully excused themselves early. As they walked away from the house, they heard the sounds of the argument resuming.

“I’ve never seen them fight like this,” Blade said. He frowned as he glanced back toward his sister’s house.

Emmaline didn’t reply. She’d seen Matt and Lili get into these kinds of arguments as Lili’s cancer progressed. She recognized the signs of Maria trying to push him away. She only hoped that Matt would be as strong with Maria as he had been with Lili.

The day had been long and tiring. Next to Blade, Emmaline drifted to sleep with thoughts of how she might go about contacting her aunt’s spirit and the hope that Blade’s quirk would reassert itself.

Bright white sunlight streaming through the window awakened her, but she didn’t move. Blade’s arm rested on her waist and his chest was pressed against her back. Sometime during the night, he’d pulled her close and wrapped himself around her. She stayed where she was, enjoying his heat and the passive affection of his unconscious embrace.

Then his hand moved, caressing her hip and her waist until it suddenly stopped. He swore lightly before he sat up, scooting himself away from her.

She rolled onto her back and tentatively touched his arm. "You okay?"

He swore again. "I didn't know you were awake."

"I was going to go to town today. Did you want me to pick you up some blinds? I know exactly what kind would work best in here."

"I molest you in your sleep and you want to buy me window coverings," he muttered under his breath.

She resisted the urge to laugh at his obvious discomfort. "I wasn't asleep."

He swore again as he got up and headed to the bathroom, throwing his excuse over his shoulder. "I'm late for work."

She noticed he hadn't apologized. When he was gone, she measured his windows before dressing and heading over to see if Matt and Maria were awake. Unfortunately, they both were. The tension in the air was palpable.

Something sizzled angrily on the stove, mirroring Maria's mood. She alternately muttered under her breath and yelled at no one in particular. Since everything she said was in Spanish, Emmaline was blissfully unaware of the exact reason for her tirade, but she strongly suspected her hormones were more to blame than Matt.

Emmaline took Dash plus a plate of bacon and toast into the dining room, closing the door firmly behind her. She figured Maria could use a break from Dash, and Dash could clearly use a break from Maria's tirade. Maria followed sooner rather than later.

She lifted Dash from Emmaline's arms. "I need to feed him before I go to work. You can eat at the Dining Room, you know."

Emmaline refrained from taking offense. She didn't have a problem eating with the rest of the resort's guests, especially if Maria didn't want her around. "If you want me to go, Maria, all you have to do is ask. I won't be offended if you want some privacy. Or, if you want me to take Dash off your hands for a while, I can do that, too."

Maria spat some particularly nasty Spanish in reply, and then said, "Can you take Matt off my hands? Can you do that? If I have to see him one more time today, I might murder him."

"I'll take him to town with me today," she offered. "I have to pick up some blinds for Blade." This was better than she'd hoped. She could bounce her ideas for contacting her Aunt Emma off Matt and he could help her hang the blinds.

Maria glared at Emmaline, and then she returned to the kitchen to spew some more virulent Spanish. Emmaline heard the front door slam before a blissful silence descended on the house. She went into the kitchen to find Matt holding his head in his hands. She slid her arms around him and rested her head on his back.

"I have to do something about this, Em. She's lost it."

"I told you she was depressed."

"She's not depressed. Crying I can handle. This is scary. I think she hates me."

"Anger is part of depression. You should know this. You said some pretty ugly things to people you love after Lili died. Let's stop by her doctor's office today when we go to town and see what she says about this."

Matt rubbed his eyes and pinched the space between his eyes. "We don't have an appointment. She's impossible to see without an appointment. She's the only ob-gyn in the area."

Emmaline snorted in reply. "Have you ever seen me take 'no' for an answer?"

He shook his head.

Her heart seized. She had given him a good opening and he hadn't attempted a teasing comment. She squeezed him one last time. "Have some faith in me."

Matt was reluctant to leave Maria alone with Dash for the entire day, so they stopped by the stables first so he could ask Blade to check in on her from time to time. Emmaline wandered out to find Verity while they talked.

She meditated with the horse first to make sure Rosalie was still with Blade. Then she whispered her plan to Verity. It might have been her imagination—she'd be the first to claim ignorance of horses—but she thought Verity understood everything she said.

By the time she and Matt made it to town, she decided to broach the subject in general terms. She was reticent to bring up the details when Matt had so much else on his mind, but he was her best friend and she really needed an objective opinion.

"Do you think I could contact a spirit?"

Matt tapped his fingers on the armrest as he considered her question. "I don't see why you couldn't. I've always told you that I thought you could do

it. You've never wanted to try before. What brought on the sudden change of heart?"

Emmaline waved a dismissive hand as she maneuvered into a parking space in town. "I miss my aunt. I thought it would be nice to talk to her."

The look Matt gave her clearly communicated his disbelief. "I'm not so wrapped up in my problems that I can't see through you."

She pursed her lips. "What do you think is going on?"

"I don't know, Em. Why don't you tell me why you're suddenly buying window shades for a guy you hated a week ago?"

"I've never hated Blade. Besides, the blinds are a selfish gift. His house faces east and I'm tired of being awakened at the crack of dawn by another bright, sunshiney day."

She tried to open her door, but Matt wrapped a restraining hand around her wrist. "Did you both sleep in the bed together again, or did one of you stay on the couch?"

The feel of Blade pressed against her back came back to her in vivid detail. She wasn't sure why she blushed. "Why does it matter?"

His nostrils flared. "I asked you not to play games with him, Emmaline. He's become one of my closest friends. I already regret encouraging you to sleep with him in the first place. And I'd move you back into my house in a heartbeat if I didn't think Maria would kill me. Plus, she stayed up yelling at me until after midnight. I'm surprised you didn't hear it next door."

Cocooned in Blade's arms as she had been, the house could have fallen down and she wouldn't have heard a thing. She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept so soundly.

"I'm not playing with him, Matt." And she didn't think he was playing with her, either. "I think I'm in love with him. I think I have been for a long, long time, only I've refused to admit it."

Matt considered her confession for a minute. "You haven't fought with him for an entire day and now you think you're in love with him. Emmaline, before you do anything, be sure. Don't break his heart again. He's still not over you."

She let him study her eyes. She wanted him to see how serious she was about Blade. At last, he released her arm.

"I don't want to see you hurt, either, Em."

The town was small, not much developed beyond Main Street and a couple of offshoots. Emmaline parked in a centrally-located public lot.

She was glad she brought Matt with her. His practical experience with building and all manner of mechanical things, like installing blinds, helped her avoid selecting the wrong size. She was glad she had measured an inside length and an outside length.

Then she dragged him to see Maria's doctor.

The office was located in a storefront just around the corner from the boutique where she had purchased the ball gown that made the blood drain from Blade's face. It didn't look like much from the outside. A bell jingled as Emmaline pulled open the door.

"Good morning." A receptionist sat at a desk behind a high counter. Her age was indeterminable, but she had the demeanor of a woman who had worked there long enough to feel like she was in charge. She rose and narrowed her eyes in a suspicious glare. "The doctor sees new patients on Mondays only."

"That's okay," Emmaline said. "We're not here for an exam. We just need to talk to Dr. Coventry for a few minutes."

"The doctor is available by appointment only." The receptionist's icy smile didn't deter Emmaline.

"This is an emergency. We'll stay until we see the doctor."

The receptionist pressed her thin lips together. "I'll have to ask you to leave. If you insist on staying, I will call the sheriff and have you forcibly removed."

Emmaline leaned across the counter. Any inclination she might have had to be polite fled. Matt tugged on her arm, but she shook him off.

"I need five minutes, that's all. I can be disruptive or I can be quiet. Which do you prefer?"

"Celine, what is going on?"

A hallway ran behind the reception area. Two women stared at Emmaline and Matt. One of them was very pregnant and the other had green eyes that spit fire at Emmaline. Her brown hair curled to just below her ears. It was streaked from hours spent in the sun.

"Dr. Coventry, these people would like to see you without an appointment."

“Please,” Matt said. “It’s about Maria Curry. I’m her husband and this is Emmaline Force, a friend of ours.”

The doctor wasn’t pleased, but something in Matt’s voice must have persuaded her that this was an emergency. She ushered them down the hall and into her office. “Sit,” she said, indicating the two chairs opposite.

“I do not appreciate the bullying tactics you used with my receptionist. If you engage in such behavior again, I will have her call the police.”

Matt nodded. “Dr. Coventry, I apologize for the intrusion. I’m desperate.”

The doctor looked closely at Matt. “What’s wrong?”

“She’s not herself.” He rubbed at his forehead. “She’s angry all the time, and it seems like she’s crying whenever she’s not yelling. I’m doing everything I can, doctor. I feed him in the middle of the night. I change him. We both work at home, so we split childcare, but nothing seems to make a difference.”

Emmaline felt for Matt, but she knew if she let him keep talking, he would end up rambling or crying. “She’s depressed. I told her she needs to see you, but she wasn’t convinced.”

Dr. Coventry nodded. “I’ll pencil you in for tomorrow at ten. You might not be able to convince her to come, but don’t give up. You just pop in whenever you get her close. Maybe you want to use the excuse of showing me that handsome little man I delivered for her?”

Tenuous hope lit Matt’s eyes.

“Thank you, doctor,” Emmaline said as she slung her purse over her shoulder. “I’m sorry about earlier.”

On the way home, Matt was silent.

Emmaline turned off the radio. “Nervous?”

“I don’t know if I should tell her the truth or lie to her. What would make her hate me less?”

“Probably some anti-depressants and a good support group.”

“You’re not helping.”

“I think I’ve done a lot. What are the chances you would have done this if I hadn’t made you?”

He shrugged. “It depends on how desperate I get.”

She reached over and squeezed his hand. “You’re welcome.”

“Thanks.”

"I'm going to eat in the Dining Room tonight," she informed him. "I'll keep Blade with me."

"Why?" The edge of panic in Matt's voice was hard to miss. He was afraid to be alone with Maria.

"Maria suggested it this morning, right before she took Dash and left. I'd take it personally, but I know what a tough time she's having right now."

Matt opened his mouth, probably to protest, but he closed it again. He might want company at dinner, but he wasn't going to get any.

She helped Matt put up the blinds before she went for a run and stopped in to see Verity. Blade was nowhere to be found when she finally made it to the stable. She didn't want to run in and out too quickly. Her relationship with Verity was fragile. Already, she felt pangs of guilt knowing she would be leaving the poor horse high and dry come the end of the following week.

However, she'd promised a very frantic homeowner in Spain that she'd investigate the estate she and her husband had purchased with the intent of living there. So far they had been unable to stay an entire night. After months of following Emmaline's instructions to have various specialists to the home to investigate all of the possible mechanical causes, they'd convinced her she was needed there.

She brushed Verity, chattering with her the entire time. When she finished, the horse once again planted her muzzle on Emmaline's shoulder. It was in that calming position that Emmaline tried to contact the one person to whom she'd always gone for answers.

Verity seemed to concentrate right along with her, adding her celestial energy to Emmaline's. Aunt Emma was in that stall in no time flat.

Hey, sugar pants. Aunt Emma had never called Emmaline by her given name.

"Aunt Emma!" Emmaline forgot to breathe.

You look surprised for someone who did the calling.

"You never said I could initiate contact, just that I could talk to ghosts."

It's a difficult thing to do. You were never strong enough before.

Near tears, Emmaline nodded. "I've missed you."

I'm here, honey. But not for long. This isn't as easy as it looks. Now, why don't you tell me what you want?

"I'm having a problem." Emmaline summed up everything that had happened in the last year and a half with regard to the ghost. "Is there a way to send her spirit to the place it should be?"

Yes. No. Well, maybe.

"What do you mean?"

Someone she loved must take her if she won't go on her own.

Emmaline's jaw dropped open. She had to summon the soul of someone Rosalie had loved. She had to summon the soul of Jonathan Edmunds, the man who had betrayed and who had most likely murdered her. Before she could ask anything more, Aunt Emma shimmered and vanished.

Tears glistened on her cheeks as she finished combing and feeding Verity. When she ran into Alex on the way out, he stopped her by grabbing her upper arms.

"Did you have another fight with Blade?"

Storms threatened behind Alex's eyes. Emmaline wondered what demons haunted him, but she had the grace to hold her tongue. She didn't know him well enough to ask things like that.

"No. I haven't seen him all day." When Alex didn't immediately release her, she shook her head at him. "Really, Alex. I'm fine."

He let her go with obvious reluctance.

When she arrived at Blade's to shower and change for dinner, she found him surveying the new blinds on his windows. They were in the Roman style and were dark enough to keep out any unwanted light.

"I see I'm going to have to get an alarm clock," he said. "These look nice."

"You're welcome."

His lips twisted in a wry smile. "Rosalie kept whispering to me that you were spending time in my room with another man."

"I was," Emmaline laughed, coming closer to look at them with a fresh perspective. They held up under scrutiny. "Matt helped me install the blinds. I closed the door because Rosalie was driving me nuts, hovering the way she does."

"She was quite explicit."

Emmaline looked at him from the corner of her eye. "If you're going to accuse me of something, I wish you'd come right out and say it."

"I'm not accusing you of anything," he said. "Besides, she didn't say it was Matt, she said it was Alex. And Alex happened to be mucking out the stall next to me."

Her mouth set in a hard line. "I don't know why you think I would be so crass as to bring a man not only into your house, but into your bed. Why do you listen to her?"

"Where have you been?" He asked it gently, but there was something else in his voice.

She looked up at him. He had recently showered and changed into fresh, crisp khaki shorts and a light blue shirt that set off his bronze features nicely. "Why don't you tell me what's really bothering you?"

Instead of an answer, she found herself crushed in his arms, his face buried in her hair. He was trembling.

"Blade, what's wrong? What happened?"

"I had another vision," he mumbled into her hair.

She fought her own fear. His last vision had come true exactly as he had seen it. "Tell me what you saw."

"You were dead."

"Cause of death?" She tried to use her best clinical voice, but when someone with reliable visions foretells death, it was hard to be objective.

"I don't know. All I see is you lying on the stable floor. You're pale and cold." He broke off.

"That could just mean Rosalie knocked me on my ass. She has a nasty habit of stealing my body heat."

"You aren't breathing and your heart isn't beating."

She had nothing to say to that.

"I don't want this to happen."

Her lips twisted in an ironic grin. "Well, this proves we've come a long way. There was a time when that vision wouldn't have bothered you."

"No, there isn't."

She was silent while he held her. "Maybe you should try CPR. You are a doctor, after all. What good is that tremendous IQ of yours if you can't blow into my mouth and do a few chest compressions?"

"Emmy, don't joke about this."

She extricated herself from his grip. "I think you might squeeze me to death first, thereby nullifying your vision. Let me take a shower and think about this, okay? It's a lot to take in."

He didn't follow her into the bathroom, but he did hover outside the door.

"I died in the stable, not the bathroom." She closed the door, but she didn't lock it.

When she finished, she wrapped herself in one of his extra large towels that fell nearly to her feet and went into the bedroom in search of something to wear. Blade sat on the bed, waiting for her.

"What am I wearing in this vision of yours? I'll be sure to not wear it tonight." The couch, where she had left all of her carefully folded clothes, was empty. "Blade, where are my clothes?"

He pointed toward the walk-in closet behind her. "I hung them in there."

She reversed direction to continue her search. Her clothes were neatly hung according to type and style. Her underthings were similarly sorted in several nearby drawers. Emmaline shook her head. No wonder he and Matt got along so well. This kind of organization should be a crime. The level of care he took with her clothes was not lost on her.

She slipped a blue sundress over her head and grabbed a pair of sandals from the shoe rack where he had arranged her shoes. A brief search through her toiletry bag showed that he had unpacked that, too. She had left her shampoo and razor in his shower the last time she used it. He had most likely put the rest of her things in his cabinets. She wasn't sure whether she should be hopeful that it meant he wanted her in his life, or wistful because he was willing to tolerate her for a short while before he got back to his life without her.

She decided to forget makeup. Blade seemed to prefer her without it anyway. She emerged to find that he hadn't moved from his sentry position. "Blade, I think you shouldn't spend your time worrying about this."

He looked her up and down with casual interest. "Well, you weren't wearing that in my vision, so we're off the hook for now. Anyway, I got rid of the shirt you were wearing when I moved all of your clothes. In the vision, I didn't see the rest of your outfit. Shall we head over to Maria's?"

She smiled and shook her head at his admission. “No, we should head to the Dining Room.” At the question in his lifted brow, she explained, “Matt asked for some privacy. I told him we’d eat in the Dining Room tonight.”

It had been quite a while since she’d eaten in the Dining Room, but she had seen the improvements before. Although there was a table full of his employees beckoning to him, Blade waved at them and steered Emmaline to a semi-secluded table for two.

“Feeling anti-social?” she joked.

“Yes.” He wasn’t kidding.

He remained somber throughout dinner, until Emmaline decided she’d had enough. “Blade, this is ridiculous. I’m not dead yet. Can’t we pretend you didn’t have this vision?”

“No.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you being surly in an effort to get me to leave? I’ll warn you now that it won’t work for you again.”

“Again?”

“Yes. The last time you threw me out of your life, you were surly and rude. You told me to get out. I think those were your exact words. It won’t work again. I’m not leaving until this problem is solved. I won’t let her ruin your life like this.”

She didn’t add that her life was on the line as well. He didn’t need to be reminded of that. Plus, she didn’t want to admit to him that she was in love with him. Matt’s assumptions notwithstanding, she had no idea if he returned the feeling. It was normal to be upset about having a vision of someone dying.

“Emmy, this isn’t your battle to fight.”

“Yes it is.”

He exhaled loudly and held up his hands. “I don’t want to fight with you.”

Emmaline didn’t get a chance to reply. Her half-finished stuffed ravioli flew from her plate, landing down the front of her dress and splashing tomato sauce onto her face and hair. She pushed back her chair and cried, “Damn it, Rosalie! I just took a shower.”

Blade hopped up, grabbed her plate, and shoveled the majority of the food back onto the dish. Using a cloth napkin, he dabbed ineffectually at her dress.

Several members of the wait staff had rushed over when the accident happened. They hovered in the background until Blade helped Emmaline to her feet. "This isn't going to come out without stain remover. I have some stuff at home that might take that out."

He looked down at the red sauce staining the tablecloth and the wasted food on the floor.

A young man who didn't look a day over eighteen cleared his throat. "We'll get that, Dr. Sanchez. You go ahead and take Ms. Force to get changed. Would you like someone to bring another dinner to your house?"

Blade waved a dismissive hand. "I'll feed her something else."

Emmaline smiled her appreciation at the server as Blade steered her to the door.

Blade's back door opened into a utility room. This was where he undressed when he came home muddy and messy. He didn't say a word when Emmaline pulled the hem of her dress up, but he threw an old towel at her and beat a hasty retreat when she kept going. She wasn't wearing a bra.

In the end, they gave up on the dress, but Blade agreed that something needed to be done about Rosalie. He was a little upset when Emmaline refused to tell him anything about her plan.

She sat on his settee and dragged a brush through her hair. "If you know the plan, then she'll know the plan and it won't work." She thought she was being reasonable, but he disagreed.

Clad in only his boxers, he pulled back the covers and climbed into bed. "I know my vision plays into your plan, Emmy. Promise me you won't do anything without me there."

She rolled her eyes and disappeared into the bathroom. How could she make a promise she had no idea she could keep? She returned to find Blade leaning against the pillows, his arms crossed over his bare, bronze chest and his eyes dangerous. Add some mineral oil and he would look as if he had sprung from the pages of a bedding advertisement. They wouldn't have been able to keep those sheets in stock.

Instantly, she was aroused. It hadn't been her damaged emotional state that made her respond to him this way when he was irate; it was the fact that he was incredibly sexy when he was mad. She regretted promising Matt she wouldn't make the first move. And damn it if she wasn't wearing actual

pajamas. If ever there was a night to wear tiny lace panties and a baby-tee, this was it.

Climbing under the covers next to him, she did her best to pretend everything was normal. She curled up on her side facing away from him.

“Emmy.”

“*Buenas noches*, Blade.”

“Emmaline Elizabeth Force, look at me.”

Since he had used her entire name, something she hadn’t known he knew, she rolled over and sat up to face him. She took her time doing it.

His voice was firm. The cords on his neck stood out and his eyes were black. “Promise me you won’t try anything stupid while I’m not there. Promise you won’t do this without me.”

“Blade, I’m not going to make a promise to you I can’t keep. However, I’d like to point out that you were there with me in your vision. According to your own presentiment, you’ll be there for the important parts.”

“No, Emmy, according to my vision, I find you dead. I don’t want to do that.”

She sighed. “Then you have your answer and you know why I can’t make this promise. I’ve never lied to you, Blade, not to spare your feelings or mine, and not when it would have been convenient to do so. I’m not going to start now.”

“Then I want you to leave. I’ll help you pack your things in the morning.”

She gritted her teeth to hold in a retort that would take them both to the boiling point. “I already told you I wasn’t going anywhere until this was resolved.”

“Be reasonable. The price is too high.”

“Look, you already hid the shirt from me. Why don’t you wait and see if you have the vision again or if it changes?” Then, because she couldn’t resist, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek before burrowing under the sheet and closing her eyes.

She didn’t know how long it took either of them to fall asleep, but she knew she was sleeping on her stomach when she was awakened by a warm hand on her hip that flipped her over before she was quite aware of anything. His mouth found hers immediately in the darkened room. Hard

and insistent, his lips slanted over hers, seeking more and more. He whispered her name and she ached for him.

Emmaline ran her hands over his chest and back, feeling the tautness of those fine muscles as he held his weight from crushing her, and returned his kisses without hesitation. His hands roamed her body, stoking the flames of desire. He lifted her to remove her shirt and he slid her bottoms and panties off in one swift motion.

He moved so that he covered her completely and she moaned as he urged her legs apart and settled between them, grinding his hips into her. She reached down, wanting to remove his one piece of clothing so that no barriers were between them. Blade's mouth traced a trail of fire around her neck before he moved lower to latch her already aroused nipple.

She arched against him, crying out his name, when she felt his weight descend upon her fully. His head rested on her chest and she heard his even breathing. Damn that man! Why couldn't he walk in his sleep like a normal human being? She said his name several times and tried shoving at him, but he was deeply asleep. Frustrated, she smacked his shoulder as hard as she could. It would serve him right to have a bruise come morning. How dare he arouse her like this and not follow through?

He did move when she hit him. His head rose slowly. In the dim moonlight that filtered through the edges of the blinds, she saw his eyes focus and surprise cross his features. He lifted himself and rolled away from her.

"Sorry," he mumbled as he fell back asleep.

Emmaline stared after him, her mouth agape. How could he be so clueless? Screw her promise to Matt. Technically, she wasn't involving Blade in what she was about to do and if he held true to form, he would sleep through it anyway.

The bag of toys her sister had given her was in his closet. He hadn't unpacked it. She rummaged around for her vibrator, which she had tossed inside when she moved her things from the guest room to Blade's, and then she returned to the bed to lie against the pillows.

She threw him a dubious glance, hesitating only a second before she found her favorite setting and then slid it inside her already drenched vagina. She moaned softly as her pleasure built, and her breaths came rapidly. She

ignored Blade completely, even when she felt his weight shift as he rolled back toward her.

The silky warmth of his fingers as he traced them lightly along her thigh didn't distract her. His hand grew more insistent as it traveled across her hip and over her stomach to follow a parallel path down her other thigh. Abruptly, he slid his hand under her buttocks and turned her to face him, drawing her top leg over him to rest on his hip.

His tongue plunged into her mouth. He whispered her name and removed her hand, taking the hilt of the vibrator from her. She dug her fingers into his arms, holding onto him as he rocked it back and forth, in and out, matching her rhythm until she cried out her release.

She clung to him, not objecting when he pulled the slickened vibrator from her and turned it off before tossing it on the floor. When her breathing returned to normal, she removed her leg from him, not sure if he was awake or asleep. But when she tried to move back to her side of the bed, he held her to him.

"I told you once that if you ever masturbated next to me I wouldn't sleep through it," he said. "I meant it."

Fairly certain he was awake, she didn't reply. Instead, she reached up to thread her fingers through his hair, pulling his lips toward her. This time, she kissed him, drawing him to her as she claimed his mouth for her own.

He submitted to her completely, molding his body to the contours of hers and banishing any space or fabric between them. Emmaline pushed him until he rolled onto his back, taking her with him. She pushed against him until he reluctantly released her, whispering her name in protest as she sat up.

Straddling his hips, she guided him into her, slamming down with such violence he could have no doubt she was upset with him. She was in control. Fighting was useless. The heat spread through them, igniting something utterly flammable and long dormant. She ground against him, her tempo increasing to impossible speeds, until she let go completely, riding the crest of her pleasure and abandoning any attempt at rhythm. Release was so close.

He sat up and held her still on him, kissing her fervently. He tasted her lips, her face, her neck, and lower until she begged him. Only then did he flip her onto her back and give her what she wanted. He plunged into her hard and fast and she matched his pace, urging him on.

Her breath came in gasps and sobs, as did his. He drove himself into her, taking everything she'd ever held back. Emmaline screamed as she climaxed in a series of blindingly powerful convulsions that squeezed and caressed him until he did the same.

He collapsed on top of her, holding her tightly to him as they both trembled in each other's arms. As her trembling lessened, Emmaline fought sleep, wanting instead to stay as close to Blade for as long as she could. When she jerked herself awake, he must have realized he was crushing her and rolled so that he cradled her in his arms.

Emmaline put her head on his shoulder and he bent to rain kisses on her face, until she stopped him with a long, slow, deep kiss that touched both of their souls.

She didn't remember falling asleep, but she awoke much too soon.

The shrill chirping of the phone disturbed the purest sleep she'd ever had. Blade's voice murmured urgently, and then the warmth of his arms eased her away, waking her fully. She groaned in protest.

She sat up to find him pulling on his jeans in the dark. Reaching over to flip on the lamp next to his side of the bed, she asked, "Where are you going? It's the middle of the night."

"One of the horses is sick. I have to go."

"Are you coming back?" Her question asked a million more.

He sat on the bed next to her, leaving off buttoning his shirt to lean over and kiss her. "I'll be back as quickly as I can. Keep the sheets warm for me."

Then he was gone.

Chapter 8

Present

Blade tried in vain to lower his arms. He hated when he slept with his arm above his head and for the life of him, he couldn't figure out why they were both there. It meant he would wake with that unpleasant pins and needles feeling shooting up through his arms and into his shoulders. After a night like one he'd just had, the prospect made him groan.

He wanted to find Emmaline—she had already headed to Maria's by the time he returned from the stable—and make love to her again and again, not stopping until she admitted she couldn't live without him. Something tickled across his stomach. He pulled harder at his arms, and that's when he felt the restraints bite into his wrists.

He opened his eyes to find Emmaline stretched out next to him, propped up on one arm with a triumphant half-smile on her face. His eyes traveled down the length of her, noting the black lacy bra that barely hid her rosy nipples, the matching crotchless panties that didn't bother to hide anything, and the thigh-high stockings that hugged her incredible legs.

Forgetting the reason that awoke him in the first place, he tried to move his arms again. He needed to touch her. She couldn't dress like that and smile at him like that and expect him to keep his hands to himself. But his arms wouldn't move.

She laughed at his efforts.

Finally, he looked up to find that she had handcuffed him to the headboard.

"Emmy?"

She drew the soft ends of the leather tassels that hung from her rather small whip over his chest. "I see you're finally awake." Tossing the whip

down between them, she moved languorously to straddle him. "You've made me wait a very, very long time."

He yearned to touch her. Jerking on the bindings that held him, he said, "Emmy, I don't want to play games with you. Unlock the handcuffs."

She leaned over to the table on his side of the bed and picked up something there. Blade thought it was the key to the cuffs, but he was mistaken. Squirting out a puff of whipped cream onto her finger, she put it into her mouth, curling her tongue around her finger the same way she had once done to his cock.

"I waited to have breakfast with you," she said. "Or on you, as the case may be."

He squirmed underneath her. He didn't look at the whip, but he was acutely conscious of it. "Emmy, be serious for a minute. Are you mad at me?"

"For?"

He searched her deep brown eyes for some sign. He found nothing conclusive. "For making love to you."

Her smile widened. "So you were awake. I wondered."

"I couldn't do that in my sleep."

She shrugged. "After last night, nothing you do in your sleep would surprise me." She squirted more whipped cream onto her fingertip and offered it to him. "Hungry?"

His eyes narrowed, hinting at the temper barely held in check. "You haven't answered my question."

"Darling, I think you need to eat. You're going to need energy for this."

She reached onto bedside table to snag something else. Blade kept his eyes glued to her. She pressed something to his lips, but he refused to open his mouth.

"It's an orange," she said. "You like oranges."

When he didn't move, she picked up the whip and trailed the ends over his chest. He couldn't stop the way his muscles jumped under the threatening caress. He opened his mouth, sucking the wedge inside and nipping at her fingertips.

She smiled and his cock rose. She had to have felt it pressing against her core. "Even if you plan to stay in your sexual prime until you're fifty, you still need energy to make the performance worthwhile."

"I have to get back to work." Now he was looking for any excuse. Emmaline was unpredictable at the best of times. Emmaline with handcuffs and a whip when she was calmly furious was something anyone in his right mind would fear.

Smiling brightly, she leaned in close, grazing her breasts against his chest. Her nipples, already aroused, scraped electric tingles down his chest. "No, you don't. I called in sex for you."

"Emmy!"

Her eyes turned serious for a moment. "Blade, don't worry about it. Your little pony is doing fine. I just talked to Alex. He has everything under control. He promised to call if anything even looked like it might go wrong."

Blade relaxed a little. "You haven't answered my question."

"I must have forgotten it," she said as she planted searing kisses down his neck and bit at the lobe of his ear. "Was it so important?"

"It is to me." He jerked on his wrists again, but the solid mahogany frame didn't yield. He bucked against her, trying to make her stop kissing him so well. She was distracting him. "I don't want to have casual sex with you, Emmy. I want more from you. I want everything. Now tell me, are you mad at me?"

She leaned back to look at him. "No, you stupid man. For someone who is reputed to be so intelligent, you lack a sense of the obvious. I'm in love with you."

"That's not obvious," he argued. He wanted so badly for this to not be a dream.

"No? Who else would put up with your crap and still be here?" She pushed his hair back from his face, fingering the long black strands thoughtfully. Shaking her head, she added reprovingly, "After what you did last night."

"I seem to recall you enjoying it." He teased her with a smile before adding mockingly, "After what *you* did last night."

"What *I* did?" She offered him whipped cream on her finger again.

He opened his mouth, sucking seductively at her finger and nipping at the tip before letting it go. "You hit me."

"You deserved it, after what you did. Or didn't do." She glared at him. "Tell me you honestly don't remember."

Regretfully, he said, "I remember waking up on top of you, Emmy, but you were naked. Don't think I didn't notice. You were trying to seduce me. Next time, wake me up first."

She hit him again, smacking him soundly on the chest. "You're unbelievable. You were the one who started it. *You* were the one who undressed me. You were the one who passed out on me. Then you wouldn't wake up or move. That's why I hit you. And that's why I'm going to punish you now."

He knew it had most likely been his fault. He couldn't help it if she invaded his dreams and his fantasies. She was the one who had climbed into bed with him, and if his unconscious brain put the two events together, it wasn't something he could help. "I think I redeemed myself."

Her steady stare was unyielding.

"Or I can redeem myself now?"

Her devilish smile made his cock jump. "I'll deal out the penance. Now, do hush or I'll have to gag you." She kissed him lightly, teasing him with her mouth and nipping at him, eluding his attempts to bind her to him with his kiss.

While he was occupied, she reached over to the table and picked up the blindfold. Gently, she lifted his head and slipped the straps underneath.

"Emmy, don't," he begged. "Let me see you. I have to see you if you won't let me touch you."

That evil grin was the last thing he saw. She licked her way up and down his body, sucking up the sticky-sweet whipped cream as she went along and vocally enjoying the way his body responded to her touch. The moist heat of her mouth and the gentle massage of her touch was the heaven of his dreams. He desperately wanted to see her tongue and her fingers as they worked their magic.

When she covered his cock with the rest of the whipped cream, he shuddered in anticipation and moaned her name. She kissed his lips before moving down to gently lap at the cloud of white sugar. He writhed, unsuccessfully willing himself to stay still.

"Emmaline!" She was going to have to release him eventually. He mentally filed it all away, adding it up. Payment would be sweet.

Finally, she took him between those lush lips, sucking hard until he climaxed. He shouted her name and his love for her. It might have been in

Spanish, but that was only because she had short-circuited his brain and no English words would come to mind.

He was still trembling when she again straddled him, but this time she kissed him slowly, telling him with her mouth how much she needed him. Blade knew the gravity of what she offered and he cherished her gift. He wanted desperately to hold her in his arms, but he didn't ask her to release him. He knew she needed this to be on her terms.

She slid the blindfold from his eyes. When she leaned back, her face was somber. "Do you really? Or is that something you shout out when you come?"

He stared at her blankly, his mind scrambling to understand her question. "Do I what?"

She shook her head and turned away to hide her disappointment.

And he couldn't grab her to bring her back. "Emmy, don't. Do I what? Do I love you?"

She froze.

He wanted his arms free. He wanted to touch her, to turn her face back to his. "Heart and soul, Emmaline. I've been in love with you since the first time I saw you. I thought that was clear when I told you I wanted to marry you."

She looked at him strangely. "You never asked me to marry you."

"I said I wanted everything with you." From the curious look she gave him, he knew he needed to elaborate. "I want a life with you. Marriage, children, everything."

She shifted and reached into the small canvas bag on the bed next to them. "We can talk about that later."

"Why later?" Was she going to outline the reasons why it would never work? Sure, they both flew off the handle a little easily, but neither of them was afraid to argue and neither of them took it to extremes.

"Because, right now, I have you at my mercy. I'm intelligent enough to know that the minute I let you go, you're going to turn the tables on me." She pulled a box out of the bag. "I'd rather you asked me something important like that when we're not having sex and I'm not willing to let you go just yet." Opening the box, she poured something into her hand. "So, we'll talk about that later."

He understood her message loud and clear. She wanted a romantic proposal. He could do that.

She held up a metal chain with tiny pinchers on each end. "Explain this to me, Blade."

He bit his lip. "Those are nipple clamps." He hoped to hell she didn't plan to put those anywhere on him.

She smacked his inner thigh. The muscle there jumped and his cock responded. "I can read the box. Tell me what they do."

"They stimulate your nipples, leaving my hands free to stimulate other parts of you." Her eyes fell to her own breasts and he breathed a sigh of relief. "You'll like them, honey. Your nipples are so sensitive. I breathe on them and they get hard."

Flipping her wrist around, she switched what she was holding. A short clamp with metal weights dangled from her fingers.

"That's for your clit. When you get to a certain level of arousal, your clit hides behind that swollen little hood. That will keep it exposed."

She stared at it. He could see the wheel in her mind spinning and he would give anything to know what she was thinking.

Next, she held up two short, plastic bulbs of differing sizes. "These are not dildos."

"Butt plugs."

The glint in her eyes scared him. She was sexy as hell, but highly unpredictable. "His and hers."

"Emmaline." Why was his dick getting harder and not softer? His knowledge of anatomy was not limited to animals. He had taken human biological science classes for comparative study. Five reasons why the orgasms would be more intense presented themselves.

She lifted her weight from his legs. "Turn over."

At the end of his list of reasons for why this would intensify his sexual experience was the one reason that overrode all the others. She had trusted him from the beginning. She had let him do anything he wanted to her body, reveling in the ways he pushed her limits. He turned over.

"Spread your legs for me, Blade."

He loved the way she said his name. He always had. She had avoided addressing him directly for so long. The bed dipped slightly between his legs as she settled herself there.

Her lips moved over the muscles on his ass. "It should be a sin to have an ass this hot," she murmured. "I could look at the back of you and touch myself all day long."

From the sounds she made, he knew she was doing just that. He squirmed, wanting to see those small fingers at work and not wanting to disturb her pleasure. If his hands were free, he would stroke himself as he watched her.

Moisture touched him where nobody had every ventured. She used her own juices to lubricate his anus. Her fingers left and something cold pressed against his opening. Two fingers worked their way into him, spreading lubricant. Trust helped him move past the fact she was touching his ass and focus on the different kind of pleasure she offered.

When he had shoved her vibrator in her ass, he had done so on theory and anecdotal evidence alone. It led to the largest orgasm he'd ever given a woman. When she had come, Emmaline's screams had been heard a block away. Some guests had complained.

The plug pressed against his opening. He breathed into it, relaxing the way he had instructed Emmaline. He felt his muscle stretching impossibly wide. It burned and pinched at the same time, then those feelings faded and he felt full. Full and horny as hell. The plug pressed against glands that increased pleasure.

"We'll start small because you're a virgin," she said. "I'll let you put the bigger one in me."

That was the small one? He didn't know if she could handle the larger one.

She pulled at his hip, turning him over. The weight of his body pressed on the plug, holding it deeper inside him. Emmaline knelt over him. She braced herself against his chest with one hand and used the other to masturbate with his rock hard cock.

His hips lifted. He wanted her to stop playing and ride him any way she liked. He swore in Spanish.

She glanced up at him. "I'm on the pill. I've been on it since I was a teenager. And I haven't been with anyone else since I met you."

God, he wanted to touch her. He had no right, but her admission made him happy. The possessive feelings he had for her had never disappeared, no matter how long she had stayed away from him. "I haven't, either," he said.

She didn't hide her surprise. "You said you dated."

"I tried," he said. "It turns out I only wanted you." He lifted his head as high as he could. "And I want you now, Emmy. Please don't make me beg."

Her lips brushed against his, feathering softly and eluding his attempts to deepen it. "I won't make you beg until I tie you to a chair." Her grin disappeared as she thrust her tongue into his mouth and sank down his length.

He groaned. The feel of the plug and of her hot sheath combined to drive him to frantic heights and she hadn't even begun grinding against him in the way that made her pant and gasp and lose the rhythm. White-hot pleasure exploded inside of him and he couldn't stop the orgasm that rocked his body.

* * * *

Emmaline felt his semen shooting into her. She opened her eyes in surprise. If anything, Blade had more stamina than any man she'd ever known intimately. She stifled the urge to laugh when she saw the shock mingling with the ecstasy on his face. Maybe she would need to use the cock ring in that bag if she was going to use the plug on him again. The experience would only improve if it lasted longer.

He hadn't protested the way she thought he would. She wouldn't have pushed the issue. Men were so touchy about those kinds of things. She should have known Blade would be braver and more adventurous. He had been brazen from the beginning.

The trust in his eyes as he consented floored her. More than anything else, she wanted to deal with Rosalie so she could make a life with Blade. She knew Rosalie wouldn't like it if they married and had kids. Emmaline feared for the lives of the theoretical kids. She was going to fight for their future family and their happiness whether or not Blade liked it.

Reaching up, she released the lock on the handcuffs. He could have freed himself at any time if he had taken the time to actually look at the handcuffs. A quick-release button was within reach on each cuff. They weren't as good as his Velcro restraints, but she had been unable to find those.

She ate an orange slice as she watched coherence settle back into his eyes. They were light brown, saturated with passion sated. His long, thick lashes fluttered against his sharp cheekbones and he peered at her with heavy-lidded bedroom eyes.

Inside her, his cock lengthened. It was a curious sensation, one she hadn't experienced before. He definitely wasn't short on testosterone. Maybe she should have kept him handcuffed.

His arms lowered slowly. The muscles flexed as he stretched them. His hands came to rest on her thighs, those long fingers splayed over her skin. "*Te amo mas que todo el mundo.*"

She recognized the first two words. They were the ones he had shouted at her earlier. "I love you, too." It had been a long time since she had said those words to a man and meant them. She thought it would take longer to become comfortable saying them, but she was wrong. This felt so right.

The world spun. The ceiling was above her and two clicks announced her situation. Blade was going to exact his revenge. She had no doubt they would both enjoy it, but she did think she was going to get more time with him in the submissive position.

He said something in Spanish. From the expression on his face, she knew it was wicked and naughty.

She licked her lips in anticipation. "You know, you could recite vegetables to me and it would sound just as sexy."

His brow lifted. "*El champinon. La zanahoria. La calabacita. El poro. El chile. El pimienta.* I can do fruits, too." He lifted an orange slice from the plate on the table. "*La naranja.*"

Emmaline giggled and opened her mouth, nipping at his fingers the way he had nipped at hers. "I see why Matt's learning Spanish."

"I don't," he said, snagging the plate from the nightstand and setting it on her stomach. "If someone yelled at me that much in a language I didn't know, I would have no problem not figuring out what she's saying. In his case, ignorance is bliss."

The thought sobered Emmaline. Matt was supposed to take Maria to town today. "What does she say to him?"

Blade shook his head. "You don't want to know."

"Is that what you tell Matt when he asks?" Emmaline knew her friend. He might wait until later, but he would ask what she said.

“*Si*.” He settled on the bed, sitting next to her. “He’d think she was crazy.”

Emmaline bit her lip. “She is crazy. Maybe you should have told him.”

“She’s not crazy.” Blade rushed to Maria’s defense. “She’s just having a difficult time adjusting.”

“She has post-partum depression. There is help available for that.”

He stared at Emmaline without seeing her. She knew he was fitting together all the pieces and wondering how he missed seeing the whole picture.

“Don’t blame yourself. Nobody saw it.”

“You did.”

“Because I haven’t seen her in four months.”

Silence settled between them. Emmaline wondered if the sexual momentum was gone. Blade absently devoured the sliced fruit on the plate.

“Is there a reason I’m handcuffed while you have breakfast?”

Blade glanced down at her. “Because you’re going to go crazy when I put those nipple clamps on you.”

She clenched her legs together, hoping he had forgotten about the other clamp in the bag. She had no idea what those little squeezey things would feel like on her nipples, but every time Blade sucked her nipples hard or scraped them with his teeth, the sweet twist of pain set her synapses shooting in all directions.

Like a magician, he lifted his hand. The clamps dangled from the short, connecting chain. Emmaline watched, enthralled and nervous, as he folded the cups of her bra under her breasts. He tweaked one nipple, pinching it sharply. A thrill ran through her body, pooling in her lower belly.

Blade’s pinch was nothing compared to that of the clamp. She gasped. Her body arched to dispel the fire in her nipple.

Leaning over, he flicked his tongue over the tip. “You’re as hard as a diamond, *amante*.” He blew a stream of air over her nipple. It distracted her from noticing he was doing the same thing to her other nipple.

Before she knew what had hit her, he had both clamps secured.

“I love cream with my strawberries,” he said.

He hated dairy. She had been surprised he sucked the whipped cream from her finger. “Cream?”

Nudging her thighs apart, he drew a finger through her slit, scooping her moisture and wiping it on a strawberry slice before popping it in his mouth. Emmaline watched in fascination as he knelt between her spread legs and pushed them farther apart. He licked his lips and liquid heat rushed to her core.

"I love your underwear."

They were crotchless. Emmaline had purchased them for the quick, frantic sex in which they usually engaged. Easy access.

"They're panties."

"They're convenient." He grabbed another strawberry slice.

"Oh, no, you're not going to..."

"I went off a little fast last time, Emmy. Let me make it up to you."

She watched as slice after slice disappeared from the plate. He pressed them softly between her spread lips. When the plate was empty, he set it aside and positioned himself between her legs. His tongue rescued bits of fruit, barely touching her.

Emmaline squirmed. Her breasts were on fire. The bite of the clamps spread, engulfing the entire globe. Her pussy wept. She needed a firm touch to come. If this was his way of making it up to her, he was falling short. A whimper escaped.

She yelped at a sudden pinch and juices flooded the mouth that latched onto her clit. He sucked that nub into his mouth, circling it with his tongue and pinching with his lips.

His hair tickled her inner thighs. She pumped her hips against his hot mouth. He drew back to lick her with gentle strokes.

Emmaline cried out in protest. "Blade!"

His face lifted and he grinned at her. Those soft brown eyes danced with glee. "I've dreamt of this for far too long, Emmaline. I have no intention of hurrying."

Her head flopped down on the pillow and she closed her eyes. "Oh, God. I need to come."

He rifled through the canvas bag. "Oh, honey, you will. I once told you I would make you pass out. I only had an hour then, and we were rather rudely interrupted. Now I have all day." He smacked her pussy.

She jumped. It had been so long since he had done that, she had forgotten how good it felt. But he was holding back. "Harder."

“We’ll get to that soon enough.”

“Blade?”

She couldn’t see what he was doing, but she heard a muffled acknowledgement.

“You’re driving me crazy.”

He frowned, but the frown wasn’t for her. “I’ll be right back.”

She watched him disappear into the closet. This was too much. Angling her wrist downward hurt a bit, but she reached the quick-release without much of a problem. When Blade returned, he found her caressing her weeping folds with one hand and thrusting into her hole with two fingers from her other hand.

He picked up the handcuffs and studied them, shook his head, and tossed them to the floor. Emmaline didn’t watch. She was so close to coming.

Then her arms were over her head, the Velcro straps locking them firmly in place. She growled at him. “I looked all over for those.”

“Apparently not,” he said. He stuck a finger into the binding to make sure they weren’t too tight. “They were in a drawer in the closet. That’s okay. I like these better anyway. You can’t get out of them and they won’t leave you with bruises.”

She wasn’t feeling charitable enough to thank him for his thoughtfulness.

He leaned down, dropping a kiss on her lips. “I love you, Emmy. I’m going to love wiping that eat-shit glare from your beautiful face.”

His lips moved down, kissing a trail of heat down her neck and across her shoulder. He lingered on the spots he knew made her quiver, reminding them both how she liked to be touched. When he whispered to her in Spanish, for the first time she wanted to know what he said.

“English, Blade,” she panted. Right now, she wasn’t so upset about her thwarted masturbation attempt. “I don’t know what you’re saying.”

“You’re beautiful, my love. You taste like heaven. I love that you tremble in my arms. You belong to me, only to me. I’m going to spend the rest of my life loving you like this.” His head lifted from where his mouth explored her abdomen. His dark, angular face peered at her with somber resplendence. “I will, you know.”

Her breath caught and she realized he had probably said those things to her before, under the cover of a language she didn't understand. She wanted to touch him, to caress his face, to let him know what he meant to her, but the restraints put an end to that idea. "I know."

Two fingers plunged into her dripping pussy. Emmaline rolled her hips forward, wanting them deeper. Then his hot mouth was back. He licked her with long strokes that centered around her clit, circling closer and closer. The pressure built and she exploded. She didn't attempt to control the volume of her scream.

Because he hadn't bound her ankles, her feet planted on the mattress and lifted her straight up. Blade jerked her feet out from under her, bringing her back to his mouth. He wasn't finished.

His lips closed around her sensitized clit and she screamed again, squirming away from the stimulation. He wrapped an arm around her middle and held one thigh against the bed, effectively trapping her where he wanted her.

The next orgasm came fast and hard, but he didn't stop. Emmaline thrashed, kicking free of him until a stinging slap stilled her movements.

It was a different kind of stimulation, spread over more surface area. She calmed, relaxing into the way her vaginal walls pulsed and clenched around nothing. She wanted him inside her. She needed him to fill her.

Blade's mouth crept back up her body, spreading more heat with those talented lips. He flicked them over her nipples, still rock-hard from the pull of the clamps. The pressure on one abated as he removed the little toy. His tongue swirled there, massaging the sore, frustrated nipple into submission. Then he subjected the other to the same therapy.

When his lips closed over hers, she sighed into his kiss. Velcro ripped.

"Touch me, Emmy." His hands moved over her arms and shoulder, massaging them. She hadn't realized how much she fought the bonds. Her muscles screamed in protest, and his hand soothed so much more than her arms.

Her fingers trembled as she reached out to caress his arms, chest, and shoulders. He captured a hand and brought it to his mouth to kiss the palm. The gesture shook her to the core and tears burned her eyes. "You've been in love with me this whole time." That surly, indifferent demeanor had been to protect his heart. "I'm sorry I hurt you, Blade. I'll never do it again."

“Shhhh.” Kisses rained on her cheeks and eyelids, mingling with her happy tears. “We’ve both made mistakes, but that’s in the past. We have only the future ahead of us.”

“Make love to me,” she said, trailing the back of her hand down the side of his face.

He slid inside her warm, wet, welcoming channel, filling a need in them both. “Always.”

She was sensitive. Her swollen pussy protested the pleasure he gave. Blade seemed to know this. His thrusts were gentle and slow, though he had to be going mad with the need to come. He had been hard for some time now.

Emmaline didn’t need the restraints to hold herself in check. She stared deep into his mocha eyes and let him anchor her. In the maelstrom of heat and electricity swirling through her body, the reverence in his eyes kept her warm and secure.

Breathing through it helped. Soon the panic turned to pleasure and she wrapped her legs around his waist. “Harder, Blade. Faster.”

He braced his weight fully on his hands. “As you wish.”

The pace increased. He moved in her, angling his thrusts to hit the sweet spot he knew would drive her over the edge. “*Madre de dios*. Come for me.”

Something about his request put all the power in her hands. Arching to let him have more access, she came, screaming her climax as blackness closed in on her.

“*Estoy sordo*,” he mumbled.

He lay on his back and she lay against his side, her head on his shoulder and his arm holding her close. Her wits were barely about her. As promised, he had made her pass out. “What’s that?”

“I’m deaf.”

She blinked at him. The fog of serotonin hadn’t quite dissipated. “Deaf?”

“You screamed, Emmy. In my ear.”

Looking up at him without moving her head was difficult. She ended up settling for a neck tilt. “That’s your own fault. If you hadn’t been so hell-bent on making me pass out, then I wouldn’t have had such a powerful orgasm and I wouldn’t have screamed.”

“There’s a gag in the bag,” he said. “I’ll have to use it on you tonight.”

Her brow rose. She was waking up. “Tonight?”

"Tonight," he repeated. "Besides all the regular sex, you have eighteen months worth of sexual frustration for which to atone. I'm going to collect on that debt, honey."

Emmaline smiled. "That goes both ways."

She lay in his arms, content just to be with him. Eventually, her eyes closed and she fell asleep.

Blade didn't. He broke the silence, jerking her awake. "Do you think Matt and Maria would be upset if we didn't eat with them tonight? I'd like to cook for you."

"They won't be home," she murmured. "Maria has a doctor's appointment and Matt said they were going to eat in town. I offered to babysit, but they took Dash with them." She lifted up, resting on one elbow to look down at him. "You're actually going to cook? This should be interesting."

He moved a strand of hair out of her face. "I'm actually a pretty good cook."

She laughed. "So I've heard, but you know how exaggerated legends tend to be. I'll reserve judgment for afterward."

He lifted his head to kiss her. "I have to go back to the stable."

"I know," she said. "And I have to go see Verity. Want to shower with me?"

The shower took a little longer than expected and it was late afternoon by the time they strolled hand-in-hand to the stable. Blade filled her in on his sick pony and several other things going on at the stable.

Emmaline was suitably impressed by the amount of work he seemed to do each day. "I wondered what you did down here all day."

"A lot of paperwork," he said. "I handle most of the paperwork for the resort. Matt has lightened my load considerably since he's been here. I like having the help. I hope he and Maria work things out."

"Matt's not a quitter," she said. "Don't underestimate his love for her. She's his whole world."

"I know." He fell silent and his brows pinched together.

"What are you thinking?"

He shrugged. "I guess I'm still amazed at what you've been able to do with Verity. She's a different horse. She still won't let me near her, but she's

let Alex and some of the others close. Alex thinks she might be ready to socialize with the other horses soon.”

Emmaline nodded and squeezed his hand sympathetically. “It’s not you she has a problem with, it’s Rosalie. She’s afraid of Rosalie, but she doesn’t mind other ghosts.”

“You’re telling me horses can see ghosts?” He sighed at her lopsided smile. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised at anything anymore.”

The stable doors were wide open. Hands bustled about, busily cleaning the stalls and replacing the hay on the floor.

“I don’t know about all horses, but Verity,” she broke off, wondering how to word it right. “Verity is like me.”

“She’s been hurt,” he agreed. “It’s hard for her to trust anyone. Maybe that’s why she took to you. You’re kindred spirits. Skittish. Reluctant to let anyone inside.”

Emmaline stopped walking and looked at him uncertainly.

He held her face in his hands and kissed her tenderly. “I’m not going to let you down, Emmy.”

At times, he was so perceptive. At other times, he was completely clueless. Sometimes, like now, he was both. “I know you won’t, Blade, but that’s not what I meant.”

“Stubborn? Beautiful?”

She laughed at him. “I meant she could talk to spirits. Maybe not talk. Communicate. I think she sees them better than I do.”

He opened his mouth to ask her something else, but a throat-clearing sound interrupted. Emmaline looked past Blade to find Alex looking respectfully at the ground. She smiled widely at him. Blade growled at the interruption.

“I hate to intrude on the two of you, especially since you’re getting along so well and that smooch just won me fifty bucks, but there’s a horse that could use your attention.” His drawl was as thick as ever.

Blade’s face darkened considerably. “Fifty bucks?”

“Any inside information about when you two will tie the knot? I got another fifty on the Fourth of July. Fireworks and all.”

Emmaline laughed. “Alex, that would be cheating.”

“There will be no betting on my personal life.” Blade didn’t seem to share Emmaline’s amusement. “Not if you value your job.”

Emmaline punched his arm. “You are the least romantic man I have ever met.”

He turned his temper toward her. “You think my employees betting on when we’ll get together is romantic?”

She couldn’t stop the sentimental smile. “They believed in us when we didn’t.”

Defeated, he smiled back at her. “Point taken.” Without taking his eyes from her, he turned his attention to Alex. “Alex, bring Verity out for Emmaline.”

“I can get her myself.” Alex had plenty to keep him busy.

“Stay out of the stable.” He kissed her on the cheek. “Stop by and knock on my window before you leave.”

She understood his fear. “Yes, dear.”

Chapter 9

Present

Emmaline pushed aside the sappy feelings she was having the moment she stepped into the yard with Verity. First, she groomed the horse, telling her all the while about her changed relationship with Blade.

Then she put Verity on a lead. Alex had shown her the day before how to lead a horse around. She wanted to take Verity away from any place Rosalie might chance upon them, but she knew she couldn't go far. There was no guarantee she could control Verity if something startled her, and she didn't want the horse to get hurt.

The second best place to take Verity was to the farthest empty corral, which she did. She thought that since it had been a few days since they'd had rain, the corral would be dry. Once inside the fence, she realized she was wrong. The ground underneath was soft and spongy. Her feet sank as she walked and Verity's hooves left deep impressions behind them. She hoped this wouldn't cause a problem. Figuring Alex or someone else would tell her if this corral was off-limits, she unhooked the lead and removed Verity's blindfold. She hoped one day soon to get rid of it altogether. "Okay, Verity. I need your help. I don't think I can do this alone."

Verity neighed and snorted, then rested her head on Emmaline's shoulder. Emmaline leaned against Verity and closed her eyes, taking them both to that calm place inside where she had contacted Aunt Emma. Sounds disappeared, as did the world around them. Emmaline was aware of nothing around her.

Concentrating on Jonathan Edmunds, she called out to him, navigating this strange, unfamiliar world through intuition and serendipity. Shadows, vague and indistinct, rushed past her. A painful chill assaulted her every

time one of them came into contact, sending a shiver through her, which was an odd sensation because she had left her physical body.

At first, the contacts were sporadic, but as the spirits realized the impact they had on her, it increased in frequency. She trudged along, calling for Jonathan Edmunds. Finally, one of the shadows glimmered. Part of a face formed. Emmaline couldn't discern features, but she was pummeled by an overwhelming sense of grief and regret. It stole the breath right out of her.

"Jonathan, I need your help."

He faded. The strong emotions faded with him.

A sharp pinch on her shoulder jolted Emmaline from the otherworldly fog. Stepping back, she glared at Verity. "That wasn't nice."

That short foray into a world she had glimpsed but never entered had dropped her core temperature. She shivered under the oppressive heat of a Georgia afternoon. Verity snorted and stamped.

Emmaline studied her new friend. It was probably a good thing that Verity had jolted her from the otherworld. If she had stayed any longer, who knew how low her body temperature would have dropped?

Priorities shifted. She would try again later. Right now, she recognized something else in Verity, a need to be free. "Wanna go for a run?"

Maybe taking an unpredictable horse away from the stable without informing anyone wasn't the most advisable course of action, but Emmaline didn't consider any of that. She looked down at her clothes. Blade had donned jeans and a cotton shirt after their shower. He had informed Emmaline that she could wear shorts because it was hot outside and he wasn't going to let her inside the stable where it was cooler.

Given the tone and the look that went with his order, she didn't argue. This had to do with his vision. It made him feel better to issue an edict, and she refrained from pointing out the futility of his strategy. If something was destined to be, then it was going to happen.

The clothes she wore were comfortable for a good run, and she was wearing her running shoes. She led Verity to the beginning of a trail and unhooked her lead.

"You have to promise to be good," Emmaline said. "Blade will kill me if anything happens to you."

Verity whinnied and tossed her head. Emmaline set off at a brisk pace, knowing the horse wouldn't have a problem keeping up.

* * * *

Blade wiped his hands on his jeans. The pony nudged his pocket, her powerful nose sniffing out the good stuff. Blade drew out a sugar cube and handed it over. The colt didn't yet have a name. It was Maria's turn to do the honors, and she was taking her sweet-ass time about it. Maybe Emmaline had a point about Maria. Maybe his sister was suffering the effects of depression and he hadn't noticed.

Alex stowed the feed bucket. Turning back to Blade, he wiped sweat from his brow with his bandana before shoving it back into the pocket of his jeans.

Alex hadn't worked for Blade all that long, but he was fast becoming a valuable asset to the ranch. His knowledge of horses was extensive. He'd earned it the old-fashioned way, by working around them his entire life.

The man wasn't more than a year or two older than Blade, but he had spent his life traveling, bouncing from one horse ranch to the next. Though Alex had an impressive résumé, Blade wasn't sure how long Alex planned to stick around. The longest Alex had ever landed in one place was six months. That milestone was fast approaching, but Alex showed no signs of a restless spirit.

As long as Alex kept his hands and his flirting smile away from Emmaline, Blade was fine with the man staying indefinitely. He had come early that morning to sit with the sick colt so Blade could get some sleep.

"He's going to be fine, Alex. Why don't you call it a day?"

"I'm fine," Alex said, running a hand along the pony's flank. "I figure I'll be here full time when you're on your honeymoon the week after next."

Blade lifted a brow. "You really have money on the Fourth of July? Don't you think that's a bit fast?"

Alex shrugged. "The way I heard, you've been dancing around that filly for more than a year."

"She's high-strung." Nobody had ever drawn him out about Emmaline before. This was the first conversation he had with Alex about her. Matt had tried to talk to him about Emmaline several times, but Blade always managed to stop those conversations before they went anywhere. Now that things were different, he felt his self-imposed gag order lifting.

A low chuckle issued from Alex as the two headed outside. “She’s headstrong. So are you. That’s why I picked the fireworks day. You two will generate a lot of those, the frustrating kind and the good kind. At the end of the day, that’s the best kind of woman to have. At least you know she’s always hot.”

Blade reminded himself that Emmaline thought it was romantic that Alex believed in them. A breeze floated past them as they stepped out of the stable, lifting the hair from his neck and cooling the skin there. The yard where he had left Emmaline was empty.

His breathing arrested, Blade slowly panned the various corrals for her and Verity. She couldn’t have gone far, could she?

“Boss, you’re looking a little pale.”

Alex’s voice came through a tunnel. The image of her small body lying prone on a pile of scattered hay was burned into his mind. He could see his hand on her shoulder, his darker tan against her white shirt, turning her over. Her chalky face was cold and those pale pink lips he loved to kiss were tinged blue.

“Where’s Emmaline?” He’d hidden every piece of white clothing she owned.

A hand shielded Alex’s eyes from the sun as he joined in the visual search. Blade noted this dimly from the corner of his consciousness.

“She knows better than to go into the stable. Would she have disobeyed me?”

Alex’s hand dropped. “You forbade her to enter the stable? Why?”

The dryness in Blade’s mouth prohibited speech. Emmaline was headstrong. Would she have gone to confront Rosalie behind his back? Turning, he ran into the stable, shouting her name. Horses snorted and whinnied. Workers poked their heads into the aisles. All eyes stared at him.

“Did Emmaline come in here?”

At his elbow, Alex cleared his throat. “Hey there, y’all. We have a filly at large. Has anyone seen Verity or the pretty lady grooming her?”

The door to the stable rolled open. A stream of guests poured inside, each person leading a horse inside to be groomed. Their chatter was distracting. Blade’s temper reached boiling. He opened his mouth to order them all out, but no sound issued.

He raced down the aisles, frantically searching for her. He called her name, but he knew if she was how he expected to find her, she couldn't respond.

The image of her pale, lifeless body haunted him. The blood matted in her hair and the crimson smears on her face stabbed fresh wounds. The stable had been thoroughly searched by every hand on his staff. There was no sign of either Emmaline or Verity.

Blade stared at the spot where he thought he would find her. It was Verity's stall and it was empty.

A heavy hand on his shoulder jerked him from his nightmare. "Gracie is saddled and ready to go. I'll ride out with you. Courtney and Robin are going to take the trails heading north and we'll take the east. Everybody has radios."

Blade shook his head. "She doesn't ride. She won't get on a horse." He remembered the stark fear she fought the one and only time he had her on horseback.

"It's the only thing left," Alex said. "They're not here, inside or out."

Maybe she hadn't been lying in the hay. Was his vision that exact? Closing his eyes, Blade tried to recall the details better. Tall grasses trampled by a horse's hooves could look like hay. His swimming hole had tall grasses around it on one side. Had she taken Verity there? Why on Earth would she do something like that?

Blade's nod was brief. From the way his employees scattered, he knew the fear clenching his heart translated as fury. Gracie knew the difference. She felt his urgency. She tossed her head when he jumped onto her back, dancing back a few steps.

He tore out of the yard at a full gallop, not bothering to notice whether Alex kept up. The swimming hole was near a trail that was little used by any but the most hardcore riders. Most of the guests at Paradise Island were amateur riders who were only allowed to take the horses into the woods on tours led by one of the guides.

Emmaline liked to run along that trail because it afforded her more privacy. Every time she visited, she ran there. Blade spent enough time watching her head that way over the past year, wishing he had the right to follow her, that she wanted him to follow her.

He nearly ran into her at the beginning of the trail. Gracie startled, but he was able to keep her under control. Verity not only lacked a rider, but Emmaline had removed her lead.

Verity reared. Blade's heart stopped as Verity's shadow loomed over Emmaline's small form. Emmaline's mouth dropped open as she watched the full-grown mare towering above her.

Blade leapt from Gracie's back, but he was too late. With the deep thud of hooves, Verity came down, wheeled around, and bolted.

He scooped Emmaline into his arms, holding her against the heart that nearly burst from his chest. She clung to him. He couldn't tell if the pounding heart shaking his body was his or hers.

Fear left, replaced with fury. "What the hell were you thinking, Emmaline? You know nothing about horses. What if she had landed on you?"

He was yelling. His hands wrapped around her upper arms, shaking her soundly with each word he uttered.

Emmaline tried to jerk away, but there was no way he was going to let her go. Her lips were compressed into an impossibly thin line. A fist jabbed him in the gut. She hit hard. If he hadn't been holding her so tightly, she would have knocked the wind out of him. He hadn't expected such a violent response.

"You spooked her!" Emmaline matched his tone. "She was fine until you came tearing around that curve like a bat out of hell. What the hell is wrong with you? You can't ride full out on the trails!"

"You can't disappear like this, Emmy! You can't just go off without a word to anyone!"

Hands closed over the ones he held on her arms. Patient fingertips pried his grip loose. Blade looked up, surprised to see Alex standing so close behind Emmaline. Alex spoke in that quiet, authoritative way he had before Blade could sputter out a question or a demand.

"You maybe don't want to shake the woman that half the town thinks you already mistreat. I advise against leaving fingerprint bruises on her, too."

Alex's admonition had the effect of pouring ice water over Blade's head, but that water steamed. His temper boiled to something that made his

stomach feel like he'd eaten a jar of rusted nails. He stepped outside his body to watch the scene below him.

His grip on her tightened. He felt her flesh like dough beneath his hands. She flinched and whimpered, fighting him harder. Alex's efforts doubled.

"Stop it!" Emmaline yelled to the air behind him. "You have no right to do this."

"I have every right," he said. "You belong to me."

Alex said something. His manner took on a frantic edge, but Blade could only hear Emmaline.

"It isn't him, Alex."

The vision of her lying on the floor of his stable, looking up at him with stunned incredulity, floated before his eyes. He made it clear that he wouldn't have anything to do with her after that, but she hadn't left for another two weeks.

The town doctor had been at the party with his kit on hand. Emmaline ended up with stitches where he had split her cheek open. The bruise on her cheek mottled purple and green, and her lip was so swollen she had trouble eating.

He had done that to her.

He was doing that to her again.

This wasn't him.

Whispers sounded in the corners of his consciousness. They had been there for some time. He had ignored them for so long that they had become background noise.

"Leave him alone," Emmaline said. Pain filled her eyes, but she put on a brave front. He hated that this was happening and he was powerless to stop it. "He isn't yours. He doesn't want you. He never wanted you."

The wind picked up, chilling him to his bones. Rotten leaves and other detritus material caught a ride, swirling around the trio. Heat was sucked from his body. Emmaline and Alex shivered.

Emmaline's lips moved as she shouted, but her words were lost in the maelstrom. From his vantage point, he knew she was swearing and cursing Rosalie's spirit to hell.

Alex spoke in her ear. He couldn't hear his friend, but he saw the urgency. Without warning, Alex moved around Emmaline's body and punched Blade in the stomach, sparing nothing.

Just like that, Blade was back in his body. The wind vanished. His midsection hurt like hell. He couldn't catch his breath and he couldn't get to his feet, but he was no longer hurting Emmaline. All in all, it was a preferable situation.

Emmaline knelt next to him. "She's gone, Blade, but she'll be back. Are you okay?"

He lifted his eyes to her face. Her teeth chattered and her lips were tinged blue. "You're freezing."

"We're all freezing, except the horses," Alex said. "They had the sense to get out of here. Looks like we're walking back." Reaching down, Alex hooked his hands under Blade's arms and hauled his taller friend to his feet. "I hope you won't hold it against me that I socked you one, Blade, but you had it coming."

Red marks bearing the shape of his hands hadn't faded from Emmaline's upper arms. The sight sickened him. "You should have done it sooner."

She parked her hands on her hips. God, she was a sight when she was getting ready to lay into him. The only things he didn't regret in the past year were all the times he had provoked her temper. To be fair, she liked to provoke his every bit as much. It usually led them to the bedroom or another convenient corner to blow off steam.

There was no fun in it this time.

"I'm sorry, Emmy."

She didn't give him the opportunity to elaborate. "Don't even think about it, Blade. I'm not going to let you run away from me this time. That bitch isn't going to come between us. I'm working on a permanent solution."

How had she known he was going to tell her it was best for them to not be together? He swept her into his arms and held her close. "If the choice is us being together or you being alive, I choose the latter."

She squirreled her arms between them and took his face in her hands. "It's not your choice to make."

Alex moved away from them and spoke into the radio.

"Emmy," he began.

She pressed a finger to his lips. "Blade, you promised to cook for me tonight. I've waited over eighteen months to taste your cooking."

There was no arguing with her once she set her mind on something. Besides, he wanted to believe he could have a life with Emmaline. Blade slipped his hand into hers. "So, you've decided to have Verity as a running buddy instead of riding her like a normal person?"

"Normal is relative," she said. "I don't think it's normal to want to be so far off the ground."

"I'm going to teach you to ride," he warned.

Her lips curved in a grin. "Maybe if you use a therapeutic approach. You know, make me really enjoy being that far from the ground?"

"Can you two stop the sweet talk just until we get back?"

Blade turned to grin at Alex. The man had proven his friendship to both him and Emmaline. Something in Alex's past chased him. When it caught up to him again, Blade would be sure to return the favor.

Emmaline reached back to pull Alex forward, hugging his arm close. "I think, Alex, that we can swing the Fourth of July. We'll keep it quiet, though. Maybe you want to increase your bet?"

Alex nodded once. "But I'm not splitting it with y'all."

Chapter 10

Present

“Well, aren’t you two snuggly.” Matt’s voice urged Emmaline awake.

Emmaline pulled the sheet up a little just to make sure her breasts were covered. Cracking one eye open, she confirmed the source. Blade’s warm body curved around her backside. His arm held her close. A feline smile curved her lips.

“I knock before coming into your bedroom.” Blade’s voice was thick with sleep. After their disturbing afternoon, Emmaline had helped Blade make dinner. He lasted almost ten minutes before asking her to just sit and keep him company as he prepared the meal.

Except for the mind-blowing sex, the rest of the evening had been blissfully uneventful.

“Yeah, well, the last time I talked to either of you, this whole ‘sharing a bed’ thing was innocent. Besides, it’s after ten. You’re usually at the stables by eight at the latest.”

Emmaline threaded her fingers through Blade’s, discouraging him from moving away. She grinned at Matt. “He’s going to make an honest woman of me.”

“Congratulations,” he said. “It’s about time.”

Behind her, Blade growled. “You could wait downstairs for us to get dressed.”

“No need,” Matt said. “I just came over to see if Em wanted to play with Dash this morning and to let you know it’s safe to come over now. The doctor gave Maria some anti-depressants and she’s going to see a therapist later today.” He turned to leave, but stopped and snapped his fingers. “And Maria wants you both at dinner tonight.”

Emmaline and Blade stared after Matt’s retreating figure.

“He looks happy,” Blade said.

“Yeah,” Emmaline smiled. “He does.”

“I hope it wasn’t because he caught a glimpse of your luscious, naked body.” He groped her breasts for tactile proof she wasn’t exposed. That foray led to a more thorough search. Neither of them made it out of bed before noon.

Emmaline dressed for a run. After a visit to play with Dash, she headed to the stable. Verity had turned out to be a good running partner.

Courtney watched Emmaline put Verity on her lead. Wariness and amusement reflected from her soft grey eyes. “Don’t let that horse eat too much grass. She’ll end up sick.”

Emmaline didn’t see how she could stop Verity if she wanted to do something. That horse was headstrong and opinionated. She glanced over at the pretty girl who dressed just like Blade. “I’ll do my best.”

“You sure you don’t want me to saddle her up for you?”

Courtney hadn’t been there all those months ago when Emmaline first visited. She was a college student who worked summers as a paid intern. Mostly, she was quiet, keeping to herself unless the topic involved horses. Because of that, Emmaline didn’t really know the woman.

“No, thanks.” Perhaps Courtney thought Verity was ready to be ridden. If Emmaline had a say in the matter, nobody would ever ride this horse.

They headed out on the same trail they enjoyed the day before. Verity liked to stop at the swimming hole and drink. Emmaline led her to the water’s edge and watched as she lapped at the quiet pool. It was a nice, private spot, perfect for contacting the spirit world. When Emmaline turned to Verity with that look in her eyes, Verity snorted, letting Emmaline know, in no uncertain terms, that she didn’t like the idea.

“I need to do this,” Emmaline said. “I need something to anchor her and take her to where she should be. She can’t keep doing this to Blade. It’s going to destroy him.” Her motive wasn’t entirely altruistic. Emmaline wanted a life with Blade and Rosalie was in the way.

If a horse could sigh, then Verity sighed. Taking one step closer, she nestled her head into Emmaline’s shoulder.

“Thank you for this.”

Closing her eyes, Emmaline leaned into Verity. Her entrance to the spirit world was much faster. This time, Jonathan Edmunds was waiting for her.

"I wondered if you would find your way back here," he said. Decked out in his best suit, Jonathan looked every part the gentleman. The coloring was grayscale, so Emmaline had no way of knowing the hue of his vest, shirt, pants, or jacket. He stood in the tall grasses, existing in time and space with them, yet not trampling anything.

Emmaline looked around, surprised that the thousands of spirits that took pleasure in running through her body the day before were gone. "Did you wait long?"

Jonathan shrugged. "Time is irrelevant. Where is my Rosalie?"

Lines from the gossip columns flashed through her mind. Did he cheat on his wife? Did he beat her to death? Though Rosalie had made Emmaline's life difficult, she didn't want to consign her to suffer eternal abuse.

"I want to know you won't hurt her," Emmaline said. "I think she's suffered enough."

Jonathan's laugh was dry and ironic, an impressive feat for a ghost. "She's suffered? How? Can she not find a man who will melt at one look from her beautiful green eyes? Can she not bend a man to her will?"

Emmaline didn't know how to respond. Her core temperature was dropping. She couldn't keep this up for much longer. She opted for bluntness. "Did you cheat on your wife and murder her?"

Jonathan shook his head. "Don't believe the scandal sheets," he said. "Rosalie was the most beautiful, most sought-after woman in New England. Men loved her and she loved them. Our marriage was a minor inconvenience for her."

Rosalie was the unfaithful party? "Rosalie cheated on you? Did you kill her?"

Sadness washed over her in waves so thick she nearly fell down. "Rosalie loved me. I loved her. Her indiscretions were meaningless. One of her lovers took exception to her refusal to leave me. I've waited a long, long time to have her to myself."

A cloud blotted out the sky, but the darkness closing on Emmaline wasn't of the earthly variety. Her limbs felt funny.

Suddenly, sunlight pierced the darkness and a soft wetness surrounded her. She opened her eyes to find Verity standing over her, nipping at her to get up.

She raised her hand to push at Verity, but the horse bit her hand. It wasn't hard, but it still hurt. She tried to cry out, to reprimand Verity, but the only sound she could manage was a slight moan. Then Verity moved away and a shadow fell over her. Strong, warm hands lifted her. It wasn't until she was standing that she realized they belonged to Alex.

"Blade is looking for you," he said as she sagged against him. "We thought it was best if I came for you alone. We didn't want a repeat of yesterday."

Heading back sounded like a good idea.

"I'll help you onto Jack's back."

Jack? Emmaline blinked at the monstrous horse behind Alex. "I'm not getting on that thing."

He laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "You can barely walk. How about I take you back and get you cleaned up?"

Emmaline took stock of herself for the first time. Mud stained her jeans and soaked her shirt, which clung to her back uncomfortably. Mud-caked dreadlocks hung around her face and she could feel it plastered to the back of her head. "Maybe I should change first," she agreed. "But I'm not getting on that horse."

He kept his arm around her waist. Verity followed, not needing a lead like Jack. The walk back to the stable was long and slow. Energy returned as she moved. She prepared to part ways with Alex outside the stable. Blade had been clear about not wanting her in there. She completely understood his reasons.

Alex pushed on her back, guiding her toward the stable door. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Emmaline chewed her lip. If it was going to happen, it was going to happen. Deep down, she didn't think she was actually going to die. "Won't Blade see me in here?"

"Nope," Alex assured her. "He had to ride out on one of the trails." He took her inside one of the tack rooms and closed the door.

Emmaline leaned against the wall, feeling stronger with each passing minute, as Alex rummaged through a box on the floor. "I'm feeling much better," she said. "I think I'll head back."

"Whoa," he said. "You smell that?"

She sniffed the air, but nothing smelled different to her. "Smell what?"

He tried to suppress a smile, but failed. "You landed in a big pile of manure. It's only on the back of your shirt. The rest of that is mud."

He pulled a plain white women's shirt from the box and handed it to her. "People leave clothes behind all the time. We keep them around for occasions like this." He pointed at the door. "I'll be out there when you're done."

To her, the entire stable smelled like manure and leather. How could she be expected to know she'd fallen into it big time? She emerged from the room moments later holding her shirt away from her. "Where can I put this?"

"Laundry pile?"

"Trash."

He laughed and directed her to a bin outside. "I'll walk you home."

Emmaline shook her head. "That's not necessary. Just let Blade know where I am once he gets back so he doesn't worry."

Her spirits high, she headed to the house. She had stopped thinking of it as Blade's house because it would be her home now. It was a good thing she hadn't renewed the lease on her apartment. Given his business, it would be necessary to live on the ranch. She could travel as needed. Something told Emmaline she wasn't going to be traveling as much as she used to. Now she had a real reason to stay home.

She knew Verity had knocked her down to pull her back to this plane of reality, and that she had nipped at Emmaline when her first plan hadn't worked. But she didn't want to explain any of this to Blade. He would have lost his temper and then he'd never leave her side. As much as she loved him, having a worried man glued to her would wear on her nerves.

She entered the house through the back door, where she stripped out of her jeans and rinsed her hair in the laundry room sink. She stopped in the kitchen to put a cup of water in the microwave. Though the temperature outside was easily in the high eighties, she was still chilly.

The microwave hummed behind her. She hadn't taken a step when the temperature in the room plunged to below freezing.

Rosalie.

The word whispered through the room and the voice sounded male.

"Jonathan?" She looked around to see if he had materialized somewhere in the room. Had he followed her back from the pond?

No! I will not let you do this! You cannot do this to me!

Rosalie's panic was all Emmaline needed to confirm that the presence belonged to Jonathan. However, Rosalie had many years haunting experience. A cupboard flew open. Emmaline ducked to dodge the cups that flew at her head one at a time. They crashed against the wall behind her, shattering and knocking holes into the drywall.

"Jonathan!" Emmaline shouted. Rosalie opened a second cupboard. A serving platter lifted slowly and hovered for a second before spinning like a horrific Frisbee toward Emmaline's head. Emmaline threw up her hands to protect her head and hit the floor. "You need to stop her. You can stop her now. You can take her back with you."

The presence vanished. Only Rosalie was left. Malice was a palpable entity. Emmaline didn't need Blade's vision to know Rosalie was out to get her. Jonathan drew energy from Emmaline. She was his anchor to this world. How in the world could she fight a ghost?

Laughter rent the chilly air. *He will never again stray.*

A fierce wind pummeled her, but Emmaline stood her ground, shivering in her thin white shirt and underwear. "If you think I'm going to let you terrorize me or Blade or anyone else, you are mistaken."

She closed her eyes, concentrating. She knew she couldn't fight Rosalie like this. The ghost was simply too cunning and too powerful. And Emmaline had no hope of retaliating on a physical level.

No, she would need to fight her on a spiritual level. For the first time in her life, she fervently wished she had some kind of actual psychic powers. But she didn't. Instead, she concentrated as hard as she could on calling Jonathan Edmunds.

She wished Verity was in the house with her.

The cupboard was empty. Another one opened. Plates and bowls flew at her. Emmaline's temper snapped as she ducked out of the way. "Enough with the dishes! Can't you be more creative than that?"

In answer, the mug she had put inside the microwave to heat up burst suddenly, but it was contained inside the closed appliance.

“Seriously? What was the point of that?” Emmaline goaded Rosalie, hoping to tire her out. She knew Rosalie was keeping Jonathan away. “I’d like to see you rearrange the food in the refrigerator.”

The door flew open. Since Blade often ate lunch and dinner out, there wasn’t much inside. Cold spaghetti noodles flew in all directions. A carton of orange juice flew at Emmaline, splattering behind her.

“Ha! You missed.”

The bread hit her, but Emmaline’s only response was to laugh. Half a dozen eggs came next, but she successfully avoided those as well. Then nothing more happened. Emmaline could feel Rosalie trying to move things, to throw something at her, but she didn’t have enough strength.

Smiling smugly, Emmaline said, “I knew you didn’t have much in you.” The presence she had felt earlier was back and growing in strength.

Rosalie, my soul. I have come for you.

No! I promised until death do we part. I will not have you in death.

He laughed. The sound rippled through the room. *I will not share you in death. Come, my sweet.*

Emmaline listened. Jonathan drew power from her. “Go, Rosalie. Go with Jonathan. Your time here is finished. I will not let you have Blade.”

More male laughter. *Foolish woman. Every man wants my Rosie. Her only flaw is that she wanted them, too. If she wants your man, he will succumb to her. They all did.*

Rosalie laughed. *You like to watch, love.*

Fury returned, lending Jonathan more power than he could siphon from Emmaline. *Do not think I will let you have your way in this.*

Wind whirled around Emmaline. She wanted to sneak away, but she didn’t quite know how strong or capable Jonathan would be without her there. The battle between the two spirits raged, but neither seemed to be winning.

Rosalie’s wrath gave her strength for one more shot at Emmaline. The glass pitcher filled with lemonade flew from the open refrigerator, hitting her in the head a second after she saw the danger.

Blackness closed in. Her body fell away. She looked back at it lying on the kitchen floor, useless to her. The next blow hit her like a wave. Rosalie

had no body, so her attack wasn't concentrated on a specific area. Instead, she directed her attack to the entirety of Emmaline's spirit.

It was a curious feeling. No matter how much Emmaline tried to distance herself emotionally and concentrate on the fight, she couldn't. She had left her physical body behind and all that existed now were the things that made her unique—her emotions, her soul. Everything was laid bare for Rosalie to see and to use against her. All of the rules had changed. Rosalie had practiced for a hundred years. Emmaline had no idea how to fight on this plane.

All of the hurt and uncertainty was multiplied. Rosalie's laughter and her words were gone. In their place was something much worse. On this plane, she was able to put those thoughts and expressions into a force she used to compress Emmaline as she whirled around her.

The pain from Rick's betrayal was fresh and raw. Her estrangement from Blade morphed into pain. Her tenuous relationship with Maria, her distance from Matt, and every other memory that had ever caused her pain coalesced into the ball of energy she had become. Mercilessly, Rosalie used this to imprison Emmaline, chipping away at her soul.

Emmaline had a vague sense of looking down on herself again. Blade was there, bending over her inert form, trying to breathe life into her. She was dying. She felt it as surely as she had ever felt anything before. Her heart broke at the agony in his voice. She couldn't discern his words, but they didn't matter now. His expression and his tone said enough.

She couldn't lose him. Not now. Not after all they'd been through. Something within her snapped, expanding outward against Rosalie's onslaught.

She concentrated on expanding, taking back the pieces of her soul Rosalie had stolen. With a sudden burst of energy, she exploded. Jonathan gathered the weak and scattered pieces of Rosalie to him. Then he and Rosalie were gone.

Slowly, she floated downward until she could feel her physical body around her. The pain in her head was the first awareness she had upon waking. The physical pain was welcome after the agony of the spiritual pain that Rosalie used against her.

She was lying in the pieces of broken glass, spilled juice, scattered noodles, eggs, and lemonade Rosalie had tossed at her. As her eyelids

peeled themselves upward, more aches presented themselves, but they were minor.

She smiled weakly at Blade. "She's gone."

"I told you not to do this when I wasn't around." Tears glistened on his cheeks. "Emmy, you can't go around doing things like this. Your heart wasn't beating. You weren't breathing. I thought I lost you."

Emmaline maneuvered herself into sitting and reached up to wipe at his tears. "I didn't do this on purpose. She attacked me. Did you honestly expect me to not fight back?"

Blade lifted her in his arms and set her on her feet carefully. "You could have gone to my room. You know she can't do anything in there." He turned her around, inspecting her as well as he could in the dimness of the cloudy afternoon. "I can't believe you're not hurt more than you are."

Emmaline put her hand to her temple. "My head hurts. She got me with the pitcher of lemonade."

Blade didn't say anything more. He picked her up and carried her upstairs to the bathroom. He settled her on the edge of the bathtub and turned on the tap before rummaging through the cupboard for tweezers.

"How do you know she's gone for good?"

Emmaline closed her eyes, searching as far as she could search for Rosalie's spirit. "Jonathan came and got her. Apparently, she was the one with all the extramarital lovers. One of her boyfriends killed her when she refused to leave her husband."

Blade exhaled heavily. "He wanted her back after all of that?"

"He loves her. He thinks he'll have her to himself now."

Blade's frown said enough.

Emmaline smiled at his reaction. At least they were on the same page as far as fidelity was concerned. "What brought you home early?"

"Storm clouds rolled in. I had a bad feeling, so I hightailed it back as fast as I could." He knelt in front of her, lifted one of her arms, and inspected her skin.

Emmaline helped in the search for pieces of glass that might be embedded in her skin. She looked up suddenly. "Alex told you about what happened this afternoon?"

"No. Courtney told me what happened. You'll have to explain Verity's behavior later. I don't know what I'm going to do with that horse."

“Leave her be, Blade.”

“She rammed into you and then bit you.”

“She was trying to save my life.”

Blade stopped and looked at her, his eyes black as he struggled to hold back his temper. “Alex tried to make it sound like it was no big deal. When he told me he gave you a white t-shirt and sent you home, well, that’s when I knew.”

“What did you know?” she asked gently.

“I got rid of every white shirt you brought, Emmy. I got rid of every white shirt I had as well.” He shook his head. He inspected her other arm, her chest, and her back before picking through her hair for the rest of the glass. “In the end, it didn’t matter. You got one from the lost and found.”

She put her arms around him, halting his activities, and pulled him close. “Blade, I love you.”

He held her tightly against him. “I love you, too, Emmy. Promise you won’t do this again. I don’t know what I would do if I lost you.”

“You won’t lose me. I’m not going anywhere.”

He kissed her tenderly. “You didn’t promise.”

She smiled impishly. “I don’t like to make promises I don’t know if I can keep. I’ll tell you what, though.”

He sighed. “What?”

“We can honeymoon in Spain.”

He kissed her again, lifting her against him. “You just want a translator.”

“Damn straight,” she said. It was doubtful he would let her travel alone. She sure as hell didn’t want to go anywhere without him. “I’m still trying to figure out what you said to me the day you introduced me to Verity.”

“*Estoy enamorado de ti?*”

“That’s the one.”

“I’m in love with you.”

She missed so much. A smile curved her lips. “I think I’m going to have to learn Spanish.”

He kissed her, hard. “Can I teach you naughty phrases first?”

“Absolutely.”

Epilogue

"I knew it was only a matter of time before you moved down here," Matt said smugly, his blue eyes sparkling in the bright June sunlight. "You can't stay away from me."

"Don't say that too loud. I don't want Maria to mistake that to mean something it doesn't," Emmaline admonished. She spread the picnic blanket on the grass next to the pond.

"She's okay now," he said as he unloaded the picnic basket. "Did I ever thank you for getting her help? I can't tell you what a difference you've made. I honestly don't know what would have happened if things had kept on the way they were."

"One of you would have realized what was going on eventually."

He hugged her and planted a kiss on her forehead. "But we didn't. You did."

She shrugged off the compliment. "Well, you know me. I'm at my best when I'm helping people."

"Are you happy now?"

Emmaline gazed out across the pond at Blade, who held Dash in one hand and helped Maria over the rocks with the other. Their one year anniversary was only weeks away. He had gone to Spain with her after organizing a wedding to coincide with their huge Independence Day celebration. He translated throughout their entire trip.

He didn't like to be away from his horses for very long, and Emmaline, who had claimed Verity for her very own, understood. However, he also refused to be away from Emmaline, and so he accompanied her on all of her cases, which she limited to only a handful a year.

Blade navigated his way to where Emmaline and Matt were arranging lunch. He deposited Dash on the carpet of grass and laughed as he immediately toddled away. Matt and Maria wandered away after their son.

Emmaline lifted her face to Blade and he didn't disappoint her. When they parted, he nodded toward Verity. "Are you ever going to ride her, or are you going to walk her everywhere?"

A smile lit her eyes. "She doesn't want to be ridden and I don't want to ride her. It's the perfect relationship."

He kissed her again. "No, honey, this is the perfect relationship."

THE END

www.michelezurlo.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele lives in her own little world where everything is perfect, so she spends her time making up problems for fictitious characters. When her perfect world is on hiatus, she mothers two adorable girls, teaches, and searches for moments of sanity.

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