

All in Time <u>Cian</u>a Stone

A story in The Hussies series.

Sara's life is filled with mysteries. Why did her parents abandon her as a baby? What's behind the baffling blackouts she suffers and the frightening images she creates while she's out? Who is the strange woman claiming to hold the answers—and why does she keep calling Sara a *Hussy*?

Morgan's got a few mysteries of his own. What was his father going to give him on the day he died, the gift he said would change Morgan's life? Who is this bewitching woman who keeps passing out and creating pictures of his past and future—and why was she sent to save his life?

All they both know from the moment they meet is that the bond between them is stronger and more passionate than anything either has ever known. And that fate has brought them together for a very important reason.

If only they knew what it was...

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

All in Time

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Edited by Sue-Ellen Gower Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book publication December 2007

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ALL IN TIME

Ciana Stone

Dedication

For my friend and teacher, Gray– who taught me to look past technique and focus on the soul of a photograph. And for my honey, who always stands by me, encouraging me to live my dreams.

Acknowledgements

My deepest appreciation to all the people who were so instrumental in the creation of this book:

Sally, my true soul-sister, who understands me even when I don't think I'm making sense.

And Raelene, for making this series possible and being good natured about being dubbed an official member of the Sisterhood of the Hussies.

And as always, my editor Sue-Ellen Gower. When I look up amazing, fabulous, talented and gracious in the dictionary, I see a picture of you.

Last but never least, all my Hussy sisters, who pick me up when I'm down and help me remember that sisterhood is one of the most beautiful things in life.

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Prologue

Danu stood on the parapet, watching the fog roll in from the sea, writhing along the land as if a living entity, seeking entrance to her stronghold. Weak rays of first light struggled to penetrate the thick clouds shrouding the castle. A sudden break in the thickness allowed her a glimpse of a ship, riding the rough sea. Its hull tipped precariously to one side as the crew fought the heavy prevailing winds.

She watched the ship for a few moments, but she had pressing matters to attend. After one hundred years of slumber she had awakened to find herself surrounded by the familiar sights of Grian Ròs Castle – Rock Rose Castle. It was just as she'd left it, a majestic stone monument to centuries of diligent service, nestled among the hazel, rowan and yew trees high atop the magical Isle of Sàbhail, known to most as the *Isle of Rescue*, off the west coast of Scotland.

Her heart pounded harder and a sense of loss brought tears to her eyes. The Ancient Folk were gone. She was the last of her kind, born during a time when mankind was young and lived as one with the earth. It had been a time before gods. A time before the one god wiped out all false gods. A time before man separated himself from the truth of life.

She glanced about the scene in front of her. Life had continued without her. For a moment she felt as if all she had done had been for naught. The world no longer remembered her and the Hussy warrior hunters. A deep sigh parted her lips. What had happened in the world to disturb her slumber?

Her mind filled with memories. Ancient and painful. Painful because those she loved had passed on to the Netherworld. In this world, she was separated from them. From him. Danu let her gaze drink in the beauty of the Isle of Sàbhail. She'd first sought

refuge when the world had lost its way, during the Dark Ages. A small smile parted her lips as she thought about Ragna, her true love.

He'd been the first warrior she'd hunted. They had fought the dragon queen and saved the world from tyranny. Side by side. Sword by sword. Ragna had been hers and she'd pledged her heart to him for all eternity.

She stretched out her arm, letting her fingers graze the marble column supporting the portico and flattened her hand against the cold stone. Tears welled in her eyes. She pined for the world she so loved. The man she'd given her heart. The warrior she had hunted and found. That had been her gift to the world. Her unique ability to locate warriors in need or peril. But not just any warrior – a man destined to change the world for the better.

Ragna had been the first. He remained the first and only in her heart. She stood in the late afternoon with a sense of loneliness chilling her. She was the last of a long line of Hussies. She alone was the keeper of the sacred duty. Trained to fight, trained to scry for those in need.

She remembered it all. It was fresh in her mind as though it was just yesterday. After the dragon queen's defeat, she established this magical fortress with never-ending mysteries. She'd created an army of Hussies. Trained in all the arts she knew and dispatched into the world to hunt and find the warrior destined to be their charge.

She frowned at the fog rolling over the ocean. They were all gone. Not immortal like she. Tears tumbled down her cheeks. The longing for her beloved tore at her as though she'd witnessed his dying only moments earlier instead of hundreds of years. In her slumber she lived in the Netherworld with him. Why had she been torn from his arms and dragged back into this world? Why had she been awakened?

"Ye must rebuild your army of Hussy warrior hunters, Danu," came her guide's soft voice drifting over her in the late afternoon breeze.

"I was to sleep for eternity. I was not to be awakened." She swiped the tears from her cheeks.

"Ye shall return to our world as promised. But the world of humankind is in need of warriors, Danu. The world needs the strength of Hussies."

Danu bowed her head, closing her eyes. Rebuilding her army would be more burdensome than the beginning.

"I fought by the side of men in many battles as an equal. My Hussies fought by the side of their men. Does humankind still fight their wars as we did upon the ancient battlefields?"

"Nay. Times have changed, Danu. The battles are just as important. Some will be upon battlefields as in the ancient times, while others shall be within personal strife. 'Tis a new world, Danu, but warriors are still warriors and Hussies are still Hussies."

"I was promised eternal rest," she said, longing for Ragna. "The momentum we set the world upon should have sustained itself and fed humankind. My special assistance and that of my Hussy warrior hunters is no longer necessary."

"Ye are wrong. The world needs you. It needs the Hussies."

She lifted her head and looked past the ocean and to the mountain range.

"Ye have been returned to your magical fortress. It has remained unchanged, still filled with never-ending mysteries.

"Serve the world this one last time, Danu, and ye shall be granted eternal rest. Ye shall dwell forever in the Netherworld with Ragna."

"How long?" she asked, knowing the answer before her guide responded.

"As long as it takes, Danu," came the expected answer.

"Seek out one Hussy at a time. Selected for her specific abilities, match them to those of her charge and above all ensure a success of each mission."

"I know my duty," she clipped, irritated with her guide's attempt to inspire her to the challenge.

"Ye are the last Hussy, Danu. Your Hussies shall do whatever is necessary to assist their warrior in defeating those forces threatening his pre-ordained destiny."

"Twas easier back then, my faithful friend. Everyone knew what a Hussy warrior hunter was and women lined up to join my legion."

"Aye, they did, but ye were very selective who was chosen to train as a potential Hussy and only a few emerged as Hussies."

Danu nodded. She'd selected them from scholars, teachers and healers. They were women of personal power who understood the importance of rescuing one man at a time in order to create a better world. They bore the title of Hussy with pride since it told all they were strong independent women, capable and dedicated to their mission. To have a Hussy on your side meant certain success and victory over whatever battles must be fought.

She gritted her teeth together. That time was over. She wanted to return home.

"Ye must accept this challenge, Danu."

"But the Ancient Council of Life decreed our work was finished. It was time for rest." She tried one last time to find a way out of the duty being forced upon her again.

"'Tis true ye bade your Hussies farewell and laid yourself down to sleep a century ago. But the Council dinna expect the world would be thrown into war so many times over such a short span of history. We dinna foresee man developing marvelous means of transportation and communication, while simultaneously creating horrifying instruments of destruction. None of these things were in our minds when we agreed to let ye slumber and travel to the Netherworld to be with Ragna."

"I earned my rest. My Hussies earned their right to normal lives."

"And so they did, Danu. It's their descendents ye must seek out to restore the tradition. Give them their birthrights and together, ye shall once more affect the world with positive changes."

"Why?" she insisted. "Why now? If the world has been ravaged by wars during my slumber, why dinna ye awaken me then?"

"The world is in a crisis, Danu. Mother Nature totters on the edge, threatening to abandon her throne. The Ancient Council of Life commanded the Wizard of Lore to awaken ye, Danu. Ye are needed by us all. Can ye deny such a request?"

"Nay." She shook her head with a feeling of defeat weakening her argument.

"Excellent! Ye must became familiar with the customs and mores of the new world and master all its technologies. Ye shall need to incorporate these with your own magical powers. Only then shall ye become a formidable opponent to the evil forces determined to gain control over the world. Combined with the ancient knowledge and yer shape-shifting abilities, ye shall once more help set the destiny of humankind back on its proper course."

Danu nodded. So once more she was charged with locating Hussies and training them to be warrior hunters.

"This shall be a difficult task, my honorable guide. These women have no knowledge of their ancestral calling. Not only do I need to rebuild my army but I will need to convince each recruit to embrace the noble cause and agree to be trained in the ancient ways of love and war."

"Aye, it shall take time to organize your Hussies, one woman at a time. Ye shall scry for each and summon her to your castle, here, on the Isle of Sàbhail. For it is under your guidance, they shall form the modern Order of the Hussies and in the tradition of their ancestors, strike out on missions to effect change in the world of humankind, assuring destiny is not denied its birthright."

"Enough of this. I shall see about this task. The sooner I am about it, the sooner I return to the Netherworld."

"So it shall be."

Danu felt the presence of her guide leave.

Alone once more, she turned from the ocean to enter her castle.

"I shall wait for ye, my love." Ragna's voice drifted over her as she closed the doors behind her. His deep brogue was faint and she knew the longer she remained in the earth plane, the veil separating both worlds would block her from hearing him. Ragna didn't have the energy to cross over. He was mortal. He had been the first. He was forever the only man in her heart.

"I'm so sorry I was pulled from ye without so much as a kiss goodbye," she whispered.

"Hurry back to me, my beloved Danu. I'm waiting."

Chapter One

Sara's eyes were glued to the image on her computer screen as her fingers worked at her clit, stroking faster and faster, feeling the impending approach of climax. In her mind, it was not her hands that urged her toward release, but those of the man on the screen.

Come for me, baby, he crooned in her mind. *Show me how much you want me. Come for me. Now.*

With a shudder that raked through her whole body, she did, her hand cupping her pulsing sex as wetness streamed from her.

She fell back into her chair, letting the sensations subside. No sooner had it waned than familiar loathing took hold. *Masturbating to an image on a computer*, she thought with scorn for herself.

Kind of the story of her life. No real passion. She was not yet thirty and already her love life had gone the way of the dinosaur. Extinct. The only physical satisfaction she achieved these days was whatever she could give herself, and that was getting old.

Not only was her love life a desert of massive proportions, it was starting to affect her work. She'd landed a nice account, developing ads for a start-up cosmetic company, and for the last three days had deleted every attempt she'd made.

Thinking she'd go fix a pot of coffee in the hopes it would jump start her creativity, she rose and walked out of her office.

And into another world.

In the space of a breath, her heart was beating like a jackhammer, she'd broken out in a cold sweat and her eyes were darting around in fear, taking in her surroundings.

This can't be real. Through an opened doorway of stone, she could see a wide parapet. Beyond lay a land from a dream. Dissipating fingers of fog snaked over the landscape as rays from the sun broke through the clouds, sending shafts of brilliant light to illuminate the rolling waves of the dark sea and the lush landscape that met at its rocky shore.

Fear claimed control, grew like a sponge filling with water and consumed her. What surrounded her was an image from a dream, a place she'd painted many times over, a place that had originated in her imagination. It could not be real. Which left only one alternative.

"Oh god, oh god," she whimpered. "Am I dead?"

"Hardly," a female voice answered from within the room behind her.

Sara whirled around and gasped. The face of the woman seated on the divan was almost as familiar to her as her own. She'd been painting and drawing it for years. Blonde hair that was best labeled platinum cascaded across her graceful shoulders, haloing a face that would have done far more than launch a thousand ships. It was the face of true beauty, housing eyes that were no defined color but seemed to change depending upon the surroundings and the light.

"Oh shit, I've gone over the edge, haven't I?"

The woman laughed a husky yet musical sound that seemed to hang in the air like dancing notes from a plucked string. "Hardly, my dear," she said as she stood and glided across the room to Sara.

That's the only way Sara could describe the woman's movements. Smooth and sensual, her body seemed to glide forward, her unusual eyes holding Sara pinned in place like a bug on a specimen board.

"Have no fear, Sara." The woman took Sara's hand. "You are perfectly safe. And yes, this is all quite real. Come, let us sit."

Sara let the woman lead her to the old-fashioned divan. "How?" She paused, looked around the room at all of the odd items it contained. "How did I get here? Who are you?"

"Why, I brought you here, dear. And I am Danu."

"Who?" Sara still wasn't convinced it was real. "Danu? What kind of name is that? How did I get here?" People didn't just spontaneously vanish from their homes and appear somewhere else. "And just exactly where is this place, anyway?"

"This," the woman gestured around with one graceful hand, "is Grian Ròs Castle. My fortress. It lies on the magical Isle of Sàbhail."

Sara gaped like a fish out of water, her mouth opening and closing but no words emerging. It was...incomprehensible.

"Yes, it can be a bit much to assimilate in the first moments," Danu agreed and patted Sara's hand. "Whilst you gather yourself, let me explain.

"There was a time when humanity was in its childhood. It was a time of innocence, when man and beast lived as one with the earth. It was the time of my people, the Ancient Folk. It was a time of peace and plenty.

"But time saw change to our world. The one god came to drive out the many false gods. It was a tumultuous time for man. To assist and guide man's evolution, there was created a great society. The Order of the Hussies, a society of women who acted as hunters, finding warriors in peril and ensuring that these men did not fall to the dangers that threatened them.

"These women dedicated and risked their lives to assist me in a quest to guide mankind's destiny, preserving life that would have a positive and vast effect upon humanity.

"My people were endowed with abilities that humans of your time would consider supernatural. Such as my ability to sense a man in great peril. A man who is destined to change his world for the better.

"It is that ability I used for centuries, with the help of my beloved Order of the Hussies."

"Hold on," Sara said. "Excuse me if this sounds...rude, but do you seriously expect me to believe that you're some...some magical creature thousands of years old and that this...this fairy tale you're reciting is real? Look, I know I'm not a rocket scientist or anything, and yes, I do tend to live in a fantasy world at times, but even I'm not gullible enough to fall for this.

Danu smiled and patted her hand again. "Good, girl, very good. I would have little respect for you if you did not question."

"Well, thank you," Sara replied. "And by the way...hussy? Ugh. Do you have any idea what a hussy is?"

Danu chuckled. "Clearly you have no idea of the etymology of the word. While rarely used today, the word comes from Old Norse, meaning 'mistress of the household'. Before the seventeenth century it carried the connotation of a thrifty, orderly or capable woman.

"Only in the seventeenth century did the sense of the word shift and take on the meaning of a rural woman of a low class. As is unfortunately often the case, the term unfairly degenerated to connote a woman of less than sterling character or moral standards. By the nineteenth century it had become a slur.

"The degradation of the original word is of no consequence. My Hussies were women of honor. Women who wore the title proudly as they undertook their missions to protect the warrior put in their charge."

Sara nodded. "I didn't know that. About the meaning of the word, I mean. But the rest of it...well...look, it all sounds fabulous. Like some fairy tale come to life, but I kind of lost my belief in fairy tales awhile ago. So what's the real scoop?"

Danu clasped Sara's hand in both of hers. "Look into my eyes and see for yourself."

Sara did, and suddenly she was sucked into a vortex of spinning images and sounds. She saw history play out before her eyes, moving steadily backward. Her mind swam with the enormity of it. It was too much. Blackness claimed her.

When she woke, she was reclining on the divan, with Danu still holding her hand. She blinked several times and pushed herself into a sitting position. Her mind was still in a whirl from all she'd seen. But inside her was a certainty that what she'd witnessed was real.

"Oh!" She looked at Danu in awe and a bit of fear. "Oh my."

Danu laughed that musical sound again and it was like a balm, soothing Sara's fears. "Yes, it is rather overwhelming. You will soon assimilate it and it will be as if it was always a part of you, which indeed it always has been. Humans have simply lost the ability to tap into their genetic memory."

"But...I still don't understand. If you've been awakened to rebuild your—army, then why am I here? I'm no hunter. I can't even find my car keys most of the time much less some warrior in need. And when it comes to battling dark forces or danger...well, I have to tell you, I'm a bit of a chicken. Heck, I'm still a little scared of bugs."

"Oh my dear child," Danu laughed. "You have abilities far beyond what you imagine. Lie to yourself if you must, but please, not to me. You know you are far beyond ordinary despite your current social and professional status. The ability you possess is maturing. I will help you to understand it. And more importantly, to not fear it but embrace it and discover the importance of it in your life. And while you do so, you will help to save someone who will prove to be quite important to the world."

Sara shook her head. "It's not that I don't want to help. I just...well, it's...see, my life is – "

"A mess?" Danu asked.

"To put it mildly," Sara answered. "I'm not very good at the dating game, and the only power I seem to have is to create marginally good images that pay my rent. And then there's my - "

"Do not say it," Danu interrupted. "Your ability is not an affliction. It is a gift."

Sara laughed scornfully. "Some gift. So far the only thing it's netted me is trouble."

"My dear, that is so far from the truth that it is laughable," Danu replied. "And I can show you. All I need is for you to agree. Join with me. Become one of my Hunters. Release the Hussy within and together we will help to ensure that man is not denied his potential destiny."

Sara got up, crossing her arms tightly over her chest to walk to the opened door leading out onto the parapet. She went to the stone rail and stood there a long time, watching the waves pound the shore, birds dart and swoop over its surface. As the minutes ticked by, something grew inside her. A need. To belong. To have her life count for something. To understand what had caused her gift.

She realized that what Danu offered was like a dream. To be handed the chance to make a real difference, to live a life of purpose.

Suddenly she turned and reentered the castle. "Yes." Her eyes shone with new conviction. "I'll join you. What do I have to do?"

Danu smiled and extended her hand. "Come then. We have much to do."

Chapter Two

My father was a man of his word. He promised that my twelfth birthday would change my life. It did. That was the day my father died.

Morgan pushed back from the keyboard, staring at the words he'd just written. Where did that come from? he wondered. Then his eyes fell on the desk calendar. Today was his father's birthday.

A feeling of oppressiveness pervaded the room, pressing on him with a near tangible force. He grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair and hurried outside.

Cold autumn air ruffled his dark hair and crept into the open neck of his shirt, prompting him to pull his fleece jacket tighter around him. Trees bare of all but a few stubborn leaves rustled in the wind, the less tenacious losing their battle and riding the air in a spinning ballet. Overhead, the sky was the color of steel, the heavy dark clouds threatening rain.

Morgan's eyes moved over the scenery but his mind was blind to his surroundings. Pulled back in time, he was once again twelve years old.

"Where are we going?" Morgan scrambled around the rear of the pickup to the passenger door. "How come Mom's not coming?"

"You'll see." His father smiled over the bed of the truck as he pulled open the truck door.

"Dad, come on!" The three words drew out long enough to occupy space enough for several more.

Morgan's father, Tom, laughed and climbed into the truck. He put the key into the ignition but paused to reach out and slap Morgan's knee, the affectionate gesture obvious by the additional pat of his hand and slight squeeze.

"All I can tell you is that today your life will change forever."

Morgan couldn't imagine what his father had planned. What would change his life forever? Tickets to the Super Bowl? A seat on a NASA mission? With each new question, a scenario played out in his mind. He saw himself as a famous photographer, a rock star, an astronaut, an actor, an athlete and a rodeo rider. Morgan was so caught up in his fantasies that he was unprepared for the sudden deceleration of the pickup.

Tom's leg straightened out in a rigid line, the brake pedal pressed against the floorboard. While steering with his left hand, Tom's right arm jerked out to keep Morgan from making contact with the dashboard.

Tires screamed and churned noxious smoke, brakes squealed in protest, adding their own burned vapors to the charged air.

Morgan jerked back to reality to turn his eyes to the road ahead. Without warning, time altered. Like a slow-motion film sequence, the sights swam at him. His mind had trouble reconciling what he saw as reality.

A small recreational vehicle lay on its side in the curve of the road, nearly cut in half by the tractor trailer that straddled it like a trick rodeo rider, its weight steadily crushing the lighter vehicle.

And it was getting closer with each second. Morgan jammed his hands against the dashboard as Tom fought to stop the pickup. Despite his best intentions at manhood, Morgan let loose a yell.

Tom was out the door the moment the truck came to a stop, shouting to Morgan as he raced toward the crushed camper. "Check the truck driver!"

Morgan didn't think to question. At the moment he wasn't really capable of independent thought. It took a bit of climbing to reach the door of the semi. When Morgan peered over into the window, his breakfast demanded an immediate release. Tears streaming down his face and stomach heaving from what he'd seen, he scrambled from the wreckage and fell to his knees on the pavement, retching.

Through the sound of his own heaves he heard his father calling him. Morgan swiped his arm over his dripping mouth and clamored unsteadily to his feet. Tom was trying to pull a lovely blonde woman from the wrecked camper. Blood stained one side of her head, the red a stark contrast to the wheat tresses. The woman cried and fought against him.

"No, please – my child. I have to – "

"Please, ma'am, just let me get you out and I'll get your child. Morgan! Help me."

Morgan moved to do as he was told. Together they got the woman free and moved her to one side of the road, behind Tom's pickup.

"Stay here." Tom directed Morgan to cradle the woman in his arms.

"My daughter!" The woman struggled to rise.

Morgan didn't know what to do except hold on to her tighter, not let her move. It seemed to hurt her for she cried out. "I have to get my daughter."

"My dad will get her. Don't worry." Morgan hoped he sounded confident. At the moment he didn't feel it. All he really felt was a sick fear.

The words had barely passed his lips when an explosion blinded him. He had time only to register the sudden lurch of his heart before everything went black.

When Morgan woke, he was lying across the injured woman. He lifted his head and saw the blood-soaked material of her blouse. It wasn't until blood ran into his right eye that he realized the blood was as much his as hers.

She blinked and fumbled for his hand, unable to sit. "My daughter...my—"

Unprepared for coherent thought, Morgan didn't hear her at first, but somehow her weak, desperate voice filtered into the chaos, offering an invitation, a lifeline to grasp to be pulled from the panic and confusion that held him paralyzed and helpless.

Morgan reached for it. He would have reached for any lifeline. But there was a price. He couldn't deny it when he turned fear-filled eyes to the blazing wreckage. Tears carved tracks in the blood and grime that marred his features.

"My daughter?" The woman's fingers tugged weakly at his hand. "Please."

Morgan turned his eyes from the inferno. The woman's blue eyes were awash with fear and tears, blood hampering her vision. Incredibly, Morgan suddenly felt responsible for her pain and loss.

"I'm sorry."

One frail cry escaped her lips. Her eyes closed. Morgan squeezed her hand, shaking it gently. "Ma'am? Ma'am, please, don't—"

Somehow he couldn't force the word "die" from his lips, even though some hidden source of knowledge inside told him that was exactly what was going to happen.

"My baby." Her whisper was barely audible.

Morgan didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm sorry."

She seemed to see him for the first time and gave him a sad smile. "What's your name?"

"Morgan. Morgan Nicholaus."

Her hand tightened in his for a moment. "My name is Hope. Thank you for trying to save us, Morgan Nicholaus."

Morgan nodded, unsure how to respond. Her smile vanished to be replaced with a grimace of pain. Without thinking about her injuries or his, Morgan pulled on her hand, desperate for contact with someone in the midst of all the horror.

"Don't go, ma'am. Please, don't – don't leave me here alone. My dad..."

All at once the enormity of it descended upon him, crippling him with its weight. His chest pounded and ached, his head swam in dizzy circles. Using the last of her strength, the woman pulled him down, cradling him against her, his head against her bloody breast.

"Shhh," she soothed. "It's okay, it's okay. It's going to be fine. Just close your eyes and hold on. I'll take care of you. Just sleep, honey, just sleep."

Giving in to the promise of her soft voice, Morgan closed his eyes.

With a jerk, Morgan returned to the present. Raindrops glistened in his hair, dripped from his thick brows and into his eyes. At the moment he didn't care. The water of nature mixed with the water of his tears as he stood in the cold rain and cried.

* * * * *

Morgan slapped his cell phone closed then hurled it across the room in a fit of fury. Why he had thought talking to his mother would help his disposition was a mystery. During the entire two hours, not once was his father mentioned. By either of them. Doris, his mother, was interested only in relating all of the gripes she had with everyone in her life.

With a snort of disgust, for himself and his mother, Morgan stormed into the kitchen and snatched a bottle of chilled vodka from the freezer. He filled a tumbler to the brim but didn't drink from it. Instead, he took it into the den to stand in front of the picture window, looking out at the rain.

Morgan wondered why it was so hard for him and his mother to talk about his father and his death. Why it was hard for them even to mention him. But then maybe he shared as much of the blame for that as his mother. He'd never even told his best friend about how his father died. As irrational as it was, Morgan still felt guilty that he'd lived and his father had died. Maybe that was because his mother's favorite comment for years after his father's death had been, "If he hadn't been taking you on some birthday outing maybe he'd still be with us."

As an adult, Morgan understood that nothing about his father's death was his fault and there was nothing he could have done to prevent it. But his mother's comments of the past had instilled a sense of guilt not even the reasoning of adulthood had erased.

The phone rang. Morgan ignored it for the first two rings, raised his glass in a silent toast to the rain, and then set it down on a coffee table. The phone stopped ringing. Morgan looked down at the full glass, hearing its invitation in his mind, its promise of escape. If he was going to drink, the time would have been *before* he talked to his

mother. At least then he wouldn't have spent the last two hours with a chest full of need to talk about his father, to ask his mother the question he'd never had the courage to ask. What was it about that birthday that made his father say it would change his life?

His father couldn't have known what was to come on that day. Morgan had rationalized that out years ago, when a cheap psychic told him that his father must have known he was going to die. Morgan had demanded his money back from the woman. She was obviously no psychic or she would have known that his father would never have led him willingly into a situation that would see four people dead. His father would have done anything to keep him from such horror and loss.

The phone rang again. This time Morgan pounced on it. He needed a distraction, any distraction to help him climb out of the black pit of his own thoughts.

"Hello?"

"What's up?" his best friend Chris drawled.

"Not much."

"Want to hit JT's?"

"Might as well."

"Cool. Meet you there."

"On my way."

Morgan pocketed his phone and picked up his jacket from the back of a kitchen chair. It was still soaked. That annoyed him. The fleece was his favorite. He snatched his leather jacket from the closet. Something fell to the floor – a small scrap of paper.

He put on the jacket then scooped the paper from the floor. On it was a phone number and name – Kelly. Morgan tried to remember, with no success. He crumpled up the paper and tossed it in the direction of the trash can. He missed. Ignoring it, he headed out of the house.

* * * * *

Sara looked up with a smile as a woman entered the room. "Hey! You look great!" she greeted her best friend Kelly.

"I wish you weren't such a liar. I look like shit. I started my period, my hair refused to do anything and I just found out that they're giving the promotion to that bitch Cheryl."

"Youch!" Sara saved her file on the computer, exited the system and reached for her purse. "Listen, don't sweat it. You'd probably have hated the job, and there really isn't that much more money – just more responsibility, hours, yadda, yadda, yadda."

"I know," Kelly griped. "But I wanted the damn title. Project Director Kelly Martin."

Sara chuckled. "Come on, Kel, you don't need a title to be somebody. That Cheryl isn't half the person you are, and doesn't have near as much going for her. Your time's coming. It just isn't here yet. And besides, there's more to life than a job and title, isn't there? Please, please, please tell me there is or I'll be forced to hurl myself in front of a bus."

Kelly finally laughed. "Okay, maybe I am overreacting. But I did want the title."

Sara linked arms with Kelly and started for the door. "But you've already got one Kel. Kelly, Queen of the BowlaRama."

Kelly shoved her away in mock fierceness but laughed despite herself. "Don't even go there—Sarafina." Her title as queen of the local bowling alley was a joke between them, since she'd earned the title by breaking the all-time worst score in the history of the place.

Sara laughed and made a sweeping curtsy for Kelly in front of the door. With a dramatic flourish of her short jacket, Kelly swept through the opening. Sara smiled and followed her friend.

She'd been back from the Isle of Sàbhail for nearly six months and still she had no idea who the man was she was supposed to help save, or what she should do to try to find him. Danu had instructed her on history and the importance of trusting her

instincts, and urged her to continue to develop her abilities, but she would not give Sara the name of the target. That, she'd said, was the role of the Warrior Hunter.

Sara had been looking. Everywhere. But so far nothing. No one she met made a bell ring in her head or lightning strike. She was beginning to despair. Sure, she'd made some progress in understanding the nature and mechanics of her ability, but she was supposed to be helping save the world and she couldn't even figure out who she was looking for.

Telling herself to trust that it would happen when it was supposed to, she pushed aside thoughts of doubt and focused on the moment.

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"Damn, how'd you make it here before me? Weather's a bitch."

Morgan's head jerked up at the sound of the voice. His best friend Chris slid onto the stool beside him at the bar. Truth be told, Morgan didn't even remember the drive. His mind was still lodged in the past. Despite his best efforts to put it out of his mind, all he could think about was the day his father died.

"Earth to Morgan," Chris' voice snapped him back to the moment. "Jesus, Morgan, you on drugs?"

"Just stuff on my mind," Morgan commented.

"Babe stuff?"

"Hardly," Morgan said with a snort.

"Work?"

"Just let it go, Chris."

"Fine." Chris raised his hands, palms out, in surrender. "So did you call that girl we met the other night? Kelly?"

"Who?"

"Christ, Morgan, Kelly. You remember."

"Yeah, right," Morgan replied. "No, didn't call her."

"Are you crazy? She was hot!"

"Then why don't you call her?"

"Uh, duh, because she gave you her number. You still have it?"

Morgan thought about the crumpled paper he tossed in the direction of the trash can. "Must've lost it."

"Man, you need to get a grip. You've been in some strange funk for over a month. What the fuck's up?"

Morgan shook his head, taking a look around. Maybe it would do him good to talk to someone, but sitting at a bar where there were lots of ears to overhear wasn't his choice of venues. "Let's grab a booth."

Chris slid off his stool, signaling to the bartender to bring his beer to a booth across from the door. He and Morgan claimed the booth and he propped his elbows on the table. "So give. What's up?"

Morgan sighed and slumped against the wooden back of the booth, his fingers twirling the untouched bottle of beer. "Today's my dad's birthday."

"How long's he been dead?" Chris asked.

"Since my twelfth birthday," Morgan replied, feeling a twinge of anxiety talking about it.

"Fuck, man, he died on your birthday? That sucks. What happened? Heart attack?"

"He died trying to save a baby from a wrecked camper."

Chris looked away, clearly uncomfortable at the sudden welling of tears in Morgan's eyes. Morgan swiped his hand over his eyes and pushed himself up straight. No way was he going to blubber in a bar in front of his friend.

"He was a hero," Chris said quietly.

Morgan nodded. Maybe he was. Only he hadn't saved anyone. Not only did he die with the baby in his arms, the mother died as well. In Morgan's arms. So in the end, he

gave his life for nothing. Morgan supposed that was what cut so deep into him. If either of the people had lived then at least his father's heroics would have been for something. As it was, it was a waste of a life, leaving Morgan's mother without a husband and him without a father.

And, Morgan suspected, leaving him with something he'd never known how to deal with. Three days after his father's death, something happened to Morgan. Something he could not explain, or understand. And something that still scared him.

"Well, hey now," Chris' voice drew his attention away from his own fears and demons.

Chris nodded in the direction of the door. "Isn't that Kelly?"

Morgan cut his eyes over at the door. It looked like the same woman. But he wasn't sure. He guessed she hadn't made that big of an impression on him. Certainly not as big as she'd made on Chris.

She looked up and caught him and Chris watching. "Oops," Chris mumbled and threw up his hand in greeting with a welcoming smile.

Morgan nodded but made no move to invite her and her friend, who stood behind her blocked from sight, over to their booth. He didn't have to. Chris was already on his feet headed in their direction.

With a curse, Morgan pushed the beer away from him, looking in the direction Chris had gone. Chris had one hand on the woman's arm at the elbow, leading her toward their booth. The second woman trailed behind.

"Hey, look who I found," Chris announced. "Kelly, you remember Morgan?"

"Yeah, hey, Morgan." Kelly's greeting was not all that warm. That didn't surprise Morgan. He had said he'd call her.

"Have a seat," Chris offered and slid in across from Morgan.

Kelly looked from him to Morgan, and then slid in beside Chris. Morgan slid over as the second woman stepped closer. He looked up and suddenly the lights dimmed.

Or his vision dimmed. Something dimmed because his peripheral vision vanished. It was like looking through a tunnel. And dead in the center of that tunnel was a set of eyes from a dream.

He nearly stopped breathing. It wasn't possible! Images flooded his mind, blinding him to reality.

She stood before the opened window, the wind blowing the flimsy fabric of her unfastened robe so that it swirled around her like light. Backlit by the moonlight from the window, her features weren't visible. She was but a silhouette of womanly curves and billowing long hair.

Slowly she walked toward him, stopping at the edge of the bed. He could make out her eyes, saw desire shining in their depths. His heart beat faster and his breath quickened. His dick swelled to full erection beneath the sheet.

"I'm here for you," she whispered.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"Whatever you want it to," she replied and sat down on the bed beside him, running her hand down his sheet-covered body to fist his erection. "Do you want me, Morgan?"

"God yes."

"Then take me."

He pulled her down to him, her long hair creating a sweet fragrant tent around their faces as her lips met his. Her taste was sweet, intoxicating. His tongue plundered her mouth, his teeth nipped at her tongue, captured her full lower lip to bite softly.

She moaned and climbed atop him. He could feel the wet heat of her pussy through the sheet. It was a delicious torment, feeling her grind her soft wet sex on him, unable to sink into her. The kiss was unending. At first passive, she became the aggressor, exploring his mouth, tasting him.

He flipped her over on her back and suddenly her face was visible to him, framed by the dark halo of her silky hair. With the light slanting across her face, he beheld her beauty. "I want you," she whispered. "Inside me. Please."

No further encouragement was needed. Ripping the sheet away, he parted her legs, gripping her behind each knee to spread her wide. She moaned as he penetrated her in one slow stroke and

one hand worked its way down her body. Her fingers worked at the bud of her clit as he watched in lascivious fascination, pumping into her stronger and harder.

The onset of a climax threatened. He tried to slow, but she wouldn't let him. She bucked up against him. "More, give me more."

Reality abruptly returned when she shrugged out of her jacket, turning her head to look at him as she tossed it across the back of the booth. Her eyes widened, her face drained of color and the next thing he knew, her eyes rolled back, she sort of went limp, and hit the floor.

Chapter Three

Sara woke with a start to find herself lying on the floor, cradled in strong arms while people crowded around her, gawking curiously.

"She okay?" a male voice asked. "Should we call an ambulance?"

"No, no. I'm fine," she insisted. "Just...low blood sugar. I guess I forgot to eat." It was a lie, and she hated lying but her embarrassment had catapulted the words from her mouth before she could stop them.

"Could you bring her something to eat? Maybe a bowl of soup and some bread?" The voice came from the man holding her. It was a deep-timbered voice, but low and soothing.

She turned to see who held her. It was Morgan. Once again the world tilted crazily on its axis. A soft gasp escaped her lips and his arms tightened around her. "Hold on," he said, "we've got some food coming. Don't faint again, okay?"

Sara wanted to do more than faint. She wanted to get up and bolt for the door, run far away from the embarrassment, and from the man whose visage made the world spin out of control. She needed to be alone, to figure out what was happening and why. Was this the man? She prayed it was not.

His face was not a stranger to her. She'd idolized him for years, dreamed about him, fantasized about him. Oh god, she'd even masturbated, thinking about him. If he was the man she'd been selected to save then she was going to fail miserably because she couldn't even look at him without turning into a pile of quivering female need.

"Let's get you into the booth," Morgan said and lifted her up in his arms as he stood.

Sara's arms went instinctively around his neck, drawing her face in closer to his. She smelled him. A scent that was clean and barely reminiscent of deep woods and

twilight. A scent that had her pulse racing and dampness gathering in her panties. As he placed her gently on the bench seat, their eyes met.

She could have sworn she read fear in his eyes. That shocked her so that it warded off the threatening faintness and tempered the desire. Why was he afraid? She was tempted to open her senses to try to find out. But the moment passed. He averted his eyes and took a seat beside her.

"I'm Sara, by the way," she said. "And I'm very sorry."

"Nice to meet you, Sara," Chris said at almost the same instant Kelly spoke.

"Forget it." Kelly dismissed the apology and addressed Morgan and Chris. "It's just like her to forget to eat. She gets so wrapped up in what she's doing that it's like she's on another planet."

"What kind of work do you do, Sara?" Morgan asked, looking at her but not meeting her eyes.

Hearing her name roll off his lips gave her an unexpected shiver of something she hadn't felt in a long time. Desire. Just his presence seemed to have that affect on her, but him saying her name was like the call of a siren that had her mind filling with images of sweat-dampened sheets, wet skin and panting breath. She tried to ignore the feelings and shake off the images as she answered.

"I'm an artist."

"Really? What's your medium?"

"Actually I now do everything on the computer, but occasionally I still do oils."

"And you should see her stuff!" Kelly exclaimed.

"I'd like to," Morgan replied.

"She makes me out to be better than I am," Sara said and changed the subject. Talking about herself was not something she enjoyed. "Let's talk about you," she asked even though she already knew the answer.

"Morgan's a photographer," Chris supplied.

"The Morgan Nicholaus?"

"Yeah, that's me."

Safely on a subject that she'd been passionate about for years—namely his work— Sara was about to forget her shyness and the awkwardness of the situation. She was a huge fan of his and considered him one of the most talented photographers in the world. If he was the man she was supposed to save, she guessed she could count herself lucky. Even if he did send her hormones spiraling.

"I love your work. Your show at ICP last year was amazing."

"You saw the exhibit?" Morgan asked.

"Are you kidding? I nearly starved for three months to make the trip to see it! This is really incredible. I can't believe I'm actually sitting here talking with Morgan Nicholaus. I'm probably one of your biggest fans."

Morgan fought the smile that rose on his face. Why it should make him so incredibly happy that a woman he'd just met was a fan of his work was a mystery. And yet her compliments meant more than any accolades he'd ever received.

Part of him wanted to bask in the feelings. Another part was still in a tailspin. How could he have dreamed her? Made love to her in his mind? Taken her over and again, in every way possible, seeing her as a submissive, watching her passion overtake her and carry them both tumbling into ecstasy?

"Well, thanks," he said, trying to shove back questions, and to put a halt to his rising erection. "But the camera does most of the work."

"You're too modest," she argued. "Your use of light is unparalleled and the way you capture the...the essence of expression in your subject's eyes is masterful."

"Looks like she wasn't lying, Morgan," Chris quipped. "I think maybe she is your biggest fan."

Morgan chuckled as Sara blushed and looked away. "Must be my lucky day. I always wondered if I had a biggest fan."

"Well, she's not all that big," Kelly jumped into the conversation. "But she isn't lying. I think she has every book of photos you've ever published and her bedroom has - "

"I think I've had enough embarrassment for one day, Kel," Sara cut in softly.

Kelly giggled at the gentle admonishment. "Oops, sorry."

"Now wait a minute," Chris said. "You can't leave us hanging like that. What's this about Sara's bedroom?"

Kelly elbowed him gently. "You heard the lady. She doesn't want you-know-who to know you-know-what's hanging in her bedroom."

Everyone laughed, including Sara. "Okay, fine," she said and turned to face Morgan. "I am the proud owner of number ninety-seven of the numbered prints of *Seraphim*. It's hanging in my bedroom and not a day goes by that I don't wish I could create something that beautiful and...and touching."

Morgan felt heat rise to his face. The photo she referred to was one he'd taken when he was twenty-two, traveling in Europe. He'd been wandering an old cemetery, taking shots of the gravestones, when he came upon an elderly woman kneeling by a grave, arranging fresh flowers on it.

She's been talking quietly while she worked but stopped when she realized he was watching, and sat back on her heels, motioning him over with one hand.

Morgan had spent more than an hour talking with her about her deceased husband and had marveled at the change that came over the old woman's face when she talked of her lost love. It was as if the age dropped away, revealing a glimpse of the beauty she had been in her youth.

Shafts of light split through the clouds overhead, lighting the fine strands of her white hair that had worked loose from the bun pinned to the back of her head. Her white dress was loose and flowing, giving her almost an angelic appearance.

Morgan asked if he could take her photo and she agreed. He got her address and promised to send her a copy. When he returned home, he discovered that the film canister had been damaged and most of the film inside destroyed. All except for one shot. Of the old woman at the grave.

He'd always attributed it to the damaged canister and the shafts of sunlight breaking through the clouds, because in the developed print the woman appeared to have ethereal gentle wings spreading out from behind her. Her hair was haloed in light and while it was clear that she was old, her face was without lines and her eyes seemed lit from within.

He'd titled it *Seraphim* and entered it into a photography contest. That was the photo that had launched his career.

"What touches you about it?" he asked, wanting to know why she was so attracted to the image.

"The beauty and sadness," she replied without hesitation. "You can see it on her face and in her eyes. Here's a woman who has known life, who's loved and lost. Who walked hand-in-hand with her true love, and also had to stand alone. You can see her love and her loss in her eyes, and there's something else there. Something...pure and untarnished...untouched by time, undiminished by life. She's...well, she really is angelic."

Morgan was stunned. She'd summed up in one short but eloquent paragraph every feeling he'd ever had about the photo. Obviously there was more to this woman than just the uncanny effect she had on him. For the first time in his life, he was interested. Not in what she would be like in bed, although that thought had risen. But who she was and what made her able to see things so clearly.

A waitress arrived with a tray of food. When she left, Morgan remained unresponsive, staring silently at her. It made Sara uncomfortable. Not only because she was afraid she'd overstepped the boundaries in her evaluation of his art, but because the longer he looked at her, the more her senses came alive. And with the awakening of her senses came the Sight.

Images swam in her mind, confused and muddled. This was not the time or place. She could not allow the Sight to take her here, now. She closed her eyes and shook her head, willing it to subside.

"Are you okay?" Morgan's hand closed on her wrist, his voice filled with concern.

She nodded after a moment and opened her eyes. "Guess I...haven't quite gotten my head together. Sorry."

"Don't apologize," he replied. "And thanks."

"For what?"

"What you said about *Seraphim*. Think I could talk you into becoming a critic? I could use more reviews like that."

The teasing tone of his voice eased away the last of the Sight and restored the atmosphere. "How much does it pay? I am a starving artist, you know."

Everyone laughed and the conversation turned to mundane topics like films they'd seen, books they'd read and favorite places they liked to go. It was clear to Morgan that Kelly and Chris had far more in common than he and Kelly did. And it looked like they had definitely taken an interest in one another.

He and Sara on the other hand seemed cut from similar cloths. They both preferred museums to nightclubs, hiking to dancing and they shared an eclectic taste in film and music. If Morgan didn't know better, he'd swear this was a made-to-order woman.

Even down to her looks. Sara was a woman of subtle beauty. There was nothing flamboyant or flashy about her. Her hair was a soft warm brown that danced with amber and gold highlights, and her eyes were a soft sea-foam green that darkened and lightened depending upon her emotions.

She had flawless creamy skin that was unmarred by makeup and artifice, and her figure was something he was certain he would fantasize about. Full, lush breasts, a narrow waist and generous hips gave her a classic hourglass shape that appealed both to the man and the artist within him.

He found her interesting and most importantly, mysterious. Morgan had always been attracted to the mysterious. There was enough mystery in Sara's eyes to keep him interested, he suspected, for a very long time.

When the evening came to an end, he was disappointed. They all walked out together. "Where's your car?" he asked.

"I rode with Kel," she replied. "We're parked across the street."

"Oh, okay. This was fun, Sara. I'd like to call you, if that's okay."

"I'd really like that," she replied and dug a card out of her oversized canvas purse.

Morgan read the card and smiled. "I'd like to see some of your work."

"Maybe," she said with a smile. "Good night, Morgan. It's been a real honor meeting you."

"Please, no more of that," he said with a laugh. "I'll call you soon. Good night, Sara."

She smiled and stood on tiptoe to plant a gentle kiss on his cheek, then turned and literally danced away with Kelly, the two of them laughing and bumping into one another the way women are prone to do who are comfortable and happy in one another's company. Morgan smiled as he watched Sara take Kelly's hand as they crossed the street.

"That Kelly's really something," Chris said from beside him. "I take it you don't mind if I call her."

"Seems like a good idea to me," Morgan replied then turned to his friend with a smile. "Thanks. I needed this."

"It's good to see you smile again," Chris replied and slapped Morgan on top of the shoulder in a brotherly manner. "Give me a call if you want to get in a game of racquetball later this week."

"Will do," Morgan replied.

"Later," Chris said and turned to head for his car.

Morgan stood there a few moments longer. What had started out to be a horrible day had taken a very interesting turn. Sara had eased the torment and made him feel at ease with himself. He wished he could think it was a permanent fix, but would be happy to just have the feeling last through the night.

Chapter Four

Sara stood in the darkness of her bedroom and stared at the framed photograph on the wall. She would never view the image in the same light. Meeting Morgan Nicholaus had changed that. Not only had it been one of the biggest surprises of her life, it was an experience that had generated unexpected results.

Like the Sight trying to take her in the middle of a crowded bar. That had never happened before. What was it about Morgan that had such a profound effect on her? Was her sexual attraction for him confusing her, making her get her wires crossed? No, it was more than that. He had to be the man she was sent here for.

But what was she supposed to save him from? He was famous and wealthy and from all appearances led an enviable life. She sank down on the floor, still staring at the photograph, watching the light from the window slant across the wall, illuminating the woman's face and turn her hair to radiance.

Who are you, Morgan Nicholaus? What do you mean to me and how am I supposed to save you?

She had to know the answers. Determined to start the quest for them immediately, she rose and went into her office, or studio as she sometimes called it. She started her Mac and sat down in front of it, pulling the oversized graphics tablet to her lap.

The familiar image of a lotus blossom appeared on the screen. Once she'd created a new file, she picked up the stylus and let her hand lie limply on the tablet. As she'd been taught by Danu, she closed her eyes and took a long deep breath. She made sure to breathe from her belly, pulling the air deep into her lungs, letting her abdomen expand then her chest. When her collarbones rose and lifted up and out, she held the breath for several heartbeats then began to slowly release it. Twice more she repeated the process, feeling the calm that washed over her. When the final cleansing breath was done, she opened her inner eye and let her mind fill with whatever impressions came to her.

She was unaware of the motions of her hand moving quickly on the tablet. Unaware of the picture taking shape on the oversized monitor perched on her desk. She lost track of time and even of herself, caught up in a swirling eddy of images that she didn't even try to interpret. She simply let them come and go, and remained a silent observer.

Time passed without acknowledgement or realization. Sara was lost, once more a traveler.

* * * * *

Morgan watched the digital display on the clock change. It was three in the morning and sleep would not come. The moment he walked into the house the demons returned, plaguing him with their whispered voices.

If only he could understand what they said. He'd tried for years to silence them, to no avail. No amount of alcohol, drugs, sex or therapy could quell the whispers. He'd learned that the hard way.

He'd hoped the positive glow he had while around Sara would last at least for the night, but that obviously was not to be.

"What the fuck do you want?" he shouted and hurled his pillow at the clock, sending it tumbling to the floor where it lay like a sentinel, its bright red eye of time silently watching.

The whispers grew in volume, their number increasing until it seemed that every voice on the planet was speaking in a raspy hiss, competing with all others to be heard and creating a dissonance that threatened to send him spiraling into madness, back into that dark place that so frightened him.

Morgan jumped out of bed and threw on a sweatsuit, hurriedly putting on his shoes to race out of the house. His pace was fast as he ran, pushing himself to the limits of his endurance, as if he could outrun the voices that clamored to be heard, to be understood.

It was the course of his life. Always running. From what, he wasn't sure. Toward what, he didn't have a clue.

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Sara jolted back to reality at the shriek of the phone. Her hand stilled on the graphics tablet and she blinked her eyes to restore moisture. How long had she been sitting there? The level of light in the room told her it was day.

She put aside the question of time as she reached for the phone.

"I was about to hang up," Kelly announced before Sara even had time to say hello. "Where've you been?"

"What do you mean?" Sara asked.

"You sound like you just woke up."

"Ummm..." Sara didn't want to lie so she tried to avoid the question. She had never made Kelly privy to certain aspects of her life.

"So are you coming to the class or not?" Kelly asked.

The question didn't register in Sara's mind. Her eyes were glued to the image on the monitor.

"Sara? Sara?" Kelly screamed her name.

"What?" Sara asked, scooting her seat closer to the desk to study the image on the monitor.

"Are you coming to class?"

"Class?"

"Duh, Earth to Sara. The rock-climbing class we signed up for last week. I'm at the center now. The next class starts in half an hour."

"Oh!" Truth be told, Sara had forgotten about it. "Ummm, no, not today. Maybe next time."

"But we've already signed up! And I don't want to do it by myself."

Sara grimaced at the whine that came into Kelly's voice. As much as she loved her friend, her tendency to whine was one thing she could live without.

"I have to go, Kel. Call you later."

She ended the call before Kelly could argue. The image on the monitor held her captive. The more she looked at it, the more agitated she felt. She broke into a sweat, and her breath hitched in her chest. Eyes that had grown wide scanned the image, fear mounting with each passing second.

It was something from a nightmare, a scene of fear and death that made tears stream down her face and sobs build in her throat. She reached for the keyboard, intent upon deleting the horrifying image. But something stopped her. Her fingers hovered above the keys. She wanted to delete it. Forget she'd even seen it, much less drawn it. But it had to be important. She never drew anything when taken by the Sight that was not significant.

With trepidation at the idea of discovering the meaning of the image, she saved the file, then picked up the phone and dialed.

"Can I come over?" she asked as soon as the call was answered. "I need to show you something."

"Are you all right, Sara?" the soothing voice asked.

"I don't know."

"Come."

"I'll be there in an hour. Thanks."

As soon as she ended the call, she made a copy of the image and burned it onto a CD. That done, she hurried to the shower.

* * * * *

Morgan was whipped. This was his second run, and he didn't think he had the energy to make it home. He'd run nearly ten miles in the dark hours of the morning and returned home to fall across the couch. Sleep had come almost immediately but he'd been asleep only three hours when the dreams came.

He'd wakened soaked in sweat with the voices whispering in his mind. He'd tried to quell them by listening to music, going through the last batch of photos he'd taken and trying to concentrate on what images to include in his next show. But the voices wouldn't let him concentrate.

The louder they grew the stronger his anxiety became. His heart raced, he felt hot then cold, he couldn't sit still. Soon he felt like he was going to jump out of his skin. So he headed out again, running as hard and fast as he could.

He lasted about three miles at a full-out run before his energy ran out. Even in near exhaustion his mind was tormented with whispers. He looked up and saw a car headed his way, and for a moment contemplated just jumping out in front of it.

But fate had another idea. He didn't notice the chunk of broken pavement until he landed on it wrong and pitched to one side, his ankle rolling over as he did, causing pain to shoot up his leg.

"Shit!" he cursed as he limped off the edge of the road into the tall grass. Just what he needed. A sprain and a couple of miles to his house. Great.

"Can I be of help?" A woman's voice drew his attention.

The car he'd considering throwing himself in front of had stopped. A middle-aged woman with kind brown eyes and long graying hair pulled back into a braid got out and approached him.

"I just twisted my ankle," Morgan said.

"I know. I saw. Where do you live?"

"Couple of miles up the road." He pointed in the way he'd been headed.

"Why don't I drive you home?" she asked.

"I'd appreciate it," he replied.

"Come," she said and slipped one arm under his and around his back. "Let's get you into the car."

Morgan accepted the help even though he thought he could have made it alone. Once he was in the car, she circled around the front and got in behind the wheel. "I appreciate this," Morgan said. "But how do you know I'm not someone who'd knock you over the head and steal your car and purse?"

The woman laughed. "Oh, let's just say I have a sense about people. But it would be nice to know your name. I'm Nadine."

"Morgan Nicholaus," he replied.

"Nice to meet you, Morgan," she said as she turned the car around and headed back the direction she'd come.

There was silence until they neared the driveway to Morgan's house. "You can drop me here," Morgan said. "Right there, that drive on the right."

"Nonsense," Nadine said and turned into the drive. "So, you bought the old Wilkins place. I wondered."

"You knew the previous owners?"

"Not really. I saw him in town from time to time. Does it bother you that he died in the house?"

Morgan looked at her in surprise. "He did?"

"Oops, sorry," she said with a smile as she stopped in front of the house. "I'd assumed you were told when you bought the place. Yes, he died in bed. From what I hear it was a peaceful passing."

"Oh." Morgan didn't want to admit that it kind of gave him the creeps to know that he was living in a house someone had died in. Had he known he might not have bought the place.

"But that shouldn't concern you," Nadine said as she opened her door. "His wife had died the year before and the poor man was just lost without her. I imagine he was happy to join her," she said when she had his door open.

"You think so?" Morgan asked, accepting her help to get out of the car.

"Oh, without a doubt," she replied. "Now let's just get you inside then I'll get out of your way."

As they headed up the sidewalk, Morgan realized he hadn't heard one single whisper since Nadine had stopped her car to help him. That thought turned his attention back to the voices, and thoughts of the voices made his anxiety spike again.

"Honey, are you okay?" she asked as he fumbled for his key. "You're shaking like a leaf."

"Yeah," he responded. "Probably just...uh, the ankle. Pain, you know."

"Maybe I should take you to the hospital. If it's broken then you'll want to get it looked at right away."

"No. No." He unlocked the door and slid away from her support. "I'm sure it's just a strain or sprain or whatever you call it. Thanks for your help, Nadine."

She said nothing for a few moments, but it seemed to him that her soft brown eyes looked right into his soul. Finally she nodded and stepped back. 'Take care, Morgan Nicholaus."

"Thanks, I appreciate the help."

"You're welcome."

"Thanks again, Nadine."

"Any time." She turned away and returned to her car. Morgan stepped inside and closed the door. He'd just started peeling off his sweatshirt when there was a knock at the door.

Tossing the sweatshirt over a chair, he opened the door to find Nadine on his doorstep. "Hey."

She held her hand out to him. "Just in case," she said.

Morgan looked down at her hand. In it was a card. He took it. A soft lilac in color, it bore a stylized image of a lotus blossom on it along with her name and a phone number.

He couldn't imagine why she would give him her card, or what it signified. "If you want help with the voices," she said and turned away.

Morgan couldn't have responded if he'd wanted to. He was stunned speechless. How could she have known?

* * * * *

Sara sat on the front steps of Nadine's small house and waited. It wasn't like Nadine to tell her to come over and not be there. Sara hoped nothing was wrong. She'd wait ten more minutes then she'd call again. Nadine hadn't answered her cell phone the last two times she'd tried.

At that moment, Nadine's little hybrid car rounded the bend in the tree-sheltered drive. Sara jumped up and walked out to meet her.

"I'm sorry, honey," Nadine said as she got out of the car. "I was going to scoot over to the store for cream before you got here."

"Where is it?" Sara asked as Nadine closed the car door and started for the house.

"Oh!" Nadine chuckled. "Fate decided I didn't need cream with my tea after all."

"What does that mean?" Sara followed Nadine inside.

"Just a nice man with a sprained ankle who needed a lift," Nadine passed it off. "Now tell me. What happened?"

Sara pulled the CD from her pocket. "Can I use your computer?"

"Sure, my laptop's on the table."

Sara sat down at the kitchen table and booted up the laptop as Nadine filled a kettle with water and put it on the boil. Once the image was loaded and displayed on the screen, Sara turned the laptop around.

"Look at this."

Nadine turned and looked at the computer. For a moment she stood frozen. Then she took a seat and pulled the laptop closer. "When did you do this?"

"Last night."

Nadine nodded, still focused on the screen. For several minutes there was silence. The whistle of the kettle drew Nadine from her seat. She busied herself preparing tea. When she reclaimed her seat, she didn't look at the computer. She focused on Sara.

"Tell me what you did before you painted this."

"Technically I didn't paint it. I did it on –"

"Honey, I know. Now tell me."

"Well, last night I went out with Kelly to JT's and...oh my god!" Excitement appeared in her voice, along with a measure of anxiety. "I met Morgan Nicholaus. *The* Morgan Nicholaus."

Nadine smiled. "The Seraphim photographer."

"Yes. And it was...well, part of it was just horrible. Nadine, something happened. When I met him, I mean. I looked into his eyes and something just...came over me. It was like...god, I don't know what it was. Like being hit by a truck. Time stopped, sort of. Nothing existed but his eyes. There was no sound, nothing. Then the next thing I knew I was waking up on the floor."

"Keep going," Nadine said as she got up to pour the tea.

Sara recited the events of the previous evening, trying as best she could to describe the strange effect Morgan had on her, and the attraction she felt for him. By the time she'd finished, they'd both had two cups of tea and were working on a third.

"And when you came home, the Sight took you," Nadine said. "And you painted this."

"Yes."

"What do you feel when you look at it, Sara?"

"Loss," Sara replied without thinking then paused. "I mean..."

"No, you meant loss. Let's explore that. What about this image speaks of loss to you?"

"The little boy," Sara said, not needing to look at the image still displayed on the computer to know it in intimate detail. "Cradled in the woman's arms, lying there on the road with fire and wreckage all around them. It's like a nightmare. There's fear and confusion, but most of all sadness and loss."

"Whose loss, Sara?" Nadine prompted. "Don't think, just answer."

"His. No, hers. No...I don't know. It's jumbled."

Nadine nodded. "It will come. Don't fight it. You're still trying to control it, to make it all make sense in your conscious mind. You have to give in to it and let it come on its own."

"I try," Sara said, twirling her teacup in its saucer. "Really, I do."

"You're doing fine, honey," Nadine said gently and reached out to put her hand on Sara's wrist. "Just fine."

Sara stared into her teacup for a few moments, fighting tears that threatened to spill from her eyes. "This...Sight. I don't know how to use it. You've always said it was for good, to help others, but I can't help anyone. Not even myself."

"Oh Sara, honey, that's not true. You've come such a long way."

Sara looked up at her friend and mentor. "Do you ever think about that day, Nadine? The day you found me, I mean? Does it make any sense to you? It doesn't to me. How did I end up on that road? And where did I come from? Who leaves a baby on the side of the road and just drives off?"

"Sara, this is old ground, and ground whose twists and turns are not yet navigable. As I've told you all along, when the time comes the answers will reveal themselves. Until then, your job is to learn to be comfortable with your gifts and to use them for good."

Sara sighed and leaned back in her chair. "It's never tried to take me when I was with someone before."

"And yet last night it did."

Sara nodded. "What does it mean?"

"That's for you to discover," Nadine said. "Obviously, Morgan Nicholaus holds significance in your life. And the only way to discover what that significance is, is to spend time with him."

Sara smiled. "Now that's homework I wouldn't mind."

Nadine laughed. "I don't imagine you would. Now, I have a client coming in a few minutes so I need to prepare. Copy the image onto my computer and I'll have another look at it later. I want you to put it aside for now. Don't look at it again. Let your subconscious have time to process it. When your mind has translated it, the answers to its meaning will come to you."

"Okay," Sara said and stood. "Thanks, Nadine. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Nadine rounded the table and pulled Sara into her embrace. "I love you, pumpkin."

"I love you." Sara melted into the comfort of the embrace. Nadine's was the only love she'd ever known. Most of the time she thought that was enough and forgot about the mystery of her life, and the string of unsuccessful attempts at relationships she'd had.

But her introduction to Danu, her mission and the appearance of Morgan Nicholaus in her life had wakened more than mystery. It had given birth to a longing she didn't know how to cope with. She wanted to believe that her mission was one of worth, that

her life had real purpose. That in itself was a longing she'd not previously known. But the biggest and most profound longing came from Morgan. Her first look into his eyes had her yearning for the kind of love one can only find with their soulmate.

"Give it time, honey," Nadine whispered. "If he's the one, you'll know soon enough."

Not surprised in the least that Nadine had read her secret longings, and grateful that she hadn't yet suspected anything about Danu, Sara pulled back and smiled. "Patience. Got it. Well, not really. But I'm working on it."

Nadine chuckled. "There's my girl. I always know when you get that sassy tone that you're back. Now off with you. Call me later."

"I will. Have a good day," Sara said and headed for the door. "I love you."

"And I you," Nadine replied.

Sara left and Nadine sat down at the table, turning the computer to face her. For a long time she stared at the screen. "Morgan Nicholaus," she murmured and reached over to turn off the computer.

Chapter Five

The car bumped. Like she'd run over something on the road. Which she knew she hadn't. Then it bumped again. Sara's face tightened in a frown as the car went into a series of bumps. She steered over to the side of the road and turned on her emergency flashers then got out.

"Great," she grumbled as she saw the flat tire on the back driver's side. "Just great."

It wasn't that she didn't know how to change a flat. The problem was that she had no spare. She went for her purse and pulled out her cell phone. It was dead. "Well screw me," she complained and looked both ways up and down the road, trying to decide which way to go.

Rather than hike back to Nadine's she opted to head down the road. There was a house not far, perhaps a mile. Perhaps the people who lived there would let her use their phone and she could call for help.

The drive leading to the house was narrow and rutted, old gnarled trees formed a thick umbrella, creating a shadowed tunnel. In her mind she could see gnomes peering from behind the trees, and fairies with iridescent dragonfly wings darting about.

The house was dark. Dark wood siding, a dark shingled roof, and sheltered beneath tall trees to put it in shadow. It was almost foreboding. She dismissed the idea and proceeded up the steps and across the narrow porch to the door.

There was no bell, so she knocked. And waited. She knocked again. When no one answered after several moments, she turned away. Just as she did the door opened. She turned back around and her eyes widened in surprise. A flush of desire rushed through her the moment she saw him.

"Morgan!"

"Sara?" Morgan pushed open the screened door. "What are you doing here?"

He didn't seem particularly pleased to see her, which stabbed at her, but what was more, he didn't look particularly well. Haunted eyes ringed with dark shadows stared at her from a face tight with tension or pain, she couldn't tell which.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she said hurriedly, feeling slightly embarrassed at the flutter in her belly and the heat that had settled in her sex merely from looking at him. "I have a flat and no spare and my cell phone is dead so I came looking for a phone to call for help."

"Please, come in," Morgan said and held the door for her. Seeing her on his doorstep had thrown him for a loop. He'd wanted to call her since the moment he'd gotten home the previous night. Wanted to be back in her company. Wanted to touch her. Wanted the voices to disappear.

And he'd not wanted to think about Nadine and her offer to help him with the voices. Not wanted to try to figure out how she could have known or what he should do about it.

"I'm really sorry to barge in on you," Sara said as he closed the door. "If I can just use your phone I'll call Nadine and have her meet me at my car."

"Nadine?" Morgan's spine tightened at the mention of the name.

Sara smiled at him. "Sorry. Nadine Tosto. She lives not too far from here. I know. I probably should've just walked back to her house, but I knew there was a house here and thought it would be closer."

"How do you know Nadine?" he asked.

Sara's smile faded. "That's kind of a long story, so in a nutshell, she raised me."

Morgan's curiosity was piqued. And he did not want Sara to leave. The moment she'd stepped into the house the voices had stopped. "I'll make a deal with you. You have coffee with me and tell me about Nadine, and I'll help you with your car."

"Okay," she said with a hint of a smile.

Morgan led the way to the kitchen, hobbling on his sprained ankle.

"What's wrong with your leg?" she asked.

"Sprained my ankle running."

"Oh I'm sorry. Listen, don't worry about coffee, you should sit."

"It's not that bad. Please." He gestured to the table where his laptop was set up with thumbnails of some of his work on the screen. "Have a seat."

"Are these recent?" Sara asked as he started preparing coffee.

"It's a mix," he replied. "Images I've been sticking away the last couple of years. Now I'm trying to decide whether to include any of them in a new book."

"Would you mind if I looked?" she asked.

"No." He looked over his shoulder at her with a smile. "Help yourself."

She did just that. He watched her as he got together cups and cream and sugar. She seemed totally engrossed. He leaned back against the counter and watched her, his hands wishing for a camera. How he would have loved to have taken her photo, capturing the light coming in from the kitchen window and slanting across the table, dust motes giving it a textured appearance, lighting one side of her face and casting the other side in shadows.

It occurred to him how unaware she was of her own beauty. Absorbed in the photos she gazed at, her bottom lip drew up slightly, to be captured by her teeth, her face set in concentration. Just watching her made lust bloom strong and potent. How many nights had she appeared in his dreams? Her warm, lush body providing pleasure he'd never been able to equal in his waking hours. How was it possible that he'd dreamed her in such perfect detail and then found her in the flesh? What strange twist of fate was at work?

A low beep signaled the coffee was ready. She didn't blink or move at the sound. Morgan poured two cups and brought them to the table then fetched the sugar and cream.

"How do you want it?" he asked as he sat down beside her.

"Huh?" She looked up at him with wide eyes, a flush tinting her creamy skin. It was enough to make him daydream of laying her on the kitchen table and licking cream from her smooth skin.

"Your coffee?"

"Oh!" She smiled. "I like a little coffee with my cream and sugar."

Morgan laughed. "In that case, you better take care of it yourself."

"Thanks." She accepted the spoon he offered and ladled several heaped spoons of sugar into her cup then topped it off with enough cream to turn the color to pale beige.

"This shot..." She clicked the pad on the laptop to move back a few frames. "This is...incredible."

Morgan glanced at the photo. It was one he'd taken of a child picking wildflowers that grew around an old gnarled oak. Sunlight filtered down through the leaves, creating a dappled effect on the child. But the child's hand, gently pulling on the fragile stem of a flower, was lit by a shaft of light.

"It's okay," he commented and took a sip of his coffee.

"Okay?" she asked with arched brows. "It's fantastic! Look at the boy's face, how hard he's concentrating trying to pluck the flower. You can see petals on the ground where his fingers have slipped up the stem and pulled off petals. He's being so careful. And the hand holding the flowers. Look how carefully he clutches them. This is something important to him. It's more than just a casual sit-down-and-pluck-flowers. He's doing this for a reason and whatever the reason is, it's very important."

Morgan was stuck by her perception of the photo. "You see a lot."

"Only what's there," she replied.

"No, I think you see a lot more. In fact, I'm starting to think that there's a lot more to you than meets the eye."

Sara looked away. Oh yes, there was more. More than what she wanted him to know. Such as the fact that she'd been secretly lusting over him for years. Or that she possessed a gift, the ability to be taken by the Sight and paint things that had happened or would happen. Or that she had no idea where she came from. That she was a foundling. Found on the side of a road. Or that she'd been recruited by a woman nearly as old as time to find and save him.

"Did I say something wrong?" Morgan asked.

She shook her head. "No. It's just...just that my life hasn't exactly been normal."

"Whose has?" he asked.

She turned to look at him and saw that he wasn't teasing. His eyes bore that haunted expression she'd seen when he first opened the door. Suddenly she was filled with deep sadness. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"For what?"

"For your pain."

Morgan's eyes widened. "What makes you think I have pain?"

She swiped at the tears. "Your eyes."

This time it was Morgan who looked away. She didn't know what to say so she leaned back, folded her hands in her lap and waited. Several minutes passed. When he spoke, it was in a low, flat tone.

"On my twelfth birthday my father said my life was going to change forever. He was taking me somewhere. I don't know where. There was an accident. An overturned RV and a tractor-trailer. A fire. He tried to help. He pulled a woman from the RV. She said her daughter was still inside. He went back for the child. There was an explosion. I never saw him again."

Sara's breath caught in her throat and in the next instant the Sight claimed her with a force so strong that all conscious thought fled and darkness claimed her.

Morgan heard the thud and whirled around. Sara was lying on the floor. Fear sprang to life like bitter bile inside him. He clambered over the chairs, knocking them out of the way to get to her. The pain in his ankle was forgotten as he scooped her up in his arms and carried her to his study.

He laid her gently on the sofa and sat down beside her. "Sara?" he called softly, patting her face. "Sara? Can you hear me? Sara?"

Her eyelids fluttered then opened. "Oh my god," she whispered.

"Are you okay?" He cupped her face in his hands. "Should I call an ambulance? Do you need food?"

"No," she whispered. "I'm fine."

"Someone who's fine doesn't just keel over," he argued in a soft voice.

"I'm fine," she insisted. "Really."

"Then why did you faint?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head fractionally. After a moment she opened her eyes. "I've seen what you described."

Something jolted inside him. Something that made him break into a cold sweat. His hands moved away from her face to grip her shoulders. "What do you mean you've seen it?"

"The accident," she whispered.

"That's impossible!" he barked sharper than he intended. "Why you're...what, twenty-two? You weren't even..."

"Twenty-eight," she interrupted softly and pushed up into a sitting position. "I'm twenty-eight."

"Well still, you couldn't have seen it. I was twelve, which means you'd have been...an infant if you were even born."

"I didn't say I was there, Morgan. I said I've seen it. And I can show you."

"You...what? No." He got up and stepped back from the sofa. "This is crazy. You're having a...I don't know...a stroke or something. I need to call an ambulance."

"No, please!" She got to her feet. "Just let me show you."

"How?"

"Your laptop," she replied. "I have a disc in my purse. Put it in your laptop."

He wasn't sure what was going on. Was she crazy? He would have been sure that was the case except for a funny feeling in his gut that told him differently. "Fine," he said and headed for the kitchen.

Sara took a deep breath and followed. She wasn't at all sure this was the wise course of action, but everything inside her was telling her to show him the image she'd created. It was too much to be a coincidence. The pieces were all there, waiting to be put together to form the picture.

She felt a little detached at the moment. Maybe it was shock. But the Sight had never lied to her before. She believed what she'd been shown. The question was, could she make Morgan believe and could she fit together the missing pieces?

She took the disc from her purse and inserted it into the drive of his laptop. "There's only one file on it," she said.

Morgan clicked on the drive, and double-clicked on the image. When it opened, his face turned chalky and she thought he was going to fall. She grabbed his arm and helped him to a chair.

"What the hell is going on?" he whispered, his eyes glued to the screen. "What are you trying to pull on me? How did you know about... Is this some kind of con?" He jumped up and towered over her, eyes flashing.

"That's it, isn't it? You got information about me from one of my shrinks and thought you'd use it against me. Sashay in here looking like the woman I've been

dreaming about and con me out of...of money or...or sell me on some bill of goods to rob me blind...or...or..."

The moment he jumped up, fear spiked inside Sara. His eyes were hot with rage. But the moment the words "the woman I've been dreaming about" emerged from his mouth all fear fled. In its place was amazement and excitement.

"You've been dreaming about me?" she asked in wonder. "Really?"

Her question and the innocence on her face stopped Morgan dead in his tracks. He wanted to hang onto the anger. It was far easier to deal with the idea that she was a con artist than to believe she'd drawn the most traumatic event in his life before she ever met him. But there was no dishonesty in her eyes.

"Sara," he sighed and took hold of her upper arms. "What's going on here?"

"Fate?"

"I guess that's as good an explanation as any, but I really need more. Can you explain to me how you drew this?"

A veil seemed to drop over her eyes. The clear green darkened to the color of spruce. "It didn't really make sense to me either," she said softly. "Until now."

"Then explain it to me. Please."

She nodded and extricated herself from his grasp to take a seat. "I have a...gift."

Morgan sat down facing her. "A gift?"

"It's hard to explain. Sometimes I see things. Know things about people."

"You mean you're psychic?"

"I suppose it's something like that," she answered. "Most of the time the Sight comes to me like a...a blackout. I lose myself to visions and am not aware of what's happening around me. I draw what I see."

"And that's what happened when you drew this?"

"Yes. Last night."

Morgan stared at her for a few moments, his brow furrowed in thought. "Do you have any idea why you drew this?"

She nodded and looked down for a moment. "I think maybe there's a connection between us."

"A connection?"

"Well, several actually." She raised her eyes to meet his. "First of all. The day of this accident. You said that your father was trying to save a child. An infant girl?"

"Yeah. So?"

She shook her head and sighed, twisting her hands together in her lap. "Was this in June?"

"June 21."

She nodded and gave another sigh, a sound of resignation that he didn't understand. "I don't know who my parents are. On June 21, 1979, Nadine Tosto found me on the side of a road. Abandoned. She said that the only clue was the embroidered shawl I was wrapped in. It had the word Hope stitched into it."

Morgan felt the blood drain from his face and a shock jolt his body. "The woman who died in the accident. Her name was Hope."

She nodded. "I think she was my mother."

"No." Morgan shook his head, disagreeing in a harsh tone. "It's not possible. My father went back for the child and there was an explosion. No one survived it."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"I'm telling you it's not possible. I was there. I saw it. The only way the child could have survived...hell, there isn't a way."

"Okay. But it's an awfully big coincidence, don't you think?"

"There seem to be a lot of those today," he murmured, thinking of Nadine Tosto.

"What do you mean?"

Morgan rose and walked to stand in front of the kitchen sink, staring out of the window. "I was running this morning and twisted my ankle. A woman stopped and gave me a ride home. She walked me to the door and then left. But a few moments after I closed the door, she knocked on it and gave me a card. Said to call her if I needed help. With the voices." He took a few steps to pluck a card from a small basket on the counter and turned to hand it to her.

"Nadine?" she asked with surprise evident in her voice.

"Nadine," he said and nodded. "The same woman you'd gone to see and ended up here on my doorstep."

Sara considered it. It was clear to her that Fate's hand was at play. She was convinced that she was the child Morgan's father had been trying to save. The timing fit. The problem was Morgan claimed that neither his father nor the child had survived. Could she be wrong? Was her conviction based on need? Did she just want to believe or was it real?

Suddenly her head popped up to look at him. "Voices?"

Morgan blew out his breath and leaned back against the counter. "Three days after my father died, I woke with...whispers in my head. I couldn't understand what they said. For years I only heard them occasionally. But as time passed, they became stronger and more frequent. I thought I was going insane. Nothing could stop them. I tried drugs and alcohol and sex and therapy, and running myself to exhaustion and still I couldn't stop them.

"They've been my companions and tormenters. They rob me of sleep, make it impossible for me to sustain a relationship and scare the hell out of me. And I don't know how to get rid of them."

He walked over and sat down in front of her, reached out and took her hands in his. "And one of the few times they've been silenced is when I'm with you." Sara couldn't stop the tears that welled in her eyes. She felt his pain as if it were her own, understood the torment and fear. Every ounce of her energy became focused on one thought. To ease his suffering. To eliminate his pain. Nothing else mattered.

"Oh Morgan," she breathed, disengaging one hand to lay it on the side of his face. "I'm so sorry."

Her touch created a conflicting mass of emotions strong enough to make his breath catch. He felt compassion and genuine caring radiate through him. Along with desire. He felt her desire for him. With that came wanting. Hunger so deep that his gut burned and his balls ached. Something that had been smoldering inside him for years flamed to life. Primal and overpowering, it claimed him, bringing an immediate erection.

"Sara." His voice was rough with need.

"Morgan."

Her hand slid to cup the back of his head, pulling him closer. Her eyes beckoned him, her lush lips parted slightly, enticing him. He couldn't resist. He didn't want to.

Giving no thought to gentleness, he pulled her from her chair, rising in the same movement, to crush her to him. His lips were demanding against hers, taking her in a kiss that had his heart hammering and his dick throbbing.

She surrendered to him, her lips soft and yielding, her body pliant, molding to his. Morgan released her from the kiss long enough to sweep her up in his arms and carry her quickly to the bedroom.

He put her on her feet beside the bed, fisting both hands in her long hair for another searing kiss. The soft moan that came from her spurred his hands into action. "I want to see you. Touch you. Taste you."

"Yes," she breathed as he began undressing her, pulling her long-sleeved T-shirt up over her head.

A lacy pink bra cupped her full breasts, drawing him toward the shadowed depth between them. His hands cupped both breasts as his tongue worked down her cleavage. She tasted sweet, like jasmine-tinted honey. It was intoxicating. His mouth worked over one full mound, his fingers working the cup of her bra down so that her breast spilled free.

She gasped when his mouth fastened on her nipple, sucking and teasing the taut tip with his tongue. Her hands moved up to fist in his hair, pulled him more firmly against her breast, her back arching to press into the sensation.

A smell of rose, of wildflowers and musk filled his senses, a heady scent that went straight to his dick, making it pulse against her belly. Morgan's hand worked down her body to unfasten her jeans, slipping down into the front to cup her wet sex.

She released her hold on his hair to assist, working her jeans down, stepping free of them as he spread her labia and worked his middle finger inside her.

She gasped and pressed against him as his finger located her G-spot. Morgan felt her come, flooding his hand, her body quivering, tightening then growing pliant as the wave subsided.

He released her long enough to ease her back on the bed. She watched with eyes hooded in desire, lips swollen from his kisses. He started to unfasten his pants, seeing her track the movements of his hands.

Someone knocked on the door. Sara looked up at him like a startled bird. His first thought was to ignore it. Whoever it was would go away. But the knocking became a persistent pounding, accompanied by a voice calling out.

"Morgan?"

It was then that Morgan remembered he'd scheduled a meeting with a potential new client.

"Shit!" He hurriedly buttoned his pants. "I'm supposed to meet with a client today."

Sara bolted up, pulling up her pants and scrambling around on the floor for her discarded shirt. "I'll leave!" she whispered.

"No." Morgan took hold of her arm as she straightened, shirt in hand. "Please. Don't go."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Okay," she agreed and slid on her shirt when he released her. "I'll just stay here and be quiet."

"No." He took her hand. "This is nothing you can't hear. Come on."

Together they went into the living room. Sara took a seat as Morgan answered the door. A large, heavyset man in an expensive suit stood on the other side of the door.

"I was beginning to think you were going to stand me up," he said with a smile.

"Sorry, Dan." Morgan gave the man a handshake. "We were tied up...going over some photos for the book."

"We?" Dan asked and followed Morgan into the living room. "Oh!" He noticed Sara. "Hi. Dan Thomas."

"Sara Tosto," she said with a smile and stood to shake his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"So, going over photos?" Dan directed the question to her. "You work with Morgan now?"

"N-" She never got the word out.

"Yes." Morgan spoke over the top of her. "Sara has an amazing eye. I've asked her to work with me in selecting photos for the next book."

"Wonderful," Dan said and took a seat in a chair adjacent to the sofa.

Morgan took a seat beside Sara on the sofa. "So," Dan said, "I hope you've decided to take the job."

Morgan shook his head. "I don't know if I'm the right man for the job, to be honest. Shooting political functions isn't exactly my bag."

"Nonsense," Dan argued and directed his next comment to Sara. "Morgan's been asked to photograph the Democratic convention. Get candid shots of the candidates, leading up to the party nomination then throughout the presidential campaign."

Sara nodded and looked to Morgan. "It's your business, but I think you'd be wonderful for this. Who else would be able to capture the essence of the people better than you?"

Her confidence and quiet praise filled him with pride and excitement. Suddenly he wanted to do the job. But on one very important condition.

"Tell you what," he replied to her. "I'll do it if you work with me."

"Me? I'm not a photographer!" she insisted.

"No, but you have the eye to pick out the best of what I do," he argued. "Just like you did earlier with the child picking flowers. If I'm going to do it I want to be sure that what the public sees is my best. I need you for that."

She smiled through a wash of tears that flooded her eyes. Blinking them back, she nodded. "I'd be proud to help."

Morgan turned to Dan. "Well, looks like we're on."

Dan grinned widely. "Wonderful. Then get packed. You leave tonight."

"Tonight?" Sara asked.

Dan nodded. "Pack heavy because you're not likely to be back home until the election is over."

"But that's more than a year!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," he agreed with a smile and stood. "A jet will be waiting for you at the airport at seven sharp. I'll have housing arranged before you reach Washington and a car waiting on you when you land. Get settled in and I'll drop by tomorrow afternoon with your schedule."

Morgan looked at Sara. "Can you arrange your schedule for this?"

She considered it for a few moments. Aside from the cosmetic ads she had nothing really on her plate. "Can I take some work with me?"

"Absolutely," Dan answered her question. "Bring whatever you need or give me a list and I'll have it waiting for you."

"Thanks," Sara replied with a smile that quickly faded. "Oh no, wait. I can't do this. I'll lose my place and I don't have the money to pay the lease for that long."

"Not a problem," Dan said with a grin. "Just have the bills sent to me. I'll take care of everything."

She gaped at him in surprise and he chuckled. "Glad to have you onboard, Miss Tosto. See you both tomorrow."

Morgan saw him out then returned to the living room where Sara was standing in shock. "You okay?" he asked, cupping the side of her face with one hand.

"Uh, yeah. Kind of in a daze. This kind of thing doesn't happen to people like me every day you know."

Morgan smiled then his face grew serious. "I meant what I said, Sara. I need you with me."

"Then I will be," she promised. "For as long as you need me."

Morgan smiled gratefully and pulled her into his arms. For the first time since he was a child, he felt he could escape the voices, defeat the demons. As long as she was with him, he was safe.

Chapter Six

Sara was packed and ready when Morgan arrived at her house. Aside from one suitcase of personal belongings, she had only her laptop, monitor, external hard drive and graphics tablet to take with her. With the exception of her laptop, which she had in an aluminum case, everything else was all wrapped in bubble wrap inside a large travel case.

"This is it?" Morgan asked when she showed him her luggage. "Most women pack more than this for a weekend."

"I'm not exactly the world's biggest material girl," she replied and then looked at him anxiously.

"What?" he asked.

"My clothes," she replied. "Morgan, I don't really have what you'd call professional outfits. Or even dressy stuff. Mostly just jeans, T-shirts and a few dresses and skirts that are sort of...alternative?"

"Don't worry," he said with a smile of assurance. "If you need something other than what you have, we'll get it."

"No!" She smiled in embarrassment at her outburst. "Sorry, it's just that...well, I can't afford it."

"Yes you can," he argued. "Dan has agreed to pay you as my assistant. And the job pays forty-eight hundred a month plus expenses."

Sara nearly fainted. "Forty-eight hundred a month?"

"Not enough? I can see if he can go high –"

"No. No!" She interrupted with a laugh. "I've never made that much money in my life!"

Morgan laughed and grabbed the travel case bag with one hand and the suitcase with the other. "Stick with me, kid," he drawled in a fair imitation of Humphrey Bogart. "This is just the beginning."

Sara grinned and followed him to the door. Giving one last look around, she locked and closed the door, hoping the chapter that was about to begin proved to be positive.

They made it to the airport in ample time. Once aboard the luxurious private jet, provided for them by one of the party's campaign supporters, they settled into deeply padded seats and were instructed to buckle up for takeoff. It was only an hour flight to Washington, where they would be based for the next year.

An attendant appeared once they reached cruising altitude to offer them champagne and caviar and let them know they would be landing in less than half an hour. Sara gladly accepted the champagne but passed on the caviar.

"Not a fan?" Morgan asked as he also declined.

Sara shuddered and sipped from the champagne. The flight attendant left them alone. Their eyes met and suddenly the cabin was charged with energy spiking between them.

For twenty minutes they tried to make small talk, speculating on the job at hand or where they would be staying. But the conversation faltered. Their eyes met and held.

Her nipples hardened beneath the fabric of her top. Morgan's eyes moved to her chest and lingered before meeting hers again. "This is going to kill me," he said gruffly, setting his glass aside. "Sara, I need you."

Her skin tingled at his words and burned when he got up, lifted her from her seat and sat down in it with her on his lap. His hand cupped her breast, the thumb stroking slowly over her nipple.

She initiated the kiss, at first gentle and slow, tongues touching, caressing. It took only moments for the kiss to deepen to one of urgency and demand. She repositioned herself on his lap, straddling him. One hand worked to his groin, feeling for the hardness straining against the fabric of his slacks.

Sara forgot about the attendant in the adjacent cabin. All that existed was Morgan. Her lips worked to his jaw, kissing, nipping, and then trailed lower, the tip of her tongue sliding down his neck as she fisted his hard cock through his pants, rhythmically squeezing.

"Jesus," he groaned, pressing into her hand. "If you're not careful you're going to make me come."

"Hmmmm," she murmured against his neck.

"Sara," he moaned as she squeezed harder.

"Morgan," she breathed in his ear, exulting in the desire her touch evoked in him.

"Sara," his voice took on a more urgent tone.

"Mr. Nicholaus?" A voice behind them had them both bolting up straight like kids caught raiding the cookie jar.

"Excuse me, sir," the attendant kept her eyes averted, "but it's time to buckle up. We'll be landing shortly."

Feeling embarrassed to have been caught in an intimate moment, Sara quickly climbed off Morgan and claimed the vacant seat. Once they both were buckled in, the attendant left. They cut their eyes to one another. Sara tried not to grin, but the wide smile on Morgan's face elicited a giggle.

He laughed along with her and held out his hand. Feeling the happiest she'd ever been in her life, she clasped his hand in hers.

* * * * *

Sara was nearly bug-eyed with excitement as Morgan unlocked the door to a topfloor apartment of the Newseum Residences in the Capital City. Located on Pennsylvania Avenue, in the Penn Quarter neighborhood, it was only minutes from the White House and Smithsonian Museums on the Mall.

"Oh my!" she gasped as he stood aside for her to enter. It was the most luxurious place she'd ever seen outside of Danu's castle. She turned to find Morgan grinning at her. "You can't tell me you're not excited," she exclaimed, spreading her arms in gesture to the surroundings.

"Oh I'm excited," he replied in a tone that sent a shiver racing down her spine and a tingling set up residence in her sex.

All thought fled when he took her into his arms, claimed her lips. All that existed was him. The feel of his body pressed against hers, the taste of him, and his tongue filling her mouth, his hands roaming down her back to cup her ass and press her firmly against his erection.

Something sprang to life inside her. An assertiveness she'd not previously known. She wanted him, wanted to explore his body. With nimble fingers she unbuttoned his shirt, running her hand over his warm skin, feeling the play of muscle beneath, the ripple of his abs as her hands moved lower.

Sara ended the kiss as she lowered his pants and pushed his underwear down. His hard cock sprang free, bobbing with excitement. Slowly she started a trek down his body, her lips and tongue working slowly toward their destination.

She knelt in front of him, feeling his hands tangle in her hair as she took his hard shaft in her hands. She ran her tongue around the spongy head, probing the tiny opening. Pre-cum gave him a salty flavor. She licked at the tiny droplets, using her tongue to smooth the lubricant over the engorged head.

Morgan's grip on her hair tightened when she ran her tongue down the length of his cock and back up. The low groan he uttered when she took him into her mouth had her insides fluttering with excitement and desire. Knowing that she was giving him pleasure was exciting, intoxicating. She wanted to take him higher, give him more.

Several times she felt his balls tighten, felt the vibration that coursed through him. Each time she slowed, pulling back to circle the head of his cock with her tongue, prolonging the pleasure.

"Christ, Sara," he breathed when she took as much of him as she could. His hands gripped her hair tighter, guiding her movements, his pelvis rocking, stroking into the wet warmth of her mouth.

"No." He gently but forcefully pushed her away as the impending wave began to vibrate through his body. "Not yet."

He stripped her, taking his time, kissing and suckling her breasts until her nipples ached and her pussy wept with need. His own release was second to his desire to brand her, make her his. Give her what no other man could.

His lips captured hers, and he tasted himself on her tongue. Slowly he ended the kiss, his lips traveling down her neck, nipping at the tender skin, tasting then moving lower, once more capturing a sensitive nipple in his mouth. As his tongue flicked over the taut nub, his hand moved lower, over her mound, his fingers sliding between the wet folds.

She jolted when his finger raked over her hard clit, gasping at the sensation. Morgan wrapped one arm behind her, bowing her back to tease her nipple, his tongue circling and flicking before sucking it into his mouth.

Her breath came faster as his fingers worked over her clit, stroking and pinching. "Ahhh," she gasped, her belly rippling with impending release.

Morgan eased her back onto the deep carpet, spreading her legs to kneel between them. She watched with heavy-lidded eyes as he spread her pussy wide then bent to run his tongue between the swollen lips.

Sara arched against his mouth. Morgan raised his head long enough to see her hands move to her breasts, thumbing the reddened nipples, her head arched back and chest rising and falling more rapidly as the pleasure intensified.

It was the most sexually alluring sight he'd ever witnessed. She was feminine sensuality personified. His need to pleasure her magnified. He wanted to hear her scream his name in ecstasy, know that it was him she wanted, needed.

His finger probed the entrance of her pussy, circling the wet silken flesh then pushing inside the warmth. Another finger joined in, feeling the heat of her wet walls, searching for that secret spot. Her body arched in answer when he found it. Her hips rocked in time to the stroking of his hand, his fingers penetrating deeply inside her.

Morgan bent forward, taking her clit in his mouth, licking and sucking at the hard bud. Sara gasped, moving faster against his fingers. He felt the vibration that raced through her and stroked faster and deeper inside her, sucking her clit into his mouth and flicking his tongue rapidly over it.

"Oh...god...Morgan!" she panted a moment before her pussy began to spasm around his fingers and wetness streamed from inside her.

Before her climax could end, he straightened and pushed the head of his dick against her wet opening. She pushed against him, taking him inside her, her tight pussy yielding to his width.

He nearly came before he was fully seated inside her. Morgan ran his hands up her luscious body, gently squeezing her swollen nipple. She smiled and took his hand, sucking one finger then two inside her mouth. The sight of her sucking the juice from her pussy off his fingers gave him a thrill that made his dick throb, threatening his tenuous control.

"Hmmm," she murmured, freeing his fingers and moving his hand back to her breast.

He began to stroke, slow and steady, straining to keep the impending orgasm at bay. Sara's pussy pulsed on him, tightening then releasing. Her hips rose and fell, meeting each thrust, keeping the rhythm steady and slow.

Both of them were breathing harder, trying to hold back. "I can't," Sara gasped and stretched her arms back behind her head, arching her body up. "Please."

The effect of her words and the sight of her submissively offering herself was more than he could resist. He grabbed her hips and pulled her to him, impaling her on the full length of his dick and eliciting a soft cry in reward. He could feel her muscles tighten around him, feel the vibrations begin.

He lowered himself down, propped on one elbow, his free hand pinning her hands to the floor as he thrust more urgently, more forcefully.

"Now," she moaned a moment before her body began to quake in orgasm. That ended his control. With two hard thrusts, he buried himself to the hilt inside her and gave in.

An orgasm claimed him that had his own body stiffening in ecstasy. When at last the wave had passed, he collapsed onto her chest. For several minutes there was only the sound of their breath, their hearts pounding against one another, sweat-slicked skin gradually cooling.

Morgan rolled off her, pulling her with him to cradle her to his side. Sara reached up to stroke the side of his face and he turned his head to look at her. The depth of emotion he saw shining in her eyes was as breathtaking as the orgasm he'd just experienced.

"Sara," he whispered, reaching up to cover her hand with his. "My Sara."

She smiled and closed her eyes. A few moments later, with a smile on his face, sleep claimed him.

Chapter Seven

In all her life, Sara had never woken with such a sense of completeness, such happiness. The first thing she saw when she opened her eyes was Morgan smiling at her.

"Good morning," he said and raised her hand from his chest to kiss the palm.

"Hmmm, it certainly is," she said with a smile.

They'd been in Washington for over three months, and in that time had flown all over the country, covering the campaigns. Morgan took scores of photos. Some of the candidates in crowds, on stage or even in private moments away from the media. She'd viewed every photo, poring over them in detail, searching for the most meaningful.

They'd become a team. Now she'd become his extra set of eyes, pointing out opportunities that presented themselves for candid shots. It was as if they were of one mind when they worked.

And in the time they weren't working, they were discovering a depth of passion neither of them thought possible. More than sexual, their bond was one of deep emotion and understanding.

Sara had told Morgan all there was to know about her life. Except Danu. She had not been able to bring herself to reveal that bit of knowledge. How could she tell him that she was on a mission to save him? Save him from what? Thus far she'd seen no threat, been given no warnings from the Sight of any danger to him. Could Danu have been wrong?

She didn't know and didn't really want to think about it. She was too happy. At long last she was in love.

"Penny for your thoughts," he said softly.

"Just wishing we didn't have to cover the rally today," she said wistfully, shoving aside thoughts of her mission and doubts as to its veracity.

"And what would you rather do?" he asked, propping up on one elbow and lifting the sheet to peer beneath it at her naked body.

She laughed and captured his face in her hands to kiss him lightly. "Have you any idea how...addictive you are, Morgan Nicholaus?"

"Have you?" he asked in reply.

She shook her head with a smile and he rolled her onto her back, pinning her hands above her head. "I feel like a kid. I can't get enough of you, Sara. I don't know that I ever will."

Her smile diminished. In their time together, no words of love had been spoken. She was certain that she loved him, but he'd made no declarations and she hadn't tried to elicit any.

"You don't have to say that," she replied softly. "I don't expect anything from you, Morgan."

"I know. You give without reservation and ask for nothing in return. And I find myself wanting to do the same. Sara, I want to give you the world. Make every day something special for you. Give back what you bring to my life."

"And just what is that, Morgan?"

"Love. I feel your love, Sara. Like a tangible force that surrounds me, keeping the demons at bay, protecting me, allowing me to breathe and feel whole. You inspire me, Sara. Like my own guardian angel and divine muse rolled up into one beautiful package. I love you, Sara."

She was stunned by his words. It was more than she'd ever hoped for. "Oh Morgan. I love you. More than I can ever say."

Tears sprang from her eyes. Tears of joy and tears of guilt. How could she profess love to him and not tell him all of the truth?

"Hey!" He gathered her in his arms. "A man professing undying love is supposed to be a happy occasion."

"And it is," she assured him. "But you know me. Miss Waterworks."

He chuckled and kissed her. "Well, you are the only person I know who can cry over a commercial."

She laughed and pushed at him. "It was touching!"

"If you say so." He rolled away as she snatched a pillow and went to hit him with it. "Sorry, baby, but fun and games will have to wait. The car will be here in less than an hour so we better get a move on."

"Yes sir!" She gave him a jaunty salute and hopped out of the bed. "Last one to the shower is a rotten egg."

Giggling and laughing, they raced for the bathroom.

* * * * *

Later that afternoon, they stood among a crowd of thousands outside the Capitol Building, waiting on the appearance of one of the politicians seeking the Democratic nomination, and the first female many believed to have a chance at not just winning the nomination but the election.

They were due to meet with her in private after the rally, something that had Sara on pins and needles. "You sure I look okay?" she asked for the tenth time.

Morgan smiled and leaned down to kiss her cheek. "You look incredible. Good enough to eat."

She laughed and pushed playfully at him. "I'm not talking about that kind of okay. You sure this suit looks right on me? I feel kind of like a kid dressed up in her mama's Sunday-go-to-meeting outfit."

"You look wonderful, Sara. Trust me," he replied and handed her one of his cameras. "Here, I think it's time you started taking some of your own shots."

"Oh no." She waved her hands on front of her. "I don't know the first thing about photography."

"Come on," he encouraged. "I already have it set. Just look through the viewfinder and if you see something good, tell me and I'll shoot it too. This will give you a better view."

"Okay, but just as a scout," she replied and accepted the camera.

A roar from the crowd signaled that the candidate had arrived. From their vantage point near the stage, they had an unimpeded view of her and could easily turn and get shots of the crowd.

While Morgan fired away at the candidate, Sara busied herself with scanning the crowd, snapping a few shots of people, noticing the expressions of excitement on many of the faces.

She got a bit bored as the candidate launched into her speech, and let the camera drift to the surrounding area. Suddenly her heart leapt into her throat. "Morgan!" she hissed and bumped him with her hip.

"Hey!" he protested.

"Morgan, quick!" she insisted. "Look!"

"Where?" He stepped behind her and directed his lens over the top of her head in the direction she pointed.

"There!" she exclaimed. "See, in that window. The...fourth one from the right."

"I don't see anything."

"There's something there."

"What?"

"Someone with a gun."

"You sure?"

"Positive."

Morgan kept his lens pointed at the window. When the figure appeared again his camera fired before Sara could get the words out of her mouth. "There he is!"

"Christ!" Morgan blurted and whirled away, slamming his camera into her hands and then running at full tilt up the steps of the platform to launch himself at the candidate before anyone could stop him. A split second after he tackled her, bullets slammed into a Secret Service agent who'd been standing behind her.

Pandemonium broke out with people screaming and running all directions, agents yelling orders and people clustering around the candidate who lay trapped beneath Morgan.

Sara tried to fight her way to Morgan but was pushed back farther and farther by the crowd, carried on the sea of fleeing people. By the time she'd managed to work her way free, she was nearly a block away and police cars were skidding to a stop all along the street, barricading the area.

She didn't know what to do. She couldn't get to Morgan. She waited and watched along with hundreds of others, and finally gave up and fought her way free. She walked for nearly a mile before she was able to hail a cab to get back to the apartment.

Once she arrived there was nothing she could do but wait. And worry. She paced the floor, back and forth, over and over until her feet hurt. Finally she flung herself down on the couch. The sound of the clock on the wall, ticking slowly, was the only sound. The space between each tick seemed to be growing.

Sara felt an impending attack of the Sight and hurried to the dining room table where she'd set up her laptop. Her hands trembled as she raced to boot up the system and start a new file.

Her vision swam. She wasn't going to make it. At the last moment the canvas appeared. She snatched up her graphic's pen and tablet and fell into a chair.

And was lost.

When she returned, the scene on the computer had her jumping up to get the cameras she'd brought back with her. Scared nearly out of her wits, she saved the scene

she'd drawn and pulled the memory cards from both cameras. She inserted the one from the camera she'd used into the card reader.

It seemed to take forever for the images to load, but finally the operation was complete. Selecting a filmstrip mode, she scrolled through the images, stopping on a blurred shot of the building where she'd seen the gunman. It wasn't clear enough to make out much of anything. She removed the card from the reader and then inserted Morgan's.

Her heart jumped when she saw the images he'd taken. Clear as a bell and zoomed in tight enough, two images displayed a man barely visible between a part in the curtains. The first showed the man's face above the rifle he held. The second showed him peering through the sight.

She quickly copied the files to her laptop, created a copy of the files and then switched memory cards, inserting the one from her camera. She copied the blurred shot off the computer, pasted the clear shots from Morgan's camera on top of it and saved it under the original file name to her memory card.

She repeated the process, substituting her blurred shots for the clear images on his memory card. Now if Morgan looked at the images, he would think he'd missed the shot. And that meant that if word got out about the photos, no one would know he'd taken them. And no one would be trying to get even with him for exposing them.

She replaced the memory cards into the cameras then took another look at the image she'd created. Her mission was finally revealed and it scared the life out of her. Where was Morgan? What was she supposed to do? How could she prevent this from happening? Were the precautions she'd just taken enough?

A sound at the door had her racing to it. She threw herself on him before he could enter the apartment. "Oh god, Morgan! Are you okay? I was so scared!"

"Sara! Thank god. I looked everywhere and couldn't find you." He pulled her into his arms, hugging her tightly as he backed her up so he could enter and kick the door closed behind him.

She scooted around him and locked the door. "What happened?" she asked. "Was she shot?"

"No. She's fine. Sara, where's my camera?"

"On the coffee table."

"Thank god!" Morgan went to it and removed the memory card. "I think I may have a shot of the assassin. We need to open the files on your laptop and see."

"No! Morgan, wait!" She ran to stop him but it was too late. He saw the image displayed on the screen, stopped dead in his tracks and turned to her. His face looked ashen.

"When did you do this?"

"Just now."

Morgan ran his hand through his hair and slumped into the chair in front of the computer. "That's me."

Sara ran over to him, throwing herself onto her knees beside him and grabbing his hand. "Morgan, look at me. Morgan?"

He turned his eyes to her and she could see the fear. It broke her heart. "Morgan, listen to me. Just because I drew this doesn't mean it's going to happen. It won't. I'll stop it."

He barked a harsh laugh. "Right, you're going to stop someone from blowing my brains out."

"Yes."

"Sara, I love you and I know you'd do everything you could to try, but you're no match for someone out to commit murder. The only thing we can do is get the images to the Secret Service. They'll know what to do. They'll protect us."

She nodded and looked down. Morgan inserted the memory card into the computer. When the images loaded he scrolled through them. "No!" he shouted as he saw the blurred photos. "No! God damn it all. What the fuck happened?"

"You were moving? Trying to get to the stage?"

"No. Where's the other card?"

"In the camera."

He got up and retrieved it. When he saw the images, he studied them for a few moments, and then switched to a detailed view of the file names. "Sara, what did you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. I know I didn't blur a shot this bad. What did you do?"

"What makes you think –"

The ring of the phone interrupted. Morgan picked it up. "Yes... Of course. Thank you."

"The Secret Service is here," he announced. "They want the memory cards."

She nodded and followed him into the living area. Neither of them spoke as they waited. They didn't have long. Morgan answered the knock at the door. Two agents entered.

"Mr. Morgan?" the first one asked. "Mike Billings. My partner, David White."

Morgan shook their hands. "Here are the cards."

"Have you looked at the images contained on these cards, sir?"

"Yes."

"And you, Miss...?" Agent Billings asked Sara.

"Sara Tosto, and yes, sir, I did."

Billings turned his attention to Morgan. "Sir, do you have a personal computer we might use to view the images on these cards?"

"Yes, of course." Morgan directed them to the dining area. "Are you familiar with—" The rest of the sentence was left hanging. Billings sat down at the computer, inserted the first card into the reader and waited for the images to load.

"Dave," he called to his partner who stood beside the sofa. "Take a look."

His partner joined him, looking over his shoulder. Sara followed and stood beside Morgan. "I don't know if we can pull it out enough or not," Agent White said. "Try the other one."

Billings switched out the cards. Once the images were loaded, he and his partner looked at them, and then he looked up at Morgan. "You took these photos?"

"No," Sara answered before Morgan had a chance. "I did."

"You did?" Billings looked from her to Morgan and back to her.

"Yes. Morgan let me borrow the camera. It's the older model, the D70. You can tell by the file designations."

The agents looked at one another then again at Sara. "Miss Tosto, we're going to have to take this card. And we'll need a statement from you."

"Of course," she replied. "Now?"

"No," Billings said. "We'll send someone for you first thing in the morning. Right now we need to get this card back for processing."

He turned his attention to Morgan. "Mr. Nicholaus. You did a brave thing today. You may have saved the life of the next president."

"Thank you," Morgan replied and stepped aside for the agents to leave.

"Nine a.m.," Billings said to Sara.

"I'll be ready," she assured him.

Morgan saw them to the door then turned to her. "You want to explain now what you're doing?"

"Fulfilling a vow," she said quietly. She'd decided she had to come clean with him, tell him the whole truth. At least as much as she knew. There were still missing pieces in the puzzle. Pieces she suspected no one could supply but Danu. And she had no idea how to contact her.

"A vow? To who?"

"That's kind of a long story," she said and extended her hand. "Can we sit?" Morgan took her hand and let her lead him to the couch. "Okay, I'm all ears." "Well, it happened like this..."

Chapter Eight

Sara was hoarse by the time she finished telling Morgan about her life with Nadine, not knowing who her parents were and the unusual ability she'd always possessed. She didn't spare any detail, not even about Danu and being taken to the Isle of Sàbhail.

Morgan didn't speak one word until she finished hours later with the statement, "...which brings us to where we are now."

"Sara..." He shook his head, raking his hands through his hair, and then stood to pace the floor. "This is..." He turned to look at her. "Look, I'm not calling you a liar or anything, but this is...a bit much."

"I know," she agreed. Had she been on the receiving end of the tale she would have thought it crazy.

He shook his head again, clearly at a loss for words. At that moment the phone rang. They looked at one another in alarm. It was the middle of the night. No call at that hour could spell good news.

"Yes?" he answered.

She watched his expression change from fatigue to alarm as he listened. "I understand. Yes, we will," he said into the phone then hung up and faced her. "The agents who were here. They never made it back. Their bodies were found half an hour ago."

Fear spiked throughout Sara's body so strong it took her breath. "The memory cards?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"Gone."

Morgan hurried to her as her hand went to her face and her skin paled. "They said for us to sit tight. They'll send police to guard the building. We're safe here, Sara."

"No, we're not," she argued softly. "Morgan, whoever did this will surely know we've viewed the files. They'd probably even suspect that we made copies. It's not safe. We have to get out of here, now."

"No, Sara," he argued, and pulled her back down when she started to rise. "Listen to me. We're safer here. The building has security, and the police are on their way. This is the safest place for us now."

"But we can't just hide in here –"

Her words were cut off by a sudden shattering of glass as the window exploded. Morgan grabbed her and threw her onto the floor, diving on top of her. They lay there, hearts pounding, clutching one another while bullets slammed into the fabric of the couch where they'd sat just moments ago.

Sara had no idea how long they lay there. Time ceased to have meaning. Morgan slid off her and belly-crawled over to jerk the cord of the lamp, sending it crashing to the floor and pitching the room into darkness.

She rolled over and watched as he crawled on hands and knees into the dining room. It wasn't long before he returned, his camera in hand, a long zoom lens mounted on it.

"Don't!" She grabbed his arm as he started for the window.

"It's okay. I just want to see if I can spot anything. Get behind the couch."

She didn't respond but after he'd positioned himself to one side of the window and rose up to peer through the viewfinder of the camera, she hurried over behind him. She wasn't sure what good that was doing, but she felt better close to him.

"Do you see anything?" she asked.

"No. Yes. There's someone there. In that building."

"I want to see."

He switched places with her, handing her the camera. Sara peered through the viewfinder. At first she didn't see anything suspicious. Then her eye caught movement in one of the windows. A form darker than the background behind it.

It was a man. With a long rifle.

Her heart leapt into her throat. They had to do something. Call the police, run. Something. Otherwise...

Her thought was cut short as she watched the man peer through the rifle sight. "No, no, no, no, no," she whispered a frantic chant. "Stop, stop, stop!"

"Sara!" Morgan pulled her back from the window. "What's wrong?"

"Stop, stop, stop," she whispered, her entire being focused on the idea of making the man stop, giving them a chance. She couldn't see Morgan, his eyes frantic with concern, or feel his hand gripping her arms, shaking her.

"Sara!" Morgan continued to call to her, shaking her and finally bringing her out of her trance.

"Morgan," she looked up at him. "We have to do something. Call the police. Please. Hurry."

"I will. Stay right here. Don't move."

He crawled across the room for his phone, snatched it up and dialed. A frown came on his face. He dialed again, and again. Finally he looked at her. "I can't call out."

She crawled over to him. "Is the battery dead?"

"No, it's..." Morgan's eyes bugged out as he looked at the phone. The digital clock on its face wasn't blinking. His eyes darted to the clock on the digital cable box. Same thing.

"What the hell's going on?" he whispered. "Come on." He grabbed her arm, tugging her along as he started to the kitchen in a hunched-over jog.

"What?" she cried as he looked at the clock on the microwave.

"The clocks," he finally answered. "Let's get to the bedroom."

Together they raced through the apartment. Morgan snatched the drapes closed over the window and grabbed the television remote. The screen lightened. Into a frozen image.

"What the hell's going on?" he asked and parted the drapes to peer down at the street. "Sara, get over here! Look at this!"

She ran to the window and looked down. There was no movement. Cars on the streets were as still as small models on a toy store shelf.

The shock had her reaching for his hand in fear. "No, this isn't right. They should be moving. Morgan, what's going on? I'm scared."

"It'll be okay," he pulled her to him.

"No!" she pushed back. "We have to go. Don't you see? This is our chance."

Morgan resisted when she tried to pull him away from the window. "Morgan, please! Those agents were killed and they were skilled people. We've been shot at and probably will be again. We can't depend on the police. Someone could shoot you when we're being escorted out. We need to get out of here on our own. Go somewhere we can hide and upload or email the images from my computer to the Secret Service."

"No. We're not leaving."

"We have to! Morgan, the image I drew. It was here in this room. We have to get out of here. Get out of this city."

"Sara – "

"Please," she pleaded. "Please."

She could see him struggling with himself. Finally he nodded. "Okay, but what if this...whatever it is wears off? We'll be sitting ducks. We need a way to get out of the building without anyone realizing we've left."

Sara hadn't considered that. She leaned back against the wall, trying to come up with a plan. She closed her eyes, struggling to concentrate. And the next thing she knew she was opening her eyes to find herself in the bed. Morgan lay beside her, awake.

She brushed the hair from her face. "What happened?"

"You fell asleep so I brought you to bed."

She pushed herself up, noting that the drapes were securely closed and that she was wearing only her blouse from the day before. "Are things...moving?"

"Yeah, the minute you went to sleep it all started back up."

She didn't even want to consider what that implied. "Did you sleep?"

"No."

"Did the police come?"

"No."

That alarmed her. "Morgan, something's really wrong. The windows were shot out! Surely someone heard – called the police."

"Apparently not."

"It doesn't make sense."

"Not much does these days," he said and changed the subject. "I've been thinking. I have an idea."

"What?"

"We order a new couch."

His answer was not something she expected. In fact, she wondered for a moment if lack of sleep had robbed him of his faculties.

"A...couch?"

"Yeah. We find someone who will deliver a couch today. The delivery truck will have to use the delivery entrance. When it arrives, we'll be waiting. I'll pay for the couch and send it back to the store. And pay the driver to let us hitch a ride back to wherever he's going. No one will think anything about a furniture delivery. Once we reach the furniture store or warehouse, we find a way out of the city."

"Yes," she agreed. "That's good. But we'll never find anyone to deliver something on such short notice."

"With enough money you can get people to do just about anything," he said in a bitter tone. "Believe me."

Sara wasn't about to argue or to question his bitterness. Everyone had baggage. One day she would want to know all of his. But today all she wanted was to get out of Washington. Morgan wouldn't be safe here. She wasn't sure where he would be safe, but she had to do whatever it took to find that place.

"Then let's get busy," she said. "I'll get the phone book and we'll start calling."

"Ahead of you," he said and rolled over to lift the phone book from the nightstand.

"Gotta get my pho—"

She stopped short when he tossed her phone to her.

"Mr. Johnny on the spot," she said with a slight smile. "Okay, rip out some of those pages and hand them over."

It took them two hours to find a furniture store that would agree to deliver a sofa the same day. But then Morgan offered an astronomical amount, along with a ludicrous tale about how he'd been smoking a cigar and inadvertently set the couch on fire and now his wife would be home that evening and his life was going to be hell unless he did something fast.

Sara had a hard time believing anyone would fall for that tale, but a small momand-pop furniture store did. They promised to be there by mid-afternoon.

"So now what?" Sara asked when Morgan finished making the arrangements.

"Now we wait."

"We could get killed waiting. You don't think that killer's just going to sit around and wait, do you? He's going to figure out a way to get to us."

"We don't have a choice, Sara. We have to wait on the truck."

"Well, I'm not the world's best at patience," she said and started to get up from the bed. He pulled her back down.

"Then maybe we should keep your mind off the wait," he suggested.

Sara's eyes popped open wide. "You've got to be kidding? People are trying to kill you and you want to -"

"No one's trying to kill me now," he interrupted in a teasing tone, pulling her closer.

"Morgan!" she exclaimed, pushing away from him and turning to get off the bed. "Don't you realize what's going on here? Someone wants to kill us! We can't just act like it's another normal day."

"It's been hours since the attempt," he pointed out. "Nothing happened all night and I don't think there will be another such attempt. Especially not in broad daylight. It would be too risky, too much of a chance of being spotted. Trust me, whoever it is may be watching but they won't make another move on us until we try to leave."

"You can't know that!"

"Yes I can."

"How? How can you know what that killer is thinking?"

"Because that's what I'd do," he replied. "If I'd attempted an assassination with a high-powered rifle through a window and failed, I wouldn't try it again. The target would be on the watch for it. Just like we are now with drapes drawn.

"And I wouldn't try breaking in on them in a place like this. There's too much security – guards and cameras. Again, too risky.

"But what I would do is wait until the target left, and pick them off on the street. In the resulting confusion there would be cover to get away.

"But, Morgan, just because you have it reasoned out that way doesn't mean-"

"Sara," he whispered. "I know. But it doesn't matter. Not now. All that matters now is that I want you. I need you, Sara."

No other argument would have swayed her as effectively. But her fear kept her rooted in place. Her mind filled with the image of the man in the window, that rifle

pointed at their apartment. He could be out there now, waiting for a chance to kill Morgan.

"Nooooo," she put her hands to her head. She couldn't let that happen. They needed time. Time to make their escape. Just a few short hours. If only they could be safe for just a few short hours.

She lost track of her surroundings, was unaware that Morgan had gotten off the bed and was shouting her name, shaking her. Her mind was focused on only one thought. Staying safe until Morgan's plan could be set into action – stopping any more attempts.

"Sara, look!" Morgan exclaimed, "Please. Look at the clock!"

She snapped to, hearing only the word clock. She looked at it. Stared at it. Counted to one hundred. Time did not change.

"You did that!" Morgan exclaimed. "You stopped time."

She shook her head. "That's impossible. If time was stopped then wouldn't we be stopped too?"

"Who knows," Morgan replied and went to look out of the window. "But this much I can tell you. Nothing is moving out there."

"What should I do? How do I make it start back?" She paced back and forth, hugging her arms tight around herself.

"Maybe we don't want it to start. Sara, if you can keep time frozen then this might be our chance to get away. We'll have to travel on foot but in just an hour we could be miles from here."

"You're right!" She started gathering up things but he stopped her. "Just get your purse."

"But my computer – "

"It can all be replaced. Come on, let's go."

They hurried through the apartment and into the hall. Morgan punched the elevator button. Nothing happened. No lights, no sound. Nothing. He punched it a few more times and they waited. Still nothing.

"I guess it's like the clocks – stopping time stopped the elevator," she suggested.

"Then we take the stairs."

When they reached the lobby level they stopped and gawked. The man at the front reception desk was frozen, his mouth open as he held the telephone receiver to his ear. A woman was halted in mid-stride, looking over her shoulder at the man on the phone.

"This is a little creepy." Sara reached for Morgan's hand and they hurried to the glass doors.

And found them immovable. The automatic opening function had frozen. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't open them. "Let's try the stairs to the parking garage," Morgan said and pulled her along as he raced for the rear exit.

Like the front entrance, the door wouldn't budge.

"Now what?" she asked.

Morgan frowned and shook his head. "I don't know. It appears we're stuck. If you unfreeze time then we're in danger and can't leave."

"Doesn't look like we can leave anyway," she said.

He blew out his breath and headed for the stairs again. "Where are we going?" she asked as he pulled her along.

"To the apartment. We need to figure out how to use this to our advantage."

Once back in the apartment, he flopped down on the sofa, frowning tightly. Sara went to the bathroom then sat down on the bed. "Maybe I should try to unfreeze things," she called out to him.

A moment later he entered the bedroom. "Or not."

"Huh?"

"Don't," Morgan said softly.

"What?" She stopped and stared at him in shock.

"Don't make it start back. Not yet."

"Morgan, I don't even know that it's me who did this. And if it is I sure don't know how I did it or how to undo it."

"Then see if you can."

She concentrated as hard as she could. He went to the window and looked out. "Still frozen."

They had no idea how long she tried, over and over. And each time she failed.

"Oh god, what are we going to do, Morgan?"

"Stop trying." He took her hand. "Look, I know it's crazy but if this is real then let it last – at least for a little while."

"You're out of your mind," she whispered. "There's a man out there..."

"Frozen," he interrupted and suddenly laughed. "You're right. This is so unbelievable maybe I am out of my mind. But if that's the case, then at least let me have my fantasies."

She resisted when he tugged on her hand. "Morgan, this isn't a game."

He laughed, earning a frown from her. "Come on, Sara. We've been handed something...incredible. A moment in time that's for us alone. Don't waste it."

His words struck home. Maybe it was crazy. Who knew? But he was right. They did seem to have been handed a moment where the rest of the world was on hold, and only the two of them were left to experience this standstill. Who knew what would happen in the next moment? If she failed to protect him then it wouldn't matter anyway.

Suddenly she wanted time to stay on hold, wanted the moment to be theirs alone. If it was to be one of their last, she wanted it to count.

Without another word she let him pull her down on the bed. He spooned his body around hers, moving her long hair to one side to kiss her shoulder. His hand stroked her thigh and moved up along the curve of her hip.

Sara felt his cock stiff and hot against her lower back and reached around to position it between her legs, feeling the hard length of it from clit to anus as she wiggled back against him. His arms moved around her, hands cupping her breasts and gently thumbing her hard nipples through the blouse and bra. Even through the layers of material the feeling was electric. She wondered if his excitement could equal half of what she felt.

Morgan's excitement was churning like liquid fire. The feel of her firm ass moving in circles, her thighs squeezing his dick and the warm, moist softness of her pussy pressed against the length of him brought old fantasies to life. The line between reality and fantasy blurred.

He realized that he was grinding against her, pressing firmer against her silky sex, sliding along the cleft of her ass and pussy as she clamped around him. She reached up and gently moved his hands from her breasts, over her abdomen, and down over the slight swell to her mound.

She was so warm, so soft. His hand moved in small circles, down her wet slit and back up to her clit, feeling the wetness beginning to slick his fingers. A throaty moan escaped her lips as he stroked the swelling nub. Her hips rocked more forcefully, sliding over his dick.

He moved his fingers down, spreading her labia, pressing into her pussy. She gave another slight moan as he stroked her slowly. Just as he felt a tremor begin in her body, she pulled his hand up to her face, sucking his finger into her mouth.

He nearly came when she murmured "mmmm" against his fingers. He moved his hand back down her body, grazing her clit. She arched against him, pressing against his fingers. His free hand played with one nipple through the material covering it.

"I need it off," she whispered, reaching for the buttons of her blouse. He released her long enough for her to strip off the blouse and lacy bra. She pushed him onto his

back and climbed atop him, her ass resting just below his dick, which stood up straight in front of her pussy.

Morgan couldn't prevent his body from arching when she reached down and fisted his cock. She rose on her knees, rubbing the head against her pussy, creating a burn that ran down his length into his balls.

Watching her was a fantasy come to life. It was more than sex. That realization nearly overwhelmed him.

"Tell me what you want," she whispered huskily, continuing to rub the head of his dick up and down her sex. "Your most secret fantasy. Let me be that for you, Morgan."

For a moment he was frozen. There was no doubt in his mind that she loved him or that he loved her. But he'd never shared a fantasy with anyone. And his fantasies all involved a woman who looked just like her. He hesitated.

"It's okay," she assured him in a sexy whisper than danced along his nerves like a drug. "Anything you want."

That last sentence seemed to echo in his mind, making his balls ache with desire.

"I want to...own you," he replied, barely recognizing his own voice, it was so rough with need.

His words sparked a new kind of thrill inside her. She'd asked to fulfill his fantasy, but his reply was a promise of the fulfillment of her own. She'd never admitted it to anyone. Never attempted to act it out with a man. But inside, she knew. She wanted to be dominated. Just the thought of it made her pussy burn.

"I'm yours," she said, feeling a slight twinge of anxiety, wondering what he would ask of her.

"Show me how you pleasure yourself," he said in a low voice.

The memory of sitting in front of her computer, staring at his image on her monitor while she masturbated, brought heat to her face. The idea of performing in front of his

eyes brought heat to other parts of her anatomy, along with an unexpected rush of shyness.

"Morgan," she hedged as the shyness began to morph into embarrassment.

"Show me," he ordered and tossed a pillow to the foot of the bed. "Lie back."

She maneuvered into position, lying on her back, her body stretched out, legs together and her hand resting on her belly.

Morgan scooted up, sitting propped against the headboard. "Bend your knees," he said. "Spread your legs wide. I want to see you."

She watched his eyes glitter beneath half-lowered lids as she bent her knees, moving her feet out to each side so that she was fully exposed.

"Now tell me what you think of when you masturbate, and show me how you touch yourself."

Sara took a deep breath, trying to calm the flutter in her belly. She'd never been so nervous. Hesitantly, she trailed her hands up to cup her breasts, running her thumbs lightly over her nipples. An immediate rush spread out, heading straight for her pussy. She'd always had sensitive nipples. Even just minor stimulation caused a swelling in her pussy.

Which she could feel happening now. She could see Morgan's eyes focused between her legs. His hand moved to his cock, stroking slowly. Seeing how excited he was helped quell her nervousness, replacing it with rising desire.

"Tell me," he commanded in a harsh whisper. "I want to know your fantasy."

"I thought we were supposed to be fulfilling yours," she whispered back.

"We are."

His reply sent blood rushing to her pussy. Her clit literally throbbed. She'd never experienced this kind of thrill. The look of desire in his eyes and his hand sliding up and down his hard cock emboldened her.

Slowly, she moved her arms up above her head, arching up so that her breasts thrust high. Equally as slow she lowered her hands, trailing lightly over her breasts, down the center of her body to her pussy.

Spreading her legs wider, she caressed across her sex and up her inner thighs, then down to spread her sex. Her fingers moved slowly along the labia, stroking and teasing, then up to circle the hard nub of her clit.

"Tell me what you think of when you touch yourself." Morgan's voice was rough and low.

"You," she breathed. "I think of you."

"Before me."

"You," she admitted, not allowing herself to think or censor herself in word or action. "I have a photo of you, taken in a park. You'd just finished running. Your shirt was tossed across one shoulder. You had your hands on your hips, sweat running down your body as you stared off at something to one side of the camera."

"And what would you think while you stared at my picture?"

"How I wished it was your hands touching me." Her fingers worked to spread her pussy more, dipping into the wet heat and then out, glistening with wetness.

"Show me, Sara." Morgan's voice was a rough croon that made her clit throb. "Show me how much you want me."

If his voice hadn't been enough to send her hunger spiking, the look on his face was potent enough to have the first vibration of a climax sizzling through her as she stroked her aching clit.

She closed her eyes for a moment, arching up at the impending release. Her fingers ceased their movement and her eyes flew open at a touch on her pussy. Morgan had moved, kneeling between her legs. His finger teased at the wet opening.

"Do it," he encouraged. "Come for me."

Sara nearly lost it when he sank two fingers inside her, going immediately to the spot that sent sparks rocketing through her. Her pussy clenched, wanting more, and her fingers moved once more to her swollen clit.

"Come for me, baby," he whispered, continuing the delicious torture inside her pussy.

She exploded. Her body quivered as the pulsing drove her into an arch. "Morgan," she gasped. "Please."

The sound of her gasping his name as wetness poured from her had Morgan's dick ready to erupt. He grabbed her legs and pulled her forward, impaling her on his hungry cock.

"Oh god," she moaned as the orgasm intensified.

Morgan ground his teeth, struggling not to come. He rode her until her pussy stopped pulsing on his dick, and then slowed, trying to regain control.

She smiled up at him, running one hand down her body to circle the base of his cock. "Want to know what else I fantasize about?"

"God yes," he rasped.

She wriggled free and rolled over onto hands and knees. Looking over her shoulder, she slowly lowered her shoulders to the bed, bringing her hands back to grip her thighs, just beneath her ass.

"Of you taking me this way," she whispered.

Morgan almost lost his load at just the sight of her, ass up and legs spread, offering herself to him.

"Arch your back more," he growled, gripping his dick in one hand and pressing on her back with the other. "Grab your ass. Spread it wide for me, Sara."

She whimpered at his words but complied.

"Have you ever had a man in your ass?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No."

Morgan plunged two fingers into her wet pussy, and then withdrew, circling her anus, lubricating her with her own cum. "Never been finger-fucked up the ass?"

"Not by a man," she whispered.

"Then what?" he asked, circling the taut opening, wanting to shove his fingers up her ass. "Did you do it yourself? Put your own fingers up your tight little ass?"

"No," she moaned as he pressed one finger slightly into the tight circle.

Morgan felt like he was going to rupture. His balls were on fire. But he didn't want it to end. Seeing her like this, supplicated before him, his to do with what he wanted, was his fantasy come to life.

"Then what, Sara?"

"A...vibrator," she admitted in a whisper.

"And did you think of me when you worked it into your ass?" He pushed his finger in more, just past the first knuckle, circling her anus and feeling her clench against the invasion.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Wanted it to be my fingers...my dick," he prompted, pressing deeper.

"Yes," she breathed.

"Spread your ass more for me. Show me you want it. Tell me."

"Yes, please," she moaned as his finger moved deeper, past the second knuckle.

"Yes what?"

"I want you. Please, inside me. In my ass. Please."

Morgan wanted to delay, but the demands of his own needs were too strong. He rubbed the head of his cock against her wet pussy, lubricating it with her slick juice, and then pressed against her tight anus.

Sara's wordless moan delivered a surge that went straight to his balls. It was so strong, so intense, that it bordered on pain.

She rocked back against him, taking him deeper. He couldn't hold back the groan. It was too delicious. The feel of her tight ass gripping his dick and her breathy moans were more than he could resist.

He drove into her hard, stroking fast to try to stay ahead of the orgasm that tingled in his balls.

"Oh god," she gasped as he pressed half the length of his cock into her ass. "Morgan. Oh...god."

"Take it, baby," he rasped, feeling the thrum inside her body. "Give it to me. All of it."

"Yes," she moaned. "Oh god yes. Take me. Please. Now."

Her surrender ripped away the last of his control. She moaned and cried his name as her anus started to clench around him. Morgan succumbed, a long drawn-out groan accompanying the pulsing orgasm that had every nerve in his body throbbing.

He lost track of reality, swimming in a sea of sensation until at last his body relaxed. Sara went limp beneath him. He fell down on the bed beside her, pulling her up against his sweat-streaked body.

For a few minutes they simply lay there, floating on the wave of satisfaction. She rolled over and laid her head on his chest.

"I love you," she whispered.

Morgan smiled and stroked one hand along the curve of her cheek. "I love you, Sara. You're everything I've ever wanted. My dream come to life."

She returned the smile and closed her eyes. Moments later her breathing slowed. He watched as she drifted off to sleep, thinking to himself how lucky he was to have found her.

The clock advanced. The moment had come to an end. Time to face the music.

* * * * *

Sara woke to find herself alone on the bed. She got up and went in search of Morgan. "Morgan?" she called as she crossed the living area and headed for the kitchen.

He stepped into view and she saw he was on the phone. Obviously time had restarted. "Sorry," she whispered. "I'm going to take a quick shower."

He nodded acknowledgement and she padded back to the bathroom. As soon as she'd finished showering and dressing, she went back to the living area. The blinds were tightly drawn, but the sounds of the city were loud thanks to the broken window. Morgan sat at the dining table in front of her laptop.

"What're you doing?" she asked, wandering over beside him.

He turned to look up at her. "Sara, listen. I need you to sign this for me so I can email it back to my attorney."

"What is it?" She peered at the screen.

"My will."

"Your...no. No, no, no."

"Sara, please!" He stood to take hold of her upper arms. "This is important to me. Should something happen I have to know you'll be taken care of. Provided for."

"No." She shook her head. "I don't want it. Nothing's going to happen to you."

"I'm just trying to be prepared in case—"

"No!" She broke away from him. "Nothing is going to happen."

"I hope not." He stepped toward her as she stepped back again. "But just in case."

"Morgan, no." She put her hands on his chest as he closed in on her. "Please. No."

"Why? I love you, Sara. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Why shouldn't I make sure that in the event of my – that when I pass on – even at eighty, that you'll be provided for?"

"That's not what this is about," she argued.

"What difference does it make when? I want to do this. I need to know you'll be okay, that—"

"But I won't be," she interrupted. "Not if something happens to you because of this...this mess. If you die, then I die."

"No. Just because someone's after me doesn't mean they'd kill you. There's no reason for them to -"

"That's not it! Don't you get it? I told you about Danu. About what I have to do. If I fail then I die."

Morgan felt the blood drain from his face. Actually felt a momentary dizziness. His expression must have alarmed her because she suddenly grabbed him. "Are you okay?"

"No. I'm anything but okay. What do you mean if you fail you'll die?"

"Just what I said. If I fail to save you then I forfeit my own life."

He stared at her in shock as what she said sunk in. "So what you're saying is that we either live together or die together. Is that it?"

"Pretty much."

He raked one hand back through his hair. Suddenly he was even more afraid than he'd been when he heard the voices say that soon he would belong to them. He'd thought that even if he did have to risk dying, at least he could leave Sara secure. But now the game had taken on a much more deadly tone.

"Then we're going to live," he said in a firm tone. "And you're going to sign this. Use your graphics tablet. Just sign it."

"It isn't legal without a witness," she argued. "Besides, money isn't important. I don't care about that, Morgan. All I care about is getting out of this city and somewhere safe so we can figure out what to do. Please, don't ask me to do this. If you love me, don't ask."

He gave in. Not because he wanted to but because he could tell by the expression on her face and the look in her eyes that she would not budge. And he gave in because it seemed that far more was at stake that his own skin. He would not let the voices be right. He would not die. And he would not let Sara die.

"Fine. Then let's get packed, okay? It won't be long before the furniture people will be here. I want to be ready to leave as soon as they arrive."

"Okay." She gave him a smile and leaned in to kiss him gently. "We'll find a way to get past this, Morgan."

"And live happily ever after?" he asked, trying to tease.

"Without a doubt," she agreed. "Now shut down that thing on my laptop and let me get it packed."

"Yes, ma'am."

Neither of them had much to say. They'd agreed that they would only take the cameras and the laptop. Everything else they'd leave behind. That way if someone came to check it would appear as if they'd simply stepped out and planned on returning.

When the clock read two o'clock they were both sitting on the couch, waiting in nervous silence.

The minutes ticked by. A quarter past. Half past. Morgan started to get worried. He reached for his phone to call the furniture store, but Sara put her hand on his arm to stay him. "Give it a little more time."

At a quarter to three, the house phone rang. Morgan sprang up to answer it. "Yes... Yes, we are... Yes, I'd like to go down and speak with the delivery person before they bring it up. Make sure it's correct." He gave a false laugh into the phone. "Yeah, you never know these days...thanks. I'll be down in a few minutes."

He hung up the phone. "It's time."

Sara stood, looped her purse over her shoulder and grabbed her laptop case. "I'm ready."

Morgan grabbed his camera case and opened the door. He looked both ways then stepped out into the hall. "Okay, come on."

Sara followed him to the service elevator. They took it to the basement level, the parking garage. When the doors opened, Morgan pressed a hand against one side, preventing them closing as he looked around the area. Aside from a delivery truck with the name of the furniture store on it, there were empty cars, probably belonging to people who worked in the building.

"Mr. Nicholaus?" the driver of the truck called out.

"Yes," Morgan replied, stepping out of the elevator.

"Man on the phone said you wanted to check the couch before I take it up?"

"Yes," Morgan said and paused to look back at Sara. "Stay here."

She wanted to argue, but the set of his jaw told her to stay quiet, so she just nodded. Morgan started toward the truck, cutting a look over his shoulder at Sara as the driver got out. The moment he did, fear bit her hard and sharp. That was the man in the photo.

The realization that she'd reached the moment of truth almost paralyzed her. Nausea bubbled in her stomach but she forced her legs to move, keeping an eye on what was happening. She hurried toward the front of the truck.

The man was walking toward the back of the truck. With his back to Morgan there was no way Morgan would recognize him. "Be easier if you just climbed in and took a look," the man said. "Save me from dragging it out if it isn't right."

"Sure," Morgan replied.

The man pulled open the right half of the back door. "You wanna check it out?"

"Yes," Morgan responded.

The man moved aside and Morgan stepped up into the truck. By then Sara had made her way along the opposite side of the truck, coming up behind the man. She had the perfect vantage point to see the man's hand as it moved behind him and gripped the gun shoved into the waistband of his pants. She had to stop him. But how? All she had was her purse and her laptop.

Desperation had her gripping the aluminum laptop case in both hands and raising it up over her head. Just as the man brought the gun around to aim at Morgan, she slammed it down on top of his head.

Time seemed completely out of phase in the next moments. The man staggered and the gun went off. She screamed Morgan's name at the same instant she heard him shouting her name.

The assailant went down to one knee. Morgan jumped out of the back of the truck. Sara saw the man raising the gun again. She screamed again and dove in front of Morgan.

And pain exploded inside her. She felt her breath whoosh out, heard Morgan scream her name and then blackness closed in around her.

Chapter Nine

"Morgan!" Sara was screaming his name before her eyes opened. Once opened, they grew wider. She was lying on a divan in Grian Ròs Castle.

"Oh no!"

She bolted up, her hands moving to her chest as she looked down. There was no blood, no pain. Her head jerked up to see Danu standing across the room watching.

"I failed," she said tearfully. "He's dead, isn't he?"

The thought of it crippled her. Her legs gave way and she sank back onto the divan, sobs racking her body. Suddenly it didn't matter that she was about to die. She'd failed. Not just the mission she'd sworn to perform, but she'd failed the man she loved.

"I'm...sorry." She choked out the words between sobs. "I'm so sorry."

Danu came to sit beside her. She put one graceful hand on Sara's shoulder. Sara fought to control the sobs and turned to her with tear-blurred eyes. "Go ahead. Kill me. It doesn't matter. I don't care."

"But I do," Danu replied. "My dear, I did not bring you here to destroy you, but to save you."

"But why?" Sara cried. "He's dead! I failed and now he's dead and...oh god, Danu, I love him and...and now..."

She covered her face with her hands, crying. When at last the sobs turned to sniffles she moved her hands. Danu handed her a pristine white handkerchief. "Dry your face, child."

Sara swiped at her face, blew her nose and let her hands drop to her lap, staring at them miserably. "Can I stay here?" she asked in a weak whisper. "Please? I can't..." Another fit of weeping claimed her. "I can't go back. Please, can I stay?" "I'm afraid not, my dear."

Sara looked up at Danu with shock and disappointment. "Why?"

"Because Morgan Nicholaus needs you," Danu said with a slight smile. "Darling girl, you did not fail. You threw yourself in the path of the bullet that would have ended his life. You succeeded, risking your own life for his."

"Then he's alive?" Joy flooded her. "He's not dead?"

"He is indeed alive. Although at the moment rather...frozen."

"Huh?"

Danu's musical laugh emerged. "Well actually, the entire planet is on momentary hold."

"You can do that?" Sara breathed in awe.

"Occasionally," Danu replied and waved her hand in dismissal. "As can you, my dear."

"Me? So that really was me?"

"I told you once before, Sara. Your abilities far exceed what you believe them to be."

Sara shook her head again, amazement shining in her eyes. "Okay, that's a bit much for me right now. I don't understand why you brought me here if Morgan is alive."

"I brought you here to heal you. And to answer."

"Answer what?"

"Why, all of the questions that have plagued you, of course."

"You mean you know...you know who my parents are?"

"Yes."

"Please, please tell me. Was my mother the woman who died in Morgan's arms? Was her name Hope?"

"Yes."

"But Morgan said that no one survived the explosion. I painted it and all I saw – "

"Perhaps this would be easier if you merely listen," Danu interrupted softly.

Sara nodded without comment. Danu stood and glided across the room to the window, taking a seat on its wide ledge.

"When I told you I had awakened to rebuild my army, I did not lie. But you are not the first of my Hussies in this time. Nor are you the first I have sent to safeguard Morgan Nicholaus. There was another before you."

"My mother?" Sara asked.

"No, unfortunately it was your mother's fate to die that day. Morgan's father pulled her from the wreckage and went back to save her child. You. He managed to get you out of the wreckage moments before the explosion. He heard the whoosh of the fuel igniting, and did the only thing he could think to save you. He tossed you."

"Tossed me?"

"Yes. As hard as he could. You landed on the side of the road. There was a steep embankment. You rolled down it. Before you'd stopped your tumble, the wreckage exploded and he was killed."

"But you said you sent someone to save Morgan."

"Yes. She was the one who called for help. She was also the one who saved you."

"Nadine?" Sara exclaimed.

Danu smiled. "Nadine was en route to the town where Morgan lived. She approached the wreckage from the opposite side, got out and worked her way along the side of the road to where Morgan and Hope lay. When the wreckage exploded, she threw herself over them. She was wounded, but not so much that she couldn't make her way back to you.

"She waited with you in her arms until help arrived. No one questioned that you were her child. It was assumed. She thought it best not to offer the information. Once Morgan was transported to the hospital, Nadine put you in her car and changed

destinations. She settled into the house where you grew up, and when asked simply said that she adopted you after your mother died.

"But...but...there are no parents listed on my birth certificate. No records. How did she..." Her eyes brightened. "You did it. You...fixed things."

"In a manner of speaking," Danu said with a chuckle. "Had it remained unaltered, Nadine would not have been able to adopt you. The man who fathered you was killed in an automobile accident before you were born, but was survived by a brother. Unfortunately he was fated to die from alcoholism five years ago. You would have been raised in an environment of abuse. I could not allow that."

Sara stared at her in amazement for a few moments, and then frowned. "That doesn't explain my...ability."

"Your lineage does," Danu replied. "Hope was of an ancient line that stretches back almost as far as my own. Her people possessed unique skills. Not every generation inherited the gift. You did."

Sara nodded. She opened her mouth then closed it, unsure whether to ask what was next on her mind.

"The voices," Danu said.

"Yes. His life has been so hard, Danu. Filled with...with demons. How do we stop them?"

"My dear, the voices were not something from outside of Morgan but a manifestation of his own mind. The day his father died, Morgan suffered a...fracture in his spirit. He blamed himself. His father had promised that to be the day that would change his life forever. Morgan internalized that statement and created a host of demons around it, tormenting himself for his father's death. He lived. His father died. He blamed himself."

"But how can it be stopped?"

"Love." Danu returned to sit beside her, taking Sara's hands. "And answers. He needs to know what his father meant when he said his life would be forever changed. Once he knows the answer, the demons will vanish."

"And what is the answer?" Sara asked.

Danu got up and went to fetch a small wooden box. She placed it in Sara's lap. "Tom Nicholaus saved for more than a year to purchase this. A rather famed photographer of the time died and his estate was auctioned off. Tom heard about it and went to the family, asking to purchase one of the cameras. They wanted more than Tom had, but agreed to hold it for one year so that he might raise the funds."

Sara opened the box and looked inside. The camera lay in a cradle of molded foam. "This? This is what his father thought would change his life?"

Danu laughed. "Tom saw more than most. He'd watched Morgan for years, seeing how the child would stare at things, framing a shot up with his little hands, completely unaware of his actions. Tom knew that Morgan was destined to be a great photographer. To give him a start on that road, he saved and in the end withdrew all of the savings he had to purchase that camera."

Sara felt tears stream down her face. To think of the love Morgan's father felt for his son, and how willing he was to spend his life savings to give Morgan something that would fulfill his life, was almost heartbreaking.

"If only Morgan could know," she said and closed the box.

"He will. Once you tell him," Danu replied, and held out her hand for the box.

Sara wished she could keep it. Give it to Morgan. But she didn't question Danu and returned the box to her.

"Thank you for giving me the answers, Danu."

"Thank you for becoming one of my Hussy Warrior Hunters, Sara."

Sara snorted, feeling a measure of her humor return. "Some Hunter. I think maybe I'm still in the discovery phase, just blundering through." Danu laughed lightly. "Dear Sara, we are all in the discovery phase."

Sara's smile faded. "I...Danu, it just dawned on me. How could saving Morgan *after* he took those pictures change destiny? He saved the candidate's life. I guess that's the destiny-altering part. But he wasn't in danger before that, so…"

Danu smiled gently. "I wondered how long it would take you. Saving that woman's life was not how he will affect destiny, Sara."

"Then how?"

"Close your eyes," Danu instructed, and when Sara did, touched her lightly with one index finger, between Sara's brows.

For a moment Sara felt nothing. Then the Sight took her. Only this time it was different. She was aware of where she was and what was going on around her while watching the images play in her mind.

She saw Morgan, holding a baby in his arms, leaning down to kiss the child's cheek. Then she saw him guiding a small boy on a bicycle, running along beside, holding the handlebars. She viewed him taking photos as a handsome young man accepted a diploma, and that same young man kissing his bride. Images came one after the other, telling of Morgan's life to come. The last one was of the young man, matured and confident, sitting in the Oval Office.

Sara's eyes flew open in surprise. "So if he didn't live, his son wouldn't be born and wouldn't one day be President!"

"Which means that your job is far from over, my dear," Danu replied. "Your mission is not one that ended when you stepped in the path of that bullet. You'll safeguard Morgan throughout his life."

Sara thought about it. She'd safeguard Morgan while some other woman lived with him, bore his child and grew old with him? A scream welled up in her throat, pressing for release as her chest seemed to constrict, preventing her from getting air. No, this couldn't be. She'd die for Morgan, but there was no way she could live her life watching him love another from afar. That was too much to ask. "Oh god, I can't, Danu. I can't watch him live his life with someone else. Just kill me and be done with it. Don't ask this of me."

Danu shook her head. "Close your eyes again, Sara."

She did and this time what she saw had her gasping and her eyes popping open in excitement. "Me? I'm..."

"So it seems," Danu answered.

Sara was bursting with excitement. She knew she loved Morgan, and believed him when he said he loved her, but she'd never thought that far ahead. Never imagined that such a future lay in store for her.

It filled her with a joy that was indescribable, and a new strength that made her feel confident.

"Do I detect a bit of the Hussy emerging?" Danu asked.

Sara grinned at her. "Well, Hussies are strong, independent women who aren't afraid of who they are and what they need to do, right? Women who embrace their destiny and live it to its fullest."

"Absolutely. And have you reached that stage, my young Hussy?"

"You know, I think I have," Sara replied.

"Then there is cause for great joy. A Hussy is born. Now, my dear, it's time."

"For what?" Sara asked.

"For you to go back," Danu replied. "Are you ready?"

"Oh yes," Sara said immediately then felt a rush of sadness. "Wait! Will I get to come back? Here, I mean?"

"Well of course, silly duck," Danu replied, using the same phrase Nadine had used when Sara was a child. "Any time you like."

"How?"

Danu winked. "That, my dear, is the next lesson you'll have to figure out."

"But-"

"All in time, Sara. All in time."

Danu's words rang in her mind as she found herself back in her own world. She was slumped back against Morgan, who was sitting on the pavement of the basement. Her laptop case was clutched tightly in her arms. The assailant was lying a few feet away, blood staining the pavement beneath his head.

"Sara, Sara!" Morgan was calling her name over and over.

"I'm okay," she said. "Is he dead?"

"I don't think so. You whacked him pretty good, but after he fired he just collapsed. I think he's still breathing."

She nodded and turned to face him. "We need to call the police."

Morgan held up his cell phone, started to dial then stopped. "Sara, you saved me. You damn sure didn't do what I asked you to do. And I'm glad you didn't."

"Me too," she agreed with a smile and tapped the front of her case. "But I think something besides me saved you."

Morgan looked at the case then up at her. "I can't believe the bullet didn't pass through the computer."

"I'd like to see a PC do that," she quipped, suddenly feeling free and happy. "Now make that call."

Morgan shook his head and pulled her to him for a quick hard kiss then dialed 911.

Chapter Ten

It seemed like a lifetime had passed since she'd seen the familiar sights of home. After the incident in the underground parking garage, she and Morgan had spent more than a week answering questions, filling out statements, and then being honored by the presidential candidate for single-handedly capturing the would-be assassin.

Sara didn't much care for the attention and was relieved when they finally were delivered via private jet back to home soil. Due to all that had happened, they'd been given time off to rest before they returned to Washington to finish out the assignment.

Sara sat beside Morgan as he drove, noting the changes. In the months they'd been gone, the riot of autumn color had faded to the dark muted tones of winter, the bare branches of trees standing stark against a faded sky.

"You want to go to your place or mine?" Morgan asked.

"Actually, I'd like to go to Nadine's if that's okay with you."

"Whatever you want," he said with a smile and reached over to take her hand.

She smiled and leaned back, enjoying the drive. When they pulled up in front of Nadine's house, she was suddenly full of excitement. She'd never brought anyone home to meet Nadine. There had never been anyone that special.

"Come on!" She jumped out of the car as soon as it came to a stop and ran around to open Morgan's door and take his hand.

"Nadine!" she called out as she pulled Morgan up the front steps. "Nadine?"

The door opened and Nadine flung her arms around Sara. "Oh honey!"

They hugged and cried for a few moments then Sara drew back. "Nadine, you know Morgan."

"Why yes, I do," Nadine smiled and reached to take Morgan's hand. "I would imagine the whole country knows the two of you by now. My goodness, my pumpkin a hero. Oh forgive me for going on so. Nice to see you again, Morgan."

"Thanks," Morgan said with an answering smile. "I guess this is probably the time I should declare my intentions toward your daughter?"

Nadine chuckled. "Well, if you're going to be declaring, I think we should go inside. I have a nice pot of tea all ready."

Sara winked at Morgan's surprised expression and they followed Nadine inside. After they were all seated at the kitchen table, with steaming cups of tea in front of them, Nadine turned to Morgan.

"Now about these intentions..."

Morgan smiled and reached over to take Sara's hand. "I intend to marry Sara." He paused and looked at Sara. "If you'll have me."

"Oh I'll definitely have you," Sara replied with a laugh.

"So?" Morgan looked at Nadine.

Nadine's smile faded. "Before I can say yes, there is something we need to do."

"What?" Morgan looked crestfallen at her reply.

"We need to make sure those voices are silenced. Permanently." She didn't wait for a reply but got up and left the room.

Morgan looked at Sara. She smiled and squeezed his hand. "Just trust a little, okay?"

"I trust you with my life," he replied solemnly

She gave his hand another squeeze and then looked up as Nadine entered the room. In her hand was something Sara never expected. Nadine set the box down in the center of the table and looked at Morgan.

"In this box is the cure."

"What is it?" Morgan asked.

Nadine looked to Sara. "I think it's time you told him, pumpkin."

"Told me what?" Morgan asked.

Sara smiled, took a sip of tea and started the tale. By the time she finished telling him what happened during the shooting, and what she'd learned in her visit with Danu about his father, the tea was cold and Morgan was staring at her like someone who was shell-shocked. She pushed the box over in front of him. "Open it."

His hands visibly trembled as he opened the box. One look inside and tears streamed down his face. Sara got out of her chair to crouch beside him. "You know what that is, don't you?"

He looked up at her and smiled through his tears. "Yeah. I do. It's love."

She nodded and hugged him. "You're a very special man, Morgan. You inspire great love."

"Amen," Nadine added.

Morgan sat there for a few moments, taking it all in. The weight he'd carried almost his entire life had vanished. All of the secrets had been revealed, and he knew in his heart that the voices were gone. Now he could live and love and be happy.

"Great enough love to let me marry your daughter?" he suddenly asked Nadine.

She laughed and reached out to take his hand. "Absolutely."

"Yes!" Morgan grinned and pulled Sara onto his lap. "Okay, what's next?"

"Next?" she asked with a chuckle. "Well, next is the happily ever after. You think you're up for that, Mr. Nicholaus?"

"Oh yeah," he laughed and hugged her. "Bring it on, baby. Bring it on."

About the Author

Ciana Stone has been reading since the age of three, and wrote her first story at age five. Since then she enjoyed writing as a solitary form of entertainment, before coming out of the closet to share her stories with others. She holds several post graduate degrees and has often been referred to as a professional student. Her latest fields of interest are quantum mechanics and Taoism. When she is not writing (or studying) she enjoys painting (canvas, not walls), sculpting, running, hiking and yoga. She lives with her longtime lover in several locations in the United States.

Ciana welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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