

ELLORA'S CAVE

Blush



Mysteries & Magick

Christine McKay

Poisoned Magic

White magic. Gray magic. Black magic. A witch is a witch. Right? Samantha never meant to cross the line. Hell, she didn't even know a line existed. All she wanted to do was make sure John noticed her. Dabbling with the herbal magic her grandmother taught her doesn't seem wrong. Especially when it produces results.

Of course, for those walking in the mystical ways, Samantha's dabbling is anything but innocent. And for those who've long since crossed to the dark side, she's a downright delectable bit of flesh. But though black magic and its wielders may be able to blind a woman, they'll never be able to fully control her actions.

Pierce My Heart

Shakespeare's Hamlet had it more right than he knew. Hierarchies of angels, deities and demons walk among us, mostly unnoticed. But every now and again, Fate steps into a person's life to bitch-slap some sense into them.

Jessie is one of those "blessed" people. Sissy, a.k.a. Lachesis, an aspect of Fate, is on a mission, and she has angels Michael and Deacon at her disposal. Combining a Virtue and Power creates some potent mojo all on its own, but adding a lonely human woman to the mix is a sure way to shake loose the knots in the weave of life. Here's hoping Jessie's thread is strong enough to take it.

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Mysteries & Magick

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Dedication

To Melanie. December 1959–September 2009. Could've, would've, should've, didn't. You'll be missed.

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Chapter One

Obsession's just a kissing cousin to passion.

"I'm looking for something containing a subtle form of cyanide. Lacking that, any other innocuous-looking but highly poisonous plant will do."

Samantha peered over the counter, the package she was wrapping forgotten on her lap. "Excuse me?"

A familiar chuckle both eased and thrummed her nerves.

She studied his clean-cut jawline through her lashes, her heart fluttering. "Mr. DuBois, what are you up to?"

"Alarmed you, didn't I?"

She cocked her head. "For a moment," she admitted. For the last three years John DuBois had stopped in at Lydia's little Door County shop, Aromatic Answers, at least once a month on his way up to his cottage. She'd substituted John into every erotic novel she'd read ever since. Alarmed? Hardly. Turned on beyond belief? Check.

"You did something different." He wagged his finger alongside his head. "Your hair. Sexy but still innocent. Nice."

Yeah, she'd quit trying to make her thin black Asian locks curl and finally left them alone. Easier to maintain and her only concession to her father's heritage. Why couldn't she have inherited her mom's thick blonde hair and big breasts? The feathery wisps framing her face did make her look younger, though she wasn't sure if that equaled sex appeal or just catered to men with daddy-daughter fantasies.

Lydia, her boss, wandered out of the backroom, all legs and slingback heels. Her mass of auburn curls were wound up and secured with a clip, giving her an I-recently-ate-a-man look and revealing the pale, perfect expanse of her neck. Samantha wished she could ooze that kind of sex appeal. "John, are you hitting on my employee again?"

He grinned. "Always."

"What can we do for you? Looking for a special gift?" Lydia lowered her voice. "I just received a package of herbal honeys." She closed her eyes and pursed her lips, hinting at what such a honey could inspire a woman to do with her lips. Her eyes opened. "Sinfully delicious," she purred.

His smile didn't waver. "I'm looking for *Achillea millefolium*. Fresh if you have it. Dried if you don't."

"Yarrow," Samantha supplied when Lydia glanced at her with a blank look.

"Of course." Lydia laid her hand on John's arm, gently steering him toward their dried products. "Why don't you start here? I'll have Samantha check the garden. How much are you looking for?"

Their voices faded, Lydia's rich throaty laugh occasionally traveling to the front of the shop. Samantha frowned at her package, automatically arranging the raffia into a pleasing shape. Lydia could and often did have any man she chose. Why did she have to go and pick John DuBois, the one man Samantha actually wanted? Lydia knew nothing about him other than he was a good customer and his credit and clothing taste were impeccable. She took a deep breath, exhaling through her nose. *She*, however, knew his actual credit rating score, as well as his company's. In fact, she knew everything about his company, from the color of the carpeting in the reception area—onyx with white sparkles, like a rhinestone-studded leather collar—to the simple company motto John displayed behind his desk: *What I desire, I make mine*.

She tapped her nails on the countertop. A second set of fingers echoed her. "Contemplating the manner of my death?" Lydia murmured.

Samantha's head jerked up. She wiped all expression off her face.

Lydia grinned. "Whatever you do, make it dramatic."

"I didn't— I wouldn't—"

She waved her ringed hand. "He wants it fresh. See what you can find."

She knew she could obtain an abundance of the feathery herb in the shop garden. Not only did she work too many hours here but she rented the apartment above the building. She considered the shop garden hers, even going so far as to tuck a couple tomato plants discreetly behind the lavender rows. Lydia didn't often venture off the gravel paths.

Picking up her wicker gathering basket, she hurried to the door.

"Samantha?" Lydia called softly.

She paused by the door, hand on the latch.

"I would never deliberately hurt you."

She ducked her head and scooted out the door. *Bitch*.

In all her unobtrusive prying into John DuBois' life, Samantha had yet to uncover the reason for his herbal fascination. It had nothing to do with a corporate businessman's life. Plus his family was healthy as he was.

She ran her hand over the yarrow's feathery fronds, letting them tickle her palm. She couldn't say the same for her family. Her father Li Xia battled gout and lord knew what other ailments stemming from a malnourished childhood. A struggle with breast cancer had already stolen one of her mother's breasts, not that she let it dampen her enthusiasm for life.

Sighing, Samantha carefully snipped a basketful of leaves, mentally taking note of tasks to do later. The garlic looked ready to bloom. She needed to pluck the tightly wrapped purple heads tonight. Cheery yellow petunias lined the main walkway, their spent flowers begging to be beheaded. On impulse she seized a peony blossom and tucked it behind her ear. She grinned. Give her a coconut bra and a grass skirt and she'd

be ready for amateur night downtown at the men's club. She knew John liked to drop in at the club from time to time. She wondered if that would catch his eye.

Though the warm sun and the herbs' soothing scents beckoned, she left them behind and returned to the shop. Lydia and John were engaged in conversation. Entering the backroom, she carefully bagged the yarrow.

Lydia rang up the purchase. Taking the bag, John smiled at Samantha. "I'll see you at eight," he said as he left.

So despite noticing her infatuation, Lydia had made a date with John. Samantha calmly checked her list. Mrs. Vanders would be in at ten to pick up the teas she'd ordered. Damn Lydia. She could have anyone. Was it too much to ask to leave John and her wretched fantasies alone? The paper she held trembled. She pressed her palm to the countertop, sandwiching the paper against something more immovable than her traitorous nerves.

"He meant you," Lydia said when they were alone.

She bobbed a pretty cut glass vial. "What?"

Lydia chuckled. "It was painful watching you moon over him. So I asked him out for you. He'll pick you up at eight." She plucked the vial from Samantha's hand and headed to a display case.

Her stomach turned. "I don't understand."

"Eight o'clock. Here." Lydia rearranged the display to accommodate the glass. "Wear something sexy." She paused. "Red would look good on you."

Samantha blinked and put her hand to her mouth.

"Don't waste the bagel you ate this morning. It's just a date, Samantha."

"With John DuBois," she whispered.

Lydia drifted to another display case and rearranged the tea packets. "He's just a man."

Lydia's casual dismissal of him raised her hackles but Samantha refused to defend him and give strength to Lydia's mooning theory. Mousiness had given her a degree of invisibility and she had found a slim measure of power beneath that protective cloak.

"You may say thank you," Lydia continued.

"Thank you," she obediently whispered.

"I haven't had time to sort through yesterday's UPS shipment. I'll watch the register while you do that."

Samantha retreated to the back room.

What to wear? What to wear? What to wear? The mantra ran through her head like a song on a scratched CD. John would be here in forty minutes and she had no place to hide. Wear something red? Fine advice. Everything in her wardrobe flirted with neutrality.

She was going to blow her chance with John. Everything would be ruined. Their friendship. Her private fantasies. Why did Lydia have to shove her into this?

Bracing her hands on her dresser, she took a deep breath. She could do this. She *would* do this. Choosing a silky violet camisole, she layered a thin black sweater over the top. The wind off the lake sometimes chilled the evening air. Skirt or jeans? The thought of him errantly laying a hand on her naked thigh made her decision. Skirt. No nylons. It was summer. She didn't need nylons. Heels. She had to have heels. She searched under her bed for a pair of unscuffed shoes. Victorious, she leaned against the bedframe.

John DuBois was taking her on a date. Where would they go? What would they say to one another? It didn't matter. She was certain it'd be magical. She would leave nothing to chance.

She crossed the room and sat at her grandmother's dressing table. Mama Du, her father's mother, heralded from a long line of what Samantha's mother called "meddlers" and "Voodoo dabblers". Mama Du sniffed at those terms, preferring "wise woman". Samantha didn't consider what she did to be magic. Rather, it seemed a somewhat embarrassing carryover from her childhood, when she helped Mama Du collect herbs and sew doll sachets for her friends.

Picking up a rag doll, she held its little mitten-shaped hands in each of hers and made it dance on her dressing tabletop. It wore miniature gray trousers complete with a leather belt and a white shirt with pearls standing in for buttons. Pictures of John DuBois, taken from a long-range camera, ringed her reflection in the mirror, tucked between the mirror and its wooden support. Lydia had unknowingly acted as a conduit to Samantha's wishes.

She set the doll down then lit the two candles standing guard on either side of her mirror. Taking a piece of cotton yarn dyed red earlier from her pricked finger's blood, she slowly wrapped it around the doll. "I bind you to me, John DuBois," she whispered. She sealed the ends of the string with a drop of hot wax. "Lips to lips." Red wax covered his embroidered lips. "Breasts to breasts." A dollop of wax for each of his pecs. Her eyelids fluttered. Maybe she'd get to see them in person tonight. "Phallus to womb." She hoped the bulge in her doll's pants, really a strategically shaped clump of moss, lived up to her expectations. Wax marred the doll's crotch. Pausing, she crossed her legs and tried to ignore her body's twitching demands. She breathed through her mouth. "Knee to knee and foot to foot." She applied wax to the final mentioned appendages and sat back.

Sweat beaded her brow. "Let's see if it works, Mama Du." That wasn't right. She believed it would work. It would. She exhaled slowly. "This I do in the name of She Who Has No Beginning And No End." She extinguished each of the candles with Mama Du's tarnished snuffer.

Finished, she propped the doll against the mirror then stood and smoothed the wrinkles from her skirt.

At seven forty-five she was waiting in the shop garden. At seven forty-eight she fought to not run and hide. By seven fifty she'd convinced herself that the whole thing was a bad idea and, if true, John and Lydia had conspired to see her embarrassed. She turned toward the shop and the stairs leading to her apartment. She needed a drink.

"Thinking of fleeing?" came a male voice.

She froze. He had come. It wasn't a dream.

"How old are you, Ms. Samantha Xia?"

She tried to find her voice and failed. Stiffening, she turned toward him. He stood at the entrance to the garden, leaning back against gate's support, arms crossed. She licked her lips. "You've known me for a couple years now. What do you think?"

"Twenty-six."

She nearly swallowed her tongue. Lydia must have told him. She looked like she was fifteen, eighteen tops. There wasn't a bar she had walked into where she hadn't been carded. "So?"

Unfolding his arms, he strolled down the path. She couldn't help but stare. His watch's thick silver cuff glittered in the fading light. Dappled sunlight skittered at his feet. She imagined she could hear every footfall, every scuff of his soles against the flagstone. *Careful, Sam. You don't want to scare him off.* She remembered to breathe, carefully keeping her expression neutral. Drooling, though suited for the moment, wouldn't endear her to him.

He'd dressed in simple charcoal pants, well cut, and a crisp white shirt. Right now his sleeves were rolled back. The contrast between his tanned skin and the shirt's fabric made her twitchy.

He took her hand, tugging her from her staircase. "So. You're far too young to be living like a maiden aunt squirreled away in the attic."

"You have no idea what I do up there," she teased and mentally thanked God he didn't.

He raised a perfect dark chocolate brow. "You'd be surprised."

So would he. She tried to keep her composure. What would Lydia do in this situation? She slowly tucked her arm through his, a ridiculously bold move for her. "So, where are you taking me?"

"Tiber's."

She swallowed her comeback. Good thing she picked the skirt.

"Is that acceptable?"

"Yes," she squeaked.

He chuckled. "I'm not a monster, Samantha."

She knew that. "Tiber's sounds great," she managed.

He laughed again. "Good girl." He led her through the garden gate and into the tourist-strewn streets.

Tiber's catered not only to the über rich, but also to the ultra private. Individual dining rooms. Personal waitstaff. A seasonal menu that included everything from the decadent to the bizarre, creamy cheesecake made with artisan soft cheeses to fresh bull penis marinated in one of the local vineyard's wines.

They were ushered into a tiny room with a balcony overlooking the bay. Candles set in bronze holders provided a shadowy ambiance Samantha both craved and feared. A swath of filmy black cloth draped the table. Its coppery edging shimmered and danced in the low light like an exotic snake. Wine waited for them, chilling in a bucket of ice.

Removing the cork, John poured them each a glass and escorted her onto the balcony. She took a sip, letting the liquid's tartness soothe her nerves. "Nearly a full moon," she murmured.

"It's nowhere near as beautiful as you."

Smooth talker. She'd expected as much. One didn't get to where he was in business without having a gilded tongue. Leaning against the railing, she turned to him and took another sip. She watched him over the glass's edge. His lips twitched—amusement warring with mild irritation, perhaps—though his intense look betrayed the seriousness of his words. Was she just for a diversion to him? A little weekend recreation?

"Why me? Why now?"

He shrugged. "Lydia asked so prettily."

She snorted, wine burning her nasal passages. Fanning herself, she tried to keep from blowing wine out her nose. "I'm sorry."

He deftly plucked the glass from her hand and refilled it. "Good thing I chose white. Red wine stains are more difficult to remove."

"Lydia? Polite. Sorry," she choked, continuing to fan herself.

His twisted lips turned into a grin. "She didn't bribe me if that's what you're thinking. I meant to ask you sooner. I saw no polite way to do so."

She waved. "I don't think I want to know how she asked."

He set both glasses aside, freeing his hands. "You're a brilliant young woman. Why work for uppity Lydia O'Claire when you could run your own business?"

She shrugged. "You need money to do that."

"Get a backer."

"For a tiny shop in Door County?" She turned away, watching the sun relinquish its hold on the bay to the moon. The water reflected the sun's shadowy sweep of color, golds and brassy, hinting at storms to come. He didn't reply so finally she asked, "You from working-class stock, John?"

Taking her hands, he tugged her close. "Do you want me to be?"

"That's my line." His cologne wafted around her, a mixture of coffee, cedar, bergamot and vanilla notes. Amateurs didn't deal with fragrances so unique. Very carefully she stood on her tiptoes, her nose following the strength of his scent. She ended up at his jawline, the tip of her nose grazing his jaw's slight roughness. "A dangerous game to play, Mr. DuBois." She resisted the urge to kiss him, wondering if he'd taste like Turkish mocha.

His finger hooked beneath her chin, forcing her to look him square in the face. Steely blue eyes watched her, rippling from storm-ridden gray to early morning sun-kissed blue. "There's a sharp mind tucked behind the bland façade you present to the world."

"How'd you know I studied fragrance?" Not even Lydia knew that. Samantha needed distance to clear her head or she was afraid her fantasies would stumble haphazardly into her real life. A man as thorough in researching her as she'd researched him. God help them both. His hand settled in the small of her back, preventing her escape. She put one hand on his chest. A chest hair teased her fingertip. So close to his damning pulse point, to that intoxicating scent that should make her wary but instead tempted her to throw caution to the wind. She shuddered.

"I'm a careful man, Ms. Xia."

Maybe he'd been coming into the store just to see her. What a silly notion. A man like him could have any woman. "What do you do with all the stuff you buy from Lydia's fine herbal establishment?"

"This and that," he murmured, his eyes watching her lips move. "You're not wearing lipstick."

"Just gloss," she replied, puzzled and intrigued by his deft diversion.

He lowered his head, lips brushing hers. His lips slid to her ear, his five o'clock shadow scraping her skin. "You taste like cherries." His hands slipped to her shoulders, easing her sweater down her arms, his palms searing her newly bared skin.

Unable to resist the temptation, she inhaled his scent. Her lips found his throbbing pulse point. She kissed his Adam's apple, feeling him shudder in their embrace. He tasted like vanilla, the cedar scent giving way to patchouli and lavender. She pulled back.

"A complex scent for a complex woman."

She blinked. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

"Yes," he said immediately. "Is it working?"

"Very well." Reality had yielded to imagination and after years of fruitless fantasizing she was powerless to stop it. He wanted her. He desired her. She'd have sold her soul for less than he had already given her.

She struggled to maintain some coherence. "Why me?"

"Why not you?" he countered.

Snagging her sweater, he draped it over the balcony's railing. He traced the edge of her camisole with a fingernail. She sucked in a breath. Too fast. Too perfect. He must have read her mind. His hands returned to her shoulders, gently guiding her inside the room. Every exposed bit of her skin begged to be touched. She couldn't help but think he might be playing with her, like a cat torturing a sparrow. Could he actually desire her *and* be as perfect as her imagination crafted him to be?

Who was she to judge? Her experience had been limited to college boys and the occasional fling with a drunken but cute tourist.

"Wait until you see the menu. A feast for all the senses," he promised.

She didn't remember what she ate. John ordered for her. She didn't know what they talked about. His low laughter dominated all her thoughts and senses, sending pooling heat to her groin, her heart barking orders to her extremities. Simple touches, his fingertips brushing her knuckles or wrists, wiped everything as neatly from her brain as a magnet stuck to a laptop.

She wanted him. She needed him. She would fucking implode if she couldn't have him.

She shifted uneasily on the chair, comfortable a moment earlier before common sense fled in the face of primal urges. She physically ached, the need to soothe that demanding spot carving away at her intelligence. She set her fork down.

"Did you enjoy the heavy cream? The hints of lush grass, the trace of herbs?"

She struggled for words. "The dessert?"

"Yes, the dessert, Samantha. Did you enjoy it?"

"Very much." God, if she didn't rediscover her brain soon he'd think she was a bubble-headed Froot Loop.

He laid his napkin on the table. "Would you like to get a cab back to your house or walk?"

"I'm up to waddling." There. See? She could string words into sentences.

He took her arm as they rose, fingers strumming lightly along her forearm. The hum of the tourists had dimmed somewhat, though they crowded around the bars' open doors like moths drawn to candlelight. Music streamed into the night, a ménage of karaoke, rock, polka and country.

At her garden gate he paused, hands on her shoulders as if he were afraid she might bolt. "I had an entertaining evening. I hope you did too."

"Flawless."

"I must admit, you're an easy date."

She backed out of his grip, the wine lowering her reservations and making her playful. "Easy as in easy to get out of my clothes?" Her sweater lay draped over her arm. "Or easy as in undemanding?"

"I misspoke. I meant straightforward. You don't play games."

If he only knew. She shook her head, backing into her garden. Her sweater's dangling sleeves brushed a circular clump of wormwood. It rippled like a giant silver cabochon, the fragrant plant the jewel of the nighttime garden. She trailed her fingers through it as well.

"Are you trying to run away and hide again, Ms. Xia?"

"Yes, but I'll give you a good night kiss before I do," she offered. Slipping off her heels, she ran barefoot down the path. "If you can catch me."

She flew from flagstone to flagstone, the slap of her bare feet against the stone and her accelerated breathing mingling with the chirrup of frogs. Rounding a bend, she skidded to a halt and ducked behind a lilac bush to catch her breath. There was no sound of his chase. Had she asked too much? Some of her delirious happiness slipped away.

She never expected to be lifted off the ground, feet dangling.

She screamed.

A mouth covered hers, sucking the sound from her throat. "Gotcha," John murmured against her lips.

Her eyes opened. Capturing her gaze, he kissed her again, his lips claiming hers possessively. His tongue traced the seam of her mouth and her lips obligingly parted. He tasted like dessert, sweet and tart at the same time. The kiss deepened, forcing her head back, arching her back. He pulled back and tossed her in the air.

She screamed again, her arms windmilling. He caught her, this time with one arm beneath the crook of her legs, the other wrapped around her shoulders.

"A second catch. A second kiss."

She couldn't tear her eyes from his gaze. "You already had it."

"Semantics."

He kissed her again. His arm muscles bunched at the base of her neck as he cradled her tight. His tongue plundered, tickling the roof of her mouth, flicking across her teeth's glossy enamel. Keeping one arm trapped to her side, he kissed the corner of her lips, beneath her jaw and wound his way down her throat. Her free hand slipped into his hair, frustratingly too short for her to fist, too silky-smooth to resist. He carried her into the garden, striding down the labyrinth paths as if he knew them as well as she did.

Lydia's pride and joy lived at the garden's heart, a spiral confection of concrete and lake stone, polished agates and chunks of waterworn glass. Koi swam beneath the misty pond water, surfacing between the lily pads like spray-painted Paleolithic creatures.

He set her down on the stamped concrete pad surrounding the pond and settled himself beside her. "Worried what I'm going to do with you?"

"Never."

"You should."

"You're a gentleman."

"Shall I prove to you I'm not?"

The laugh burbling in her throat died as she looked at him. Intense was the only apt description she could think of. Hunger surfaced, rising like a leviathan from the pit of her stomach. He wanted her as badly as she desired him.

He traced the outline of her bra through her thin camisole, his thumb whispering over her nipples.

"Gentlemen do not fuck ladies in public places," she murmured.

"Ladies do not use the word 'fuck'."

"So where does that leave us?"

He tweaked her nipple hard enough to have her straightening. "It leaves you getting fucked in your employer's garden."

"Maybe I don't want that."

He kissed her collarbone, nudging her bra and camisole straps down one shoulder with his nose. "You very much do." His hand rested on her thigh, the other continued to tweak her nipple. His fingers strummed a beat against her inner thigh, sending shivers directly to her core. He nudged the straps off her other shoulder, trapping both her arms to her sides. He laid a kiss between her breasts. "And I very much want to give it to you."

He pressed her flat so quickly she gasped. His hand cupped the back of her head, preventing a collision with the concrete. Wriggling, she tried to work the straps up her arms. He wagged a finger at her, one hand between her breasts to hold her in place.

"Please," she whispered.

"Please what?" he growled. He no longer sounded like the genial man she dealt with in the shop.

A thrill ran through her. "I want my arms free."

"Not yet." His hand slipped beneath her skirt, fingering her damp panties. One finger crooked, dipping beneath the wet cotton to stroke her. He delved deeper, seeking her bud, twirling his fingertip atop it before retreating. "You're wet." He brought his errant finger to her lips, tracing it across the tongue-moistened skin.

God she wanted to touch him. She could see how he strained against his pants. She wanted to hold him in her hands, to finally see and study the one thing that no amount of surveillance or stealth could uncover. Any thoughts of inadequacy fled. This was where they both belonged.

He undid his belt buckle. With a quick snap, he drew the leather through its fabric loops. She gasped. He laid the belt beside her head. His waistband's button came next, followed by a swift unzip of his pants. Plain white cotton briefs peeked between the charcoal fabric's folds. He made no effort to slide his pants and briefs off, only teased her with a glimpse of his bulge.

His hands slipped beneath the camisole, tickling her sides as they crept to her breasts then dipped behind her back to undo her bra's clasp. They returned along the same path, catching her cups with his thumbs and tugging the bra away. The violet fabric was a deep enough shade to hide her areolas but not thick enough to camouflage her nipples' interest. He dangled her bra from his fingertips, as if studying her cup size, then set it aside.

She'd never been ashamed of her breasts. Oh, she'd coveted Lydia's perky monstrosities. Who wouldn't? But her B-cups were still respectable. And she'd been privy to some of Lydia's end-of-day-aching-back rants.

She opened her mouth to defend herself.

He covered her lips with his fingertip. "Shh." Bunching her skirt in his fists, he slid it up her hips. Her cream-colored panties made her milky skin appear even whiter. He lowered his head, kissing the wet fabric and inhaling her scent.

He raised his head. "Lavender. Just the sort of woman to keep lacy herbal sachets in her lingerie drawer."

She wondered how he could smell anything other than her scent. Then his hands were liberating her from her panties and she couldn't think at all.

She shivered and arched her back, pressing herself into his face. "I want to touch you." Her hands clenched and unclenched, frustrated.

"Another time."

"Now!"

Without raising his head, his hand pressed her flat, an unspoken answer to her demand. His fingers occupied themselves, twirling her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, stretching and teasing until the fine pleasure-pain line blurred and her insides dissolved.

She relaxed beneath his hand.

Fingers joined his tongue, exploring and tasting. She sighed. That final release of control was all her body needed. She felt as if she was melting into the concrete, skin and nerves and muscle trickling away until she was nothing more than a quiet vibration in the night, harmony to the frogs' chirps. A contented hum escaped her lips.

His velvety shaft replaced fingers and tongue. She gasped, eyes popping open. He covered her mouth with his, still forcing her to remain supine. His fingers laced with hers, forearm to forearm, biceps to biceps. He curved their joined limbs over her head. Her straps scraped up her shoulders while the concrete bed beneath her rasped her tender skin. He thrust into her, striking her core. She shattered.

She couldn't collect the pieces. She didn't want to. From meltdown to invasion. His hips undulated, wringing a moan from her throat. Every still-functioning fragment concentrated on his movements, so in tune with the assault she didn't know whose motion governed whom. She gasped, the orgasm striking her so fast she reeled. He captured her lips, further sucking the air from her lungs. She struggled against him, the

thread to the world blurring, hazing. Was that wind in her ears or his ragged breathing? A scream torn from her throat or the piercing screech of a triumphant night hunter? The shrill of her nerves or the far-off cry of a plucked guitar string?

Her legs twined through his, bucking against him, demanding more. He jerked their joined hands back down, wrapping her hands around her breasts, his hands covering her, guiding her fingers to her nipples. He groaned. Teeth nipped her neck, left marks along her collarbone. And still her hips beat into his. She abruptly stiffened beneath him, trembling, begging for more, praying she could endure.

"Harder. Harder. Harder." She didn't recognize her voice.

He obliged her. She felt herself slipping again. Primed and denied release far too long, she was in no position to do battle with her conscience or her aching body. The moon blurred. Stars streaked. She tried to close her mouth, tried to breathe, failed at every effort. Her body only knew how to clench and buck.

She came almost violently, her body contorting, trapped between the artificial and the real, concrete and muscle and bone. He cradled her head to keep her from cracking her skull. She didn't care. Hand freed, she grabbed his shoulder and dug in. His breath hissed out between his clenched teeth. His grip tightened on her remaining hand. He came in one long shuddering gasp. A bead of sweat ran down his brow. She wanted to reach up and lick it from his skin.

Their ragged breathing dominated the night.

Wrapping his arm around her waist, he pulled her into a sitting position. Her arms looped around his neck. She could remain this way for an eternity. Well, not really. Her breasts still wanted to burrow into his chest's warmth, skin to skin. Two buttons were undone on his shirt, but other than that cotton and silk thwarted her nipples' planned invasion.

"Was this part of tonight's agenda?" she murmured into his neck. She could still smell his cologne, but layered beneath the intriguing cedar scent was the odor of their shared coupling. He'd marked her and, judging by the glimpse of the scratches on his back, she'd left her signature as well.

He didn't immediately answer her. His fingers played with her hair, tickling her neck with the ends. "I brought you a present," he said abruptly.

She pulled back. "Really?"

He drew his hand from behind her back, gesturing like a magician might. A dip of the hand. A flash of silver. His fingers peeled back. A sparkling blue and silver globe rested on his palm.

"It looks like a crystal ball."

He frowned. "It's a glass paperweight."

"Oh." Odd for a gift. Twisting, she nestled into the circle of his arms and took the globe from him. Heavy. Where had he stashed that on his person? Too big to be carried

in his pocket. Had he tucked it in the garden earlier, intent on bringing her here all along? She didn't want to ruin the magic by asking.

Bubbles formed and burst, frozen within the paperweight's glassy depths. Primarily clear, a swath of color swirled at its center, adding to the illusion. Tip it one way and it was as brilliantly blue as a Caribbean Sea. Tip it the other and all color leached away, leaving a starry prism of distorted bubbles.

"Do you like it?"

"I don't believe anyone has ever given me one before."

"Is it charming? Or bizarre?" Amusement tinged his words.

"A little of both, I think." She held it at eye level. "It reminds me of the sea."

He plucked the globe from her hand. "It made me think of you." He turned the glass one way, showing nothing but its clear bubbled expanse. "This is what you show to the world." He tipped it again, the moon spotlighting the blue shimmer of color. "This is what I see."

"Oh." She put her hand to chest, touched. He was more than she'd imagined him to be. A worrying and exhilarating thought.

He placed it back in her hands. "What do you want, Samantha?" he said, abruptly changing the subject.

"Beg pardon?"

"To do with your life? To have in life?"

"I suppose what everyone else wants."

He laid his hands over hers, hiding the globe from sight. "You disappoint me. I expected more thought put into the answer."

Laughing, she gave him a sidelong glance. "You."

"Better."

"Eternal beauty and youth, a devoted partner, no concerns about money, the usual."

His lips quirked. "The usual."

She detected a mocking tone. She rocked against him. "How about you?"

The blue seeped from his eyes. His grip on her tightened. "Power," he admitted finally.

"Typical male," she teased.

"Oh, I'm far from typical, Samantha." His hands slipped from the globe.

She studied the dancing bubbles in the glass. "I believe you," she whispered and shivered.

Chapter Two

If the prey's a willing catch, are you really hunting?

Samantha snuck down the stairs as soon as the sun peeked over the horizon. Every part of her body ached. In a good way, she supposed. She'd popped two aspirin with her first cup of coffee and had almost added a shot of Bailey's to the concoction but then thought better of it. Lydia relied on her. She wouldn't betray that trust by drinking on the job. Not after the truly magical night she had thanks to her employer's meddling.

She still couldn't believe it was real. If John hadn't given her the paperweight she might have chalked it up to an overactive imagination and a deprived sex life. Well that wasn't entirely true. The paperweight wasn't the only thing she physically took away from the encounter. She had managed to steal John's briefs, though she'd misplaced both her panties and bra in the melee.

Circling back to Lydia—Samantha hurried into the garden. She didn't want Lydia to accidentally stumble over any telltale signs of the evening's coupling. Normally she was responsible for the morning gathering of the more popular culinary herbs, though Lydia sometimes took an interest in her cuttings. She wondered if a bra tangled in a clump of hollyhocks would be enough to displace Lydia's aloof mask. Laughing to herself, she hurried to the pond. The koi lazily greeted her, splashing water and begging to be fed. "Later," she promised. In the early morning sunlight she could find no traces of their lovemaking. Not even a footprint. She circled the area twice. Hands on her hips, she studied the plants. Underwear didn't grow legs and walk off, though that's what she'd tried to insist to John.

Disturbed and a little annoyed—they *were* her best pair of lingerie—she fanned out, combing through the plants. When she crossed the wormwood- and marigold-lined path leading to pond, she paused. The marigolds' cheery heads poked through what remained of the wilted mass of wormwood. She frowned.

She hadn't seen any frost warnings last night and she'd lingered in the garden long after John left, replaying the scene in her mind. Crouching, she picked up a wilted stem. Lydia wasn't going to be pleased. At least the marigolds had survived. Summer solstice was fast approaching. The shop's steady clients expected their Midsummer Night wreaths to be ready in less than a week.

Giving up the search for her missing underwear, she began the task of cutting. By seven a.m. she'd managed to work the worst of the kinks out of her muscles, though she was ready for a couple more aspirin and a second cup of coffee to chase them down. She headed back to the shop, balancing several baskets and the light coat she'd shed.

John DuBois waited for her at the side door.

She nearly dropped her cuttings.

He raised a coffee cup, its gaily painted label indicating he'd stopped downtown to purchase it. "I thought you might need a stimulant."

Was that a smirk? She glanced at him again. He patiently waited for her to acknowledge him.

She didn't know if she was excited or worried to see him. Morning gathering hadn't been kind to her appearance. Her hair was snagged in a messy ponytail and her face felt flushed. Usually she managed to sneak in a shower between cutting and opening the store. Today there'd be no such luxury. Running as late as she was, she'd be lucky if she got a chance to splash water on her face and apply some makeup. She didn't want him to think of her as the simple summer girl he'd had a fling with. She'd seen the women he'd escorted around Chicago's swanky establishments. Glamour girls who probably never broke a nail let alone let dirt mar their manicures. Speaking of dirt... Her fingers curled into her palms.

"Did you ever find your underwear?" she finally asked.

"No. You?"

She shook her head. "I looked. God, I don't know what I'll say if Lydia stumbles over them."

"Nothing. She can't make you admit they're yours."

Lydia had her ways though. "True," she said slowly. Sneaky. She'd have to remember he did have a law degree even if he wasn't a practicing lawyer. She fumbled with the shop key.

"Here." He plucked it from her fingers and unlocked the door, deftly holding it open for her before she could utter a protest.

Entering the backroom, she set her baskets down. She pushed her sweaty bangs away from her face. So much for looking sexy. She hadn't even bothered to put on mascara this morning. Taking a deep breath, she turned around. John was leaning against her desk, sipping from his coffee cup.

He set the cup down. "I didn't know what you liked so I opted for white chocolate cappuccino. I hope that's suitable."

She blinked. "It's my favorite."

"Excellent. I prefer—"

"Black, no sugar, a dollop of cream, whipped if they have it, whole milk if they don't," she said automatically, then put her hand over her mouth. Shit, he was going to think she stalked him. She didn't, technically speaking. Occasionally following didn't translate into stalking. So her last five or six vacations had taken her to Chicago and yes, her wanderings did take her past John's business, also headquartered in the Windy City. She had a life. His was just more interesting.

He lifted a brow.

"Good guess?" she squeaked, lowering her hand. She turned to her workbench. Three batches of soap needed to be dumped from their molds and cut. Despite his

presence, she had a job to do. And she had probably just squelched any remnant of his interest in her.

His hands settled on her shoulders. "I'm flattered."

"Not weirded out?" she muttered.

He kneaded her tense muscles. "You know what you want and you pursue it with a single-minded focus. Admirable qualities rarely found in a woman."

Her hands shook as she dumped the four-foot tray of soap. "I asked the barista."

"Of course," he said smoothly. Hands still on her shoulders, he turned her to face him. Wrapping a finger around a lock of hair that had escaped her ponytail, he tugged. "I like this look."

"Sure you do." She tried to escape but her back was to the workbench. His arm hemmed her in on one side. "Sweaty. Smelly. And without makeup."

His head lowered. Might he kiss her? Instead he pressed his lips to her neck and licked a path from her collarbone to her jaw. She shivered. He raised his head and met her uncertain gaze. "Vulnerable with a hint of cranky. You do have a spine tucked away in there."

She straightened, proving him correct.

"What would you say to me taking you right here?"

Her jaw dropped. "Are you insane? Lydia could walk in any minute."

"So?"

"So, I don't want to lose my job."

"Ms. O'Claire's considerably more jaded than that." His lips brushed her cheek. He nibbled on her earlobe. "How badly do you want me again?" he whispered.

She gnawed her lower lip. "Pretty bad," she admitted.

"But not enough to throw caution to the wind." He pulled back, freeing her. "I'm disappointed."

She wrapped her arms around her waist. He watched her with his unreadable blue-gray eyes, daring her to deny his offer. "Let's say I'm on the fence. What can you do to convince me?"

"First, I'd say you look quite stunning in your tank and sheer shirt." He reached for the blouse's buttons and undid the first two before she could catch her breath. All she could smell was him. Her arms dropped to her sides. "But for the shirt's sake, it needs to go." Undoing the remainder of the buttons, he caught the garment before it slid to the floor. With a smirk, he set it in Lydia's in-box.

Returning to her, he traced the camisole's curves, teasing the tops of her breasts. She shuddered. "As much as I'd like to bare these, I'm afraid of your propensity for losing underwear, while charming, has no place here."

"I'm not wearing a bra."

He blinked. The bulge in his pants twitched as well. "Ah," he murmured.

She liked this game. Emboldened, she caught the edges of her stretchy camisole and pulled it up, settling it just above her breasts. "See?"

His mouth opened and closed. He took a deep breath through his nostrils. "I see." He reached for her breasts.

She leaned back, daring him to pursue. Here was an unfamiliar-to-her feminine sort of power and she intended to hoard it.

He caught her breasts in a tight grip which immediately loosened, as if he fought a war within himself to remain in control. His eyes shifted to a stormy gray, desire's electric need flashing through them. She arched her back, pressing into his palms.

He groaned.

"Who's supposed to be doing the convincing?" she teased.

He rolled her nipples between his thumbs and fingers while his pinkies tormented the undersides of her breasts. Leaning forward, he captured her lips. "Seductress," he whispered into her mouth.

"Sorcerer," she whispered back, hands skating up his back.

He froze, muscles bunched, body tensed like a runner at the starting block. Pulling back slightly, he rested his forehead against hers, hands gripping her shoulders just this side of painful. This close, she saw the flecks of blue and gray ripple in his irises, topped by a froth of white. "What did you say?" His breath tickled her lips.

Her hands ceased their play along his spine. Had she offended him? Was he deeply religious? She licked her lips, tasting his coffee on them. "Sorcerer," she repeated.

"Why would you say that?" His voice remained gentle but she caught its underlying steely tone.

"I was teasing."

He relaxed and kissed the corners of her lips. His hands dropped to her breasts again. "One should never mock magic."

She nodded, unsure of how to reply. The clock in the front room began to chime.

Shit! She glanced at her wristwatch. Her brain, spurred by panic, kicked into overdrive.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "Splash a little water on yourself before you put on the shirt. It'll cool you off." He ruffled her hair as she passed. "Cat got your tongue?"

"And my brain," she muttered.

He laughed, a boyish noise of delight.

She grudgingly glanced at him. His blue eyes twinkled, the genial gentleman once again. "You flatter me."

She wrapped her arms around herself, afraid the magic might fade and she'd be left with nothing but memories. "Why me?" She knew she sounded like a broken record but she couldn't help herself.

He leaned against her desk. "Why not you?" he countered.

Her eyes narrowed. "Why now?"

He held his arms wide, palms out. "Time is short. Why not indulge when you can?"

Ah, but she wanted more than a simple gorging. She wanted the fairytale and the never-ending happiness that accompanied it. Marriage didn't matter but commitment did. How strong was Mama Du's magic? Had he discovered her secret? No, Lydia had arranged the date. What they made of it had happened free of any further outside influence.

Her heart beat a little faster. She tried not to skip as she retreated to the bathroom to freshen up.

When she returned she found John seated behind her desk, idly doodling. He looked up when she entered. "Feel better?"

Her smile was wicked. "Of course. You?"

"Energized."

"It must be the coffee." She perched on the edge of her desk and lifted the coffee he'd brought for her to her lips. It smelled divine, sweetness mingled with the bean's biting edge.

He picked up his cup and saluted her before taking a sip. "Must be." He set his cup down and tapped her paperweight with a pen. "I see it already has a place of honor."

She hid her smile behind her cup. Smoothing her face, she said, "Yes. The official designation is north of the laptop, southwest of Lydia's mound of notes from her last conference that need to be transcribed and east of the pen cup."

He raised a brow. "Are there GPS coordinates on that?"

The sound of the backdoor opening and shutting made Samantha flinch. John merely collected his coffee cup and stood. "Do you have plans for the weekend, Samantha?" he asked in a low voice.

Her heartbeat quickened. "Not yet."

"Humor me. Don't make any."

"I'll see what I can do," she said.

His lips quirked. "Playing hard to get is moot at this point."

Lydia walked into the room and set her keys on the workbench. "I thought I heard voices. Mr. DuBois, I hope that's coffee or tea brewed from Aromatic Answers." She tipped her nose, sniffing. "Though I doubt it."

He reached for her hand. "I beg your forgiveness."

She stepped back, just out of reach. "I'm afraid as disappointed as Samantha may be, you'll have to let her get to work. I run a tight ship."

"I admire that," he said smoothly. He kissed Samantha chastely on the cheek. "'Til later." He headed toward the door. "Ladies, have a productive day."

Samantha concentrated on her computer monitor, fingers flying across the keyboard. She couldn't undo her actions but she'd atone for them. She'd already printed out her latest inventory sheets, intent on going through the shop today. A task she'd put off far too long, she guiltily admitted.

"Midsummer Night is on Saturday. Do you and Mr. GQ have plans?" Lydia asked, casually lighting a cinnamon-scented incense stub and waving it around the room.

Samantha tried not to cringe. "Umm, not yet." Her gaze flicked to sparkling bracelets Lydia wore at her wrists. "You don't think we're moving too fast, do you?"

Lydia shrugged, the silver bangles tinkling. "Michael and I married within a week, despite his family's disapproval. Use your gut instinct." She turned, pinning Samantha with her sharp blue gaze. "Is it too fast?"

"I'm n-not sure," she stammered. Lydia had never spoken about her deceased husband.

Rummaging through an open box Samantha had yet to inventory, Lydia pulled out an amber necklace. Strung on a silver chain, it looked like an imprisoned bit of sunshine. "Hold out your hand," she demanded.

Samantha complied. Lydia dropped the necklace into her palm, the silver pooling there like an alchemist's potion. Lydia closed Samantha's fingers around the amber. It felt warm, almost alive. She fancied she could feel the stone's heartbeat, slowing, steadying.

It was her own, she realized with a start.

"You're in need of a gift, I think," Lydia murmured, eyes unfocused. She blinked, gaze as sharp as uncut crystal.

Samantha didn't know what to say.

"Well?" Lydia's voice cut through her fog.

"Th-thank you."

"Wear it. At least through the solstice."

Samantha nodded, alarmed by her employer's sudden interest. The shop door's bells chimed. Lydia's heels clicked across the floor as she exited the backroom to attend to the customer's needs.

She studied the puddle of silver and sunlight. Like rival siblings, each fought to shine brighter than the other. The silver shimmered, its elaborate whorls and curls holding the amber prisoner in its unusual setting. Despite all its gleaming newness she suspected the silver was quite old. Orangey-gold, the amber was an irregular triangle shape. Looping the silver chain around her fingers, she held it up. The translucent stone twirled, like dappled sunlight peeking through a fringe of leaves. Opening the necklace's clasp, she settled it around her neck.

Heavier than it looked. And warm, she supposed from her and Lydia's handling. The amber nestled between the tops of her breasts, partially hidden by her shirt.

She reluctantly picked up the inventory sheets. Time to get to work.

Dusk settled on the garden like a cool mantle. Delicate flowers, wilted under the heat, now opened their heads and thrived. Moonflowers unfurled while daylilies died. Trumpet vines shed their spent orange blossoms. Blue comfrey bells nodded, plucking their rhythm from the evening breeze.

Collecting a black-eyed Susan, Samantha perched on the bench beside the fountain and tucked her legs beneath her. Like a young girl enchanted with her first true love, she removed the flower's yellow petals one at a time.

"He loves me."

"He loves me not."

"He loves me."

"He loves you not," Lydia interrupted. Her auburn locks hung loose around her face, clinging to her shoulders and frame like molten lava. She managed to make the wide floppy straw hat she wore to shield her face from the sun look chic. "Lusts after you. Definitely. But men like him don't love."

Samantha froze.

"I'm not telling you anything your heart doesn't know."

She swallowed the curse that burbled in her throat. "I thought you'd already left, Lydia." She started to rise. "I'm sorry to intrude on your favorite spot."

Lydia waved a hand at her. Samantha sank back down, trapped. Lydia always got her way. For the first time, Samantha was actually angry about that. The garden belonged to Lydia in name only. Samantha did all the work to maintain it. And now that she and John had coupled right here, making the spot extra special, she resented Lydia's presence. Even if the woman did arrange their date.

Circling the fountain, Lydia ran her fingers through the spray. Water droplets clung to her bangles, sending rainbow prisms dancing around her. She'd traded her business attire for a cool blue sundress, hem edged in crocheted lace. Knowing Lydia, it was probably hand crocheted.

Lydia paused. Veiled by the fountain's mist, she seemed not quite human, a nymph masquerading as a human. Samantha ground her teeth. The woman wasn't even trying and she still looked gorgeous.

"I think you should question his motives," Lydia said finally.

"It's love at first sight."

Lydia said nothing.

"I don't care what his motives are."

"You should," she said softly.

"Stay out of this!" Samantha shouted, leaping off the bench, hands clenched at her sides. "Why did you bother setting me up with him if you planned on trying to sabotage it?"

"I thought a taste would purge him from your system. I was wrong."

"He's mine." Her impulse to automatically run warred with a new urge to fight for what she wanted. She had never raised her voice to Lydia, let alone confronted her.

"Infatuation breeds obsession. Stop pursuing him and see if he comes back to you."

"No." She trembled. He wanted her. She saw the desire in his eyes, felt it with every mark he left on her body. She couldn't risk losing him by playing Lydia's childish games. "You're jealous."

Lydia tried a different tactic. "Where do you see yourself in ten or fifteen years? Still working in my shop? Still pining over this man? What do you want in life?"

"John."

Lydia sighed. "Look further."

"John," she repeated more stubbornly.

"May the Bright Lady keep me from slapping sense into you. Life offers quite a bit more than the Johns of the world. One more time, Samantha. Think hard."

She raised her chin, defiant. "John makes me happy."

"A hex on John DuBois." Closing her eyes, she tipped her head upward. The waning sunlight swept her cheekbones like a golden blush. "I didn't mean that. Well," she amended, "I did, but I won't." Sighing, she let her hat's floppy brim shade her face again.

Samantha slowly unclenched her fists. "I'm going to pretend we never had this conversation."

"As you please." Lydia perched at the fountain's edge and trailed her fingers through the water. "What happened to my wormwood?"

The abrupt shift in conversation threw Samantha off balance. "It died."

"Did you know the *artemisia*s belong to a very select group of herbs? One tasked with warding off evil."

Herbal hearsay had never interested her. Samantha hesitated. "Maybe we had a beetle attack."

Lydia gave a short bark. "You do have some sense. We did have an attack." She lifted her fingers, sprinkling water onto the stamped concrete path. "Why don't you pick a bouquet of St. John's wort, rue and elecampane for John? A sunny visage that'll remind him of you."

"Why don't I trust you?"

She lifted her head. "I'm the one you need to trust." When Samantha remained silent she made a shooing motion with her hands. "Run along, Samantha. I need to be alone."

Samantha was used to Lydia's blunt dismissals. Grabbing her backpack, she slung the straps over one shoulder and walked away.

Curious about Lydia's choice of herbs, Samantha assembled a nosegay of black-eyed Susans and St. John's wort. The dark-headed lion-maned flowers nestled harmoniously amongst their tiny sidekicks. Lydia was right about one thing. One couldn't help but smile upon seeing the combination. She wrapped the stems with a length of yellow ribbon then grabbed her bicycle from behind the shop.

John lived on Bayview Court. She'd pilfered his address from the shop's computer database. She wasn't going to spy on him. If he happened to be home and saw her, so be it. If he invited her in and she actually got to make love on his black silk sheets she'd personally thank Lydia for the idea. Wouldn't that frost her cookies?

Tossing the bouquet into her front basket, she hopped on her bike and headed down the road.

She didn't expect him to be home. Oh, she hoped and prayed he would be. Especially since it was a six-mile ride one way. She told her weary legs that she needed the exercise and promised herself to take up bicycling again. Being so close to town's conveniences made her lax. Just because she bicycled a couple times a week to the grocery store didn't mean she was a fitness buff. Hell, she could see the store from her apartment window.

Rounding a bend, she paused beside Bayview Court's road sign and took a couple minutes to fluff her hair and wipe the sweat off her face.

Lydia was wrong. She and John were meant for one another.

Her stomach roiled, nervous energy mixing with anticipation.

Putting her foot on the pedal, she shoved off. *Look casual, like you bike this way all the time.* Yeah, right. She didn't think John would be fooled.

Only John was nowhere in sight. A sleek yellow Mustang lounged in his cobblestone driveway. John didn't own any such vehicle.

"Let me grab my bag," a woman called, a laughing lilt to her words.

The supermodel skipped down John's steps to her car. Tall. Lithe. High perky breasts. Bronzed skin. Samantha's front tire wavered. She didn't know how she didn't crash the bike. She managed to bicycle past the cottage, pedaling around the court's circle before returning to his mailbox.

Her heart raced. Cheeks flushed.

Plucking the nosegay from her basket, she jammed the flowers into his newspaper box.

Damn him. How could he? Didn't he know he belonged to her?

And double damn Lydia for being right.

A curtain parted at an upstairs window. John watched Samantha Xia bicycle away, angry, humiliated and vengeful. His lips quirked. Just the way he liked his women.

Chapter Three

If obsession's a kissing cousin to passion, jealousy's their bastard love child.

Midsummer's Night, better known as the summer solstice, was only a day away. Lydia's shop bustled with its usual host of early weekend tourists as well as discreet and not-so-discreet pagans. Candles were always popular sellers, though a fair portion of today's beeswax purchases leaned toward rose and golden hues. Samantha wondered how many buyers belonged to covens and how many were solitaires. Which were simply dabblers or exhibitionists looking for a reason to shed their clothing?

Lydia hadn't mentioned John at all. One, she'd been too busy. Two, Samantha had shown up with poorly camouflaged red-rimmed eyes. If she'd discovered a spot of sympathy in Lydia's gaze it'd been quickly hidden by her characteristic aloof manner. The woman kept Samantha hopping from the moment she walked in the door.

She'd just returned from her lunch break and was still in the backroom when she heard Lydia say, "Good afternoon, Mr. DuBois."

Her heart hammered. Should she pretend nothing happened? That she didn't know? She hadn't forgiven him, well, not entirely. After making another poppet and repeating Mama Du's binding lesson she'd decided she just needed to practice being more perfect. John couldn't help but see how well she really complemented him. Damn the raven-haired supermodel. She'd made a doll especially for that one too. Ms. Perky Breasts wouldn't be disturbing John anymore.

"You're looking lovely as usual today, Lydia."

Taking a deep breath, Samantha stepped out of the backroom.

Lydia and John locked gazes. The masks both wore so easily slipped.

Why had Samantha never noticed how fierce Lydia could look? Her elegantly painted lips drew back to reveal gleaming white teeth, a feral display on such a beautiful face. Samantha found herself wanting to slap John's countering smirk off his face.

The words they exchanged hummed in her ears, just out of comprehension's grip.

Lydia abruptly raised her hand, a stick pointed at John. He laughed but it was a forced sound.

No, not a stick but a wand, a gnarled chunk of burr oak. Samantha didn't know where the knowledge came from. It was simply there, in her mind.

Words scrolled before her eyes as if she was reading from a teleprompter, though she couldn't say from where such words manifested. Again, they were simply there.

"You cannot stand in her stead unless she wills it." John's voice and yet not his. Masculine, arrogant, assuming, buzzing with power. Samantha staggered under the force of that voice. She gripped the counter.

Lydia spoke now. "This is my property and my will rules here."

"She's invested just as much sweat and pride as you. You cannot lay claim over that which refuses to be claimed."

Both stared at her. "Do you seek protection from me?" John asked, but she didn't see his lips move.

God, what had Lydia brewed in the coffee pot this morning?

"Samantha, focus and answer the question," Lydia instructed.

She put her hand over her eyes, kneading her forehead. She didn't need anyone's protection. "No," she answered out loud.

"Well enough," John responded. "Stand down." He seized the tip of Lydia's wand between his thumb and forefinger, directing it toward the floor.

The sunlight caught the crystal suspended over the shop's doorway. Rainbows skittered across the beige carpeting. John's watch flared, brilliant silver. Both Lydia and John jumped. Samantha blinked. The watch's face must have reflected the sun just right. She wiped tears out of the corners of her eyes.

Their masks slid back into place, the mood broken. Lydia concentrated on helping a client find the perfect gift for her New Age daughter. John sauntered to the cash register counter.

Samantha ducked behind it, grabbing a stack of brochures that needed to be folded. What had just happened? She could have sworn Lydia had physically threatened him. But neither bore any marks and the rest of the store's clients busied themselves as if nothing had occurred. Had they both spoken in her head? She shuddered as she stood, paper clenched to her chest.

Weirdness heaped upon weirdness. She could only blame Lydia's coffee. She hadn't deliberately ingested any narcotics since a little experimentation in college, and by little she meant pot brownies, basically the same sort of experimentation a Catholic school girl did when selecting the red satin panties over the perfectly functional white cotton.

"Hello, Samantha. You're looking a little pale. Lydia isn't working you too hard is she?"

At the sound of his concern, the sour words she'd rehearsed died in her throat. "I'm fine." She set the stack of papers down and began to fold a sheet.

"Just fine," he mimicked. "No, hello, John, I couldn't wait to see you?"

"I stopped by yesterday. You were busy."

He hummed noncommittally.

In her imagined version of their confrontation, he had apologized and they'd gone ahead and made love behind the counter. Of course in that variation neither Lydia nor customers were present. Too bad. Unless he apologized for his behavior, she no longer

had time for him. At least not when other people were around. What she'd concocted to win him completely to her side involved quite a bit more than Mama Du's poppets and a good deal of privacy. She figured that would entail kidnapping—an exciting proposition all on its own—a dollop of flagellation and about twelve feet of cotton rope.

His fingers tapped a foreign rhythm on her countertop. Blisters marred the back of his hand and the sides of his fingers.

Startled, she asked, "What did you do to your hand?"

"The St. John's wort in your bouquet made my skin photosensitive."

She glanced at him then ducked her head before she was faced with the anger and rejection she expected from him. "Sorry."

His restless fingers's rat-a-tat-tat ceased. "You didn't know." He placed a finger beneath her chin, raising her head to look him in the eye. Storms dawned and died in their depths. "Did you?"

"No!" *Damn Lydia.*

His lips crooked into a smile. "Good." She took a deep breath, inhaling his woodsy scent. His finger dropped from her chin to stroke her neck's length. It paused at the silver chain's barricade. "Wherever did you find such an exquisite necklace?"

"Lydia gave it to me."

She thought she heard Lydia murmur, "Take that."

Impossible. The woman was at the far end of the store. What the hell was going on here? Maybe she should take a half-day of vacation. Lydia would crucify her if she did. She sighed, trapped. "Why does Lydia suddenly dislike you?" she found herself asking out loud.

"She doesn't hate me. She fears me. Fears that I will take you from her. She's like a spoiled child, refusing to share her possession. That's all you are to her, darling. A toy." As if to emphasize this, he patted her head.

Common sense struggled to surface. Samantha slouched away, elbows propped on the laminated countertop, chin resting in the nest made by her laced fingers. "And how does that differ from the way you treat me?"

He blinked, visibly taken aback by her perceptiveness. He laid two fingers on her lips. "Come with me and I'll show you."

Straightening, she stepped back, the counter between them. His eyes gleamed, a flash of tropical water blue. What she wanted to say was, "Sure, let's go up to my place and work it out." Sweat it out. Scream it out. What left her lips was, "I have work to do."

Another blink of surprise. "May I remind you that we've left playing hard to get far behind?"

"I'm playing for keeps." Her voice was cold. "My terms." God, she sounded like him.

His upper lip curled. Clearly he'd never been put in his place before, at least not by a woman. The pulse in his neck jumped, a staccato beat of sixteenth notes. His eyes betrayed his desire. She had him. "How do you suggest we resolve this dilemma?"

She held up a hand. Where had this self-confident side come from? *Don't lose him!*, her subconscious anxiously screamed. *I won't*, she reassured herself. She had tasted the heady feminine power she wielded. If he didn't still crave her, he wouldn't be here.

"What is the woman in the yellow Mustang to you?"

"Spying again?"

"Answer the question, please."

"Would you believe interviewing for a position on my staff?"

She bit her tongue to keep from crudely saying what first came to mind. "So did you hire her?"

"She failed to meet my expectations," he said blandly.

Meaning what? She overcooked the noodles? His noodle? She stifled a giggle. That wouldn't do. She needed to be serious. "I'll get off early tonight. Come upstairs for supper."

He eyed her warily. "Shall I bring anything? Wine? Champagne?"

"Your cock will do." She didn't think she had ever said that word out loud. And if so, certainly not to a man's face. Giving herself a mental congratulations, she glanced at her watch. She needed to package a few online orders yet before the delivery man arrived to pick them up.

He gave her a tight-lipped grin. "What are you planning, Samantha?"

To make him understand how badly she needed him. To drive him crazy with desire. To wipe away any memory of the foxy Mustang chick and any other women he'd managed to sneak under her radar. John DuBois needed to be taught a lesson. And she thought she was woman enough to do so.

Pretending she was Lydia, she trailed her fingers along his bared arm. Goose bumps erupted along the exposed flesh. "Come and see. Or don't." She shrugged as if his decision didn't matter to her.

His eyes flashed.

She'd found a weakness. He didn't like being challenged then dismissed. She headed for the backroom, toying with turning around and blowing him a kiss. No, that'd be too much, wouldn't it?

Lydia didn't care for the idea of Samantha leaving early. She liked it even less when she found out it was to be with John.

Samantha powered down the computer. "I'll be okay. Honest."

Lydia actually wrung her hands. Samantha had never seen her so agitated. Her lips were pressed flat, hair still perfectly coifed, body alternately shrouded and revealed

in her pale gray business suit. Her heels clicked on the floor as she paced but she didn't say a word.

"If it'll make you feel better I'll call you when he leaves."

Lydia paused. "Do you dabble in the occult, Samantha?"

That was the last question she'd expected Lydia to ask. Standing, she blew out a breath. Collecting the cash box, she placed it in the safe and spun the dial.

"My grandmother taught me a few things," she answered honestly.

"Did you use them on John?"

Why the Inquisition? Lydia wasn't her mother. But the unexpected concern in Lydia's eyes made her continue. "Yes."

"Can you undo what you've done?"

"Yes, but I won't." Her chin rose at Lydia's swift intake of air. "I've read enough of the books you have lying around. Gray magic's morally questionable at best. And mucking around in free will's frowned on. I did what I did knowing the consequences."

Now she saw Lydia's nostrils flare, a truly unbecoming look for the elegant woman. Her hands clenched and unclenched at her sides. She inclined her head. "May you get what you deserve, then, Samantha," she said in a cool, impersonal voice. "Get going, you'll be late." Emotion tinged those words.

Samantha flashed her an uncertain look.

Lydia jerked her head in the direction of the door.

Samantha hurried to comply. The glisten of tears she thought she saw in the corners of Lydia's eyes had to be from dust or some other irritant. Ice bitches didn't cry.

Grabbing her purse, Samantha hurried out.

Samantha's closet might have lacked exotic lingerie, thigh-high boots and leather accoutrements but she knew a way to keep John's interest. She simply dispensed with underwear. The pale blue blouse she chose accented her milky skin. She left it untucked and partially unbuttoned from both the top and bottom so that just three buttons held the garment on. Making any of her skirts appear sexy was a good deal more difficult. In the end she opted for a school-marmish tan skirt and ecru slip edged with lace. Technically the slip did not fall into the lingerie category. She doubted her mother would have purchased it otherwise.

The only jewelry she decided to wear was the silver chain and amber piece Lydia had given her. It didn't match the aura she was trying to project but after seeing the look in Lydia's eyes this evening, she kept it on. It soothed the stab of guilt she felt for disappointing Lydia.

She wasn't a gourmet cook but, armed with a telephone, the phone number of a great restaurant and her credit card, she sufficed. When the food arrived she hurried to place it on appropriate platters then stuffed it in her pre-warmed oven.

She glanced at her watch. He was late. As far as she knew he'd never been late.

Maybe he wasn't coming. Maybe she'd turned him off with her boldness.

The doll she'd made and bound caught her eye. Pulling open a drawer, she shoved it inside. It nestled happily amid its brothers and the pair of briefs she'd stolen. He would come. She trusted Mama Du's magic.

And if by some twist of Fate it didn't work, she'd just have to resort to the sleeping pills her doctor prescribed for her but she'd never used.

If the Xia family had its own coat of arms, "resourceful" would have been written in Latin on the banner, right beside "patient" and "stubborn".

He arrived at seven forty-five and entered her place without so much as a knock. Which was a neat trick considering she thought she'd deadbolted the door. Obviously she'd neglected that precaution. Security wasn't something she gave an exceptional amount of thought to, but she probably should. Given the tourist nature of Door County the bulk of its population, summer especially, was largely transient.

Ever the gentleman—though strutting into her home as if he belonged didn't endear him to her or reinforce that quality—he'd brought a bottle of red wine.

Good. She'd ordered ribs. If Fate shined down on them he'd splatter sauce on himself and she'd be "forced" to help tidy him up. Off would march his shirt, straight to the washing machine and, if she played her cards right, directly to her dresser drawers.

Tonight's attire was very *GQ*, from his pleated pants to his navy coat and vest to the silver cufflinks that peeked from beneath the coat's sleeves. She almost wished he'd remained casual. His business demeanor put a barrier between them, forcing him to carry himself stiffly. She wanted him out of his element.

His power-red tie was so typical of him she almost laughed. Instead she covered her mouth with her hand and politely cleared her throat.

"Have trouble finding the place?" she teasingly asked. She thought he might shrug out of his coat but he didn't. She made a mental note to lower the air-conditioning. She'd pry him out of his clothes one way or another.

He tapped his fingers on the tabletop. "I'm here." He held out his arms as if to embrace her. She knew better. He returned to tapping.

She overlooked his irritated tone. "The ribs are ready."

"I'm a vegetarian."

"No, you're not," she snapped. She took a deep breath. She wouldn't play his game. "That's all right," she said with a forced smile. "I have salad."

"I really don't have much of an appetite."

"You will." She walked up to him, stood on her tiptoes and kissed him chastely on the lips, giving him a great view down her blouse and what she wasn't wearing beneath it.

His lips caught hers before she could escape. Wrapping his arm around her, he kissed her soundly. His fingers tunneled through her hair, trapping her to him. Her

breasts ground into his chest, rubbing against his suit's austere buttons and sending little shivers through her.

He released her when he was good and ready to. She placed one hand on his shoulder while she caught her breath and tried to marshal her thoughts, barely resisting the urge to fan herself. He grinned, a tight-lipped, satisfied smile, a feral light in his eyes.

"May I take your coat?" she asked a bit breathlessly.

"No, I think I'll keep it a little longer."

"I'll fetch supper then. Make yourself comfortable."

Crossing his ankles and arms, he leaned against her dining room table. God, what she'd give to see him naked and in that same position. His smile widened a smidgeon, as if he sensed her thoughts.

She tried not to flounce as she left the room. She had to remember. It was her house, her binding spell that brought them together. She had the power. She did. Pouting like a spoiled child would accomplish nothing.

"Samantha," he called after her.

She poked her head out of the kitchen. "Yes?"

His gaze burned into her, bringing a flush to her cheeks. "I'm not hungry for food."

"Too bad," she said softly, meeting his gaze. "I am."

She could have sworn she heard him growl as she retreated.

He picked at his salad and neglected his ribs. Even his wine remained untouched. The wine he had deliberately selected and brought. He reminded her of a child sulking because he hadn't gotten his way.

His fork clinked against the glass plate. "Are you a solitary?"

She took a sip of wine to wash down the bite of ribs. "I'm not a Wiccan if that's what you're asking."

His lips twitched. "What you do betrays that fact. I asked whether you have a coven and high priestess you report to or if you practice alone."

"My mama raised me Lutheran. You?" She knew he was Catholic, had even served time as an altar boy. A minor barrier to their future happiness. She'd happily convert.

"Don't fuck with me, Samantha. Did you think I wouldn't detect a binding?" His jaw worked as he fought for control. "And not just one but dozens?"

She automatically swallowed. The partially chewed food lodged in her throat. Coughing, she stood. "Let me refresh the wine."

He caught her wrist as she reached for his glass. "Answer me."

"In a moment," she rasped.

He released her. Stumbling back, she clutched the glasses to her chest and fled to the kitchen. Her cheeks flamed. How could he possibly know what she had done? Was

he spying on her? Opening her cupboard, she rummaged through her spice rack. The harmless-looking bottle labeled sea salt really contained a few of her sleeping pills, ground up. Rinsing out their wineglasses, she poured the measured contents of the container into his glass and hastily refilled it. Thank God for red wine. White might have shown a cloudiness, hinting at her deceit.

Returning to the dining room, she set his glass beside his plate. Sitting, she raised her glass and took a sip. "You caught me. Now what are you going to do about it?"

"Admission is far from settling the matter."

She inclined her head, waiting for the demand she knew would come.

"You will release the bindings, of course."

"What's in it for me?"

"Your life," he said simply.

She laughed, hoping it didn't sound strained. Her heart pounded against her breastbone. What could she do to get him to drink? "How about a toast first? To well-matched opponents?"

He reluctantly raised his glass. "You are a clever wench," he admitted grudgingly.

"Thank you." *Now drink from the glass*, she wanted to scream at him. Instead she took a long drink, emptying her glass. "Let's negotiate just which bindings you want removed."

He copied her gesture, downing the wine. "All of them go, Samantha." He smiled humorlessly, a gleam of straight white teeth. "No one bests me at this sort of game."

"I already have." She toyed with the dregs of wine in her glass then set it down.

The glass slipped from his hand. He caught the edge of the table. "Damn it, Samantha!"

Standing, she slipped out of his reach.

He stood, still clutching the table for support. "You drugged me!"

She retreated toward her bedroom, baiting him. "Of course. You didn't think I'd give up after coming this far?" Though she couldn't wait to strip him, she didn't relish the idea of dragging his deadweight through her house.

He used the wall to keep himself upright as he approached her. "What do you have in mind?"

She pressed her lips tight. So many things to do. Where to begin?

Her face must have revealed some of her intentions. He bared his teeth. "No one owns me." He crashed to the floor.

"I do," she murmured.

She pleased herself while he slept, stripped of his clothes and tied naked to her bedposts. How many times had she dreamt of him in her bed only to wake up and find herself alone and hugging her pillow? Now here he was in the flesh.

Giddy, she touched his flaccid shaft, savoring its softness. He twitched in his sleep. Her fingers played down his leg, tickling her palm with his bristly body hair. Just enough covering to give the aura of masculinity. God she wanted all of him. She couldn't wait any longer.

Straddling him, she bent her head to his groin and inhaled. His sweet masculine scent filled her nostrils. She took him in her mouth, playing with the soft skin, raking it with her teeth. He cried out, hands fisting.

"You like that, don't you?"

She resumed her efforts, tongue dancing over the slit in his head, tasting his salty sweetness. She raised her gaze to his face. His eyes were open, stormy gray and pissed.

Releasing him, she worked her way up his chest, kissing his stomach, tongue flicking over his bellybutton's puckered skin. She sucked in his nipple and bit down ever so gently.

"Remember the outcome. You have to release me sometime, Samantha."

She raised her head. "Do I?" She pouted. "We've only just begun."

"Where are the poppets?"

She glanced at her dressing table, its mirror lined with his photographs. "Safe. If you behave I might destroy one or two for you."

"Before the night's over they will all be destroyed."

Her lips hovered over his. "Don't bet on it."

John bucked his hips and snapped at her.

She jerked back. That wasn't how she'd pictured him in her dreams. No matter, he would come around. Now that she had him she could craft better dolls, complete with real hair and nail clippings. No more grainy photographs. Before the night was out he wouldn't be able to resist her.

"Let's start with a shaving," she said, running her fingers up his cheeks.

He turned his head.

Slipping off the bed, she disappeared to the bathroom and returned with a warm wet towel. She draped it over his cock and balls.

"You can't be serious." His voice remained steady. Only his eyes betrayed his outrage.

Plucking the scissors from a champagne bucket full of ice, she grinned. He squirmed, testing his restraints. She'd padded them with her panties. He could twist and writhe all he wanted. She was confident the cotton rope would hold.

"Let's discuss this," he said in his still-calm, lawyerly voice.

"There's nothing to discuss. I want you. And here you are. Mine." The last word hissed out.

His gaze sharpened. "Shaving me will accomplish nothing."

She tsked. No sense wasting her time arguing. She'd already spent half the night waiting for him to wake up. "If you continue to squirm I might accidentally cut you."

He stilled.

She placed the cold steel scissors against his balls. His lips twisted but he remained silent. Unfolding a white hand towel, she laid it on his belly. Then she carefully began to cut away his curls, amassing a collection on the towel. When she finished she patted his pelvis. The remaining stragglers looked lonely, a beheaded horde of bested warriors.

"There. That wasn't so bad, was it?" Despite his anger, his penis rose from its violated nest. She bent and kissed its head. "At least somebody enjoyed it."

"Stop this nonsense now and I may forgive you."

She ignored him. Fetching a bar of soap and another warm wet towel, she lathered the remainder of his hair, taking time to knead his balls. Her soapy hand stroked his shaft several times before retreating to pick up a plastic safety razor. She made her first pass through the wiry fuzz. Pale skin, a sharp contrast to his bronzed thigh, gleamed through the suds. She carefully kissed the bared skin. He twitched.

"Samantha—"

"Samantha," she mimicked. "Have you ever once asked whether I enjoyed being called that?"

He licked his lips. "It's your given name."

"So what, Johnathon Marvin DuBois."

He winced. He'd managed to keep his middle name off every piece of documentation he could. Still, she'd discovered it. It hadn't taken much effort. Just a phone call to his parents asking for Johnathon Sterling DuBois, a made-up name that had his mother huffing and correcting her. Marvin had been John's grandpa's name.

Leaning forward so her breasts scraped his chest, she murmured, "You can call me Sam."

"You sure you don't want Mistress or Ma'am?" he retorted.

She tipped her head. "I have a better idea." Rising, she rummaged through the dresser drawer and came up with a pair of panties. She returned to the bed and jammed them in his mouth. "That solves that dilemma."

If looks could ignite she'd be smoldering.

She didn't know where her boldness came from. Perhaps being denied so long and then disappointed when reality didn't quite belly up to her imagination tapped her darker emotions. Maybe a bit of Lydia had finally rubbed off. She shrugged. John was truly hers now. She'd worry about her newly surfaced desires later.

Despite his anger, his manly bits didn't appear to mind the debasing. Without his pubic hair hiding its base, his shaft looked massive, a pale pink blush crowning its head. Closing her eyes, she squatted above him. She swallowed a delighted moan.

Fuck John. She'd set the pace this time.

She slid slowly down his shaft. Too exquisite to imagine, the sensation could only be understood by indulging in it. Around his panty gag, John groaned. She closed her eyes, savoring the stretch, the fluttering of her muscles as it accommodated his width.

Sucking a finger into her mouth, she moistened it, then rubbed the wetted tip against her thumb pad. Fingers suitably lubed, she tweaked her nipple. Twisting the tight flesh until her breath hissed out in exquisite pain, she rocked against John, delighted with his stiffness. Her other hand crept to their joined flesh and found her twitching nub.

John groaned again. Beneath her, his hips had begun to thrust, driving himself deeper inside her. She ignored him, intent on pleasing herself.

Her finger worked her nub 'round and 'round, teasing out sparks of pleasure. Her toes curled. Calves tightened. She threw back her head and moaned, letting her orgasm wash over her. John squirmed beneath her, his release denied by her sudden immobility.

Raising her hips, she let him slip out. His eyes widened, hands balling into fists. She slid up his stomach, leaving behind a wet trail. She hovered above his mouth. The scent of her arousal and satisfaction surrounded him. She imagined him inhaling, desiring and being denied. She was giddy with her own power.

He closed his eyes. Gripping the headboard with one hand, she played with herself. A drop of her moisture spattered his cheek. He opened one eye. His accompanying groan made her muscles clench, sending delicious shivers down her nerves.

She dropped to his chest. He grunted, wind knocked out of his lungs. Swiveling, she faced him, leaned forward and kissed the tip of his shaft. His hips lifted off the bed. Laughing, she seized his thighs and spread his legs. Her tongue licked the length of him, swirling around his rounded head until she thought he might come. She wriggled her ass into his face and began, in earnest, to give him the best tongue-lashing of his life.

His freshly shaven skin kissed her cheeks and chin. So soft. So vulnerable. The taste of his fluids excited her. She sucked harder, playing along the underside of his sensitive head. His helpless thrashing made her redouble her efforts. When he exploded into her mouth she shuddered too. Never had she felt so powerful.

It was the last thing she remembered feeling.

She stirred. Her head weighed a thousand pounds and needles pricked the backs of her eyes.

"Wake up, my damned little witch," John murmured.

Groaning, she tried to focus through slitted eyes. John held one of her dolls above a lit taper candle. The candle's flame swept sideways, igniting the doll's white linen sleeve. "I call on Morfran, cursed son of Cerridwen. Release this binding."

The doll smoldered but failed to burn. John frowned.

"My will is strong. My thoughts are clear. These bindings are wrong. Break them here." A pencil-thin blue light speared the doll's center. The scent of burned herbs made Samantha cough.

The unnatural light highlighted the harsh angles and lines in John's face. His lips peeled back in an ivory caricature of a smile, mortal sins bleeding the light from his eyes.

Her jaw dropped. Or maybe it was his hocus-pocus making her muscles slack. No, she had truly damned herself this time. Without knowing it she'd bound herself to an honest-to-Horned-God warlock.

She was so screwed.

Chapter Four

Possess, possessive, possession. Crossing the line's as easy as addition and subtraction.

Waking up naked and tied to an unfamiliar bed failed to disquiet her. She did, however, worry about her lack of unease.

Black robed him from head to toe. Samantha craned her neck back. His gleaming silver belt buckle winked at her, its leather companion wrapped about her wrists, binding her to his headboard.

"Welcome back."

She twisted her wrists experimentally. He'd secured her well. "What happened?"

He flitted around the room lighting candles, the black robe giving him the illusion of floatation. The candle flames flickered, twining seductively around their wicks like exotic dancers caressing their poles. Shadows coalesced outside the flames' reach, snaking up the walls to vanish into the anonymity the darkened ceiling provided.

"You tell me. We were progressing so well, Samantha, but then you had to try to dominate."

She licked her lips, excited despite her position. "I wanted more."

He shook his finger. "You crossed the line."

"You liked it."

He paused and blew out his long match. Those thin lips could be cruel or clever. She didn't care which persona they assumed. She simply wanted them latched on to her, be it her breasts, lips or elsewhere. "I like many things." He laid his hand, fingers spread, palm down, on her stomach. "This, for instance." He closed his eyes. "I feel you fighting the urge to twitch, to give yourself to me."

If he expected her to beg for his touch he had another guess coming. She turned her head.

"So strong," he murmured. "You deceived me there."

She didn't know what he meant.

Drawing back, he picked up a wicker basket. His hand dipped into the basket and emerged with a fistful of leaves and petals. Strewing them around the room, he also tossed several handfuls over her. Oak leaves and rose petals cascaded across her body, tickling her skin. She shivered.

"I was going to choose the aspect of Aphrodite for you but now it appears you're more suited to Artemis or Athena."

She turned back. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course not. Lydia shares nothing. Her mistake." Setting the basket aside, he perched on the edge of the bed. His fingers danced over her ankle, temporarily shackling it with his hand. "We're going to celebrate the Great Rite together, here, in my bower, on Litha's sabbat."

A sabbat marked one of the special holy days for Wiccans. She'd shadowed John for close to three years and had never seen a whisper of his beliefs until now.

She licked her lips, fear overlaying her initial excitement. She didn't mind playing a role in his fantasy as long as he was the only one involved. "Are you a solitary or are you expecting a coven?"

He chuckled. "Is it fear or jealousy talking?"

"A little of both," she admitted.

"Run with me, Artemis."

"Only if you remember my name."

He ignored her request. "You will call me Herne." He lifted a cord from around his neck, a vial dangling at its end. Removing the stopper, he pressed his thumb over its mouth. His cloak whispered across her body as he dabbed the fluid on her bound wrists. She caught the glimmer of a solid silver disk strapped around his neck, set with a blood-red ruby. Symbols were incised on the disk's edges, which, in the candlelight, squirmed and danced to their own unheard beat.

The scent of cedar overpowered the other smells. She strove to recognize them all, trying to recall what each might hint at. An acrid odor made her scrunch her nose.

The smell continued to hang in the air, sucking the fresh air from her lungs. The room spun. She blinked, focusing on his face. The rest of the furniture stopped moving. He removed his robe, revealing his lean naked body beneath. A black pentagram was tattooed between his pecs. No wonder he'd hesitated to remove his shirt. She squinted. The tattoos lines weren't straight connect-the-dot tracks but actually looked like artfully arranged tree branches.

He finished anointing her body and set both robe and oil aside. "What are you thinking?" He tweaked a very alert nipple.

"Of carnal revenge."

"You are welcome to have such thoughts, but they aren't conducive to our rite." He captured one of her feet. "Think of Artemis, the huntress. Her silvery bow which never fails to strike its target. Of the cry her bowstring makes when plucked, the screech of a fierce bird." He bent and placed a kiss in the arch of her foot. "Foot to foot."

Despite her resolve to not think of anything, an image popped into her mind. John's room retreated, the candlelight blurring, twisting, becoming sunlight. The walls no longer held her. She stood on a mossy plateau overlooking a forested valley below. The wind tunneling through her hair smelled wild, earthy and fresh.

She wasn't alone.

A woman stood beside her. Whoever she was she was simply gorgeous, though not in the traditional sense. Oh, she had curves in all the right places but they weren't made up of soft, lush flesh. Muscles defined her arms and broadened her chest. Her red hair fell in one thick plait down the center of her back, a copper-hued rope that twitched under the wind's caress. A pert heart-shaped mouth that threatened to separate a man from his senses as well as sharp, brilliant green eyes weren't the only weapons in her arsenal. A bow dangled loosely in her grip, a quiver of black-flocked arrows at her side. If this was the female equivalent to Cupid, she was one dangerous deity.

"Artemis," the woman said, clearly defining her role in this bizarre fantasy.

John straightened Samantha's crooked legs, holding them flat with his hands. He kissed each kneecap, licking the tender flesh tucked behind them. He was like a distant thought, there and yet not. "Knee to knee," she heard him murmur.

Samantha wriggled and squirmed. Glancing over her shoulder, the woman in her mind nocked a silver-tipped arrow. "The Huntsman comes. Run. You're not mine to protect, Cowan." The woman vanished.

Opening her eyes, Samantha watched John kiss her stomach. "Phallus to womb," he murmured.

She put as much bravado into her words as she could muster. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

He raised his head, meeting her gaze. She shrank back with a little yip. His eyes were solid gold, no trace of human iris or pupil present. "Giving you what your heart desires."

"I want John, not whoever you are." She was beginning to think she didn't want him either. Of all the men she'd chosen to fall head over heels in lust with it had to be some black magic warlock.

"I am John." His voice buzzed, John's voice overlapped with a lower-pitched growl. "And you, Artemis, are mine at last."

Well, at least she could answer that clearly. "I'm not her."

He ignored her protest. She twisted in the restraints but the belt leather held fast. His hands skated up her sides. He kissed her breasts. "Breast to breast." He aimed for her lips. She turned her head but he caught her face, his grip rough. "Lips to lips."

Two things happened at once. She screamed into his mouth, arching her back and inadvertently—or not, in his case—driving him into her. Her underappreciated and overworked brain was bombarded with images. Not of Artemis, the female Cupid, but of a woman, no, a horse. The images overlapped, horse and woman. The golden-haired woman shook hair, a mane really, that Samantha, cursed with fine black hair, lusted after. Her eyes were brown, odd in a face that demanded the Californian typical surfer blue-eyed gal look. Unlike Artemis, this woman bore no weapons.

The woman's head turned as if she stared at Samantha from a distance. Then she shrieked, or maybe Samantha's scream was inserting itself into her dream, vision, hallucination, whatever. The scream carried, twisting and becoming a neigh. The

woman-horse pawed her hoof and shook her head, her mane draping around her like a golden waterfall. She issued another challenge.

Challenge? *Where did that come from?*

Samantha opened her eyes and immediately wished she hadn't. John's bright yellow orbs stared hungrily into her face. His fingers dug into her hipbones, pulling her harder into him. Another presence inserted itself into the back of her brain. God help her, was this how it felt to descend into madness? *Schizophrenia here I come.*

"You want a fair hunt?" Samantha taunted. "Release me."

John wavered, interrupted mid-thrust. Blue eyes boiled up from the roiling golden depths, emerging like a lava-cooled island from the sea. "Who are you?"

"Samantha Xia."

His hands skated up her sides, detouring to stroke the tender skin where breast met chest. "You aren't Artemis."

At the back of her brain that second presence stirred but continued to let her drive. "Samantha," she repeated.

He gripped her shoulders. "Tell me!" he shouted into her face.

She yipped and tried to recoil. Trapped beneath him, she had no place to escape. Her heart raced, breathing breaking from short gasps into a panting rasp. Silence spilled through her, and the alien presence came to life inside her, filling her as if her body was simply something to be tried on, like a piece of clothing. Tension slipped from her muscles and she stopped struggling. Whatever had slipped inside her had decided they fit. She lay quiescent, waiting for its lead.

Her head tipped back, the presence studying the restraints with new eyes. Her previous struggles had stretched the hole in John's belt. If she twisted one wrist she might be able to pop the buckle's tongue out.

She took a deep breath. A circle of white light surrounded them as if they'd been abruptly marked with a spotlight. John didn't appear to notice. The shadows, however, did. They backed off, clinging to the ceiling's corners, hiding in the cracks between the crown molding and the wall.

She twisted her wrist ever so carefully and met with pressure. Just a little more. The pressure released. She kept her wrists still. She didn't want to give away her freedom. "Let's play a game," she murmured.

His unfocused gaze centered on her tongue's actions. His breathing quickened, a harsh sound. "What kind of a game?"

"Hide and seek. Close your eyes."

How could that possibly work? But John's eyelids obediently drooped.

"Rest your head between my breasts," she instructed.

His nose burrowed between her breasts, his tongue flicking out to lick their sides. He nestled deeper, nose traveling around the curve of her left breast, circling the flesh. Her nipple tensed. He continued tracing circles, spiraling in tighter and tighter. When

he reached her areola and scraped his nose across the puckered skin her breath hissed out.

She twisted her wrist and one hand slipped free. Holding the bedframe, she freed the other hand as well. John never noticed the deception. His teeth and tongue and lips had discovered her tightly furled nipple. God that felt good. If he wasn't clearly possessed with psychopathic thoughts—no, she needed to escape. The presence riding her knew whatever he intended to do to her threatened to harm her. Her body wriggled beneath him.

He hummed, mouth greedily consuming as much breast as he could stuff into the warm, wet opening. Inside her his shaft stirred, teasing her.

She didn't want to leave him. She wanted him to ride her, to use her human lust to turn fear and bitterness into pleasure. Her emotions blended and overlapped with the Other's. She wondered if anyone had the balls to study her aura what they'd find.

She resisted the urge to cradle his head to her breast, to run her fingers through his sandy locks and mark the smooth slope of his back, bared to her. He'd ordered the Hunt though and Herne never rode alone. Bright lady forbid that something else claw its way through the veil between the worlds and lay claim to another human.

Her lips twisted. She'd picked up Lydia's oath. Or the Other's.

Both, a voice whispered. Now let's get out of here.

How? Her gaze settled on the closed door though she had no idea what lay outside. Maybe the rest of John's coven. There was always the window. But opening it would probably take more time than bursting through the door and she didn't know how far below the ground lay. Hell, she might be in the basement and have to climb out of the window well. No thanks. Door it was.

She forced her body to remain calm while she studied the rest of the room. A typical reading lamp perched on the nightstand to her right. Though judging by the elaborate motif painted around its base it was anything but a bargain basement find. She didn't have time or the options to avoid damaging priceless art.

He latched on to her other breast so hard she bucked her hips, a cry was wrung from her throat. *Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me.*

The Other gave a mental shrug. As John would say, "Sorry, darling." Grabbing the lamp, she smashed it on the back of his head.

His teeth clenched and he grunted. God, he'd tear her breast off. His body went slack. She and the Other weren't fooled. Well, she was, the Other was less trusting. Trapped beneath his bulk, she used the headboard to leverage herself free. Her arm muscles shrilled, stiff and unaccustomed to weightlifting her body mass. What she wouldn't have given to have him inside her months ago instead of a dildo and photo to comfort her.

She padded to the door, wincing as she tracked through porcelain lamp shards. Her hand closed around the knob. She looked back. John was on his hands and knees,

shaking his head. Yanking the door open, she bolted through the opening and nearly fell down several flights of spiraling stairs.

"Whoa." She grabbed the railing.

Run, the Other whispered. A sensation of being fully free swamped her. The ground churned beneath her hooves. The wind whispered secrets into her ears, bringing her unusual scents as gifts. One such "gift" belonged to Herne. Cedar mixed with lavender and bergamot, underlying coffee and vanilla notes. *John's cologne*.

"Herne," the Other protested, shaking her head. Lacking a body, it was Samantha's head that actually shook.

John bellowed, a deep cry of rage and pain.

She bolted down the staircase, clinging to the railing as her feet tripped over the marble steps. Smearred red footprints marked her passing.

Above her the door smashed open, hinges shrilling, wood splintering. She covered her mouth with her hand, muffling her scream. What had she done?

She skidded to the right, searching for a door to the outside. There wasn't any. Who put a grand staircase in the middle of a house with no one to see it? Window after window mocked her, their heavy lined velvet drapes reminding her of an executioner's robes.

"Samantha!" John called.

At least he remembered her real name.

She didn't bother to answer. Seizing a vase from atop a sleek ebony piano, she flung it through the nearest window. Pane and vase shattered. God, this was going to hurt. Wrapping her arm in a fold of drape, she knocked out the worst of the jagged glass. She grabbed the window frame.

An arm seized her around the waist.

She screamed, fingernails digging into naked flesh. John dragged her back into the room. "Artemis, I finally have you," he purred.

Twirling, she bit him on the shoulder until she tasted blood. John's head snapped back. She aimed for his neck.

He grabbed a hank of her hair and jerked her head back. Screaming, she spat blood and saliva at him. It splattered his cheek, marking it like bright red candle wax. Oh God, she was going to be ill. The Persian rug's colors blurred and swirled. She heaved her stomach's contents all over it.

"There now, darling." He dabbed the corners of her mouth. She snapped at his fingers.

He lost his grip, dropping her. She landed on her hands and knees, missing the rug and the vomit. Scrabbling for purchase on the glossy lemon-scented floor, she automatically kicked out and struck him in the shin.

He yelped but never slowed down.

Damn it. Too low. His hand wrapped around her ankle and dragged her to his side. One arm bound her to him, her back to his chest, forcing her to remain on her hands and knees. The other gripped her hair, jerking her head. He kissed the juncture of her throat where shoulder met neck. Her breath hissed out.

His lips traveled to her ear, his tongue licking its curves. "You aren't Artemis."

"Samantha," she said through clenched teeth. "Get off me!" But even as she said those words she knew if he took her, her body would respond. She'd programmed it too well to need him.

Silence met her demand.

Releasing her hair, his hand delved between her thighs and found her wet. He chuckled.

Her heartbeat thudded in her ears. "You're insane!"

"And you're Epona," he guessed.

She stilled, the Other renting headspace from her freezing in terror. She whimpered, a half human, half bestial sound.

"We're bound, my dearest, and may I remind you it was at your command I came."

The poppets! Where were her frickin' dolls? Then she remembered he'd already destroyed them. Had fire eaten away the spell or banished it someplace where she'd never be able to reach it?

"Too late for retreat. You began the hunt. And I will finish it." He plunged inside her.

The sound that tore from her throat lacked any human origins. Instinct or her own distorted desire surfaced. He'd proclaimed his need for her. She backed into him, driving him deeper inside her. He groaned, a guttural noise of pleasure. His hands sought her breasts, fingers finding her tight nipples and tweaking them. He kneaded her soft mounds in rhythm to his thrusts. She whimpered and wriggled against him, encouraging him.

In this position, he invaded her more deeply than anyone ever had. One hand released her breasts and crept to the juncture between her thighs. He burrowed into her curls, capturing them between his fingers and tugging. She mewled.

"What do you want?" he panted.

It took her a moment to catch her breath.

His finger passed over her nub, wringing a gasp from her lips. Her nerve ends tingled, robbing her of pain, intellect and gods-knew-what shreds of self-awareness she still possessed.

"You started it, darling. Now finish it." His finger worked its way inside her, tracking the path his shaft had formerly traveled.

So tight. So full. So absolutely mind-blowing delicious. Her muscles tightened, wrapping around him, joining them. She shuddered, toes curling, eyes rolling back into her head. Her orgasm rattled her teeth.

"I feel you," he whispered. "Greedy little witch." He pushed another finger inside.

She threw her head back and screamed. His growl echoed hers. Pulling out, he rolled her and picked her up in one sweeping move. Her body still twitching with aftershocks, she couldn't marshal the effort to fight back.

Something cool and smooth brushed her back. He spread her legs, hooking one leg over the side of whatever she lay on. Her toes trailed across ivory keys, playing a scale of notes. He'd propped her on the piano. Before she could open her eyes to verify, he plunged into her again.

This spread position bared every bit of her to him. He wasted no time slipping his fingers inside her, groaning as his nails raked his engorged skin. His thumb found her nub. She hissed when he touched her. Ignoring her protest, he bent and seized a nipple in his mouth.

Back arching, she rose off the piano. Wet fingers trailed up her stomach, resting at the base of her throat. The smell of her sex filled the air. "Uh, uh, uh." He pressed her flat.

He drew almost completely out of her, lingering long enough to tease her with his girth.

God, how could he still be hard? Worse, how could she still want him?

His eyes were golden again. "Remember your wish?"

Hell, she could barely remember her name.

"Eternal youth," he prompted. "A devoted partner. No concern over money."

She couldn't find her breath, which was okay. He didn't seem to expect a response from her.

"I'll grant all your wishes, darling, in one fell swoop." He slipped inside her, drawing a groan from her throat. "Just come for me."

She shuddered, his words ringing dully in her ears. She didn't care what he was trying to offer. She just wanted him. Man, monster or deity, it didn't matter. She'd bound herself as closely to him as she had him to her. Her hips rose to meet his.

The friction between them built. The air crackled. She swore her hair started on fire, the acrid smoldering scent it carried making her eyes tear. A couple more strokes and *she'd* be on fire. Perhaps literally.

One of his hands left her flesh. She mourned its departure.

He cupped his gift to her in his hand. The bubbles frozen within the glass paperweight winked and flashed. The scent of salt filled her nose. The lap of waves beckoned.

If he intended to bludgeon her to death with it—

His lips quirked, as if he could read her mind. He gave a slight shake of his head. "As you've bound me, so I bind you." He fought to speak the words, veins standing out along his neck. A bead of sweat ran down his brow. He was as close to orgasming as she was.

There were worse ways to die.

She yielded to him, her body exploding in a lightning flash of heat and sensation. So this was how it felt to be fucked to death...

Silence ruled.

She opened one eye, certain she was dead.

Her body was supported by marshmallow fluff. Wiggling her fingers and toes, she turned her head. She lay on a bed draped in black silk, her outflung arm leached of color. Lifting her hand, she touched her fingertips to her face. Still there. Did that mean she was alive?

She gazed beyond the bed. Prisms of light reflected back at her, as if she lay inside a diamond.

Had she died? Was this the entrance to the Summer Lands?

Beyond the brilliant sparkle shadows rippled, the flash of black and mauve and gold.

Her breath caught in her throat.

An eye took up the entire width of one shimmering wall. While she watched, it blinked.

Slipping off the bed, she wondered where she found the nerve to still function. Her body moved jerkily, as if it and her brain had chosen separate paths. Walking to the wall, she placed her palms on the smooth surface.

It felt like glass.

She tipped her head back. A dome of sky-blue glass curved above her.

The eye on the far wall retreated, a pair of lips joining it. May the Bright Lady and whatever goddesses she could muster save her.

Samantha was trapped inside John's glass paperweight. The thick glass walls swallowed her scream.

Epilogue

Glass, like civility, is a fragile entity. Beware its wicked edge.

John leaned back in his office chair, feet propped against the windowsill. Dawn approached, heralding the shortening of days, the coming of Yule in a handful of months. The sun crept stealthily across the steel and glass landscape, scaling structures with a leopard's litheness, leaping from building to building, pouncing on air vents and rooftop gardens. It struck his window, repelled momentarily by the UV panes. Then it spread like warm caramel across the panes' slick black surface, as brilliant and cold as a diamond's heart.

He held Samantha's prison up to the light.

Samantha appeared unaware of his interest. She arched her back, body draped across the bed like a lissome dancer. Her eyes were closed, legs spread and hooked over the bed's footboard. She wore nothing but Lydia's amber necklace. The stone nestled between her breasts, a trapped bit of flame against a body of polished ivory. Atop the black silk platform she looked like a goddess. A disinterested, self-absorbed bitch.

His hand clenched.

"Mine," he whispered and shook the globe.

Alerted to his interest, she caught his gaze. Her eyes' black depths beckoned, the glint of unexplored galaxies taunting him. Silken strands of hair floated about her, framing a siren's eyes set in a cherub's face.

She blew him a kiss, devoid of any panic he'd seen in his other prey. Her hand covered her mons. "Mine," she echoed. The dome swallowed the vocal sounds but he could clearly read her lips.

He reached for her, fingertips scraping futilely against the glass barrier.

She laughed.

He raised the globe as if to fling it against the wall. His arm froze. If he broke it, she'd no longer be his. Once freed she could not be imprisoned again. Those were the boundaries of his spell. He swore.

Pressing her breasts against the glass, she reached between her legs, teasing, taunting. Her mouth opened, a red vortex that reminded him how she'd gulped him down. The tiny tip of a pink tongue touched her top lip. His shaft flared to life, bumping uncomfortably against its cloth confines.

He carefully set the paperweight down at the far edge of his desk. Plucking a tissue from its box, he draped it over the globe.

There. Take that.

He picked up a report that needed to be read. The print wavered and blurred. Setting it down, he put his finger beneath the first line of text, following the words as he read. He glanced at the covered globe. What was she doing? Did she continue pleasuring herself, regardless of his disinterest? He had to know.

He lifted the tissue. She'd unscrewed one of the knobs on her bedpost. Her glistening temptress's lips hovered above it. Saluting him, she lowered herself.

Cernunnos be damned. He couldn't resist her. What had he gotten himself into? He watched her, frustratingly aroused to the point of pain, mesmerized by her antics. Giving himself relief would only add to her power over him.

He clicked off his cell phone. The report lay forgotten on his desk. The telephone rang several times until, with a snarl, he ripped the cord from its bowels.

Time possessed no authority within the globe. Nor did the baser needs of the body. Sustenance. Sleep. Those were the living's constraints and of no concern to Samantha. She continued to entertain herself. *Insatiable wench.*

Behind his back the sun rose and set, then rose and set again.

PIERCE MY HEART

Dedication

For Randy and Julie. Inspiration comes in so many sizes and shapes, mud-covered and otherwise.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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

Barbie: Mattel, Inc.

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Boy Scout: Boy Scouts Of America Corporation

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Jaguar: Jaguar Cars Limited Corporation

Playboy: Playboy Enterprises International, Inc

Princeton University: Trustees of Princeton University

Realtor: National Association of Real Estate Boards

S'more: Hershey Chocolate & Confectionery Corporation

Chapter One

"Jessie, smell this." Celena held out her arm.

Jessie eyed her warily. "Is that your sniffing arm or your licking arm?" She couldn't remember how her now very drunk friend had talked her into coming to a sex toy party. She was sure Celena had good intentions. It wasn't healthy for her to sit alone in her empty house.

"Sniffing arm of course, silly." One arm was reserved for smelling body lotions, the other for adding flavor to the skin, assuming there was a partner ready to nibble the flesh.

"Then why is it wet?" Jessie pointed out.

Celena frowned. "Oops." She held out her other arm.

"It's wet too."

"Party pooper." She flopped back in her chair, her frizzy mop top of brown hair bouncing with her.

"Why don't I get you a washcloth and you can start over with a fresh sniffing arm?"

Celena's smile lit up the room. She hugged Jessie. "That's a great idea. You're so smart. I have such a super friend." She slurred her "S"es. Jessie was glad she'd chosen to be the designated driver.

She stood. "Be right back."

Celena grabbed her arm. "You're having a good time, aren't you?"

"A blast," Jessie lied.

"I'm glad. Life's short. I hate seeing you miserable." She wrapped both hands around the wine goblet and slurped its contents.

Because she didn't know how to respond to emotions laid so bare, Jessie pulled away. "I'll be right back." She headed toward the kitchen. Margaret, Celena's friend and party host, was also plastered. Jessie suspected she and the toy demonstrator were the only sober occupants in the house.

The paper towel holder was empty as well as the napkin rack. Jessie glanced under the sink. She hated to rummage through an acquaintance's cupboards. Maybe Margaret had extra supplies stashed in the pantry.

With a sigh, she took a moment to trace the elaborate P in the etched glass of the pantry door. What was she doing here? Celena was trying so hard to cheer her up. The more Celena tried, the more Jessie withdrew. She'd let her life end the day her husband's did. She knew it was wrong, knew deep down she should fight her way out

of the hole she'd fallen in. But most mornings it took all her willpower just to get out of bed, let alone spend time on herself.

Shaking herself out of her funk, she opened the pantry door and paused, confused. There were no shelves inside. Instead it opened to a sunroom washed in silver shades of moonlight.

She started to back out.

A shadow shifted, rearranging itself. "Hello," a woman's voice said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intrude. I was only looking for a washcloth or some paper towels..." She trailed off. "This isn't the pantry, is it?"

The woman laughed. "Yes and no. Come in. Come in."

She was drawn to the sound of the woman's pleasant voice, the soothing silence and the sheer magic of the moon-washed room. The pantry door shut with a click behind her.

"I shouldn't disturb you."

"Nonsense." The woman waved her hand. "Have a seat." A padded white patio chair disentangled itself from the shadows.

Jessie sat facing the woman. Once her eyes adjusted to the natural light she found she could see her more clearly. The moonlight was kind to her unexpected companion. Deep chocolate-brown hair, silver threads running generously through the mix, was wound in an elegant bun at the nape of her neck. Her forehead was smooth and unlined but there were creases at the corners of her eyes and lips. Overall it was a rather nondescript face, easy to look at but just as easily forgotten. Her gray silk shirt was a shade lighter than her eyes, her dark pants a black divided skirt with wide legs.

Jessie fumbled for her words. Socialite she was not. "Do you live here too? Margaret has a gorgeous home."

The stranger crossed one leg over the other, revealing a sensible black flat. "Ach, where are my manners? No, I'm just visiting." She held out a manicured hand. "Call me Sissy."

This elegant woman before her didn't look like a Sissy. Maybe a Victoria or an Elizabeth, something more regal. "Jessie Arrows." She shook her hand.

"I know." She glanced up, the glass ceiling revealing the evening sky. "Beautiful, isn't it? Why aren't you enjoying yourself?" The stars twinkled above them, diamonds against black velvet.

"Umm." How did the woman know her? And wasn't it a bit rude to be so forward? But Celena was exactly like that as well. That was one of the reasons Jessie loved her so. "Is it obvious?"

"You are the only sober one."

"Perhaps I don't drink."

"You have too many lines on your face for one so young."

That stung. The sudden pulse of emotion surprised her.

Sissy laughed, a tinkling sound. "I see I've offended you."

"No," Jessie said stiffly.

"I mean only to say you look worn, like a neglected Oriental rug. The colors and intricate patterns are still there, but sullied."

And that's more polite? Jessie sighed, looking away from Sissy. "I should get back to the party." *And away from this sharp-eyed woman.*

But it was quiet here, the shadows soothing. She relaxed against the back of the marshmallow-soft chair. She closed her eyes. If a complete stranger could see how miserable she was, what about her friends?

"Have you ever wondered what your subconscious might say to you if it could speak? If you listened with your whole soul instead of that very practical head of yours?"

"You mean go to a psychiatrist?" She snorted, her eyes still closed. "No." She didn't want anyone poking around in her head. She could barely stand being there herself.

"No, I was thinking of less orthodox means. Tarot cards, perhaps."

She opened one eye and found Sissy watching her carefully. "Quack science."

Sissy didn't appear insulted. She drew a deck of cards from within the folds of her odd skirt. Jessie blinked. The shadows shifted again. It was only Sissy crossing her legs. Sissy began to shuffle the cards, back and forth, from hand to hand. They made a whispery scratching noise as they rubbed against one another.

Jessie raised an eyebrow.

"Tarot cards," Sissy said.

"You can't be serious."

"You dream, don't you? This is merely dreaming with your eyes wide open."

She used to dream. She couldn't remember the last time she had. Most nights she collapsed into bed too numb to do anything but succumb to sleep's impenetrable vault. Only her alarm clock could rouse her.

Sissy pulled a small shelf out of a hidden storage space in the arm of her chair. She spread her cards facedown in a circle. "Come. The others are having a bit of fun losing their inhibitions. Why not you as well?"

She had a point. No one had to know. She straightened in her chair, both eyes open now. "I'm a scientist."

Sissy shrugged. "So?"

"I live by the concrete. What can be proven. A deck of cards is nothing but colored paper. No magic involved."

"You've never had a hunch? A whisper from the subconscious begging you to try a different path?"

Jessie pressed her lips tight. Everyone had hunches. One of her coworkers called it “educated inspiration”. “Oh all right. What do I need to do?”

“Choose ten cards.”

“And from this random selection you can map out my life?” Doubt colored her words. Yet she picked a card from the circle strewn before her and handed it to Sissy. “Here.”

Sissy held up her hands, refusing to take it. “Lay it down, face up, in front of you.”

The card held a picture of a man lying prone, staked to the ground with ten swords. “A bit of overkill, don’t you think?”

“The Ten of Swords.” Sissy eyed her thoughtfully. “Yes, you wear your sorrow. This is the most desolate card you could have chosen.”

“Lucky me.”

“You recently had a horrible loss.”

She thought about her husband, about the cancer that’d claimed his life in less than three months. She bit her lip to keep her tears from falling. She shrugged.

“Choose another and place it crosswise over the first.”

She flipped the chosen card and laid it down. It showed a heart pierced by three swords.

“Three of Swords.” Sissy’s frown deepened. “Sorrow, heartbreak, emotional pain. Pick another and place it below the cross.”

So far she was batting a thousand. She turned a card. A woman with wavy dark-brown hair, not unlike her own, stood in front of a wall of swords. Bound and blindfolded, the character radiated helplessness.

“Eight of Swords. You’re stuck in quite a rut, aren’t you? Someone has been cruel to you. You’re hurting and unsure how to carry on.”

Jessie shifted uncomfortably in her chair, glancing toward the pantry door. Escape was so near.

“Humor me,” Sissy encouraged.

With a sigh, she picked a fourth card. Sissy slid it to the left of the murdered man. “More swords. What else is in this deck?” A picture of a man paddling in a flat-bottom boat, the bow punctured with swords, faced her.

“Six of Swords.”

“The artist who drew these has serious issues. Nothing but dead and sad, wounded people.”

“There are other cards. These all came to your hand. Interesting, eh? The Six of Swords signifies change.” Sissy tapped the dead man pierced with swords. “See the break through the clouds? Your difficult times will soon be over.”

Jessie folded her arms across her chest. “This isn’t divination, just lucky guesses.” How much worse could her life really get?

Sissy tipped her head. "Out of all the cards you've chosen the unhappiest. Do you think that is mere coincidence?"

Jessie opened her mouth and closed it, swallowing back the sharp retort. She didn't want to insult Sissy. Instead she said, "Maybe they're all unhappy cards."

Sissy actually rolled her eyes, an inelegant gesture at odds with her appearance. "If every reading was miserable, there would be a lot less people using the cards."

Jessie stabbed at a card with her forefinger then flipped it.

"King of Cups. It seems to be out of character for you, or perhaps I misread you." Sissy tapped the card thoughtfully. "The King of Cups indicates a deep, intuitive knowledge of the human condition. You have the ability to see into another's heart." Sissy's lips curved. "Maybe your own as well."

She didn't want to hear any more. "The cards aren't quite infallible, huh?"

"If you'd work with me, maybe we'd get somewhere," Sissy muttered, allowing a hint of irritation to creep into her voice for the first time.

Jessie tried not to laugh. She turned another card. A caricature of Rapunzel's tower was sketched on a black background. Lightning and flame poured out of the tower's peak. Two upside down bodies flanked the tower, people plunging to their deaths.

The hair rose at the nape of her neck. She kept her tone light. "Well, at least it doesn't have a picture of a sword."

"This signals an abrupt change in your life, Jessie. Maybe a promotion." She hesitated. "Or a failure."

"Any other cards I should look for?"

"Death, perhaps."

Jessie's smile was cold. She chose another card. "My knight in shining armor." Or the prince rescuing Rapunzel from her tower. Too late.

"Card number seven. Knight of Swords. How interesting. This represents one of two rival forces. Any tall, dark, handsome men in your life?"

"No men," she muttered. "I'm not looking for another man."

"Oh but this one is both charming and arrogant, a passionate lover."

"For Pete's sake! Do I look like someone who'd attract that kind of person?"

Sissy dodged the question, a smile tugging at her lips. "And his rival?"

Jessie picked another card, her movements savage. She bent its corner, glanced at Sissy guiltily. Sissy didn't appear to notice.

"Knight of Cups. My, my. Another exceptional lover." Whatever she saw on Jessie's face made her add, "Or devoted friend. A dark path you've started down."

"Am I done?" She didn't want to think about sex or men. She'd buried her needs and wants and desires for far too long. She was afraid of what she'd do to the first man who caused them to surface.

"You're still a woman," Sissy said, as if reading her thoughts. "The next card will show you how to resolve the tension between the two knights."

A ram-horned creature glared at her from the card she turned.

Sissy chuckled to herself. "You've been neglecting your needs for far too long. You and your knights will have a bit of fun." Her eyes sparkled and she held up a hand to forestall the inevitable protest. "One more."

"Sex. Two lovers. And a bunch of people fascinated with sharp, stabbing objects. You'd think I was some sort of deviant."

"Everyone is a deviant in one way or another. Some just hide it better."

"What a charming thought."

Sissy actually laughed, a deep-throated, musical sound. The shadows skittered around the room as if they'd been struck by a disco ball's shadow-shattering rays. Jessie glanced around suspiciously but there was nothing apparent to have caused the odd dance.

The last card held an image of a chalice. A white dove dipped its beak into the cup. "Ace of Cups," Sissy said. "Well, that goes hand in hand with your knights and the devil. You have a chance to learn to love again. I suspect your knights will show you the way."

Six of the cards were laid out before her in the shape of a cross. The other four formed a pole on the cross's right.

Jessie stared at the pictures, the man in the middle with his heart pierced by swords, surrounded by his cousins, all with swords as well. "I suppose I should thank you but I'm not sure it's been entirely pleasant."

"Sometimes your subconscious needs a physical voice to make itself known. You scientists are the worst. So hardheaded. So sure your path is the only right one. And yet our most brilliant revelations lurk in the shadowy corners of our minds, waiting for the right time to burst forth."

"I'll try to remember that," Jessie said dryly. She stood. "I think it was nice meeting you, Sissy."

"Be careful with your life, Jessie. Your research is very valuable."

Jessie's eyes narrowed. "How do you know that?"

"I recognized your name. I read the *Journal of Science*."

Jessie's jaw dropped. This woman who based her life on fate and the toss of some silly cards read science journals? Dry science journals. She might as well have declared she was from another planet.

Sissy gathered her cards up. "You think my teapot lid's askew. It's not, you know. You're working on a vaccine for AIDS using CAEV-positive goats." Her cards vanished in the folds of her billowy pants. "Innovative. Refreshing. Reminiscent of daVinci. It's all you've worked on since your husband left you behind. You'll burn out at this pace."

Jessie backed toward the door. Who'd told her? Margaret? Celena? She wanted to fire back with a searing remark but grief abruptly clogged her throat. The room was too dark, too small. She put her hands out for balance, seeking comfort. "I have to go."

Sissy looked up, alarmed. "Jessie —"

Jessie didn't want to hear any more. She bolted out the door.

Leaning against the closed pantry door, she tried to get a hold of herself. Sissy just happened to know which buttons to push. Some people were like that. Her research wasn't secretive, just obscure. Not obscure enough, though, to dodge budget cuts. She'd been informed on Friday her funding had been cut. Her research assistant took the news hard and had quit that day as well. No two-week notice, just packed her things and left. Monday was going to be hell.

"There you are! What's taking so long?" Celena wandered into the kitchen. "I licked my sniffing arm." Her face wrinkled in disgust.

Jessie wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. "I couldn't find any washcloths or paper towels."

"Margie's a neat freak. They're right here." Celena reached around Jessie, fumbling with the pantry's knob. Jessie stepped out of her way.

Celena opened the door, stepped in and pulled out a handful of washcloths. "Here." She swayed slightly.

Jessie caught her friend's elbow as she backed out of the room. "Where'd you get those?" She peered around the open pantry door. Neat rows of cans stared back at her. The third row was devoted to linens, the bottom to cleaning supplies and paper towels. "This wasn't here a minute ago."

Her throat constricted. It'd finally happened. She'd lost her mind. She stepped into the pantry and rapped her knuckles against the back wall. It sounded solid. "There was another room here, a sunroom."

"Margie doesn't have one," Celena said, voice muffled by the door.

Jessie stepped out. "Look. I was sitting in her sunroom not five minutes ago, chatting with a woman named Sissy." She couldn't afford to lose her mind. It was all she had left.

Celena gave her a blank look then leaned forward conspiratorially. Jessie balanced her, hand still on her elbow. "What are you smoking?" Celena asked. Her breath reeked of alcohol.

"I don't do drugs!" Maybe she should start.

Celena eyed her suspiciously. "Hmm."

"I swear."

Celena didn't believe her. And quite frankly she wasn't certain anymore either. She wasn't a woman prone to fanciful imagination. After settling Celena back in her seat, Jessie found Margaret. The woman was holding court in the corner of the living room, empty martini glass in one hand, skewered mushroom in the other. As she spoke she

waved the mushroom like a miniature scepter, blessing her subjects with drops of vodka. She sported one of those hundred-dollar haircuts and a tailored gray t-shirt that probably cost more than Jessie's entire outfit. Jessie rolled her eyes. Margaret wasn't in much better shape than her guests.

Of course, Margaret probably hadn't conjured up an additional room in her house and a person to go with it. Maybe she shouldn't cast stones.

She drew close to Margaret. When a lull appeared in the conversation she asked her, "Pardon me, but do you have a sunroom?"

"A fun room?" Margaret repeated. Her brow wrinkled ever so slightly, like melting plastic – Botox did have some limitations – and then she grinned. "Oh! You stumbled on my dungeon. I thought I locked that room."

Oh lord, the woman actually had a room in her house for sex toys? She didn't want to cover that territory, not with Margaret, not with anyone. "No, no," she said hastily. "Sunroom. Greenhouse."

"Honey, I get all the sun I need from the tanning parlor." The mushroom went flying across the room. Margaret didn't appear to notice.

Jessie wandered off. How could she have dreamt up not only another person but an entire conversation with another person and a secret room to boot? She knew nothing about tarot cards or fortune-telling. Had Margaret spiked the food? It seemed the only logical explanation.

She sat next to Celena, numb. Celena chatted happily at her, pointing out things she'd purchased from the catalog. Jessie didn't see how any woman could be completely enamored with a sparkly glass dildo. It wasn't a baton, for god's sake. Who cared if it sparkled?

The one-sided conversation stopped. Celena looked at her expectantly.

"Sorry, my mind was elsewhere."

"Really? I said, let's go home. I wanna try out my new toys." She gargled her drink and spit it back into her glass. "I'm tired. I can't believe you didn't share what you smoked."

"I don't do drugs," Jessie hissed. "Maybe Margaret spiked the food."

Celena snorted, hiccupped mid snort and collapsed against the back of the sofa, laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"You." She tried to keep a straight face and failed.

"Okay, let's go home."

Celena snickered then put her fist in her mouth to plug her laughter.

Chapter Two

Jessie dropped Celena and a handful of other partygoers off at their homes, pouring inebriated bodies into sympathetic and not-so-sympathetic husbands' and boyfriends' arms. She also made sure Celena was tucked in bed before leaving her. Celena had no one to make sure she didn't drown in a puddle of her own vomit.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been awake until four a.m. She lived on the fringe of the suburbs, where one could still see mature trees and wake up to the occasional rooster crowing, compliments old Mrs. Erwin's illegal flock of backyard chickens. Since Jessie was also buying eggs from Mrs. Erwin, she couldn't turn her in to the town constable.

She turned down her street, her car's headlights illuminating someone's dog rummaging in the trash. Beasley, the neighbor's overweight beagle mix, poked his head out of a shredded trash bag. His eyes gleamed, phosphorescent. He dropped his prize piece of garbage and abruptly darted across the street.

Jessie slammed on the brakes. The car surged forward. *Shit. Shit. Shit. Wrong pedal.* She jerked the wheel. Her feet fumbled for the brake pedal. Something hit the car with a thunk. The car slid across the street like a carnival bumper car, coming to rest against some garbage cans.

She didn't remember getting out of the car. She just found herself running. Something lay too still in the street. Dropping to her knees, she fumbled for Beasley. Blood dripped out of the corner of his mouth. His eyes were already glassy.

"No!" she screamed, pounding her fists against the pavement. The last thread holding back her misery snapped. She'd suffered enough. Why did everything around her have to die?

"Miss, are you all right?" A man's voice came from behind her.

She hiccupped. "I killed Beasley."

The man knelt beside her. "Let me see." His voice was smooth, soothing.

She didn't bother to look at him. "He's dead! He ran across the street. I hit him with the car." Oh God. She put her knuckles in her mouth to keep from screaming...and vomiting.

The stranger touched her shoulder. She flinched away, exposing Beasley. His hands massaged the little body, feeling along the dog's ribs.

She tasted bile. Turning her head, she vomited. The stranger wordlessly handed her a handkerchief.

"Thanks." She wiped her mouth. Her sanity returned piecemeal. What man carried a real handkerchief these days? And what should she do with it now? It seemed rather

disgusting to give it back. She folded it and tucked it in her coat pocket. More importantly, what was the stranger doing up at four in the morning?

"I heard you hit my trash cans," he said absently, as if he could read her thoughts.

Either her mouth had disconnected from her mind or she seriously needed to look into therapy. This was the second person she'd encountered today who could read her thoughts. Of course, the first had been imaginary. Maybe he was as well. Her body shook so badly her teeth rattled. Who knew today would be her day to take a dip in the insanity pool?

She tried to not look at the fat little body beneath the stranger's hands but she couldn't help herself. She blinked. What the hell? Beasley was licking the man's hand.

Her jaw dropped. "But-but he was dead." She looked at the man.

He has kind eyes, was her first thought. They were a warm blue, etched with sun-tipped lashes. He had strong features, a high forehead, dominant nose and square jaw, all softened by a generous set of lips. A few tufts of blond-streaked hair poked from beneath his woolen cap. Her heart tapped a staccato beat against her breastbone. If he had been invented by her overworked and depressed mind, she had a better imagination than she expected a scientist to have.

"I'm Michael Carrigan," he said, breaking the spell.

"Are you a veterinarian?" She congratulated herself on finding her voice.

Beasley rolled to his feet and stood up. He didn't have any blood on him. She worked in a lab. She knew what dead animals looked like. Beasley had been dead. She was sure of it. She shook her head. As sure as she had been sitting in a sunroom talking to a tarot-reading psychic.

"No, no. I bought the house for sale on this block." He pointed to the house with the Realtor's sign still in the yard, two doors down from hers.

She flushed. "I saw Beasley. Then he ran into the street. I tried to swerve." And then she surprised both of them by bursting into tears. "He was dead," she whispered. Beasley licked her hand then trotted off to wreak havoc on someone else's trash.

"You just had a fright." He stood, offering her his hand. She couldn't imagine what she looked like. Disheveled, kneeling in the street, crying over a dog that was very much alive. Oh what the hell? She put her very cold, unreasonably trembling hand in his.

His warm fingers curled around hers and he pulled her to her feet. Dropping her hand, he smiled gently. "You'll be okay." He said it more as a statement than question, as if he was certain of her sanity, while she was less and less sure of anything let alone her mind.

She sniffled, dashing away the tears with the back of her hand. "Welcome to the neighborhood."

He grinned and the stone that occupied her heart's spot cracked ever so slightly. "Where do you live? Close by? I'll see you home."

She held out her hand. "I'm Jessie Arrows. I live two houses down from yours."

He shook it firmly. "The old brick bungalow?"

"Yes. You needn't bother. I can drive myself. I'm sorry I woke you."

"It's no bother. I'm awake and dressed. And you're bleeding."

She glanced down. Her nylons were torn and blood seeped from her scraped knees.

"And shaking," he added. He pulled off his wool coat and draped it around her shoulders. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

She was left standing at the curb wrapped in a stranger's coat while the same stranger trotted toward her car. His scent clung to the cozy wool, an unexpected shield against a cold she couldn't rid herself of. He smelled, oddly enough, like gingersnap cookies, spicy and sweet at the same time.

Michael Carrigan pulled one horribly crushed plastic recycling bin from beneath her parked car and tossed it beside two dented metal cans. She cringed.

Her car limped into her driveway and then the headlights flicked off. She wasn't hurt. It was idiotic of her to stand here waiting for him to retrieve her like some frail damsel in distress. She started toward her house, snagged the heel of her shoe on the curb and stumbled. A hand caught her elbow, saving her knees from a rendezvous with the sidewalk.

"Careful," Michael warned.

"Thank you. You have impeccable timing." How had he gotten to her so fast? He must have run all the way from her garage but he didn't look winded.

He steadied her while she alternated hopping on each foot as she took off her shoes.

He eyed the broken heel with an odd look, a touch of a smile mixed with genuine concern. "Perhaps you can have them repaired."

"Everything I touch breaks." *Or dies.* She tossed her shoes in the nearest garbage can, which happened to be one of the cans she'd just disfigured with her car.

Michael kept his hand on her arm as he walked to her house. "I don't believe that."

"You don't know me."

"Beasley ran off."

"I swear he was dead," she muttered.

His hand squeezed her arm gently. "But he ran off." He stopped. They'd reached the bottom of her driveway. "Look at the positive side. It allowed me to meet you."

She gazed into his face. It was warm and smiling. His blue eyes were a splash of color in a world that'd bled to black and white and grays. Her fingers itched to touch his cheek, to run her fingertips over the shadow of beard marring his smooth features.

He remained utterly still, forcing her to break the spell. "Umm, good night or good morning...and thank you."

He dropped her arm somewhat reluctantly. "You're welcome." He hesitated. "Would you come if I invited you to a housewarming party?" His smile was a bit lopsided but sincere. "I don't know many people here yet."

It was those slight asymmetrical features that made his face charming. The way his nose curved, almost too prominent save for the hint of a bump on the end. Perhaps an old break? The eighth of an inch higher arch in one blond brow than the other. The faint white scar that crossed his neck at a funny angle. Michael Carrigan had truly intriguing features.

He was still waiting for her answer. No. "Yes." She tried a tentative smile. Contrary to her belief, her face did not crack. "Yes, that would be nice."

His smile widened, creating a dimple in each cheek. "Wonderful. Sleep well, Jessie Arrows. I hope I'll see you soon." He turned toward his house.

"Wait. Your coat." She shuffled out of it, reluctant to part with the borrowed warmth.

Taking it, he folded it over his arm.

She rubbed her arms to keep from shivering.

"You'll catch cold," he said. "Better hurry inside."

She didn't feel like sleeping. Nor did she want to be alone. "Would you like a cup of coffee?" she blurted out.

"I thought you'd never ask."

What was she doing inviting a strange man into her house? He could be an axe murderer. Or worse yet, he could be married. Sighing, she let her inner demons battle it out while she unlocked the back door and let herself into the kitchen.

He followed, draping his coat over the nearest chair. "I would have never guessed," he murmured.

The kitchen was done in white, black and red. A black-and-white checkerboard floor marched diagonally across the room. The stove was a true antique, bright red and as cantankerous as an old maiden lunch lady. She had used it regularly when there'd been two in the house to cook for.

"Decaf or regular?" she asked, ignoring his curious glances.

"Whatever you're having is fine."

She put on a pot of decaffeinated coffee—she hadn't decided whether she'd try sleeping yet or not—and pulled two round mugs from an open shelf. Now what? She was reluctant to leave the safety of her kitchen counter. She turned, resting her hands on the smooth black countertop.

He had quietly seated himself at her table and pulled off his hat. His hair was white blond, the creamy color of real butter. The ends that had poked out of his hat curled a bit haphazardly. His plain navy blue shirt was unbuttoned at the throat, sleeves rolled up as if he'd been interrupted mid-project. Ah yes, she'd been that interruption.

"Sit." He indicated the open chair beside him. "I'll check your knees."

She glanced down. "They're just scrapes. Really, they don't hurt." *Much. Icky oozing scrapes.* They'd probably get infected.

"I won't bite."

She sighed, running her fingers through her unruly mass of hair. She needed a haircut. Shoulder-length hair was too much for her to manage. "That obvious?"

He nodded. "Sit," he repeated.

Oh, why the hell not? "Wait a second." She stepped into the hallway and out of his line of sight then peeled off her sticky nylons. Her knees did hurt.

When she returned she found Michael by her sink. He turned, damp washcloth in hand.

"Really, that isn't necessary." Her mouth went dry.

His smile was patient. "Jessie."

She sat, afraid he might say her name again. The way he said it made her knees weak. Foolish thoughts danced in her tired brain. He was just being kind.

His shirt stretched tight as he bent over her, revealing the broad curve of his back. Cupping her calf with one hand, he steadied her leg while he cleaned the scrapes. He dabbed at a particularly tender spot. Her breath hissed out.

"Sorry, it's a little deeper than the others."

"What do you do for a living, Michael?" she asked, trying to take her mind off his clever hands.

"Rescue damsels in distress."

"Seriously?"

He paused, glancing up at her. A few weak rays of early morning sunlight trickled through her kitchen window's blinds, setting his hair ablaze. The highlighted strands sparkled like liquid gold.

"Seriously?"

She nodded, holding her breath.

"I'm the new organist for St. Bartholomew's Cathedral."

She exhaled.

His blue eyes gleamed with amusement. "Expecting something more glamorous? A bit mysterious?"

"I'm afraid I have preconceived notions about musicians." She reached out and ruffled his hair, surprising them both. "Starting with this. It's too short."

"I disagree," he whispered. "Anything more than a fistful is too much." He rose on his knees, fisted his hand in her tangled mass of hair and pulled her face to his.

The logical side of her resisted but her sneaky subconscious had teamed up with her libido. She leaned in to the kiss, resting her hands on his shoulders. His lips tasted sweet, like peaches. His hand cupped her cheeks and she felt the odd strength in his long fingers. He drew back, sweeping his fingertips across her lips.

"I wanted to do that the moment I saw you. So beautiful. So alone."

She opened her eyes. It'd been so long since she'd been kissed. She didn't know what to say or do. She simply stared.

"Coffee's done," he said smoothly, drawing away from her. He stood and filled their coffee cups. "Sugar or cream?" he asked, as if the kitchen belonged to him rather than her.

She shook her head, regaining her senses. "Black."

She watched as he poured a generous amount of sugar and cream into his own, until it appeared more like chocolate milk than coffee. He set her cup beside her then joined her.

"It's been a while. And that was a surprise," she began again, a bit lamely. She pinched her upper arm, trying to regain some semblance of sanity. She wasn't some starstruck teenager. Where had her mind fled?

His eyes twinkled over the rim of his cup. He set the cup down. "You've forgotten nothing."

"Umm, thanks?"

He laughed and she found herself smiling back.

"Consider it payment for the garbage cans." Michael glanced at his watch. "I have to head off to morning services. You'll be okay, won't you?"

"Of course." She hid her disappointment well.

"I'd like to see you again, Jessie. So don't hide from me." He pulled on his coat and hat.

"That would be nice," she replied.

He laughed again, at what she wasn't sure, then squeezed her shoulder. "Keep your chin up. The dawn's coming." He walked out the door.

What did he mean? She must have been overtired, nerves strung too tight. The first thing that came to mind was that silly card she had drawn at Sissy's. The Ten of Swords—the one with the man speared to the ground with ten swords. In the distance, dawn had been encroaching on night's territory.

And what was with that kiss? It must be the lack of sleep. She wanted to smile idiotically and daydream over it, to call Celena and gossip like they were teenagers. Celena was most likely dead to the world and would be for several more hours.

Jessie poured herself another cup of coffee. She needed to seriously consider taking some time off from work.

Chapter Three

"Hold the door," Jessie begged as she raced across the parking lot. Her coworker Scott Gills juggled two cups of coffee and obediently tried to hold the door open with his foot. She caught a cup just as it fumbled out of his grasp. "Thanks."

He grinned. "Anytime." Scott had an easy grin and sweet-natured, laid-back personality. His sandy brown hair was cut in a low-maintenance crew cut, slightly too long on top to be professional and prone to curling in the heat. His warm brown eyes could flick from serious to amused in a second. All the scientists she knew lacked the ability to carry on normal conversations. Particularly with members of the opposite sex. She wondered why some girl hadn't snagged him yet.

"Is this mine?" She held up the coffee cup she rescued.

"Yes."

"Thank you."

He eyed the stack of paperwork cradled in one arm. "You look more cheery than I thought you would, seeing as you just lost your best research assistant."

"Does that scare you?"

"Oddly enough, yes."

She laughed and he looked startled at her sound of gaiety as well.

They entered the office lobby and flashed their picture badges at the security person. He waved them through. They hit the elevator at the same time. Scott punched the button and they headed down.

The silence was comfortable. She sipped at the coffee, savoring the warmth and the caffeine. She allowed herself one cup of caffeinated coffee a day. She'd make the most of it.

"You look different today," Scott began again. The elevator doors opened.

"It's been an odd weekend. I did something I haven't done in a long time."

Scott raised an eyebrow. "You shaved your legs?"

Lips pressed tight, she tipped her head and gave him a black stare. Skirts weren't something she was known for wearing at the office. "Hah. Hah. I went to a party Saturday night and stayed up past midnight."

"And you didn't turn into a pumpkin." His gaze softened. "I'm glad to hear it," he said in a low voice, squeezing her arm.

Her face grew hot and she wasn't sure why. "I also met my new neighbor at four a.m. when I totaled his garbage cans with my car," she added as a distraction. His quiet

gaze was unnerving. Next to Celena, Scott was her closest friend. She'd known him since high school.

Scott's face drew into a frown. "Tell me you didn't drive drunk. You know you can call me at any hour. I would have picked you up."

She waved off his offer. "I didn't drink." *Hallucinated, yes. Drank, no.*

"Are you hurt?" The genuine concern in his eyes and voice was touching.

"No. Just destroyed some garbage cans and dented my car." *And was kissed by a complete stranger in my kitchen.* That was something so out of line with her personality she'd never mention it, not even to Celena. No matter how out of this world good it was. She had dwelled entirely too much on a simple kiss.

"Well, kudos to whatever part of the evening helped you. It did you a world of good. You look," he hesitated, "rested."

It was her turn to frown. "So you're saying I look better after a car wreck than when I get my full eight hours of sleep?" Her dark hair was pulled up in a simple ponytail, nothing fancy. But she had taken the time this morning to dab on a hint of lip gloss and actually put on mascara. It'd been months since she'd done that.

He raised his cup of coffee in a salute. "Whatever or whoever lifted your black mood, I'm thankful to." He took a big swallow. "Don't hit me." He dodged her feigned punch. "Meet me for lunch?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure if I can take much more of you today."

He grinned. "Same time, same place. I'll even buy dessert."

"I'll remind you of that."

They reached the T-intersection in the hallway and went their separate ways. She unlocked her office door, flicked on the lights and dumped her paperwork on her desk. Without her assistant Kathy the office was too still. She checked her rats, measured out their food and water and moved on to the next room and her bigger subjects.

Eight doe-eyed goats of mixed ancestry bellowed as she opened the door. "Ladies, I'm not late," she said. The girls disagreed. She needed to draw and process blood on all of them today. Normally Kathy would have had them fed and watered already. They complained loudly at the injustice, propped up on their pen doors in a line like a group of elderly, walker-bound Vegas showgirls. Her does had been corrupted by a damn morning person who doted on them too much.

All her does tested positive for CAEV, basically a goat version of the human AIDS. Her girls were special though. They naturally made antibodies against human AIDS. Jessie had dedicated her career to manipulating that extraordinary feature in the hopes she could find a vaccine. She was willing to spend her lifetime trying to do it.

She had her arms full of the does' hay when an unfamiliar voice said from behind her, "Need a hand?"

She glanced over her shoulder. "Who let you in here?"

He stood at least six feet tall and held himself with a lanky grace. He shrugged and held up an index card trapped between his thumb and forefinger. "Security said it was all right. You're advertising for an assistant."

She dropped the hay and snatched the paper from him. Kathy's neat handwriting marched across the index card. Bless her. So she did care. "Minimum wage is all I can afford to pay. And it's part-time."

"Not a problem."

She studied him as if he was a particularly complex algorithm. He looked too old to be a student. He wore his dark hair shaggy, his bangs brushing his carefully groomed eyebrows. His eyes were very dark, almost black, and set deep into his face. High cheekbones and a narrow nose hollowed out his cheeks, accenting a carefully groomed mustache and goatee. A thick gold ring adorned his pinkie finger.

"Are you independently wealthy?" she asked, unwilling to believe someone other than a college student would want to work for her. "Wait, it's not my business. Do you have a resume? Any prior experience?"

"Both," he said. The hollows vanished when he smiled, revealing a row of perfectly straight white teeth. He pulled a folder from the computer bag he carried and offered it to her.

Dusting the hay off her hands, she took it. Deacon Price. Mr. Price had a lot of experience, from assisting in archaeological digs in Egypt to working in a lab setting at Princeton. She glanced up at him. He was staring at the goats. He also had earned master's degrees in both chemistry and biology. Why would someone with so much knowledge want to take a minimum wage job? He looked like he'd be more comfortable on a photo set, modeling some bad boy line of underwear.

She cleared her throat, dispelling any images of him naked. What was with her today? It was like she'd let her imagination out of Pandora's box. "Any references?"

He handed her another sheet.

"I'll have to check these before I can officially offer you a job, Mr. Price."

He folded his hands in front of him. "Understandably. But if you wish I could start today. You'd be welcome to fire me if my references aren't impeccable." He rocked back on his heels. "I assure you they are."

He had listed one of the foremost Princeton University scientists as a reference. That intrigued her. She closed the folder. Why not? At least she'd have some labor for the day. "All right then. I need blood drawn on each of the girls, three tubes each."

He arched an eyebrow.

"The goats."

"Ah. Of course."

She pointed him to the supply cabinet and left him to his own devices. Her desk needed serious organizing and she had to go through what Kathy had left behind as well. She spent the better part of the morning analyzing her notes, setting aside

information Deacon could key in later. When she brought her empty coffee cup to her lips she stared at it, surprised. Normally she never managed to drink an entire cup before lunch.

Normally she didn't stay out until four in the morning and invite strangers into her kitchen or office. Perhaps she'd slid unknowingly into a new soap opera chapter of her life. Depressed, sometimes hallucinatory widow seeks financially stable, sane and healthy atheist... What a grand date she'd be. She frowned to herself. Celena was addicted to that kind of fluff—soap operas, tarot card readings, psychic hotlines, blind dates, horoscopes. She, however, was a professional.

At the moment, Celena's life seemed the more enviable of the two.

With an irritated sigh, she tossed her coffee cup in the trash. The building's lounge had decaffeinated coffee as well, if one could call that grit-infested stuff such. She wasn't that desperate. She returned to studying Kathy's notes. Rubbing the back of her neck, she shivered. Annoyed, she glanced around. She should have a sweater tucked somewhere around here.

Deacon Price was leaning in the doorjamb of her office, basket of filled tubes in one hand. He offered her a languid smile, gaze roving over her. The man knew he was handsome. The knowledge of his appeal haunted his eyes, an arrogant self-awareness. Michael Carrigan—now there was a universally attractive man. She shook her head. She shouldn't be sizing up men, particularly a man she was possibly going to hire on as her research assistant.

She stood and took the basket from him. "Thank you."

He raised an eyebrow. "Anything else?"

Damn, the man exuded sexuality from his pores. Her face flushed. "How are your typing skills?"

The slightest bit of a frown flashed across his features. "Quite satisfactory."

"Great." Kathy was an adequate typist but she'd fallen behind when Jessie needed her hands in the lab. "There's a computer here," she hurried on. "I'll have to sign you on with my user ID and password until security gets you your own."

He perched on the edge of Kathy's desk as she logged him on to the computer and showed him how to enter what she needed. He leaned over her slightly and she caught a whiff of his cologne. Bone-melting musky cologne. Her mouth went dry and her stomach did a funny flip-flop.

Had her body chosen to mutiny?

"Ms. Arrows?" His voice was low and husky.

She glanced at her watch. She was going to be late for lunch with Scott. "I'm sorry. You'll have to make it quick."

There was that gleam in his eye again, that quick surprise. Did women simply fall at his feet? He recovered smoothly. "Of course. It can wait." Glancing at the leaning mass

of papers before him, he lifted the first sheet with his thumb and forefinger and scanned it. "Your directions are succinct. I'm sure I'll have no problems following them."

"Good." She snatched a piece of paper and jotted a number down on it. "Just in case, though, here's my cell phone number."

Another raised eyebrow was all she coaxed from him. "I'll be fine."

She grabbed her purse from her office and headed out the door.

Scott wasn't waiting for her. His office was empty, computer screen locked. It wasn't like him to be late or to forget. Thinking he might be in the washroom, she waited for a few minutes. But the man didn't magically appear. Slightly annoyed now, she started down the hall, intent on checking with the security guard at the door. Maybe he'd already left. He was toast if he had.

As she was passing by the lounge's open door, she heard voices. Pausing, she thought she caught the sound of Scott's laugh. That was odd. The lounge offered only vending machines and the aforementioned wannabe coffee. Then she heard the lilting high note of a woman's voice. She felt like she'd been kicked in the stomach.

She shouldn't pry. She made no claims on Scott. He was just a good friend. But she found her footsteps slowing. Halting, she backtracked to the door and peeked inside. She could see the woman but not Scott.

The woman said something in a low voice then reached out and touched his arm. He laughed in appreciation. Jessie's gut twisted. How could she possibly be jealous? She wanted Scott to find a nice girl and settle down. But the woman she glimpsed was not her vision of the perfect wife for Scott.

She had naturally blonde hair, not a dirty blonde but a silken spill of palomino mane that ended mid-back. Right now she wore the hair clipped in a single large barrette but Jessie could picture her flinging that mane over her shoulder like a *Playboy* model. She had the pale white skin of someone who rarely saw sun but her soft pink nails and lip gloss added color to her features. Of course her curves happened to be in all the right places, even though she was dressed in a discreet white lab coat. The collar of a chocolate silk blouse peeked out. She could serve as a poster model for the term "blonde bombshell". And she did it with such a natural grace it had Jessie gritting her teeth.

Glancing at her watch, she shrugged. She only had a limited time for lunch. She wasn't going to waste it standing around and watching him flirt. Ignoring the churning in her stomach, she turned around and headed for the bank of elevators.

In no mood for a meal but well aware of her body's mutinous hypoglycemic nature if she skipped one, Jessie picked up half of a sandwich from the lobby vendor and headed outside. Asantic Research Facilities tried hard to take care of its employees. A small walking path curved around the tree-shaded acreage, looping its way to the shining gem in its center, a pond stocked with koi. Jessie strode over the lawn, ignoring

the winding paths, cut through an opening in the privet hedge and plopped herself down on a vacant bench. It was late enough that most of the employees had already retreated inside. She was left alone with her thoughts and the begging koi splashing at her feet.

She'd started the day off in a great mood. It should have continued through the day. After all, she might have found a competent research assistant while Scott played with a potential new lover. She ignored the irrational thought. He was just talking to her, being polite. Talking didn't translate into automatic sex. Jessie usually admired his easygoing nature, his gentle way of teasing out the most shy of people. God, did she expect him to remain single forever?

Yes.

Her cell phone rang. She dropped the unopened sandwich beside her, rummaged in her purse and pulled out her phone. It was Scott. She toyed with not answering it but that was childish and immature. She refused to believe she was either of those.

"Hello?"

"Jessie, I'm running late. Did you already get lunch?"

"Yes."

There was momentary silence on the other end of the phone. She hoped the guilt was eating away at his psyche. Okay, maybe she was a *little* childish. "Dessert too?" he asked.

"I'm not really hungry." Out of the corner of her eye she saw a shadow cross through the hedge's opening. She swore silently to herself. She'd hoped to have some privacy.

"You sounded more chipper this morning."

"That was before I was stood up for lunch."

He sighed. "I lost track of time."

"Easy to do," she said smoothly.

"Yeah, well, I promise to make it up to you."

"That isn't necessary."

"Jessie, you sound angry. What's wrong? Where're you at?"

She took a deep breath. There was no reason for her to be angry. She rubbed her brow with her fingertips. "Nothing's wrong. I'm just taking in some sunshine." She lightened her tone. "What time are you working 'til?"

"Just five tonight. I'll walk you out?" He sounded hopeful.

"Sure."

"Great. See you then." She heard his phone click off.

Snapping her phone shut, she rested it against her forehead, eyes closed. She wasn't a bitch. She repeated the mantra to herself until she felt better. The wooden bench creaked. Opening one eye, she glared at the person who dared to sit next to her.

It was Sissy.

"Beautiful afternoon," Sissy remarked. She was wearing her wide-legged black pants and black ankle boots rather than flats. Her shirt was a cool blue today, collar opened to reveal no less than five strands of gold chain wound around her neck. A bit overdone for a walk in the park, Jessie thought.

"Margaret didn't have a sunroom," Jessie muttered, glancing away.

"No, she didn't," Sissy agreed, voice pleasant.

"That makes you a figment of my imagination."

Sissy snickered. "Does it now?"

"It does." Jessie unwrapped her sandwich and proceeded to break chunks of bread off and throw them to the waiting fish.

"Have you seen a psychiatrist about it?"

Jessie gave her a sideways glance. "No."

"Then how do you know I'm not real?"

She paused mid-throw. "I met you in a room that didn't exist. How could you possibly be real?" Dropping the bread chunk, she flung the rest of the slice at the fish. It bounced off an orange koi's head and was attacked by the waiting throng.

Sissy leaned forward and pinched her on the arm.

"Ow."

"That'll bruise. Imaginary creatures don't leave marks."

Jessie glanced at the red mark on her upper arm. "I could easily have made that mark myself, just to convince myself that you exist."

Sissy sighed melodramatically. "Scientists." She reached back and pinched Jessie high on her back. "Figure that one out."

With a yip, Jessie slid off the bench. "Who do you think you are?"

"According to you, a creation born from your overworked mind. Why would you dream up someone like me?" She reached into the folds of her pants and pulled out two tarot cards. She tossed them on the spot Jessie had just vacated. The Knight of Swords and the Knight of Cups stared back at her. "You said yourself that you've never played with tarot cards. Did you conjure these as well?"

Jessie shrugged. "Celena likes to play those kinds of useless games."

"I see." Sissy was silent for a moment, looking toward the fish pond and the splashing koi. "And what of Deacon Price and Michael Carrigan?"

"What about them?"

Her glance was sharp but Sissy continued to stare across the water.

"Oh please. Don't tell me those are my predestined knights in shining armor." Jessie gave a short, humorless bark. "The next thing you'll be telling me is that I'll be having sex with both of them."

Sissy was silent.

"Pul-lease."

"They are not really knights," Sissy said carefully, crossing her arms. "Michael is Virtue, from the fifth choir of angels, not that you keep up on that sort of thing. And Deacon, well," she hesitated, "Deacon is a Power, from the sixth choir. They both have their unique skills."

"In the bedroom?"

Sissy colored. "Fringe benefits," she muttered.

Jessie had had enough. She turned on Sissy. "Why now? Why not six months ago or even a year ago? Do you think I'm any more or less whole now than then?" She tried to keep her voice steady but it shattered on the last question. She cursed to herself.

Sissy flinched at the vicious tone. "What you are trying to do is worthwhile."

Jessie ignored her statement. "What Mother Teresa did was worthwhile. I'm doing my job." She raked her hand through her hair; the rubber band holding it back clung to her fingers. Her hair tumbled in haphazard waves to her shoulders. She viciously tucked it behind her ears. "Okay. For sake of argument let's assume you exist. You're telling me you're here to make sure I don't burn out. What does it matter to you?" She flung her arms up. "I don't even know who you are, what you are, how you control people's lives."

"People choose to have their lives controlled," Sissy corrected absently. She patted the empty spot beside her. "Why don't you sit?"

"Why don't you go away?"

Sissy looked at her levelly. "You are acting like a child."

Jessie resisted the urge to fling the rest of her sandwich at Sissy. *Try getting mayonnaise out of that pretty blue blouse.* Instead she carefully crossed her arms over her chest. She took a deep breath and exhaled. Sissy was a figment of her imagination. Arguing with her—it, she corrected—was just making her crazier. She closed her eyes. "I am not having this conversation."

Sissy laughed. "You cannot will me away."

She took another deep breath then exhaled slowly through her nose. "You aren't here."

"I see you need something more substantial than a pinch," Sissy murmured.

"I am taking a break," she told herself. She made herself take a bite of the sandwich, chew and swallow. "This is substantial. This is real." She was just irritable because she had had too much coffee and too little food.

"Jessica Louise Arrows, stop talking nonsense."

Now she sounded just like her mother. "You can't force me."

The words were barely out of her mouth when she was thrown forcibly against the bench, her back striking the wood and maybe a bolthead or two. She winced.

"I can only allow so much leeway."

Jessie opened her mouth.

"Zip it." Sissy was sitting straight on the bench now, both feet firmly planted on the ground. "I can tolerate a certain amount of disbelief but this is ridiculous."

She tried to speak but no sound came out. Struggling on the bench, she felt like a beached fish thrashing in the sand. Her arms refused to work properly. Her legs just lay there like they didn't belong to her body. There was a rustle of sound. Sissy swore softly to herself. Scott stepped into the ring of hedges, looked around and then focused on Jessie.

She suddenly found herself sitting upright, in control of her limbs again. Sissy was nowhere to be seen. What had just happened? Her half-eaten sandwich, more worried apart than chewed, lay beside her on the bench. She must have suffered some sort of seizure. There were no tarot cards in sight.

"Jessie?" Scott asked. "Was there someone else here? I thought I heard arguing."

Jessie shrugged and tried to remain nonchalant. "Did anyone pass you? There's only one way in."

"No. Do you normally carry on conversations with yourself?" She wondered how much he had heard. Frowning at her sandwich, he nudged it aside as he sat on the bench. He held a small brown paper bag. "I brought you something to eat."

She was absurdly pleased by his concern. She shook her head. She needed to remember the reason they hadn't been eating together was because he blew off their appointment so he could be with the blonde bombshell. But then her stomach rumbled. "What did you bring me?"

His smile lit up his face. "Guess." She sighed and his smile slipped just a bit. "Roast beef, fresh tomato. I added the lettuce and tomato. They came from my garden."

"Really?" She had a hard time summoning any interest.

"Heirlooms, and soon to be last of the season. Hey, I'm having a cookout tomorrow night. Why don't you come?" His brown eyes pleaded with hers. There'd been lots of cookouts in the past but she'd stopped going. It'd turned out to be too much effort.

She hesitated. "I'm not sure."

"My friends won't bite."

"I should get back to my office."

"Jessie." He set the bag between them then took her hand. His grip was warm. His thumb rubbed back and forth over her knuckles.

"Thank you for the roast beef," she said, not looking at him. The koi had given up on her and swum off.

He squeezed her hand but didn't say anything.

"I will eat it."

"I'm sorry I missed lunch," he said quietly.

In a gesture that surprised them both, she turned toward him and rested her forehead against his shoulder. She wanted to tell him she was going insane, that she needed an MRI or worse, a shrink. She wanted to explain how absurdly jealous she felt when she saw him talking to that woman and how that confused her more than she could possibly admit. The words stuck in her throat.

He took her other hand in his and simply held them. "I'll always be here for you."
"I know." For the first time in a very long time, she felt content.

Chapter Four

Jessie held a check addressed to Michael Carrigan in her hand. It had seemed like a good idea when she'd written it out in her car. After all, she had destroyed at least one of his garbage cans and his recycling bin. Now that she was standing in front of his door however, she wondered if she was only courting trouble.

She rang Michael's doorbell. It chimed several times, echoing through his house. There was no answer. She could just wedge the check between the screen and house doors. She tapped the envelope against her open hand. She wanted to see him again.

And that, like many thoughts during the last couple days, astonished her. She was actually seeking out another person's company, not because she needed to but because she wanted to.

Stepping off the porch, she skirted the flowerbed and headed to the front window. Cupping her hands, she glanced into Michael's front room. The room was bare save for a sleek white grand piano. The behemoth took up nearly the entire room. How had anyone managed to get it in the house?

"Find what you're looking for?" a familiar voice asked.

She yelped, dropping her envelope.

Michael caught her elbow. "Easy there. I forgot you said you were a walking disaster."

She shook off his hand and bent to retrieve her envelope. "I wanted to give you this." She offered it to him, a dirty heel print clearly embedded on the flap.

He took it. "What's this?"

"A check for the garbage cans I destroyed."

"I didn't expect that, Jessie. I'm just glad you didn't hurt yourself."

"Yes, well, I felt I owed it to you. I hope you cash it."

He folded it, tucking it into his coat pocket. "Thank you. It was unnecessary but thank you." He glanced at his watch. "Did you just get home from work?"

She didn't miss the small frown. "I don't have much of a social life. Sleep, eat, work. It works for me," she added as he opened his mouth to say something.

He nodded, apparently rethinking his words. "So it's early to bed tonight?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to hear me play sometime?" he asked, glancing at the baby grand.

"That would be nice." Not tonight. Tonight would be spent booking an appointment for a complete physical. She needed to rule out the brain tumor idea, which, in her mind, was preferable to insanity.

He smiled. "How about tomorrow morning? The early services are at six. You'd have plenty of time to make it to your office."

"At the cathedral?" How long had it been since she'd stepped inside a church? The memory came unbidden. The day she'd buried Jim had been the last. She still remembered the sound of the thick oak doors shutting behind her as she followed the coffin out. Scott had been one of the pallbearers.

"Nobody's there," Michael continued. "Just the priest and the sisters from the cloister, and they sit by themselves. The organ sounds so grand in an empty church. And the nuns sing like a choir of angels."

She didn't feel particularly heavenly at the moment but his blue eyes were lit with a private fire. Here was a man with passion, with a need that drove him like her work drove her. The burning ferocity called to her own flame. "Yes, I think I could manage it."

He smiled, revealing his dimples and a wide, white set of teeth. "Wonderful." Taking her elbow, he helped her off his lawn and back onto the sidewalk.

"Is that all you do, Michael?"

He gave her a puzzled look.

"Play? Is that all you do?"

"Life is short. One should focus on what one's passionate about."

"I agree."

"But passion shouldn't be mistaken for obsession," he added.

He dropped her arm and she sighed.

"Passion comes from here." He put his hand over her heart, careful to avoid grazing her breast. "Obsession from here." Two fingertips brushed a stray strand of hair away from her forehead. Then he replaced his fingertips with his lips, just a sweet sweep of warm silky skin across her flesh. He pulled back. "Do you believe in love at first sight?"

"No," she said automatically. He looked crestfallen. "Lust at first sight," she offered.

His blue eyes darkened. "How about desire at first sight?"

"You have a way of twisting words," she said, a smile playing on her lips.

"And you a way of sweeping them aside. It's a good defense mechanism," he added. When she would have protested he put a finger to her lips. "I'll see you tomorrow morning. Thank you for the check."

He spun around and vanished into his house before she could offer a word of protest. Spellbound, she watched him go. Then, cursing softly to herself, she strode down the walkway and headed home.

Jessie's cell phone rang as soon as she entered her house. "Look out your window," Celena said in her ear.

She stepped to the window and parted the lacy curtain. Having finally been disturbed after months of neglect, the dust motes exploded into their own dismal version of fireworks. Jessie sneezed. Celena's zippy red sports car was pulled up at her curb.

"Whatever you're thinking, the answer is no," Jessie said. "I'm tired and —"

Celena plowed right over her protests. "We're going exercising."

Jessie bobbed the phone. "What? What did you say?"

Celena climbed out of her car while she talked. A pink velour jumpsuit clung to her curves. "Put on some comfortable clothes. I've got a treat for you."

"Exercising?" Jessie repeated. "Have you been drinking?"

"Yes, an elixir of love, baby," she snorted, laughing to herself.

Jessie heard her stomp up her steps. Her door was flung open. Celena clicked off her phone. "Don't just stand there. Get your butt moving." She glanced around the living room. A slight frown crossed her face. "Girl, you need to hire a maid service."

"It's on my list of things to do," Jessie muttered. "Last I looked, exercising wasn't even mentioned."

Catching the edge of the curtain with her thumb and forefinger, Celena gave the fabric a quick flick. Dust motes littered the air. "Probably got lost under the 'Host Haunted House Party' list. This place's a disgrace."

"I've seen your house," Jessie reminded her.

"Yeah. Mine's messy but that's camouflage. To hide the cracks and structural issues. You, you're plain lazy."

She clearly wasn't going to win today. She switched subjects. "Exercising, you say. What prompted that epiphany?"

Celena gave up on the curtain. "It's code for get off your lazy butt and get a prescription for Prozac. Or go to the gym with me and check out the new yoga instructor."

Jessie sighed. A normal person would have been insulted. A normal person wouldn't have picked someone like Celena to be a best friend, a woman whose lips and body, though not always her brain, were in constant motion—even in her sleep.

She resisted the urge to pull out her hair and instead pasted a smile on her face. "I'll see what I can find in my closet."

"You could just get some single miserable fat friends to hang out with instead," Celena offered.

"Kill you and start fresh? Don't tempt me."

Armed with a somewhat presentable pair of shorts and t-shirt, Jessie crawled into Celena's car. Her muscles were already crying out in protest. It was too cold to exercise. She was too tired. She needed to replace her shoes. She planned on getting up early

tomorrow. The only wise thing she did was to keep her whiny thoughts to herself. Celena would show her no mercy.

Celena thumped the steering wheel with the flat of her hand. "Hurry up. Class starts in fifteen minutes."

"Can't we wait until afterward and just get his autograph then?"

"Some of us aren't as genetically gifted as others, skinny bitch. Chocolate gravitates to my ass. I wish they'd ban candy jars in offices. They're more dangerous than secondhand smoke. And they can go ahead and block those cooking channels too. *The Secret Life of Chocolate*," she mimicked. "I could show them where chocolate ends up." She leaned forward and slapped her ass.

Jessie rolled her eyes and tried to repress a giggle.

"That's better. Buckle up, now, 'cause we're gonna fly."

They arrived with five minutes to spare, a time-traveling feat Jessie had no wish to ever repeat. Celena spent a minute scrounging through her purse looking for her pass, failed to find it, and then chewed up another minute explaining, in rapid-fire English that sounded nothing like the English Jessie'd learned, how she'd misplaced it. The gum-popping girl at the check-in counter had biceps larger than her breasts and probably could have bench pressed Celena if she'd wanted to, but she simply gave up and waved them in.

It must not have been the first time she'd dealt with Celena.

Celena sniffed at Jessie's choice of outfit but they didn't have enough time for her to come up with a scathing comment.

The class was packed. Wall-to-wall mats adorned the floor like unstitched pieces of a crazy quilt. Women dressed in every color of the rainbow—and some colors that had no place in a rainbow or, for that matter, on a woman's body—covered the mats. Celena waved to someone in the far corner then elbowed and apologized her way through the throng. Jessie followed in her wake.

She managed a few halfhearted stretches before Deacon Price walked in. The room silenced.

"You've got to be kidding," Jessie muttered.

Glancing her way, Celena actually shushed her.

"I hired him this morning. He's my new research assistant." Apparently he taught yoga as well. She couldn't have been more shocked if a Martian or—she searched her brain for an exercise guru and sad to say, could only come up with one—Richard Simmons strolled in.

Black spandex clung to his thighs, his ass barely hidden by the charcoal running shorts he'd pulled on over the biker spandex. A sleeveless tailored blue shirt hugged his shape, its edges trimmed in charcoal. She groaned to herself.

His gaze slid over the crowd then settled on her. His lips curved politely and he gave her a slight nod. The woman next to her misread the look and cooed. *Oh for god's sake.*

"Good evening, ladies." His voice oozed sex appeal.

Had stepping through the gym doors landed her in some alternate reality? One in which perfectly sensible women abandoned their brains and fawned over a man like he was some sort of decadent dessert?

The music started, a low throbbing beat that made her suspiciously think of sex. Or maybe her mind had just remained in the gutter since Michael's kiss.

Then Deacon struck the first pose. Muscles rippled across his abdomen, straining against his shirt. Cheater. He had to be deliberately tensing. Not that she was about to stand up and stage a protest.

After a few simple poses he shifted into a more complex posture. Celena slid effortlessly into the form. Jessie struggled for a few seconds, her muscles protesting, then lapsed into something more simple and definitely less elegant. Deacon stood and slowly walked around the room, making minute adjustments on women, praising those with Gumbylike bodies.

He stepped to Jessie's side. She kept her eyes focused straight ahead. "Ms. Arrows, I'm surprised to see you here."

"Ditto," she muttered.

His low chuckle made her heart race. She inhaled slowly, held the breath then released it. She wouldn't deny he was nice to look at, but she refused to salivate over him.

"Would you like assistance?"

Her face flamed. "That'd require cutting some tendons."

Stepping behind her, he carefully adjusted her elbows, his touch professional. "This will place less strain on the joint. Stretching in the morning and the evening would help as well."

She nodded and he moved on.

Celena squealed softly. "He touched you."

"Remind me not to wash," she said dryly.

Celena stuck her tongue out.

"Wasn't that just fabulous?" Celena asked, rocking on her heels. "I'm so energized I feel like running a few laps."

Jessie finished tying her shoes. "Isn't yoga supposed to relax you? Not juice you up worse than a shot of caffeine?"

"I can't believe you hired him. I'm so jealous. You sure you don't have any openings for me there?"

"Unpaid. 'Sides, I don't have time to waste drooling over him." She shouldered her duffel bag and followed Celena's skipping form out of the locker room.

Celena pirouetted. "Spoilsport."

"Watch out—"

Celena collided directly with Deacon's back.

Deacon caught her by the elbows. "Careful." He'd changed into a pair of dark slacks and a crisp white button-down shirt. His damp hair clung to his forehead.

Celena batted her eyelashes at him. "Hi."

He set her on her feet and took a discreet step backward.

Jessie snickered. "Mr. Price, this is my friend Celena Drew. Celena, close your mouth. He's not a dental hygienist."

Celena shot her a black look that morphed into sugared sweetness when she turned her head toward Deacon. "Thank you. I love your class."

Deacon's gaze was for Jessie. "Did you enjoy it, Ms. Arrows?"

"Jessie's fine and yes, it proved, if anything, that I am grotesquely out of shape. Thank you. I hadn't pictured you teaching exercise classes," she added.

"Then we're even. I hadn't pictured you attending them."

She should have been insulted but she wasn't. Success didn't come without sacrifice.

"Don't worry. It won't cut into my lab time," he said smoothly.

"I didn't mean to suggest that—"

"We're stopping off for a cup of coffee," Celena interrupted. "Would you like to join us?"

Both stared at her.

"Decaf?" she squeaked. When no one answered, she tried again, "There's a great martini bar downtown that just opened up."

"My day starts pretty early," Jessie murmured. "Maybe Friday night?"

Deacon gave Celena a polite smile. "I'm rather new here. Does this martini bar have a dance floor?"

"Oh yeah." She handed Jessie her car keys. "Do you mind dropping me off at Jessie's when we're done? We carpooled."

"Of course not." He offered Celena his arm but his gaze was still on Jessie. "I can't wait to see what this place has to offer."

As he escorted her friend away, she couldn't help but worry. She knew very little about the man. Celena's moral compass was questionable even when she was sober. What were the odds she'd only order a soft drink? She rolled her eyes. What if he took advantage of her? The car keys jiggled in her hand.

"Damn it," she muttered. She wouldn't sleep until she knew Celena was safe.

What did all these people do for a living? The Chesapeake Blues was packed. Cars spilled out of its too-small parking lot onto the street. She parked in the used bookstore's lot, three blocks away. Deserted at this time of night, the lot's single yellow light did nothing to improve the looks of the worn brick building. Heavy bass music spilled out of the bar's doorway whenever people entered or exited.

Shouldering her purse, she raised her chin and prepared for the frontal assault. People themselves weren't the problem. Drunken people, loud music and too many bodies crammed into too small of a space were. How was she ever supposed to find Deacon and Celena?

By the time she made her way to the bar three men had offered to buy her a drink. Four if she counted the set of twins who looked barely of age. Were men really that desperate? Or was she the one exuding one-night-stand fuck-me vibes? Usually Celena was the object of men's attentions. A burly guy her dad's age made room for her at the bar.

"What's your poison, honey?" he asked, tipping his beer bottle toward her.

Beer? In a martini bar? Only in Wisconsin...

Someone draped his arm around her shoulder. "I am."

She turned around, fully prepared to toss a half-full bowl of pretzels at the presumptuous stranger. Deacon dropped his arm. "I didn't expect you here."

"Where's Celena?"

He nodded toward the throng on the dance floor. Jessie caught sight of Celena's frizzy curls, trapped between two familiar gyrating forms. How typical. The set of twins had moved on to greener pastures.

She carefully set the bowl of pretzels down.

He bent close to her ear to be heard over the music. "Worried I'd take advantage of her?"

Cologne drifted around her in drugging haze. "Sorry. I don't know you." She tried to give herself some space but the bar top was at her back.

His lips twitched, amused or irritated, she wasn't sure. He shrugged. "Either way, I've been abandoned. Care to keep me company?"

"I really do have to get up early tomorrow."

His eyes widened, mock shocked. "But you have a new assistant. Surely he can be trusted with such simple chores."

"You presume a lot."

"And you trust entirely too little." He took her arm and steered her toward the door. "I saw a nook just outside the door."

The nook turned out to be the remains of a bus stop or former telephone booth. Either way, it didn't have much room. She squirmed in his grip. "I really need to get going."

"Chicken."

She froze. "What did you call me?"

"You're afraid to be alone with me."

"Excuse me? I worked all day with you."

"Safe and sound in your corporate prison. Untouchable." He licked his lips. Her eyes followed his tongue's movement. Sliding his hand up her arm, he rested it on the bared skin of her neck. His thumb stroked her chin.

She would have sworn everyone could hear her heart beat over the thrum of the bar's music. She swallowed hard then swallowed again. "I make a habit not to get involved with my employees."

He tipped his head. The streetlights glinted off his dark eyes. "If I remember correctly the last one was a woman. Kathy?"

She nodded once.

"I'd imagine she wasn't much of a temptation."

His thumb drifted to her lips, his nail lightly scraping the tender skin. He traced their outline, lingering in the crease. She need only part her lips to taste him. Where'd that come from? She started to shake her head but his fingers joined his thumb to cup her cheek. Her eyes widened.

Lowering his head, he kissed her.

She'd expected sweetness, predicted the desire that made her clench her thighs and sigh. But she hadn't anticipated her own need. It simply overwhelmed her, swiped rational thought from her mind and begged her to touch. She balanced against him, her hands sliding beneath his unbuttoned coat and digging into his shoulder blades. His other hand caressed her cheek, imprisoning her face in his grip.

And still he kissed her.

Her lips parted. His tongue accepted the unspoken invitation. Her body melted against his. One hand released her face to open his coat and tuck her beneath it, sharing his warmth. That devilish hand played along her curves. Her nipples ached. His fingers dug into her waist, drawing a small moan from her. Then they began to knead her thigh.

"Geez people, get a room. Or use a car." Celena's voice broke the spell.

Jessie stepped back and Deacon let her, his hand falling to his side. She jammed her hands in her coat pockets.

"What are you doing here?" Celena continued, eyes gleaming. Her face was flushed from dancing, hair crazily framing her face but still cute on her.

"I came to make sure you were okay. You can't trust anyone these days." She shot Deacon a black look. He merely smiled the smile of a satisfied male.

Ooh, she wanted to punch him.

Celena laughed. "R-i-g-h-t. I'm fine, Jess. Why don't you let your assistant drive you home?" She winked at Deacon.

She jammed the keys into Celena's outstretched hand. "It's not what it looked like."

Celena wiggled her eyebrows. "Lots of work to do tomorrow. Going in early to work. I understand." She turned to Deacon. "Thanks for the drink. Watch out. She has a tendency to run."

"I think I can take her," he murmured.

"Standing right here," Jessie said, quietly fuming at both of them.

Celena laughed again then gave Jessie a peck on the cheek. "'Night, girl. Too damn cold to stand out here without a coat on. I'll call you tomorrow."

And she was left alone, car-less and downtown, with Deacon Price.

He pulled his keys out of his pocket and held them up. "Want a ride home?"

"Can I trust you to keep your hands to yourself?"

He held up two fingers. "Scout's honor."

She couldn't picture him ever being a Boy Scout.

True to his word though, he didn't unnecessarily touch her. He did hold the car door open for her to step into his shiny black Jag and shut it behind her. Then, when he wasn't shifting, he rested his hand on her knee. It was an innocuous gesture but it made her wish his hand would creep a bit farther north. She'd laid the ground rule though, and he obeyed. This one couldn't read thoughts.

When they reached her block she noticed the lights on in Michael's house. She glanced at her watch. Midnight. Michael sat at his piano, head bent over its keys, fingers flying from one side of the keyboard to the other.

"Odd neighbors," Deacon remarked, following her gaze.

"No odder than me, I suppose."

He raised his brows. "You play the piano in the nude?"

"He wasn't naked!"

"So you looked."

"Well, duh." She couldn't help herself. He hadn't been wearing a shirt but she had caught a glimpse of gray sweatpants. Damn it, she wasn't normally a window peeper. She hoped he used the money she gave him to buy himself some drapes instead of garbage cans.

Deacon grinned. "The heart still beats then. Good." Pulling into the driveway she indicated, he cut the engine. "And here we are. Safe and sound, your innocence intact."

She cleared her throat. "About that kiss —"

"Of course." He closed the space between them and kissed her. The rest of her words drowned in her throat.

He didn't reach for her, didn't force her to come to him. Her body did that all on its own. Her hand settled at the nape of his neck, fiddling with the hair that curled over the wool coat's collar. She wanted his hands on her but he did no more than rest one on her shoulder.

He pulled back first. "Good night, Jessie. See you tomorrow."

She blinked, body aching to be touched. Should she invite him in? God, why make the itch worse than what it already was? She managed to find her voice. "Thank you for the ride home."

His eyes gleamed. "You're welcome."

He waited for her to unlock her door, enter the house and turn on a light before he left. She heard the rumble of his car as it disappeared down the street. She threw her house keys on the counter and pulled off her coat.

God help her, his scent still clung to its collar. Pressing the fabric to her nose, she inhaled. Her nipples automatically tightened. *Idiot*. She dropped the coat on the couch and headed for the bathroom. She needed a cold shower.

Later, standing in her steamy bathroom with nothing but her robe on, she let the terrycloth slip down her shoulders. She studied herself in the full-length mirror mounted on the back of the door and frowned.

There was a bruise in the middle of her back, no bigger than a dime but bright purple. Holding her robe partially closed with one hand, she reached back with the other. No matter how much she stretched, she couldn't quite touch the spot on her back.

The place where Sissy had pinched her.

She was afraid she might need more than just her head examined.

Chapter Five

The cathedral was one of the most intimidating buildings in the city. The portico alone stood as tall as a four-story building and was sealed with wrought iron gates. Flanked by two winged stone gargoyles, the entryway narrowed to a steeple, also topped with a gargoyle. All along the roof edges stone dragons crept up its steep sides. At its arch Saint Bartholomew was carved in letters the size of a man's torso.

Jessie walked through the arches feeling very small, which she supposed was the whole purpose of the edifice. Her heels clicked as they struck pavement, echoing in the courtyard. Michael was right about one thing. No one was here. She felt very much out of place. She opened one of the great oak doors. It swung soundlessly open.

The inside was cool and dark, save for the altar, bathed in golden light. Candelabra were set in niches beneath the two-story stained glass windows flanking the altar and aisles. A group of perhaps forty black-garbed women occupied the first few rows. With their heads bent in prayer they didn't seem human, just part of the grand architecture, a study in reverence and piety.

The pipe organ dominated one entire alcove just left of the altar. She could barely see the top of Michael's head. Music erupted from everywhere at once, as if it had been waiting for her alone, a trill of sound reverberating through the stones. She hurried to find an unobtrusive spot to sit.

At some silent signal the black-robed ladies rose as one. And then the singing began. The words were in Latin. Hugging herself, she felt the fine hairs along her arms raise. The music was surreal, the voices angelic. The church, acoustically built to handle literally hundreds of people, echoed back the music until she felt she was the center of some supernatural surround sound system.

As abruptly as it began it ended. She picked up a missal. It was worth getting up this early. When the readings began she was startled to hear a man's voice rise in song. A rich tenor, he sang in English. It took her a few moments to realize it was Michael. She froze, closing her eyes. His voice was soothing, the music accompanying it a complex scale of sound, the deep bass of the pedals chasing the flutelike piping of the higher notes. When the women's voices joined his she felt as if she had front-row seats to a medieval opera.

When the nuns raised their voices in song at the very end of the service there were tears in her eyes. She hastily wiped them away. Such silly sentimentality, all over music. With the hushed sound of swishing cloth the ladies exited the building through a side passageway, vanishing into the darkness.

She was alone in the cathedral with Michael. The candelabra still flickered, casting eerie shadows up the stained glass, but now the morning light had begun to pour

through them as well, highlighting a face here, a flower there. She stood up and walked toward the alcove.

Michael stepped from behind the massive instrument. "Did you enjoy the services?"

The sheer grandeur of the edifice demanded she speak in hushed tones. "Definitely," she whispered.

He smiled. "As soon as I stepped into the cathedral I knew I had to play here."

"You sing too," she pointed out.

He actually blushed, color blooming high on his pale skin. "Yes, well, the sisters teased it out of me."

"There's nothing to be ashamed about. It's remarkable."

"I'm glad you like it. Do you have time for another song?"

She glanced at her watch. "Yes."

He offered her his hand. "Come sit next to me. You really can't experience it fully until you feel the music right through your bones."

She shivered but took his hand. His long fingers wrapped around hers, strong and sure. He helped her behind the organ and she seated herself beside him. Four rows of keyboard stared back at her as well as an indeterminable number of little stops, each one marked with a different word. "Flute" said one, "Alto" another. Beneath her feet the keyboard was replicated in pedals meant to be played by one's feet.

"Are you sure I won't be in your way?"

He grinned. "You'll never be in my way."

Her heart did a hopscotch of beats. She silently scolded it for being so frivolous. His hands settled themselves, each on a separate keyboard. Then they began to dance. It was the only way she could describe the movement of his long fingers. They waltzed across the keyboards, caressing ivory keys and coaxing sound from ebony ones. The music swelled from behind her. She couldn't hear herself think, only feel the beat of the music against her breastbone as if it was her own heartbeat. And then his feet began to move as well. The swell of the bass beneath her rumbled through the organ bench.

She didn't recognize the song but then she had no need to. The music consumed her, teased her, seduced her with sound and vibration. She didn't realize she was holding her breath until he stopped.

"Don't stop," she breathed, not realizing she spoke out loud.

His fingers dutifully swept into another song and she realized he was playing this entire, complex piece of music by heart. She closed her eyes. When he joined his voice to the music she flinched in surprise. He sang in Latin, the words a twist of the tongue but done so cleverly with the music she didn't care that she could only understand every third word or so. When he finished the church still reverberated for a moment with the music.

She opened her eyes. The church hushed, as if every stone had a breath to hold. The sunlight glinted through the stained glass, throwing weird shadows onto the tiled floors and the backs of the pews.

"I barely know you and yet, after this..." She was silent for a moment. Reluctant to resume their duties, her lungs breathed shallowly.

"Music is the window to one's soul," he offered.

She'd always spurned the arts. They couldn't be put to rules or logic so she didn't bother with them. "You have a very precious gift, Michael," she murmured.

"Everyone has gifts."

She shook her head. "I could never play like this."

He took her hand, forcing her fingers to spread. "Practice makes all the difference but genetics helps too. Your fingers would really have to learn to stretch. They're very short."

She smiled wryly. "So eloquent."

He grinned. "It's hard to be romantic in a church." He glanced at a small clock mounted in the corner of the organ. "You better hurry. You're going to be late for work."

He was so wrong. Music was a seductress, the piping notes like a flash of bared skin, his voice a whisper of forbidden silk and cloth. She reluctantly stood. Behind her the pipes stood like silent sentinels, as large around as her waist. Other pipes were arranged in front of them in a descending army of metal, until the smallest pipe, no larger than her index finger.

"Thank you for inviting me, Michael," she said quietly, looking into his eyes. They were a deep blue, warm and amused. "Thank you for sharing this."

"You're welcome. You'll come again?" he asked.

"Yes." She laughed. "Not every day, I mean, sheesh, it is early in the morning."

He laughed with her and the candle flames danced. "The best things are sometimes the most difficult to achieve."

"You have a whole litany of those sayings tucked up in your head?"

"It comes from rubbing shoulders with holy people every day for years."

"How long have you been playing?"

He tipped his head, a faraway look in his eyes. "Always. I've always played."

For some reason, she shivered. He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek, so chaste, and yet she found herself trembling. "Take care of yourself, Jessie. Maybe I'll see you soon." He caught her hand, fingers twining through hers.

"I'm going to a cookout tonight," she said, deciding as she spoke. "At a friend's. Would you like to come with me?"

He grinned. "Sure."

"I'll pick you up at six."

"You'll be home in time for it?"

"I'll make time."

A few sheets of music fluttered to the floor. He slid off the organ bench and retrieved them. She studied his bent head, the way the early morning sunlight gleamed off his white-blond hair. He was impeccably dressed, black slacks, shined black leather shoes and matching belt, a simple white shirt and pale blue silk tie. Something inside her stirred.

He raised his head. She reached down with a hand and traced his jaw with her fingertips. His eyes darkened a shade, blue-black, the color of still water at dusk. She ran a single fingertip across his lips. The music he'd seized in one hand was forgotten.

He stood slowly. She started to back away but his free hand caught the nape of her neck and drew her close. They stared into each other's eyes. She grabbed his arm to keep her balance. The muscles beneath the crisp cotton fabric bunched.

"Are you going to kiss me?" she whispered. His spicy scent, so reminiscent of molasses-laden cookies, had her mouth watering. Or maybe it was flex of the biceps she still had her fingers wrapped around.

His lips curved. Leaning forward, he kissed the tip of her nose then each cheek. Her eyelids fluttered, then he broke the spell with a soft sigh. "Have a good day at work, Jessie."

"Tease," she muttered.

Laughing, he turned her toward the door. "Out with you now, before you get me in trouble."

As she pulled her car into her parking spot, Jessie found herself singing along to the radio station. She couldn't remember the last time she'd done that. Humming to herself, she pulled her computer bag out of her car's back seat and slung the strap over her shoulder. She glanced at Scott's vacant spot. Looked like she'd managed to beat him in, a rare occasion.

She was just reaching for the lobby door when she noticed Scott's car pull into the parking lot. Pausing, she turned to wave to him. Her hand froze mid-wave. The buxom blonde he'd been talking to in the lounge yesterday was sitting in the passenger seat, visor pulled down while she casually applied lipstick. Jessie felt as if she'd been sucker punched. All the happy thoughts that had been spinning around in her head vanished.

And to think she'd actually rummaged through her closet and found a skirt to wear today. She was so naïve.

Her hand groped blindly for the door and she nearly tripped when it didn't find it. Deacon Price had come up on her left side while she'd been standing there gaping at Scott.

Catching her elbow, he smoothly righted her then held open the door for her. "Waiting for someone?"

The bubbling rage was interrupted by embarrassment. She closed her mouth, swallowed hard. Of all the people to see her fawning over a coworker, it had to be him. "No."

His smile was polite, nothing more. She relaxed a smidgeon. Thank God. He wasn't going to mention last night. She thanked him for holding the door. He inclined his head in acknowledgement then followed her soundlessly toward the bank of elevators.

Deacon Price—now there was an enigma. His references gushed about his flawless performance. Judging by the pile of papers he'd plowed through, it was well-deserved. He worked through lunch, preferred a premium coffee, which he brought in with him and didn't eat junk food or snacks. And he taught yoga classes in his off hours. She couldn't find a nice neat slot to put him in. Midlife crisis? Not old enough. On the lam? He'd given her references that checked out. Serial killer? That made her lips twitch.

She needed to stop thinking about him and focus on work.

They stepped quietly into the elevator together and she punched the button. She glanced at him discreetly. He was wearing a deep purple button-down shirt today, charcoal pants pressed into a sharp crease and shiny black shoes. He carried only his cup of coffee. From what she'd seen of him so far his wardrobe was fabulous. He knew what colors complemented his dark features, those deep jewel tones, and he carried himself with a lazy confidence.

If he wasn't gay then he had to have a woman in his life picking out his clothes.

"May I ask you a question?"

She was so startled by the sound of his voice she flinched. She'd been caught staring. *As long as it has nothing to do with last night.* "Of course."

The elevator came to a halt and they stepped off in unison.

"Are you attached?"

She stopped and gaped at him, mind blank.

His face was inscrutable. "In a committed relationship?" he prompted.

"Um, no." She couldn't find anything more to say. His gaze was intense, eyes a deep brown that had a tendency to melt into his pupils like a fine, dark chocolate. She wanted to either squeal and run away or just dissolve in a puddle at his feet. On a professional level, she could do neither.

"Hmm."

She unlocked the door to her office, priding herself on the way she managed to keep her hand relatively steady. Why should his interest bother her? Michael didn't unnerve her so much.

"You look delicate and lovely today," Deacon commented.

"Thank you." Startled again, this time by his choice of words, she didn't know what to say. Flirting hadn't been foremost in her mind for a very long time. Okay, that wasn't entirely honest. Wasn't that exactly what she'd had in mind when she'd worn the skirt?

A bit of flirting with Scott? Or had she put it on for Deacon? Her life had suddenly grown way too complicated.

She flicked on the overhead lights and glanced at his immaculate desk. "You can't begin to understand how opportune it was that you showed up."

He placed a napkin on his desk then carefully set his cup of coffee on it. "I noticed some discrepancies in one of your algorithms. Are you open to discussion on it?"

She turned to him and raised an eyebrow. "Of course."

"You would be staggered by how many people are not."

"The danger of academic egos." She turned from putting her purse in her drawer to find him directly behind her. He might have been ogling her rear but his face gave away nothing.

"I keep my academic ego in proper perspective but I'm about to indulge in forbidden territory." His gaze deliberately strayed up and down her body.

She hiccupped on a nervous laugh. "Please." She held up a hand that ended dangerously close to his chest. "I'm not looking for anything. Last night was nice but not something to be repeated."

"You made similar protestations last night."

She shouldn't have worn the skirt today. She should have found sackcloth. Better yet, she should have called in sick. "I'm not playing hard to get. Please don't take it that way."

"I'm not. You look all prim and proper in your plain white blouse and pencil skirt." He tipped his head. "Your hair needs to be down. Like this." He leaned over her, reaching for her ponytail.

She tried to pull back, caught a whiff of his cologne and froze. He smelled as good as he looked, like dark roast coffee with an underlying exotic note. *Oh, why not?* part of her whispered. At least someone noticed her unusual effort at her appearance. The thought of Scott with the blonde only fueled the fire. What would he think if he found her in this position with Deacon? Would he be shocked? Alarmed? Jealous?

See? Somebody wants me. Just not Scott.

Deacon undid her ponytail, letting her dark hair spill across her shoulders. "That's better."

"What are you doing?" Her voice sounded thick in her ears.

"Seducing you."

"I'm not looking for sex."

He chuckled, sending heat puddling between her thighs. "Oh but you are. I saw your need, like some great leviathan, rise through those impossibly large eyes of yours. You hide your desires well but you can't tuck them away forever."

"You have a quite an imagination," she managed. His offer was terribly tempting. She wanted to fan herself but that'd only stoke his ego.

"Since we are both scientists and reputable professionals I'll break it down for you in clear, definable sentences. You like the definable, don't you? The proven, the concrete. The world of gods, emotions, fate is just trickery to two individuals such as us."

She thought of Sissy and her ridiculous stack of tarot cards. Two knights, one in shining armor, another dark. She couldn't picture Deacon, Michael and Sissy conspiring to unnerve her. They had no goal, no motivation to do so. "Get to your point before I call security."

He nudged the phone toward her hand. "Go ahead."

What would she tell them? Her new research assistant was making not-entirely-unwelcome advances? Despite the Princeton scientist's gushing recommendation, Deacon Price was a stranger. Never in her very structured life had Jessie ever strayed from what was expected of her. What would her tombstone read? Here lies Jessie Arrows, renowned scientist and prude. Wait a sec, Dr. Albright, Deacon's reference, was a woman.

"Do you sleep with all your employers?" she asked.

He actually looked surprised. Then the emotion vanished, to be replaced by amusement. "Aha. So your imagination is not dead after all."

"You didn't answer my question."

His lips pursed. "You have a quick mind. How quick are your hands?" He reached for her collar.

She caught his wrist. She felt his pulse, a lazy beat beneath her fingertips, not at all like her own.

"You're a beautiful woman. I just want to sate your desires. No harm intended."

"How beneficent," she said dryly.

He reached for her collar with his free hand. If she let go of him he had her, and if she picked her hand up off the desk she'd fall back in her chair and pull him on top of her. He undid the top three buttons on her blouse. His fingertip traced the V of skin the open collar revealed.

Last night's kiss burned in her memory like a signal flare. *What do you have to lose?* she could hear Celena chiding. She sighed, mentally giving in.

He leaned forward and placed a kiss there, just above her breasts. His lips were impossibly hot. She crossed her legs to keep them from trembling.

"You're making a mistake," she said softly. "I have nothing to offer you."

"Let me be the judge of that." He undid another button, revealing the swell of her breasts above her bra. He followed the line of her lingerie with his lips, alternating feathery kisses with demanding sucks.

Oh god, her breasts ached. She tipped her head back, closing her eyes. He twisted his other hand free. Capturing her face in his hands, he tilted her head back further, baring her neck. He kissed her erratic pulse point then licked a path to her earlobe and

sucked it in his mouth. He bit down until she yelped and jumped up. Seizing her around the waist, he pulled her against him.

His lanky frame hid a remarkably strong body. She should have known that. She'd seen it last night. Knowing and feeling were two totally different things. Something uncoiled in the pit of her stomach, a syrupy heat that coated her senses, leaving her mind numb and her body thrumming like a live wire. *Too much clothing* was her only thought. Her libido did a cartwheel.

He fastened his lips on hers. *Sweet Jesus*. He seized her lower lip, sucking it into his mouth. When she made a small noise of protest his tongue took advantage and darted inside. He tickled the roof of her mouth then played tag with her tongue until she was forced to retaliate.

Her hands roved down his solid chest until she found the edge of his shirt. She slid her hands beneath it. He gasped against her mouth. He pushed her bra up over her breasts. The cool office air brought her temporarily back to her senses.

"Wait!" she gasped.

He seized a nipple between his teeth and played his tongue across its sensitive peak. Her lungs struggled for air.

Bending her backward over her desk, he hitched her skirt up higher. His hand found the juncture between her thighs and came back with moisture, even with the barriers of nylons and panties. He brought his fingers to his lips, tasting her. His eyes rolled back in his head. "Forbidden fruit," he murmured.

His hand dove beneath her skirt again, tugging down both hosiery and panties. The other kneaded her breasts. She didn't know what she was doing or thinking. Her clitoris throbbed, demanding release. Her nipples couldn't get any harder.

Dropping to his knees, he placed his palms on both sides of her inner thighs and split her apart. His tongue dipped into her, plunging as deep as it could reach. His soft, satisfied noises almost undid her right there. He worked his way out of her to lick all the curves and wrinkles in her secret lips. When he rubbed his goatee gently across her, she exploded.

Every bone in her body melted. Her muscles mirrored the beat of her heart, clenching and releasing like the brisk march of sixteenth notes across a page. The cacophony of sounds assaulted her—the ringing of her heart like a brass bell orchestra, her breathy cymballed gasps. Deacon's low moans, the driving drum, beat beneath it all.

He licked a path from her labia to her navel then she felt him enter her. She arched her back, her mind's protest, her body's invitation, to his invasion. His clever fingers tweaked her nipples. Her hands clenched his tight ass. The dulled portion of her brain desperately tried to form a thought or a word, some sort of objection, even if it did feel good. Fuck, it felt like a miracle. Her body was going through a transmutation.

Then he began to stroke, finding a rhythm both he and she could adapt to. Murmuring something in another language, he closed his eyes, fingers dug into her

hips. The thrusting stoked her flame of need, built it into a full-fledged conflagration. His hands moved to her breasts, massaging them and tweaking her nipples. Too many sensations bombarded her. Dear god, she thought she might rupture something in her brain. Death by too much pleasure. What a way to go.

When she teetered on the edge of total annihilation, her body thrumming, nerves strung tight, he bent over her and seized her mouth. The shift in position drove him deeper inside her. She clenched around him and whimpered into his mouth. Her world was consumed by bursts of white lightning. She heard him whispering her name over and over. Then his body went rigid against her, his breath exploding alongside her cheek.

The telephone chose that inopportune moment to ring. Her hand groped blindly for it. Deacon swore—she recognized that in any language—and picked it up off the floor, handing it to her.

“Hello.” She hoped her voice didn’t sound breathless.

“Jessie, is everything okay?” Scott’s voice rang in her ear. *Take that*, the vindictive part of her whispered. *Tell him what you just did*. Thankfully, the more rational side won out.

“Why?”

“I didn’t see you this morning.” He fumbled with his words. “I just wanted to check in and make sure you were okay.”

Bastard, she thought, although she wasn’t certain she was justified in calling him that. “I’m just fine, Scott.” She kept her voice cool.

“Um, are you busy? Do you want to have lunch?”

“I have an appointment.” She was going in for a complete physical. If her doctor couldn’t find a brain tumor or something else leaking that could cause hallucinations of creatures like Sissy, she might just have to bite the bullet and see a shrink. When Scott was silent, she relented a bit and added, “But I’m planning on coming to your cookout tonight.”

“You are?” He sounded incredulous.

With a date, she quietly mouthed. Deacon started nuzzling her stomach. If he made it to her clitoris before she got off the phone she wasn’t going to be able to carry on a conversation. “I’ve gotta go. I’m training my new research assistant.”

“You found one already?”

“Apparently Kathy decided to post the position.” She wondered how many more index cards were floating around out there, advertising the opening. Would they all draw someone like Mr. Price? Educated and sexy as hell? Deacon nuzzled her with his stubbly goatee. Her breath hissed out.

“That doesn’t sound like something Kathy would do. She was really upset when I saw her leave on Friday.”

“She must have changed her mind.”

"I guess so." Scott didn't sound convinced.

Deacon's tongue dipped inside her. "Look, I gotta go. Bye." She hung up the phone. "Someone could have stumbled in on us," she said, trying to rise off her desk.

Deacon lifted his head. "I locked the door behind me."

"You're a sneaky bastard."

"You don't seem to mind," he pointed out.

The phone call and Scott's voice brought her back to herself. She wasn't some sex-starved teenager. She offered Deacon her hand. "I really do have work to do." She tried to sound professional. She wondered if she just sounded panicky.

"Does it have anything to do with the papers stuck to your derriere?" He pulled her to her feet.

She gasped, reaching for the paperwork. "Oh no."

"You're wet." His eyes gleamed. "I've never seen a woman so wet. We shouldn't let it go to waste."

"You're insane. I don't know what came over me." She did, though. The green-eyed jealousy monster. A nice "take that" to Scott that he'd never know about. What the hell was she thinking? She could get fired and then where would she be? She doubted the neighbors would let her keep her goats in her backyard.

"Well, then. You'll not want to forget it. We should do it again as soon as possible." He offered her a handful of paper towels.

"Not a chance." At least, not a chance in her office again. Out of the office, well, that was another story. She shook her head. No and no and no. Yes, Deacon Price was sexy but he was also arrogant. Look at all the women who fawned over him in class. For once she saw what they saw, felt what they desired, craved what they only dreamed about. Did she want him, arrogance and all? Oh yeah. In about fifty different positions. She sighed, conceding defeat.

A smile played on Deacon's lips. "What are you thinking?"

"That I made a huge mistake."

His eyes flashed but not with anger, rather amusement. "No one knows but you and me."

She raked her hair away from her face then knotted it in a loose ponytail. "Deacon, I'm not the kind of woman who has sex with just anyone. What I just did shocks me." And turned her on so much she nearly grabbed him to have another go at it.

Leaning around her so she caught an added whiff of his cologne, he pulled a sticky note off her back. He placed it on her desk. "I do not require emotional involvement. The physical aspect is just fine."

Her hands balled into fists. "Damn it, that's not me!"

He straightened, tipping his head to the side. "Something upset you and I took advantage of that. I apologize. But this I do not regret. Nor will I apologize."

She felt her cheeks flame. Taking her wrists, he coaxed her fingers out of their tightened balls. When her hands were flat he placed them palm to palm, sandwiched between his. The fluorescent lights winked off the gold ring he wore on his pinky finger.

"Look at me," he commanded. She looked up, miserable with herself. "May I give you some advice?"

She shook her head. "Sure," she muttered.

"Don't overanalyze. You, Jessica Arrows, are quite a woman, and anyone who does not see that immediately is a fool. Now then," he began in an entirely different tone, "we have some time before your lunch appointment. While you freshen up I will assemble the documents we need to discuss. I think you will be pleasantly surprised by the oversight."

Biting her lip, she nodded.

Chapter Six

Deacon had already left for the day when Jessie returned from her appointment with the doctor. She was both disappointed and relieved. She glanced around her office. There were no telltale signs of her indiscretion. The wastepaper basket had been emptied, Deacon's doing she supposed. As usual, his desk was immaculate. Sexual hijinks aside, she couldn't ask for a better research assistant.

Preliminary results wouldn't be available until next week but overall the doctor had proclaimed her to be in excellent health. She hadn't been able to bring herself to mention her hallucinations, but she did say she hadn't been feeling herself and had headaches. He'd asked about her working hours, hummed to himself then told her to find a hobby, something unrelated to her current occupation. Inline skating, walking, joining a gym—how she chuckled at that one—anything to get her more active than she was. It wasn't what she wanted to hear but at least it was something.

Forty-thirty rolled around sooner than she thought. God, she wasn't used to leaving the office in daylight. She closed the laptop she'd been using since Deacon had usurped her older office model. After checking on her does and rats she locked everything up and left. It was almost a relief to leave early, no chance of running into Scott and his Barbie doll.

He shouldn't matter. He was just a friend, a close friend who had shared more with her than anyone but her husband. She'd thought she wanted him to find someone. Now she wasn't so sure. Her brain shied away from wondering why. She just wanted to see him happy, didn't she?

Then why did she want to plow her fist into Barbie's face?

After she'd showered, she carefully crept into the back of her closet again in search of a skirt. She came up with a loose A-line, narrow purple lines criss-crossing the black border and falling to mid-calf. She chose a sleeveless gray-green sweater top with a scooped neckline and twisted a long strand of gold and cat's eye beads around her neck several times. The effect was so unlike what she normally wore she stopped to stare at herself in the mirror. She held her hair up away from her face then, on impulse, let it fall to her shoulders, tucking it behind her ears.

Her eyes were a clear blue, like a pristine Montana creek. She added a bit of brown eyeliner then spruced up her lashes with mascara. A touch of blush and a bit of pink-tinged lip gloss made her more than presentable—it brought life to her face. She did a slow circle, letting the skirt's filmy fabric swirl around her legs. Sleek chocolate-brown boots completed the effect.

She snagged the matching sweater coat then headed for the door. Opening it, she found Michael with his hand raised, ready to knock.

"Perfect timing," he said with a smile. "I thought it was foolish for you to have to pick me up when I live so close so I walked."

"Hello." She smiled automatically. She'd never had the opportunity to juggle more than one man in her life. Now she had two. Three if she counted Scott, which the rational – or was it irrational – side of her refused to do.

He stepped back so she could walk out. Then he took her arm as they navigated her steps.

"Worried I'll trip and fall?"

"Hedging my bets," he said somberly.

She laughed and laid her free hand over the one he had clamped to her elbow.

"You know," she said, giving him a sidelong glance, "most men would feel emasculated having a woman drive them around."

He smiled. "I'm not concerned." He walked her to the driver's side door, keeping his hand on her arm. Opening the door for her, he murmured, "I feel like I should be taking you to an elegant restaurant, not just a cookout."

"I thought a lot of people would be coming straight from work."

He raised one white-blond eyebrow. "This is what you wear to work?"

She lifted her chin, feeling mulish. Must everything she do be transparent to everyone but herself? She was dressing up because she felt like it, not because she wanted to impress Scott. And what excuse could she come up with for bringing Michael? Introducing a new person to the neighborhood. Except Scott lived a couple miles away and in an entirely different neighborhood. She sighed. Couldn't she just admit she wanted Scott to feel as jealous as she did? *No!*

"You look lovely," he said quickly, before she could say anything more. Then he shut her door, crossed in front of the car and slid into the passenger seat.

"Have you met anyone else in the neighborhood?" she asked as she carefully backed the car out of the driveway. She noticed he'd replaced his dented garbage cans already. The new cans glittered silver in the late afternoon sunlight.

"Just you. I have a rather odd schedule," he added. "Everyone else seems so wrapped up in their own affairs."

That was one way to explain the casual way neighbors politely ignored one another.

"But I meet plenty of people at church."

She bet they weren't exactly a lively bunch and probably nowhere near his age. "Scott's throwing the party tonight. He's one of my coworkers. I'm sure there'll be plenty of people to meet." Scott was such a social butterfly. She bet that even on a work night there'd be no less than thirty people milling around his backyard.

"Great. How long have you known him?" Michael asked.

"Forever it seems. Since high school." She glanced at him. "Go ahead. Ask the question."

He shook his head. "I won't play the age game with a woman."

"Smart man."

"Just because I'm single doesn't make me dim-witted."

"I never—" She changed her tactic. "Just why is a talented man like yourself unattached? You must have some pretty hideous skeletons tucked away."

"You mean like a mother locked in an institution? A crazed ex-wife or six kids?"

She gave him a sidelong glance. "Do you have any of the above?"

He laughed quietly, gaze focused elsewhere. "I could ask you the same thing. I've never been married, nor do I have any children. I'm disease free. And you needn't worry about my mother."

"I have been married, no kids and no psycho parent."

He glanced questioningly at her.

"My husband died over a year ago. Cancer." How she hated that word.

"I'm sorry."

"Everyone is." Bitterness laced the words.

He touched her bare arm. "Expressing empathy is difficult for most."

The physical contact blocked the brief torrent of sadness. "Everyone says time is a healer but it seems like I miss him worse every day." She hadn't meant to say that out loud but the genuine sympathy in Michael's eyes had the words tumbling out of her mouth.

"You forget about the little irritating things he did. Easier to adore him."

Her lips curved. "I would gladly endure all those things he did to drive me crazy just to have him back." She gave a short bark of laughter. "Now you see how I've managed to stay single. Not very difficult. The grief-stricken widow act is a good deterrent."

Michael shrugged. "He occupies a place in your heart. I don't see any reason why a decent man would be turned off. There is plenty of room for others."

"See, that's the thing. I don't think there is." She parked across the street from Scott's house then turned to face Michael. His smile was sweet and a bit sad. She wondered at the sadness.

"I think you're wrong." Leaning forward, he let his thumb stroke her chin then wiped away the single tear that managed to leak out.

He kissed her on the lips. She didn't understand what made his kisses so sweet. The gentle way his lips possessed hers, as if asking rather than taking? The way his hands framed her face, his long fingers caressing her cheekbones? Or was it simply his scent,

as if he'd just baked gingersnap cookies? She could imagine those long fingers cooking, kneading flesh—bread, she corrected—generous lips parted for a taste. She shivered.

What was she getting into? Bringing Michael to meet Scott? She drew back. She knew she looked as confused as she felt.

He touched a finger to her lips. "Shh." He straightened. "Let's go meet your friends."

Scott opened the door before she rang the doorbell. He glanced at Michael, one step behind her. "You came." He sounded and looked surprised.

"I said I would," she replied.

"I know." He raked his fingers through his hair. "I didn't think you'd follow through." She frowned at him but he'd already moved on. "And who's this?" he prompted.

"Michael Carrigan," Michael said, extending his hand. "Jessie was sweet enough to invite me along. I just moved in two houses down from hers."

Scott shook it. "That place has been for sale for over a year now." He studied Michael. "You a carpenter? I looked at it a while back. There were some serious structural issues."

Jessie blinked. She hadn't known that.

"I'm a bit of a tinkerer. The house suits my needs for now."

Scott nodded. "Nice backyard, beats renting a condo."

"Exactly."

The two men beamed at each other. "A friend of Jessie's is a friend of mine." Scott stepped back, ushering them inside. "Maybe you can give me a few hints on fixing the dry-rot I have in some of the beams downstairs."

"I can take a look at it."

She could hear the rumble of people and music coming from the back of the house and the yard beyond. "Sounds like quite a party."

Scott smiled. "You know me."

She started to head toward the yard but Scott grabbed her arm. "Go on." He nodded to Michael. "I have to ask Jessie some work questions."

Michael hesitated. Jessie flashed him a quick grin. "I'll be right there."

"Help yourself," Scott added. "Soda's in coolers next to the patio doors."

Scott dropped his hand as soon as Michael vanished. He appeared at a loss for words. "You came," he repeated. He didn't seem to know what to do with his hands.

She'd known she was overdressed the moment she saw him standing barefoot in the doorway in his worn jeans and sweatshirt. She didn't care. The way his eyes roved over her made any other discomfort worthwhile. "Don't make me regret it," she muttered.

"You look gorgeous." He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I mean, you always look good but, well, you look really nice," he finished.

She raised an eyebrow. "Thanks," she said dryly.

"I mean it."

She heard the patio door slide open and shut. "I should go out and introduce Michael to the others."

"Yeah." He made no effort to move out of her way, only continued to stare at her with that silly grin on his face.

She gave him a light shove. "Out of my way, Neanderthal."

He caught her wrists and pulled her close. "You smell good."

"I don't make a habit of dousing myself with chemicals in off hours too." She could hear her heart hammering. Scott's dark eyes were focused on hers, his thumbs rubbing the erratic pulse at her wrists. His breath whispered across her skin. Her mouth went dry.

Someone cleared her throat. Scott dropped Jessie's wrists and they both took a step back, away from one another. The blonde bombshell from their office building walked into the room. "Scott, you appear to be out of ketchup." Her smooth-as-velvet-cake voice grated on Jessie's nerves.

Scott glanced at the woman a bit stupidly.

"I'm sure I have more in the basement fridge. Jessie, this is Barb. Barb Smythe. She and her husband just moved to the offices above mine this week."

It was Jessie's turn to stare stupidly. Husband? So Scott and this, this colleague—her mind plucked the most polite term it could think of—weren't dating? She was mortified. Her cheeks flamed.

Barb glanced over her oversized movie star sunglasses, first at Jessie then at Scott. Shaking her head, she suppressed a snicker. "In the basement, you say?"

"Umm, yes." Scott's gaze never left Jessie's.

Barb wiggled the empty ketchup container at Scott. "I'll just find it myself, if you don't mind. You two look like you were busy." She didn't wait for a response from Scott.

"I should go introduce Michael. It's rude to let him wander around on his own," Jessie began when Barb had gone.

"I need to help Barb find the ketchup."

They both started in separate directions.

He paused by the basement staircase. "Jessie?"

She froze, turned. "What?"

"Michael? Is he your— Never mind. He seems like a nice guy. I hope he's good to you."

"Yes," she whispered.

Scott nodded, as if he came to a silent decision. "Good. I'm glad to see you happy."

He hesitated a moment longer then headed downstairs. Jessie cursed softly to herself.

Jessie needn't have worried about Michael. By the time she found him he was nestled in a small group of people in the corner of the deck, engrossed in a conversation about the role music played in alternative healing. She recognized Bruce, a chiropractor by day and Judo instructor by night, and his very expectant wife Darla. Elizabeth, Scott's octogenarian next door neighbor, was also there. Jessie started to back away, content to leave him alone, but Michael raised his head and caught her eye.

With that, Jessie smiled and found a spot on the glider next to him.

Elizabeth tilted forward and squeezed Jessie's arm, giving her a toothy grin. "You chose a smart one. He's got a brain in that pretty head of his."

She heard Michael laugh. Jessie leaned close to Elizabeth. The elderly woman refused to get a hearing aid, though in crowds she desperately needed one. "He's my new neighbor," she said carefully.

Elizabeth smiled. "My neighbor's pretty cute too, if you haven't noticed."

"Really? Who's that?"

She touched her hand to her perfectly coifed white hair. She had it done at the beauty salon twice a week. Tipping her head, she laughed. "Scott."

Smiling, Jessie sat back in the glider. "I don't stand a chance against your charms."

"He does love my apple pie," Elizabeth agreed.

Jessie shook her head. "See? I can't compete."

"Have you eaten yet?" she asked Michael.

He smiled sheepishly. "Yes. I was hungry and you seemed preoccupied with Scott. I hope you don't mind."

Sheesh, the man must have inhaled his food. He and Scott would get along well. "Not at all. I'm going to fix myself a plate. Be right back."

He squeezed her hand. "Take your time. I'm comfortable here."

Elizabeth cackled. Michael's smile was so sweet. He leaned toward Elizabeth. "If you lived next door to me, I bet you could woo me with your apple pie too." He winked at Jessie.

Michael's arm rested on the back of the glider and he made no move to drop it when she returned with her plate laden with food. She settled down beside him, laid a napkin on her lap and began to eat. Bruce had taken the reins of the conversation, trying to coax Michael into attending one of his Judo sessions, while Darla remained silent and occasionally rolled her eyes.

Jessie bit into her burger, her gaze flitting over the crowd. She was right. Scott had found about twenty people willing to attend a party on a work night. Scott was toasting

marshmallows over the grill. When he saw her looking at him he raised his stick and the slightly charred marshmallow. "Want one?" he mouthed.

She nodded.

With an exaggerated flourish, he set to preparing the graham cracker base and piece of chocolate bar that would accompany the gooey marshmallow.

Her gaze drifted. She wondered if she'd be labeled a pig if she took another burger. Food hadn't tasted this good in a long time and the burgers, doused in Scott's secret sauce, were on an entirely different plane from what she normally ingested. Couple it with his thick, homegrown tomatoes and sweet young spinach and who could resist?

Then her stomach did a flip-flop and she nearly puked. Sissy was standing next to the bar, mixing herself a drink. Jessie closed her eyes and counted to ten. She looked again. The woman had the audacity to wave. She was dressed in a pair of wide-legged tan slacks, the fabric rippling like a loose skirt's hemline, and a plain white cotton blouse.

Michael gave her shoulder a squeeze then stood so Bruce could demonstrate a move.

Elizabeth leaned forward in her chair. "You look like you just ate something disagreeable. Are you all right?"

Setting her plate aside, Jessie swallowed the lump in her throat. "I'm not sure." She kneaded her forehead with her fingertips. "I think I'm going crazy," she muttered.

"I never look that ill when I happen to spot Sissy Kismet. What did that meddling biddy tell you?"

Jessie's eyes flicked open. "You can see her?"

"Well of course I can." Elizabeth sat back in her chair and eyeballed Sissy. "White blouse, brown slacks. Really, could she dress any more plain? I've never seen her wear even a shard of color." Her gaze settled on Jessie. "Question is, why can you see her?"

Jessie sighed softly. Who'd ever heard of a dual hallucination? She supposed it was possible.

"The older you get, the more in tune you are with what's going on around you. When you're young you're busy flitting here and there." Elizabeth made a zigzag dancing motion with her forefinger. "When you get to be my age you just don't have the energy to dart around anymore. And then you get a chance to see the things that have always been right in front of your nose that you missed because they didn't jump out and shout, 'Here we are'."

Jessie closed her eyes again and slouched in her seat. "So is she real or not?"

"Depends on what you mean by real. She's standing there plain as day, but if you asked someone else if she saw her—" Elizabeth shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not."

She felt like she'd swallowed her tongue and then some. "So what does she want?" she whispered. "What can I do to make her go away?"

Elizabeth patted her knee. "Do what she says. She doesn't mince words. No time to."

Jessie straightened and looked toward the bar. Sissy was gone.

"Seems to me you're awfully young to be seeing such things," Elizabeth commented, her gaze still sharp.

Jessie waved her hand. "I think I'm working too many hours." Damn it, hadn't she left early today? She took time for herself. She was here, wasn't she? What more did that woman want?

Scott walked over and perched on the edge of Elizabeth's chair. He carried a perfectly arranged S'more on a paper plate. He offered it to Jessie with a half bow. "Your dessert, mademoiselle."

Jessie carefully took the plate and set it in her lap.

"I may need bifocals, young man, but you're giving me more than enough to view." Elizabeth gave him a swat on back.

He hopped off the chair's arm and took a seat next to Jessie. "Where's your friend?" he asked, his voice carefully neutral.

Jessie looked around. She spotted him on the ground, arm wrapped around Bruce's waist. "Wrestling, I think. I swear Bruce is just trying to get another patient." Despite his small stature, Bruce appeared to have the upper hand. "He looks like he's enjoying himself." She picked up the S'more with her fingertips and took a bite. The mix of marshmallow and melted dark chocolate had her sighing in delight.

Scott gave her a boyish grin. "Reminds me of camping."

"Me too," she said around a mouthful.

"We should go camping again. It's been ages."

Elizabeth laughed. "You look like a puppy dog waiting to be kicked. Shoulders back, boy. Are you asking her on a date? If you are, I'd suggest a meal and a movie, not hard ground and a chance of getting drenched."

Jessie'd almost forgotten Elizabeth was still there. She snickered, nearly choking on her S'more.

Scott gave her a swift pat on the back. "Serves you right."

She set the gooey concoction down and took a long drink from her water bottle. "I like Elizabeth. She keeps you in line." She smiled at the older woman.

"Darn right. Young people used to have chaperones. The threat of sex wasn't the only reason why." Elizabeth helped herself to her own glass. Red wine, Jessie noted. She set her glass down. "So, you gonna ask her or keep staring at her?"

Color flashed into Scott's cheeks. He started to stand. Jessie swung the glider just enough to keep him from finding his feet. He sat down hard.

"You're enjoying this," he accused.

"Undoubtedly."

"I can't ask her on a date, Miss Elizabeth, because she already has one. It'd be rude."

Elizabeth winked at Jessie. "A girl can have more than one beau."

He took a deep breath, cheeks puffed, then blew out. Tipping his head, he raked his fingers through his hair then said hurriedly, "Do you want to go out to eat sometime?"

"No," Jessie said, then took pity on his dejected look. "But if you cook for me I'll come over."

"Really?" His smile deepened, showing just a hint of dimples. "Saturday night?"

"Sure."

His expression took on a cautious air. "What about Michael?"

"You want me to bring him too?" she asked, deliberately toying with him.

"Show the man some mercy," Elizabeth interrupted.

Jessie laughed, a laugh that started in the pit of her stomach and just built until her entire system thrummed with amusement. She knew it wasn't what the situation required. She had brought another man to the party, had sex with a third man neither man one nor two knew about, and saw things only an eighty-plus-year-old widow saw. For her own good she should probably be committed.

Then she heard Elizabeth's crackly laughter join hers.

"I don't see what's so funny," Scott said, a wee bit cranky.

Jessie wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes then patted his knee. "Saturday night. Seven o'clock. I'll be here."

Chapter Seven

Jessie beat Scott in to work again. Surprised, she wondered how late his party had run. She'd left just after ten and it had shown no signs of letting up. In fact, she, Elizabeth and Michael were the only party poopers to leave early.

She entered her office, dropped some of her papers on her desk and glanced at Deacon's spot. He'd be in around ten a.m. His papers were laid neatly on his desk, his writing instruments lined up in military precision. She wondered what the man thought of her. Sure the sex with him had been great, even spectacular. While it hadn't been exactly the best of locations, she readily admitted that had been part of the allure. Taboo office sex. So soap opera-ish. She almost laughed despite herself.

In her mind she had banned any further sexual contact at work. Since she didn't trust her resolve, she'd also worn slacks. Sex distracted her and she needed to be focused. Her body, though, was acting as if it'd been on a ten-year sex hiatus. So slacks it was, belted and buttoned and a turtleneck to cover her from neck to waist. She'd worn her hair in a severe bun, yielding only enough to put little gold hoops in her earlobes. No one could say she was seeking attention.

Donning a pair of coveralls, she headed for the goat room. They were happy to see her and she actually appreciated doing something that required no conscious thought. It allowed her thoughts to drift, to wonder what Scott had in mind for their date Saturday night. It made her jittery just thinking about it. Scott, her Scott, had asked her out. It was inconceivable and exciting and nerve-racking all at the same time. What if he wanted to kiss her? On the lips? She wanted his hands on her but her stomach clenched just thinking about it. She couldn't stand losing him as a friend. What if she bungled it so badly he never wanted to see her again? She sighed. If she didn't try now she'd kick herself just as hard for not trying later. Especially if a single version of Barb Smythe wandered into his life.

When the water buckets were cleaned and filled and the hay bags stuffed with sweet-smelling hay she headed into her lab. Flicking on the lights, she was prepared for the normal cacophony of squeaks and cage rattling. But the cages were silent. Odd. Her heels clicked against the linoleum floor as she moved.

Fifteen cages were filled with dead rats. Unwilling and unable to believe it, she opened the first cage and pulled out the stiff body. The rat's legs were constricted tight to its body, its eyes and mouth open. Its shavings were horribly mused as if it thrashed before it died. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

Losses happened, but fifteen? Much to her colleagues' amusement, the leading cause of death in her rats was old age. She'd have to double-check but she was certain these had been injected with her latest serum. They were fine when she left yesterday.

Well, this changed her plan. Autopsies would have to be done, the organs examined. She should have gotten Deacon's phone number. She sighed. No, that wasn't his job. She needed to personally examine these. Where could she have possibly gone wrong?

She checked the rest of her rats and her batch of test mice. Everyone else appeared healthy. Just in case the deaths were unrelated to her testing, she washed her hands and donned a fresh pair of gloves before feeding everyone else. She stacked the silent cages in another part of her office and prepped her area to begin her analysis.

She was so engrossed in her work she didn't know she wasn't the only one in her office until someone put his hands over her eyes and said, "Guess who?"

Yelping, she dropped her scalpel. "Damn it."

"Oh Jessie, I'm sorry." Instantly contrite, Scott retrieved the scalpel. He looked over her shoulder. "What happened?"

She bit her lip, uncertain. "I'm not sure."

"Do you need a hand?"

She found herself wanting Scott beside her. He'd aided her through a countless number of her experiments and she, his. She knew she could count on his keen eyes.

Then Deacon walked into the room.

She cursed to herself. In her perfect world, neither man would have ever met the other. "Deacon Price, meet Scott Gills. Scott works in the office next to mine. Deacon's my new research assistant."

The men carefully shook hands. Deacon was dressed impeccably, as usual. It made Scott look like he threw things together haphazardly and in the dark. While that was probably the truth, she didn't need it staring her in the face. She felt the absurd need to justify the man's wardrobe.

"Nice to meet you," Scott said. "How long do you plan to be here?"

"As long as Ms. Arrows needs me," Deacon responded.

So it was Ms. Arrows again, huh? They looked like they were sizing each other up. If she had to she'd put money on Deacon. In addition to yoga, he probably trained that rangy body in some ancient version of Kung fu. She'd never seen Scott raise his voice, let alone his fist.

"I envy you. I couldn't survive working part-time and only at minimum wage." Scott absently twirled the scalpel between his thumb and forefinger.

She wanted to slap him.

"I have other pursuits," Deacon replied smoothly. "This is just a hobby."

Hobby? His resume certainly didn't reflect such.

Scott took a casual step toward her, narrowing their distance and staking his claim. "Jessie's pretty modest but she's made some significant inroads. I hope you'll be able to keep up with her."

Deacon eyed her thoughtfully. "I'm sure that won't be a problem." He nodded toward the stack of cages. "What have we here?"

"Dead rats," Scott supplied before Jessie could speak.

She clenched her fists and her jaw, envisioning taking the scalpel and temporarily excising them both from her life. *Men.*

"How remarkable." Deacon glanced over her shoulder. "Advanced stages of rigor mortis. They probably died shortly after you left last night." He looked at Jessie. "Does this happen often?"

"No," Scott and Jessie said in unison.

Deacon simply waited. Jessie needed to make a decision now. "Deacon, I'd like you to continue entering our backlog of data."

"You don't need a hand?"

"Scott has already volunteered to help."

"And take time out of his valuable research? How noble."

She didn't like his tone or his words. "Deacon, I've worked with Scott for years. Even with a stack of glowing reviews, I've known you for less than a week." It was simply too important. And she quite literally did not trust his hands.

"Of course," Deacon said in a stiff tone. She'd basically demoted him to a glorified secretary. The man had overseen digs in Egypt for god's sake, and she'd out-and-out told him she didn't trust him. Well, it was nice having a research assistant for one more day. If his ego held up to that slight, maybe he was a keeper.

"I don't like him," Scott said after Deacon had left. He helped himself to her instruments and a rat.

She didn't bother to look up from her work. "You don't have to. He's my assistant."

"He looks at you like you're a piece of meat."

She sighed. She didn't think so but she wasn't about to argue with his observation. Scott could be remarkably pigheaded. And so could she. "So? He's a man. You all look at women like they're prime rib."

"I don't," Scott protested. When she remained silent he said, "I don't. Do I?"

"No." No, he didn't. He respected her for her work, joked with her and held her hand when she needed comfort. If he pushed, she'd probably fire Deacon. But she knew he wouldn't. He always let her make her own decisions. When some of them blew up in her face he mutely helped pick up the pieces and patch her together.

Why hadn't she ever realized just how important he was to her?

He abruptly stopped, scalpel in hand. "When I saw you hunkered over I forgot what I came in to tell you about. Security alarms went off last night here. I wanted to make sure your office wasn't disturbed."

She eyed the row of quiet cages. "Nothing looked out of place. I had to unlock the door. Do you think—" She broke off, studying the inert form beneath her hand. It'd be

easier to blame the deaths on sabotage than admit she'd made a mistake somewhere along the line. She shook her head. No, this was her fault. "Any damage to the other offices?"

"Security guy says it looks like an amateur. Broke the window with a brick and took some drugs out of supplies. Stuff they could sell, I imagine."

Of course. No conspiracy to be found in that logic. She took a deep breath.

They worked through the normal lunch hour and still were only partway through their gruesome but necessary task. Scott raised his head. "I'll fetch us some lunch." He glanced at her face. "Just a salad, Jessie. You need to eat something."

She nodded.

"Take a break. Get some fresh air."

She pulled off her goggles and then her gloves. "I will." At his sharp glance she added, "Right now. I promise."

"I'll meet you by the pond. The sun's out, at least it was when I came in. We can eat outside."

"Okay."

She heard Deacon and Scott exchange words, their voices a low blur. *Chicken*. Celena would have told them both off then sashayed out, leaving them lusting after her. Jessie didn't possess enough chutzpah to pull it off. Instead she waited until the outer office door closed before she entered the room.

Deacon stared at the computer screen, his finger sweeping noiselessly across the keyboard. She gave him that—he knew how to be unobtrusive. His dark brown hair was slightly unkempt, as if he'd run his fingers through it repeatedly, something she had yet to see him do.

When it was obvious she wasn't just passing through the room, he folded his hands on his lap and looked up. "May I help you?"

"Deacon," she began, a hint of exasperation in her voice.

He held up his hand. "I apologize. I should not have insulted your coworker."

She eyed him suspiciously. That wasn't what she'd expected him to say.

"You don't trust me because you slept with a complete stranger and that's unlike you. Mutual attraction does not necessarily lead to mutual trust. I can respect that if you agree to have sex with me again."

Her jaw dropped.

He smiled at her then, his dark eyes gleaming.

"Deacon Price, you arrogant—"

"Tonight," he interrupted.

"I have plans."

He raised an eyebrow.

"I don't invite strangers into my home."

"My home then," he said smoothly.

That immediately intrigued her. She shook off the curiosity. "I don't have any feelings for you."

"Are you certain?" Jessie was silent and his lips quirked, not quite a smile. "You can prove it to yourself by coming over to my house tonight."

"And if I say no?"

"A gentleman never pursues a woman when it's clear he's not invited."

She snorted.

"It's just sex, Jessie. I'm not asking to marry you."

Just to fuck me. She tapped her pen against her desk. She didn't know how to word what she needed to say. "I enjoyed the sex. That's all I needed."

His eyes darkened. She saw a nerve twitch at the corner of his eye.

"I'm sorry. I'm not good with words but it's the truth. You caught me at a vulnerable time. I'm looking for something permanent." She was looking for Scott.

Deacon's Adam's apple worked. He blinked and leaned back in his chair, studying her face. "I know about the tarot card reading."

She bobbed her pen, thought she caught it and then heard it clatter on the floor. It skittered under Deacon's desk. He ignored it. "I don't know what you're talking about."

His gaze was steady. "This is as strange a maze as e'er men trod. And there is in this business more than nature was ever conduct of."

"Science is my expertise, not poetry."

He yielded first, glancing at the computer screen and back to her. His hands remained folded in his lap. "Shakespeare," he said absently. "I've met Sissy, done quite a few errands for her in the past, although this was favor to me, not her."

She leaned against her desk for support. "I don't believe you."

"If you choose to lie, you should practice more often in front of a mirror. Your face gives you away."

She put a hand to her flaming cheeks. "If you know so much why don't you explain it to me?"

"I will. Tonight. At seven."

There wasn't enough air in the room. She needed to escape, needed the tangible touch of sunlight against her skin. "I have to go. I'm meeting Scott for lunch."

"Platonic male-female relationships are filled with emotional traps," he said, turning back to his screen. "Enjoy your lunch."

She paused, hand on the doorknob. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He shrugged. "I'm just the typist. You need to ask the lead scientist that."

She grabbed her coat and slammed the door behind her.

Scott and Jessie spent the remainder of the day measuring and recording carcass details. Deacon excused himself at four. There'd been no more mention of imaginary women and tarot cards. She sighed in relief.

Scott worked at her side until six. Then he wordlessly helped her clean up the mess and walked with her to the incinerator.

"I can't believe I went that wrong," she said quietly, depositing the bag and signing off on the destruction notice.

"These things happen."

"Fifteen and they all look exactly the same."

"At least they're consistent," he offered.

"I should have monitored the rats' vitals myself. I shouldn't have slacked off and let Deacon feed them."

"There's no science to feeding rats."

"They were in the advanced stages of the disease. I had hoped the serum would slow it." And as long as she was hoping, maybe reverse the ravages. Tears stung the backs of her eyelids. She took a deep breath. There were always setbacks.

He placed his hand on her shoulder. "You are a good scientist, Jessie. Take a break tonight and go through your notes tomorrow. I guarantee the mistake will pop out at you."

"Ever the optimist," she muttered. "Thank you."

He dropped his hand. "I believe in you." They paused in the hallway. "It's good to see you back, Jessie," he added in a soft, shy voice so unlike him.

She gave him a confused look. "I never left."

"You did. You just didn't realize it." His gaze roved over her face, inscrutable. He touched her jaw lightly with the backs of his knuckles. "See you tomorrow."

He left her standing in the hallway alone. She laid her hand over her cheek. Her stomach clenched, uncertain. Shaking her head, she retreated to her office.

Deacon had left his address on her desk. Damn him. He knew what buttons to push. Picking up the scrap of paper, she jammed it in her pocket.

Chapter Eight

Deacon's apartment was at the heart of town, in one of the sleek new apartments that rose like a dagger of shimmering glass to pierce the blue sky. How could the man afford it? She entered the ultra-modern lobby with its piece of impressionist art dominating the central room. She stared at the blobby curves of black and white plastic for a moment. What was it supposed to be? Of all the various art forms, she hated abstract art the most.

"If you look closely you'll see the woman's form, sinewy in black and bent backward over the man's white arm. His lips pressed to her breast, her hand covering his cock." She flinched at the whispered voice.

"You're easily startled," Deacon said in a normal tone.

She clutched her purse. "I am not."

"You are a distracted type of woman."

"Did you invite me here to insult me?"

His lips curved into a hint of a smile. "I think you know why I invited you."

"For information, I hope," she said.

He tipped his head and smiled but there was something in his gaze that was unsettling. "I will give you what I can." He offered her his arm.

"First you insult me. Now you want to be chivalrous." But she took his arm, linking hers through his. "I hope you don't waste my time."

"Time spent with me is never a waste. And a progressive woman never accepts gallantry."

"Call me old-fashioned."

He paused at the doorway to the elevators, looking her over until she blushed under his scrutiny. She raised her chin. She'd not dressed to wow tonight. Just a simple white A-line skirt and a chocolate cashmere sweater. She had argued with herself whether to put on jewelry or not. In the end she'd wound a chunky gold chain necklace around her throat and paired it with tiny gold hoop earrings. What was she thinking? She should have worn her stained, smelly work coveralls. Dressing nice invited disaster.

"I could call you a lot of things but old-fashioned would never cross my lips."

The elevator appeared, a sleek cage of silver and glass. He ushered her in.

"A top floor apartment has to set you back, oh, two grand or more a month."

He smiled. "You're going to ask me how I afford it. I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed. I'm not going to tell you."

"And why not?"

"Everyone needs their secrets."

"You think that's your appeal?"

He eyed her carefully. "Jessie, I am my *own* appeal. I don't need secrets to enhance it."

"You are so egotistical."

"Perhaps that is my allure. Your altruistic nature calling to my egocentricity."

She snorted. "Perhaps," she mimicked his patronizing tone, "I just liked the sex." As if she'd revealed too much, she toyed nervously with an earring. "Look, I just want answers. Not sex, not smart-ass comments, just a reason to believe I'm not going insane."

He seemed unperturbed by her change in attitude. "You are one of the sanest people I've met."

She didn't know how to respond. The elevator doors slid open, revealing a sterile white hallway lined with black carpeting.

She rolled her eyes. "I feel like I'm entering a spaceship."

"I prefer the contrast," he said. They walked down the hallway then paused in front of the wall. Now she could see the outline of the door. Painted in the same style as the hall walls with no apparent doorknob, it had blended seamlessly into its surroundings. He put his hand on the door. His hand was etched momentarily in white light then the door slid soundlessly open.

She revised her opinion on the cost of the apartment.

The entire wall facing her was nothing but sheer glass, with no apparent supports to break up the view. The city spread out before her, gleaming in the evening sunlight, a mass of glass and steel. She could see the spire from St. Bartholomew's and beyond that, she fancied, she could pick out her house, or at least the patch of green representing her suburb. She stepped forward, unaware of the other belongings in the apartment.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he said with pride in his voice. "My own personal piece of ever-changing artwork."

She swallowed hard. It was exquisite. She couldn't tear her eyes from the view.

"It's equally stunning at night but I find it lacks the human element. Oh it has the occasional office affair but that's just soap opera drama." He pointed to a telescope mounted on a tripod tucked to one side. "In the light of day the whole expanse of human nature is revealed."

She could see the miniature figures moving below her like colored dots, all going their separate ways, unaware of those watching them from above.

"What, the esteemed scientist is left speechless?" he taunted.

She caught movement out of the corner of her eye. He offered her a glass of white wine.

She took the glass, holding it to the light. The liquid shimmered, colorless. "You've extracted the color from even this?"

"Red wine is a bugger to remove from white carpeting."

She laughed and took a sip. She hadn't imagined what Deacon Price's apartment might look like. A man who'd traveled all over the world, who'd seen some of the greatest treasures unearthed. What would he cherish enough to hide in his apartment? And the answer startled her.

His apartment was Spartan. No knickknacks, no pictures, just a low-lying black leather couch flanked with the usual accoutrements of end tables and coffee table. A plasma television took up nearly the entire expanse of the far wall. She wondered what kinds of gadgets were tucked into and behind the smooth gray walls. They looked like they were sheathed in metal.

"So are you making me supper too?" she asked, eyeing the kitchenette with its smooth black granite countertops and stainless steel equipment.

"I have a special treat in mind," he said. "You're overdressed for it."

Her pulse jumped. She sipped the wine again. It made her feel warm and comfortable, tingling to the tips of her toes. She finished the glass. Suddenly the apartment was way too warm. She wished she'd worn a blouse instead of a sweater. Fall was a difficult time to plan for. Eighties one day, fifties the next. And no warning how the fickle weather might swing. Kind of like sex.

Deacon took the glass from her hand and set both on the window's edge. "I like to be prepared before the feasting," he said softly, his voice a low thrum.

She put her hand out to catch her balance. "Whoa, what's the alcohol content of that?"

He said something in another language and she just shook her head, not understanding. "The nectar of the gods," he translated. "Priceless."

He twisted an arm about her waist and she steadied herself against him, hands wrapped around his biceps. She wasn't a drinker but she shouldn't be this tipsy after only one glass.

"I'm sorry your rats died. They must have represented months of work."

"Yes," she agreed. His arm closed tighter around her and despite the warning bells going off in her head she leaned into him. "The waste of it all makes me want to cry."

"Then why don't you?"

"I've lost the ability," she said quietly. "Crying is just a misuse of bodily fluids and emotion." She pushed away from him, slightly unsteady, and rested her palms and back against the glass windowpane. It felt cool. She wanted to lay her cheek against it. Instead she closed her eyes and tipped her head back. The cold seeped into the nape of her neck. "Who is Sissy, Deacon? How do you know her? What does she want with me? How do I make her go away?"

"Which question do you want answered?"

She heard him refilling the wineglasses. "All of them."

He chuckled. "There's a price for such honesty."

A snarl tore from her throat. Turning, she lunged at him, bunching the silk fabric of his shirt in both hands. "Don't you dare—"

He used her momentum to draw her down, pulling her into the leather couch's cool embrace. She struggled against him but he trapped her wrists in one hand's tight grip. He pressed her legs to the back of the couch with his thigh, ensnaring those as well.

She stopped thrashing. "Let me go." Her voice bobbed, unsteady.

He ignored her request. "Sissy is a deity." He waited for her reaction, saw none and continued, "Actually, Lachesis is her given name. The middle aspect of Fate."

Still no reaction. She simply stared at him, torn between denial and shock. She hadn't expected this out of a man as cultured as Deacon Price. Had everyone around her gone mad?

Leaning forward, he picked up one of the wineglasses and brought it to her lips. She obediently drank. The liquid warmed the numb spot in the pit of her stomach. He set the wineglass on the coffee table.

"As to how I know her, well, let's say that sometimes we have mutual interests. You, for instance." He dipped his fingertip into the wine and drew it down the line of her jaw. "I was looking for someone intelligent, headstrong and passionate. Sissy suggested you." His tongue and lips followed the path he'd drawn with the wine.

She sighed. "Deacon, you need to let me go." Her body melted under his touch like fine dark chocolate sliding down one's throat. He freed her legs then settled her more comfortably in his lap.

His eyes gleamed with amusement. "You don't believe me."

"How can I? What you're saying makes no sense."

"If you don't believe me, how can I explain how to make her go away?"

"I don't know," she replied, weary with the craziness. "I feel like I'm losing my mind." Her rigid control was slipping through her fingers like water in a cupped palm.

"Tonight, let me do the leading," he whispered in her ear. His nose nuzzled the spot just below her earlobe, sending shivers down her spine. "Who cares if angels or demons or deities are involved in your life? Feel me. I'm real. I'm here." He shifted and his erection pressed against her. His hand grazed the undersides of her breasts through the sweater's thin material.

"I don't know what to think anymore," she murmured.

"Tonight there'll be no thinking, only action. You just have to say yes."

"I want answers, the real answers." Her limbs felt full of liquid warmth. He released her hands. She moved slowly, as if she didn't quite have control of her extremities. Her fingers wrapped around the stem of the wineglass and she downed its contents. Somewhere at the back of her mind, the warning bells shrilled. The wine

muting them, made her feel warm and mellow, silenced that oppressive, overanalytical portion of her brain.

She'd come here for answers. Deacon's ludicrous response was as plausible a one as any had given her. "What is in that wine?"

Raising an eyebrow, he took the glass from her lax hand. "Is that a yes?"

"Tell me the truth."

His lips curved. "Ah, the truth. A nebulous concept, isn't it? What is reality to one is fantasy to another." His hand closed around one breast and squeezed. "My truth? I want to see those beautifully painted lips of yours caress me. I want to see streaks of lipstick coat it like a candy cane. That is real, my dick pressed against your lips."

She shivered. "What will that tell me?"

"That I am a man. Nothing more. A man who tonight wants to feast on your lovely body."

"And tomorrow?"

He chuckled. "So demanding. Tomorrow I am your humble research assistant."

"I don't think sleeping with you will make Sissy go away."

"No, but you didn't come here looking for all the answers." He set her on the floor.

She rolled to her hands and knees, her skirt puddling around her. Her mouth opened then closed.

Standing, he removed his pants and briefs. The fabric shimmied down his skin, black against creamy tan. Then he sat back down again. "Come here."

She kneaded her forehead with her fingertips. She didn't know what she wanted anymore. Gods meddling in her life. Knights in shining armor. The images spun in her head like bubbles whirling down a drain. "What if I want to go home?"

"I promise you, I can take you to a much more interesting place." His voice was thick and low, placating.

She didn't want to go home. Home was empty, devoid of life. Deacon was warm and full of life and waiting for her. So is Scott, a tiny voice whispered. But he wasn't here. This need, this pulling inside her, needed to be assuaged. Now.

She came to him on all fours, giving him a nice view of the rounded tops of her breasts. The tip of his shaft glistened, a drop of liquid beaded on its head. Like the rest of him, his pubic hair was carefully groomed, his sac shaved bare. A taste, that's all she wanted, her libido told her. To touch her skin to his, to rub her lips against that crinkly skin and feel the strength of his unfulfilled need in his tight, ropy thigh muscles. Raising herself up on her knees, she placed her hands on his inner thighs and bent over him. He fisted his hands in her hair.

She pressed her lips to the tip of his shaft in a kiss, the bead of moisture dotting her skin. Then she closed her eyes and slid her mouth down him, a long slow line, trailing lipstick as she went. Wrapping her fingers around him, she followed with her fingers where her lips had tread. He trembled under her touch. She stroked him, down and up,

exploring his ridges with the tip of her tongue. She could taste him, smell his musky scent. This was a heady sort of power, controlling the needs of another. He was so close to exploding. And she controlled it. He needed and she gave.

Pausing, she drew back and pulled her sweater over her head. She leaned over him again before he could protest or comment, slid him beneath her bra and trapped him between her breasts and the fabric prison. Sliding up and down, she worked his shaft between her soft skin and the bra's silk. It was too much all at once.

Deacon exploded. His fluid slicked the valley between her breasts. She continued to stroke him. He cried out and gripped her shoulders, stilling her movement.

His eyes were impossibly dark, shadowed by his bone structure, the high cheekbones, the deep eye sockets. He pulled out with a cry, cradling himself in his hands.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked teasingly and then when his dark eyes focused on hers, more seriously, "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Hurt me?" he whispered, his voice pitched higher than she'd ever heard. His gaze was wide-eyed and wild. "You're an enchantress, a succubus shrouded in an innocent's skin."

He spat more words out, a mix of Latin and Greek and something else. Springing off the chair, he tackled her. She yelped in surprise. He pinned her wrists to the floor, spread her as wide as her skirt permitted with his knees. "Do you know how many people want you to succeed?" His voice was thick. "How bothersome it is to measure, cut and place threads into the world's weave only to have them snap, not by the hundreds but by the thousands? It makes a mess of everything."

Part of her brain *uh-oh'ed*, the other thrilled at his loss of control. She didn't understand what he was saying. The inflection he imparted to his words changed with every breath he took—Greek, French, German, Italian. She lost count of the accents, the blending of sounds.

"You asked for the truth. I'm giving it to you." He made a feral sound, a growl of frustration. Then he was tearing at her skirt until he managed to slide it, her panties and her nylons in a tangled snarl down her legs. His lips latched on to her nipple through the fabric of her bra and she found herself arching her back, trying to cram as much of her breast as possible into his nimble mouth. He assaulted her with teeth, tongue and lips until she cried out.

He raised his head. A bit of composure returned to his gaze. "On the table," he demanded.

She eyed the coffee table dubiously. Without waiting for her reply, he picked her up and set her on it. Then he covered her body with his own, forcing her flat. He pinned her wrists again with his hands. She heard the click of metal closing and found her wrists imprisoned above her head.

Fear cleared the clutter from her brain. "Hey!"

He licked a quick path between her breasts, across her bellybutton, but then laid the briefest of kisses on her mons. Seizing her ankles, he spread her legs wide. Cold metal clamped around them. She was spread-eagle across Deacon's coffee table.

He stood, smoothed his hair and removed his shirt, undoing each button with care.

Alarm surfaced, the warning bells loud, clear and chastising now. "Let me go this minute!"

"You asked earlier if I was making supper. The answer is yes."

A slight tremor ran through her. He bent shirtless over her and brushed a kiss across her forehead. The fine hairs on his chest tickled her nipples. "Fear is sometimes an excellent alternative to foreplay."

"Deacon Price, you let me go." She wasn't scared...yet.

"Raise your voice or scream and I'll gag you with your own panties."

She stilled.

"Good girl." He swept the hair out of her face, tucking it carefully behind her ears. Straightening, he vanished out of her line of sight. Her heart raced, jackrabbit fast. He returned almost immediately, carrying a carefully arranged tray. Setting the tray beside the table, he busied himself positioning everything just so. He raised a silver spoon above her waist, liquid dribbling over its edges, then tipped it.

Heat puddled between her thighs. She bucked against the restraints, arching her back. It wasn't the heat that surprised her. It was the sensation, as if fat little fingers were finding their way into her most intimate places.

"We're having pizza," he said conversationally. He drizzled sauce up her stomach and over her breasts. The unexpected heat caused her nipples to contract.

He offered her a sample of the sauce. She turned her head. Her heart was in her throat. She couldn't get enough air. "What are you doing?"

"Expanding your narrow little missionary horizons."

"Untie me and I'll show you how creative I can be," she threatened.

"Now now." He shook his spoon carefully at her. "Teasing will only get you in trouble. Oh, I spilled a little." He set the spoon aside and his head dipped between her legs. He spread her and explored her folds, until she was left breathless and gasping. "Much better."

She meant to curse but instead all that came out was a moan.

He adorned her sauce-covered body with pieces of intricately arranged meat. Pepperoni covered her breasts and made a stepping stone path down to the juncture of her thighs. Sausage whirled across her stomach, an elaborate series of circles and swirls. He arranged the mushroom slices in a delicate half circle atop her mons. "I want mushrooms on my half. How about you?" He picked up a container of shredded cheese.

"This is insane," she muttered, fear transforming into embarrassment.

He eyed her closely. "This is a sexual feast," he replied. He liberally sprinkled the cheese across her breasts and stomach.

She rolled her eyes. When she focused again she found him holding a small handheld torch, the kind she used to light Bunsen burners. "No. I don't care where or what but no." She tried to keep her voice steady and firm. A fine tremor started in her limbs.

"You're not in a position to argue," he reminded her.

The flame flared to life. She arched her back, fighting against her restraints. She didn't want to be burned, to be horribly scared. He tipped it, keeping it inches from her body, and carefully melted the cheese on her breasts and stomach. She felt its heat but it was nothing more than a growing warmth. He snuffed out the flame as quickly as it had begun. The cheese had conformed to her every curve. Her breasts gleamed like they'd been dipped in fondue.

He kissed each breast. "You have serious trust issues."

"You're deranged," she retorted.

"Have I hurt you?"

Without waiting for her response, he lowered his face to her mons and started nibbling at the mushrooms there. He worked his way up her stomach, licking cheese and sauce off her. His goatee left a scratchy path in its wake. His tongue played with her bellybutton. He left her breasts covered and headed farther south.

She bucked her hips. "Don't try to change the subject." Her words came out in breathy gasps.

He dipped two well-oiled fingers into her. "What subject was that?" His thumb played with her tender little nub.

Her legs began to twitch. Her toes curled. Leaning back to get a better view, he caressed one of her shaking calves.

"You tricked me," she whispered. She shivered, her nipples tensing.

"I freed you so you might experience true pleasure." He bent over one of her breasts and nipped it. The dark pink bud poked out of the cheese like the center of a flower. His eyes gleamed, unrepentant. "Besides, you'd never have agreed to this."

He was right. She tried a different tactic. "You'll get sauce all over your precious white carpeting."

He shrugged and continued to massage her, his fingers sliding in and out of her in a slow rhythm. The sensation drove her nuts. She was used to being able to use her hands, to touch and taste and feel on her own. She clenched her hands into fists.

His tongue licked up one side of her body and down the other. He lay on top of her, one hand supporting the bulk of his weight. She had not guessed him to be so strong. The muscles in that arm bunched, biceps and triceps forming perfect half-arcs of steel. Her breath caught in her throat. She desperately wanted to reach up and touch his arm, to feel if the muscles were as taut as they looked.

Putting two fingers beneath her chin, he lifted her head up a fraction. Then he lowered his lips to her throat. At the same time he arched his back and plunged into her.

"If you don't want me, just lie still," he whispered. He continued to ravage her body with hard kisses, scrubbing away each mark with his stubbly goatee.

She couldn't. Her hips adopted his cadence.

Her entire body stiffened, fighting the restraints. As the orgasm swept through her, it consumed her senses. The blood rushed through her ears, drowning out her hearing. Pinpricks of light danced before her eyes. She clenched, felt his strokes as he waltzed with her nerves, forcing her to orgasm a second time before the first tremors had left her body.

Dimly, sound returned. Her voice was pleading with him, making small mewling noises. "Don't stop. Oh God, please don't stop. Oh God, I'll die. I'm dying." And still her body craved more. Her hips pumped harder, demanding speed. If she had had her hands free she'd have seized his buttocks and forced the speed from him. Trapped as she was, she could only plead.

He didn't tease her. A slick sheen of sweat coated his body. He latched on to her nipple, wringing another cry from her.

She didn't remember him undoing her restraints, only found herself on the floor lying atop him. His fingers were playing with the dip in her back, skating up and down its slope.

"I'm a mess," she said softly. It took all the strength she could muster to raise herself up on one elbow. Then she poked him in the chest. "You owe me an apology."

He opened one eye. "For stretching your limits?" He snorted and his chest heaved. "You should be thanking me."

"The point is, you should have asked my permission first."

The one open eye rolled. "Do the gods ask permission before they meddle in humans' lives?"

"You're not a god," she retorted.

His other eye opened. "How do you know?"

"A god would have made me orgasm a fourth time."

He chuckled then, sat up and captured her in his arms. "Let's get you cleaned up and see if I can't prove my godliness to you."

She woke with her head pillowed on Deacon's stomach. His bedroom was as Spartan as the rest of his house, though decorated with Japanese influences. The material under her fingertips was the finest cotton weave, almost silky smooth. The king-size bed squatted on four thick ebony posts, its narrow headboard padded in black leather. Deacon's fingertips swept in long lazy strokes up and down her spine.

"You're awake," he murmured.

"Barely."

He chuckled, a satisfied male noise. If she had had any energy left she would have rolled over and smacked him. His abdominals rippled beneath her cheek, making her wet all over again. *Yoga good*, was all she could think. The positions the man could assume...she needed to seriously consider taking up yoga or Pilates.

His fingers burrowed into her hair, kneading her scalp. "What if I could fulfill your deepest fantasy?"

She shivered. How much did she want to share with this man? *Hah. Funny time to be asking that particular question.* She'd already crossed just about every sexual line she'd ever consciously drawn. Except one. The real question was, how serious was he?

"Two men and one bed?" she asked, lacing humor with her words while she mentally crossed her fingers and prayed. For what, she wasn't sure.

Amusement tinged his voice. "Tempting, but not what you really want."

Light filtered through his paper shades, bathing the room in muted shades of gold. How long had she slept? "What time is it?"

"Early. Six a.m., and you're avoiding my question." Those sexy fingers found another knot at the base of her skull and worked at massaging it away. "The Engelbreck Facility."

She stiffened. How could he possibly know?

He shifted, hands resting on both her shoulders. "You carry entirely too much tension here." He dug his fingers into the muscles and kneaded forward and back. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes. Her gasp turned into a whimper and then a contented sigh. "The primate labs in San Diego. I have friends there. I was sent by them to observe you in your natural element. I must admit, Ms. Arrows, I'm quite impressed. You've accomplished a lot with the measly funds from Asantic and your grants. Just think what you could do with unlimited resources."

She abruptly sat up. His hands slipped away. Turning, she clutched the sheet to her chest. He lay back, his dark hair a stain on the pristine white cloth. Stubble dotted his cheeks. She'd never seen him with stubble. It actually softened his devilish look.

"Lost your voice?" he gently chided.

"Engelbreck wants me?" she whispered. It made sense. His impressive resume, his skill set. They didn't belong in her lab. She'd applied to Engelbreck several times. They'd never expressed an interest in her.

"They want you." He stroked her forearm. "You're cold." He grabbed a fold of comforter and settled it over her lap, covering her legs.

"I—my goats—everything?" It was too much to take in, too much to hope for.

"Just you. Your mind. You'd have to move, of course."

"But the girls—"

"Shh." Sitting up, he put a finger to her lips. "Think about it. Working on primates."

She pulled out of his reach. Swinging her legs free, she sat on the edge of his bed. "I need to get to work." She needed to think. Away from him. Stumbling to her feet, she searched for her clothes and found them neatly piled on a chair. He must have gotten up sometime in the night and done that. She hugged the fabric to her chest. Engelbreck sent Deacon to observe her. They wanted her. She was afraid to breathe.

"Jessie."

She glanced over her shoulder.

"Some opportunities only arrive once in your lifetime. It's up to you to make the most of them."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. This is all so sudden. I'm excited." Nervous enough to vomit. Terrified of saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing. "Is there someone I can talk to there? A contact other than you?" She couldn't meet his eyes.

"Of course." His tone was curiously devoid of emotion.

"Last night. You spoke of gods meddling in my life. It comes down to this, doesn't it?"

He was propped up against the headboard. He held his hands out, palms up. "It does."

Give up everything she'd built for herself here to travel across the country and work with some of the brightest minds in the world. Or stay, fight for her meager funds year after year and pray for success someday.

Which path was she supposed to take?

"I'll see you at the office. I need to go."

Chapter Nine

As she eased her aching body out of the car—self-reproach had yet to arrive, Jessie figured it'd do so after the eight gallons of caffeine she'd consumed wore off—her cell phone rang. She had allotted herself five minutes to get a fresh change of clothes and leave for the office. She toyed with not answering it, saw that it was Celena and cursed to herself. She'd meant to call her days ago.

"Where have you been?" Celena demanded. "And why haven't you returned my calls?"

"I've been busy," she replied. "I'm sorry. Truly sorry."

Celena was instantly mollified. "What have you been up to?"

"Isn't it a bit early for you to be calling?" she asked, dodging the question.

"I took a chance. Since you weren't answering my calls in the evening."

She tried to think of an excuse, anything that might make sense to Celena. But she'd known her for years. She'd scent a lie. "I've been making up for lost time."

There was dead silence on the other end of the phone. "Hello?" Jessie asked.

"With Deacon? You sneak! I want details. Every tiny one in all their depraved multicolor glory."

Jessie laughed. "I'm running late. Maybe later."

"And here I always thought it'd be Scott."

"Why would you say that?" She dropped her keys on the table and headed for her bedroom.

"Oh please. He's had a thing for you for years."

A knot formed in her throat. "No," she whispered. A million images of Scott ran through her mind. In an instant she realized Celena was right. The man had been in love with her for years. Oh lord, how could she have been so blind? "I've got to go," she said, hoping she hid the tremor in her voice.

"Oh all right. At least say we can get together this week. Saturday?"

"How about Sunday?" Her tongue felt like sandpaper. "I have a date Saturday night with Scott."

"Well, I'll be. Out of the nunnery and into the whorehouse. Where are you going? Is he picking you up? What are you going to wear?"

Jessie smiled to herself then winced when she tried to step into her slacks. "Stop over Sunday with cheesecake and Bailey's and you might be able to pry details out of me."

"Jessie Arrows, I'm hurt. You finally do something exciting and I'm left out."

She heard the beginnings of Celena's pout. She didn't have the time to wait through that twenty-minute drama. "I'll see what I can do. Now I have to go."

"It's been so long. I need to live vicariously through you."

Jessie nervously laughed. "If I told you, you'd never believe me."

"Oh baby, it better be good."

"Bye, Celena." She clicked off the phone.

She couldn't deal with this kind of information right now. Scott in love with her? Her heart pounded just a little too quickly. He'd never move. That is, if she accepted the position at Engelbreck. She'd be insane not to. It's what she was supposed to do, wasn't it?

She blew out a breath. First things first.

She needed to confirm Engelbreck's offer with someone she hadn't slept with. Cultured, educated and sexy-as-hell Mr. Deacon Price believed in deities and Fate. Whoever she spoke with could worship trees and rocks in their off hours, she just didn't want to know about it.

Arriving late to work was a rare experience for her. That meant parking in the back lot. Scenic and shady but nearly a quarter-mile hike to the office doors. Sometimes Asantic's aesthetics clashed with practicality. Luckily she hadn't taken any work home with her last night.

Shouldering her bag, she made a mental note to sort through its contents. Deacon was right about one thing. She carried her tension in her shoulders and the bowling ball bag – purse – wasn't helping matters.

"Don't forget your keycard."

Jessie nearly slammed her fingers in her car door. Turning around, she scanned the lot. Sissy sat on a bench under one of the trees, ankles crossed, a book in her hand. The woman carefully marked her page and stood up. She glanced pointedly at her watch. "You're running late."

"What do you want from me?"

"Appreciation would be nice. In lieu of that I'll take respect."

"You'll have to settle for antagonism."

Sissy tsked. "After everything I've done for you –"

"Assuming it is a real job offer, you're asking me to choose between my right hand and my left." Her ambitions and her heart. She started walking toward the building.

Sissy joined her.

"What do you want me to say?" she ground out, still walking.

"When tragedy strikes, everyone is affected differently. Some people gradually find their own way back, shadows of their former selves. Others, suddenly freed, shine.

Then there are those, to borrow from your friend's colorful vernacular, who need to be bitch-slapped back into reality."

Jessie stopped and turned on her. "I'm fine now. Send them away."

Sissy blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Deacon. Michael. Your knights, angels, whatever you call them. Send them away."

"I can't do that."

"You brought them here."

"No, I enabled them to come but their decisions and yours are your own."

"So—I want them to go." She stepped through a colorful arbor of trumpet vines, in no mood for riddles. Only fifteen more feet until she reached the building. She prayed she'd be free of Sissy then. Other than their first auspicious meeting, the woman had chosen not to accost her in a building. Jessie hoped she held to the pattern. "What do I need to do?"

"Choose."

"I can't!"

"It's too hard. It's not fair. I'm not strong enough. Why now?" Sissy's words mimicked Jessie's thoughts.

They sounded weak coming from another's mouth.

They'd reached the door. "Stay away from me," Jessie said in a low voice. "You want my decision? You stay away from me."

Sissy folded her hands. "Get on with it then. Live."

Jessie slid her keycard into the slot. When she glanced over her shoulder Sissy was gone.

She went through her morning chores in a haze. Deacon arrived at ten. When he did she all but pounced on him. He wordlessly handed her a business card. Dr. Arlen Penning, Engelbreck Facility. Her fingertips left sweaty marks on the stiff, embossed paper.

"Anything else I need to tend to?" he asked.

"Not at the moment." She vanished into her office to place her phone call.

Forty minutes later she still sat at her desk. The business card spun in her hand, its edges tapping the desk as it turned. It was true, all of it. The job. Deacon's part in recruiting her.

She'd have to leave behind her goats. Her life. Scott.

Celena might follow her. The woman could cut hair anywhere and everyone knew she despised the winters here.

Scott wouldn't leave. She knew it without asking.

If Celena were in her situation, what would she do?

Why, circumvent all reasoning and throw a party, of course. Though certainly not the sort of party Jessie had in mind.

Her lips curved. Time to introduce Deacon Price to Michael Carrigan. Her taking the offense was long overdue. *Let's see what you think about that, Sissy.*

Jessie took off early on Friday, leaving Deacon to close her office. By the time she reached home the maid service had already come and gone. Dead plants had been replaced with new ones and, in some cases, with authentic fakes. The curtains were washed, the windows gleaming.

If she decided to stay she was hiring an interior decorator. Time to pull herself out of the nineties.

Her bags jostled against one another as she dragged them into the house. She wasn't a chef and she wasn't about to pick up a new hobby. Thank goodness for delis. Transferring the food from plastic containers to platters and glassware, she hid all evidence of her deceit.

After she'd showered she whacked at her eyebrows with tweezers then played with the makeup kits Celena had given her over the years. Time for a change.

She'd never owned a dress like the one she sleeked down her body. Black sequined, it conformed to every curve but bared as much as it covered. While her breasts were shrouded in sequins, her back was near nude save for a criss-crossing of straps. The bodice halted its plunge just above the dip in her back. She might suck at yoga but a glance at her body would fail to reveal her lack of flexibility. Mousse and a low side part gave her hair a sophistication she could never pull off. The wide gold clip at the nape of her neck ensured it would behave itself.

If Celena could see her now she'd scream like a teen swooning over her latest heartthrob.

She studied herself in the bathroom mirror. Who was this woman? She'd never worn so much makeup, but it looked good. Dark. Mysterious. Her eyebrows arched gracefully over eyes deeply etched in black mascara. If she passed self-inspection under fluorescent lights, imagine what soft lighting would do.

If both men took one look at her and forgot the other man, she'd know she succeeded.

Candlelight spilled through the house, reflecting off the freshly polished surfaces. She nibbled on a cracker, nervous. Sissy wanted her to alter her destiny. Well, her lackeys, Deacon and Michael, were in for a surprise. Jessie wasn't taking any more bullying.

She sighed, rubbing her brow. Tomorrow she'd decide what she was going to do about Scott. How much more did he want? What if she didn't have enough of herself left to give?

Michael and Deacon, those were men who asked nothing of her. And in asking nothing, in having nothing to lose by becoming involved with them, she felt safe.

If she left her home, Asantic and Scott, she'd lose everything that mattered to her. But what would she gain?

Michael arrived first.

She knew she was overdressed but she didn't care. She felt utterly wicked. Snagging her wineglass, she opened the door.

Michael stepped in. His breath whooshed out. "Are we staying in?" His gaze traveled from her head to toe. "I'm sorry, I'm at a loss. You're stunning. Simply amazing." He glanced around the sparkling house. "So quick," he murmured. "Impressive."

"Thank you." She took a swallow of the wine, the liquid courage soothing her nerves. "Sissy be damned. I've decided to take matters into my own hands."

He blinked at the mention of Sissy's name, lips pursed. "Ah, the crux." Sliding off his coat, he revealed a pair of dark-wash jeans and a blue polo shirt. "I suppose you'll have questions for me."

"None." If he answered them as obliquely as Deacon did, why bother?

Hanging his coat on the rack, he stepped into the living room. "None at all?"

"Just this." She paused, feeling her stomach dance, then stood on tiptoe and kissed him. His breath rushed, hot, into her mouth. She wound her arms around his neck, drawing him down. She closed her eyes.

His mouth traveled down her skin, trailing kisses from the corner of her lips along her neck to the hollows above her collarbones. His hands stayed at her waist as if he were afraid to move them, afraid of being unable to check his impulses.

She wasn't nearly so careful. She fumbled with the buttons on his shirt and then, in a hurry, tugged the fabric free from his pants and over his head. Five feet inside her house and he'd already lost his shirt.

Startled, he laughed. "What's come over you?"

"It's my life. I'll do what I want."

His chest had a light dusting of blond hairs. She ran her hands over them, tickling her palms. A solid expanse of muscle rippled beneath his skin, a broad span of chest that sloped to the clearly defined muscles of his abdomen.

She immediately reached for his pants but he grasped her hands, checking her motion. The noise out of her mouth was part snarl part moan. He chuckled. "Patience. We have all the time in the world."

"You might, but I don't."

"Indulge me. There'll be plenty of tomorrows." Michael took a step back and pulled a CD from his coat pocket. "Music?"

Plucking it from his fingertips, she placed it in her player. An orchestra erupted from her speakers.

"Dance with me," he urged.

Her arms moved of their own accord, circling his neck. She pressed herself tight against him, feeling the warmth of his chest through the thin layer of her dress separating them. Her breasts were impossibly heavy, her nipples little daggers trying to spear through the fabric. He spun her around the room.

He wanted her as badly as she did him. She could feel his erection pressed against her. When he spun her away from him, she could clearly see it as well. His black dress pants molded to his movements.

Hugged close again, her hands roved over the tight crest of his ass. He dipped her over his arm, arching her back. His lips descended to her nipple and he suckled at her breast, the sheer fabric barrier taunting her. When he brought her upright she trailed her hands down the length of his body until she reached his pants. She needed to touch him, to prove to herself that she was really going through with this.

She kneaded his full erection. "Supper or the bedroom?"

His lips descended on hers. "Bedroom."

Somewhere along the way he lost the rest of his clothes. Save for her panties, so did she.

She pulled him onto her bed. Flipping them over, she straddled his hips. "I've decided I don't want to have sex. Let's lie here and read poetry instead." She ground herself against him, feeling the wet fabric of her panties stretch as he sought entry.

He cupped her mons, slid to tease her nub with the tip of his finger. She was left breathless. "You read, I'll listen."

She leaned back, rubbing his erection against the valley of her ass while she wiggled out of her panties. He groaned softly. Then she was straddling him again. "I really want to fuck you." She put her hand over her mouth. *Did I say that out loud?*

Michael's smile was wide and unworried. "I'm not going to argue with you."

"Well, then, what are we waiting for?" She pierced herself with his shaft.

Engulfing him all at once drove her immediately to the fine line between pleasure and pain. It wasn't his length—although he was more than adequate in that department—but his width that presented a challenge.

With a groan, he reached for her breasts, kneading them in his hands. Her nipples rested in his cupped palms, rubbing against the smooth surface while he stretched and teased the sensitive skin around them. She leaned over him, taunting him with her breasts. He arched up, trying to seize a nipple between his lips. She held herself just out of reach until he put a hand on her back and bent her forward. The sucking action made her catch her breath. Her insides clenched around his shaft. She closed her eyes, letting the sensations envelop her.

Pulling back, she spun slowly until her ass faced his head and she, his feet. She lay flat on top of him, letting him stroke the muscles in her calves. His leg hairs tickled her oversensitive skin as she moved in a relaxed rhythm.

The doorbell rang. Beneath her, Michael froze.

She smiled. "I invited someone else. I hope you don't mind."

His exotic musk enveloped her a moment before she heard his quiet laughter. "My, my, what do we have here?" Deacon stood in her doorway, her dress dangling from one hand. "Isn't this an interesting variation? You continue to astound me. Don't quit." His gaze shifted to Michael. "Hello, Mr. Carrigan."

"Deacon," Michael acknowledged.

The bed bent and shifted and then Deacon's hands gripped her waist. She almost climaxed right there.

"Now that would be impolite, wouldn't it?" Deacon said in a low voice. "Invite me to the party and then orgasm prematurely?" His finger played at the edge of her anus, sliding around the tight circle. She tried not to clench, tried instead to relax. After all, she'd invited him.

What would happen if she brought out the third? She found herself thinking selfish thoughts, not willing to share Scott with anyone else, male or female. He was hers and he belonged in her world. These men, presences foreordained by Sissy or her own psychotic mind, could never measure up. She was connected to them by web-spun strands of lust. Her connection to Scott was reinforced by a thousand tender acts until the thread binding them had become diamond strong. Why was she substituting two men's attentions for the one she craved?

Then Michael began a slow rhythm beneath her, drawing her attention to him. Her thoughts fled, replaced by sweet pulling sensations. Deacon poured a warm fluid down her back. It puddled in the dip of her spine, just before the swell of her hips. Deacon dunked two fingers in the pool and slid them through the valley of her ass, easing them into her anus.

She whimpered, grinding herself against Michael's thick shaft. She didn't know who to focus on, the slow steady build of heat Michael was kindling inside her or the new sensations Deacon was stirring with his gentle plundering. Then Deacon's fingers were replaced by the head of his penis and she shattered right there.

Her breath caught in her throat, the orgasm swift and fierce. Every muscle in her body twitched and fought and wrenched. But neither Michael nor Deacon were content to let her recover from the onslaught.

Michael continued with his slow rhythm, building the storm again. Flicks of lightning seized her muscles. Tremors of thunder filled her ears. Somehow Deacon had slid more of himself into her. She felt completely full, her body stretched to its limit. Deacon pressed himself against her back, wrapping his arms around her so he could play with her engorged breasts.

The room was filled with small whimpering noises and she realized they were coming from her mouth. "Oh God," she whispered. Her muscles tightened around Michael's shaft, each contraction making her more aware of Deacon's slow assault as well. Then Michael exploded beneath her, sending her body into a fresh wave of spasms. He clenched her calves, pressed his lips to her ankle and moaned against them. The low note vibrated through her body.

Deacon was not to be forgotten. He leaned back, put one arm under her stomach, picked her up and pivoted her to face Michael.

Michael's eyes were shut. When he opened them, the blue overwhelmed her, drowning her inner demons. She sucked in a breath of air and still couldn't breathe. Their lips met and Michael's hands found her breasts. Deacon repositioned himself, then slowly slid back into her. Her unused muscles and nerves shrilled, walking the fine pleasure-pain line until she felt she was a single throbbing sensation, not a pitiful creature trapped by muscle, bone, and flesh.

Michael scooted a bit lower, catching one of her breasts in his mouth. His tongue licked a slow path around her areola. Her nipple contracted, impossibly tight. He paused, rubbing the tight nub between his thumb and forefinger. She moaned. Behind her, Deacon picked up the pace.

"Look at me, Jessie," Michael urged.

She kept her eyes shut.

His hand crept to her wetness, found her supersensitive nub and began to flick across it. She whimpered.

"Look at me," he said again.

Another wave was rising up in her. Toes tingling, her calves stiffened in anticipation. She opened her eyes, met his. "Oh God, you'll kill me."

"Say my name," he said softly, then he pushed her over the edge yet again.

"Michael!" she screamed. Oh God. God have mercy. "Michael," she whispered. "Michael, Michael, Michael." A mantra, a plea.

Behind her, Deacon stiffened, his movements quick and jerky.

He wasn't going to spill himself in there, was he? What if he did damage? She pulled away, his frustrated snarl loud in her ears.

Still atop Michael, she spun around and splayed her legs. "Here."

With a growl, Deacon peeled off his condom, to reveal yet another one beneath. She would have giggled and made a nasty comment, but the savage look of concentration on his face stopped her. He plunged into her all the way. She gasped. His lips found the hollow of her neck and he bit her, hard enough she cried out.

He moved as if he were some great cat, clinging to his mate's neck and possessing her. Her hips bucked against his, bone to bone, jarring each other. There was no tender lovemaking, only a white-hot need. Her body curved into his muscles. Her hands dug into his back. When he collapsed on top of her, his body twitching, a set of fine tremors

ran through her own body as well. After a moment, he began to lick the sweat off her breast, his goatee rough against her skin.

Michael rolled the whole group sideways. She pressed her head against Deacon's unsteady chest and drifted off, exhausted.

Jessie lay sandwiched sleepily between the two men, her fingers tangled in Michael's hair. He faced her, his face buried between her breasts, arms wrapped around her waist. Gauging by the slow even rise and fall of his chest, he was asleep. Deacon lay behind her, cupping her ass and back with his body. She could feel his half-raised erection against her buttocks, but he made no move to make use of it. Instead he trailed his hand lazily up and down the length of her body. His lips pressed against the nape of her neck.

"Have you decided whether you'll stay or go?" Deacon murmured.

"Either way you'll leave me, won't you?" She didn't mean to sound sullen. Deacon's attention, while flattering and enjoyable, wasn't something she'd want to be faced with every day. Cowardly but true.

He chuckled. "You want me, but you don't need me." His goatee scraped back and forth along her upper arm. "The broken excite me. You? You present a challenge. Truthfully, it's wearying."

If anything, it was the simplest breakup she'd ever endured. Not that any of them had viewed their tumble as a sign of commitment. "Are you even human?" she wondered out loud.

"Do you wish to test my DNA?"

"Would you let me?"

That earned her another quiet laugh. "You wouldn't find any satisfying answers. And Jessie, no matter what the endeavor, I pride myself on being satisfying." He rolled her toward him.

Michael murmured in his sleep then shifted to hug a fold of comforter.

She studied him, his deep-set eyes, fox-sharp face and ragged bangs. Just who was Deacon Price? She was pretty certain she'd never know for sure. As a scientist, it bugged her. As a woman...oh hell, who was she kidding? Not knowing added an addictive thrill.

Angels, demons and deities be damned. She didn't care what she was sleeping with right now. Snuggling into his arms, she let him tempt her with his now fully awake shaft.

Chapter Ten

Tonight was “the night”. Jessie would have been less nervous having a lesbian encounter with Sissy than going on an actual date with Scott. It was only supper for god’s sake, not a marriage proposal. Certainly nothing important enough to have her chugging anti-diarrheal medication like it was cheap wine.

Her fingers itched to call Celena. For once, she wanted an opinion on how she looked. What should she wear? Hair up or down? A little makeup or the dark sultry look she’d been honing? She was afraid no matter what she did, she’d bungle it.

The bottom line—Scott mattered. He mattered a lot.

She finally opted for a simple green silk dress.

Dressed to kill or at least sexy enough to cause some brain malfunction, she glanced at her watch and realized she didn’t have any more time left. Either she wowed him or she didn’t. One way or another, it wasn’t a night she’d forget.

She never considered he might be just as nervous as she was. When she knocked on his door, she was met with a partially shaved, half-dressed madman. His shirt was unbuttoned and she noticed four different ties draped over the back of his couch.

“Oh, you’re here. Is it seven already?”

She stepped inside and took off her coat. “Can I help with something?”

Scott’s jaw dropped. “I—um—wow.”

“I’ll just throw my coat on your guest bed.” She headed for the bedroom, hiding her smile. *Brain malfunction, check. First round goes to me.*

“No!”

She froze at his panicked word. Plucking the coat from her hand, he threw it over the couch beside his discarded ties. His hand hovered over the ties.

“You don’t need a tie. It’ll only get in the way later.”

He made a choking noise.

“Scott, are you all right?”

Raking his fingers through his hair, he gave her a lopsided smile. “Sure.”

“Do you have food burning?” she prompted.

“What? No.” He sniffed. “I don’t think so.”

This close to him she could smell his aftershave. That was new. She smiled back. “Look at us. Flitting around like idiots.”

Sighing, he finished tucking in his shirt. “I’m grilling chicken.”

“With that hot sauce you always used to make?”

He grinned sheepishly. "I didn't know you were going to get so dressed up. Maybe I can find a napkin or a bib..." He trailed off as she approached him.

All she could think of was what he'd taste like. "I think we should get this out of the way right now." Boldness had never been one of her skills but she adopted it now.

Poised to land between her breasts, his hand stopped her. He stared at it. "I love you." He raised his head and met her gaze. "I've always loved you."

"I know. That doesn't change anything."

He shook his head. "At first I thought it was deceitful, loving my best friend's wife. I swore I'd never lay a hand on you."

"You've never been anything but kind."

He made a low noise, the sound of a trapped animal.

Understanding dawned. It all came to this. Life. Ambition. Passion. All of it so sweet, like sun-warmed strawberries picked and eaten fresh from the vine. But how much sweeter the taste when paired with champagne or chocolate. She'd finally stepped beyond herself.

She twined her fingers through his outstretched hand, brought both to her lips. "There's just us now."

And she realized that it was true. Not Deacon, not Michael, not even Sissy could tempt her from his side. Her stomach settled, her world curiously calm. Now she just had to convince Scott.

They ate on his deck. She knew she actually chewed and swallowed, made appropriate and appreciative noises, but she couldn't remember what she ate. They sat together side by side instead of facing one another, as if they couldn't bear to be parted for even that long. They talked too, about what she couldn't remember.

Twined around the arbor's supports and looped overhead, white Christmas lights provided soft mood lighting. A cool breeze ruffled his hair. She watched his lips move, his eyes sparkle when she laughed at something he said. Aware of his leg brushing hers, she fancied she felt the heat of his skin through his pants.

So this is what it's like to be in love.

"Jessie?" Scott startled her from her daydream.

"What?"

His hand closed around hers. "I asked if you wanted dessert."

"Oh." Setting her fork down, she reached up and with her fingertip, very slowly traced the laugh lines at the corner of his lips. "Do I have a choice?"

His nervous laugh made her squirm, warming her body and causing a flood of heat to pool between her thighs.

"I made white-chocolate semifreddo, but I might have some ice cream or a bag of candy tucked away."

She licked her lips. "How about whipped cream?"

"Oh lord –"

She swallowed his protest, sealing his lips with her own.

Whatever notions she'd had fled. His hand slipped into her hair, cradling her head. Teasing the seam of his lips with her tongue, she begged for entrance. He finally relented, his eyes popping open when her tongue dipped inside. He tasted of barbeque sauce and she quietly laughed. He'd wanted everything to be perfect and had forgotten one of the most important things, breath mints. Hands fisted in her hair, his tongue tentatively battling hers. She taunted it, tickling the roof of his mouth and dueling with him until they were both breathless.

He pulled back. "Jess," he whispered. His pupils were wide and dark.

She pressed a kiss to his cheek and another to his throat where his pulse hammered. "Hmm?"

"I want you, but – this will change everything – what if it doesn't work? I couldn't stand to be the one to hurt you. Worse, I couldn't stand to lose you."

"I'm not going anywhere and neither are you," she murmured, touched. A thought nagged at her. "Why couldn't I go into your guest bedroom?"

He blinked twice, eyes going back to their normal size. His lips curved. "The bed's out here."

"What?" She looked around and saw nothing out of place.

"Green tent behind the arbor."

The tent remained hidden in the darkened part of his yard.

"I wasn't going to say anything unless I was certain – that is, I didn't want to make assumptions –"

She put her finger over his lips. "Mighty smooth move."

He smiled then kissed her finger. "Thank you."

"And how were you going to get me to that part of the yard?"

His eyes sparkled. "I thought about carrying you, but the mood would be ruined the moment I dropped you."

She punched him lightly in the shoulder. "Idiot."

He reached up to twirl a loose strand of her hair around his finger. "Will you come to bed with me?"

"Of course."

"It's been a while. I may disappoint you."

"You don't know when to quit, do you?"

He grinned and the shyness fled. "I'm being honest."

"Well here's honesty for you. Practice makes perfect. Anyone who says their first time was special is lying, was drunk and doesn't remember or was doing it with

someone with lots of practice." She raised an eyebrow. "Do you have lots of practice, Mr. Gills?"

"You'll have to let me know." Standing, he offered her his hand. "I racked my brain for days. I had no idea how I was going to get you to that part of my garden. Somehow, 'hey, baby, wanna see my compost pile' just didn't cut it."

Laughing, she let him draw her to her feet.

She had wondered how he managed to fit a tent around an entire double bed, springs, headboard and footboard included. It turned out to be a screen tent, its sides zippered shut to keep out prying eyes and the cool breeze. The bed from his guest suite stood in its center. In the LED's glare, the thick white comforter draping the bed looked like a snow-capped mountain peak.

He'd been pretty sure of himself, she thought.

Dropping her hand, he peeled back the comforter. More white fluff greeted her. They'd be buried alive, a human S'more.

There was a wicked gleam in his eye that made her feel incredibly hot. "Expecting rose petals?" he asked.

"Well, between you and Jim, you were always the more frivolous."

"Was not!"

"And the propane-fired oven was necessary for camping?"

"Got me." He sat on the edge of the bed then patted a spot beside him. "I don't know how to be romantic, Jess. I mean I do, but not with you."

"You're doing a pretty good job," she murmured. Shucking her shoes, she joined him, one leg tucked under her butt.

His hand caressed her cheek. "What do you think he'd say?"

She knew he meant Jim. When he'd died, they'd both lost their best friend. "I think he'd laugh. And when he got done poking fun, he tell us to stop behaving like teenagers and get on with the good stuff. Life's short." Funny, not too long ago she'd have disagreed. Life seemed achingly drawn out.

His hand slid to her shoulder and drew her close. Their second kiss was sweeter still. Arms wrapped around each other. They tumbled into the bed. Contrary to her first worry, they didn't smother. His hands on her breasts felt just right. She pulled his shirt out of his pants, her fingers playing with his vertebrae. His skin was almost feverishly hot.

He sighed against her mouth. The skirt's silk whispered up her leg as his hand caressed her inner thigh. She tugged his shirt down his shoulders, lifting her mouth off his skin only long enough for him to free his arms.

His pants came next, lost beneath the tangle of sheets and down. He found her dress's zipper. The straps slid down her shoulders, the fabric bunching at her waist. She

wore matching green silk beneath. What a bugger it'd been to find. When she saw his eyes light up, it made the frustrating search worthwhile.

He cupped her breasts in both hands and simply stared. She wriggled her hips, rubbing against the erection tenting his cotton briefs.

"Arms up," he said finally. The silk bunched in his hands. He drew it over her head slowly, then held the fabric to his nose. "Can I keep this and send you home naked?"

"Already pushing me out the door?" she teased, pulling him down for a kiss.

"Never," he whispered against her lips. His arms circled her body. "Never ever." He nuzzled her neck.

"Then let's get rid of these." Her fingers closed around the waistband of his briefs and yanked them down.

He swelled into her hands. Soft and yet hard, achingly warm. She stroked his shaft then reached lower to gently cup his balls.

He groaned. "Not too much. Please."

Her fingers tightened their grip.

"Later, oh god, later. I need you now."

She guided his shaft to her panties, rubbing it against the silk. His head lowered to her breast, suckling her nipple through the fabric. It was her turn to moan. Shimmying out of her panties, she gripped his ass and urged him into her.

Oh god, he filled her up.

He whimpered, fingers fumbling with the clasp on her bra.

She framed his face with her hands, steering his lips to hers. "I want you to watch me."

Her hips ground against him. She fought to keep her eyes open. He had to see. He had to know. She wanted him, only him. No ghosts would stand between them.

Gasping, he kissed her fingertips. "Jess, wait."

She didn't listen. Bucking beneath him, she took what she wanted. The frenzied tempo of their hips matched their lips' pace. Somewhere in the back of her brain, she marveled at her climax's fervor, her breathless screams, and her writhing body. When she crested, her eyes rolled back. The last thing she heard was Scott murmuring her name.

She came back to herself gradually, to find her hips still grinding against him. Slower now but with no less desire. His half-flaccid shaft teased her oversensitive bud.

"You'll kill us both," he muttered in her ear, then nibbled at the lobe.

"If only we'd be so lucky." It was impossible to get any leverage in the down surrounding them.

He propped himself up on his elbows and smiled. "My intent all along." He waggled his eyebrows at her. "To keep you trapped underneath me."

“Then you’ll miss out on my breasts bouncing in your face. I’m told it’s even better than a lap dance.”

He blew out a breath, eyes wide. “What have I gotten myself into?”

Chapter Eleven

She met Scott in Asantic's parking lot Monday morning. He'd wanted to pick her up, but she'd declined. She had plans. She held up a paper sack.

"What's in there?" Scott asked, suspicious.

"Pastry." She dangled the bag in front of his nose. "From Grandma Pat's." Grandma Pat made the most delectable pastries in town.

His eyes lit up. He glanced at her face, surprise warring with suspicion. "Are we celebrating something?"

"Maybe. You tell me."

Color crept up his neck. He grinned.

"Toxicology reports should be in on my rats. Do you have time to go over them with me?"

"You, me, the pastries and the koi pond?"

"Too tempting."

A wicked look flickered in his eyes. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Are you cooking?" she teased.

"If it'll get you in my house, yes." He held the door open for her as they entered the building. "Let me drop my things off and I'll meet you in your office."

She nodded.

Unlocking her door, she deposited the pastry bag on her desk and headed to check on the animals. She knew there was something wrong before she entered the room. The goats were too quiet. She flicked on the overhead lights.

Gabby, a noisy chocolate-colored Nubian doe, propped herself up on the edge of her gate and bleated once, long and mournful. Jessie absently petted her, glancing down the row of pens. Merry, her mutt doe, was lying down, head and neck stretched out in an unnatural position.

It had taken Jessie nearly a year of criss-crossing the country testing animals before she'd collected her eight precious does. To lose even one was a loss her project would have a hard time enduring. Especially since she no longer had the funding to travel.

She entered Merry's pen. The doe's eyes were closed, mouth partially open. Jessie wiggled one of the goat's legs. It was still flexible so she hadn't been dead for that long. She walled away her emotions, forcing the clinical side of her to the forefront. A bit of cud was jammed in Merry's cheek. Damn it, the doe's cheek. Not Merry, not the bright-eyed speckled doe that loved bananas. She rose, retrieved a digital camera and a pair of

gloves from her desk. When she returned she snapped a few photos then carefully pried the cud from the doe's cheek and put it in a plastic baggie.

She felt a sudden spot of warmth at her back. Turning, she glanced over her shoulder. She squinted, shading her eyes with her free hand. Michael Carrigan stood framed in the doorway, haloed by the light coming from her outer office.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

He held up one of her business cards. "In the neighborhood. Thought I'd drop by." His casual smile did nothing for her today.

"I'm sorry. I'm really busy right now."

Tucking the card in his pocket, he stepped into the room. "What happened?"

Using her best clinical voice, she said simply, "I don't know."

"May I look?"

"Are you going to resurrect the dead?" Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. She needed this doe.

"Do you believe I can?" he asked, carefully avoiding her gaze.

She stilled, baggie in one hand. "Professionally? No." Personally? Personally, she wasn't sure where the line between the mundane and the mystical lay anymore.

He entered the stall and knelt beside the animal. "She's very important to your project, isn't she?" he asked softly, stroking the goat. His long fingers curled around Merry's jaw, cupping it. His other hand ran the length of its body. "Are you staying here now, Jessie? No Engelbreck?"

She swallowed hard, suddenly nervous. "What's it to you?"

"Everything." He met her gaze, blue eyes as deep as the ocean depths and just as unfathomable.

"I'm staying." She blinked and looked away. "Please. I know you can fix her."

Merry's front leg twitched in the straw. Jessie began to shake. A hind leg bumped against her knee, then the doe's eye twitched open and shut. She couldn't stop the tears now. They streaked her face, smearing her makeup. Who was she to be given this chance? This opportunity to rub elbows with something science would never be able to comprehend, let alone dissect and catalog?

"Jessie? Jessie!" Scott's voice called. "I've found what killed your rats." He burst into the room, hesitating when he saw Michael. "Hello, Michael. Did Jessie forget something at home?" He glanced at her, his face a mixture of confusion with a dash of hurt. The hurt vanished as quickly as it'd appeared.

Jessie shook her head. "He just dropped in." She wiped the tears away with the sleeve of her coat. "What did you find?" Her voice sounded thick in her ears.

He glanced at Michael again then turned his attention to her. "You didn't do anything wrong. They were poisoned." He thrust a handful of papers at her.

Michael stood, dusting straw off his trousers.

She took the papers with a trembling hand. Merry lifted her head and nibbled at them.

"What's wrong with her?" Scott asked, indicating the goat.

Jessie sniffled. "Nothing. Nothing at all." She glanced at the paperwork, reading the results Scott had carefully highlighted. Who had access to poison her rats and why? The answer came quick and had her blushing with rage. Deacon Price. There had been no mass die-offs under Kathy's care. No one else fed her animals. No one else had access to her test rooms when she wasn't there, not even the janitors.

But what about the break-in? Were the stolen drugs merely a cover-up for the real reason? To ruin her project?

Again, who would want to see her fail? Deacon Price. Was this his way of encouraging her to quit her job and move? She shook her head. It didn't make sense.

"I think your overly talented assistant owes you some answers," Scott said.

She silently agreed. Handing him the baggie full of Merry's cud, she said, "Could you analyze this? I think we'll find it contaminated too."

Scott's eyes narrowed. "He poisoned the goat?"

"Someone tried to," Michael said.

"I'll run some preliminary tests, see if anything pops up right away." He glanced at the baggie. "It probably won't but I'll try my best."

"Thank you," she said quietly and both men seized the words for themselves.

When Scott had left and she'd checked on the remainder of the goats, she turned to Michael. "Did Deacon poison my animals?"

His lips twitched. "Humans were born with free will. Something which even Fate cannot control. You have no idea how that irks her."

"What does that mean?" If not Deacon, who?

He pulled a handful of cards from his pocket and handed them to her.

"What's this?" she asked, but she recognized them immediately. They were tarot cards. No, she recognized the bent corner on the knight's card. They were Sissy's tarot cards. She flipped through them. The Ten of Swords, Three of Swords, Eight of Swords, Six of Swords, King of Cups, The Tower, Knight of Swords, Knight of Cups, The Devil and the Ace of Cups. The King of Cups slipped out of her hand and fluttered to the floor.

What had Sissy said? She had the ability to see into others' hearts. She had thought it meant Scott, maybe even her own. She didn't think Deacon would stoop to poison.

Michael's smile was enigmatic. "Have a good life, Jessie." It sounded like goodbye.

She clenched the cards in her fist. She wasn't ready to see him go. "I'll never see you again, will I?"

He avoided her question. "Scott is in the lab waiting for you."

She glanced at Merry. The doe was calmly eating hay out of her feeder. Michael took Jessie's outstretched hand and folded it over his then kissed her knuckles. "I was what you needed me to be. A key. A door."

Into her heart and soul. A wordless panic struck her. She dropped the rest of the cards. "Don't go."

He drew her to him, wrapping his arms around her. The scent of ginger and molasses surrounded her, wiping away her panic as quickly as it had surfaced. He kissed her forehead, moved to her cheeks and then his lips found hers.

He made no demands, just molded his lips to hers, seeking the softness of her skin, the taste of her. He lingered, his lips held to hers. She breathed in his scent, felt the rise and fall of his chest pressed against hers.

Drawing back, he laid his hand over her heart. "It beats."

She put her hand over his. "It always has. I just didn't want to let anyone else in."

"Love. Live. Succeed." He dropped his hand. Backing away, he turned and walked out the door.

She left the cards scattered on her lab floor and went to find Scott.

Deacon found them bent over a twin set of microscopes, sifting through particles of cud. Not a particularly exciting task, but necessary. She needed to know what Merry had been poisoned with. She doubted anyone would just helpfully offer up the information.

Straightening, she turned toward Deacon. He was dressed in a tailored dark gray shirt and black slacks, impeccable as always. He held up a fistful of cards. "I couldn't find you. Did you take the day off to play cards?"

What if she was wrong? What if he had poisoned her animals? Her heart started to hammer. She should have locked her office. She should have made sure Security was aware of him and never let him enter the building. As quickly as her heart began to race, it slowed. A calm enveloped her. She swore she smelled ginger in the air. "Did you stop off at my lab to poison the rest of my goats? Or how about my rats?"

Deacon arched an eyebrow, ever poised. "What do you mean?"

"My rats were poisoned. So was Merry."

"Mary?"

"The goat." She gritted her teeth.

"Ah. All the animals looked well when I was there."

"Surprised?" She felt Scott at her back, a comforting presence, but this was her battle.

"No. Should I be?"

"Don't deny you tried to kill my animals."

Deacon held his hands out, palms up. "And what would my motive be? Better to look at your partner for that. He'd have more to gain if your project failed."

She couldn't believe Deacon was trying to lay the blame on Scott. Scott's research paralleled her own only in that he was also seeking a vaccine for AIDS. Everything else, from their methodology to their approach, differed. "I know Scott would never do such a thing."

"What would I have to gain from such an action?" Scorn laced Deacon's words.

"Me giving up and accepting Engelbreck's offer."

Deacon snorted. "Do you know how many researchers would kill for an offer like that?" She remained silent and he continued, "You academics are all alike, clinging to your own ideas like they're the holy grail and everyone else's are demented. Why should Mr. Gills be any different?"

"He is," she insisted.

"One should never trust one's own heart, especially yours, Jessie. Have you forgotten? It's flawed."

"That may be true but I intend to make use of it as best I can." She stepped forward and drew a card out of his hand. She knew without looking it was the Knight of Swords. "Tell Engelbreck I'm flattered but my place is here."

Closing his eyes, Deacon inhaled deeply. When he opened them his glance was amused. He shrugged. "Ah well. AIDS is yesterday's atomic bomb. SARS, now that shows promise."

"If you didn't poison my goats, who did?" she persisted.

Deacon held up a finger. "One. Two." The phone rang. "Three. Here's your answer. Right on time."

The phone rang again. Scott and Jessie shared a look.

"Both of you deserve each other," Deacon murmured.

Scott picked up the receiver. "Hello?" He listened for a while, his face going from red to white back to red. He glanced at Deacon. "Police picked up Kathy Smith trying to sell the drugs stolen from the lab. She admitted to everything, including poisoning your animals."

"Kathy?" Jessie said, incredulous. "But the offer at Engelbreck? Was I supposed to take it?"

Deacon's sardonic look silenced her. "The future is what you make it, demons and deities be damned. I thought you, the esteemed scientist, would have come to that conclusion yourself."

Scott answered a few more questions then quietly hung up the phone. "I owe you an apology," he said to Deacon.

Deacon shook his head. "And I owe you a congratulations. Asantic Labs," he murmured as he turned away. "Might as well be doing brain surgery with ice picks. May Kudan take pity on you both." The door closed behind him.

She suspected that'd be the last she would see of him. Funny, that didn't bother her. She had thought it might. She turned to Scott. "Now where were we?"

He hesitated, his face a mix of surprise and confusion. "Umm, I'd isolated what I thought was the culprit. You were arguing with me. What was all that about Engelbreck?"

"Nothing, just a whim." She grabbed the edge of his lab coat and drew him to her. "Kiss me."

"Here?" A slow grin spread across his face. Seizing her face in his hands, he kissed her soundly.

Epilogue

There were candles and flowers, soft touches, sweet scents and whispered promises. The bedroom had been transformed into a scene from a fairy tale. The sheets were molten gold and reflected the candlelight with sparkling winks. White candles, squat and tall, lean and four-wicked, lined every flat surface. Surrounding them were purple tulips, armloads of them. A bucket of chilling champagne crouched on one side of the bed. Two crystal flutes gleamed beside it.

Jessie stood in the doorway, jaw slack. Holding her hand, Scott drew her into his bedroom.

His smile was shy. "I wanted our first time as husband and wife to be magical."

She blinked and blinked again. "The flowers," she whispered. It was all she could manage.

"Roses are unremarkable and passé." Still holding her hand, he knelt and picked up an errant tulip. He brought it between them. "You are neither."

She took the flower with her free hand and brushed its velvet petals against her cheek. She wanted to cry. How utterly absurd. "And the color violet?"

"It suits you. Your skin, your mood."

"Are you saying I'm moody?"

His face broke into a wide grin. "Jessie! Don't spoil it." Taking the flower from her hand, he flung it onto the bed, then seized her other hand.

"I don't know what to say."

He kissed her. It was like being swept away by a flood, no control, just a wild rush of fear and anticipation. Her heart stopped. Her breath hitched. She prayed she'd never lose this sensation. The taste of him on her lips, the slight tremor in his hands when he touched her, it broke her heart. He folded their twined hands and arms behind her back, bent her backward and deepened the kiss. She tipped her head and he laid a line of kisses in the hollow of her throat, down her neck, lingering in the dip between her breasts.

Raising his head, he smiled at her, a bit silly, she thought. "You wore perfume."

"Is there some law against it?"

His grin widened. He pulled her straight, then surprised her by scooping her up in his arms. Her arms wrapped around his neck. Carrying her to the bed, he laid her down, then straddled her, knees imprisoning her thighs.

"You didn't drop me," she murmured.

"I've been practicing." He stared down at her. He'd worn forest green tonight, a crisp button-down shirt that cried to be peeled off his body. She saw the strength in his arms as he propped himself above her, hard-won muscles no gym or weights helped to carve. "Jessica Gills, you are the most remarkable woman I've ever met. And you're mine. All mine."

She lifted a hand and touched his scratchy cheek. He placed a kiss in her palm.

"If you give me your heart, I swear I'll never do anything to hurt you."

She couldn't stop the tears from leaking out of the corner of her eyes. "You already have it."

"Don't cry, honey." He collapsed beside her, wiping away the tears with his thumbs.

"They're tears of joy, you idiot." Leaning forward, she kissed him soundly.

"Women," he muttered when she let him catch his breath.

She pulled his shirt out of his pants' waistband. Her hands slipped beneath the fabric, sliding over the slightly damp skin beneath. His back muscles rippled as he wrapped an arm around her waist. Her hands dropped to his sides and he shivered.

Her eyes danced. "Ticklish?"

"Horribly so."

"That admission will be your downfall."

"Will it now?" Seizing her, he rolled them so she now straddled him. He flung his arms out. "Take me now."

Laughing, she undid the buttons on his shirt and spread the fabric. He was built lean, chest dusted with dark brown hairs. His pulse beat like the flutter of hummingbird wings, but his eyes were smiling, lips curved in a deceptively relaxed grin. Leaning over the bed, she snagged an ice cube from the champagne bucket and held it above him.

His eyes widened. "First you threaten me with tickling, now this?"

"It's for me," she purred. She took the ice cube and pressed it between her breasts. Shivering, her nipples tightened. She was sure the chocolate camisole she wore hid nothing.

He licked his lips. She was intent on returning the ice cube to its bucket when he flipped her again. She yipped. His hands skimmed beneath the silk of her camisole, found her hardened nipples and rubbed his thumbs over them. Sparks of electricity radioed her nerve endings, *Danger, code red, orgasm alert*. Those clever hands slid behind her, down her back, and found the zipper on her skirt. Undoing that, he shimmied it down her hips and legs, until she was clad in nothing more than chocolate silk and gold lace.

He fingered the thin triangle of fabric, mesmerized.

"We think alike," she whispered.

"How about this then? I love you." His finger played with the thin strip of gold silk, his skin whispering against the flesh of her upper thigh. He teased the strip down her thigh, first the left, then the right. She lifted her legs so he could slide the panties off.

How lucky was she to hear those words come from a lover's lips again? She caught the edges of his shirt, reared up, and tugged it down his shoulders. He cast it away without a backward glance.

Cupping her heel, he lifted her leg and pulled her body flat. Her stomach muscles weren't strong enough to resist. He ran his fingers across her insole. She arched her back and shivered. "You're ticklish too," he pointed out.

"You're trying to distract me."

In one fluid movement, he dropped her leg and pinned her body with his. His lips found her throat and he kissed that tender spot. Tongue and lips moved to her collarbone, nudged aside her camisole strap, and kissed her shoulder. He brought his head up, pressed his brow to hers. "I'm trying to pace myself. God help me, I want it all. Now." Leaning all his weight on one hand, he ran his fingers through his hair.

The unconscious display of strength caused little twitters in her inner thighs. She rubbed her nakedness against his rough jeans, found a perfect spot at the base of his fly and stroked herself. Her nub was on fire. She needed him, needed something to assuage the heat building inside her, the spasms claiming her legs.

"I love you too. Now prove it." She planted a kiss on his chest, then turned her head to let his chest hairs sweep across her cheek. Her hands moved to his fly and two sets of hands were abruptly trying to help him part company with his jeans and briefs. His briefs hit the floor a moment before her camisole did.

"Wait," he pleaded as she started to undo her bra.

"Now!"

He buried his hands in her hair, fanned it out around her so the gold silk of the sheets showed through the strands. The fine hairs on his stomach grazed her tender skin. She shivered. Wrapping her arms around him, she yanked him down. She felt him hard against her thigh.

He was right. They should take more time, linger, enjoy the view. But the need inside her was building and she knew she had a lifetime to explore all the delectable secrets of his body.

Her slick hidden lips closed around his shaft and she arched her back, accepting him all. With a groan, he buried himself in her. His breath whispered against her neck and she thought she heard him speaking to her, a low rumble of sound. But the blood pounding in her ears blocked all but the pleading noises spilling out of her.

Their bodies fit as if built to accommodate one another. The candlelight cast dancing shadows on their skin. His hands slid over her body, teasing her nerve endings. She never knew when he removed her bra, only hissed when his lips found a tender nipple waiting for his wet touch.

When she couldn't endure any more, she let the lightning consume her body. He followed after her, one breathless stroke later. She twitched in his embrace, his strong arms a sanctuary.

Rolling them to their sides, he cupped her against him, his chin resting on top of her head. His fingers lazily roved up and down her back. With her ear pressed against his chest, she heard his heart return to its normal pace.

"I couldn't hear what you were saying," she said softly.

He pulled away from her and smiled, a bit sheepish. "It was the Periodic table. I was trying to focus on anything but coming too quickly."

Stifling her laughter, she traced a finger down his jaw. "It was perfect. You're perfect." She cupped his neck and drew him down for a kiss. "My hero."

* * * * *

Sissy drew away from the balcony window, fingers pressed to her lips. *Good job, child. Good job.* She'd seen enough. There was a fine line between window peeping and checking in on her charge...and she just crossed it. Unapologetic, she turned to the waiting angels.

She waggled her finger at them. "You, two—"

"Are to be commended. For a pair of substandard second hierarchy angels, we did an admirable job," Deacon interrupted.

"And enjoyed every moment of it."

"Of course."

Michael's stifled laugh turned into a snort. Shocked at his uncharacteristic outburst, Deacon and Sissy stared at him.

He shook his head. "I am sorry. It's not you." He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. "Well, a little of you."

She folded her arms across her chest. "Out with it."

"'Woman is a miracle of divine contradictions'. You asked us to mend a broken heart. We did. Yet you chastise us for enjoying our work." He shook his head, lips pressed together, and wiped another tear from his eye.

Deacon continued to stare. "My, my, quoting Jules Michelet. I hadn't expected you to have an attention span long enough to endure *Histoire de France*."

Ignoring him, Michael waved his hand at the interlocked human couple oblivious to the angels' and Sissy's presence outside their bedroom. "How else does one explain that? She tasted eternity and chose the earthly instead."

"Perhaps you overestimate your abilities?" Sissy offered.

The angels shared a look. "No," both said in unison.

Sissy stepped to their side and slipped an arm through each of theirs. "Come along then and prove me wrong."

About the Author

Christine McKay was born and raised in northeastern Wisconsin, graduated in a class of less than 54 students, and earned a Bachelor's Degree in Computer Science at a local college taught mostly by nuns. She is the oldest in her family, with two brothers and one sister.

Christine lives on a farm with her husband and an assortment of four-legged creatures including goats, mules, dogs, rabbits, cats, chickens, a donkey and a llama. Her favorite authors include Robin McKinley, Patricia McKillip, Anne McCaffrey, Ayn Rand, Andre Norton and Nora Roberts.

Christine welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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