

To break this curse, they'll have to turn the heat up. Way up.

Jasmine Dante prowls Key West's nightlife, fighting a losing battle against a jealous rival's curse that forces her to seek carnal pleasure, no matter the danger. Weakened from lack of sleep, driven by insatiable lust, she spots a man who stirs her desperate craving, and begins yet another dance of seduction.

Except the dark stranger who returns her direct stare is no ordinary lover. Inside his powerful body lies a raw sexuality that just might be enough to break her curse. There's only one way to find out: imprison him in her bed and feed on his passion.

Former U.S. Marshal Mike Stearn is many things, but he's no woman's sex slave. The deadly telekinetic power he ruthlessly suppresses comes alive again at Jasmine's touch. Beneath her bold, potent sensuality he senses vulnerability and desperation. He may be in handcuffs, but she's the one who's enslaved.

As Mike resurrects his power to free himself so he can find the curse's source and defeat it, Jasmine revels in his masterful rule. Her ravenous yearning evolves into rapture as she surrenders to his hunger, her darkest needs—and the emotional connection that lies beyond. Unless the curse takes her life first...

Warning: Tons of steamy sex, smoldering passion and a to-die-for love story with a hot Alpha hero who finds himself imprisoned by one sultry and desperate babe.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd. 577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520 Macon GA 31201

The Yearning
Copyright © 2011 by Tina Donahue
ISBN: 978-1-60928-352-0
Edited by Linda Ingmanson
Cover by Kendra Egert

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: February 2011 <u>www.samhainpublishing.com</u>

# The Yearning

Tina Donahue

## Dedication

To the wonderful members of The Romance Room, especially my co-hostess & writing buddy, Sarah McNeal, author extraordinaire. Lady, you make writing wicked fun.

#### Chapter One

You will want as I want. You will know insatiable lust, but no peace.

—Desiree Zazou

Despite the danger, unending desire drove Jasmine Dante through the Blue Bliss Club, a hangout for locals in Key West. Slow-dancing couples clung to each other in the intimate atmosphere. Turquoise lighting gave the place a dreamy underwater feel, while tiny azure bulbs sparkled like Christmas decorations on the palms flanking the bar.

A man Jasmine had just noticed sat on the last stool. No more than mid-thirties, he wore his long, black hair tied back. Sharp, masculine features, dark eyes and a coppery complexion revealed his Native American heritage. Unlike many of the other men, he didn't wear the ubiquitous flowered shirt, shorts and flip-flops. Black mocs hugged his large feet. Jeans and a T-shirt the color of midnight clothed his lean, muscular frame. Beneath his right sleeve, she spotted a bold tattoo of what looked to be an eagle.

She pictured her mouth on the strong design, her tongue roaming his slightly salty flesh, her fingers travelling over his hard abdominal muscles and beneath his jeans' waistband, seeking the thick, fragrant curls below. Unendurable yearning sliced through her, quickening her heart. She moved closer.

His attention didn't stray from tonight's band, a new group named Engaged. Their R&B throbbed soulfully, evoking the seductive richness of Alicia Keys, Jennifer Hudson and Toni Braxton. The lead singer, a slight young woman with heartache in her eyes, seemed to perform solely for him.

Were they together? Was he waiting for her set to end? Panic flared, pushing Jasmine to do something. What? her mind cried. Fight another woman over a man she didn't know? Months ago, she would have found the notion ludicrous and daunting. Since crossing paths with Desiree Zazou, everything paled beneath Jasmine's consuming lust.

The woman's mocking voice echoed in her mind: "You will want as I want."

A bead of sweat slithered from Jasmine's temple to her cheek, intensifying the fragile, dewy scent she wore. Her steps slowed as she regarded the singer.

The girl dipped her head in a gesture of farewell to the man, then sang with equal passion to another guy who leaned against the satiny blue wall.

She's playing to her audience, Jasmine thought, it's a part of her act. She probably doesn't even know him. Though relieved, she remained shaky inside and stopped at the end of the dance floor.

Someone bumped into her. She stepped aside and froze as a young redhead in a scarlet Band-Aid dress tottered toward the man, her gait unsteady from drugs or too many drinks. He noted her blurry smile and offered a guarded expression in return. Twisting her hair and holding it back with one hand, the redhead pressed close, her ample breasts snuggled into his sculpted biceps, her mouth to his ear. Whatever she said made his dark brows lift.

Heart pounding, Jasmine glanced over and captured the server's wrist as the twenty-something girl—Sara, by her nametag—tried to move past. Jasmine kept her voice raised just enough so the music and singer wouldn't drown her out. "See that man at the bar on the last stool?"

Server Sara put her voice at the same pitch. "You kidding? Me and about a dozen other women got him in our sights, including the one who's with him now. You thinking about sending him a drink?"

"Whatever he's having." Afraid to use a credit card the police could trace back to her if anyone reported him missing, she took a twenty out of her evening bag.

The bill went into the front pocket of Sara's cobalt blue apron. "What's your name? So I can tell him."

No. She couldn't chance the girl putting any name to her face. "Have the bartender point me out. And keep the change. Please."

"You got it." With a savvy wink, Server Sara turned and wove through the crowd.

One of the bouncers, an older guy with a shaved head and goatee, watched the redhead as she clung to the man and continued to speak. Jasmine saw the building annoyance in the man's twilight eyes. Before he had to do anything about it, a trio of giggling young women joined the redhead. All wore skimpy, skin-tight dresses in a rainbow of shades: bright yellow, grass green, purple as deep as a bruise. They tried to coax their friend back to the dance floor.

She flung out her hand to shoo them away. The bouncer stepped forward and said something the young woman didn't like. Head whipped to the side, she gave him a frown. A tense moment passed during which the other girls convinced her to leave.

Jasmine feared the man would do the same, fed up with aggressive females. What would she do then? Follow him outside and pretend she wanted to know the time? Ask for directions to another bar, maybe one on touristy Duval Street? Invite him to join her? And if he didn't, would she be able to find someone else to ease her ravenous yearning or would he stay in her blood the entire time, making her lust even worse?

Seconds crept by. The air hissed with uncertainty.

He settled back on his stool, absorbed by the smooth tenor sax and the songstress's smoky vocals.

Jasmine remembered to breathe. Closing her eyes briefly, she wondered if he was a musician, given his interest in the band. He certainly seemed to be a gentleman, considering his restraint with the redhead. However, this was a public place. What would he do when he thought they were alone? Travis, the last man she chose, would have harmed her, if not for her sisters' intervention.

Recalling that night, her insides rolled, though it didn't stop her. She watched the female bartender accept her twenty. To the left, Jasmine's younger sisters, Violet and Lily, sat at a corner table, their apprehension palpable. When she made eye contact with Lily, her youngest sibling rose to join her. Violet grabbed Lily's arm, a reminder to sit. Worried they might argue and ruin everything, Jasmine shook her head, warning them not to be obvious. To the casual observer and especially to the man, they shouldn't appear to know each other. Thankfully, they didn't look like sisters. Violet, with her light brown hair, hazel eyes and pale complexion, resembled their late mom. So did Lily, even though she'd dyed her brown hair platinum and wore it in a close-cropped boyish style. Jasmine, on the other hand, had her late dad's olive coloring, dark brown hair and blue-green eyes.

Violet inclined her head toward the man. Jasmine looked. The bartender had already slid a bottle of Dos Equis to him. They exchanged comments, and then the woman lifted a slender forefinger and pointed to Jasmine.

He turned.

Heat surged to Jasmine's cheeks. Crushing need prevented her from taking a full breath.

In his hooded eyes, she saw fulfillment, no matter how fleeting...his confining weight trapping her, the ends of his untied hair skimming her bare shoulders, his mouth hard and ruthless. A virile male she wouldn't have dared approach before Desiree changed her destiny, falsely accusing her of taking Connor Rolands, the man Desiree wanted.

Now, the curse drew Jasmine to this man as the road to Hell seduces a born sinner. She walked in time to the music's sensual beats. Inwardly, a part of her cowered. For him and what would soon come, she offered a welcoming smile.

He returned it easily, his attention drifting to her black halter dress. Cut low on the top, with a short teasing skirt, it deliberately tantalized.

"Hi." Her voice seemed throatier than she recalled, nothing at all like the woman she'd been. Leaning over so he could hear her above the band, she caught a hint of his clean, soapy scent. It derailed her thoughts. She fought her compulsion to cup his face in her hands and brush her lips over his. "Mind if I join you?"

His gaze lifted from her black high-heel slides. Unashamed interest charged his words. "I'd be disappointed if you didn't." He pushed to his feet.

She raised her face. Though tall like her father, her height was no match for his. He had to be sixthree. Anticipation rippled in her belly. She made her voice playful. "In that case, I wouldn't want to disappoint you."

"I doubt you will."

His soothing baritone held such wicked promise, her heart banged into her throat. She sank to the stool he'd pulled out, trying to hide her arousal. If he guessed too quickly what she wanted—no, what she simply had to have—what would he think of her? What would he end up doing?

The band came to the end of their set with the singer announcing a brief break.

He didn't seem to notice them any longer or the crowd's protests. His eyes held hers. "Thanks for the drink."

"My pleasure." She eased her hair from her neck.

With his attention moving to her throat and lower, he motioned for the bartender. "What are you having?"

"Just a sip of your beer, if you don't mind." She couldn't risk drinking and losing even more control. In way of explanation, she added what no man would question. "I'm watching my weight."

"False alarm," he told the bartender, sending her away. He handed Jasmine his brew. "No, you're not."

The lip of the bottle stalled near her mouth. "What?"

"You don't have to watch your weight." He settled on his stool, facing and studying her. "You're fine just as you are."

The old Jasmine flushed in delight and embarrassment. The woman she'd become gave him a feline smile. "If you say so."

Holding her gaze, his eyes searched. "What's your name?"

Although it shouldn't have, the question rattled her. She struggled to remember the fake one she and her sisters had concocted, but all her mind gave up were generic and unbelievable choices like Jane Doe or Mary Smith. Flustered and having to say something, she offered her own. "Jasmine Dante." She transferred the bottle to her left hand and put out her right. "And you are?"

"Happy to make your acquaintance, Jasmine." His large hand covered and warmed hers.

A roguish grin crinkled his eyes, mellowing his features.

She liked his effortless confidence and calm strength. It awakened memories of how her father had behaved with her mother. His long fingers squeezed gently. The small intimacy reached her soul, leaving her breathless and lighthearted. "So do you go by Happy or do you prefer the more formal Make Your Acquaintance?"

He chuckled and released her hand. "Call me Mike."

"Ah, a nickname. I like that, Mike...?" She deliberately made it a question and sipped a bit of the brew, giving him time to add his last name and more.

Still regarding her, he did not.

Faster than she wanted, her pulse quickened. Unease seeped through her previous comfort. Travis had also offered little, only that he owned a body-piercing shop. He certainly hadn't confided his violent past. No matter her attraction to Mike or her cruel need, Jasmine couldn't take another gamble on her safety.

Seconds passed as she searched for the right questions to ask to learn as much as she could about him. Perfumed flesh and the smell of beer thickened the air. Animated chatter created a din near the tables. Someone laughed too loud. A woman squealed girlishly. Jasmine handed him the bottle. "Are you a musician?"

He enjoyed a sip and shook his head. "Never came close, not even in high school when it's more or less required to be considered cool." He appeared amused. "Why would you think I played?"

"You seemed very interested in the band. Is that why you're here tonight?"

"I like their sound. What brings you here?"

"I thought going out tonight might be fun."

A deeper smile tugged the corners of his rich mouth. "It might be. So, tell me about yourself, Jasmine."

Again, he'd taken command of the conversation. Could he be a cop? He acted like one, never really answering a question. But what about his long hair? Cops didn't look like that, not even on TV, unless they went undercover in vice. Thoughts racing, she put her forearm on her thigh and leaned nearer to him. "You first, I insist."

"Why?" His gaze dipped to her breasts, then inched back up. "I'm not half as interesting as you."

"Let me be the judge. Please."

Something flickered in his eyes. Confusion? Fascination? At last, he put the bottle on the bar. "My name's Mike Stearn. I spend my days in front of a computer."

Jasmine tried not to show her surprise. Of all the occupations she might have given him, none would have called for full-time use of a PC. He certainly didn't look like a programmer or an Xbox junkie. She hazarded a guess. "You're a novelist?"

He laughed, an easy, rumbling sound. "I swear I don't have a creative bone in my body."

Briefly, she smiled. "Then that only leaves hacker. You're a computer bad boy?"

As his laughter wound down, his broad shoulders relaxed. Resting his arm on the bar, he considered her. "Hardly. I'm an outside consultant for various federal and state agencies."

Law enforcement? Had she been correct in her earlier assessment? Her throat tightened. Not wanting to grill him too obviously, she joked, "Please tell me the IRS isn't included in your work."

"You cheat on your taxes, Jasmine?"

She gave herself to men she didn't know to relieve her oppressive hunger, putting herself in danger. Tonight's plan was supposed to end that. "No—but if you could divulge a few tips on how I might get away with it, I'd be forever in your debt."

"Sorry." He ran his thumb over his mouth to tame his smile. "I have no affiliation with the IRS." "FBI?"

His expression gave nothing away.

Anxious, she continued to guess. "CIA?" No response. "DOD?" He didn't even blink. "FHA?" He regarded her with increasing amusement. She decided to play into it. "MTV? DVD? JD? CD—"

"Enough." He put up his hand, his shoulders shaking with more laughter. "Before you go through every acronym you know, I will tell you this much—I used to be with the US Marshals Service, all right?"

Jasmine nodded, worried his consulting work required him to carry a gun. What would it do to tonight's plan? She took in his length, searching for a weapon. Not seeing one, she noted a scar near his tattoo. The line of puckered, pink skin looked frail and vulnerable on his sinewy arm. She lowered her fingertips to the uneven surface. The muscle beneath it jumped. Compassion, rather than an indecent urge, weakened her voice. "Is this from a bullet?" Her head lifted. "Did someone try to kill you? Is that why you left the Marshals Service and went into consulting?"

His expression clouded, cautioning her not to pursue the subject. As she took back her hand, he grabbed the Dos Equis and finished a fourth of it. She bit her lower lip, expecting he'd excuse himself and leave because of her foolish questions.

Instead, he cocked one brow. "How about we talk about you?"

She couldn't. He'd never know the real Jasmine. If she and her sisters were unable to locate Desiree and beg her to remove the curse, it was unlikely she'd survive. Each day she became more obsessed and exhausted. With fear gripping her, she nodded. "Sure. I watched that redhead hitting on you. I admired your restraint."

He lowered his head and shook it. "You're still talking about me."

"I can't help it. Few men would have acted as you did."

"Then they're fools." He raised his face. "That kid's barely out of puberty and had too much to drink. Tomorrow, she'll regret it"

"Or blog about it."

He smiled. "True."

"What did she say that made you frown? I know, I know," she added quickly, "I'm still talking about you, but I'm well past puberty, thirty-one, in fact, and I won't apologize for being interested."

His dark eyes glittered in the low light. Mischief filled his voice. "You're a whole thirty-one? Man. A regular old lady."

"Sometimes I feel that way."

His brows arched slightly.

"Not now," she added, hating herself for letting down her guard, frantic to lighten the mood. "Give me a few minutes and I might feel thirty again."

Smiling, he passed the beer to her. "Let's not get crazy."

"Agreed. So, what did she say to you?"

"She asked if I'd like to take on a foursome."

Jasmine's tongue stopped circling the edge of the bottle. She wasn't certain what to think or say. Stalling, she finished a small sip of the beer. Its bubbles tickled her mouth and throat, rasping her voice. "Wow." She crossed her legs. The edge of her shoe brushed the outside seam of his jeans. She didn't move her foot away, driven by the curse and her own interest in him to remain. "So, that's why you frowned? You don't like kinky sex?"

He retrieved the beer, his fingers purposely touching hers. "Not with her or her friends, I don't. But that's not why I frowned. She told me she and the others had always wanted to do it with an Indian."

Jasmine stopped running her foot down his leg. Her voice rang with embarrassment. "I'm sorry. What a stupid thing for her to say."

"I think she meant it as a compliment."

Without thinking, she glanced at his fly, the meaty bulge straining the denim. Wanting shuddered through her. Moisture streamed from her sheath. "I'm sure she did."

He laughed.

Her head jerked up. "What?" Humiliation heated her throat and cheeks. "Are you putting me on?"

"I was about to ask you the same."

Why? Alarmed, she tried to recall what she'd revealed about herself so far. Telling him her name couldn't have given away too much. He didn't seem like the type of man who would know she and her sisters owned a local dress design business. "I wouldn't. I'm not." She forced herself to calm down. Her foot stroked his jeans again. "If you don't mind my curiosity, what's your ancestry?"

"I don't mind at all." Deepening attraction sparkled in his eyes. "I'm Seminole on my mother's side. English and a bit of Irish on my father's. So how about you? What's your heritage?"

"I'm a mixture of a lot of stuff." She waved her hand in dismissal. "Too many nationalities to count. Do your parents and siblings live in the Keys?"

"My parents and siblings?"

She realized how stupid the question sounded, but she had to know if anyone would miss him. For days, she and her sisters had discussed keeping a man prisoner at their house, a safer means of appeasing her cravings than frequenting bars and clubs. A crazy, desperate plan Jasmine still wasn't certain she could go through with. "I'm interested, okay?"

He appeared to be mulling over his response as he put his bottle on the bar. "I'm going to tell you a secret, but I need your word first that you'll keep it."

Her heart stuttered. What did he intend to confess? "Of course."

Misgiving rose in his eyes. He drew in a ragged breath. "There are no siblings. My parents didn't have any kids after me. Could be I was so wonderful they didn't think they could get that lucky again, or I was such a disappointment they were afraid to try."

She laughed and scolded. "You are putting me on."

"Only a little." He returned her smile. "But if you must know, Dad lived in the Keys all his life. He passed two years ago from emphysema. Smoked three packs a day right up to his last hacking breath. A few months later, Mom moved to Georgia to live with her twin sister. From what I've heard, they still fight every day. Now, no more questions about me. I want to hear about you."

Steeled for the inevitable, Jasmine nodded, knowing she'd have to lie, hoping she could pull it off. "What do you want to know?"

"Do you like to dance?"

Her stomach unknotted. Looking over, she saw the band returning, urged on by the unruly crowd. The first husky notes of the sax quieted the audience. At their table, Violet and Lily watched with increasing anxiety. Jasmine smoothed her hair, the signal they'd agreed on, telling them this man appeared safe. She smiled at Mike, liking and trusting him already, hoping it wasn't misplaced. "Yes, I do. But I have to confess, I don't know any fancy steps."

"Those are the worst kind. So, we'll keep it simple." He pushed off his stool and offered his hand.

A jolt of warmth from his touch relieved her doubt. She put her purse's dainty chain on her shoulder and slid her fingers over his.

On the bluesy strains of the song, Mike wound his arms around Jasmine's waist, drawing her into him.

She ran her hands up his shoulders, her fingers caressing his nape, her ripe breasts and peaked nipples nestling against the solid planes of his chest.

His lids slipped down on a hard sigh as her succulent body tormented him. He hadn't had sex in months. He'd never been the type of man to have a devoted girlfriend, which kept his private life uncomplicated and left all the trouble for work.

On the next easy sway, Jasmine tugged the leather cord tying his hair and worked her fingers through the freed strands to stroke his scalp.

Liquid heat oiled his body, loosening his shoulders and limbs. Grunting in approval, he eased her into his stiffened cock and buried his face in her shoulder-length mane. Her delicate perfume reminded him of a garden's subtle aromas beneath the morning sun. He found it unbelievably provocative, even though it didn't match the rest of her packaging.

She'd dressed for sex tonight, and yet beneath her smoldering gaze he'd caught unexpected vulnerability, perhaps fear. It convinced him she wasn't a pricey call girl. So given her obvious angst, why

was she doing this? Because she craved excitement and wanted to fuck someone outside her ordinary world? With minimum risk, of course. That had to be her reason for asking so many questions and dodging all of his. She was checking him out to make certain he posed no threat to her physically and that their bed-play would be shameless fun, not dangerous.

The singer reached a high note, holding it. The sax wailed in the background. Applause and appreciative whistles erupted from the audience.

Mike turned until he and Jasmine completed a half-circle. At the basic move, her breath spilled out in what sounded like wonder, telling him tonight might be her first foray into the club scene and casual sex. Despite her suggestive attire, she seemed as out of place here as some of his witnesses had in their new lives under his protection.

Individuals he had saved, but at what cost?

He frowned at his memories of a past he never discussed with anyone. So why had he told her about being with the service? Because he wanted her to trust him? A stupid decision. It made her too curious.

Did someone try to kill you? she'd asked.

Once more, unwanted images flashed through his brain, brutal and accusing. The bullet meant for his witness, hitting him instead. Staggering back in shock and falling to the ground. The gangbanger's remorseless stare as he pointed his .357, intending to finish him off. The endless seconds as he expected death. Everything going too fast or too slow, robbing him of the ability to think, but not to react.

Instinctively, he had used his power to push the gangbanger's gun aside with the bullet striking and killing Tommy, his friend and partner of four years. Like a fucking coward, he'd saved himself with his telekinetic gift, an unwanted talent he'd kept hidden from others. Since Tommy, it lay dormant. Never again would he call on it or work for the service. A week after the assault, he'd resigned over his superiors' objections.

Frowning, he shook off his memories. Tonight, guilt wouldn't deny him what enjoyment and comfort Jasmine could bring.

He turned her in another tight circle. She lowered her mouth to his neck. Her tongue found his galloping pulse, wandering over it, loving it as she drove her slender fingers through his hair.

His rod thickened in gratitude, prompting a pleased growl. Whatever reservations she'd had about him seemed to have passed. Raising his hands, he cradled the sides of her head, his fingers sinking into her lush hair. He stopped dancing and eased back. Her blue-green eyes blurred with expectation. Moisture sparkled on her plump lower lip. His hoarse voice betrayed the hold she had on him. "I want to know about you."

Her lids slid down. Long, dark lashes rested on her cheeks. Taking a full breath, she opened her eyes slowly. Her gaze beckoned. She asked again, "What do you want to know?"

In answer, he slanted his mouth over hers. His tongue burrowed inside. Sheltering heat greeted him, along with the taste of beer and female submission. It took all of his will not to moan like an oversexed teen.

Around them, couples continued to dance, their lethargic steps complementing the club's surreal lighting and haunting music. The singer's sad voice rode the keyboard's muted melody, inviting closeness.

Mike accepted. His exploring kiss was unhurried. He relished the sharp feel of Jasmine's bottom teeth, the inside of her satiny cheeks. Her hands moved from his shoulders to his back.

Palms flattened, she pulled him closer so he couldn't escape.

He wasn't about to try. To prove it, he angled his mouth for heightened penetration.

Following his lead, her lips parted even more. She alternately suckled and curled her tongue around his, offering a raw, unguarded response.

His reserve broke. He deepened their kiss, his passion savage, relentless. The other sounds drifted away. He became conscious of her strained breathing and his. Their chests knocked into each other's. Cupping the back of her head in his palm, he slipped his other arm around her waist, his fingers dangling above her cushiony buttocks.

She yielded, her body willing against his, her reaction undeniable.

It made him even greedier. Seconds trickled by. His thoughts muddied, not allowing anything to register except the tight, wet sanctuary of her mouth, the aching solace of her body, each supple curve and rounded swell. He didn't know how long he was lost in their kiss, but when he finally pulled his mouth free, the music faded.

Chest heaving, he stared. Her features were more elegant than he first thought, her almond eyes, straight nose and full mouth finely shaped beneath the skillfully applied makeup. Longing softened her face, along with the same vulnerability, stirring him as few things had. He wanted to strip her of the unnecessary cosmetics, the titillating clothes, to see and to know the real woman beneath.

The applause subsided. Several couples left the dance floor, arms slipped around each other's waists. As the band began their new piece, the keyboardist ran her fingers up and down her instrument, setting the mood.

Jasmine's gaze remained on him, absorbed, as if everyone else had left. "Do you have to leave?"

Even if he did, the disappointment in her voice would have persuaded him to stay and promise more than he could ever deliver. He shook his head.

She watched the ends of his hair glide over his shoulders. "Then you don't have to work early tomorrow?"

Unlike her last questions, he welcomed these. They told him what she wanted, but hadn't yet asked. "I don't have anything planned for the next couple of days or nights." He touched his mouth to her ear.

Trembling, she moved into him. Wrapped in her oddly innocent temptation, he murmured, "How about you? Do you have to work early tomorrow?"

Her hand went to his right pec, branding it with her heat. Several of his muscles leapt, liking it.

"No." She paused to clear her throat. Her voice remained gravelly. "I'm on vacation this week."

Hearing the invitation in her words, he straightened.

She trailed a tapered nail down his torso to his belt, circling the buckle as she tilted her face to his. Sin filled her eyes.

Resolved to give her what she'd come for and what he now demanded, he took her hand and led her from the dance floor toward the back exit.

#### Chapter Two

Desire compelled Jasmine forward even as a thread of panic stole up her spine. Had Violet and Lily seen them leave the floor? If not, how long would it be before they noticed? Where was he taking her?

His earlier comment nagged. He didn't have anything planned for the next couple of days or nights.

Jasmine forced down a swallow. She'd asked about work to learn if he'd be missed immediately. Too easily, he told her he would not. Her sisters would be pleased if she lured him to their house tonight. If not, where would she end up?

Dizzy with ambivalence, she allowed him to lead her past the restrooms and a small, cluttered office. He paused at the opened back door where two club employees enjoyed a smoke and shared laughter. The young men cast them a look, then exchanged knowing glances. Sly smiles plumped their youthful cheeks as they discarded their cigarettes and moved past, returning to their jobs.

Mike brought her outside. Late-summer air, humid and heavy with the ocean's tang, enveloped her. The dimly lit alley stretched the length of this establishment and the other businesses. Her heart jumped at the metallic clack of the door closing. She heard traffic whooshing by on the next street. Faint music pumped from the club. Laughter floated on the gentle breeze, coming from an unknown place, since she and Mike were the only ones around. She asked, "Why are we back here?"

His mouth captured hers. Her apprehension fell away, turning into stark need. She tried to slip her arm over his shoulder. He stopped her, taking her wrist and tearing his mouth free. "Not here."

Her heels clicked on the asphalt as he led her to the adjacent building, set back from the club and closed for the night. He stopped next to a door stenciled with fading white letters stating: Delivery Only. If the same young men or others came outside for a smoke, they wouldn't see her or him.

Without warning, images of Travis sped through her mind. Him ordering her to undress in the secluded apartment above his shop. Her wrists and ankles lashed to his bed. His frightening smile.

Jasmine's heart crashed into her chest. She looked at Mike, her emotions torn between worry and craving.

"I won't hurt you," he said, reading her fear. Holding her face gently, he studied her, his dark eyes concerned. "Have you been raped?"

It never got that far. Her sisters had arrived and—she shook her head, not wanting to think about it. "No."

"But someone hurt you."

Her mind saw the belt in Travis's hand. She recalled its whistle as it hit the air. "He tried. I got away." "A boyfriend?"

She lied. "Yes." Her voice sounded strange, strangled as she next offered the truth. "He seemed fine at first. I didn't know he was doing meth and that he'd injured another woman. He got crazy and—" She couldn't continue.

Mike's thumbs skimmed her jawline, stoking her pulse, making her limp and restless for more.

"Why did you choose me tonight?" he asked.

Her smile wobbled, feeling weird. "Like I said before, I liked the way you handled that young woman. You were the perfect gentleman."

"That may be, but I wasn't the only one showing restraint. The bouncer was a regular sweetheart."

Her smile widened. "I'm sure he's a nice guy and really I don't want to sound unkind, but he's not you. Haven't you seen yourself in a mirror recently?" She could scarcely hold back her wonder. "You're freaking awesome."

He barked a laugh. "Bullshit."

"You are." She touched his bottom lip with her fingers, breathless at its silkiness. Her words rushed out. "I spotted you the moment I reached the dance floor. It pissed me off when the redhead got to you first. The server told me there were a dozen other women interested in you. Could be she was lying. It might have been more. That's why I sent you the beer. It was the only way I knew to get you to notice me."

His eyes rounded in amazement. "You wouldn't be putting me on now, would you?"

She reached for her purse. "I have a mirror. You really should look at your—"

"Fuck that." He lowered his head and captured her mouth.

An indecent grunt tore from the back of her throat. Lips parting, she accepted his tongue, needing its wet warmth more than she required oxygen or food. She tasted a hint of the beer he'd drank, along with his flavor, which spoke of cleanliness and good health. His chin and upper lip rasped hers with his beginning stubble.

She wound her arms around him. Eager to touch, her hands moved up and down his muscled back.

He ground his lean hips into her mound, taunting her with his imposing cock. Her pussy clenched, bidding him inside. Unaware, he trailed his fingers over her cheek, sending tingles to her temple. His hand ventured lower, past the line of her jaw and throat to the edge of her halter. He hesitated, interpreting her reaction, before he slipped his fingers inside, his palm clothing her naked breast, his heat searing it. She edged nearer, her knees knocking his, telling him she craved all he had to give. Assured, he squeezed her flesh hungrily.

It wasn't enough.

With his superior height and weight, he backed her into the building. Shoulders pressing the weathered wood, she moaned. His tongue invaded deeper, while his other hand explored.

Bunching her skirt in his fist, he lifted the gauzy fabric, exposing her to the night air. Its sultry breath licked the moisture bathing her opening. The side of his hand grazed her, moving from her navel to her mound.

There, he stopped, most likely surprised. He broke the kiss, stepped back and whispered, "My God."

Mike dropped to one knee in front of her and looked up.

Silken waves the color of cocoa framed her face. Her graceful nostrils flared. She searched his eyes, no doubt gauging what lay beneath his shock.

He found it difficult to breathe or think. She wasn't wearing panties. Even more amazing was what she did wear—a silvery belly chain and navel ring with tiny diamonds in an ornate design that dangled over her slightly rounded stomach. The gems winked in the scant light, trailing beads of brightness to her shaved pubes.

Jasmine's feminine folds were slick with womanly moisture, plump and impatient. In spite of her bad experience with the fucker she'd dated, she hadn't given up on men. She wanted him. Equally important, she trusted him.

His cock hardened painfully, insistent on entry. Eyes closed, he touched his mouth to her smooth mound, enthralled by the exposed skin. His tongue snaked over it.

She gasped and parted her legs, enticing him further.

Her real scent, earthy and feminine, wafted up, stealing what remained of his admired restraint. "Grab the ends of your skirt on each side." He had to taste her.

Obedient, she gathered the fabric in her hands and pulled it to her waist.

He pushed her wrists into the building, holding them captive as he examined her. The murky light didn't hide her engorged clit, blushing dark above her cleft. He'd seen few things more beautiful. Tongue poised, he flicked it over her erect nub.

She moaned brazenly, her thigh muscles tensing. As cautious as she'd been, now she became wild, twisting her hips to bring her mound closer to his mouth, begging for relief. Mike wasn't about to give it so easily. By dragging this out in a public place, where someone might discover them, he'd added to the allure. Like most women, she wanted simulated danger.

A riot of sounds filled the steamy night—the rumble of passing cars, a horn blaring with its shriek weakened by distance, snatches of voices carried on the muggy wind, Jasmine's mewl in response to his mouth embracing her defenseless sex.

His tongue probed her inner recesses, lapping her salty dew, indulging his appetite, while ignoring hers. She bent her knees to force his tongue nearer her clit. He used more pressure on her wrists, wordlessly commanding her to follow his lead. To wait for what he would offer.

"Please," she groaned in a guttural voice.

Resting his forehead on her belly, he breathed heavily, refusing to relent. "Straighten your knees."

The back of her head hit the building with a tiny, frustrated whack. Her wrists flexed within his grasp as she clenched her fists. Each panting gasp quivered her sweet little tummy. Finally, her knees straightened.

Pleased, he licked the trail of light drizzling toward her groin. She reacted instantly, nudging nearer, intent on her goal.

Not yet ready to allow it, he moved his head away, tipping it back to look at her. She'd sunk her teeth into her bottom lip. Her eyes sought his and implored.

He winked.

Her slender brows arched.

Swooping down, he latched onto her sex, his tongue circling her clit. Contented sighs poured from her each time he made brief contact with the nub. Soon, she learned the value of obedience and opened her body to his will. Not even the murmur of female voices coming from the end of the alley slowed Jasmine's hitching breaths. Oblivious to everything except this—or simply not caring what anyone else saw—she delivered herself to him.

Mike welcomed her gift and held her clit carefully between his teeth, keeping it prisoner as his tongue teased and tempted, working its magic. To the side, the club's door opened. Music spilled out, the melody loud and lusty. A female voice complained, "I can't believe the shitty tip that jerk gave me."

A male voice responded, "Relax. I saw Sara trip him on the way out."

The girl laughed.

Beneath Mike's mouth, Jasmine writhed, her muffled moans telling him release wasn't far away. He withdrew his tongue and suckled to delay the inevitable. Her whimper stiffened his cock even more.

The girl who'd received the lousy tip said something indistinct. The boy coughed. At the end of the alley, the same female voices continued an increasingly heated conversation.

With no further delay, Mike licked Jasmine's clit rough and fast. Not expecting it, her body alternately tensed and trembled as pleasure lurched through her. He imagined her moving her head back and forth, willing him to stop, unable to handle the sensation.

He gave her even more. During it, the voices of the club employees receded and the door clicked closed. Jasmine's wrists relaxed within his fingers. She slumped into the building, spent from her orgasm, unable to fight his determined mouth.

His tongue stroked her sensitive area until she came again, harder than before. Releasing her wrists, he pushed to his feet and folded her in his embrace.

Inside the club, the muted music grew progressively torrid, conjuring scenes of men and women molded together, their sexes meeting as they danced. Here, Jasmine's head sank to his shoulder. Her hands cupped his ass as she swayed to the tune.

Gratified and seriously horny, he turned circle after circle, dancing her away from the building. She giggled.

He whispered in her ear, "I like your body jewelry."

"Thanks." Her voice purred. "I really love your tongue."

Mike buried his face in her hair, trying to quiet his proud laughter.

She cuddled close, her fingers fondling his butt and traversing the furrow between his cheeks.

Sweet Jesus. His penis behaved as if a woman had never touched him there, the head pressing against the barrier of his fly, wanting her searching fingers and mouth on it. He choked out his words. "If you keep doing that, I won't be able to control myself."

"Then don't." She paused to pull in more air and spoke on a whispery sigh. "Come home with me, please."

Hunger deepened her voice, giving him an idea of how she'd sound when he mounted her. Intoxicated at the thought, he turned again and grinned at her newest giggle. He planned to show off and try a more complicated dance move when he unexpectedly caught movement in his peripheral vision. Gaze shifting to the right, he paused.

At the end of the alley, two young women huddled beneath the pool of yellow light from the gas lamp. They spoke in subdued voices he couldn't possibly overhear. Were they the ones who'd sounded close to arguing? If so, why were they still hanging around this place and talking so low?

The one on the right appeared to be in her late twenties. She had light brown hair and a pallid complexion, which looked out of place in the sunny Keys. The other one, younger by a few years, was equally fair. She wore her hair very short, like a man, and had dyed it an impossible platinum blonde.

Neither appeared to notice him or Jasmine. In fact, they looked everywhere except this alley. Their presence didn't feel right. As a former law enforcement officer, he thought it seemed downright staged. He glanced at Jasmine.

Anxiety pinched her features, so fuzzy with contentment a few moments ago.

He frowned. "Do you know those two?"

Her head snapped from them to him, her eyes widened in confusion. "What?"

"You heard me."

At his abrupt tone, she stepped back and kept her voice low. "No." Head bowed, she adjusted her halter top to make certain it covered her breasts. "I don't know them." She lifted her face and avoided his eyes. "Did they see us?"

"Not from way over there they didn't."

She nodded and turned away, arms hugging her middle.

He studied her narrow shoulders, the sleek expanse of her back revealed by her dress. Two small moles decorated her tawny skin, one on her right shoulder blade, the other on the graceful slope of her

spine. On her second sigh, his shoulders slumped. What in the fuck was the matter with him? So what if two women decided to use this alley for their incessant chatter? Could be they were so deep in debate over whatever in the hell women talked about, they forgot to keep walking. Stranger things had happened. At least it hadn't been a bunch of guys invading this space.

"Hey." Hands resting on her firm biceps, he eased her into him, her back to his front.

With her plush ass blanketing his groin, he murmured, "I shouldn't have snapped at you. I'm sorry."

She turned in his arms. It took her a few seconds to lift her head and another to open her eyes.

Unexpectedly, a wave of tenderness hit hard. In her blue-green gaze, he saw guileless yearning. Beneath it, he sensed a wounded soul who needed his protection. How crazy was that for a man who'd failed his duty so miserably? Driven to redeem himself with her, he ran his hands down her buttery arms and used his softest voice. "Despite my acting like an SOB, does your invitation still stand?"

"Will you bring your tongue?"

Laughing, he hugged her until she squealed like a little girl. "Where do you live?"

With her head nestled on his shoulder, her breath warmed his neck. "A few blocks from here. We can walk."

"We'll take my bike. It's right over there."

She didn't bother to look. Her hands returned to his ass. She resumed squeezing. "Whatever you say."

Exactly what every man longed to hear.

He insisted she put on his helmet. "I want you safe."

Completing a full circle around his Harley, a customized V-Rod Muscle, she ran her fingertips over the black leather seat. "What will you wear?"

"You." He tossed her his helmet, which she thankfully caught, straddled his bike, and patted the space behind himself. "Hop on, put your arms around my middle and press the insides of your thighs against mine."

She turned the helmet in her palms while staring at his legs. "Shouldn't we wait to do that until we get to my place?"

Head down, he hid his smile and faked a growl. "Come on, woman. You're making me wait."

"Sorry." With more care than he thought necessary, she tucked her thick hair into the sides of his helmet, secured the strap and lifted her foot, stopping short of swinging her leg over the bike.

Suddenly, he remembered she wasn't wearing panties, just her amazing body jewelry. He got so hard he winced inwardly and it showed in his unsteady voice. "Ah, if you pull the back of your dress between your legs you can..." His words trailed off as she did as he suggested, her succulent ass resting on cloth rather than his seat.

Blood pounded in his ears at the way she wrapped her arms around him, leaving one palm on his belly and the other on his fly. God help him if he took a corner too fast and she grabbed his shaft and balls to hang on.

"How's this?" she asked.

Surrounded by her fragrance and heat, distracted by her rigid nipples poking his back, he lowered his head and forced himself to take a calming breath. "It's great. Precisely what I wanted." He looked past his shoulder at her.

Indecency sparkled in her eyes. Her forefinger stroked his balls.

His ears rang. He'd never experienced a moment quite like this, not even in high school or college where he fucked as much as he possibly could. It killed him to break the mood, but he couldn't think of a way around it. "We'll have to stop at a drugstore first for protection. There's one two streets over, unless you have condoms at your place."

Her finger found the head of his cock and traced its outline. He bit back a moan. She reduced her voice to just above a whisper as though someone might overhear. "I have an IUD. There's a slight chance you may feel the strings when you're inside me. Is that okay?"

Was she joking? He nodded quickly and guided her hand to his waist, placing it on top of her other one. Once his heart began to beat normally again, he heeled the kickstand. "Hang on."

They roared out of the alley and entered the street, weaving around a slow-moving vehicle to zip past a continuous flow of cars. A teenaged boy in the passenger seat of a red Honda Civic hung out his window and waved with both arms as they approached. "Hey man," he shouted, "I love your bike!"

Head turned to the boy, Mike grinned to acknowledge his thanks.

Jasmine nuzzled the back of his neck, adrift in his potent masculinity. The thought of his powerful thighs separating her legs and his cock buried deep dulled her earlier distress.

He'd given her an opportunity to retreat when he'd seen Violet and Lily beneath the gas lamp, asking if she knew them. For a moment, she'd vacillated, and then the curse took over, pushing her to have him at all costs, allowing her to look confused at his question and to lie so easily.

She knew her sisters followed. When he'd stopped at the end of the alley and regarded the passing traffic, she'd peeked to the right. Violet and Lily sat in her blue Saturn, parked at the curb. She'd given them time to head for the vehicle while she fooled with his helmet and her skirt. Her nod let them know everything was going as planned. Within minutes, she'd be home with him. They wouldn't enter the house for an hour, time enough for her to get him into her bedroom, so he'd believe she lived alone.

Her lids slid down, shame mingling with accelerating delight. Cheek pressed to his shoulder, she savored his tee's fresh scent, his glossy hair whipped by the wind, his torso tensing with each movement, the way their bodies dipped to the right, the left as he expertly maneuvered his bike around street corners.

On the fourth turn, he slowed and stopped at the address she'd provided. Opening her eyes, Jasmine looked at her childhood home, a two-story Victorian with white wrought-iron columns and porches draped in crimson bougainvillea. The petals fluttered in the midnight breeze, delivering their perfume. Moss-draped cypress trees and gigantic banyans flanked the structure, along with squat palms and ferns. Stately and inviting, the house didn't look like a place where she would imprison a man.

He eased toward the curb.

"No," she said, her voice just a shade too loud.

He turned to her. His eyes glistened in the moonlight. "No what?"

If he parked out here, the neighbors would see his Harley. Not a problem, if he left in the morning. If she couldn't allow it... Not knowing what to do, or what she might be capable of, she said, "There's a detached garage in back. Your bike will be safer there."

"You rent a room here?"

Her throat constricted at his simple question, one she should have known he'd ask. She shook her head, not able to lie this time. He knew her real name and should he leave in the morning, there were too many public records to confirm ownership. "It's mine."

His dark brows lifted. "You don't seem too happy about that. Is the bank giving you grief? They're getting ready to foreclose?"

"Actually, the place is free and clear, an inheritance from my parents."

His head turned to the house, taking it in. "Can I ask you something?"

She wished he wouldn't. "I guess."

He glanced over at the uncertainty in her voice. "I know this is none of my business. If you want, just tell me to shut up, but did they die recently?"

His question brought relief and sorrow. "No. I lost them when I was eighteen." Her belly cramped at the memory. "They'd gone to the store that day and didn't return when they said they would. The police department called. An officer said a group of kids was tossing rocks off an overpass, thinking it'd be fun to smash some windshields. My dad lost control of the car. It rolled over several times, killing him and Mom instantly. A stupid, senseless accident." The loss still angered and pained her, though she shouldn't be talking about it. If she wasn't careful, she'd tell him everything: how she'd raised her younger sisters. How she'd crossed paths with a mad woman. How Desiree's jealousy had altered her life. Tears burned her eyes.

His expression softened. "I'm sorry. It must have been tough. Do you have any siblings or relatives?"

She shook her head, not wanting to involve Violet and Lily in this, hoping her next lie would sound like the truth. "I'm pretty much it." Running her finger beneath her nose, she turned her head to the right. "There's the drive, you can take it to the garage."

Once he'd parked his bike next to Violet's black VW, which he surely thought belonged to her, she placed his helmet on the seat and ran her fingers through his hair, easing it from his ear. He offered a gentle smile and gathered her into his arms. His embrace nearly defeated Jasmine. New tears threatened. She hated deceiving him but didn't know what else to do. Without his warmth and touch, she'd go crazy.

He whispered, "You okay?"

She nodded.

He ran his hand up her back. She sagged into him, loving his solid support. "Ready to go inside?"

"Depends." He kissed the top of her head. "What do you have in mind?"

Jasmine pushed to her toes and suckled his throat while cupping his sac with her free hand, feeling the shape and weight of his balls through the rough denim.

Air hissed through his teeth. "How about we stay here? I've always wanted to have sex in a garage. We could even try to do it on my Harley."

Her grin released several tears. "Inside's better. Follow me."

With her fingers laced through his, she led him past the gazebo, a lacy white structure ringed by fat bushes and towering palms. White wicker rockers graced the back porch. Silvery light streamed through the tall kitchen windows, illuminating the snowy cabinets and gleaming hardwood floor. The fragrant cinnamon cake Violet prepared for tonight's dessert sweetened the space.

Jasmine hung her purse on Lily's chair at the glass-topped kitchen table. A prearranged signal to let her sisters know she'd chosen a safe man. He wouldn't harm her.

She eased her hand from his and backed up several steps toward the hall.

He finished looking around the airy room. Shadows and light played across his features, giving him a mysterious, formidable appearance. He moved closer. Her body throbbed, hurting for his.

"I can't believe you live here alone," he said.

The back of her neck prickled. She warned herself not to break and blurt the truth. In addition to Violet and Lily, Ben Bishop, their border, rented a room upstairs. Ben waited for her now, determined to protect her if the man she chose became threatening. Heart racing, she offered a promising smile. "Most of the time I like the solitude, though not tonight." To distract him from the subject, she lifted her hands and unfastened her halter.

Mike followed the ends of the cloth as they slid over her breasts to pool at her waist. Eyes riveted to her partial nudity, he pulled his tee out of his jeans.

"No-don't."

His gaze jumped from her tight nipples to her eyes. "Don't? Why?"

If worry caused Violet and Lily to arrive before she got him out of the kitchen, he'd see them coming up the porch. "I want to undress you. Please."

He flung out his arms, his resonant voice even huskier. "Have at it."

Jasmine smiled, liking him so much desire rose swift and pitiless, worse than the times with the other men. The room pressed in and the air became suffocating. Tension magnified every sound: crickets chirped boisterously, something in the wall popped as the house settled. Her heart skipped a beat while she battled for composure. No matter his impatience to sink inside of her, if she allowed him to witness the heartless depth of her passion, she'd spook him and he'd leave.

She'd have no way to satisfy herself through tonight's grueling hours, not even if she went to Ben. He'd argued for them to become intimate, not understanding the curse. Desiree didn't want her to crave just any male. That would be too easy. She could hire escorts. The man had to be one she felt in her core with a connection so strong he seemed to be a part of her, whether he was vicious like Travis or as seemingly honorable as Mike. Only then would the sex gratify, though never for long. She'd still want unendingly. Finding her voice, she tried to make it as light and tantalizing as possible. "Not here. Upstairs."

Mike's arms fell to his sides. He arched one brow. "What's upstairs?"

"My bedroom." She looked at him from beneath her lashes. "You do want to see it, don't you?"

"Eventually." His amused smile grew mischievous as he inclined his head. "Right now, though, that table has your name on it. Once you've stripped me, I definitely see you bending over it, lifting your ass and spreading your legs."

Her pussy thumped, indelicate, shameless beats at the picture he'd created, her body displayed for his use, vaginally and anally. She strained for control. "I was saving that for breakfast." Her voice trembled. She cleared it. "By the way, I'm quite the chef. I cook in the nude." She unzipped the back of her dress and nudged it past her hips.

Mike watched the flimsy fabric float to her feet. She stepped out of it and slipped off her slides. Excited and embarrassed at being naked, she didn't move, allowing his scrutiny. Her breasts felt heavy and vulnerable beneath his intense gaze. Chilled air from the cooling system drifted down, glancing against her hard nipples and the building moisture between her legs. With each breath, the belly chain rolled over her stomach. She knew the dangling diamonds shimmered in the ashy light.

Transfixed, his attention roamed from the jewels to her shaved mound, exactly as she wanted. When she brought him through the house, she couldn't risk him noticing anything other than her. A necessary precaution to keep him from asking too many questions. And, if she couldn't bring herself to keep him captive, the only way she could allow him to leave in the morning.

Hand outstretched, she coaxed, "Let's go upstairs."

#### Chapter Three

Mike knew seduction when he saw it, though he couldn't figure out why Jasmine considered it necessary, given his obvious attraction to her. If his interest went up another notch, he'd be drooling.

Maybe being alone in this house gave her lots of time to read romance novels and dream about heroes who didn't take meth or beat up on women.

He followed her into the hall. Ornate nightlights—one a fairy, another a stylized sun, the next a hummingbird—created circles of colored light on the shiny hardwood floor.

Her feet slapped the wood. He slowed his pace, watching her ass bounce with each step. The dainty dimples above her cheeks baited him shamelessly, as they would any sane man. His testosterone spiked to a dangerous level, sending his heart rate into triple overdrive. Not willing to risk a stroke, he pulled her toward him, facing him, then backed her into the rose-colored wall, imprisoning her with his body.

"Not upstairs. Here. Now," he insisted.

"But-"

He kissed her objections away, his hands roughly fondling her luscious breasts chilled from the airconditioning. As he warmed them with his palms, his fingers tugged her long nipples, sensing she'd like it.

She did. Smothered moans punctuated her heightened breathing. Knee lifted to his groin, she prodded his balls and cock.

Arousal surged through him. Every hair on his body seemed to stand on end. He responded with an indulgent grunt and kept her pinned to the wall with his kiss as his hands went to his belt.

Jasmine gripped his wrists as best she could and tore her mouth free. "No." Her breasts heaved against his chest. "I want to strip you."

His swallow interrupted his gasp. "Then for God's sake, do it now or I will."

She released his wrists and sidled away from the wall. "Please, let me." Fingers grabbing the hem of his tee, she eased it up his torso and arms, off his head, and flung it aside. A soft, feminine growl purred from her as she ran her hands over his chest. Her warm, caring fingers traced his muscles and flat nipples. Pleasure, shocking and deep, shot to the top of his head. He trembled.

Encouraged, she licked his right nipple and his tattoo as her fingers gently tugged the hair peeking from beneath his arms.

Torn between laughing and groaning in appreciation, he settled on another grunt, this one coarser.

Her fingers slid down him as she went to her knees. She gifted his body with hot, openmouthed kisses. His toes splayed within his mocs.

Tongue sweeping over his navel, she unbuckled his belt, pushed his jeans' metal button through its slit and lowered his fly. His rigid cock twitched within the stretchy cotton of his navy briefs, sensitive to all contact. In no hurry, she ran her tongue across the underwear's elastic edge as her fingers glided down the front placket.

She was fucking killing him. His chin lifted on a new groan that barely got past his clenched jaw. Her fingers negotiated the underwear's opening. Once inside, she caressed his rod and searched for his balls.

He ground his teeth so hard they hurt. One more stroke and he'd be making love to his Jockeys. No damn way. He demanded her wet, snug heat. His strangled voice betrayed his agony. "If you don't take my clothes off now, I swear I will."

"I'll do it."

He hoped.

She hooked her thumbs beneath the band, lowering his briefs and jeans. His cock jumped out of its prison, plumped by blood, dusky with lust. A whimpering sigh escaped her, but she didn't touch his sex. Puffing like a long-distance runner, she pushed his briefs and jeans down his legs, stopping at his ankle holster. Her head whipped up.

Surprise and concern registered in her lovely eyes. Her voice, so seductive a moment ago, grew cautious. "I thought you left the US Marshals."

"I did." His hammering heart choked his voice. "But my current work still requires me to carry a weapon."

Waves of hair spilled over her shoulders as her head lowered to the Glock 27. Although law enforcement considered it the baby Glock due to its smaller size, he sensed it looked like a cannon to her. He wondered whether he'd be here right now if she'd detected it at the bar as she ran her foot up his leg. "Give me a sec and I'll take it off."

"I will." She lifted her face. "I promised to strip you."

He smiled at her sweet willingness. "Of clothes. Not weapons. You didn't know I had one."

Her gaze shifted to his erect penis, its skin pulled so tight the damned thing bobbed each time he breathed.

"Actually, I did," she said.

He laughed, though not for long. "Whoa. Hold it."

"I'm nearly through." With great care, she finished unbuckling the holster from his ankle and held it in both palms like a sacred offering. "See, I didn't hurt it." Affection washed over him. She seemed so young, suddenly, so determined to please. He placed his hand on the side of her face and ran his thumb over her downy upper lip. "I'm not worried about the gun. I don't want you to get hurt."

Carefully, she pushed to her feet, inhaling deeply as his fingers trailed from her neck to her breast. "You like?" he asked.

"Oh yeah."

"There's more as soon as I put this down." He reached for his Glock.

Instantly, she stepped back, keeping the weapon from him. "I'll put it away so we're both safe." She left the hall.

Mike stopped himself from calling her back, figuring she wouldn't return. His weapon scared her, he saw it in her eyes, and she didn't want it anywhere near them. He, on the other hand, didn't want her to stick the pistol in an umbrella stand or a closet. It should be at his side. Placing his hand on the wall, he hurriedly toed off his mocs, then stepped out of his briefs and jeans.

Naked, he padded down the hall, halting at the opulent front entry. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought he'd stepped back in time. A sparkling crystal chandelier hung from the beveled ceiling. Nightlights shaped like candles glowed near muraled walls depicting ocean scenes from long ago, complete with racing sailboats and couples in dated dress. Floral arrangements of pink carnations and white roses, fresh and aromatic, filled clear glass vases on the mahogany accent tables. On either side of the front door were long, narrow windows. Tall ferns stood in front of each, discouraging anyone from looking inside. An antique sofa in blue velvet was to the left, near an opened white door. A wedge of brightness came from within the room and shone on the polished flooring.

Glancing over his shoulder, Mike didn't see Jasmine on the winding staircase leading upstairs. He went to the opened door and nearly ran into her.

"Oh." She jumped back, hand to her long neck.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to frighten you. I wondered where you'd gone." Inside the room, an office, apparently, he saw a banker's lamp, its green shade glowing faintly from its small bulb. The light fixture sat at the edge of a large desk, possibly an heirloom given its elaborate gold handles and carvings. Placed squarely in the middle of it, with no chance of falling off, was his gun. He suppressed a smile and looked at the other side of the office, surprised at the racks of bridal gowns adorned with lace, pearls and other finery, each as ethereal as a cloud. Other racks held evening dresses in hues he'd never seen: fluorescent blues, pinkish greens, outrageous reds. "Do you design women's clothes?"

She didn't respond.

He turned his head to her.

Something behind him had caught her attention. He glanced around to the foyer. It looked unchanged to him, unless one of the candle nightlights had gone out.

"I inherited the business from my parents," she finally answered. Her voice sounded anxious. She flicked off the light and started to close the door.

Mike put his arm in the middle of it, stopping her. "Does my gun make you uncomfortable?"

"Not if it's in there and we're out here." With one hand planted on his bare chest, she pushed him back with surprising strength and closed the door. "Now, where were we? Oh, yeah." She circled him. He turned. Suddenly, she advanced. Not expecting it, he instinctively withdrew a step. His head jerked to the side as his shoulder hit the muraled wall. Sinking to her knees, she embraced his cock in her baby-soft palm, put her other hand on his ass and pressed her face into his groin.

Holy fuck. His hands went to his temples and dug through his hair, his fists yanking it. Unmindful of her deliberate sexual torture, she filled herself with his scent. He growled. She countered by running her tongue down his stiff length, wetting and heating it in a way her pussy never could. With her mouth, she had full control and used it well. Her lapping strokes on his shaft and suckling kisses on his crown added a level of intensity and intimacy he didn't think he could endure for long.

"Aw, shit." His shoulders bunched to his ears at his cock's ruthless need.

Reaching the most sensitive part of the head, she drew her tongue over the wrinkled skin on the back. The muscles in his chest tensed at the sensations raging through him. Before he could catch his breath she slipped him inside her mouth, taking him so deep the tip of her nose nearly touched his pubic hair. At the intense heat, his knees buckled. He struggled to lock them. They cracked. Unconcerned, she slid him in and out of her mouth, her tongue swirling over his width, while her fingers fooled with his balls.

It had been too many months since he'd experienced this. Hell, who was he kidding—he'd never known anything quite this good. She played him expertly, knowing every move to make as if he'd told her beforehand how much he liked her tongue flicking the back of the head and the way she periodically probed the slit, all while sucking hard, pulling his skin, urging him to grow even harder.

Damn. Raw anguish crowded his words. "I can't hold off much longer. If you don't stop now, I'm going to come."

Unfazed, she continued to enjoy his sex, encouraging him as few women had. The others talked a good game, then always pulled away at the last moment, uncomfortable with a man's ejaculate. Not Jasmine. With her hand still on his ass, her lips and tongue held him prisoner as she tightened her lips around him, increasing the pace of her strokes, sucking him as hard as she dared.

He wrestled against the intolerable grip of his climax, knowing he'd never win. Heat flashed in his groin, chest, face, followed by a thin sheen of sweat. Hardened beyond anything he'd known, his sex felt as if it were so big his skin would split. Even if he'd wanted to stop, nothing could have given him the power. With a shudder and a groan, he succumbed.

Her mouth hugged him with each swallow, the snug fit bringing even greater relief. Seconds passed, maybe a minute. He cried out repeatedly, his vocabulary gone, reducing him to crude animal noises. She kept at it until she'd drained him completely. His arms dropped and his shoulders drooped. Each gasp took an enormous amount of effort. Slowly, she released him and looked up.

Desire smoldered in her eyes, yet her expression was surprisingly tender. She opened her arms.

He collapsed to the floor and moved into the refuge of her body. In between pants, he pressed his face to her neck, catching her delicate scent, similar to the floral arrangements, though far more enticing.

She combed his tangled hair with her fingers and sucked his shoulder, just short of giving him a hickey. "Good?"

Freaking unbelievable, he wanted to say, though a nod had to suffice. His racing heart and heaving chest wouldn't allow much else.

"Want to lie down?"

More than anything, but male pride wouldn't permit it. He was the big, bad former US Marshal with the scary gun and super-stiff rod. "No. I'm fine." His voice scratched, sounding unused.

"What if I join you?"

"Just for a sec." A hard floor never felt so wonderful. He spread his legs wide—his left ankle hit the sofa—and put one arm under his head to pillow it. His other hand patted the area next to him, telling Jasmine where he wanted her.

She remained on her knees, running her fingers over his tattoo, stopping short of the scar.

He fought his impulse to pull away, not wanting to wound her feelings. He remembered the concern on her face at the bar when she'd first asked about his injury and he'd cut off any further questions. She had only tried to be kind and he'd answered with cold indifference. To his way of thinking, it was a miracle he was here.

Her eyes moved to his. "Can I ask you something?"

He forced himself to nod, hoping her question wouldn't be more than he could handle.

She laid the tips of her fingers on his scar. "Does it still hurt?"

Only on lonely nights when he had too much time to think. Pushing aside the pain, he lied. "Not any longer."

"I'm glad." She held her hair back with one hand, leaned down and touched her lips gently to the bumpy skin.

His eyes stung at her unexpected gesture and her intuition not to ask more. Her gentle breathing warmed his battered soul. She trailed light, loving kisses from his scar to his mouth. There, she lingered, brushing her achingly soft lips against his. Beneath her perfume, she smelled of him. His lips turned up in a smile. Her tongue followed it, teasing the seam of his mouth before slipping inside to give him a taste of himself.

Unhurriedly, they necked, like pre-teens who don't have the option to do anything else. Mike couldn't recall the last time he'd experienced anything so satisfying. Their slow, wet, noisy kisses engendered peace, the kind a man seeks after a brutal and humbling day. The kind that restored, bringing renewed hope. He could have done this forever.

After a time, Jasmine lifted her head, inhaling deeply, luxuriously.

Forcing his lids to open, he marveled at her, so damned glad they'd met. "I thought you were going to lie next to me."

"I've changed my mind."

He smiled at the sass in her voice. "Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"I have a better idea." She turned her back to him and straddled his body, lowering herself until her mouth had easy access to his sex, and she'd poised her cunt provocatively above his head.

Shit, she was just full of surprises. More than he was certain he deserved. His cock stirred, coming back to life at the sight of her bare female flesh. He'd never slept with a woman who'd removed all of her body hair. Although he liked a fluffy, fragrant bush, he had no complaints about this. Her pouty, unprotected lips and glistening passage urged him to be uncivilized.

Hands on her velvety ass to keep her confined, he snaked out his tongue and took the first lap of her delicious juices.

Jasmine's head dropped. If Violet and Lily came home now, they'd see her like this. She wanted to care, but didn't. Her ability to behave like a rational being had fallen away, the same as a liar's empty promises, when Mike had backed her into the wall, compelling her to do as he willed.

His hot, demanding mouth explored her swollen folds. Periodically, he made certain to torment her dangerously aroused clit.

He headed there now.

His tongue circled the hard nub, a predator homing in on its prey. I'm coming, it said, you can't get away from me. But I will make you wait.

She groaned in desperation. He paid no heed. Though his lips tightened on her, his tongue remained elusive. Lids fluttering, she blew out an exasperated sigh. If she'd been able, she would have burrowed inside his marrow to become a part of him. Her sisters would have argued the curse drove her reaction. Her heart understood it was the man.

Still suckling, he slid his hand to the furrow between her cheeks. His forefinger rounded her anus.

Lewd need punched through her. Body shaking, her chin jerked up. His tongue grazed her clit. Scarcely able to catch her breath, her head dipped back to his groin. Musk scented the dark fur above his rod, exciting her even more. She licked the seat of his cock, moaning as his mouth troubled her clit and his finger probed her anus.

Exquisitely trapped and used, she required even more. Using the last of her strength, she took him inside her mouth. The head of his penis slid past her tongue to her throat, silky, salty, savory and stunning.

He muttered an obscenity.

No sounds could leave her. He filled her too well. As he worked her openings, cunt and anus, she deliberately held off suckling his cock, cradling his testicles instead, testing their weight, learning the contours of the wrinkled, lightly furred glands.

His legs pressed her shoulders and hers hugged him. It seemed a toss-up as to who would come first.

Jasmine surrendered, mostly because she had to, partly by design, since she wasn't remotely through with him. Her ragged gasps allowed him to slip from her mouth. His erection snuggled against her damp cheek, thrilling her with its merciless power.

He placed both hands on her ass, spreading the cheeks wide to display her tightest passage. A promise of what he would have. "Good?"

She smiled at the way he repeated her earlier question, with the same hope in his voice as she'd had in hers. Like him, she nodded. The movement rubbed her face across his dense pubic hair, releasing more of his musk. She shivered.

Lowering his legs, he yawned and stretched.

She seized the opportunity, gathering what little energy remained, and pulled from his grasp. Slow to respond, he grumbled good-naturedly. She turned around and straddled him again so they faced each other.

The dim lighting caressed his magnificent chest, a sweep of smooth coppery skin and taut muscle, while curiosity lifted his brows. Fascination soon replaced it as she wound her fingers around his still-rigid cock and brushed the head over her sheath's slick mouth.

He inhaled sharply and lost his breath on a rough sigh. "Take me inside of you. Now. This fucking minute."

Her pussy pulsed, suffering without him as much as his shaft hurt without her. Even so, the real Jasmine, not the creature she'd become, grew genuinely playful, something she'd never been with any other man. Mike was different. He had a sympathetic heart. She knew he grieved from a tragic event in his past. She'd witnessed his stricken expression when she'd kissed his scar and wanted to purge his pain, if only during this act. "In a sec." Eyes on him, she ran her forefinger over the crown and down the slit, slippery with pre-come.

His legs drew up so fast, his hairy thighs knocked into her buttocks and back.

Pretending to be startled, she deliberately dropped his penis. It bumped into her smooth groin and quivered above her thigh. "Whoops."

He laughed. "Dammit, mount me." He pushed to his elbows and warned, "Don't make me wait."

She did, knowing he'd enjoy the game as much as she. Scooping his cock in her palm, she used his pearls of moisture and her own nectar to lubricate his cap and shaft. He fell back to the floor, his head smacking it lightly.

Jasmine scolded. "If you knock yourself unconscious, you won't be able to enjoy this."

He laughed again and swore beneath his breath. The heels of his hands ground into his eyes.

She quieted her voice. "If you keep doing that, you're going to miss me taking you inside." Pushing up, she positioned her body over his.

He moved his hands away from his face, lifted his head and stared as her opening swallowed him slowly, inch by inch, her inner walls stretched relentlessly by his size. At the pressure of containing him, her breathing picked up, jiggling her breasts. With unyielding purpose, his male organ squeezed through her narrow walls, commanding shelter and obedience. She gave it, helpless to do anything else, moving down him until her engorged lips nestled above his dark thatch of curls.

His hands fisted. Hers drifted over her jeweled navel to her mound.

"No. Stop." Grunting, he pushed to his elbows and a sitting position. Hands on her hips so she'd stay put and keep him inside, he edged them toward the muraled wall, using it to brace the back of his shoulders and head. Settled, he swept her fingers away so he could claim and use her clit.

She conceded, bringing her hands to her breasts, fondling them, tugging on the nipples as he'd done, while he lazily stroked her nub. *My God*. She couldn't even gasp the words—his actions and girth overwhelmed. Dominated by his shaft and fingers, intimately used as a female needed to be by a male, her vaginal muscles clenched.

His cock answered by swelling a bit more.

Her head slouched to her back, her hair trailing past her shoulder blades. She lifted herself from his penis, nearly releasing him before slinking back down. His fingers paused in their stroking, her movements destroying his concentration.

For her, the world consisted of this moment, having him tunneled within. Again, she pushed up and coasted down, while roughly caressing her breasts. He produced a sound somewhere between a grunt and a growl, the kind only a man can manage if driven past all boundaries.

Bucking his lean hips to drive himself deeper and to hasten her strokes, he resumed playing with her nub, knowing her lack of endurance, goading her to the brink. Heavy with lust, her pussy swallowed him a bit deeper, the muscles flexing painfully, begging for relief and an end to this blessed agony. He tried to lengthen it until she slowed her strokes as he'd slowed his. With both wanting to win, they each conceded. This time they came together, panting and writhing, with neither able to resist.

Physically drained, Jasmine slumped to his chest, cherishing his scent and heat as a forgotten comfort settled over her. It wouldn't last. It never did since the curse, so she kept her eyes closed and didn't move, intent on relishing each blissful moment.

Not even trying to hide his fatigue, Mike's hand bumped limply down her spine to settle on her ass. "Wow."

She giggled so hard it stole the last of her breath. Right behind it, tears returned. She wanted this to continue, to endure. His presence reminded her of the loneliness she'd borne prior to the curse, and the despair she'd known since then. How could she let him go? How could she not? Snuggling closer, she tried to become a part of him, to pull his strength into her for the long days ahead.

"Hey." Doubt laced his voice. "You okay?"

She lied. "Hungry. You?"

"Enough to eat my own cooking." He continued over her newest giggles. "Want me to order a pizza?"

"It's too late." Even if there were an all-night place with delivery, if someone saw him here and she found she couldn't let him go... No, she wasn't yet ready to face the decision she'd have to make. Skimming his right pec with her fingertips, pleased at how the muscle danced, she put her mouth to his ear and whispered, "I have leftovers from tonight. Ham with honey sauce, potato salad, coleslaw and cinnamon cake."

"I'm impressed. You had me at leftovers." His hands wearily cupped her ass. "After we're done with our meal we can use the table to continue with this."

No, they could not. If Violet and Lily weren't already here, they would be shortly. "I don't know about you, but I miss being in a soft bed. Old age, I suppose." As he chuckled, she lifted her face and grazed his lips with hers, adoring the bite of his bristly upper lip and cheeks. "How about I take you upstairs and let you snooze while I get the stuff? I'll serve you dinner in bed." She eased back.

He looked at her through slitted lids. "And after dinner? What happens then?"

She was afraid to think of it. Upstairs, handcuffs waited. So did Ben. He'd seen her and Mike together. Jasmine had spotted him at the top of the stairs when Mike startled her as she'd left her office. In that moment, Ben's handsome face darkened with jealousy. Luckily or not, he'd already retreated as Mike looked over his shoulder.

Consumed with worry and possessed by yearning, she breathed, "This." Her mouth molded to his with her suggestive kiss.

#### Chapter Four

Mike didn't have long to enjoy it. All too soon, Jasmine deserted his mouth and stood. "Your bed awaits."

Her enticing offer reminded him of a story he'd read in high school: Homer's *Odyssey*, specifically, the Sirens' song to sailors. As Mike recalled, the sea nymphs' sweet voices tempted mariners to shore as long as the men could get safely past the boulders. The poor bastards never did. Climbing her staircase seemed as daunting, given his fatigue. Not that he'd tell her. With meager energy and grace, Mike groaned inwardly as he got to his feet and scrubbed his face with his hands.

Jasmine ran her nails lightly down his backbone.

God. Shivers feathered outward from his spine to his fingers and toes. Heels leaving the floor, his legs wavered.

She looped her arm around his waist, draped his arm over her shoulder and placed his hand on her ungodly soft breast. "You ready?" Not waiting for an answer, she pushed to her toes and suckled his neck.

A tingling warmth reached parts of his body he didn't know existed. He huffed. "Let's go."

She headed toward the steps. He did not. Though beat, he possessed far more strength than she and encountered little difficulty turning them both toward her office.

Jasmine tightened her arm around his waist in a foolish attempt to hold him back. "What are you doing?"

Mike stopped and finished his yawn. "Getting my Glock." Having it in her office while they were down here was one thing. Leaving it one floor away as he dozed in her bedroom was quite another.

She shook her head. "What's a glock?"

"My pistol."

"No. Why? Nothing's going to happen to it on my desk."

"Something might, if anyone breaks in here."

"No one's ever broken in here. This is a safe neighborhood."

He rested his head against hers, closed his eyes and failed to inject any energy into his voice. "Then why'd you tell me to park my bike in your garage?"

Her body stiffened as though she recalled her earlier words.

"See what I mean?"

"No, I don't. I wanted it in the garage so no one would hit it. My neighbors are elderly. They don't see as well as they used to."

If they were that old with bad eyesight, they probably didn't cruise the streets at midnight, now did they? Rather than point out the obvious, he stayed firm on his gun. "Whether your place is safe or not, there's always a first time and I don't intend to take a chance on either of us getting hurt. I'd feel better having it at my side."

She shrank away. "You're going to wear it in bed?"

He warned himself not to laugh at her adorable naiveté. "I'll put it on your nightstand. You do have one, don't you?"

"I have a dresser. We could put it in one of the drawers."

He pictured it beneath her underwear, if she owned any. Planting a small kiss on her forehead, he blinked repeatedly until he got his lids to stay up. "We'll pick the spot together, how's that?" Unwilling to give her time to debate it, he broke her embrace and dragged his tired body to her office.

She grabbed his wrist with both hands, stopping him from opening the door. "I'll get it. Wait here."

He used the muraled wall for support, overcome by another yawn before she returned. This time, unlike the last, she held the holstered gun in one hand and as far as she could from herself

"Careful." He eased the barrel to one side so it no longer pointed at his groin. Taking the pistol from her and lowering it to thigh level, he crushed her wavy hair in his left hand, using it as an anchor to keep her to him. "Thanks." Intent on showing his appreciation, and to erase the anxiety on her face, he dropped his head to her right breast and ran his tongue over the ruddy nipple. Her areola pleated instantly, the once smooth ring a landscape of peaks and valleys, further delighting his mouth. He drew it inside and suckled leisurely.

She arched her back to grant him full contact, her fingers flicking down his throat. Her bewitching touch was nearly more than he could manage. His convulsive swallows bobbed his Adam's apple.

He tongued her nipple one last time and got his head up, despite how heavy it felt. "Ready to go upstairs?"

Renewed passion showed in her dazed eyes. "Oh yeah."

He liked her enthusiasm and intended to reward her for it after a ten-minute nap. Like a good boy, he allowed her to pull him up the stairs. On the fifth step, he joked, "Does this stairway ever end?"

"We only have eight more steps to go. Not bad at all."

He turned his head so she wouldn't see his eyes rolling. She took the next step. He didn't.

Decorating the wall were numerous paintings, the kind you'd see at one of those starving artists sales advertised on late-night TV. The uninspired landscapes and portraits didn't match the elegance of the rest of this place. Nor did the frames fit the spaces they occupied. The powder-blue paint was a shade lighter

around their edges, as if something larger had been there previously. "What happened to the original paintings that hung here?"

She halted on the next step. Still holding his hand, her arm remained outstretched. "Those are the originals."

He lifted his face. She regarded the paintings. Given how her brows drew together, he knew she saw what he had.

He kept his voice mild. "All right, so there weren't any other landscapes or portraits there before these. How about photos?"

Her head swung to him. She opened her mouth and closed it without comment.

He wondered why it was such a big deal. He'd simply been curious and guessed she'd had money problems, which required her to sell the original paintings to pay the property taxes on this place. Only now, he realized there had been photos in these spots. So why take them down? The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. "Did you have pictures of you and your parents here?"

Her face and chest flushed, darkening her rich skin.

"Hey, it's okay," he said, going up the steps to her. "If the pictures caused you more pain, there was no reason to keep them there."

Tears brimmed in her eyes. "I waited years to put them away. I just couldn't stand the memories any longer." She dropped her head and shook it.

He gave her a moment, then spoke as gently as he could. "Forgive me for having asked. None of my business. Maybe you should start telling me to shut up."

"No. It's all right." She ran the back of her hand over her eyes and smiled. More tears spilled from her lids.

Mike thumbed them from her cheeks, wishing he'd kept his stupid questions to himself. For a man who didn't like anyone prying into his personal life, he sure as hell was crossing the line when it came to her private stuff. His only excuse was he was as interested in her as she seemed to be in him. "You're sure?"

"Yeah." She covered his hand and brought it to her mouth, kissing his knuckles. "Let's get you to bed so I can throw together a snack. By the way, I have Corona and Heineken. Is that all right instead of Dos Equis?"

He considered asking her to make some industrial-strength coffee but didn't want her questioning his stamina. "Whatever you have is great. I'm not picky. Just make certain you return as quickly as possible."

Her voice hushed. "I couldn't stay away even if I tried."

He liked the way she talked.

She brought him to the top of the stairs and flipped a switch. Quaint overhead lights shaped like tulips in full bloom ran the length of the spacious hall and offered puddles of illumination. Brass vases dotted the

walls. Philodendrons dangled over the shiny metal rims, their waxy green leaves creeping halfway to the floor. In between the vegetation were a variety of elegantly designed antique mirrors and a few accent tables, along with two doors on the left, two on the right and one straight ahead.

A man could get lightheaded with this bounty. "Are all of those bedrooms?"

"Four are. One's a hallway bath. Only my bedroom's in use," she added quickly, as though she'd guessed his intent in asking. "Materials for my business take up the other rooms, including the one behind us." She held his hand in both of hers and backed down the hall, stopping beneath one of the tulip light fixtures, which shone over the largest mirror. "There." She gestured to it with her head.

He allowed himself a moment to appreciate her nudity and jewelry. The diamonds swayed beneath her navel, pointing the way to heaven. In a sec, he told himself, soon as he rested a bit. Glancing over, he took in the mirror—a heavy-looking sucker with a partially naked woman on the right side, her arms arranged as if she were holding it. Her bare breasts tilted upward. The lavender cloth draping her hips flowed past her legs. "Nice. But you're definitely better looking."

Jasmine pushed her shoulder into his and laughed, a delightfully youthful sound, so different from her former gloom.

"Don't look at the nymph," she said. "Look at you." Her voice fell to a whisper. "You're awesome, just like I said."

Brows lifted, he glimpsed at his tangled hair, beard-shadowed cheeks, and barely opened eyes. He'd seen more attractive cadaver shots. "Damn. You're absolutely right." He blew himself a kiss.

She laughed recklessly and backed up even faster, pulling him to the end of the hall.

The door opened on a large, high-ceilinged room. Her bed, a queen-sized four-poster in a dark wood, possibly cherry, was dressed in frilly white linens and bathed in moonlight. Three windows stretched from the floor to the ceiling. Each wore gauzy white tie-back curtains. On either side of the bed were nightstands with no end of figurines, comparable to the mirror nymph, and brass lamps with shades constructed of pink seashells. To the left stood a large cheval mirror, positioned so it captured what went on in the bed. To the right, a bulky dresser dominated, presumably another antique like the bed and the downstairs desk. Larger figurines stood atop it. Hanging from the second handle, on a padded hangar, was an old-fashioned corset. The moon revealed its blue-green brocade and silvery laces.

Jasmine released his hand and went to the dresser, her fingers moving down the garment's crisscrossed front. "I'll wear it for you when I come back." She smiled seductively and crooked her forefinger, gesturing him closer.

He approached slowly, and not only because of his two-orgasm exhaustion. She'd given him far too much to look at. His attention seesawed between her breasts, mound, her incredible body jewelry and the decadent corset. He imagined her lush body confined by it, her full breasts plumped and threatening to spill over the top, the cloth kissing the flare of her hips, the front dipping to her cleft. "Put it on now."

"After your nap." She settled her palm on the side of his face, offering a month's worth of comfort with the simple endearment. His lids sank. She ran her thumb over his lashes, ruffling them. Her throaty voice enchanted. "You can lace me into it. We'll pretend I'm your sex slave, obedient to your will. At your command, I'll feed you. When you're full, you'll take me as a master should, using every part of my body for your pleasure. How does that sound?"

His heart pumped brutally, driving most of his blood toward his weary cock. He parted his lids. "Are you serious?"

"You don't like to play games in bed?"

"Oh, honey, that's not a game. That's—" He stopped, unable to find the appropriate word or any word. If she kept amazing him like this, he wasn't certain what he'd do.

Yeah, right, his thoughts mocked. He'd play any game she liked. If she wanted him to be Napoleon, he'd oblige.

She brought back her hand. "I'm sorry." Her voice vibrated with shame. "It's too weird. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"I'm glad you did. Believe me, it's not weird. It's just more than most guys can ever hope for or even fantasize about."

"You mean it?"

"Let's get rid of this—" he lifted his Glock. "—and I'll show you."

"No. You need to rest first, then I'm going to feed you, and then we'll play." She pointed at the far wall, painted the same shade of pink as her seashell lampshades. Ferns hung from white wicker planters on either side of two closed doors. "The bath's on the left. If you don't mind, your gun will be perfectly safe on the counter in there. I'd feel better if it wasn't in the same room with us."

"I'll put it there now."

"I will." Her hands covered the leather holster. "Go on, the bed's waiting. Relax. Let me serve you."

He saw no reason to object and released his weapon. She held it as she would a dead rat and went to the bath, flicking on the light. Bottles rocked on the counter as she moved them aside, gingerly placing his gun where they had stood. Next, she lifted a slender container of pink liquid and spritzed it on her wrists, nipples and slender column of throat.

His cock flicked, wanting to join her. The rest of his body pleaded for rest. Backing toward the bed, his calves bumped the mattress. He draped his watch over the largest figurine and pulled down the lacy comforter to fall upon sweet-smelling linens, soft as kitten fur. Lured by the texture, he pressed his face into the pillow. Its lack of resilience told him it contained goose down, not foam. Seriously nice.

Arms around the pillow, Mike allowed himself this momentary weakness. As Jasmine had said, he'd nap and she'd feed him, after which they'd indulge in some slightly kinky bed games.

What could be better?

She watched him from the bath. The faint rise and fall of his shoulders told her he slept. Jasmine whimpered at how beautiful he was—firm muscles on a large frame—intimidating in size, unusually kind in nature. The type of man she'd always longed for. One who wouldn't have glanced at her before the curse. She'd been too ordinary, dull, reserved. Men who asked her out did so because they couldn't attract the attention of a woman as exquisite as Desiree. Or, if they were handsome like Connor Rolands, they wanted an adoring fan so they could talk about themselves.

Mike seemed oblivious to his obvious appeal. If anything, he appeared embarrassed by her compliments. She'd never known a more down-to-earth and empathetic man. How she enjoyed his consoling embrace and teasing him even as he teased her in return. How she liked just being with him. He seemed to like her too—what little he knew about the person she really was—though his feelings would quickly turn to hate if she went through with the plan.

She rolled her forehead over the door's edge. If only she could relax long enough to sleep, to think. The curse wouldn't allow it. At first, she'd been edgy after six hours of rest. Now, she was lucky to manage four hours a night. How long could this go on?

You will want as I want.

Teeth clenched, her fingers gripped the wood. The tenuous peace Mike's lovemaking had provided was already gone. Fearful of her building obsession, she slipped on her silk robe and left the bath.

Halfway across the room, she looked back. Mike's hair fanned over the pillow, sable against all the white. The moon tinted his skin a lighter brown. Wanting to protect him, even though she'd done everything possible to bring him here, she went to the bed and pulled the top sheet over his slumbering body.

It didn't disturb him at all.

Her hand stilled above his head. Smoothing his hair was an indulgence she didn't deserve and couldn't chance, not with the others not knowing what had been going on.

Jasmine left the room and turned to Ben, not surprised to find him waiting in the hall. The overhead light brightened his dark blond hair, cut short and worn spiky like a rocker. It reminded her of Lily's hairstyle. They were both twenty-six, their friendship and artistic talents bringing Ben here. Lily painted the fabrics Violet used for her designs. Ben illustrated their catalogues. Like Mike, Jasmine was the only one in the group without a creative bent. She served as business manager, running the show.

Ben took charge now. His fingers curled around her wrist, giving her no chance to escape as he led her down the hall to his room. His art nouveau sketches papered the walls. The acrid bite of inks, paints and turpentine lingered from today's work. He leaned one shoulder on the closed door, hurt and anxiety evident in his pale blue eyes, his voice low so only she could hear.

"You all right?"

She knew he'd heard them in the hall and probably watched from the stairway as she'd knelt in front of Mike, taking him in her mouth. Being observed during an intimacy bothered the woman she'd been, bringing warmth to her chest and throat, even as it hardly fazed the woman she'd become. She spoke in an equally subdued voice. "I'm fine."

"How can you be? Jas, that bastard has a gun and is obviously—"

"No." Her fingers went to his lips to stop his quiet outburst. "Don't call him that. He's a good man. Better than I deserve."

Ben's blond brows rose to his hairline. He moved her hand away. "You've got to be kidding. You picked him up at a club."

Laughter gurgled at the base of her throat, along with a sigh. "He wasn't born there, Ben. He used to be a US Marshal."

"So I heard while you two were downstairs. You actually believe that?"

"Why would he lie?"

The muscles in his neck corded with exasperation. "Did you tell him the truth about why you wanted him here tonight?"

Tears stung her eyes. "I wanted to and I should have. I believe him, Ben. Even if I didn't, I don't care what he did for a living or where he works now. He's a good man."

"Like Travis, the last guy you trusted?"

"Ben, please." She didn't want to discuss this and wound him further. "Get out of my way."

Shoulders to the door, he hooked his thumbs in the front pockets of his paint-speckled shorts. "If you'd only give me a chance, I could take care of you."

"No, you couldn't." She kept her voice kind but firm. "You know the curse doesn't work that way."

He began to argue, though it seemed more like a plea. She interrupted, "I have to go downstairs. Lily and Violet might be waiting for me."

"Fine." He sounded like a petulant little boy. "But I won't let him hurt you."

"I know."

Stepping aside, he still blocked her from leaving, his arm on the door just like Mike's had been downstairs. As if mimicking the man would make him more attractive to her. Mouth to her ear, he asked, "I heard you say you were going to put his gun on the bathroom counter. Did you?"

A knot tightened in the middle of her chest. If Ben took the gun and Mike saw him—oh God, if they fought and anything happened to Mike... She whispered, "Don't do anything foolish." Pulling back, she lifted her face. "No matter how bad it gets tonight, I can't go through with this. I'm going to let him leave in the morning. You'll never see him again."

Conflicting emotions passed over his face. Gratitude that Mike would be gone shortly. Disbelief that it would actually happen.

"Promise me you won't take the gun," she said.

He lowered his head.

"I want your word!"

"Okay, okay, you have it."

She hurried from his room and stopped in the hall, not certain what to do. If she took Mike's gun from the bath and put it in her dresser, he might wake up and question why she suddenly wanted it in the same room. If she put it in her downstairs safe and he noticed it missing, what could she possibly say? Even if he believed her explanation, he might get pissed and leave.

Her teeth worried her bottom lip. She had no choice except to trust Ben, a truly sweet guy who'd never lied to her. Surely, he wouldn't do anything stupid now.

A quick peek at Mike showed her he hadn't budged. On the stairs, she noticed again what he'd pointed out. The paintings didn't fit the spaces where her family's pictures had been. She'd taken them down so the man she chose wouldn't know too much about her, especially that she had sisters who might share the blame if things went badly tonight.

They couldn't. She wouldn't allow it. Come daybreak, she'd insist on Mike leaving. An argument would drive him from here to safety. She'd make it so bad he'd want to stay away, leaving her to the next men and the next.

Exhausted at the thought, she went into the downstairs hallway, her head turning to Mike's clothes, his jeans pockets turned inside out. Unless Ben had gone through Mike's things, it meant her sisters were home.

She found them in the kitchen. Violet had her right hip to the sink and Mike's wallet in her hands. She flipped through the clear plastic holders, pausing to read the contents in the available light. Lily sat at the table, her fingers flying over his cell phone's keypad. Jasmine guessed she was searching the numbers he'd stored.

"Stop that," she said in a low voice to Lily, then turned to Violet. "Don't go through his stuff."

The younger Dantes exchanged a look. As one, they went to Jasmine and put their arms around her, motherly and protective. Their devotion overwhelmed, bringing a quick sob to Jasmine's throat.

Immediately, Lily spoke in a hard tone. "What did he do to you? Where's the fucker now?"

"Asleep in my bed. And he didn't do anything to me." Her voice bounced. "He's not the threat, I am." "Is it getting worse?" Violet asked.

"Of course it is," Lily hissed, combative as always. "Where have you been? Just look at her."

"Guys, please, don't argue." Jasmine continued on a sigh. "Put his things back where you found them. Take the company card and get a hotel room for the night."

"No." The answer came from both sisters. Lily continued, "What do you mean for the night? What about tomorrow, and the next day, and the next? We're not leaving you alone with him for a minute, much less the time it takes us to find Desiree."

"I won't be alone. Ben's here." Jasmine freed herself from their arms and went to the refrigerator, keeping her voice low. "And you won't be gone longer than tonight. Tomorrow morning, I'm making certain he leaves."

"Why?" Violet asked, joining Jasmine at the fridge. "Are you afraid of him? Who is he, exactly? I found a concealed gun permit in his wallet."

"No shit?" Lily asked.

Jasmine spoke to Violet. "His name's Mike Stearn, as you probably already know from reading his driver's license." She turned to Lily. "He's a former US Marshal."

The girl came to her. "I was worried he might be a biker or a former gangbanger, but he's a freaking cop?"

"Consultant," Jasmine corrected. "Not that it matters. He's leaving in the morning."

Violet spoke up. "But what happens then?"

Jasmine handed her the platter of ham. "I don't know. I'd rather not think about it."

"You have to." Lily frowned at the Tupperware Jasmine gave her. "What's this for?"

"I promised Mike a snack."

Her eyes brightened. "We still have the Ambien your doctor prescribed. We can put it or the Sominex into his food and make certain he stays asleep so we can talk about this and decide what to do."

Jasmine didn't know whether to laugh or cry at her youngest sister's ridiculous idea. "No drugs, not even over-the-counter." She took plates and silverware from the cupboard. "I've decided to let him go."

"Screw that." Lily tossed the plastic bowls on the table. They hit the glass top with a sharp whack and wobbled like slowly spinning quarters.

"She's right," Violet said, her tone far more reasonable than Lily's and sounding so much like their late mother. She put the ham on the table and inclined her head to the bank of windows. "You'll be out there within a couple of hours, if you don't keep him here. You'll be drawn to God-knows-who. What you went through with Travis could happen again."

"Jas." Lily's normally blunt voice entreated. "Have you forgotten how close you came to being hurt?"

Her gaze darted from sister to sister. The fear in their eyes matched hers as the night with Travis returned. She recalled the twenty-four-hour convenience store where they'd met and how she'd roamed the aisles, unsteady from desire, searching for something, anything to calm her nerves, to help her sleep. Frantic, Violet had called her cell phone. She and Lily begged Jasmine to come home.

She hadn't. Turning the corner near the sleep aids, she'd bumped into Travis, a tall man her age. Hand flying out, he'd caught her arm as she stumbled backwards into a display of toothpaste. Her gaze met his

and the room shifted. Interest rolled through her, heightening her senses. She felt male strength in his callused fingers and saw fire in his chocolate eyes.

They flirted shamelessly, exchanging first names only, speaking with the ease of strangers or impending lovers. For reasons she didn't understand, Jasmine told him she just moved to the Keys from the Midwest and hoped to have some fun. Revealing nothing truly personal, he offered to show her around, starting with the body-piercing shop he owned, a block away.

Remembering her cell phone, she told her sisters she was going to get her navel pierced, ending the call on their imploring voices. Her finger traced the name of Travis's business printed on his tee and the five gold studs he wore in his right ear. In a kittenish voice, she asked, "Do you take late appointments at your place?"

Within fifteen minutes, he had her stretched out on his vinyl table, her cotton shorts lowered to bare her navel. He pierced her flesh with metal and quieted her gasp with his mouth, his beard-roughened face scouring her cheeks. Her fingers groomed his wild chestnut locks as she purred, "What now?"

"Let's have some fun."

Racing forms and body jewelry catalogues littered his worn sofa in the small apartment above his shop. Remnants of a fast-food lunch, or maybe breakfast, remained on the counter.

Unceasing lust blinded her to the clutter and the edge in his voice as he ordered her to undress.

Staring at the dark fur between her legs, he asked, "You like being tied up, Jasmine?"

His question sparked her first taste of panic. She wasn't certain how he'd react if she said no. Once he'd lashed her ankles and wrists to his bed, he brought out his drug paraphernalia, taking a hit of crystal meth, then offering it to her with a chilling smile.

She refused. Determined, he pressured her to try it. She started to sob, telling him she wanted to leave. It triggered his rage. Unbuckling his belt, he pulled it from his jeans, saying he didn't like a tease. The belt sliced through the air, sounding like a shriek.

Primal terror stole her ability to cry out. Even if she had, no one would hear her. The surrounding businesses had closed for the night...his was the only apartment. The bed shook with her futile struggle to get free. At last, she found her voice and screamed. Seconds later, something crashed into his front door.

"Jas!" Lily's voice hollered, followed by Violet's and Ben's.

In an area overcrowded with body-piercing shops, her sisters had located the one nearest the convenience store and saw her car parked outside. Ben used his baseball bat to beat on Travis's door, leaving several gashes in the wood. Travis's hostility turned to self-preservation. He took off through the back way, leading down to his business. Her sisters and Ben brought her home. Safe, desire ate at her.

Jasmine trembled at the memory and what she'd learned later. Travis had served time for brutalizing a girlfriend. Whimpering, she welcomed Violet's gentle hug.

Lily insisted, "We've come this far. Mike Stearn is not going anywhere. We have to keep him here. It's the only way. At least until we find Desiree."

Jasmine dug her nails into her palms. "We're never going to find her. She didn't leave with the Wanderers."

"So that means she's still in the Keys," Violet said. "She's probably looking for Connor."

Lily snorted. "Did you ever think his disappearance might be because Desiree killed him after seeing him with Jas?"

Jasmine answered before Violet could. "She wanted to punish me, not Connor. She blames me for seducing him or luring him or whatever went through her mind. He's the only man she wants. I don't think she'd harm him."

"I agree," Violet said. "She's still in the city looking for him. All we need is time to locate her, beg or force her to lift this damn thing, and keep you safe in the interim. That means here with Mike."

No. Jasmine argued, "We're talking about a man's freedom."

"We're talking about your life." Violet eased her hold and leaned back. "As far as I'm concerned, nothing's more important than that. Right, Lil?"

"Fucking A." Lily shoved her fingers through her short hair. "Besides, what will he have to complain about? So he'll be stuck in a soft bed with a beautiful woman and room service for a little while. We're hardly talking Attica. And even if he doesn't like it, what's he going to do? Complain to the cops? Think they'll believe Jas locked up the big, bad former US Marshal?"

It was still kidnapping. Jasmine pressed her fingers to her forehead, wanting to reason with them, but could not. A new wave of lust, ferocious and frightening, seized her.

## Chapter Five

In his dream, Mike heard the Sirens' voices, young and filled with tension, speaking not singing. Didn't make sense. What were they talking about? He listened and caught the sound of water dripping. On the boulders where the Sirens lured the doomed sailors?

He tried to reason it out. The voices fell quiet, though the water did not. Its *plunk-plunk-plunk* made him think of his Glock. Why? And then he knew. Jasmine had put his pistol on the bath's counter. Her leaking faucet must be making the noise he heard. The last of his dream vanished like warm vapor on a frigid day. Rolling over, he sensed he wasn't alone.

His lids made it halfway up on his second try. Jasmine stood at the side of the bed, washed in moonlight, watching him. The edges of her shimmery pink robe parted, showing her bejeweled navel and moist cleft. Carnal greed flashed in her eyes, deeper than before, more intense.

Her earlier promise about sex games came to mind. It thickened his cock and sharpened his voice. "Get the corset."

An immodest smile tilted the corners of her mouth. She padded to the dresser, her robe rippling over her shapely form. The sight pulled him to a sitting position. He inhaled deeply and caught the mouthwatering aroma of smoked meat. She'd placed a tray on the right nightstand, crowding her sexy figurines. He saw two plates heaped with equal portions of steaming ham, potato salad, coleslaw, containers of amber-colored sauce, and squares of cake. Next to it stood a pair of Coronas, the glass bottles beaded with moisture. His stomach growled noisily.

Corset in hand, she turned. "You're starving. I made you wait too long. Please forgive me."

Her voice had a drugged, faraway quality about it, as though she'd already immersed herself in their game of master and slave.

Fine with him. "Come here," he ordered.

She did, running her fingers down his chest. His pecs jumped, loving it. She murmured, "Do you want me to feed you now?"

"The food can wait. I want you in the corset."

She dropped it on his lap and depressed the start button on her wall-mounted CD player. A popular Eagles tune from the nineties filled the room. Her silk robe billowed away from her body and drifted to the floor. She unhooked her belly chain and diamonds, dropping the jewelry between a pair of statues. The metal jingles died quickly. Her fragrance did not. She smelled of sex, musky sweet.

Fully alert, Mike grabbed the corset and left the mattress, his impatient cock brushing her glutted vulva. "Raise your arms so I can put this on you."

The pose flaunted her generous breasts. His hands shook, antsy to lift them and know their precious weight. He resisted, leaving the delight for later. For now, he navigated the corset past her elbows and head to her torso.

Hands beneath her hair, she held it above her shoulders and turned. "Lace me tight. Trap me so I can't get free." Her voice, a blend of hunger and submission, offered what no lucid man could refuse.

The cheval mirror reflected their bodies. From this angle, her rounded cheeks hid his rod as though he were inside of her, his cock planted to its base. A pleasant agony spun through him, grating his voice. "Don't worry, you won't get free." He looped the laces around his hands and pulled carefully. He wanted her breathless from him, not this damned thing.

Her chin pointed to the ceiling, exposing her throat. Ass jutted out, she begged, "Tighter, please."

In the mirror, he saw the fabric drawn snugly across her breasts, the swells close to spilling out just as he'd imagined. "No. This is good enough." She'd said she wanted a master and he had no intention of disappointing or harming her. He tied the laces in a loose bow and turned her to face him.

She sought his mouth. He made her wait, his lips to her throat, tasting a mixture of perspiration and perfume as he imprisoned her wrists behind her back.

Although she mewled contentedly, she rotated her shoulders and fisted her fingers, trying to get free.

Puzzled, he whispered in her ear. "What's wrong?"

"I have to touch you."

Her hair cushioned his face, smelling as good as the rest of her, compromising his ability to think. He gave himself a moment to collect himself. "Not until I'm through with you."

"But—"

Her protest stopped with his feverish kiss, the kind he'd given his first girlfriend in middle school. All passion, no finesse. Jasmine didn't seem to mind. She sucked his tongue as if she'd never tasted anything better.

For her kindness, he slowed down, savoring her mouth as he would a perfectly prepared steak, letting flavors, scents, textures govern. She melted into him, the frenzy gone, replaced by something more substantial, though he couldn't put a name to it.

Ready to go further, he ended their kiss and opened his eyes for an unguarded view of what he'd accomplished with her. She seemed at peace and very tired. Before he could comment on the fatigue, her eyes opened. In them, he saw mounting heat, which contradicted the apparent sleepiness. To make certain, he asked, "You want to rest for a bit?"

"I want to touch you." She tried to turn her wrists in his hands.

Smiling, he increased his grip. "You damn sure will. First though, I'm going to touch, lick and fuck every part of you."

"Whatever you want."

Her eager obedience did amazing things to the package between his legs. With one arm around her waist and the other behind her knees, he lifted her into his arms. Her head fell back, presenting the creamy expanse of her chest and neck. Mesmerized, he dropped his head to her cleavage, womanly and magical. His tongue dipped into the narrow channel. Jasmine's hand tightened on his shoulder, her nails raked his skin.

A rush of air escaped his lungs, leaving him panting for more. He steadied his knee on the bed and deposited her in the middle of the mattress, her feet near the headboard. Her arms left him and came to rest above her shoulders. Sinuously, she unfolded her body, spreading it over the frosty linens, prepared to give him whatever he wanted.

His lungs burned. Moonlight slanted across her corset, its blue-green sheen no match for the glittery laces or the woman it contained. Clouds of dark hair flowed away from her face, giving her an untamed appeal. He imagined her as a modern-day Siren, reclined on a massive rock in a volatile ocean, spray shooting upward, her hooded eyes and sultry call ensnaring mere mortals and gods.

"Don't move," he said, his voice pitched so low it scraped his throat. He went to her robe, pulled the sash from its loops and crawled across the bed to her.

Her eyes flicked to the silk tie.

He assured, "I won't hurt you."

Her attention returned to him. Something far greater than trust and akin to rapture filled her voice. "I know."

He draped his body over hers. His belly twitched at the bumpiness of the corset's laces, though he soon forgot the discomfort as their mouths nearly touched. Her uneven breaths tickled his upper lip. A pulse beat in his groin, bringing his cock to attention. It nudged her moisture. "Give me your hands."

They went to his back, her nails scratching him lightly, while she kissed him fucking hard.

His thoughts scattered with her assault. He'd been with passionate women before, though even they hadn't behaved like this. He wanted to believe he turned Jasmine on as no other guy had. You're awesome, she'd said. No, his mind amended, she'd said he was freaking awesome and kept proving it. Damn. Remembering the sash, he leaned on one elbow and reached behind to cover her hand. She gave it up though her tongue stayed in his mouth, swishing and wiggling to capture every contour and taste.

It took him three tries to wrap the silk around her wrist. He kept forgetting it as she coaxed his tongue into her mouth and sucked him to distraction. With a grunt, he shifted to his other elbow, took her free hand and finished their kiss.

Tattered breaths pumped from her. He felt her gaze on him as he tied her wrists to the tall footboard's left post. A simple job, though he made more of it than need be, not wanting to hurry, preferring to build her excitement as she waited for his next move.

She trembled at his fingers running down the inside of her arm. He gave the ultra-sensitive spot a series of wet kisses, certain no other guy had thought to do it, which made this virgin territory. Pleasured sounds rose from her core, unlike any he'd ever heard. He grinned, feeling damn near smug at his erotic skills.

Not wanting to neglect her breasts, his hand travelled there, running just beneath the corset's top. She made a noise halfway between approval and a demand for more. He kissed her smooth, sweetly scented armpit.

She breathed out her request. "Lower."

Pretending not to understand, he made his voice firm. The master she wanted. "I'll get to your breasts in time."

"No." Her tongue darted out, journeying the length of her lips. Lids closed, her brows drew together. "I meant my clit."

He put the heel of his hand on the edge of her mound. His fingers curled over the side into her slippery folds. "Here?"

Her hips bucked. "God, yes."

"You want me to eat you?"

A shiver passed through her. She whispered, "Yes."

"In any way I want." He made it a statement, not a question.

"Yes—what?" The confusion in her voice showed in her opening eyes. "What other way is there than with your mouth?"

He looked over at the tray of food, then back at her. "I'm thinking the sauce is going to taste good on you."

The ashen light betrayed her surprise, hastened away by her increasingly husky voice. "Yes, it will."

He really had her now, betting this was another first for her, just like the kisses on the underside of her arm. His hand glided down her thigh as he gave his next command. "Bend your knees and spread your legs."

She felt, tasted and smelled her arousal, a female essence grown stronger with the curse.

Her wrists twisted the silk binding, her overwhelming need not allowing her to relax or take a full breath. Every second Mike made her wait for his touch was a brutal eternity. Her mind pleaded for him to hurry.

He dipped his long fingers in the honey sauce, testing its flavor. His brows lifted in obvious approval. He sucked his fingertips clean.

A soft rock tune by Lionel Richie wound down. She heard the grandfather clock in her office bonging the hour—two am. Dawn would come before she knew it. Lily's voice rang in her mind: "We have to keep him here. It's the only way."

Mike turned to her, craving in his dark eyes. "Spread your legs farther."

His directive pushed away her sister's voice and the worry over time. Her connection to him deepened. His honor and gentle kindness touched Jasmine in a way she'd never anticipated or experienced with the other men. They'd served a purpose, nothing more. Mike fed her darkest and most hopeless desires. She wanted him to take her in ways no one else had.

He put the linen napkins between her legs and tipped the plastic container, allowing the honey sauce to drip onto her mound.

It wasn't what she expected. She stiffened.

"Shit." He sounded worried and brought back his hand, stopping the flow. "It's not hot. Does it sting?"

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"No." She swallowed. "It's so—so..."
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"What?"

"Wet. It's dripping down me."

He watched, then leaned down and smelled it on her flesh, making her feel even more naked. His head tilted to hers. "Would that be in a good way?"

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"Oh God yeah."
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He guided more of the sauce over her clit and down her swollen folds. Her sharp intake of breath became lost in a mewling moan. He spread his knees against her feet so she couldn't close her legs. His fingers stroked her most intimate areas, coating them fully, preparing them for his mouth.

He started high on her mound, gorging himself, his laps prolonged, lewd. In their wake, he left her skin tingling and wanting.

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"Lower," she begged.
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His thumbs pressed into her inner thighs, drawing the skin tight to display her cunt. Cooled air fell from the ceiling vents. Combined with the clammy sauce, goose pimples rose on her arms and legs. Mike's mouth warmed her again. He drove his tongue all the way into her opening, his lips to her vulva.

Her buttocks clenched at the wondrous indecency of the act. Slick juices poured from her sheath. His tongue retreated, taking a different route, this equally nice. He licked the puffy fold on the right, working his way toward her clit.

"Please," she cried when he stopped suddenly, "lick it."

He moved to the left fold. She yanked on the silk sash, shaking the bed, crazy to get free so she could touch her nub. Although he must have noticed, it didn't sway him. His mouth suckled sluggishly, lingering in the same place for too long.

One pant followed another. Soon, she was breathless, unable to cry out as he caught her off guard and focused on the most exquisite spot. Stunned, she lifted her hips from the bed.

With his mouth clamped securely on her, he wasted no time in tonguing her hard peak as fast and rough as possible.

She found her voice, though not to form words. A gravelly cry had to do, accompanied by a thin wail with the unmistakable ring of satisfaction. The orgasm lasted longer than all the others, wringing everything from her body and mind.

Her hard gasps competed with the music's volume. An interminable amount of time seemed to pass before her heart settled down, though movement remained impossible. She lay sprawled on the bed, limp and glowing with cherished calm.

Mike watched. "You okay?"

She swallowed and nodded.

He winked then rubbed the napkin over his face, cleaning off the sauce.

Finding her voice, Jasmine whispered, "That was wonderful." He'd given her an instant of true peace. A gift she hadn't experienced since angering Desiree. "Thank you."

He offered a devilish grin. "My pleasure. Now turn over."

Her gaze trickled down his body to his weighty sex. His balls had drawn snug to his body. Blood engorged his shaft. He was so hard the crown hovered above the linens, pointing at her.

Enjoying a quiet moment no longer seemed important and not only because of the curse. The real Jasmine wanted them joined. She, more than the woman she'd become, wanted him to fuck her senseless.

He'd left enough slack in the binding so she could roll to her belly and push to her knees.

Given her limbs' lingering heaviness, it took her two tries. Certain her legs were widely apart and her ass lifted, she lowered her head to the mattress and turned her face to the mirror.

Her hair, tangled and damp, clung to her neck. At some point, her left nipple had popped from its prison. Tight and just perfect for his mouth, it skimmed the top of her corset. The angle of her ass invited. When he mounted her, the mirror would provide a flawless view. She wanted to see all of it. "Is this all right?"

He mumbled, "Fuck yeah," and crawled between her legs. His sac and rod, both ready for action, hardly swung with his efforts. On his knees, he brought his hands to her cheeks, gripping their meatiness, spreading them so he could see each entrance.

She imagined him mounting her vaginally then anally, taking what he willed, behaving exactly as she craved. Her insides fluttered at the thought, thickening her voice. "I have condoms."

His head jumped up. He leaned over to see her face.

She explained what she would have once found shocking. "For when you take me anally."

His coppery cheeks flushed.

"Unless you don't want to," she added quickly, surprised by his reaction. "I'll understand if you'd rather not."

"Actually, I'd like it very much." He looked bewildered, then frowned. "I thought you said you didn't have any condoms."

"I said I have an IUD, and I do." Since Desiree cursed her, she'd had to make certain she used every protection. "Is that all right?"

"Oh, honey." His shoulders shook with giddy laughter. "It's so all right, it's fucking great."

"Then please don't make me wait any longer."

His smile caught and faded. Head turned to the mirror, he regarded her reflection as his fingers skimmed her vaginal lips, so dilated they easily pulled away from her cleft, allowing clear entry into the wet passage. He made certain she could see him transferring her moisture to his sex, paying particular attention to the cap.

The rounded knob was darker than the rest of him, the skin pulled so tight she imagined the slit at the top opening like a tiny mouth.

She shuddered the moment it made contact with her body. He prodded her vagina, while his other fingers teased her clit. Her bound hands clawed the linen, fisting around it. The head of his cock moved inside slowly.

Her inner muscles tightened at his drawn-out entry, his size and pace stretching her beyond endurance. He made her accept it, welcome it, long for it as he pushed a bit and paused, stroked for a second then stopped, repeating the actions over endless seconds, his shaft still not fully within, her nub aching.

Another song ended. A new one began, its cords plaintive, mirroring her torment.

He increased it. His hand left his cock and went to her breast. He amused himself with her freed nipple, tugging and rolling it between his thumb and forefinger as his other hand played with her clit.

His rod continued to penetrate.

Jasmine's attention swung from sensation to sensation, to what he did to her cunt, her clit, her breast and back again. Her teeth sank into the comforter, biting it to silence her cries as his body finally touched hers, his sex fully contained, his balls snuggled to her ass.

Her vaginal walls trembled around him. He responded by flexing his cock, making her accommodate him even more. She had no choice, wanted none, braving whatever he chose to do.

His hands flicked her pleasure zone and ran over her nipple. He backed out of her, releasing his shaft but not the head. It remained inside. It plundered as he thrust hard and fast with unbending male lust. His mouth fell open on a feral cry, the same as hers. Head reeling, she watched his face in the mirror, his features scrunching as he pumped again, his pace increased, though not swift enough to end this. She pushed her body into his to hurry him along. He slowed even more, demanding she bear this hardship, to suffer helplessly.

Her lids slid down. Sweat coated her neck and shoulders. The air-conditioning's cool breath dried them. She shivered and moaned at his solid plunge followed by rapid pumps. During it, his fingers flew over her nipple and clit. Her mind screamed no, she couldn't tolerate much more. Her body encouraged and hailed it.

A bellow signaled his climax, drowning out the music and her lusty wail.

Her pussy quivered, keeping him inside. Eyes closed, he slumped over her too quickly, his chin hitting her shoulder. "Damn." He caught another breath. "Sorry."

She contracted her muscles, squeezing his awesome cock as hard as she could, an embrace to show her forgiveness.

He smiled. His hand grazed her breast, missed the nipple and fell to the bed. "You still okay?"

For once she didn't lie. "Tired and hungry. How about you?"

"I could stand to eat."

She smiled at his refusal to admit weariness, figuring the male in him wouldn't allow it, with the former US Marshal in full agreement. Her lungs filled with air, eager for a steadying breath. "I'll feed you."

"No. You're tired. I'll take care of you."

"Are you always this sweet?"

"Practical. In a little while, I want you ready for more."

With her hands unbound and two pillows behind her, Jasmine parted her lips to the sliver of ham Mike held. He eased it inside her mouth. Once she'd chewed and swallowed, he presented her with his fingers, wet with honey sauce. Dutifully, she licked each digit clean, dawdling over his long forefinger, pulling it into her throat until her lips touched the pad at its base.

He emptied his lungs in a serene sigh. "I like how you eat."

She spit him out on a laugh. "I have nothing on you."

"True." Pride brightened his drowsy features. He spooned potato salad into her mouth, licking away the mayo on her upper lip. "This is damned good."

"What? The food or my lips?"

"The food on your lips."

Laughing, she slapped his arm.

He offered her another spoonful, smiling as she accepted it. "Do you make stuff like this every night?"

She and her sisters took turns. Her shoulders lifted. "About two or three times a week." She fingered a bit of potato from the side of her mouth, liking the way he licked it off her finger. "There's nothing like home cooking."

"If it's like this, I'd have to agree." He scooped more salad on the spoon. Once she'd tongued it into her mouth, he licked the utensil clean.

"You should eat," she said, talking around the food in her mouth. "I'll feed you."

"In a sec." He laid the spoon on the tray and looked at her. "Tell me about you."

Her chews slowed. What did he want to know now? Somehow, she got the food down, though traces of it gurgled in her throat. "Can you hand me a beer?"

He passed a Corona to her, watching, waiting for her history.

She gulped a mouthful of the brew. Her hand flew to her mouth to cover her burp. "Excuse me."

"Not a problem. Want me to take that?" He reached for the bottle.

"I'll keep it." She put the chilled glass on her thigh intentionally, wanting it to make her shiver. If her voice shook, she hoped he'd think it was from this and not fear. "I thought I did tell you about me. But if you want a recap: I live here. I own a dress design business with the bulk of it being bridal gowns. They pay the best what with the lace and beadwork. My parents have been gone for too long, because of a stupid, senseless accident. And I'm alone. What else is there to tell?"

He dropped to the mattress, his head propped up with his hand, his steady gaze assessing her. "When you first approached me at the bar, your behavior didn't quite match your sexy outfit."

Her heart lurched. Had he seen her real personality at the Blue Bliss? Would he notice her worry now? If he did and persisted in his questioning, she'd have to start an argument and force him to leave. What other choice would she have? She couldn't tell him the truth. With no other options, she pretended not to understand his comment. "Even after buying you a drink you didn't think I was interested?"

"I knew you were. But you also seemed very afraid."

Her nails dug into the sheets. The music changed, the new selection a tune by Steely Dan. Her mind tried to formulate a response he'd accept. Thankfully, it came. She tried to sound embarrassed. "Despite sending you a beer, I was afraid you'd tell me to get lost. As awesome as you admittedly are, you must have been rejected at least once in your life, right?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

"I'm not saying it was your fault. Whoever turned you down had to have had poor eyesight. Maybe she was a lesbian."

He smiled briefly. "It wasn't worry over rejection I saw. It looked more like fear of what you were doing and where it might lead."

"I told you in the alley, I had a bad experience with a guy."

"Your boyfriend, you said. Did you pick him up at a club?"

She lied. "A mutual friend introduced us. So much for playing it safe."

He adjusted his weight, finding a more comfortable position. "I can understand the experience souring you on your friend's choice in men, but that doesn't mean hanging out at clubs is the way to go."

She looked past him, praying he'd drop the subject. "Other women do it all the time. So do guys."

"Yeah, I know." He sighed loudly. "But you don't seem to be the kind of woman to bring strangers home with you. Is tonight your first time?"

Unnerved by how close he'd come to the truth, she found it impossible to answer or to get angry with him. If he left now, she'd be in even worse condition. Already the hellish yearning had returned. "What if I said it wasn't?"

"I'd guess you were lying. Tonight should be your last in the club scene. Hooking up with guys you don't know is dangerous."

Her head swung to him. "Have you hurt me?"

His brows lifted in surprise. "Of course not. Nor would I."

"I knew that all along."

His laugh sounded tired and perplexed. "Although I'm flattered, how could you come to that conclusion without really knowing me?"

She transferred the bottle from her thigh to the mattress and for the first time tonight decided to be honest. "In the club, when I asked if you'd been shot I saw the pain on your face." Her gaze dropped to his scar. "Something terrible happened—and I know, it's none of my business. But the look in your eyes told me you're a good man."

His frown and features went slack, saying he hadn't a clue how to respond.

She cradled his face, running her thumb over his high cheekbone, wishing the calm had lasted, only it had not. "I'm still very hungry, how about you?"

She fed him most of the ham, advising that he'd need the protein for strength. He gave her both pieces of cake, informing that she'd need the carbs and sugar to keep up with him. Together they devoured the last of the potato salad and coleslaw.

Revived by the feast, he put the tray on the floor and crept across the bed to her, his hair skipping over his shoulders. "Where are your condoms?"

"They're not mine, they're yours. I'm giving them to you."

He laughed. "Then tell me where they are."

"I'll get them." She pulled a string of the shiny packets from the top drawer of the nightstand and draped them over his shoulders like a Hawaiian lei. "They're the super big ones. I hope they won't be too small for you."

He looked down. "They may be. Ordinarily, I have to have mine custom made."

Giggling, she tumbled backwards to the bed.

"On your knees," he ordered, separating the first packet from the string.

She complied eagerly, turning her head so she could watch him. He used his teeth to rip the packet open. The others tapped his chest. He pulled them off, flinging them to the floor. His eagle tattoo rippled. Lust flooded her.

He separated the condom from the packet and worked the silky latex over the crown.

His fingers worked feverishly until the rubber was halfway up his erect shaft. There his hand stalled.

She laughed. "Come on, don't tell me it really doesn't fit."

Mike didn't comment. Head lifting, his gaze swept the room to end at the closed bedroom door.

Jasmine's mouth went dry. Had he heard her sisters or Ben moving down the hall? How could he? She'd deliberately put on the music to drown out the other sounds. "What is it?"

He stared at the door. "Nothing."

Then why was he acting like this? Did he wonder why she hadn't left the door open when she supposedly lived here alone? Had the oddity of it suddenly occurred to him? "If you heard something, it's just the floors and walls settling. The house is old. It makes a lot of weird noises. That's why I close the bedroom door at night. It makes me feel safer."

"I didn't hear anything." He shook his head. "I can't explain it, but I had the strangest sensation of being watched."

Her heart pounded. She stopped herself from glancing at the bath. On the left side of the counter, where she'd put his gun, a door led into Violet's bedroom. Had Ben used it to come inside?

Earlier, he'd watched her and Mike from the stairway. That alone told her he was surely in her bath now. She imagined him kneeling behind the partially opened door, using the space between it and the jamb to watch what went on in this bed, to make certain she wasn't injured.

She sensed his gaze moving over her partial nudity. The unseemliness of his spying would have stopped the old Jasmine. Tonight, her accelerating passion knew no boundaries.

She spoke up. "That's because you are being watched."

Mike's head turned to her.

"By me," she added and smiled. "I can't help it."

He unrolled the condom to his pubic hair, his face lowered to hide his grin. "I really enjoy your BS."

"It's the truth. And if you do enjoy it, show me how much."

Challenged, he moved his thumbs down the furrow between her cheeks, though uncertainty colored his voice. "Have you done this before?"

The linens muffled her answer. "Not with you."

"Well yeah, I know." His words bounced on his laugh. "I meant—that is..."

"Don't worry about me. I'm certainly not. I know you won't hurt me." She wiggled her butt.

Enthusiasm overcame his hesitation faster than a swallow follows a drink. "If you feel any discomfort, tell me and I'll stop."

"You won't have to." She proved it by consciously relaxing her body even as longing coiled in her mind, taking hold of her thoughts, banishing anything unrelated to this moment.

His girth made no exceptions for her narrow entry. She embraced the pressure and the act, subservience magnifying her urges. He moved with care and insistence, certain not to forget her pleasure. Leaning down, he rubbed her clit. Her blissful exhale of air matched his as the last of him slid inside.

Resolute, he kept his pace measured and slow in her anus and on her nub. Tension welled up, coursing from her genitals to the back of her neck.

His jagged breaths deepened his voice. "Doing okay?"

"Yes, don't stop."

He did not. His actions were both selfish and giving. The mattress vibrated with his vigorous pumps, the bed's legs tapping the wood. Her pussy got the full attention of his gifted fingers.

Thrashing her head, Jasmine broke and came, shaking uncontrollably, not able to vocalize. Her body rocked beneath his relentless moves. His unending massage caused her to peak twice more, which ushered in his payoff. He made loud, uninhibited sounds with no thought as to niceties.

On an indistinct comment, he wrapped his arm around her waist and tipped them so they'd topple over. The bed bounced with their fall, rattling the frame. His punchy gasps whistled past her ear. "That was—was..."

"Awesome?"

He grunted. His fingers held hers in a loose fist, his arm's weight pressing on her hipbone. Before she finished her yawn, she knew he'd fallen asleep. For the next few hours, at least, there'd be no more questions and he would belong to her.

Happiness bubbled up unexpectedly, as it had when she was a little girl and received a present she hadn't expected. Drawing his arm more tightly around her waist, she allowed his weight, scent, and the music to lull. Remarkably, her thoughts remained quiet. The insides of her lids got gluey, encouraging them to stay shut. A feeling of weightlessness soothed. Not realizing it, she fell asleep.

In her dream she was back at Tempos, the restaurant Connor Rolands had taken her to on their only date. Dishes clattered in the kitchen, male servers in black bowties and vests hustled between tables set with fine china and sparkling silverware. The scent of bacon-wrapped filets made her stomach rumble, though no one came by to fill her empty plate. Had she told them she was too nervous to eat? First dates always affected her appetite.

"Try this," Connor said, offering her a glass of wine.

She smiled across the table at him, liking how his white shirt and beige linen jacket enhanced his movie-star looks. He reminded her of a young George Clooney or Jon Hamm from that sexy TV show *Mad Men*. Female patrons deliberately passed their table, whispering to each other about how hot Connor was. Jasmine smiled and tried to voice her agreement. The restaurant's music, an eclectic mixture of old hits, was too loud for them to hear her.

Jasmine stopped one of the servers to ask if he could turn down the volume on the current selection, a song by Whitney Houston. The young man glanced over her head and hurried off, as though something frightened him. Curious, she turned and saw a woman three tables away. Emptiness surrounded the area where she sat. Her hair was the color of champagne, her skin café au lait, her exquisite features a mask of pain. When she opened her eyes, Jasmine saw they were a sheer, unearthly green and focused on Connor.

Jasmine looked and found his chair empty, overturned by his hasty exit. She tried to stop one of the servers to ask where he went. None of them would acknowledge her. When she grabbed the sleeve of the maitre d', he yanked his arm from her and backed away. "Get out of here fast," he said.

Panic gripped her. "Why?"

He looked past her and fled.

The woman with the sheer green eyes rose from her chair. A man behind Jasmine murmured, "Do you know who that is?"

Another man hushed, "Desiree."

You will want as I want.

Jasmine ran from the restaurant into the night. Horns honked, but no one was on the street, there wasn't anyone to help. She heard a rush of wind barreling toward her. Reaching an intersection, she didn't know which direction to take. Taut with fear, she looked behind. Desiree approached—intent, relentless. Jasmine heard her voice in her head.

"Connor is mine. You will pay. You will die."

Horror constricted her throat.

Hair snaking in the wind, eyes narrowed, Desiree advanced. Jasmine tried to step back but couldn't. Desiree loomed over her, hate in her eyes. Crying, Jasmine lifted her arms for protection.

A laugh tore through the violent wind.

Jasmine fell to her knees, screaming.

## Chapter Six

Mike jerked awake, his pulse thumping, not certain what roused him. His head swung to the bedroom door. Still closed. His hand patted the mattress next to him. The linens were cool to the touch and empty.

Where is she?

Propped on his elbows, he took a closer look at the shadowed room. Moonlight angled across the shiny floor, rather than the four-poster, telling him some time had passed. He groaned to a sitting position and lifted his watch off the figurine. They, or rather he, had slept for nearly an hour.

Dropping his watch on the bed, he left it and turned down the music. He couldn't immediately place the steady hissing noise he heard until he glanced at the bath. A faint glow, as from a nightlight, illuminated the wood at the bottom of the closed door. Was she taking a shower?

It reminded him of his own grubbiness. He could still smell the honey sauce on his hands, his bristly cheeks were starting to itch, and the forgotten condom hung from his flaccid penis. He dropped the rubber into a wicker wastebasket near the dresser and toyed with the idea of joining Jasmine.

His hand hovered above the doorknob, only to retreat. He didn't want to startle or impose on her, so he returned to the bed to wait. Five minutes passed. Six. Seven. The door stayed closed. The hiss continued. Could she have fallen asleep in the tub?

Worried, he padded to the door. Hand on the knob, he rapped gently. No response. Convinced he should check to make certain everything was all right, he opened the door a crack so he wouldn't scare her.

Steam fogged the mirror and room. Flames from five fat candles flickered in the misty air, creating fuzzy shapes on the wall. He opened the door a bit more and saw the tub on the right. Water zigzagged down the clear plastic shower curtain, silhouetting Jasmine. Her back was to the water's stream, her arms outstretched. Hands braced against the tile wall, her head hung down.

He watched for what seemed like an hour, though it couldn't have been more than a few minutes. She didn't move. He could barely detect her breathing. Concerned, he pulled the curtain back cautiously, prepared for her to jump or shout.

She did neither. As if she finally sensed his presence, her head turned to him. Wet strands of hair stuck to her forehead and cheeks. Her eyes were narrow slits, puffy from lack of sleep or tears. "Hey."

"Hey." He smiled. "You like long showers?"

"The water feels good."

She sounded so exhausted, he worried she would pass out and figured he better stay. "Mind if I join you?"

Turning, she sagged against the wet wall. Her eyes dropped to his groin. "Think all of you will fit?"

He stepped into the tub, his skin prickling from the water's assault. "You're good for a man's ego, you know that?" He kissed her throat, liking its dampness and heat from the pelting flow.

She sighed.

"Are you having trouble sleeping?"

"No." She closed the shower curtain, rattling the metal hooks over the rod. "I was sticky from the honey sauce you smeared on me. I think I got all of it off. Why don't you check?" She moved his hand to her mound and wedged his middle finger in her cleft. It was degrees hotter and softer than the steamy water.

His body said "oh, yeah", and thought playing in the tub would be a great idea. His mind told him he'd be taking advantage, which would make him a prick. He'd slept. She clearly hadn't. "Where's your soap?"

"Why?" She squeezed her pussy around him in a way far more wanton than her innocent voice would suggest. "Am I still sticky?"

"You're a real mess. So am I. After I wash you, I'll do myself and we'll get some more sleep."

"I'm not tired."

"Then you can watch me snooze, because I'm fucking beat." Unwilling to put up with an argument, he grabbed a loaf of scented soap from her shower caddy, lathered his hands and ran the bubbles over her firm breasts.

Air whooshed from her. "I'm not sticky there."

Who cared? To keep her quiet, he nibbled her lower lip. She cooed at the love bite. His hands went down her torso, washing her ass and mound. Her body wilted against his, confirming her fatigue.

He held her tenderly, his fingers trailing over her sodden hair, shoulders and back. She made grateful sounds that he met with a sad smile. He tried to imagine her nights in this big, old noisy place. Did she roam the empty rooms, looking for the source of the sounds, discouraged she had to protect herself because she'd ended up alone? Did she think of her parents then and consider what might have happened if they'd lived: that they would be here, welcoming her to dinner to hear about her work, apartment, life, while giving her the unconditional support all children needed? Or did she watch TV like everyone else and fall asleep during the eleven o'clock news?

Probably the latter. Could be his presence, not sorrow or fear of burglars, had kept her from sleeping. Shaking off his sentimentality, he turned her to the showerhead to let the water rinse away the soap.

She moved her head to the side. "Although this is very nice, I enjoyed facing you much better."

"Soon as we're in bed, I'll hold you like that again." He swatted her butt playfully. "Towel off. I'll be with you in a sec."

He washed and shampooed quickly, practiced in the art. As a kid, his father had taken him camping a lot, mainly in the Dakotas where some of the Stearn clan had started out and still lived. Every facility his dad picked provided clammy cold water to match the icy days. Shutting off the shower's flow, Mike pulled his wet hair off his face and opened the curtain.

Jasmine sat on the toilet seat, the sole of her right foot on the wicker hamper. She blotted her calf with a thick terry towel. Beads of water dotted her back and arms, the moisture winking in the candlelight.

Confronted with her newly scrubbed flesh, Mike decided to be selfish and give her no more than a half hour to sleep before he took her again. At thirty-four, he needed only a ten or fifteen minute nap to rev up. She was three years younger, so thirty minutes should have her perking till well after sunrise. Pleased with his math, he left the tub, found a towel on the shelf and scrubbed his hair dry. While he patted his shoulders and chest, he noticed the door to the side of her. He figured it was a linen closet until he saw the lock near the knob. "What's behind that door?"

The towel paused on her calf. "Nothing."

"You mean it's a fake door leading nowhere?"

"No." She cleared her throat. "It's just another bedroom, or what my parents had wanted to use as a nursery before Mom found out she couldn't have more kids. When I was younger, it was our guestroom. Since I took over the family business, I use it for storage. I told you that when we came upstairs, remember?"

Vaguely. "Uh-uh."

She lowered her right foot and put her left on the hamper to dry it.

Reluctant to ask any more questions, he ran the towel under his arms. Though clean, he would have liked to get rid of his stubble. He glanced at her counter to see if she had a razor he could use and maybe a new toothbrush. No such luck. All he noted were ten bottles of perfume or cologne, in various tints, shoved together haphazardly. He pushed the towel to his thighs, drying them as a thought nagged: something about her spraying perfume on her throat and nipples, and the bottles rocking as she moved them aside.

For his Glock. The space it should have occupied was empty. His head snapped to the stack of towels, thinking she'd shoved his pistol inside. Their neat contours told him she had not. "Where's my gun?"

She lifted her head from her leg and glanced to where he looked. "In the bedroom." Apprehension strained her voice. "I didn't know if the steam would hurt it, so I put it in the dresser next to my underwear."

That solved one mystery. He teased, "I didn't think you owned any."

Her right brow arched. "It comes in handy when I have to meet with clients or go grocery shopping. You should see me then. I look deadly dull."

"I doubt that." He imagined her elegant and regal, the way she was now. Without makeup, she owned a natural, more interesting type of beauty. He toyed with the idea of telling her and decided against it. Convincing a woman she looked great without beauty aids was as impossible as persuading a guy that length and size didn't matter. "We left my clothes in the downstairs hall, right?" He felt stupid for asking, but his memory of the first few minutes here was kind of fuzzy.

Her expression said she found the question very odd or troubling. "Why? Have you changed your mind? Did you decide to leave already?"

The already caused him to smile. "No, I haven't changed my mind. I just thought I'd get my comb."

"You don't have to. Use mine." Her voice trembled with nervousness and gratitude.

He figured she really didn't want to be alone in this great big place.

She opened the counter's top drawer, taking out a wide-toothed comb, a container of unisex deodorant, a tube of Aquafresh and a red toothbrush still in the manufacturer's box. "Do you think you'll need anything else?"

He hid his surprise at her preparations for tonight. She had an IUD, condoms and spare toiletries? Almost too good to be true. "You wouldn't happen to have a spare razor in there, would you?"

"Dozens. I attend lots of conventions to promote the line." She put a plastic travel razor and a miniature can of shaving cream next to his other supplies. On her feet, she kissed his scar, her lips a caress, her tongue a balm. "Take your time." Her breath ruffled the hairs on his arm. "I'll be in bed."

She barely made it past the door. Weakened and anxious, she leaned against the wall, trying not to panic. Ben must have broken his word and taken Mike's gun, unless one of her sisters had it. Jasmine hadn't noticed it missing when she'd gone into the bath, fleeing her nightmare about Desiree.

God. Her hands flew to her eyes. She couldn't erase the bad dream, an eerie approximation of what really happened. On her and Connor's date, Desiree watched them at the restaurant, though not from a table. She'd been in the parking lot. Her stare unsettled Jasmine and filled Connor's beautiful features with dread. They left quickly. Although he said he'd never seen the woman before, within a few weeks he'd disappeared. Only the beginning. Jasmine began to see Desiree everywhere, those frightening green eyes staring at her. She changed her schedule and normal routes. Didn't matter. At the ATM, Desiree waited. At the bakery counter, Desiree watched. At this house, Desiree refused to listen to reason. Her anger erupted and she uttered the curse.

You will want as I want.

Inside the bath, Mike flushed the toilet and turned on the water in the sink.

Breathing shallowly, Jasmine padded to the nightstand. She dropped the string of condoms in the top drawer next to the handcuffs. Lily's voice played in her mind. *We have to keep him here*.

Jasmine's legs gave out. She sank to the bed. What was she going to do if he asked for his gun? What would she do in the morning when he wanted to leave?

He shut off the water.

She looked at the bathroom door, waiting for it to open. A part of her feared what she'd do once he came out. A greater part of her welcomed it.

Thunder crashed, shaking the house and rattling the windows. Awakened by the noise, Mike opened one eye. Gloomy morning light bathed the room. Wind tore at the cypress and banyan trees flanking the last window. Slanting rain, sounding like hundreds of pebbles, hit the glass. He wrinkled his noise at the metallic odor permeating the dank air. Shit. Today he had a week's worth of errands to run. The thought of driving his bike through this mess made him groan.

"It's only thunder," Jasmine whispered, her mouth to his ear.

Her presence and voice offered such solace, his eyes closed. "I was thinking about my bike."

"It's in the garage. It won't get wet."

He chuckled. "It will when I take it out."

"Don't leave." Her fingers traced his lips.

It tickled. He caught her hand. "I have errands to run."

"Later." A new wave of thunder rumbled and boomed, ringing the air as it passed. "It's early, nothing's opened. The weather's too bad. I'll fix you breakfast."

His hand dragged down her arm and fell to the bed. "You cook in the nude." He recalled her boasting about it last night.

"We can use the table like you wanted. There's so much we haven't done."

His lethargy proved otherwise. Last night, when he left the bath, she gave him a full body massage with her talented hands, mouth and tongue. He reciprocated by masturbating her in front of the cheval mirror, insisting she keep her eyes open to witness what she looked like during an orgasm. An impassioned fuck, missionary style, followed, after which they collapsed. "Like what?"

"You haven't let me tie you up."

"Wasn't in the game plan." He ran his tongue around his mouth. "You said you wanted me to be your master and you'd be—what are you doing?"

"Shhhh." She straddled his body, her velvety cunt on his cock, her mouth to his. "Give me your hand."

He liked where it was—on her left breast, her nipple stiffening against his palm. "To tie me up?" "It'll be fun."

The wind slammed against the house. Branches swished and snapped. The crack of wood said one of them broke off. Definitely too bad to go out, just as she'd said. He surrendered and offered his hand.

She kissed his wrist, then looped her silk sash around it. Eyes still closed, he yawned. She crawled off him, shaking the mattress as she left the bed. His arm followed.

When his fingers hung over the side, he asked, "You tying me to the bed post or the doorknob?"

"The post." She pulled on the sash, redirecting his arm to the headboard.

Wind pushed a branch against the window. Behind his closed lids, Mike saw lightning flash. Thunder followed quickly. The bed jiggled. He heard metal hitting metal. A sound he hadn't expected. "What was that?"

She slipped something cool and smooth beneath his hand. It drew closer, surrounding his wrist with a tinny click.

His eyes flew open. He turned his head and stared at the handcuff, not yet believing what he saw. The second he realized the truth, he yanked his arm, wanting to get free. She'd made certain he couldn't, hooking two sets of cuffs together. The end farthest from him clanged against the metal bed frame where she'd secured it. He scrambled to a sitting position and frowned. "What the hell is this?"

Jasmine backed away from the bed. A precaution so he couldn't grab her arm. Lightning kept flashing. She didn't appear to notice it or the resultant thunder. In the glare, he saw the maroon circles beneath her eyes. Last night her makeup and the soft candlelight in the bath hid her shocking exhaustion.

A stew of emotions surfaced. Surprise and concern for her...anger and a faint thread of unease for himself. What the fuck was going on? "Jasmine." He used his mildest voice.

Her eyes glinted with lust. "I can't let you go."

Alarm raced through him. He recalled her voice last night when he'd awakened to find her watching him and told her to get the corset. She'd sounded distracted and drugged then, the same as now. "Why?"

"Desiree. The yearning."

She wasn't making sense. He hoped his voice didn't show his deepening anxiety. "I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

"She blamed me. I tried to fight it and stop, but..." She shook her head, unable or unwilling to go on.

Mike inhaled as deeply as he could, forcing himself to remain composed. "Did you take a drug while I slept?"

Her eyes glistened with tears. One slipped down her cheek.

"Jasmine, it's all right." He wasn't worried about the cuff. If he couldn't convince her to unlock it, there was always his telekinesis, a lousy, fucking gift he'd sworn never to use again, especially to save his sorry ass. Shit. If she saw the cuffs opening on their own, what would she do? Think she'd lost her mind and really freak out? Go totally nuts and hurt herself? As long as she didn't pull out his gun, he told himself to wait. To talk her down like a normal person would and leave the supernatural stuff buried where it

belonged. "Just tell me what you took." Another tear followed the last, dripping from her chin. He fought the urge to push. "Was it a street drug? Ecstasy? Meth? Coke—"

"No! I didn't take anything!" She stepped back with her shout.

Behind her, the door to the bath flew open, the knob smacking the wall. A man in his mid-twenties stalked out. His barbed blond hair, bronze tan and toned frame gave him the look of a surfer. His glare and Mike's Glock in his hand said he wasn't so laid-back. He meant fucking business.

The pistol changed everything, urging Mike to use his gift. Just as quickly, his mind warned him not to make another wrong move as he'd had with Tommy, which could result in someone else dying this time. If not him, then Jasmine.

She shouted, "Ben, no!"

"Stay out there!" she cried.

Footsteps pounded in the hall, heading this way. A young female voice yelled, "Jas! What's wrong?"

Another young voice hollered, "No!"

Two women hurried into the room dressed for bed in dark boxer shorts and stretchy pastel camisoles. Their complexions were far too pale for the Keys. The youngest one had shockingly white hair.

Instantly, Mike recognized them as the two from the alley outside the club. He remembered thinking it odd how they'd remained beneath the gas lamp, whispering. Jasmine had talked it away. Just like everything else. His mind ticked off the warning signs he hadn't heeded, beginning with her questions about his parents and siblings. She'd wanted to know if anyone would miss him when she lured him to this house. Upon their arrival, she insisted he park his bike in the garage. So the neighbors wouldn't see it? And what about the paintings on the stairway wall not quite matching the spaces where the original photos had hung? Were those pictures of her and the two young women? He would have bet several years of his life on it and more. She'd made certain his gun was always one room away where he wouldn't be able to get it. Even the CD player had a role in her plan. She'd turned it on so he couldn't hear the others here. And when he'd sensed someone watching, it had been Mr. Surfer, slinking into the bath from the other room.

"Stop it." Jasmine's voice cut off the younger women's continuing questions about what had happened. She pulled on her silk robe, holding it closed with her fists. "I want you to leave. Now."

They didn't budge.

"Please," she begged. "I don't want you guys involved."

In what? Mike wondered. He managed a swallow and a deeper breath as he watched the dynamics between the three. Their devotion went far beyond friendship and living together. Although neither of the women resembled Jasmine, they had to be her cousins or sisters. The wild card was the guy. Ben. He wasn't the meth-addict boyfriend she'd talked about, if her story was true. He had the look of health about him, provided by a steady diet of carrots and sprouts. He also appeared murderously protective, possibly jealous of another man in her bed. A muscle in his jaw jumped as their eyes met.

He lifted the gun's barrel. "Cover yourself."

The girl with the platinum hair looked over. Mike used his free hand to pull the sheet to his hips before his nudity caused Ben to fire a round he'd be afraid to divert. Even if he used his power to push the boy into the wall or wrench the gun from his hand, Ben might still be able to squeeze off a shot with possibly tragic results. Mike warned himself to remain calm and consider his options. To think, not react.

He couldn't imagine why they were doing this. Desiree, Jasmine had said. The yearning. Ramblings of a druggie? A moment ago, he'd thought so. Not now. She appeared exceptionally lucid. Which left the same questions—what in the hell was going on? Why coax him here and keep him prisoner?

His lousy net worth made him a poor ransom choice. Only his mom would have bothered to bail him out, using the meager insurance she got from his dad. He had no value, unless he counted his time with the service. Maybe they wanted to know the new identity and location of a former witness. Maybe Desiree paid or ordered them to do it, which would have required them to connect him with the individual, then follow and bait him into coming here. An elaborate scheme he knew they didn't have the chops to pull off. Ben appeared uncertain what to do as Jasmine and the other women argued, with nothing being resolved.

Finally, Mike interrupted. "I hope you're aware the Blue Bliss has security cameras at all of its entrances and exits, including the alley. Everyone is videotaped going into the building and out."

Ben's eyes darted to Jasmine for confirmation. The two younger women turned to the bed, plainly surprised by his comment.

Good. He had their attention. If by some miracle they could keep him here, all the cops needed to do was view those security tapes and, if necessary, play Jasmine's and his picture on every local TV station. To make certain she and the others understood what would happen, he added, "I'm a regular at the club. If I don't keep my appointments today, it's the first place the police will think to check out."

Jasmine exchanged a look with the other women. She spoke to him. "You said you had errands to run this morning, not appointments." She stepped closer. "At the club you said you didn't have anything planned for the next couple of days or nights."

He didn't. Not that she had to know. His voice cut through the room. "I lied."

She shook her head. "No, you're lying now. I can hear it in your voice. I see it on your face."

His gut twisted. "Jasmine, listen to me."

The one with the platinum hair looked at her with shock and anger. "You told him your real name?"

Mike's worry ratcheted up a notch. What would they do if they thought that compromised their plan? He spoke to Jasmine. "You don't want to go through with whatever you intended. Stop this now and we'll forget it ever happened."

"Not a chance," the one with the platinum hair said.

Jasmine grabbed her arm, trying to turn her around. "Lily, please."

"No." She argued, "You can't let him go now. I won't let you. Violet and Ben won't let you."

Mike raised his voice so they'd hear him above the roaring thunder. "Why not?"

The one with the light brown hair, presumably Violet, cried, "Can't you see that Jas is dying!"

He stared, not expecting or understanding what she'd said. His head swung to Jasmine, the smudges beneath her eyes. She seemed markedly tired, but dying? How? And why would it have anything to do with him? "From what?"

Ben snapped, "What do you care?"

Ignoring him, Mike spoke to Jasmine. "What's wrong with you? If you're ill, why aren't you in a hospital?"

"She's not ill, she's dying." The icy remark came from Lily. She strode to the bed, close enough for him to see she had light brown or hazel eyes, far enough away to stay out of his reach. "What Desiree did to her can't be cured by any doctor."

Again, that name. "Who's Desiree?" he asked Jasmine.

She wrapped her arms around her middle. It didn't stop her shiver. "A Wanderer. A witch."

He could see she believed it. So did the others. Even so, he asked, "You mean in the literal sense?"

Ben made a sound between a derisive laugh and a snort of disgust. "It's obvious he doesn't believe you, Jas. Quit wasting your energy trying to explain. You," he said to Mike, "keep it zipped, got it?"

"Ben, please." She put out her hand to stop him from saying anything further. "Yes, I mean it in the literal sense." Her voice shuddered from fatigue or a horror she couldn't quite explain. "She's one of the Wanderers."

Mike shook his head, edginess creeping up his spine. "I don't understand. Who or what are they?"

Violet mumbled, "You wouldn't believe it if we told you."

"He doesn't have to believe it," Lily countered. "That's not why Jas brought him here."

"So why did you?" he asked Jasmine. "And why choose me instead of one of the other men at the club?"

Shame passed over her face. Her lower lip quivered. "What I told you in the alley at the Blue Bliss was true. I wasn't lying."

She expected him to still swallow her story about finding him ultra-attractive and the perfect gentleman? Yeah, right. She'd had to have been lying.

He looked for it in her eyes and saw anguish so deep it startled him.

She pleaded, "Mike, I wasn't lying then. I swear to you. If you can't believe anything else, please believe that."

He didn't know what to think. Either she had to be the world's greatest actress or in a shitload of trouble he couldn't begin to comprehend. "Why am I here?"

Lily snapped, "What difference does it make? She didn't have a choice."

"About what?"

"Lil, please," Jasmine said, her voice barely audible. "He deserves an explanation. He needs to know what this is about." She looked at Violet. "Please get my notes and the photos."

The younger woman left the room and bolted down the hall.

## Chapter Seven

Jasmine noted how Ben took charge immediately, the young lion trying to oust the virile male who ruled.

"Move your legs to the left," he ordered Mike, gesturing with the gun as he would with his hand. "Jas needs to sit down."

"I'm fine." Jasmine took another halting breath and turned toward Ben so Mike couldn't hear her. "Give me the gun."

"I can't do that." He held it out of her reach, nearly poking Lily with the barrel. Lightning streaked across the sky, fainter now. Several seconds passed before thunder followed. "You'll let him go."

"And you'll hurt him, me, Lil, or yourself if you keep swinging it. It's not a toy, Ben. Put it down, away, I don't care. Just get rid of it."

"I'll be careful. Promise." He touched her cheek. Rain and wind buffeted the roof. "Go on and sit down, please. Help her," he ordered Lily.

She leveled her gaze on him. "Knock it off, Ben. You're here to help Jas, not prove how macho you are."

The corners of his mouth turned down in indignation and embarrassment. "I just thought you should help."

"I can get there myself," Jasmine said. Reluctantly, she turned to Mike, expecting to see more fury or disgust. He observed her and Ben with a dispassionate expression. She sensed he was trying to figure out their relationship or his next move. Worried, she sat at the footboard, resting her head on her arm.

He drew his legs up, away.

Heart aching, she pressed her fingers to her forehead, struggling not to cry. As she'd feared, he couldn't bear to be near her now. Who could blame him?

"Are you feeling ill?" he asked.

Lily answered. "She's exhausted."

"Why haven't you been sleeping?" he asked Jasmine.

"She can't," Lily insisted.

"Let her answer," he ordered the girl. "Jasmine, tell me—why can't you rest?"

The unexpected worry in his voice shamed her further. He should be yelling, calling her a damned liar, threatening to bring the wrath of the federal government down on all of them. It would have been easier for her to accept his rage than his kindness. "It won't let me."

"What won't?"

Lust. It roiled through her blood, insistent and grinding. "The yearning."

"What's that?"

Ben's feet smacked the floor with his quick approach. "Leave her alone."

Jasmine dropped her hand.

"Fine," Mike said in an unshaken voice. "You have the Glock. I'll do exactly what you want."

"You better or you'll regret it."

She straightened and hollered at Ben, "Stop it! Lower the gun and get away from him!"

He didn't move. "Now!" she warned.

Lily fisted her fingers in Ben's tee and pulled him toward the bath. "Okay, okay," he said, shaking her off and pointing the gun's barrel at Lily's feet. "I'm not near him, all right? I'll stay here, but I am not leaving."

Violet ran into the room, a stack of photos and Jasmine's laptop in her hands. Her head swiveled from one to the other. She huffed out her words. "What's wrong now? What happened?"

Lily muttered, "Ben had a testosterone attack."

"Violet." Jasmine paused to swallow. She inclined her head toward Mike. "Give him the pictures and bring up what I found on the Wanderers."

From the corner of his eye, Mike watched Ben lift the pistol's barrel. The muzzle stayed trained on him as Violet got close enough to drop the pictures near his knee. She opened the laptop, hit numerous keys, and put the computer near his cuffed hand. With the items delivered, she backed away quickly.

"Ben," Jasmine said.

Like a good boy who didn't want to piss her off, he lowered the barrel. It pointed at the bed frame. Mike knew if Ben fired now, the round could ricochet and hit him or one of the women.

"Lil, Violet," Jasmine said next. "I want you to leave."

They shared a quick look and shook their heads.

Jasmine's eyes closed. She remained so still, not even seeming to breathe, Mike wasn't certain if she'd fallen asleep or passed out. He expected her to slump over. She did not. Her lids opened slowly. He stared. In the bleak gray light, he saw desire, hunger, lust flaring in her blue-green eyes.

She whispered to the women. "It's building again. I don't want either of you to see."

"Go on," Ben said to them in a gentle voice. "I'll stay and make sure she's safe."

"She's our sister," Lily countered.

"Then do as I ask," Jasmine snapped. Thunder rumbled rather than roared, its force subdued by distance. "Ben, lock the door when they leave."

Violet pleaded, "Don't let anything happen to her."

"I won't." He ushered them into the hall, closed the door on their scared faces and turned the lock.

The sound seemed final. Mike regarded Jasmine. Her face and body bristled with what went on inside. She fought it, her jaw clenching. His heart rate climbed at the nightmare he was witnessing, his foreboding focused fully on her now. To distract her and possibly lessen her misery, he said, "Tell me about Desiree."

She gestured to the pictures and laptop with a shaky hand. Her voice seethed with frustration. "She's beautiful and insane."

He grabbed the color printouts. Jasmine had enlarged Desiree's image in the photos, some candid and some posed, taken at a mobile home park and at a variety of storefront businesses. The grainy quality didn't compromise her impact. She had an unholy beauty that didn't look real. Mike could recall only two other women with the same perfection: Liv Tyler and Angelina Jolie. Hollywood stars with makeup people, hairdressers, professional lighting and award-winning photographers.

Desiree didn't need any of it. Her wheat-colored hair, caramel-colored skin, and green eyes—so pale they looked see-through—would have generated envy in a starlet or an angel. Her expression, though. Mike saw obsession, anger. Jasmine's earlier comment returned. "She blamed me. I tried to fight it and stop, but..."

He asked, "How did you meet her?"

"I didn't. I met the man she wanted."

His face lifted at the slight change in her voice, its dull, absorbed quality. She'd stopped fisting her fingers. They ran down her robe, opening it so he could glimpse her nudity. "What man is that?"

Her fingers slowed. "Connor."

"How did you meet?"

"Why?" Ben asked.

Mike wanted him to shut the fuck up. His Glock in the boy's hand warned him not to be too blunt or to make any unnecessary moves. "I'd like to understand what's going on." Certain Ben would question him—as he had on every other point—Mike spoke quickly to Jasmine. "Did Desiree see you and Connor together?"

"Not at first." Her gaze turned inward. Rain streamed down the panes, creating shadows on her cheek that looked like falling tears. "I met Connor in Miami at a business management seminar. He runs, or rather ran, a financial services business. I was at the conference to get some ideas on operating my sisters' dress design shop." Her brows drew together. Renewed shame rose in her eyes. "I didn't want to lie to you, Mike. I just couldn't allow them to be involved." She leaned forward suddenly, her hand on his ankle. "It was my idea to bring you here. I only wanted to do it until I could find Desiree and stop this. When it's

over, promise me you won't tell the authorities about my sisters. I don't care about me, but I can't let anyone hurt Violet and Lily."

Too many questions played in his mind. Stop what, exactly? How and when would it be over? "No one will know about them or you."

Her hand remained. She lowered her face.

He could see she didn't believe him any more than he'd believed her a few minutes ago. The mounting lust he'd seen in her eyes had changed his opinion on one point—no actress could produce the agony he kept witnessing. "You met Connor at a seminar?" he asked, wanting her to talk so he could gain her trust.

Her hair bobbed over her shoulders with her nod. "I had some questions about one of the presentations. He explained it to me over drinks and got to talking about his job in financial services. I didn't understand a lot of the jargon he used, but I didn't let on. I was flattered he would even be speaking to me. Every woman there thought he was so hot. They called him the eight-by-ten glossy, referring to the headshots actors use as they try to get parts. As far as I was concerned, he was better-looking than any actor I'd ever seen. When he asked if I wanted to have dinner when we returned to the Keys, I said yes. I didn't know about Desiree."

"Because he didn't tell you," Ben said, then spoke to Mike. "That bastard didn't do squat to protect Jas. He lied about knowing Desiree. When she started stalking Jas, and we needed to know what he knew about her, he disappeared suddenly. Poof. It's like he fell off the face of the earth."

Mike followed the boy's flailing arms, the pistol swinging wildly in his hand. "Connor's missing?"

Jasmine answered. "Shortly after Desiree saw us at the restaurant for our date, she started to follow me. I figured then that Connor had to know her and they were involved. Why else would she be behaving so irrationally? I called his office to find out what I was dealing with. His secretary said he'd taken a leave of absence. She didn't go into detail, but it sounded like his departure was unexpected. I got his address and went to his condo. He didn't answer his door. His neighbors said they hadn't seen him. I looked for his car in the lot. It wasn't there. I kept returning at various times during the day, thinking he'd have to return. He didn't, but Desiree was always nearby, watching me from beneath a tree, the street, or the next building."

Mike looked down. Jasmine was twisting the sheet in her hand, her face filled with pain and animal longing. The linen slipped from his navel to his hips as she stripped him slowly, deliberately. He slanted a gaze at Ben to see if the boy noticed. No. The gap in Jasmine's robe held his attention. "Where's Desiree now?"

The sheet moved another inch. "I don't know. After she cursed me, I tried to find her to explain again that I barely knew Connor. I had no idea he was involved with her. I wasn't trying to steal him away."

With his free hand, Mike held on to the sheet so it wouldn't fall below his groin. He didn't want Ben going ballistic at the sight of his cock. "She cursed you?"

Tears welled in her eyes. "You don't believe me. How could you? I can barely believe it myself."

Mike kept his tone and manner nonjudgmental. "How did she curse you?"

She released the sheet. Leaning forward, she ran her hand up his calf. "She watched me first. I changed my routine, thinking it would help. It didn't. No matter when I went out or what route I took, she found me. I got so spooked I decided to stay home for a while, thinking I'd be safe." Her free hand flew to her head, the heel against her temple, the words wrenched from her.

"When I went out on the front porch to get the mail, she grabbed my wrist. I hadn't seen her to the side of the door. Her eyes were wild. I wanted to run, but I couldn't move. What I felt was worse than fear. My sisters and Ben were gone. The neighbors were all inside their houses. The street was empty. No one was around to help me. I tried to explain that she had it all wrong. I wasn't stealing her guy. He didn't want me. I wasn't pretty enough for him. If anything, he asked me out so he could talk about himself. Guys like that use women like me all the time as adoring fans. She wouldn't listen. She chanted in a language I've never heard. I clawed her arm, trying to get away. I shouted for her to leave me alone. She smiled. I know this sounds nuts, but in the same instant, I felt something slice through me, hot and cold at the same time, like being on fire while encased in a block of ice. I started to shake. She let go of my wrist and murmured, 'He is mine.' As she backed away, she told me I'd want as she did. Like her, I'd never have any peace. I'd know only insatiable lust."

It blazed in her eyes now. In a normal world, her intensity and ravings marked her as a lunatic. Mike knew better, in spite of his previous misgivings. From birth, his mother's mysticism and his telekinesis tied him to a shadow existence. "How long has this been going on?"

"An eternity."

"Five months," Ben mumbled. "She's tried everything to get rid of it. Chants. Potions. Self-proclaimed witches. Prayers. Nothing's worked."

Jasmine's words caught on her hitching breath. "It started slowly at first. For reasons I couldn't understand, I'd be drawn to guys completely different from Connor, men I would have never chosen in the past. And yet one thing didn't change. It seemed as if Desiree wanted me to crave men who wouldn't give me a second look. They preferred someone sexier, prettier, less reserved. It wasn't like I could pick just anyone. I had to feel a connection with the man or I wouldn't get even a second's relief from the yearning."

The floor creaked beneath Ben as he shifted his weight. Mike suspected he'd already offered himself to help her out and she'd refused. "The guy on meth that you told me about, was he someone you chose?"

Ben answered first. "The prick could've hurt her. We couldn't risk that again. We had to control the situation."

By bringing him here and keeping him prisoner so he'd be available to relieve her craving. He'd wanted to know why she'd chosen and lured him. The truth didn't make it any better. She'd felt a connection to him because of the curse. She'd found him attractive for the same reason, the only reason. He

told himself he shouldn't care, but he did. Last night, she'd touched his soul in a way he'd never experienced and so he acted like Super Cock, needing to pleasure her as no man ever had. He wanted her to find him special. He knew now he could have been any of a hundred other men.

The reality of it should have made him feel differently about her, only it didn't. Like a lovesick adolescent, he still desired what she obviously would never be able to give. Suppressing a sigh, he asked, "You said you don't know where Desiree is. You went to where she did live?"

Her fingers circled his knee. "Where the Wanderers lived. They left the Keys months ago. I thought she did too, she's one of them, but I couldn't locate her in Louisiana where they relocated. The papers called the group modern-day nomads. There were numerous articles about them a few years back. Violet and Lily remembered the pieces and made the connection to Desiree after I told them what happened."

Mike put the computer on his lap, moving his knee away in the process. Jasmine's hand fell to the mattress. He stopped himself before he laced his fingers through hers, an unconscious attempt to console, and concentrated instead on the screen. It showed one folder titled Desiree. He clicked it open and read the file tags. Three bore the names of area newspapers. Others sounded like ordinary places of business: Tatiana's Speedy Alterations, Nick's 24-Hour Plumbing, Susanna's Home Care. "They operate scams?"

"They don't have to." She went to her knees. Her robe fell open as she crawled to his side.

Ben's stony silence evidenced his disapproval. Mike wasn't willing to chance a look at the younger man's face. "What do you mean they don't have to?"

She reached across him to touch his tattoo. Her proximity brought a trace of her still-soapy scent, just as intoxicating as he recalled. He didn't allow himself to inhale too deeply.

"Not in the ordinary sense," she said. "Though the newspaper articles never quite say it, what makes the Wanderers such a success is their skill in the occult." Her fingers followed the eagle's outline. The muscle beneath it flicked repeatedly. He tensed his arm to stop it.

Jasmine continued, "Some of their customers can't explain why they willingly paid far more for the services than what had been agreed upon. A few didn't remember calling or visiting the establishments, yet they freely gave large sums of cash to these people, verified by their receipts and the photos of them smiling as they stood next to the Wanderer who'd done the work." As she moved closer, her nipple dragged from his arm to his pec.

Mike squeezed his fist to keep himself from touching her and setting Ben off.

Her fingers moved to his biceps, her stroke tender and seductive. She kissed his collarbone.

He inhaled more sharply than he wanted.

Her lips lingered, damping her words. "Those customers who were foolish enough to complain fell ill with a variety of mysterious ailments. One woman said the alternations on her husband's suits were so shoddy even he could see it. Two weeks later, the man went blind. The doctors couldn't find a brain tumor

or other disease. Idiopathic, they called it, of unknown origin. The wife knew otherwise. She stopped complaining." Jasmine's hand crept beneath the sheet, heading for his groin.

"Jas," Ben said suddenly, his voice beseeching. "You need to sleep."

Heedless of his comment, she wrapped her fingers around Mike's cock. Her fingers burned with energy and heat. His erection blossomed. Shortened breaths pumped his chest. "Jasmine, listen to him. You should rest."

"No." A whisper spoken against his lips. Grasping the computer with her other hand, she flung it across the mattress and yanked down the sheet to straddle his lap, her robe floating around them.

To ward off Ben's jealousy and his own response to her enticing warmth, Mike talked fast. "Jasmine, if you want this to be over, listen to me. I can help."

"Yeah sure," Ben challenged. "How?"

Mike held her face in his free hand, praying she'd hear him out and believe. Both sisters said she was dying. What if it was true? What if the curse kept escalating until it took her life? Fuck. He couldn't stand by and let it happen. "I have friends in the government, one in particular, a woman I trust completely. Erica still works with the service. With her help, we can find Desiree. The government has resources you couldn't begin to imagine. No one can hide from them. Once we locate her, we'll deal with this."

Jasmine's eyes widened in hope, which faded quickly. Brows drawn together, she whispered, "You can't help. No one can."

"I will, if you'll let me."

"You want to be free."

"I know you don't trust me, so let me tell you how to protect yourself. Get me a disposable cell phone. It can't be traced when I contact Erica. Listen in on the call. Monitor every word I say."

Her bottom lip trembled. "I can't let you go."

"Honey, it's not about letting me go. It's about freeing and saving you."

Head shaking, she ran the pad of her thumb over his brows and lower. Against all reason, her sweet, gentle touch persuaded his lids to close. Her other hand returned to his shaft, her hard pulls forging it into a rigid column. In danger of losing his self-control, Mike said the only thing he could. "Ben, if you don't leave now, you're not going to like what you see."

The boy breathed fast.

Mike hissed, "Forget your damned pride."

Jasmine stroked the head of his cock, using his pre-come to lubricate it.

He held back a moan. It took all he had to continue. "If you kill me, the only thing it will change is you going to prison."

Jasmine rubbed the back of the head, the area with the most feeling. Tingles dashed from Mike's groin to his chest to his scalp.

Ben moved slightly, making the floor groan.

Mike forced out his words. "If your shot misses me and harms her, I'll fucking tear you apart."

"What are you talking about?" Ben cried. "I'd never harm Jas! Shit! Do what you have to! Help her!"

Mike couldn't comment as her lips crushed his. She pierced his mouth with her tongue at the same moment she guided his crown into her cunt. Currents of arousal clutched him. His hips jerked, demanding she take him fully.

Her body slunk down his rod, caging him in her depths. She gripped his hair to keep his head to hers. Pushing her tongue aside, he took control of her mouth and the kiss. His lips vibrated with her moan. The four-poster shimmied, making music to match his savage thrusts and her pumps. In the distance, thunder rolled meekly. Rain dripped from the roof to the windows, its patter keeping time with his heart's brisk drumming.

Jasmine freed her mouth. Chin lifted to the ceiling, her lips pulled away from her teeth. A carnal sob, soul deep, rose from her and filled the room.

Mike suckled her throat. Her fragrance and driving warmth on his shaft pushed him past all resistance. His lips found hers again, bruising them, his tongue demanding. His body invaded hers as it hadn't during their most ardent lovemaking. She seemed to want to crawl inside of him. He knew he wanted to do the same with her. Unlike their other times, neither of them could delay their lust nor curb it in order to draw out the pleasure. This release became their sole purpose for being, the animal part of their natures absolute.

Limbs entwined, bodies joined to each other, they worked as one. There were no missteps. His cock plundered, her cunt accepted, sucking him as deep as a man could go. His groin smacked hers. Her vaginal lips left traces of moisture on his flesh and pubic hair.

She cried out and he gave her even more, all he could manage.

On the heels of her climax, his shattered. She might as well have infected him with her curse, his response was that pronounced, the sounds coming from him as crude and fierce as hers.

Sweaty and sated, they clung to each other, gasping.

Mike kissed her damp temple, the curve of her ear. She turned her face into his neck, her breath tickling it.

He smiled and continued to drop gentle kisses on her cheek, eyebrow and hair. Only after his heart and breathing began to settle down did he remember Ben. The boy hadn't left. Mike could hear his rough breathing, captivated and envious. He felt him watching, the same as last night.

Opening his eyes, he concentrated on what mattered most—Jasmine. Her robe flared out on either side, concealing their bodies. Slumped against his chest, she continued to breathe in shallow pants, matching his.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Ben suddenly lifting the gun's muzzle, aiming it at them.

Mike's weariness dissolved. His arm tightened around her protectively, shielding her body with his. "What are you doing?"

Desire and despair charged the boy's voice. "Put her down on the bed."

"No."

"Do it," Ben said.

Mike cradled her weight to him, turning away from the boy to protect her further. "Think about what you're doing, Ben. It's not going to solve anything."

"Fuck that and you. I told you I wouldn't harm Jas, and I won't." His voice trembled with hurt and rage. "She's going to wake up in a few minutes, wanting more. If I carry her to another bedroom, she may sleep for a couple of hours."

Mike glanced at the boy. "Whose room exactly?"

The prominent bulge behind the younger man's shorts deflated with the question. "I love Jas. I'd never touch her while she's asleep."

His wilting erection convinced Mike. The boy's artless behavior reminded him of Tommy. His partner had been younger than him by two years and so unsophisticated, in spite of their jobs, Mike always felt he had to watch over the guy. Maybe that's why Tommy was the one who'd ended up dead. He'd put his faith in the wrong man.

Mike frowned at the memory, determined to do better by Jasmine. "See that you don't. Before I do anything, get rid of the Glock."

Ben lifted his hand in surrender and put the pistol in the hallway. Unarmed, he returned to the bed.

Mike toyed with the idea of using his power to pin the boy against the wall and decided against it, not wanting to wake and frighten Jasmine or bring her sisters in here. He'd let Ben take her out of the room. Alone, he'd get free. His cell phone was probably still downstairs. Once he reached it or a landline, he'd have a chance to call Erica and get her started on finding Desiree. "Put one arm around her waist and the other under her legs. It'll be easier to lift her from me than the bed."

"No." He stayed clear of Mike's reach. "Lower her to the mattress. I can get her from there."

"Do it my way or she stays right where she is."

Ben's upper lip curled. "Fine, I'll do it, but don't try anything funny. Even if you get me in a headlock and threaten to break my neck, Lily and Violet will not let you leave, nor will they give you your gun."

"Sounds like you're the odd man out in this group."

"You have no idea."

Curbing his urge to smile, Mike removed his arm from Jasmine and leaned forward. She sagged from him into Ben's chest. He tucked the robe around her, then lifted her from man and bed.

Her head fell back. Both arms dangled limply as he carried her to the doorway.

In the hall, someone gasped.

"Oh my God," Violet said. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Jasmine's weight sapped Ben's voice. "She's asleep. I thought I'd bring her into another bedroom so she won't be disturbed or tempted."

"Take her to mine," Lily said. "Come on."

Footfalls moved down the hallway.

Mike heard a brief, hurried discussion, the details of which he couldn't catch. No more than a second later, bare feet slapped against the hardwood floor, padding to this room. One of the sister's hands grabbed the knob and closed the door on him and what they thought was his prison.

## Chapter Eight

Violet whispered, "Wait a sec. Let me pull down the comforter."

"I'll stay with her," Lily informed as she entered the room. "Ben, you should go back and guard Mike."

"What for?" His words scraped as if he had a hard time getting them out. "He's handcuffed to the bed. He's not going anywhere. I'll stay here with her."

Jasmine's shoulders and back sank into the mattress. The pillow puffed around her head, surrounding her with the melon-and-mint cologne Lily liked. Arms released her. Mike's? No. Lily said Ben should be guarding him. With the gun?

"Ben." Jasmine couldn't open her lids, they were too heavy. Blindly, her hand flailed, trying to find him. "Ben!"

"I'm right here." He curled his fingers around hers, bringing her hand to his mouth. His breath warmed her knuckles. "I'm not going anywhere."

"The gun." She thrashed her head, her voice shrill. "Get rid of it! Don't hurt Mike! He's a good man!"

"We know." Violet's voice, conciliatory and soothing. She smoothed Jasmine's hair. "No one will hurt him. I swear. Now, please, just relax. Get some sleep."

How could she with Mike to worry about? She pulled her hand from Ben and flung out her arm to keep Violet back. "Lily."

"Yeah, I'm right here." Gently, she squeezed her shoulder.

Jasmine clamped her hand on her younger sister's wrist, holding it with all of her strength.

"Hey." Lily tugged, her voice grumbling. "Let go."

Jasmine didn't. Her baby sister could be a handful. She didn't want her giving Mike any grief. "Help Violet make breakfast for him. Lots of ham. He enjoyed it last night. He never had any cinnamon cake. He gave me his slice. I want him to have the rest. If none's left, then make more. Give him whatever he wants. Let him shower and shave. I don't want him to lack for anything."

"We'll take good care of him," Violet promised.

Jasmine's face scrunched. She fought tears. "Tell him I'm sorry. I really like him."

"Of course you do." Lily spat out her words, twisting her wrist free. "It's the curse."

"No." Jasmine's hand fell to the mattress. "It's more than that."

None of them commented.

A cry caught in Jasmine's throat. She wanted them to understand that she'd never believed she would meet a man like Mike, commanding and compassionate, a man she felt safe with. He reminded her of their dad. She wanted to repeat what he'd said, and ask if they thought he could really help. She wanted them to keep looking for Desiree, to check out the newest information she'd found.

The words wouldn't come. Sleep, so elusive till now, claimed her.

Sweat rolled down Mike's forehead, running into his eyes. He blinked repeatedly at its sting, swiping the back of his free hand across his face to dry it.

The damned cuff wouldn't open. He'd been concentrating on the lock for ten minutes, willing it to turn. The metal shivered slightly and stopped. For all he knew, the cuff moved because of his clenching fist, not because of his gift. He sagged against the pillows, trying to catch his breath and calm down.

Impossible. His mind flew in several directions at once, none of them good. He hadn't called on his power for nearly two years. Had it wasted away like an unused muscle? How could it in such a short period, given its previous strength? Hell, he first noticed his talent when he'd been three and amused himself by making his Fruit Loops dance above his cereal bowl. For him, the action had been as effortless as having his cells divide. All he needed to do was look at something, not even think about the object, and there'd be a whirring buzz, like a too-close bee, followed by the thing moving. His only problem, in the early days, had been with control. More than once, he'd sent his blocks and puzzles sailing from his bedroom into his parents' instead of the toy chest where they belonged.

Over the years, he'd kept his gift a secret, not wanting the government to research it or have himself exposed to the public as a freak. He'd never seen any practical use for it other than to amuse himself. And he had, mastering his telekinesis until he could move a fly like a remote-controlled airplane. He'd lift the insect above his kitchen table, watching its wings beating violently, then bring it down for a landing. After it made contact with the wood, he'd lift it again, landing it on the counter, the stove, the fridge, taking the poor thing on the ride of its brief life.

His power couldn't have disappeared.

He glared at the cuff, his mind picturing the lock turning, opening, the metal falling away from him.

The pulse in his wrist thumped too fast, with it being the sole movement. The only sound was the thudding of his heart. No buzz.

Mike ran his hand down his face, thinking about his promise at Tommy's grave never to use his gift again. His loathing for it and himself hadn't waned. Was guilt blocking him?

"Fuck." He tried for another five minutes. His thoughts went bleary. White-hot pain ran the length of his shoulders and arms. Rolling off the bed, he opened the nightstand drawers slowly, so as not to make any unnecessary noise. The first drawer held the string of condoms they hadn't used. The middle drawer held a

variety of sex toys: a dong, dildo, vibrator, lubricants. Stacks of women's socks crowded the third drawer. There wasn't a handcuff key beneath them, or even a hairpin he could use to pick the lock.

He closed the drawer and studied her figurines. Without a strip of metal beneath the ceramic, they were of no use. Wait. What about her body jewelry? He turned it over in his palm, noted its ineffectiveness and dropped it back on the wood. His watch caught his eye. If he pulled out the stem with his teeth, he might be able to get it into the lock. Would the thin column of metal be long enough?

Hell no. Hannibal Lecter couldn't have used it to get free. These cuffs boasted a double lock, not impossible to pick, but harder than the single-lock variety. His gaze scoured the room for something he could use, while his mind told him it didn't matter. He wouldn't be able to reach it.

His ass hit the bed, shifting the mattress. Something tapped the footboard. He looked over and spotted the laptop, his window to the Internet and Erica's email. A grin broke across his lips.

He pulled on the comforter to bring the computer close.

It didn't cooperate, bumping into the wood as it slid over the fabric and stayed away. He figured the same would happen if he yanked on the sheets.

Facedown on the bed he tried to reach it with his free hand, stretching himself as far as he could. Something in his shoulder popped, sending new waves of pain up and down his spine.

Although it didn't deter him, his fingers still wavered inches from what he wanted, just like the criminal Tantalus in Greek mythology, another tale from high school. The gods had cursed Tantalus to have food and water just out of reach for all of eternity.

Mike growled a curse into the linens and tried another tack. Turned so his feet faced the footboard, he stretched out until his ankles made contact with the laptop. Grunting, he picked up the device with his legs and lifted it several inches. It jiggled then dropped, its top falling and shutting with a snap.

More sweat stung his eyes. He rubbed his face over his shoulder and tried again. The laptop's smooth exterior kept sliding over the linens and away from his heels. Curling his toes like a freaking ballet dancer, he gripped the computer's corner, holding it steady. His other toes, crooked over the opposite side, coaxed the damn thing closer.

Within reach now, he pushed to a sitting position and shook the kinks out of his shoulders and arms. The second set of cuffs rattled on the bed frame. The one around his wrist burned. Checking it out, he saw it had scraped his skin raw. He ignored the sting and opened the computer, recalling how Jasmine carelessly tossed it aside and how his maneuvers kept banging it into the footboard. With any luck, they hadn't damaged it.

He fired it up. The screen flickered a bright blue, went black with the software's logo, and turned blue again with the login. Shit, he'd forgotten about that. He tried her name as the password. Nothing. Violet's. Zip. Lily's. Nada. Damn. It must be something simple. Few people thought up complicated names or letters and numbers they couldn't remember. He recalled how Ben and her sisters always called her Jas. He tried

it. Didn't work. He modified it to read Jazz, a play on the sound. Still nothing. He forced himself to think and finally keyed in JasVioletLil—the names the sisters always used. Bingo. The computer responded. Grinning, Mike waited for her icons to come up. Only one did, a folder titled Desiree.

His stare turned into an annoyed frown. Surely, she had a browser on this. Explorer came pre-installed on computers. He went into her programs. The browser was there, just as it should be. He went further into her system. No ISP. She had built-in wireless and a provider but no access? She hadn't activated it? Or hadn't paid the bill? Or had shut it off?

He turned the computer over, looking for an answer. Two minutes later, he came up empty and hung his head.

No access. Jasmine had thought of everything to keep him here, not realizing his continued imprisonment meant her certain death.

Breakfast ingredients crowded the kitchen counter. Outside, sparrows made a racket, chirping in the damp trees. Moisture accumulated in the corners of the windows, fogging the glass slightly.

Stepping beneath a ceiling vent and the air-conditioning, Violet tapped the spatula against her thigh as she regarded the chopped onions and shredded potatoes for hash browns, eggs, ham, thick-sliced bacon, cheddar cheese, packaged biscuit mix and numerous spices. She nodded, confident she hadn't missed anything. "What kind of eggs do you think I should make for Mike?"

"Are you serious?" Lily pushed cinnamon cake into her mouth and talked around it. "You're worried about whether he wants scrambled or fried?"

Violet ignored the flip comment and the thought behind it—Lily thought she was a doormat, born to please. No way. Violet didn't allow herself to be steamrolled. She'd held her own with the few guys she'd dated. Four, to be exact. Like Jasmine before the curse, she'd never been a guy magnet. Nor did she believe she had to always come out swinging like their baby sister who still wasn't certain whether she preferred women or men or both in her bed. God, their mother would have been appalled at Lily's anything-goes lifestyle. "Jas said to take good care of him." Violet turned on the gas beneath the skillet, bending at the waist to watch and adjust the flame. "She likes him."

"Get a clue, Violet. That's the curse talking, not Jas."

"No, it's not. Did you see her face? Did you listen to her voice? Jas genuinely thinks he's a nice guy." Violet straightened and looked at Lily. "So do I." She'd seen Mike's fear for Jasmine, not of her. He was also spot-on gorgeous in a rugged, formidable way.

Lily ate the last of the cake and dropped the empty plate on the counter. Violet frowned at its clatter.

"You think he's a nice guy?" Lily repeated. "Sounds as if you want him as much as Jas seems to. Maybe more."

"We're not you, Lil. There won't be any threesomes, okay? I simply think he's nice. And attractive."

Lily leaned against the counter, her features surprised or mystified. "You like his looks too?"

What normal woman wouldn't? Violet draped ribbons of bacon in the warmed skilled. They sizzled on contact. "I like how he treats Jas." Her head turned to Lily. "He's good for her, I can feel it."

"Then let's make certain he stays right where he is. Ben should be in the room when they're together. Otherwise, magnificent Mike might talk Jas into taking off the cuffs or giving him his cell phone or making a call to the cops herself."

"I agree." Ben padded into the kitchen, laying the gun on the table. Wan light glinted off the barrel.

Violet suppressed a shiver at it and the thought of Ben watching her sister and Mike in bed.

"I don't think Violet's on board with the plan," Lily said.

She hedged. "We'll talk to Jas when she wakes up. See how she's feeling. What she's thinking. Then we can decide about Ben staying in the room." She heard shame in her voice and tried to clear it away. "Do you guys think Mike meant it when he said he'd help Jas?"

"How'd you know about that?" Ben asked.

Lily answered. "How do you think? When you pushed us out of the room, we stayed in the hall and listened to what was going on."

"At least until they..." Violet shook her head, unwilling to say it. "We moved away when he stopped talking about helping her."

"He won't," Lily said. "He just wants us to unlock the cuffs so he can slug Ben and split. And if he can't do that, he might be waiting for his moment to be alone with Jas so he can grab her by the throat and force us to let him go."

"Is that what you think?" Violet asked Ben.

He shrugged.

She lowered the flame on the popping bacon, moving it with the spatula so it wouldn't burn. "You like him, don't you, Ben?"

His attention whipped from the pistol to her. "What? No." He stepped back.

Lily teased. "I think he does. He's blushing."

He growled, "My face is red because it's sticky and hot in here, all right? Why in the hell is the oven on?"

He did like Mike, a kind of hero worship he'd have for an older brother. Violet heard it in his rant. She saw a faint flash of it in his eyes. "I'm making biscuits."

"For majestic Mike," Lily added.

Ben's neck flushed scarlet.

Violet returned to her cooking. "We should consider using whatever help he can offer. He has ties with the government. That woman he talked about would be able to find Desiree faster than we could. And

we can use a disposable cell phone like he said. There would be no way his friend could find out he was here."

Lily rolled her eyes. Ben averted his gaze.

"We can't keep him forever," Violet said, realizing the implications of what they'd done, what Jasmine had tried to warn them about.

"We'll keep him as long as we need to," Lily argued.

Violet wanted to counter, but knew her sister and Ben wouldn't listen. If this continued another day without a resolution, she didn't want to consider what might happen to Jasmine. Each hour she grew weaker. Somehow, Violet had to change their minds or go to Mike on her own and get him to help. Holding back a sigh, she asked, "Which one of you wants to go back upstairs and ask him how he likes his eggs?"

Lily pulled out Jasmine's chair and sat. "Not me."

"That's right," Violet said. "You have to stay here and make him another cinnamon cake." She interrupted Lily's whining, "Ben, please ask Mike what kind of eggs he wants. And leave the gun down here. The man is handcuffed to Jasmine's bed. There is no way he can hurt you."

Ben's hand fell away from the weapon. Without comment, he strode out of the room.

Deep in thought, Mike frowned at the door creaking. It appeared his time alone had ended. He dropped his cuffed hand on the mattress. The metal felt faintly warm, either from his intense concentration or because he kept touching it.

Ben looked around the jamb cautiously, as he might when peering into a pit bull's cage.

Mike spoke first. "Is Jasmine all right?"

Nodding, he stepped into the room. "She's sleeping."

"How many hours does she get each night?"

"Four, if she's lucky."

"I can help," Mike said again. "Let me call my friend."

Ben shifted from foot to foot. He jammed his hands into his back pockets. "Violet wants to know how you like your eggs."

"Screw the eggs. Jasmine needs help." He leaned forward. "Do you want to be responsible for what happens if I can't call my friend?"

He matched Mike's frown. "I don't want anything happening to Jas if you bring the cops here and they throw her into a mental ward because they don't know what the fuck is really going on. How do I know you're being straight with us?"

"It's just a call, Ben. Look," Mike added quickly, not wanting to push too hard, "if you don't want me to make a call, then at least let me send an email to Erica."

The boy's gaze cut to the laptop. "You've tried already, haven't you?"

Ben's deduction impressed and bummed Mike. Apparently, the younger man wasn't as naïve as he acted. "Only to help Jasmine. How long can she continue like this? Get me a computer with Internet access. If you want, you can send the email. I'll give you my friend's address. I'll tell you what to write. You can edit it."

"So you can bring the cops here?"

"No." His growl stabbed through the relative quiet. "If you edit the damn message and send it, how in the hell would that bring the cops here?"

Ben pulled out his right hand and held it up. As he talked, he uncurled his fingers, ticking off his answers. "IP addresses can be traced back to the user's computer. You might be talking in code to your friend. Maybe you two have a system worked out where you use certain words to say you're in danger. Locate this person might mean one thing to me and I'm in trouble, help me, to her."

Good God. This kid watched too many CSI programs. "Then let's go back to my first request for a disposable cell. That can't be traced even if my friend and I use code."

"What's her full name?"

Annoyed, Mike threw up his hands. The cuffed one flew back, banging his knuckles into the nightstand. His nostrils flattened with the pain. Shit. "Why in the fuck do you need her full name?"

"I want to research her on the Internet before I do anything. Maybe she's not a Fed. Maybe she's one of your former witnesses, a Mafia princess or a hit man who owes you a favor."

Mike hissed, "Are you serious?"

Ben's eyes narrowed, making him look a few months older. "What is your friend's name?"

Jesus. "Erica Marie Vega."

"Birth date?"

"I don't know. She was born sometime in May."

"What's your full name?"

He planned to research him too? That would waste hours or days they could be using to find Desiree. "Michael Micco Stearn. It's on my driver's license, which I'm certain someone here has already read. All my info's in my wallet. Go through it and learn."

"I plan to." He went to the door, stopped and looked back. "I forgot. How do you want your eggs?"

"In a fucking restaurant."

Ben arched one blond brow. "Sorry, man. Not today. Will over easy do?"

Mike looked at the cuff, concentrating on it, rather than answering.

Jasmine's eyes opened. Filmy sunlight filtered through the curtains, creating wavy shadows on the ceiling and walls.

She followed the dark splotches to pictures of Lily in grade school, high school, college. In the photos, the girl's hair went from her natural light brown to bright red, inky blank, chestnut with gold streaks, platinum blonde and back again.

Jasmine smiled at those happier times and lowered her lids, greedy for a few more minutes of rest. How long had she slept? Ten minutes? Fifteen? Seemed like more. The dull pain in her limbs was gone. Her temples didn't pound with her nearly constant headache.

The bed frame creaked as she rolled to the side, noticing what she hadn't before. Lily's antique clock wasn't ticking. Had someone removed it, thinking its loud sounds might disturb her? Probably. She curled up in a fetal position to slip back into darkness. The movement set off a small alarm in the back of her brain. Her heart skipped several beats. Her mind warned—it's returning. Muscles tensed, she tried to push the yearning away, aware it was hopeless.

She had to go to Mike. More importantly, she wanted to.

Violet entered the bedroom, followed closely by Lily and Ben.

The three Mousketeers, Mike thought wryly.

"Hi." Violet gave him a timid smile and placed the tray on the bed.

It held two plates covered with metal tops, hiding yet another surprise. He glanced at the silverware: a spoon and a fork, no knife. If he bent one of the fork's tines, would it open the damned lock? Maybe. Why hadn't he thought of that earlier?

"Here." Lily set a bottle of Heineken on the nightstand and shoved it in his direction. The bottle bumped a figurine. Its bottom wiggled on the wood.

"We also have Corona," Violet offered, "if you like it better."

He wanted to be angry with her, with all of them, but wasn't able to manage it. A horror they couldn't have conceived had taken over their days. His words rode out on a sigh. "How's Jasmine?"

"Hungry."

Mike's head swiveled to the doorway, the same as everyone else.

Jasmine stood framed in the jamb, her freshly washed hair and complexion glowing, the circles beneath her eyes hidden by makeup. She wore lingerie long on glamour, short on fabric. Her breasts nearly spilled out of the black strapless bra, a confection of lace, satin, sequins. The panties or thong, he couldn't tell which from this angle, was made of the same fabrics and embellishment, barely covering her pussy. In place of the diamond navel jewelry, she wore a gold pendant in the shape of falling leaves. Earrings of the same design dangled from her earlobes.

Ben blurted, "Where'd she get that?"

"My room," Lily muttered. "I didn't hear her showering. She must have done it while we allowed our guest to have his shower."

"That bra and thong are yours?" Ben sounded astonished.

Violet elbowed him. "Jas, you okay?"

Ambivalence clouded her expression. Mike watched her look from the others to him. She smiled shyly even as her attire and posture flaunted her near nudity. "I was able to sleep for a few minutes."

"Way more than that," Lily said. "It's one in the afternoon."

A breathtaking smile radiated across Jasmine's glorious mouth. Mike had rarely witnessed such surprise and joy. Lily might as well have said the curse was in remission. He could see it wasn't. Behind Jasmine's quiet reserve the yearning continued to build, flaring intermittently in her eyes.

Violet crossed the room to the closet and pulled out a dark green robe. "Come downstairs, Jas. I'll make you lunch."

"She can have mine," Mike said. He offered Jasmine his hand. "Join me."

Lily stepped aside to let her pass. Ben didn't move until Lily grabbed his arm.

Jasmine went to the bed, her fingers skimming Mike's palm. A spark rose between them, a charge of interest, the same as the first time their eyes met. It didn't quiet her trembling hand or warm her clammy fingertips. He held them carefully to let her know he posed no danger. She responded with a smile of sheepish appreciation and escalating lust. Both parts of the same women, though to what degree?

He warned himself it didn't matter. She searched for men with whom she had a connection and had chosen him, though only because of the curse. Her kind of woman preferred corporate types, handsome hunks like Connor. She'd said as much. When this was over, and he'd see to it somehow, he doubted she'd be glad he'd been in her bed.

His attention must have troubled her or perhaps she'd read his pained expression, because she averted her gaze. It went to the raw spot on his wrist. "You're hurt."

"Not really." He thought fast so she and the others wouldn't guess what he'd been doing. "I forgot the cuff was there and moved my hand too quickly."

She heard his lie. He'd tried to get free. What man wouldn't? No guy liked a lunatic imprisoning him. Humiliated by her actions, she wanted to run. Desire wouldn't allow it, boring into her core with each tap of her heart. Drawn to his wound first, she kissed the skin around it, indulging in his refreshing scent, tonguing his pulse. His fingers curled to settle on her cheek. Jasmine's throat jerked with her prolonged mewls. She moved her face into his palm, coveting it more than she did sleep or food, reveling in its bulk and might.

Someone moaned, sounding embarrassed. Probably Violet. "Please leave me and Mike alone," Jasmine asked.

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Lily answered. "I don't think so."
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<sup>&</sup>quot;I agree." Ben's voice.

Jasmine straightened, noting the gun in his hand. She glanced at Violet.

Her sister's blush deepened to crimson, brighter than the bougainvillea on the porch. She spoke haltingly, "Maybe it's best if Ben stays, in case you need him. He can wait in the bath. Isn't that right, Ben?"

"He could wait outside the bedroom door," Mike said.

"I don't think so," Lily repeated.

Jasmine regarded her sisters and Ben. They feared she liked Mike so much she'd feel bad and help him escape. They weren't going to risk it or give him a chance to flee on his own. Laughter, bitter and helpless, bubbled in her throat, because they were sadly wrong. She liked him so much she didn't want him to ever leave. Even if the curse ended, she'd be in a worse prison. One forged by his hold on her. Her body would still obsess for his, while her heart would ache for his calming voice and embrace. Not that it mattered. Given his freedom, he'd bolt faster than Connor fled Desiree. She'd never see him again.

He'd become a painful memory of loss, a mocking reminder there never could have been anything lasting between them. He'd only been attracted to what she'd become. Without the curse, she was horribly shy, dreadfully bland. Not what he wanted.

Head down, she spoke to her sisters and Ben. "None of you have to stay. I won't let him go."

Mike moved his leg under the sheet, swishing it.

She kissed his ankle through the thin cotton, truly Desiree's creature, wanting a man she could never have, doing everything she could to keep him for as long as possible. Her voice was sluggish with defeat. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay." His fingers grazed the ends of her hair.

"Ben stays," Lily announced in an anxious voice. "So does the gun. Come on, Violet." Their footfalls retreated. The door creaked closed.

## Chapter Nine

"You should eat," Mike said to Jasmine, hiding his fear for her. She'd changed subtly since she'd come into the room. An air of resignation showed in her face and voice. How many weeks or days would she last if he didn't do something? "Let's see what we have."

She sat near the tray, her hand on his foot. "Mexican, by the smell of it."

"Violet's best dish."

With Ben's comment, Mike put the metal cover to the side and turned to him. "Did you finish your research or even start it?"

"I'm working on it." A wounded tone shaded his voice. "I couldn't find everything I need."

Like what? An FCC guarantee that an email or phone call wouldn't have the cops storming over here? "How much longer will it take?"

"I don't know," he growled. "I can't risk making a mistake." His pale blue eyes jerked to Jasmine.

A melted string of Monterey Jack hung over her thumb. Listless, she tongued it off.

Mike smiled. "Looks good."

Her gaze flicked to him, then dropped to the plate. "You're talking about Desiree. The two of you are looking for her."

Wariness and something he couldn't place rang in her voice. "We'll find her. This will end, I promise."

She nodded gently. The heel of her hand went to her forehead.

"What's wrong?" Heart catching, he circled her biceps with his fingers and leaned close. "Does your head hurt?"

"Just a little dizzy."

"You should rest. Try to get some more sleep."

"No. I'm fine." She managed a brittle smile.

Reluctantly, he removed his hand.

Blinking tears from her eyes, she uncovered the second plate. Caramel flan and cinnamon crisps. She bypassed it and the monstrous enchilada to scoop a bit of the refried beans on her fingertips. "Try this."

He took her hand, pleased it was slightly warmer. "I had a fifteen-course breakfast. You didn't. You should be the one who's eating."

"I'm watching my weight."

"No, you're not. You're perfect just as you are."

Her eyes grew shiny again. She whispered, "You first. Please."

Eyes on her, he sucked all three fingers into his mouth, noticing the taste of her skin more than the beans' flavor, and it was damned good. She was better. Succulent female with a gentle sweet core. He tongued the last of the food from his teeth and concentrated on licking the traces from her fingers. Cleaned, he kept them near his lips, not wanting to let go, unwilling to hide what he felt.

"Tell me about you," she said. Curiosity shone in her gaze.

He wasn't certain where this was heading and avoided an answer. "I thought I did at the club."

"I want to know more. Everything. I'll keep asking till you tell me. We have so little time."

His belly cramped at her comment. The floor squeaked with Ben's shift in weight. Mike had forgotten about him. "Is something going on besides the dizziness?" he asked her. "Does your head hurt? Do you need to lie down?"

Jasmine's fingers curled over his, catching on his bottom lip. "I need to know about you, Mike."

He joked. "I swear it's boring."

"Not to me."

Was that her talking or the curse? Again, he told himself it hardly mattered. She didn't really want him. She never would. His only purpose was to help and keep her safe. Sighing, he tried to think of what to say and just went with the truth. "My childhood was uneventful, except for the usual crap boys get into. You know."

"No, I don't. Tell me."

Uncomfortable, he frowned.

"Please," she said.

Her plea melted his resistance. He considered his greatest adolescent crimes, settling on one. "When I was eleven, I sneaked a smoke from my dad's stash. By the time I was seventeen, I was going through a pack a day, working odd jobs after school to pay for them. Dad started getting sick and it scared the shit out of me, so I quit for good when I turned twenty." He shrugged, finished.

"What else?"

He hadn't a clue what to say and thought for a moment, recalling an event he'd forgotten. "At my buddy's fourteenth birthday party I got drunk for the first time, along with the rest of the guys. I had a hangover that lasted two days. As I remember, it felt like someone was shooting rocks into my eyeballs." He grinned at the stupidity of youth.

Her fingers traced his lips. He sobered. She asked again, "What else?"

Why did she want to know? Where could this possibly lead? He wanted to argue for her to eat, to let him call Erica. In the end, her next plea had him throwing out what he could recollect, though it wasn't much.

"All through school I got A's in math and science and struggled with history. I just couldn't get interested in such tedious crap. I wasn't one of the cool kids. I was far too tall and skinny. In those days, I wore my hair so short and had such a slight build a girl I liked called me Mr. Eraserhead. She said my head looked like an eraser on top of a pencil." He winced inwardly at the awful memory. "I did my level best to avoid her after that. In my sophomore year, I found sports or they found me, and I learned discipline for the first time in my life. It's not that my parents didn't keep me in line, but my coach—God, he was a real fucker. Hiding my smoking habit from him nearly killed me, but it didn't get me to stop. I puffed away whenever I was off court and under his radar. I played varsity basketball in high school and college, though nothing the NBA would be interested in. Dad seemed disappointed, not that he said anything. He was too nice a guy to hurt my feelings. Mom just wanted me to be happy and to stay out of trouble. I tried not to let either of them down." Wrung out, he lifted his shoulders for a second time, truly having nothing else to offer.

She squeezed his fingers gently. "More."

He laughed. "There isn't any, really."

"Tell me why you feel so guilty. You're so sad."

A pain, deep and familiar, pricked his chest. He shook it off. "I'm not. I'm worried about you."

"You're grieving. I can see it in your eyes. What happened?"

He stared and lowered their hands to the bed. His eyes fixed on their laced fingers not her.

"I want to help," she said.

"I don't need any."

"I can listen. Tell me."

"No." He released her hand and toughened his voice. "You need to eat. Go on. Have all of it, I'm not hungry."

"We have so little time."

"Dammit, quit saying that! I'm going to find that bitch and fix this!"

"Because it will ease your conscience over what happened in the service?"

His teeth clenched. He averted his gaze.

She put her hand on his chest, her fingers curled slightly, consoling. "Whatever's troubling you, you did all you could."

Mike pushed her hand away. "How in the hell could you know that?"

"You wouldn't have been with the service if you weren't good at what you did."

"Oh, yeah? You should tell that to my partner."

"I'm sure he'd agree."

His fingers fisted in the sheets. He wanted to tear them apart or punch something.

"He would," she said.

"From a grave?" he shouted, looking at her. "You want to know what happened. Fine. During a witness transfer, he was shot. He died. That's why I left. It was my fault."

"No." She rebuffed his claim, disbelief and melancholy in her voice. "You were shot too."

He growled, "Don't you understand? I should have protected him. I saved myself instead."

"I don't believe it."

"It's the fucking truth!"

His rage didn't faze her. "How could you have saved him when you were hurt?" Her thumb rubbed his scar's craggy surface, the action saying she'd erase the imperfection and horrible moment for him. "The bullet hit your right arm. You're right-handed. You couldn't have been able to hold onto your gun."

Every muscle in his face went slack as he recalled what he tried so desperately to forget. The gun had dropped from his hand with the round's impact, the slug shattering his humerus.

A surgeon repaired it with a metal plate and numerous pins. The only lingering damage was a partial numbness in his ring and little finger. He welcomed it as a constant reminder of his cowardice.

With her fingers beneath his chin, Jasmine lifted his head, waiting until he gathered the courage to meet her gaze. Her expression was too kind, too accepting. "How could you have saved him without your gun?"

Tears smeared his vision. "I could have taken the bullet. I should have."

Her head shook, whisking her hair over her shoulders. One of her gold leaf earrings caught in the waves. "You were injured. You couldn't move."

"I dodged the shot. It hit him instead."

"You have to forgive yourself." She pushed the tray aside and folded him in her arms. "You're a good man."

His voice cracked. "You don't know me."

"I know enough." Her lips found his earlobe, temple and cheek as she gave him a series of compassionate and humbling kisses. For the first time in his life, Mike accepted a woman's sympathy, allowing her to tend to him. Jasmine made certain she didn't miss any part of his face, from the tip of his nose, to his lashes, brows, and even the mole on his right temple.

In her embrace, he allowed himself to hope, to momentarily forget his past and her present for a more pleasant future. He imagined them enjoying breakfast in this bed on a lazy Sunday morning, bodies bared, newspapers spread out on the mattress, conversation easy as they discussed what to do with the rest of their day—go to the beach or a ballgame, ride his bike to one of the parks for a picnic. Ordinary activities he wanted to share with her, ones that existed only in his mind.

Already, her solace had turned to bruising demand. She clawed at the sheet to expose him. Her mouth trapped his, her tongue striving to fill him as much as possible.

He sucked hard, encouraging it, not knowing how much of the passion was from her, how much from the curse. Nor did he care. Fool that he was, he wanted whatever she could give, willing to pretend her feelings for him were real, grateful her renewed vitality quieted his dread about the time she had left. He'd make certain she survived, just as soon as he silenced her current yearning and his.

Too little time left. Not enough for a dozen caresses or a hundred kisses, when a thousand wouldn't do. His musk, heat and innate goodness called to Jasmine as nothing else had, depriving her of reason and inhibition.

Ben was still in the room, not quite forgotten.

Ending the kiss, she watched him put the pistol on the floor next to the tray he'd taken from the bed. The gun made a slight clack. The wood recorded his advancing steps.

"Jas, I'd do anything for you," Ben said. "You'll be okay. I'll make sure of it."

He couldn't. Only Mike owned that power, at least for relieving her hunger.

Mike's forehead furrowed at Ben being so close. "Get the laptop and work on it now," he ordered.

Desire and something akin to love shook the younger man's voice. "I can't leave her. She needs me as much as you."

"It's all right," she said to Mike, her fingers on his lids, compelling his eyes to close. She guided his head to the pillows and his body to the side, his feet facing the cheval mirror so she could kneel next to him.

He caught her wrist, bringing it to his mouth, sucking vigorously. To mark her as his own? Her foolish heart couldn't entertain such a thing. He was here only because she'd tricked him.

All too soon, he stopped and asked, "Is this what you want? What you need? Both of us in your bed?"

Blood rose to her cheeks, her thoughts troubled by an act that seduced and disturbed in equal measure. Was the curse bringing out behavior she would have never considered or was it freeing her to be what she tried to deny? Reluctant to know, she murmured, "I want time I don't have."

"Don't say-"

Her kiss stopped him, a tender meeting of lips and tongues. His free hand went to her throat, thumb on her pulse. Its forceful beat proved his possession of her. With his objection forgotten, she nibbled his lower lip and chin, smooth from his shave, then moved to his neck and chest, inhaling his male scent, licking the sharp centers of his nipples, loving his satiny skin and the faint depression of his navel.

Ben said something she didn't hear. His hand went to her, fingering the ends of her hair. Gently, he brushed back the locks that had spilled onto her cheek, while his other hand skimmed the edge of her bra. A meek protest rose in her throat and died. Mike's torso twisted. In disapproval? For attention?

She gave it, stabbing her tongue into his navel, tasting the tapered hair beneath it. His narrow hips lifted, his ponderous cock toiling to reach her mouth.

With his knee on the mattress, Ben leaned forward, his fingers pushing down her bra's lacy cup, finding her nipple, shaping it into a rigid nub.

Her nostrils widened. She smelled both men's arousal: Ben's was urgent, Mike's heady and rich.

Mike offered the first invitation, straightening his right leg, beckoning her mouth to his groin.

She accepted. Ben's arm dropped to his side as she moved away from him and toward Mike's penis, holding it out of the way to uncover his sac. Passion compressed the glands into two tidy packages. Rubbing the tip of her nose against the creased skin, she sniffed his fragrance, more sumptuous than the most expensive perfume. She licked his sac, wanting it to smell of her. Damp with her saliva, she took his left testicle into her mouth.

He groaned loudly, happily.

Ben climbed on the bed. He unhooked her bra, asserting his place in the act. Jasmine's breasts swung free, though not for long. Ben clothed her flesh with his palms, squeezing and panting his delight.

The walls of her pussy pumped, driving more moisture from inside. She released Mike's left testicle and gathered his right into her mouth, her tongue studying how it differed from the other. A bit larger and more sensitive, which his extended moan clearly demonstrated.

It must have made Ben jealous. He pushed into her buttocks, his impressive bulge saying it would have its due.

Purposely, she kept her ass lifted to him and her head lowered to Mike. Finished with his balls, she rejoiced in his shaft's beauty, her lips touring its grand form, every vein, ridge, depression, curve.

The metal teeth of Ben's zipper hissed. His shorts fell to his knees, hitting her calves.

Jasmine's heart stalled for a second, then beat wildly, but she didn't stop. She took Mike's penis into her mouth, opening her throat so most of his shaft could slip inside. He grunted. Ben pulled her thong away from her cunt and anus, his fingers exploring each, making her belly flutter and her ears ring. She had no idea which entry he'd choose, nor did she dwell on it. He would have her.

He said as much, telling her again how he'd protect her, how he'd save her. "Anything you want," he promised, "anything, I'll give it to you. Oh God." His words turned into a tortured moan as he entered, unrepentantly sinking his cock into her sheath until it encased every inch of him. The invasion surprised her when it shouldn't have. She panted around Mike's cock. His fingers dug into the sheets, Ben's into her hips. Both men thrust their hips, exacting pleasure.

The ménage created a decadent and enchanting picture in her mind of her nudity, lust, their need and hers. She didn't know which image to embrace. Her body did. It chose both, the act whetting her clit. She moved her hand between her legs to attend to her need. It must have reminded Ben of his duty.

He pushed her fingers aside, rubbing her in tune with his hasty pumps, his words hurried as he again assured. "I have it, Jas. Aw God, I'll do it for you. You won't have to—" His words halted beneath another aching moan.

There wasn't a chance for her to respond or to hold off. Her orgasm arrived seconds after his, gripping the insides of her thighs, her belly.

Ben muttered a curse, pissed he'd made them both come too fast.

Mike didn't give him an opportunity for redemption. He pulled back his hips, which released his erection from her gasping mouth.

Jasmine glanced up. Mike's ebony eyes bored into her. His voice commanded. "Take off the thong and come here."

Obediently and willingly, she stripped and left Ben for the second time to join Mike. Despite his cuffed wrist, his position allowed him to push her down to the mattress. His body covered hers. His shaft lay hot, inflexible, imposing against her thigh. "Bend your legs. I want to feel your cunt."

Her breasts tapped his chest with each jagged breath. From the side, Ben watched, his loose tee shifting with his elevated breathing. She bent her knees, planting her feet on the comforter, spreading her legs.

Mike's penis slid to her juicy slit. Grabbing her hair with his cuffed hand, he pulled her head back, his mouth heading for her throat. She mewled in anticipation, hungering for this. Mike did not disappoint. His tongue swirled over her neck at the same moment his free hand guided his rod inside. He entered in one thrust and thumbed her clit in an economy of motion.

But he didn't rush.

He obliged her to experience the act second by second—the mounting pressure in her groin from his width and size, the extreme sensitivity of her nub, the perfect warmth of his breath and tongue.

She braved his uniform strokes, holding off as he did, biting her bottom lip as he stopped so neither of them would know immediate joy. When she tried to bury her face in his hair, he wouldn't have it. He kissed her urgently, like a man who knew their time was ending and his best intentions couldn't change a thing.

Held captive by his tongue and cock, she relinquished everything to him, her body, heart, mind and soul. Downstairs, the grandfather clock tolled the time. For the better part of the next ten minutes he remained inside, pumping and pausing, his actions methodical, meant to drive them wild.

A glaze of sweat dampened her chest and his. They stank of sex, animal passion, each other.

His eyes pinned her as his pumps increased, demanding she hold his gaze so he could see the power he had over her, convinced she'd do anything he desired. Her hips rose to meet his, her pussy tilting to allow him the most depth.

Mike accepted, using her as he willed, as she required. Just as his size and thrusts became more than she could withstand, they came as one, their sounds carnal and indistinguishable.

Gulping air, unable to move or to think, she expected him to pull out. He didn't. His hold on her tightened.

The bed frame rattled with Ben's movements. Mike heard the younger man zipping his shorts, the sound of concession. Ben knew it would be a long time before he got another chance with Jasmine.

Possessive, Mike kissed her at his leisure while remaining inside to prove he was the man to whom she now belonged. Ben's presence didn't discourage him. In this bed, only he and Jasmine existed. Their fragrance perfumed the sheets. The pillows and mattress molded to their contours.

He tended to her cravings with his mouth, kissing her deeply, unmindful of his languor as he waited for his body to recover.

Fifteen minutes later, his cock stiffened within its prison. Her body accepted it, welcomed it. He took her again, his lovemaking painstaking and dogged. To please her? To show off for Ben? To prove something to himself? Probably all three.

He didn't stop until he drew the last weary cry from her.

Sated, though hardly finished, he pulled out and slumped against the headboard. "Come here," he said, his heavy breathing interrupting his words. "Sit between my legs."

Compliant, she crawled to him, allowing him to position her body, her head lolling on his shoulder. With his feet, he pulled her legs apart, baring her naked cunt. The cheval mirror caught its damp mouth and their reflections perfectly, just as it had hours earlier. Lips to her ear, he said now what he had then, "Watch."

Through slitted eyes, she saw him stroking her puffy folds. He viewed her elegant features. They crumpled with displeasure as he teased her clit too briefly. Her writhing told him to hurry and finish it. In direct defiance, he fingered the golden leaves dangling from her navel and those on her earlobes. The precious metal winked back. He smiled. Jasmine whimpered, her hips lifting, begging.

Rooted to the moment, Ben's eyes rounded, taking in the scene. He slid his right knee over the linens but didn't come closer.

Good choice, Mike knew. This act belonged to him and Jasmine. He massaged the inviting area between her legs—fleshy, wet, his.

Unknowingly, she clawed his cuffed hand. Her skull hit his collarbone with her desperate attempt to move her body into his fingers. He gave in at last and touched her, concentrating on her nub. She gasped and moaned, finally settling on a weak cry.

He worked her until she climaxed again. Her hand loosened on his wrist and fell from his. It didn't take long for her breathing to slow. Shortly thereafter, her head slumped forward.

Mike kissed her cheek and met Ben's eyes. In them, he saw a mess of jealousy, hurt and admiration, none of which he had the energy or time to address. He spoke as quietly as he could. "She's asleep. I want her to stay that way until morning."

Apparently confused, Ben crawled off the bed, shooting a glance at Jasmine to see if he'd disturbed her. She didn't move. He went to Mike's side and whispered, "How are we supposed to accomplish that?"

"Doesn't anyone here have over-the-counter sleep aids? When she wakes up, put them in her food or in a drink."

"We tried that and sedatives from a doctor after Travis almost hurt her. It didn't work then. It's not going to work now."

Mike countered. "Isn't she more exhausted now than she was then?"

"Well, yeah. She gets worse every day."

"Then the pills may work this time. Try them. I want her to stay asleep. And I expect you to send that email. If you're worried about someone tracking you down, use a computer at a damned Internet café or the library. Just go."

"I will. Should I bring her to Lily's room first?"

"She's not going to stay asleep long in this bed, is she?"

"Okay, okay." His blush ran all the way to his fair hairline. "I'll take care of it." He gathered Jasmine into his arms, struggling with her slack body.

Mike spoke softly. "When you get her settled, come back here with a pen and a piece of paper. I'll give you what you need to get into my email account, along with Erica's address and what I want you to send."

## Chapter Ten

Twenty minutes later, Ben read what Mike wrote and frowned. "Why are you so interested in Connor?"

"He's the key to this crap. Without him, it's going to be pissing hard for us to find Desiree."

For once, doubting Ben took what he said on faith. He closed the notepad and shoved it into his back pocket. "There's an Internet café on the other side of town. How long should I wait for Erica's answer?"

Mike tried hard not to smile. "Once you send the message you can come back here to wait. Opening my account on your computer isn't going to bring anyone to this house. It's unlikely the Feds have this place under surveillance."

"You think I'm a real ass, don't you?"

He thought Ben loved Jasmine as only a kid in his twenties could. With a lot of romantic crap that had nothing to do with reality. She appreciated Ben's protection. She may have even loved him as a friend, but he could never give her what she most required, even without the curse.

And you can? his thoughts ridiculed. He wasn't here because they'd met under ordinary circumstances. He recalled Jasmine's previous words, how the curse drew her to guys completely different from Connor, men she would have never chosen in the past. His heart sank a little more. "I think you'd do anything, legal or otherwise, to help Jasmine. What's your connection with her anyway?" He knew he sounded like a drooling, pimply adolescent, and didn't care. "Are you renting one of the bedrooms?"

Ben's surprise showed in his arched brows. "Did Violet or Lily tell you that?"

"I guessed. You're always here. Don't you ever work?"

"All the time." His previous admiration vanished. "I illustrate the catalogues for the sisters' business."

"Jasmine hired you?"

"Why? Jealous?"

Maybe. "Lily seems to be the one bossing you around. You work for her? If you do, you might want to think about telling her no every now and then."

He picked up the gun and the tray. "I'll send that message now."

"I don't advise you to take my pistol out of the house."

"I won't, but I'm not leaving it up here, either."

For Jasmine to find and give to her hostage? "Ben."

The boy stopped at the door.

"Thanks," Mike said. "And please tell Violet and Lily about putting something in Jasmine's food to keep her asleep."

He nodded and left, closing the door behind himself.

Mike held his breath, listening to Ben move down the hall. He counted off a minute, then two. The silence held. No one came this way. His eyes darted to the bath. He reminded himself that someone could enter from it. He had to be careful. Taking a moment to prepare himself, he regarded the room. Long shadows flowed from the cheval mirror and dresser, tracking the sun's descent. Clouds from earlier had evaporated or scattered, leaving a slice of Wedgewood-blue sky just below the filmy curtain.

He cautioned himself to start small. His sprinting pulse said no, bad idea. Jasmine's condition deteriorated by the second. Ben wanted to play it too safe, wasting precious time to go to an Internet café, which added another delay. And there was Violet and Lily. Who knew when they'd come into the room to check up on or feed him? What if they saw his power before he could free himself?

What if his gift didn't return?

The cuff hung heavy on his wrist, deriding him.

He stared at the figurines on the nightstand. Their empty gazes also taunted, saying his mind wouldn't be able to move or lift them. The curse would consume Jasmine. She'd seek relief until she collapsed and died.

No. Stop it. He ran his tongue over his lips and looked for the smallest figurine, the easiest for him to manipulate. In front of it lay the belly chain Jasmine wore their first night. He studied the links, his attention catching on the dangling diamonds.

Estimating their weight, his scrutiny went to the shortest strand. He centered his thoughts on it. Nothing happened. He tried harder. A muscle in his neck pinched, sending a burst of agony down his arm. Teeth gritted, he endured it while willing the diamonds to move. They didn't. The sounds of his labored breathing, the outside breeze and the air-conditioning distracted him further. He held his breath. His lungs started to burn. The corners of his vision faded until he saw only the jewelry, the gems' glint and cut, their clarity, the mountings.

The sibilant buzz, familiar and welcome, surrounded him. His scalp tingled, the hairs on his forearms rose.

His power hadn't vanished.

Neither had Tommy. The man's face loomed before him, bewildered and terrified. In his mind, Mike saw the bloody froth at the corners of Tommy's mouth, the spreading stain on his shirt, his hollow gaze.

The buzz faltered, drifting away. Other noises intruded, a bird's chirp, the steady drip of water.

Gut clenching, he heard Jasmine's earlier words. "You have to forgive yourself." Tears stung his eyes. What if he couldn't? Shit. If anything more happened to her, how could he forgive himself then? Hadn't she suffered enough for a supposed crime she hadn't even committed?

He saw her as she'd been when he'd come into the bath, her palms pressed to the tile, body wilted, head lowered. He recalled her limbs dangling inertly over Ben's arms as he carried her from the room. He heard her saying the words she'd come to believe. "I want time I don't have."

He blinked repeatedly, but his eyes kept filling, making the diamonds shimmy. He swiped at the tears to clear his vision. The jewels moved again.

His heart snagged on the next beat. He stared. Had the movement been in his sight only or had the diamonds actually shifted over the wood?

Scared to trust what he hoped he'd seen, he fixed his attention on the strand, while more images unwound in his mind. Jasmine approaching him in the bar, a smile on her face, terror in her eyes. Her distress in the alley when he'd asked if someone had raped her. Lust flaring in her eyes as he awakened to see her watching him. Hair stuck to her cheeks in the shower, her eyes slitted, her body too weary.

The buzz returned, its intensity vacillating like a car radio trying to regain its signal.

He didn't move, refused to breathe. The last diamond in the strand shifted to the right and ascended, mimicking a cobra's move as the serpent's about to strike. The rest of the diamonds followed. They hovered above the wood, creating a faint reflection on the polished surface before dropping back down.

His head fell forward. A savage headache spread across the back of his skull. Spasms gripped his neck and shoulders, the same as those times he'd worked out in the gym too long. He felt like shit and couldn't stop smiling. His power had returned.

It was far from useful. He didn't have weeks to get it back into shape to turn the handcuff's lock or failing that, pull the metal rings apart. He might not even have days to exercise it.

Still winded, he disregarded his body's complaints and looked at the hour hand on his watch, determined to move it, to perfect his talent, to welcome it for the first time and grow strong.

Violet closed the refrigerator door and backed up double-time. Her shoulder bumped the appliance. "Oh my God. What are you doing down here?"

Jasmine filled a glass at the sink and drank all the water in one long gulp. She ran the back of her hand over her mouth to dry it. "I was thirsty."

Her sister didn't ask why she hadn't used the faucets upstairs.

She'd wanted to and tried the door leading into her bath, finding it locked, the door to her bedroom closed. More agitated than an addict, she'd burned to rejoin Mike. His need to rest was the only thing protecting him from her. She'd come down here to put as must distance between them as possible. "Do you have any flan left?"

"Sure. I'll get it and an enchilada for you. Go on, sit down."

The backs of her legs bounced on the chair. She wrapped her robe tightly around her thighs. "Where's Lil and Ben?"

"We had some deliveries to make, so Lil said she'd go."

Jasmine drummed her nails on the table's glass top. Violet's hand paused on the Tupperware, her voice shaky. "Is it getting bad again?"

Far more than in times past. Lust used to dominate. Her growing love for Mike exacerbated it. She could only presume this was how Desiree felt about Connor. A rapturous hell Jasmine couldn't bear much longer. "Where's the Ambien?"

"Why?"

Elbows on the table, she held her head in her hands. "Maybe it will help me sleep this time. Isn't that what we all want?"

"Not that way. It made you nauseous and gave you a terrible headache. Why don't you try some wine first?"

Jasmine laughed without meaning to. "I think I need something a little stronger than wine or even my prescription. Know anyone who could hook me up with the anesthesia Michael Jackson had?"

In an instant, Violet was behind her, massaging her shoulders. "Don't talk that way. Ben's taking care of this."

Ben? Heat flooded Jasmine as she recalled what had happened between them. Worry over seeing him again gripped her. She dropped her hands. "How? I thought you said he and Lil were on a delivery."

"She is. Hold on, Ben's not bothering Mike." Violet put a lot of her weight on Jasmine's shoulders to keep her in the chair. "He went to The Ocean's Brink."

"Why did he go to an Internet café?"

"He's sending an email to Mike's government friend, so she can help us find Desiree."

Blood drained from Jasmine's face.

"Mike told him exactly what to write," Violet continued. "This is going to be over before you know it—Jas, what's the matter? Don't you believe me?"

Sobs racked her body, restricting her speech.

Violet rubbed her arms. "Are you crying because you're relieved?"

"No!" She blurted, "I love him. He'll leave. I'll never see him again."

Violet's massage slowed. She used their mother's firm voice, the one Jasmine tried to imitate when she'd raised her and Lily. "You don't know that."

"Of course I do." She ran the robe's sash beneath her eyes and nose. "You think he's going to want to see me after this?"

"I meant you don't know that you love him. How could you?"

She pushed Violet's hands off her, rage peaking so fast it heated her face and chest. For the first time since they'd reached adulthood, she wanted to slap her sister's face. "Because he's Native American?"

"What? No! Believe me, I don't think I've ever seen a more attractive man. A guy you met less than two days ago. One who isn't at all like the type you dated before. You know I hate to ever agree with Lily, but I think what you're saying is the curse talking, not you. Being attracted to him, liking him, even trusting him is one thing. Loving him is quite another."

It made sense intellectually, but in a part of her soul unaffected by the curse, Jasmine knew better. For too many years, she'd longed to have what her parents experienced, a sense of completion and rightness about being with another person. A man she respected, admired, craved and wanted to keep safe. Until Mike, no man had evoked that from her. She pressed her fingers to the corners of her eyes, squeezing them to stave off more tears.

Violet rubbed her back. "You'll feel better after you eat."

"Do you know where Lily put the Ambien or even the Sominex?"

"I'll find one or the other for you, if that's what you really want."

"I do. And hurry. Please." She trusted herself even less now than she had these past months. At the prospect of losing Mike, Jasmine wasn't certain what she might be capable of doing.

The hand on Mike's arm told him he'd fallen asleep or passed out from his mental gymnastics. Had Jasmine returned? His lids opened on ashy light. Dusk? He regarded the blunt fingers still touching him and Ben's troubled face.

Mike's skin went hot then cold. With his free hand, he felt the sheets behind himself. Cool to the touch. Empty. Jasmine hadn't come back. "Where is she?" It took him two attempts to get to a sitting position, with the cuff insistent on yanking back his hand. He swore. "What's happened?"

"Nothing." Ben stepped away from the bed, the Glock at his side. "With her or anything else."

"Stop being so fucking cryptic. Where is she?"

"Asleep. Violet said she took her prescription. You were right. It finally worked. Your friend hasn't answered the email. That's why I'm here. I've been staring at the computer screen for the last couple of hours."

Shit. "I'll call her. Get me one of those disposable phones."

"In the morning."

He frowned. "Why not now?"

"I researched throw-away cells. Some have GPS locators on them. That's what the stores around here happen to be selling. I located the phone I want at a store that's an hour away. Even if I left now, I couldn't get there before it closed. It will have to wait until tomorrow."

Mike reined in his temper and voice. "You don't have to go through all this shit. No one's looking for me, all right? I lied to you guys about that so you'd let me go. When I told Jasmine at the club that I didn't have anything planned for the next couple of days or nights, it was the fucking truth."

"Oh yeah?" Ben's smartass tone said he didn't buy it. "I found messages in your account from the people you work for. They were expecting you to email them today about the Jenner case and the Malwaski situation. At the café, I sent all of them the same response—that you'd be out of town for the next couple of weeks. A family emergency. They replied with their condolences and said to take your time and get back to them when you returned. I'm not going to let anyone worry about where you are, look for you here and hurt Jas. You're not leaving until she's cured."

"And how in the fuck do you think that's going to happen if you don't let me call Erica and get her started on this?"

"If she's not answering her emails, could be she's out for the night. Could be she's not taking calls or returning voice mails, either. We'll know for certain tomorrow when I get the phone. If she doesn't work out, I expect you to call one of your other government friends. All of them, if need be."

"Is he ready?"

Mike followed Ben's gaze to the door. Lily stood in the jamb, a huge chef's skillet in her left fist.

"In a sec." Ben dug the handcuff key out of his short's front pocket and tossed it on the sheet by Mike's hand. Next, he pulled a bath towel from the footboard and pitched it. "You know the drill."

Too cornered to argue, Mike unlocked the cuff, letting it smack into the floor. Lily came deeper into the room with her weapon. She didn't trust Ben to use the gun if Mike rushed the boy. The steel in her eyes told him she'd pulverize his knees or shoulder with the skillet should he misbehave in the slightest.

He put the key on the nightstand, wrapped the towel around his hips and headed for the bath.

Behind him, Lily said, "After I change the sheets, I'll call down to Violet to bring up his meal."

Mike spoke over his shoulder. "How about my clothes?"

"They stay downstairs."

He stopped and turned to her. "I'm glad to hear that."

"Why?" Ben asked, clearly suspicious.

Mike used his most arrogant tone, implying they were both idiots. "They're out in plain sight where they can be seen from the front windows. All someone has to do is look past those ferns and know I'm here."

A vertical line appeared between Lily's narrowed eyes. "We didn't leave your stuff where you'd dropped it. Don't worry, it's safe in Jas's office."

Excellent. He now knew where to find his clothes. "I hope you haven't been using my cell minutes or credit cards."

"Get real." She bounced the skillet against her knee, causing the metal to bong dully.

"We're not thieves. All your stuff's in Jas's office. Safe and sound."

With a nod, he thanked her for telling him where to locate his phone and padded into the bath.

"Hold it." Ben hurried to the jamb. "Don't close the door all the way."

"And deprive you of a chance to watch? Wouldn't think of it."

Lily snickered. Ben shot her a frown and moved past Mike to the bath's other door, making certain no one had unlocked it. "Do what you have to. I'll be by the jamb, just like the last time. I'm going to be watching the other door to see you don't head for it. Make one wrong move and—"

"Lily will part my hair with her skillet?"

Her voice came from the bedroom. "That's the plan."

Ben swung the door toward himself, leaving enough space to slip back inside should he have to. "Go on. No one's watching."

Mike did his business, shaved, brushed his teeth and started the shower. With the curtain closed and the water pounding into the porcelain tub, he felt relatively safe and alone, an acceptable setting to exercise his power. He focused on the shower caddy's contents: a bottle of designer shampoo, conditioner, soap and several sponges.

The spray's noise muted the mounting buzz, insurance Ben or Lily couldn't hear it. To this day, Mike wasn't certain if others detected the noise. His parents could. However, they had the same genes as he. Erica also picked it up. Not a surprise, since she was telekinetic too, a secret they shared. The bastards who ambushed him and Tommy hadn't seemed to notice the drone, possibly because they'd been too preoccupied with their escape when they'd seen the gun's muzzle moving on its own. As to everyone in this house, he wasn't about to take a chance on discovery.

He willed the speckled brown sponge to rise. It shuddered in place. He kept at it. The thing climbed the air, listing from side to side, unsure of its direction or his expertise. His mind saw it turning to the right. It did, its edge hitting the soap. He glanced at the lavender-colored bar. The sponge fell back to its tray, his power not yet strong enough to maintain it.

Head aching, he tried repeatedly, Jasmine in the corners of his mind—the circles beneath her eyes, her drowsiness, panic, words: *I want time I don't have*.

"Hey!"

Mike flinched at Ben's voice. His head swiveled to the curtain, expecting to see the younger man.

Ben remained outside, rapping the door with his knuckles. "What are you doing in there? You going to take all night?"

How long had he been exercising his talent? Who cared? He'd managed to stack the sponges on top of each other and even moved the soap closer to the conditioner. "I'll be out in a sec," he shouted, then hastily shampooed and washed off. The sooner he got rid of Ben and Lily, the quicker he'd be able to continue his practice and test the cuffs.

He came out of the bath to a freshly made bed and a tray of food provided by Violet.

She averted her eyes from his chest. Unfortunately, for her, her gaze landed on the towel around his hips. Her face flushed a bright red as she talked. "You didn't eat lunch, so I thought you wouldn't mind the enchilada again. It's not the same one from before. I threw that one away and got you another. It's hot. Temperature-wise. I heated the plate in the oven, just like they do in restaurants. I hope you don't mind."

"Good God." Lily rolled her eyes.

Mike thanked Violet with a nonthreatening smile. "I don't. But I am tired."

"Oh sure. We'll leave." She slung her arm around Lily's shoulders. "Come on," she hissed at her sister, then looked over. "Ben?"

He stopped scratching his hip with the gun's barrel. "I'm staying."

No fucking way. Mike frowned. "Why?"

Lily answered. "Jas might come in. He should stay."

With Ben in here, how could he practice or even come close to opening the cuffs? "You said she took a sedative and it put her to sleep. If you're worried she's going to wake up, stay in the hall and come in if she does."

Ben shook his head. "If I fall asleep, she might get by me and lock the door in here." He crossed the room, sank to the floor and rested his back against the wall. "No way will it matter if I'm already inside." Down for the night, he waved the pistol's barrel at the bed. "Go on and enjoy your dinner. Sleep as long as you want. I won't disturb you. Lil, can you get the handcuff key?"

She bounced it in her palm. "Aren't you going to make certain he locks the cuff after he puts it on?"

Ben frowned. "You're closer."

To stop their coming spat, Mike snapped the cuff around his wrist and spoke to Lily.

"Are you going to check it out or not?"

"Turn away. Don't look at me."

"Why? We may not get along, but I can't set you on fire with my eyes."

Violet laughed shrilly. "You'll have to forgive her, she's a bit high-strung." She glared at her sister. "I'll check it out."

Lily kept the frying pan raised, ready to conk him if he moved. Violet regarded the raw skin on his wrist. "Let me get some antiseptic for that and a bandage."

"It's fine," he assured, wanting to get rid of her and Lily. "I'm tired. I'd just like to sleep."

Shame filled her eyes. Steering clear of the scraped spot, she pressed the cuff together and tried to pull it apart. "It's good," she sighed to the room in general. "Sorry," she whispered to him and followed her sister into the hall.

Mike tried to predict how long it would be before Ben fell asleep. A couple of hours? He suppressed a sigh. His gaze skipped from the enchilada to the Corona. Although he wanted to gulp the brew, he bypassed it to nibble on his meal, eating just enough to quiet his grumbling belly, not enough to make him groggy.

This was going to be one long night. Thankfully, Jasmine had found a bit of peace.

## Chapter Eleven

She lay on her side, teeth sunk into the pillow. The sedative hadn't worked. Nothing would.

The curse no longer slithered through her. It slammed, attacking viciously, screaming in her mind. Go to him. Kiss him. Fuck him. Don't let him leave. Kill him if he tries.

Shaking, she drew her arms and legs closer. Her body rocked, its movements synchronized with the loud chirping of crickets. For hours, she'd listened to them and her sisters moving through the rooms, periodically checking on her. She'd managed to keep her eyes closed and to lay motionless, convincing both the pills had done their job.

Outside of the insects and other familiar sounds, the house was now still. Violet and Lily had to be asleep. They wouldn't know if she got up. No one would stop her from making certain Mike never left.

Hands fisted, she fought her insane thoughts. They badgered and grew. She pushed to a sitting position, ready to swing her legs over the side of the mattress. It shook as she trembled, struggling not to give in. Falling back, she put her hand between her legs, forefinger on her clit, her will forcing her to outwit the curse by masturbating. To indulge in a decadent fantasy about Mike taking her.

It took several tries, her temples hurt from the effort, but at last she envisioned him in the club, his expression negligent as she approached from the other side of the dance floor. Couples scattered like pigeons, creating an opened space for her to walk through. She paused at the end of the wood, standing in the emptiness, the overhead bulbs raining turquoise light on her face, shoulders and arms.

Confident, he appraised her scandalous dress, the halter top so brief the cloth covered only her nipples. His voice ordered, "Take it off."

Female murmurs spread through the crowd. Male wolf whistles stifled them.

She couldn't refuse or run. The others surrounded her, pressing close, cutting off escape. Lightheaded, she unfastened her halter top. The ends cascaded to her waist, presenting her bared breasts. Men pushed into each other to get a better view. Many smiled. A flash of heat burned her skin. Icy air poured from the ceiling, cooling it and puckering her nipples so they'd fit Mike's mouth.

Indolently, he stared. "Touch them."

Cradled by her palms, her breasts tilted upward, displayed for too many male eyes. Embarrassed, she slid her fingers over them, attempting to cover her nudity.

Mike glanced over, his voice displeased. "Strip her."

From behind, Ben lowered her zipper, pushing the dress past her hips. His hands loitered on them and her bare ass, bringing more fire to her face and throat and another gush of moisture from her cleft.

Mike rose from the stool, his strides loose, unhurried, knowing she couldn't retreat. "Look at me."

Lost in his eyes, she waited for his next command.

He cupped her smooth mound, his fingers stroking her glutted folds, not yet ready to tease her clit. "Spread your legs."

Her buttocks tensed. The men in the audience pointed it out, accusing her of defiance.

"Now," Mike ordered.

Flushed and unsteady, she obeyed.

His hand slipped lower. Three fingers cleaved her vaginal lips to enter her tight, heated passage.

Her mouth opened on a soundless cry at the thick intrusion, its bulk stretching her mercilessly.

He offered no comfort or relief, merely more of the same, burying his fingers within her until the pads at the base touched her moist lips. "Squeeze your muscles around me, so tight I can't get free."

Her pussy clenched as he demanded, increasing the strain of containing him.

His thumb moved to her clit, glancing over it. Jasmine's hands flew to her mouth to muffle her stunned cry.

Displeased, Mike snapped, "Hold her arms behind her back."

One of the men came forward to help. Ben stepped in front of him. Fingers curled around her wrists, he brought her arms down and around, holding them in his unforgiving grasp.

Exposed and helpless, Jasmine lifted her face to Mike's. His eyes bored into hers as he thumbed her nub. A shock of pleasure ripped through her. Heels leaving the floor, she went to her toes.

It didn't sway him. He refused to rush. Restless whispers rose from the crowd. The men demanded more.

Eyes glazed with passion, Jasmine fought for each breath. Mike stole it with his tongue and harsh kiss while he rubbed her clit quickly, unendingly.

Her cry of satisfaction had barely left her throat when he pulled his fingers from her and licked them.

The men cheered. The women whispered.

"Bend over the stool," Mike said. His deep voice cut through the club, commanding and unappeased.

Still breathing hard, she grasped the sides of the wooden seat. Her body trembled so badly the legs scraped the floor. Ben's hand went to the small of her back, steadying her. He ground his palm into her spine, forcing it lower so her buttocks would rise, giving Mike easy entrance into her passages.

Again, the crowd gathered in tight knots to watch.

Her pussy throbbed. She heard Mike's belt buckle tapping his jeans' metal stud. His zipper rasped. Male musk subdued every other scent. Cock poised at her opening, he plowed inside on her moan and the newest cheers of their audience.

Jasmine rubbed her tiny knob quicker than Ben had. Groans convulsed her throat with an orgasm too tame to last. The curse persisted, demanding she listen.

Go to him before he leaves. Kill him when he tries.

For an unwanted roommate, Ben was about as good as Mike could have hoped for. The younger man hadn't made small talk, getting right to the point. In a surprisingly discouraged voice, he'd asked if he and the sisters were in deep denial, hoping to save Jasmine when it wasn't possible. Mike told Ben they'd find Desiree. No way would he accept defeat. He'd wring the bitch's neck if she didn't cooperate and lift the curse to release Jasmine.

"You have to find her first," the boy said.

He had to get free without Ben seeing. Hours passed before the younger man drifted off. Currently, Ben's head and torso leaned to the left. His legs stretched straight ahead, his limp hand propping the Glock's barrel on his right knee.

The cuff hit Mike's wrist bone, metal jerking, attempting to part. It didn't. Sweat rolled down his neck, shoulders and chest. The backs of his eyes pounded. He tried again and failed, cursing his gift, cajoling it. Nothing worked.

Until Tommy, he'd never had to call on his power for a critical situation. Repeatedly, Erica had advised him to hone his skill as much as possible. She'd said he'd never know when it might save someone's life.

It took Tommy's instead. Did guilt still screw up his concentration? Did fear? Could he be trying too hard, expecting perfection, hoping for precision? How could he settle for anything less? He required a deft touch to open the lock or brute force to tear the metal apart. Even when he got free, he still had Ben and his Glock to consider. If he couldn't will the weapon from the boy's hand and keep him trapped with his power, ditching the cuff wasn't going to solve anything.

Come on, do what I want! He glared at the metal. It shivered and creaked. Excited by the sound, he spun the cuff as far as possible, studying the area where the two halves came together. Moonlight showed they hadn't budged. Were the rings between the restraints separating? Had they made the creaking noise? He examined them, not seeing any difference. The damn thing wasn't even moving any longer.

Creak. Creak. Creak.

Mike's head swung to Ben. Still asleep. So where in the hell did the creaking noise come from? The bath? No. Water dripped steadily from the faucet, producing that room's only contribution to the night's mellow din. The wall to his left popped. Wind swelled and died down. Branches stopped slapping the panes.

He heard another creak, followed by a snap. Metal? Wood?

Jasmine? The knob to the bedroom door turned, its crystal glimmering in the silvered light. The wood shivered slightly as it separated from the jamb and crept open.

Apprehension crawled from Mike's belly to his throat. Why did the door move so slowly? Was it Lily or Violet on the other side? Were they checking on him and Ben? Or did they have something terrible to relate?

The door inched a bit farther.

His heart pounded into his ribs. Nude, Jasmine slipped inside. The thin light wandered her body's luxurious curves, defining her erect nipples, the fleshy slit between her legs. He swallowed. She stilled upon seeing Ben.

Mike expected her to recover and come to him. She did not. Stepping lightly, she went to Ben's side, her gaze lowered to the pistol.

What's she doing? Mike leaned forward. She reached for the gun. Why? Did she plan to put it in another room? Give it to him? No. Her hand stopped short of the barrel, her fingers wobbling as if she were fighting not to take it. He waited for her to move away. She remained in her uncomfortable position, hand still outstretched to his Glock. He counted off the seconds. One. Two. Three. Ten. Fifteen. Twenty. Her arm shook. A dog barked nearby. She jerked back her hand.

Mike remembered to breathe. She straightened and came to him. Tear tracks glistened on her face. Her eyes were huge, wet, new tears collecting on her lashes.

She whispered, "Don't let me do it."

His belly knotted at the horror and plea in her voice. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist, holding firm as he brought her down to the mattress. "Do what?"

"I can't let you leave."

"I'm still here. I'm not going anywhere."

"You are." Pain and rage flooded her eyes. She turned her wrist, trying to release it. His grip tightened. Frowning, she clawed his hand and hissed, "You want to leave, but I'll never allow it. If you try, I'll—" She stopped on a gasp. Brows lifted, she shivered, her free hand falling away from his.

Plump tears dripped from her chin, plopping on his thigh. His pulse accelerated. He made certain it didn't affect his voice. "It's okay." His tone soothed, and he hoped, convinced. "You don't have it in you to hurt me. Even if you did and tried, I'd stop you."

"Oh God."

His chest quieted her cry, his arm holding her to him as she sobbed. Awakened by her outburst, Ben gaped. His free hand beat the air to catch Mike's attention. His mouth formed the words: What happened?

Mike shook his head to keep Ben from standing or saying anything. Right now, he had to win back Jasmine's trust and persuade her to return to Lily's room. After, he'd tell Ben how she'd tried to take the gun, convincing the boy to guard her so she couldn't find another weapon, a knife in the kitchen, a fireplace

iron, who knew? Alone again, he'd have a chance to get free. This time he couldn't fail. There might not be another opportunity.

He loosened his hold. She reacted immediately, her arms circling his shoulders. "Don't tell me to leave."

"I'm not."

Her kisses were unbelieving, frantic, fueled by her doubt and the yearning.

He remained calm, patient. His tenderness slowly damped her frenzy. Her lips didn't press as hard. Her tongue retreated from his mouth, giving him a chance to dominate. It quieted her further. Breathing more easily, she lifted her face to his, her eyes swollen.

Desire and what felt like love squeezed his throat. He'd never known any woman as tortured or as brave. She'd battled her urges, begged for his help, terrified of harming him. He delivered a gentle kiss to each lid. "Tell me what you want."

Pulling the sheet away and snaking down his body, she curled her fingers around his toes, kissing the square tips. "To stay here."

How long? He pretended not to understand her. "In bed?"

"Right where I am now." She squeezed his toes. "You have nice feet." Eyes closed, she gave them another kiss.

He shared a glance with Ben. The boy lifted his shoulders, a clear sign he didn't know what was going on or what to expect.

Mike asked, "You're going to stay down there and sleep?"

"I'm going to watch you." She draped her other arm over his ankle, her gaze meeting his. "To make certain you don't leave."

It was her only chance to regain some control. The vigil would assure her of his presence. Hopefully, her inner voice would quiet.

She laid her head near his calf, imagining the dark hairs stirring with her sighs. It brought a smile that dissolved too fast. She'd nearly taken the gun. Would Ben have awakened in time to stop her? If he hadn't, would she have used it on Mike?

God no, her mind cried. I won't hurt you, her thoughts promised him. She'd destroy herself first. Exactly what Desiree wanted.

Alert during the first hour, Mike's adrenaline plummeted during the second. By the third, he dug his nails into his palms, drawing blood so pain would keep him awake.

Ben wasn't faring much better. He punched his shoulders and slapped his face to keep his lids opened. Several times, they slipped down with him jerking to attention, causing the back of his head to bang into the wall.

Jasmine didn't appear to notice. Her eyes stayed on Mike, watching as she'd promised, her lust swelling. He heard her rough sighs, witnessed her predatory stare. Twice, she pushed to her elbows, holding her breath, fixed on advancing toward him. Twice, she hesitated, then sank back down, either fighting her desire for sex or lacking the energy to continue.

He made no comment on her charged state, pretending to focus on the window, the waning night beyond. In a corner of his vision, he could still see her. Ben couldn't—the footboard prevented it. The airconditioning clicked on, its whirr disguising the buzz as Mike willed a slender lock of her hair to float upward, enough to separate it from the rest, not enough for her to feel. He followed it with more strands. With his mind, he moved the first tresses to the right, the next to the left, while leaving some in the middle. Gingerly, so she wouldn't question the motion and reach up, he braided a small part of her hair, refining his skill so he could use it to open the handcuffs and—

"What are you doing?"

Her question broke his concentration. The braid fell. His thoughts caught it a breath away from her other hair and lay it down, unnoticed by her. "Nothing." His voice didn't give away his walloping heart.

Her tone accused. "You're staring at something outside."

"The trees."

"You wish you were out there."

He wished they both were. "Not unless you were with me."

She searched his face for a lie. He remained motionless, allowing it. Uncertainty and then sorrow cramped her features. She murmured, "That would be nice."

"It will be."

Her lower lip trembled. She averted her gaze.

Free of her scrutiny, he moved the figurines on the dresser, spinning the smallest in place. Next, he willed the top of the curtains to billow out and deflate, as if they rode wind that didn't exist.

He exercised his talent until the air-conditioning clicked off. A short time later, he saw the first threads of sun reaching the trees. Dawn, finally.

Ben must have noticed the rosy shadows on the opposite wall. He sat straighter, elbows on his knees, head in his left hand. A sloppy yawn interrupted his groan. Jasmine drew her legs up, using them and her elbows to push to a sitting position.

Mike stopped himself from saying anything, preferring to observe. She left the mattress and went into the bathroom, closing herself inside. Ben's hand dropped. Glock in his right fist, he went to his feet and staggered to the bed, his voice loud enough for Mike to hear. "What happened when she came into the room?"

He kept his eyes on the bathroom door. "She went to you and reached for my gun. She seemed to be in some kind of trance. A dog barked outside. She backed away. She begged me not to let her do it."

"Do what?"

He turned his face to the boy. "Murder me if I try to leave."

"Holy shit." Ben shoved his fingers through his spiky hair. "You don't think she'd actually do something like that, do you?"

"I don't want to wait and find out. You have to get her to Lily's room and guard her, not me." He lifted his cuffed hand as far as the shackle allowed. "Like I told her, I'm not going anywhere. If you fall asleep again and she takes my gun, I'm fucking dead. Even if she doesn't do that, she can always go downstairs and grab a butcher's knife or a fireplace poker or even Lily's beloved skillet. Which means I'm still dead unless you guard her."

"What about the phone? I have to get it today so we can call your friend."

"Tie her to Lily's bed before you leave."

"I could have Lil or Violet watch her while I'm gone or have one of them pick up the phone."

"No." He wanted Ben out of the house and her sisters downstairs, not a room away where they could monitor him. "Tie her wrists to the damned bedpost. It's for her own good. Use the silk belt from her robe. It's not going to hurt her."

"What if Lil or Violet say no? What if you're fucking lying?"

"What purpose would it serve? Is it going to help me get out of here?" He growled, "I don't think so. If Violet or Lily are too prissy to see Jasmine's wrists tied to a bed, then tell them they better get ready for court when she goes on trial for my murder, should she be lucky enough to live that long."

Ben shifted from one foot to the other, looking as though he wanted to be anywhere but here. "All right. As soon as she comes out of the john, I'll try to talk her into going back to Lil's room—what was that?"

Mike's head had already snapped to the heavy thud coming from the bath, followed by something else falling. Ben bolted to the door, swinging it opened. From the bed, Mike saw Jasmine curled up on the bathroom floor, her cologne and perfume bottles scattered around her.

"Check her pulse!" he shouted.

Ben kicked away the plastic bottles and laid the Glock on the toilet seat. Squatting, he put his fingers on her neck. His shoulders sagged. "She's okay. She must have passed out."

Her sisters ran into the room. Lily's head pivoted right, left, noting the furniture. "What fell?"

"Jas!" Violet cried.

"It's okay." Ben's voice lurched. "Stay there." He helped Jasmine to her feet.

Her hair swung forward. She moaned. "What happened?"

"You fainted. I'll take you to Lil's room."

She pushed his arms away then grabbed his tee in both of her fists. "Ben, I'm scared. I don't want to hurt Mike!"

"You won't, I promise. I won't let you anywhere near him." With his arm around her waist, he opened the door inside the bath and brought her into the next room.

Lily shouted at Mike, "Do something to help her!"

Crying, Violet pulled her sister back. "Ben's taking care of it."

She shook her off and hissed at him. "What about your stupid friend? Is she really going to find Desiree or is that more of your BS?"

He stated the obvious. "I can't call her without my phone or yours."

"Yeah, right." She bared her teeth. "You just want the call to be traced so the cops know where to find you."

"Lil, stop it." Violet spoke to him, her voice cracking. "What did Jas mean, she doesn't want to hurt you?"

Mike's gaze darted between the two sisters. "When she first came inside, Ben was asleep. She reached for my gun. She said if I tried to leave, she'd stop me."

Violet moaned. "Oh my God."

He warned, "If she can't get her hands on the Glock, she'll find something else. You can't allow her to leave that other room."

## Chapter Twelve

Lily held Jasmine's left arm, Violet her right. Ben wound one of the silk sashes around her left wrist first, securing it to the headboard of the wrought-iron bed. None of them would meet her eyes.

"You have to do this," she said.

A muffled sob escaped Violet.

"Stop it," Jasmine snapped. "Ben, make it tighter. I can't get loose. I'll hurt myself before I harm Mike."

"You won't be doing either." He knotted the sash twice, huffing as he yanked it, then went around the bed to work on her right wrist. "We'll call his friend today and she'll find Desiree."

Lily growled. "When I see that freaking witch, I am going to beat the living crap out of her."

"No!" Jasmine hollered at her youngest sister. "Stay away from her or she'll curse you, too! I don't want any of you involved in this. It's between her and me. Do you understand? Tell me you understand!"

"We'll worry about what to do when we find her." Finished with her wrist, Ben drew the top sheet over her nudity. Face wet with tears, Violet turned away, her narrow shoulders shaking convulsively.

Lily sat at the foot of the bed, her hand resting on Jasmine's ankle. "I'll stay until you fall asleep."

"No. I don't want any of you watching what it does to me." Her fingers curled into fists. "If you want to help, then do your regular work. Don't come back until Mike's called his friend. Now go."

The three of them exchanged a glance.

"Will I be able to get free?" Jasmine asked Ben.

He shook his head. "The knots are too tight."

"Then leave. All of you. Right now."

They left her in Lily's room, alone with the yearning and her brutal thoughts.

In their haste to tend to Jasmine after she'd fainted, they'd forgotten to fully close the door to her bedroom. As they came down the hall, Mike heard their muted discussion about him. Ben and Lily argued with Violet, saying they couldn't let him use his cell phone or their landline, convincing her someone might trace the call. If the cops came now, there'd be no chance to help Jasmine.

"I'll be back with the disposable cell in a few hours." Ben's heavy footfalls pounded into a room, then out to the stairway. Seconds later, a downstairs door, probably the front one, banged shut.

Up here, Lily spoke in a subdued tone. "Violet, get a grip. The world isn't ending. We're going to fix this."

"When?" Violet's voice sounded thick as though she were crying. "Jas is getting worse by the second. I can't leave her. I'm going back in."

"No. As long as she can't get out of my room she'll be all right."

"No she won't. She fainted a few minutes ago."

"She hasn't been sleeping. Anyone would pass out from that. Let's give her a chance to rest. Come on, we both have work to—good God," she interrupted herself, "what's the matter now?"

"Today's the Steinmans' appointment." Violet's voice had raised several notches. "What are we supposed to do about that?"

"Oh shit, I forgot about them." The floor groaned beneath her or Violet's pacing. "I'll call and cancel."

"It's too late. They're coming in from Fort Lauderdale. They're probably on the road right now. We can't bring them in the house, Lil." The footfalls stopped. "Not with what's been going on."

"We can have the meeting in the gazebo. They'd probably like that. While they go through your sample books, we'll serve them lemonade and Mom's sour cream streusel. There's enough time for you to make it if you get started now."

Violet snapped, "You expect me to bake?"

"I expect you to do what Jas wants. She said for us to do our regular work, so let's freaking do it."

"Wait. When they get here, take them down the driveway to the backyard. Don't let them in the house."

"I wasn't planning to." Their light steps raced down the remainder of the hall and stairway.

Mike's gaze darted from the bedroom door to the bath, his Glock on the toilet seat. Would one of them think to return for it? Would Ben? His watch ticked off the seconds. He made himself wait ten minutes to be certain no one would head this way. Soft rock music came up through the vents, an old Billy Joel tune. He heard faint thuds. Violet slamming drawers and cabinets in the kitchen? Hopefully. Where was Lily? He listened for another minute, not hearing anyone's footfalls in the hall.

Holding his breath, he lowered his gaze to his cuff. In his mind, he saw Jasmine if he didn't get free...her life slipping away, losing her. Fuck no. If he had to chew this off, he'd get rid of it.

He made a final apology to Tommy, knowing the man would understand Jasmine needed help. His concentration narrowed, homing in on the lock, seeing it turning, the teeth lifting, sliding back, the metal separating.

Breathless, he caught the opened cuff on its way to the floor and unfastened the others, tossing them on the mattress. On his feet, he took a step toward his gun and stopped. His heart beat so fast he got dizzy. What in the fuck was he doing? If he walked across the room to the bath, Violet and Lily would be able to

hear him from downstairs. Then what? Use his power to push them into a room and secure it so they couldn't get out? Violet might not scream, but Lily sure as hell would. If the neighbors didn't hear and alert the police, the Steinmans would when they arrived.

He sank to the bed, still a virtual prisoner. Although he could lift objects and people with his mind, he couldn't do it with himself, something he'd tried years ago when he'd wanted to sail around like a fly or a bird and failed repeatedly. The only way for him to get out of the room undetected, and to Jasmine's office, would be to walk as close to the walls as possible. There, the floor's give would be minimal, not recording his movements.

First, though, he wanted his damned gun.

His eyes swept over its sleek outline, his mind seeing it lift from the toilet seat. Another old hit, this by Elton John, flowed through the vents. A car accelerated down the street. The dog from last night barked.

The Glock hovered above the seat, its barrel pointing at him. He willed it to the left. The muzzle turned and dipped to the floor. A bead of sweat rolled into his eye. Jaw clenched, he blinked wildly, his mind ordering the gun to him.

It bobbed in place, then drifted unhurriedly across the jamb. The dog's barks turned to shrill yelps, so strident they pierced the buzz. His concentration broke. With nothing holding it, the pistol fell.

No! He stopped it seconds before the grip struck the floor. Gulping air, he kept the weapon elevated no more than an inch above the wood. *Come on, dammit, you can do this.* He focused on the buzz, pushing the other distractions away.

The gun rose again, seesawing in the air as it inched forward. Ten feet away, nine, seven, five, three. It dropped to the mattress. Elbows on his knees, Mike hung his head, trying to slow his heart rate, unable to give it too much time.

Partially composed, he slid the Glock under the pillow, the first place Jasmine's sisters or Ben would look for it. What in the hell was the matter with him? Even a rookie would know better. He considered sticking the pistol in the nightstand drawers or dresser and decided against it. Between the mattress and box spring at the foot of the bed seemed best. Once he had his weapon concealed there, he further hid it with the sheet and comforter.

Now for his cell phone.

He gripped the corners of the nightstand and stepped heel-to-toe around the furniture. The floor didn't groan with his weight. Shoulders to the wall, he sidled across it to the door, not daring to breathe.

From here, the music played louder. This time, an ancient Beatles tune. He heard a metallic clatter, the sound a pan makes when it falls.

On the heels of it, Lily hollered, "What happened?" Her voice seemed to come from the downstairs hall.

Violet's fainter shout put her in the kitchen. "I just dropped the baking pan and two eggs. Damn, I can't do this."

"I'll be right there."

Mike heard Lily bounding across the floor. He rounded the doorjamb, his back and ass pressed to the hallway wall. What he saw ahead brought a whispered oath. He'd forgotten about the antique mirrors and accent tables between Jasmine's bedroom and the stairway. If he were to step away from the wall to avoid making contact with the furniture or mirrors, the floor would surely creak.

He sank to his knees and crawled slower than a fucking snail, stopping repeatedly, terrified Lily or Violet would hear him.

Their muffled argument didn't allow him to hear details of what they said, though it did keep them busy. He crawled another few inches and paused at a steady whooshing noise. One of them must have turned on the kitchen faucet. Would it drown out all other sounds? Taking a chance, he crawled more quickly, at last reaching the top of the stairway. Neither sister came running into the foyer. He caught his breath and glanced at the wall, the paintings that didn't fit the original spaces. No way could he use that side to get down the stairs. He straightened and put his feet flush to the banister, taking small, cautious steps, his attention on the white door to the side of the blue velvet sofa.

He recalled Lily's words: "All your stuff's in Jas's office. Safe and sound."

One could only hope.

His head turned to the right, the windows flanking the front door. It would take a Peeping Tom or someone decidedly nosy to peer past the ferns and see him naked on the stairs. Given his luck these last few days, he decided not to chance it and worked as quickly as possible.

He studied the white door's crystal doorknob, turning it with his thoughts. The door edged inward. If it made a sound, he didn't catch it beneath the buzz. Now for the hard part. He had to visualize where his cell phone and clothes might be. To go into the room might be hazarding too much.

His memory of the space put Jasmine's desk to the left. To the right were racks of dresses and gowns. What else? Images of the area rolled through his mind: a chair behind her desk, two others to the right, next to the rack with the bridal gowns. So where did they put his stuff? Not far from the banker's lamp where Jasmine previously laid his Glock? On the seat of one of the three chairs? In a drawer?

He pictured the desk first. A scene of his neatly folded clothes, with his mocs on top, filled his brain. He imagined the items floating above the furniture and coming to the door.

The space remained empty.

Shit. Running his hand down his face, he tried again, thinking about the chair nearest the foyer. The buzz surrounded him, louder than a buzzing bee, more like white noise obstructing all other sounds. If Violet or Lily came out of the hall now, he wouldn't hear and have a chance to make it back up the stairs. Eyes narrowed, he concentrated on his things—black tee, jeans, briefs, mocs, wallet, cell phone.

Miraculously, his stuff drifted to the door and past, just as he'd envisioned it, a tidy pile with his shoes on top. He smiled so hard his cheeks hurt. He willed his things closer. They soared upward, as high as the chandelier, and stopped. In the corner of his eye, he'd seen movement.

Lily. She hurried from the hall into the foyer. Just as quickly, he backed up the steps, while keeping his clothing suspended yards above her head.

She opened the front door a crack and grabbed the morning paper. Face lowered, she thumbed through it quickly, then stopped and glanced around.

Mike's heart jolted. Did she hear the buzz? Would she look for its source?

Her head tilted as if she were listening. Her face inched toward the stairway, then unexpectedly turned to Jasmine's office, the opened door. She went to it and stuck her head inside.

Quickly, Mike backed up the rest of the steps, his clothes tagging along, reaching him. He snatched the items, clutching them to his chest. The buzz receded. Other sounds filtered past. From the landing, he heard Jasmine's office door close. He retreated down the hall, one slow step at a time so Lily wouldn't hear his movements. His heart banged so loudly, she and Violet could be vaulting up the steps and he wouldn't know it.

Eggshells dotted the butter and sugar. Violet spooned them out, her trembling hand and tears prolonging the search.

Lily ran into the room. "Did you move his clothes?"

She flung a glob of yolk into the sink, in no mood for her sister's hyperactivity or question. "Ben's?" "Mike's."

She examined the mixture for more shells. "No."

"Well, someone did. When I went to get the paper, I heard something—like a fly or a bee—and noticed the door to Jas's office was opened. I didn't remember it being that way, so I looked inside to see if the sound was coming from there. It wasn't. That's when I noticed Mike's stuff was gone."

"Ben probably moved it yesterday or last night. Is there anything in the paper about the police searching for Mike?"

"Not in the front section. Why would Ben move his things?"

"I don't know." She wiped her brow with her arm. "Maybe he knew we had the Steinmans coming in this morning and figured we'd be talking in Jas's office like we usually do. He's the only one who could have done it."

"Unless Jas took the stuff last night while we were asleep."

"So what if she did? If it gave her some comfort that he wouldn't leave, I'm all for it. Here." She shoved the bowl across the counter to Lily, wanting to get away, be by herself. "Finish this so I can take a shower and get dressed."

Back in the room, Mike had cuffed himself again just in case Lily or Violet decided to check in on him. Approximately five minutes after he'd crept inside, the bedroom door opened briefly and closed. Whoever took a peek must have bought his I'm-asleep-don't-bother-me act. Footfalls moved down the hall, another door opened and closed. He next heard water running, someone showering.

He willed the cuff open more easily this time, draping it and the second set on his pillow should he need to get to them quickly. Reaching between the mattress and box spring, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Erica.

She answered on the third ring. "Vega."

"It's Mike." He kept his voice as low as possible, his eyes on the door. "I don't have a lot of time to talk. Did you get my email last night?"

"Haven't been in my account yet. What's wrong? I can barely hear you. Why are you whispering?"

"I can't get into that now. I need your help in locating a Desiree Zazou." He spelled the surname. "And a Connor Rolands." He gave her their last known locations and the information Jasmine told him about Connor's job. "Desiree's a member of the Wanderers, ever hear of them?"

"Vaguely. Weren't there newspaper articles about them a while back? What's this about?"

"Saving a woman's life. I have to know where I can find Desiree, and I don't have a lot of time to wait for the information. If you come up blank on her, you should be able to locate Connor."

"Wait a minute. Have this Desiree and Connor threatened someone? Are the local authorities involved?"

"No. And it's not about a threat in the usual sense. We're talking the occult here, Erica. I'll call you in a few hours to see what you have."

"A few hours? It might be better if you let me call you when I have a lead."

"No." He couldn't predict what would happen in the next few minutes, much less the next few hours. If he had to keep pretending to be cuffed, he couldn't leave his cell phone on and risk having the sisters or Ben hear it ring. "It has to be done this way."

"Mike, are you involved with these people? Are you in trouble?"

"Jasmine is."

"Jasmine? Who's that?"

"A woman I care about deeply. No more questions. Just trust me on this." He ended the call and glanced at his watch, determining how long it would be until the Steinmans arrived.

Their presence would give him a chance to make his next move.

Thirty minutes later, the doorbell rang. Footfalls ran down the upstairs hall. Lily called out, "I'm not dressed yet, you'll have to take them to the gazebo. As soon as I'm decent, I'll bring your books out."

Violet's voice sounded next, penetrating and too loud. "Rachel! Ethan! Right on time!" The front door slammed. She must have joined them on the porch.

Not too long after, a door on the second floor banged shut. Lily raced to the stairs, flying down them. He heard a downstairs door hitting a jamb though not the front one—it had a different sound. She must have gotten the sample books from Jasmine's office. Her next stop had to be outside. Mike tapped his foot impatiently.

From below, he heard something thwack loudly. The door to the kitchen?

He hoped for it as he moved to the windows, his steps slow and cautious just in case Lily remained inside. Screened by the curtains, he snuck a look at the backyard.

A young couple dressed in dark Bermuda shorts and white knit tops sat in the gazebo with Violet. Lily stood to their side, running her fingers through her still-damp hair. Mike ducked back when her face turned to the house.

Uncertain of his next move he waited, starting at the sound of someone throwing open the kitchen door. Had Lily seen him? Was she coming up here now?

His heart roared, waiting for the worst. Minutes ticked by. No one came up here. Without warning, a downstairs door banged shut. He chanced a look. Lily sped across the backyard with the refreshments.

He headed for the other door in the bath, opening it to see a bedroom decorated with scrubbed pine furniture, fluffy sheepskin rugs and lacy curtains for a woman. He'd seen Ben take Jasmine in here and assumed this would be Lily's room. So where was Jasmine? Out in the hall, he tried the next door. The stench of turpentine, combined with the drawings on the walls and the area's all-around sloppiness, made this Ben's space.

A well-kept office with an artist's easel and several dress forms lay behind the next door.

He tried again and found the hall bath. Edgy, he moved to the room at the front of the house. His hand gripped the knob so tightly its fluted edges bit into his nail-lacerated palm. He forgot the pain as he entered the last bedroom and his eyes met Jasmine's.

She thought she must be dreaming or hallucinating and then realized the truth. Somehow, he'd gotten free and was searching for his clothes, his cell phone, a way out. Paralyzing sorrow defeated Jasmine's obsession, banishing her anger. This was the last moment she'd see him. A sob shook her throat. He wouldn't soon forget her, though he'd do everything he could to push this hideous experience from his thoughts. Heartbroken and exhausted, she turned her face away, burying it in her shoulder.

He came to the bed. "Jasmine."

Misery shaded her voice. "I don't know where your things are. Try Ben's room or my office." He didn't move.

She wanted to yell at him to leave, but could not. How would she get through this day and all the others without him? How could she expect him to stay and forgive her? She didn't deserve it. What she'd done was horrible, insane. "When you call the police, please tell them I did this on my own. I don't want them hurting my sisters or Ben. They didn't mean any harm, they only tried to help."

"Shhhh." Hand on her cheek, he turned her face and touched her lips lightly with his.

Their breaths mingled, tempting her lust. She wept, unable to stop her tears. "Why are you kissing me? I can't help you find your stuff. If it's not in my office or Ben's room, then just take some clothing of his and leave, and try to forgive me. Please."

He worked on the knots to free her right wrist.

Frightened, she jerked her arm, a fruitless attempt to stop him. "Don't untie me, I could hurt you!"

"There's no need. I'm not leaving."

Her heart soared and fell, unable to believe him. "What are you talking about? You unlocked the handcuffs." All at once, the truth of it hit her. "How did you do that? Where are my sisters?"

"Outside with the Steinmans. Ben hasn't come back yet with the disposable phone. For the moment, you and I are alone." He undid the other sash and scooped her in his arms. "Did you sleep at all?"

His shoulder heated the side of her face. His heart's steady beat reassured her. God, how she loved him, even though he'd never love her. So why was he doing this? Because he wanted to save her as he hadn't his partner?

"Jasmine, did you sleep?"

His neck muffled her words. "I don't know. A little, maybe. I kept drifting in and out. It didn't help. It never does."

"Let's fix that."

"How?"

He carried her down the hall to her room and brought her to the bed.

She sank to the mattress and stared at the cuffs. "Are you going to use those on me? I wouldn't blame you. You have a right."

"No, I don't." He put the shackles in the nightstand drawer and went to the door in the bath, locking it. He secured the bedroom door next. Returning, he unfolded his body over hers, loosely wrapping his fingers around her wrists, lifting them above her head in a tender attempt to imprison.

Readily, she surrendered her freedom to his strength, warmth and weight, her lids closing as their lips touched.

He gave her a lover's kiss, more emotion than hunger, as he had last night. The gentle pressure of his mouth, his tongue hugging hers, nourished and consoled, temporarily pacifying the curse. They explored each other slowly, adrift in tastes, sensations, textures, their effortless breathing revealing their delight. Finished, he kept his cheek to hers. Her throat convulsed. She whispered, "Thank you."

"Shhhh." His lips skimmed her throat, journeying to her breasts, navel, mound, tarrying on her cleft. Palms beneath her ass, he encouraged her to lift her body to his mouth. He savored this part of her as a man does when he loves a woman. No need to hurry. They had the rest of their lives together.

Jasmine pressed her face to her shoulder, trying not to think of the meager time left with him.

His tongue swept over her clit repeatedly. He slipped two fingers into her slit, slowly erasing the sadness and replacing it with unruly longing, more intense and meaningful than any she'd experienced before or since the curse. Arms above her head, she angled her hips so he could more readily reach her cunt. His fingers, lips and tongue worshipped her. She panted with her first orgasm and moaned on the second as Mike's cock replaced his fingers.

He pinned her with his body, his gaze, tenderness and desire in his eyes, his thrusts slow, luxuriating in the act.

She gave herself to him in a way she hadn't earlier. Not to tame the yearning for an instant of relief, but to experience human closeness more powerful than any curse. Second by second, her body climbed toward climax. Reaching it, her soul drifted down. She parted her lids to look at him one last time before falling asleep in his caring embrace.

Mike fingered a strand of hair from Jasmine's cheek, unwilling to let it or anything else disturb her. He was so nutty in love with this woman, he would willingly offer a year of his life to buy a day's worth of rest for her, and would have told anyone who asked that it was a fair proposition.

He wouldn't lose her to this craziness. Desiree promised lust without relief. He'd thrown his adoration into the mix, fucking up her plans, because he saw how his devotion calmed Jasmine, allowing her to relax. Not that he could consider it a permanent solution. There was always the chance the curse would behave like a virus, mutating and growing stronger, resistant to all cures until it destroyed.

His belly cramped, stealing his breath. He held Jasmine closer, letting her weight and heat wash away his pain. Everything would be all right. He'd make certain of it, even if he had to offer his life for hers.

Right now, though, he had to content himself with watching her sleep.

She awoke slowly, her mind taking a few seconds to catch up to her body. How long had she rested? She lifted her face, meeting Mike's black velvet eyes. They held an affectionate smile and something else. Disappointment? Concern?

He murmured, "How do you feel?"

Jasmine reflected on her sluggishness and the pleasure beneath it, putting it into words. "Still sleepy, but like I want to kiss you too."

His grin creased the corners of his eyes. She ran her forefinger down the small folds, loving how they added depth to his features. Age would treat him well. Something she'd never see. Sorrow threatened again, constricting her throat, making it difficult to speak. "How long was I out?"

"Fifteen minutes."

Lost time. "Kiss me."

He did, with passion and what seemed like love, but wasn't. Without the yearning driving her, she wasn't his type of woman. She'd conned him into this and now his honor and integrity would see it through. It was more than she was worthy of. She told herself to be grateful for the moment.

He drew it out far longer than she'd hoped, then pressed his mouth lightly to her lashes and brow. "Try to go back to sleep." His arms encircled her. "I'll be right here when you wake up."

It sounded so nice. Exactly what she wanted for the coming days, weeks and beyond. A future she couldn't have. "And then?"

"I don't know. We'll figure it out."

She wasn't certain if his nonchalance was for her benefit or to convince himself. Her hand went to his chest. "My sisters and Ben are going to be shocked that you got out of the handcuffs. How'd you do that? Oh my God," she suddenly said, a thought striking her, "Ben has your gun."

"I have it." He guided her head back to his shoulder. "Don't worry. I put it in a safe place. And it doesn't matter how I got out of the cuffs, when your sisters and Ben come up here I'll take care of whatever happens. No one's going to get hurt."

Thirty minutes passed. Forty. An hour. He listened to Jasmine's rhythmic breaths and the noises coming from downstairs. Ten minutes ago, the kitchen door had banged into the jamb, announcing Lily and Violet's return.

Now, the front door shut with a wallop. Ben. Mike closed his eyes, listening to the boy sprint up the stairs, most likely with the disposable cell phone in hand. Right on cue, Ben's heavy footfalls headed for this room. He turned the knob and stopped.

The delay said he didn't understand why the door hadn't opened. He tried again with the same result.

Mike lowered his gaze to Jasmine. Long lashes fanned above her cheeks. His mind begged Ben to go away, not to awaken her.

The younger man tried the knob repeatedly, refusing to believe. Cursing, he ran down the hall and into another room. Mike's gaze darted to the door in the bath. The knob turned, useless against the lock. Ben punched the wood. His footfalls returned to the hall, tearing down it to Lily's room. By the next sounds, he'd pushed open her door, realizing Jasmine was no longer inside.

He ran to the stairway, shouting her sisters' names. Given the loud thudding, he took the steps three at a time.

Mike eased Jasmine to the mattress, scooting a pillow beneath her head. She mumbled indistinctly and continued to sleep. He left the bed as quietly as possible. His jeans were on and his fly zipped as three sets of footfalls dashed this way.

Ben yelled, "Give me the key!" He punched the door, the wall.

From behind, Jasmine murmured, "What was that? What's going on?"

Mike put his hand out to keep her from leaving the bed. "Everything's all right. Go back to sleep."

The key rattled in the lock. Ben punched the wood again.

She cried, "No, it's not. What's going on?"

The lock clicked, the knob turned, the door flung open. Mike's power stopped it from banging into the wall. Ben and the sisters didn't note it or the buzz. They stood in a tight knot gaping at him.

Lily shouted, "How'd you get free?"

Violet cried, "Where's Jas?"

"Here," she said. Sheets rustled, the bedsprings creaked. "I'm okay."

Ben stepped inside and bellowed, "You let him go?"

Mike placed himself between the boy and her. "I did it myself."

Lily growled, "How?"

Time for the truth, not to mention getting their attention and cooperation by putting the fear of Mike into them. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and used his will to push Ben back. The younger man's mouth opened with his staggering gait, his arms flailed, the door whisked closed and locked. Stunned silence filled the hall. In here, Jasmine stared at him as though he were more dangerous than Desiree.

He couldn't blame her and spoke without preamble. "I'm telekinetic. I can move objects and people with my mind. It's what got my partner Tommy killed. I diverted the bullet meant for me and it hit him instead."

She clutched the sheet to her throat.

If she'd called him a coward, it couldn't have hurt more. Freak, her expression cried, monster. Shame for what he was and could never change heated his cheeks, quieting his voice. "Jasmine, I swear, I won't hurt you, your sisters, or Ben."

She shook her head.

"I won't," he insisted, pulling his hands from his pockets only to press them at his sides at the look on her face. "I would never do anything to—"

She interrupted. "I don't understand. Why did you wait until now to use your power or whatever you call it?"

He advanced a step, then retreated, not wanting to frighten her. "Before Tommy, I called it a gift I didn't want. Since his death, I hadn't used it. Between guilt over what happened with him and inactivity, I had a shitting hard time bringing it back, practicing every time I was alone in here. Do you want me to let them in?"

All three hammered on the door, cursing and shouting.

Her face turned to the ruckus. "You haven't called the police?"

"I told you I wouldn't do that and I won't. I only contacted my friend Erica. She's pulling up everything she can on Desiree and Connor. I give you my word, we'll find her. This will be over."

Her hand went to her temple. He wanted to argue, to convince, to make her want him again, to see him as a man not an aberration. Given the shock on her face, he knew it wasn't possible. His head lowered.

"Let them in, please," she said.

Mike willed the door to open. Not expecting it, Lily stumbled inside, fist upraised. Ben grabbed the back of her tee, righting her. Violet scurried past them. They spoke as one, their voices drowning out each other.

Jasmine shouted, "Shut up and listen to me!" She continued in a loud voice. "Mike hasn't contacted the police. He called his friend. She's looking for Desiree and Connor."

Violet and Lily exchanged a glance. Ben glared at him. "You sent me to get that stupid phone and you already had yours?"

"Calm down." Mike shoved his hands back into his pockets. "I didn't get it until you left. And you sent yourself. I told you to let me use my cell."

Lily circled Mike warily. "How'd you push Ben back and close the door? I didn't see you touch him or it."

Jasmine answered. "He's telekinetic. He can move things and people with his mind. Because of something that happened in the Marshals Service, he wasn't able to use his power until now."

Violet's eyes bulged. Ben looked partly appalled, partly impressed. Lily produced an unbelieving frown. "Telekinetic? Are you serious? You're saying he's like that girl in the movie *Carrie*?"

Mike arched one brow. "Not exactly. She had a much harder time in high school than I did."

Violet laughed. It sounded hysterical.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Jasmine said. "We hurt Mike, not the other way around. He's doing everything he can to help me. Please, just leave, I want to be alone with him."

Mike stared at her, not certain how to take what she'd said. The others didn't move.

She cried, "Get to work! We have contracts to meet! Leave Mike and me alone!"

To hurry them along, he offered what everyone wanted to hear. "Before you unlocked the door, Jasmine had slept for an hour. She needs to get far more rest. I promise to take good care of her."

Ben crossed his arms over his chest, his youthful bravado back. "I'm staying to make certain he does."

Mike shook his head. "No, you're not."

The boy looked at Jasmine.

She spoke quietly. "Go to work, Ben."

His face turned a deeper red with her dismissal, her siding with Mike over him. He turned and left the room. Still frowning, Lily argued, "I don't think we should leave him alone with you, Jas. We don't know what he's capable of doing."

"If you don't leave now," she answered, "I'll have him remove you."

Lily gaped at her, swore beneath her breath and left the room in a huff.

Violet backed up, bumping into the jamb. Her head swung from it to them. "Let me know when you two want breakfast or lunch or dinner. Whatever's good." She shut the door.

Mike returned to the bed, though he didn't dare get on the mattress. He had neither the courage nor the right. "You don't have to say you're okay with this if you're not." He lifted his shoulders, feeling like an adolescent waiting for the prom queen to reject him during a full school assembly. "You told them there wasn't anything to be afraid of, and believe me, there's not. Still, it would be hard for anyone to come to terms with what I am. Odd. Weird." He sighed deeply. "Give me a minute and I'll think of a more descriptive word."

"Like awesome?"

"Huh? What?"

Her mouth quivered. "You heard me." She dropped the sheet and opened her arms, welcoming him inside.

Mike hid his face in her neck so she couldn't see his grateful tears. She held him as though she truly cared or felt a great deal of sympathy. He prayed it wasn't the latter even as he warned himself not to hope. "I should have freed myself sooner."

She kissed his cheek and held him even tighter, as though she wasn't certain whether to be motherly or wanton. Smiling, he enjoyed both.

She whispered, "I'm glad you waited. I might have thought you were leaving and..." She didn't finish.

"It's okay. We're going to fix this."

Whimpering, she turned her face into his hair. "What if you can't?"

"I will. I swear." Hands on her shoulders, he drew back so he could see her face. Her eyes were as wet as his. "When I call Erica, I'd like her to have all the information she needs. Is there anything you haven't told me about Connor?"

"Not that I can think of." Moving back into his chest, she rubbed her nose against the base of his neck. "I have some research notes on him, old addresses and stuff, on my office laptop. I could get it for you."

"Later. Right now, I want you to try to sleep."

## Chapter Thirteen

The morning passed effortlessly, the first time in more than five months.

Intermittently, Jasmine heard Mike speaking on his cell, presumably to Erica, asking for information from her and providing it to her from the laptop on the mattress. Jasmine's sleep had been so profound, she hadn't noticed him leaving the room to get the computer.

Awake finally, she watched him as he worked. His large hands skipped over the keyboard. His hair caught on the top of his ear, falling forward. Annoyed, he pushed it back and frowned at what he saw on the screen.

Another dead end?

A part of her hoped, an equal part feared. She couldn't expect him to stay here forever, helping her. He'd promised this would be over. He hadn't said in what way. By finding Desiree and forcing her to stop the madness? Or by having it end on its own when it killed? And it surely would.

Even with her rest, Jasmine sensed the curse lurking, waiting for its next chance, an opening in her defenses.

"Hey, you." Mike tilted his head, noticing she'd awakened. He studied her. "Everything all right?" She lied with a smile. "I'm good."

"No, you're not. Your stomach's growling." He glanced at his watch. "It's about time for lunch."

"Have you or Erica found anything out yet?"

He dropped his hand, drumming his fingers on his knee. "A little."

"Tell me? Even if it's bad."

"It's not bad. It's just not where we want to be. But we will get there, I promise you." He held her chin between his thumb and forefinger, giving her a fast kiss.

Her lids opened, she asked, "What did you find out?"

Mike saved the file he'd been working on and turned to her. "Connor didn't take a leave of absence from his job. He quit. His position's been filled. His condo has a new owner. There's no forwarding order on his mail. His driver's license and tags were up for renewal a couple of weeks ago. He let them expire. All activity has stopped on his social security number and credit cards. He made a six-figure income for approximately eight years with the Hemmler Group and had a healthy portfolio of investments many would kill for in this economy. He liquidated everything five months ago and cleaned out his bank accounts. Right

now, we're figuring he's living on cash and if he's reinvested any of the funds, it's in the name of someone he trusts so he can't be traced."

Her breathing sounded too loud, troubled. "Why are you focusing on him? Didn't you find anything on Desiree?"

"Not yet." His hand covered her wrist. "The Wanderers don't like to leave the typical paper trails like birth certificates, tax ID numbers, records of school attendance or doctor visits. When she confronted you, did she say where she had first met Connor? Where he took her on their dates?"

"No. Why? Do you think she'd be frequenting those places in the hope of seeing him again?"

"It's always possible. We'll know for certain once we find him."

"If he's using cash, how can you?"

"The usual way." He smiled, the kind a sage teacher gives a naïve pupil. "People just don't drop out of sight and start new lives without help. Believe me, I know."

"You mean your work with the service."

"Exactly. The witnesses I protected were clueless as to how to keep a low profile. They all shared the same fatal flaw—a desire for the known. It's what fucks them up every time. Making contact with someone from their past, engaging in a hobby or activity they've always liked. Connor's no different. My guess is he's not that far away. And we'll certainly find him. It may just take a little longer than I'd hoped." He squeezed her wrist. "Want me to get some lunch for you and bring it up here?"

"It would be easier for us to eat downstairs. While we do, I can tell the others what you've found out."

Jasmine brought another chair to the table for Mike. Violet heaped his plate with two Monte Cristo sandwiches, warm syrup, a mound of home fries and several slices of cantaloupe. Lily nibbled on a sweet pickle, watching him eat.

"Something wrong?" he asked her.

She swallowed. "Pass me the salt."

He did.

Her brows drew together. "I need the home fries."

He placed the bowl in front of her.

"And a napkin," she added.

He reached for them.

Jasmine spoke up. "Lil, knock it off." Her sister intended to ask Mike for everything in the house until he willed it to her with his power.

"What?" the girl asked, feigning innocence.

Jasmine arched a brow and reached for the pepper at the same moment Ben did. Their fingers touched. She snatched back her hand and regretted it immediately, seeing the hurt on his face. His pain,

along with her memories of their one sexual encounter, heated her throat and cheeks. She couldn't think of any consoling words, nor would she encourage him. It wouldn't be fair to Ben. She loved Mike.

Slouched over his food, Ben ate listlessly while she told him and the others what Mike uncovered about Connor, adding that Desiree might be trying to find him at the places they used to go.

"Sounds right to me." Lily pointed her cantaloupe as she talked. "All we have to do is hang out at the local spots and corner her when she shows up."

"If we take into account all the clubs, bars, restaurants and various attractions, it would mean hundreds of places." Mike finished his lemonade. He shook the glass, rattling the ice. "We could keep missing her. It would take forever."

Grabbing her fork, she stabbed a home fry. "You have a better suggestion?"

Jasmine did. "I'll help with the research on Connor so we'll find him that much quicker and learn where they went."

"No." Mike speared another slice of cantaloupe. "When we go upstairs, you're going to sleep."

She frowned. "What about you? You've been up since yesterday."

He finished his chew and swallowed. "I caught a few hours while you snoozed."

"That's not enough."

"Sure it is. I think I know how much rest I need."

"Just like I know that about myself, so don't presume you understand me better than I do."

His brows arched at her sharp comment.

She refused to back down. The only way out of this for him was for her to find Connor and Desiree as quickly as possible. The restlessness had returned. Behind it would be lust. If it claimed her, she wanted it to be because she'd failed, not Mike. She couldn't burden him with new guilt for not having protected her. "Give me what Erica's found so far, show me how to dig deeper. While I do that work, you can get back to your consulting job and whatever agencies you have contracts with."

Ben mumbled, "Homeland Security, INS, the Florida Department of Corrections. There may be others. I didn't go through all of his emails." He turned his head to Mike. "You're leaving?"

"No." He'd looked at Jasmine with his answer. "I'm seeing this through. You can help if you want, but you're also going to sleep. I'll make damned sure of it."

Lily's pale brows rose. Violet's blush reached the tips of her ears. Ben pushed away from the table and left the room. They knew the only way Mike could be certain she rested was to slake her desire by making love to her.

The remainder of the meal passed quickly and in silence. Thoughts of Mike mounting her dominated Jasmine's mind, constricting her nipples, dampening her pussy, stoking her need of him. Hands shaking, she put her plate in the dishwasher and went down the hall. At the end of it she saw Ben, his elbow propped

against the wall, head in his hand. Hearing her approach, he dropped his arm and turned. She moved to her right just as he moved to his left. They danced back and forth, getting in each other's way.

"Sorry." He backed into the foyer so she could pass.

She smiled as she would to a stranger.

"Jas, wait." He followed her to the stairway and spoke softly so only she could hear. "I don't want you to think I took advantage of you during the time we were all...that is..." His blush outdid Violet's from a few minutes ago. He dropped his head. "I thought you wanted me. Maybe I convinced myself of it, but I'd never hurt you. I know you think you love him. Could be it's real, could be it's the curse. I wish you felt that way about us, but I'd be happy if you don't hate me."

Oh, Ben. "Hate you?" She cradled his face, tipping it so he'd look at her. "You helped so much. I'll never forget what you've done."

He turned his head into her hand, kissing her palm. His words warmed it. "I'm always here if you need me."

Footfalls came down the hall. Ben moved away from her, not acknowledging Mike as he edged past him to get to the kitchen.

Mike watched for a moment. At her side, he said, "You sleep first, then you work."

His hand covered her breast, caressing it through her silk robe with determination, possession. "No arguments, understand?"

He never gave her a chance to protest. In her bedroom, he locked the door and tore off his tee. She noticed a faint buzz, the same as she had earlier when he'd pushed Ben into the hall. Air, or a current of energy, whispered over her, no stronger than a sigh. Looking down, she gaped at her silk belt untying, her robe parting.

His jeans and underwear dropped to the floor. He stepped out of them, his cock fully erect. With his mind, he lowered the silk robe from her shoulders, stripping her.

Jasmine's heart beat uncontrollably with surprise, excitement and longing. "Are you showing off?"

"No. But I will." Naked, he came to her, one hand on her ass, the other on her throat, his mind trapping her arms behind herself, wrists together, defenseless against his power and male appetite.

His punishing kiss aroused. Her throaty sigh couldn't begin to drown out his pleasured groan. She tried to push her tongue into his mouth. He wouldn't allow it. This act belonged to him—he made the decisions, she complied. His sex ground into hers. In response, she parted her legs. Not good enough. With no warning, he turned her to face the bed, bending her at the waist, grabbing her ass and mounting from behind. His balls struck her buttocks with each penetrating thrust, his power massaging and tormenting her clit as superbly as his fingers had all the prior times.

Two orgasms depleted her. Heedless of her fatigue and his own, he gave her a third, his lips on her cleft, his fingers, rather than his penis, pumping inside.

She slept. So did he, his leg on top of hers, his arm draped around her waist, a reminder she wouldn't get free.

That night, he allowed two hours of work, then took her repeatedly, tirelessly. She behaved as a glutton would, or a woman in love, her hopeless cravings turning to rapture.

Three days later, shortly before midnight, she got a lead.

"Oh my God." Jasmine stared at the laptop's screen. She motioned Mike over. "You have to see this."

He leaned into her, the ends of his hair dangling on her shoulder, his scent a mixture of soap and sex. "St. Rita's School? Erica sent this?"

"Around six, along with some other stuff." Her voice shook with excitement. "Connor went to St. Rita's with his good friend Larry O'Rourke. Look at this." She tiled the screen so numerous pages would show simultaneously, pointing to the upper right corner as she spoke. "These are yearbook pictures of Connor and Larry on the swim team, playing basketball, soccer." Her finger moved lower. "This article ran when Larry became a priest. In the upper left," she tapped the screen with her nail, "there's a newspaper series about him. He left the priesthood and began an outreach service to the homeless, addicts, you name it. And this," she pointed again, "shows the president of the Hemmler Group presenting Larry with a check to start an afterschool program for disadvantaged kids. Why did Connor's company get involved unless he had something to do with the donation? He and Larry must have remained friends all these years."

Mike un-tiled the screen. He brought up the Hemmler article, scrolling down as he read. "It says here, this group is recognized for its charitable contributions."

"And of the hundreds of organizations clamoring for funds they just happened to pick one run by Connor's childhood friend?"

"No, he surely had a hand in this."

"Exactly. He disappeared but didn't go to his relatives. I wouldn't either, knowing Desiree might show up and cause them no end of grief. So, what other options did he have? He could have left town and had strangers surround him, but what if one of them turned out to be a Wanderer? If I were forced to run, I'd want a measure of safety, someone I trusted to be on my side. Who would be better than a friend you've known since your teens? One who was once a priest? One that's not tied to you in an obvious way?"

Mike nodded slowly. "Connor's name wasn't mentioned in the Hemmler article. Did you find any press on him and Larry as adults?"

"No. This is the only article that came up on Google and Bing."

"Tomorrow I'll go to see Larry and if your guess is correct, Connor."

"Not without me you're not."

His thumb flicked her nipple. He tried to sound stern. "You need to rest."

"I've slept more these last days than I have in months." She brought his hand to her mouth and nibbled on his thumb, making him smile. "I want to get some answers from Connor. I deserve it."

"And a whole lot more." The tip of his nose touched hers. "Want me to use my power to throw him around, smash that pretty face of his?"

She smiled, knowing she'd miss his sense of humor as much as his compassionate heart, and would envy the woman he'd finally fall in love with. Her voice caught with emotion. "Ask me again tomorrow if he doesn't cooperate."

"You got it."

As the hour drew close, Jasmine's stomach began to churn. Dressed in beige linen trousers and a short-sleeved white blouse, she caught Mike evaluating her. She brushed an imaginary speck from her sleeve and felt compelled to apologize or explain. "It's what I usually wear, or used to wear before Desiree."

He finished dressing in a fresh pair of jeans and cotton shirt he'd brought from his apartment. "Looks nice."

For a boring business manager, a woman he wanted to save. One he wouldn't keep. If he ever witnessed her without the effects of the curse, his interest would evaporate like water on hot concrete. He gave her a small taste of it now as he averted his gaze. A dull ache spread from her belly to her chest.

Sketchbook in hand, Violet came out of her office to hug Jasmine and wish them luck. Lily and Ben, both with paint on their clothes and hands, offered the same from the hall outside his room.

Mike slung his arm around Jasmine's shoulder, giving her a quick, brotherly hug, which matched her unimaginative attire. "There's no reason to worry, everything's going to go well. We're getting close."

They were reaching the end.

Larry O'Rourke lived in a boxy two-story building where the only view of the Atlantic was from a TV screen. The Cartoon Channel played loudly, in English and Spanish, from several units. Mothers yelled at their offspring. One of the kids cried.

Jumpy, Jasmine scanned the building's shabby vegetation and the bordering street. She saw men in baggy jeans and white T-shirts waiting for their rides to construction sites or other manual jobs. Women pushed shopping carts, presumably to the nearest grocery store. Older children rode their bikes, free from school for a few more days.

No Desiree.

Mike rapped on Larry's door. A stocky man with strawberry blond hair and a ruddy complexion answered, his smile untroubled and wide. The aroma of bacon and coffee wafted past him onto the landing. "Morning."

"Mr. O'Rourke?" Mike asked.

"Yep." Larry passed his smile to Jasmine. "You must be with Anita's shelter. She told me you'd be coming today to iron out the details."

Jasmine leaned to the right to see past him into the shadowed apartment. "We're not with the shelter. We're looking for a friend of yours."

"Connor Rolands," Mike offered. "It's important. We need to speak to him right away."

Larry's smile hung on for a millisecond longer. He crossed his arms over his chest. "Connor Rolands?"

"We're not with the Wanderers," Jasmine said. "Desiree didn't send us. We're looking for her."

The man's face drained of color.

"You know what happened," she said, then cried, "You have to tell Connor that Jasmine Dante is here. He's inside, isn't he?"

"All we want to do is talk," Mike said quickly. "We need information."

Larry shifted his weight so he'd take up even more of the jamb, not letting them look inside. "Ah, I saw him a few years back when we had a school reunion, but since then we lost touch."

His complexion reddened considerably with his lie.

Jasmine's frustration and anger flared. She snapped, "You accepted a donation from his company in January. He's not with his family. He has to be here. If not, then you know where he is. You have to tell me. Because of him, Desiree did something to me, a curse or a spell that won't let me sleep. It's killing me!"

Mike took her hand, his grip comforting, his voice calm as he spoke to Larry. "Like I said, all we want to do is talk. But I will tell you this. If he refuses to show himself and anything happens to Jasmine, I will come back. No matter where Connor hides, I'll find him and I will make him pay."

Larry's arms tightened. "Ah, I think I could call him and—"

"Lar, it's okay," a weary voice said from inside. "Let them in."

## Chapter Fourteen

Connor wasn't the man Jasmine recalled. In a few short months, he'd lost his tan and too much weight. His clothes hung grotesquely on his large frame. Gray streaked his brown hair, once darker than hers. Prominent lines beneath his eyes and around his mouth aged him far beyond his thirty-two years.

He sat on the edge of the cheap sofa, legs bobbing, ready to run. His hands shook so badly orange juice sloshed in his Styrofoam cup. "Jasmine." He flicked his gaze at her like a whipped dog. This from a man who'd had boundless confidence and charm at the seminar, casually asking for a dinner date he knew she wouldn't refuse. "How'd you figure out I was here?"

She took the chair Larry offered, thankful her trembling legs wouldn't have to hold her. "Mike knew what to look for." She gestured to him. "He used to be with the US Marshals, working in their witness-security program."

Connor stared at his juice. "If you found me, then Desiree..." A defeated sigh replaced his words. He buried his face in his free hand.

Mike spoke in a firm, reassuring voice. "She won't show up here as we did. From what I understand of her, she's not going to use a tactical approach."

Connor's shrill laugh pierced the modest living room. "I wouldn't put anything past her. She's like a disease that won't go away no matter what you do. There isn't a moment when she's not in my head."

Larry put his plump hand on his friend's shoulder. "The few times Connor can sleep, he has nightmares about her."

A chill ran through Jasmine. She rubbed her arms, trying to warm them. "I've been having dreams too. In mine, she's watching us at Tempos. When I leave, she follows me into the street and..." She shook her head, unwilling to continue.

Connor groaned. "I didn't think she'd find us there or even know about the date. I had no idea how crazy she was." He lowered his hand, studying his palm as he spoke, his voice haunted. "You do believe me, don't you?"

Mike spoke first. "Tell us about Desiree."

"Oh God." He trembled as if wet leaves were stuck to him, clammy, cold, and he wanted to shake them off.

Jasmine shivered, torn between running from here and watching a man's courage disintegrate before her eyes.

"Desiree," Mike prodded.

Connor heaved in air. "We went out a few times shortly before I met Jasmine." He glanced at her then Mike. "I'll admit, Desiree's beauty attracted me. Shit, I don't think I've ever seen a more gorgeous woman. But we had nothing in common." A shudder ran through him, followed by his words, quicker now, saying he had to get it out. "Conversation with her became more trying than a ten-mile run. No matter what subject I brought up, even insignificant stuff like what I thought about the newest challenges on reality TV, she didn't offer anything of her own. She just listened. I'll admit, I like to have the floor to offer opinions and talk about myself, but not that much. I tried every topic I could think of to engage her. She simply sat there, looking at me as if I were Moses arriving with the tablets. At first, it flattered me. Later, I wondered what in the hell was going on. Finally, I just didn't call her anymore."

Mike scooted forward in his chair. "You have her phone number?"

"Not a home phone. I had no idea where she lived. We met up at places for our dates. The number she gave me was where she worked as a receptionist, some kind of homecare employment service."

"Closed now," Larry offered.

Connor put his juice on the coffee table and laced his fingers, squeezing them so hard Jasmine saw his knuckles blanching. "I thought my not calling her would be the end of it, she'd move on to another guy. Given her looks, I knew she'd have no trouble finding someone. Instead, she started calling me." He shook his head, his tormented expression said he was remembering. "At first, she left voice mails on my cell phone. Nothing heavy, just asking me to call when I had a chance, she'd love to hear from me. God, she sounded so sweet and kind of confused, like she didn't understand why I hadn't made another date. I felt sorry for her and made the mistake of calling back, wanting to break it off like an adult, but lost my nerve. She was thrilled to hear from me, and I mean with a capital T. I ended up lying, telling her that I'd be busy for awhile and couldn't see her because of work."

He hung his head. "The next day she sent a basket to my office from an outrageously expensive gift shop. There was gourmet coffee, French pastries, designer water, orange juice and a note telling me to take care of myself. When I got home that night, I listened to her message on my machine. Again, she sounded so sweet. She said she hoped work went well and that I'd finish soon so she and I could be together. I couldn't stand it any longer. I called her work number, knowing it had closed for the night and left a voice mail. I told her I didn't think going out again would be such a good idea. That she was beautiful and sharp, but I wasn't looking for anything exclusive or lasting." His face lifted.

Jasmine winced at the hollows around his eyes.

Misunderstanding her reaction, he spoke quickly, "I know it was the coward's way out, and I'm not proud of it, but I really did not want to get into a drawn-out conversation with her with me doing all the talking. It wouldn't have solved anything and I was afraid it might have hurt her even more."

Sighing, he sagged back into the sofa. "A couple of days passed and nothing happened, so I figured it was over. When the ladies at the office started talking about a strange woman hanging around, I didn't equate it with Desiree. I thought it was a homeless person wanting to use the building's public restroom or trying to panhandle a few bucks. Happens all the time. The next day, I had lunch with a friend of mine, a woman who works in the legal department. Nothing sexual there. She's old enough to be my mother for God's sake. While we were in the restaurant, someone slashed her tires. I never once considered it might be Desiree. And then I met you." He looked at Jasmine.

Terrified and saddened at what he'd become, she had to force herself not to avert her gaze.

"I wouldn't have put you at risk if I'd known what I was dealing with," he said, "but I didn't." He glanced at Mike and Larry. "I couldn't believe Desiree showed up at Tempos. Jesus, she scared the crap out of me. I'd never seen eyes that wild. You know what I mean." His gaze shot to Jasmine. "I know I should have admitted to knowing her, but God I just didn't want to. It would have made it seem even worse than it was. After I dropped you off, I drove for a while, trying to figure out what to do. By the time I got home, my machine showed fifty messages. The next day there were a hundred. All dead air. She had called and let the tape run without saying anything. Somehow, that was more frightening than having her scream or cry. She followed me. No matter where I went, there she'd be, watching, waiting. I talked to a cop friend who told me it would be nearly impossible to prove she was engaged in stalking. The places I saw her were all public. She had every right to be there. Not once did she confront me. She left no messages. He advised me to ignore her, she'd eventually go away. I knew better. There was something else going on with her, an intangible I couldn't quite grasp. I Googled her and the place where she worked. That's when I found out about the Wanderers and started to believe the occult was more than the musings of the Church and fiction writers. I knew reasoning with her wouldn't help, nor would a confrontation. She'd never give up until she got what she wanted. So, I decided to give it to her."

Surprised, Jasmine straightened. Mike rested his hand on hers and shook his head, warning her not to speak.

Connor rubbed his face before continuing. "I saw her again at the bar where we first met. Instead of leaving, as I had the other times she'd followed me, I told Desiree I was glad to see her. I'd been wrong to break it off, to let anyone else get in the way. She seemed wary. She told me she could make me love her, but hadn't. She wanted me to come to her on my own. As crazy as this sounds, I figured she was threatening me with some kind of spell. We danced and had a few drinks. I didn't want to take her to my condo, I figured she'd never leave, so we spent the night on the beach and started hooking up as we had previously for our dates. I did everything I could to make her believe we were back together. At the same time, I made plans to run. No job or condo is worth what I figured she'd do. She'd put me in a hell where I had to love her and if that didn't work, she'd kill me or blind and paralyze me like the other Wanderers had

done to their victims. With Lar's help, I've been hiding out here." He spoke to Jasmine. "You said she cursed you and now you can't sleep?"

Mike answered first. "It's more than that. Desiree obviously believed Jasmine was a serious rival. The two of you met at a bar. Which one?"

"Haney's Hut on the beach. Whenever I'd have a long meeting at work, I'd go there after to get a burger and beer."

"Where else did you go with her?"

Connor named the places. "I know she's still looking for me, and this time she will force me to do what she wants. I feel her all the time. At night, it's the worst. Lar's had his hands full trying to keep me from leaving this place. It's like she's crawling under my fucking skin and pulling me toward her."

Aided by a spell or a curse, Jasmine thought. "To anywhere special?"

Connor's shoulders bunched to his ears. He nodded. "Haney's Hut. It pops into my head all the time." Mike muttered, "It would be the most sentimental spot for her."

"Jasmine, you're not planning on confronting her, are you?" Connor's legs bounced even faster. "This time, she may kill you. Even Lar knows nothing can stop what she's doing to me. Believe me, he's tried everything from hypnosis to good old prayer."

The man exhaled sadly. "I may not be the best one to battle her power on a spiritual level, considering my own failings with the Church."

"You're a saint next to me." Connor turned back to Jasmine. "Listen to what I'm saying. There is no way to defeat Desiree."

"There's always a way," Mike said. He pulled a business card from his pocket and gave it to the man. "Call me tonight when her presence is the strongest. It'll help us a lot and may stop this." He stood.

Connor's gaze jumped from him to Jasmine. "I'm sorry for getting you involved. Please don't tell her you saw me. I don't know where else to run."

In the lot, Jasmine handed Mike her car keys. "Do you mind driving?"

"Not at all." He opened the passenger door. "Don't let what he said get you down. Desiree isn't invincible."

She dropped into the seat without comment, lacing and squeezing her fingers just as Connor had.

Mike's heart sank. "It's coming back, isn't it?" Just as he'd suspected, the curse had mutated and found another way. He saw the ravages of it in her eyes.

"I'm okay."

He hunkered down next to her, his hand cupping her knee. "After I talk to Connor tonight, I'll go to Haney's Hut or any of the other places that pop into his mind. If she's not there, I'll go back tomorrow and every day after until she does show up."

"No, I don't want you to. I'll go alone."

He stared, then hissed, "Absolutely not. This time I mean it. I don't want you anywhere near her. I won't let you anywhere—"

"Mike." She'd unlaced her fingers and put them on his mouth, stopping him. "We don't know if she can even remove the curse unless she sees me."

He pulled her hand away. "I'm aware of that. But I can bring her someplace safe for you. Maybe to your garage and control the situation."

"No. This is between her and me." She brought back her hand. "I don't want you involved. God knows what she'd do to you. I'll go myself."

"Not if I tie you to the fucking bed, you won't."

She regarded him. Beneath her building lust was a depth of sadness he hadn't seen.

Her voice grew quiet. "I don't want you to ever be responsible for me."

His belly burned, the word *ever* sticking in his brain. Why had she used it? Was she worried he'd want to stick around after this was over when in her mind there'd be no reason for them to continue? A braver man might have asked. Like Desiree, he couldn't face the truth that she wouldn't want him, and so he got pissed again, adolescently, stupidly pissed, and kept on point with their subject. "If you insist on going, fine. I don't have the right to stop you. But I'll be there too."

At eight thirty that night, Mike's cell phone rang. Jasmine snatched it before he could. "Connor?"

"Yeah." His voice shook. "I keep picturing Haney's Hut. Be careful. Please don't say anything about me."

"I promise you, I won't." She ended the call and handed Mike his phone. "Haney's."

The last days had been ones of relative peace. Tonight, the yearning returned, restored and belligerent.

Jasmine dressed in front of her cheval mirror. The blue-green dress, a new design by Violet, snaked over her nudity. She wore no underwear, only her belly chain and navel finery as she had when she'd met Mike.

The mirror reflected his ever-watchful eyes. They followed the spaghetti-thin straps, the plunging neckline that dipped to a sharp V at her waist, the slightly flared skirt, the geometric designs Lily had painted on the borders of the cotton voile.

The hefty bulge behind his fly said he approved. He wanted her again. Somehow she knew tonight would be their last together.

Jasmine turned away from the mirror, her head down, pretending to check her strappy sandals so he wouldn't see her anguish.

Someone rapped softly on the door. "Can I come in?" Violet asked, her voice muted by the barrier.

Mike let her inside.

Jasmine went to her middle sister and hugged her hard, smiling at the vanilla scent from Violet's perfume or her baking.

She whispered, "Jas, what's wrong?"

Everything. "Nothing." She made certain to keep her voice steady, to remind herself she had no hold on Mike. For him to leave her freed of his own doubt and guilt was all she could ask. "I really love the dress."

"It loves you more. You look beautiful." She pulled back so they'd be face-to-face. "You will be careful."

Mike offered Jasmine his hand, his fingers firm and warm. "I won't let anything happen to her."

Ben and Lily waited in the hall. Uncharacteristically sentimental, her youngest sister held back tears as she kissed Jasmine's cheek. Ben took her free hand, brushing his lips across her knuckles.

Mike assured, "Nothing bad is going to happen. We'll be back."

Jasmine didn't comment. If she survived the coming hours and returned, she'd be alone.

Haney's boasted a mixed clientele, from young professionals who worked nearby, to middle-aged tourists braving the Key's sweltering summer, to college-age kids looking for an affordable meal and no-strings sex. The kids necked more than danced to the newest Justin Timberlake hit, groaning when the DJ followed it with a milder tune for the post-twenties crowd.

Mike wound his arms around Jasmine's waist, his hands on the small of her back. Her embrace tightened, fear mixed with scaling passion. He recalled their night at the Blue Bliss when desire had won and he'd taken her orally in the alley.

He whispered, "You doing all right?"

Chin on his shoulder, her head moved to the left. "She's not here."

"It's still pretty early." He turned them to the music's beat. "It could be hours."

Her fingers gripped his tee.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know if I can make it." Her voice shook. "Hold me closer, as hard as you can. Please."

With one hand on the back of her head and his other arm around her waist, his caress owned her, assuring she wouldn't make a move unless he allowed it. As his eyes swept the room, searching for Desiree, he continued to slow dance.

Jasmine whimpered, "It's never been this bad."

Mouth to her ear, he whispered, "The longer you hold out, the better it will be when we're alone."

Her nose nuzzled his cheek. "We could go outside for a few minutes. The car's not that far away."

"No." He increased his hold on her, turning another half circle, and spoke softly in her ear. "We're going to wait, Jasmine. The next time I have you, it's going to be in your kitchen."

She steered her fingers through his hair, worn loose the way she liked it. "We never used the table."

"We will tonight, after your sisters and Ben go to sleep. I want you naked on the chair. I'm going to cuff your hands from behind. You'll spread your legs when I tell you to."

Her moan warmed his neck.

"For as long as I want I'm going to play with your cunt. My fingers first, then my mouth. You won't be able to make a sound. If you do, you'll wake the others." He glanced at the bar, the tables, the patrons milling about. Still no Desiree. He kept his voice low. "When you're ready to break, I'm going to stop and delay your release."

She shook her head, her face rubbing his shoulder. "No. You can't."

"I will, so I can bend you over the table and fuck you from behind. But only if you hold off now. You have to, Jasmine."

A tremor moved through her body. "I'm trying."

"You can do this."

The song ended. Arm around her waist, Mike escorted her to one of the empty stools against the far wall where a horizontal plank allowed patrons to eat. From here, they could watch for Desiree. He gestured for the server, ordering bacon cheeseburgers, Cajun-spiced fries and two Coronas.

Jasmine pressed the frosty glass to her throat, then took a small sip. Mike pushed his bottle to her and leveled his voice to a pitch only she could hear. "Go on and drink mine too. It might help you relax."

She regarded the beer as she would a poisonous spider. "It might make this worse. I could lose even more control."

"You're stronger than that and you know it. You didn't hurt me, did you?"

Jasmine grabbed his hand, holding the back of it to her cheek. "I'd destroy myself first."

"Honey, you can do this." He turned his palm to her face, wiping away the tear at the corner of her eye. "She may show up in the next five minutes."

Jasmine gave him a stiff, unbelieving smile.

Mike wasn't a man who prayed, but tonight he begged for the horror to end.

At closing, only a handful of patrons remained. The bartender announced the last call for drinks. Desiree hadn't showed.

## Chapter Fifteen

The meringue-white beach, studded with palms, glistened beneath a waning moon.

Mike held Jasmine's wrist, his grip nearly painful, fighting her as she tried to pull him to a bank of trees and vegetation that would shield them from view. Her flimsy shoes filled with sand, making each step too lengthy and difficult. The curse bullied, demanding she have him immediately.

He held back, on his cell phone with Connor, asking the man what he felt, what his mind pictured now.

Jasmine no longer cared. Fronds swished restlessly in the wind. The breeze tugged at her hair and dress, its hiss blending with the docile surf. Voices and laughter didn't intrude. The bar was behind them, the patrons gone, this area deserted. Even the habitual sunrise watchers wouldn't gather for hours.

A patch of shadows caught Jasmine's eye. She pictured herself backed into one of the palm's trunks, Mike crowding her with his muscular body, his hands lifting her skirt, fingers slipping down her slit to confirm her readiness for him. Her vaginal walls pulsed in delight. She could no longer bear separation from him.

With all of her strength, she tugged, annoyed by his slow pace, urging him forward. Unmoved, he continued talking to Connor, trying to calm the man. Jasmine frowned. Her head swung to him, her mouth opened to insist he hurry. No words came out. She stared at an odd shape within the palms.

The wind picked up, whipping the leaves, allowing the moon to touch the figure's champagne-colored hair, café au lait skin, unearthly green eyes.

Icy alarm seized Jasmine. She halted, her legs barely able to hold her. Mike said something she didn't catch. Clawing his hand, she broke free, wanting to protect him. She stumbled toward Desiree.

Mike grabbed her arm.

She cried out to the woman. "I'm begging you to stop what you've done before it kills me!"

Those green eyes darted from her to Mike and back. Hatred filled her voice. "Where is Connor?"

Jasmine lied. "I haven't seen him since that night at Tempos. I don't know where he is. I don't want to know."

She shouted, "You're here waiting for him!"

"No! I'm here to see you! To explain! Connor and I were never more than acquaintances, not even friends!" Jasmine's chest heaved with her gasps. "I'm no threat to you. I can't match your beauty. I am not what men want. You are. Connor never loved me."

Tears gathered in Desiree's eyes, along with renewed fury. Her voice rode on the wind, hollow, threatening. "You took him away from me."

Mike pulled Jasmine back. She fought his hold. "No!"

"You wanted him." Desiree stepped forward. Bathed in moonlight, her hair writhed around her exquisite face, tossed by the current, the same as her filmy white dress. "I saw you in the restaurant, smiling and laughing. You were talking about me, making fun of my love for him."

"I didn't even know about you then."

"Liar. I saw. I felt your ridicule. He is mine."

Jasmine sobbed, "Please don't do this."

"So now you hurt?" Desiree asked, her breathtaking smile not reaching her eyes. "You have no idea the pain I go through every minute of every hour. My last curse was too weak, too kind. This one won't be." Her lips pulled back in a grimace. Words from another time, another world poured from her.

Dazed with fear, Jasmine couldn't run, couldn't breathe. She expected to die, her mind begging Mike to save himself and escape.

He held on to her. A familiar buzz rose in intensity above the wind. Desiree's voice cracked suddenly. Her hands flew to her throat as though someone or something was strangling her. She clawed her neck.

Mike's power lifted the woman a few inches above the beach. Jasmine's eyes rounded in shock, her face tilted to Desiree's ascent—a foot, then two feet. The woman's legs kicked, trying to reach the ground.

He spoke in a measured voice. "Remove the curse."

Desiree gasped, laboring for air. "Never. It will kill her."

The buzz strengthened, tingling Jasmine's fingers and toes, constricting Desiree's throat. Her legs thrashed.

"Now." Mike hissed.

She tried to repeat her earlier words, the newest curse. His power stopped her. Desiree's eyes bulged. Her voice croaked. "Let me speak."

"Only to remove it."

Her head bobbed in agreement. The buzz softened. She stopped digging into her throat and cried, "I will tell my people what you've done! They will come for you and her! They'll destroy both of you and the ones you love!"

Oh God, no. Jasmine's mind screamed at the thought of anyone harming her sisters and Mike.

His words vibrated with rage. "You'll die before that happens. I'm giving you one last chance to remove the curse. I can snap your neck in a second."

"Mike, no!" Jasmine shouted. She couldn't let him murder her. There had to be another way.

"Do it!" he ordered.

Desiree refused.

The buzz became too loud, unbearable. Jasmine's palms flew to her ears. Her teeth clenched. Terror replaced the wrath in Desiree's eyes. Abruptly, the woman stopped fighting. Her arms and legs went limp.

Something whisked through Jasmine, draining the tension. Knees wobbling, she fell to the sand, her body and mind light. The oppressive yearning gone.

Erica gestured Mike away from Jasmine. He shook his head, not wanting to leave her. Ever since she'd been free of the curse, she'd kept her face lowered, her arms wrapped around her torso. She kept saying she was all right, but her voice belonged to a woman who wasn't yet free.

"Mike." Erica trudged through sand to him.

On the street, her contacts from the police department kept spectators back and monitored hospital personnel. They rolled Desiree into an ambulance, safe from her frenzy thanks to whatever sedative they'd given her, along with the restraints she wore. At the end of her ride, a mental evaluation awaited. And, Mike hoped, lifelong commitment.

There'd be no record of it or what happened tonight, at least none for public scrutiny. When Mike had called Erica, she'd promised him as much. The feds had been interested in the Wanderers for a very long time. Desiree was their one window into that world.

Erica sighed, clearly annoyed with him. "I need to have a word with you." Her gaze flicked to Jasmine, and then she pointed to the right, nearer the surf. "Over there. Come on." Not giving him a chance to argue, she grabbed his sleeve.

Once they reached the spot, he shook himself loose of her grip, pulling his hair back with both hands. "Make it fast. I don't want to leave her for too long."

Erica leaned to the left to see past his shoulder. "You're sure Desiree removed the entire curse? Jasmine doesn't look all that happy."

The muscles in his chest ached. He recalled her earlier words when she'd said he wasn't responsible for her. She didn't want him to ever be in that role.

With the yearning over, what they'd done together had to be going through her mind. He sensed she had a lot of shame and regret, when what he needed from Jasmine was her continuing desire for him and love. New pain rose to his throat. He cleared it so he could speak. "She's been through so much crap, I'm surprised she isn't hysterical."

"Maybe she should go to the hospital and get checked out."

"I've already suggested it. She refused." He turned his head at the sound of the ambulance's motor. "The paramedics do know to keep Desiree sedated so she can't speak, right? The moment the sedative wears off and she starts uttering her curses, their lives aren't going to be worth shit."

"They're with the feds. They don't intend to take any chances. When you confronted Desiree, you didn't tell her who you are, did you?"

"There wasn't time. Not that I would have anyway. Why?"

The persistent wind blew Erica's dark hair into her face. She fingered it away. A pretty woman, her black eyes burned with intelligence. "Before she went under, she kept babbling about your power and how you tried to strangle her with your mind."

"The ravings of a lunatic, wouldn't you say?"

"If anyone asks, that's my story." She crossed her arms beneath her breasts. Fond of weightlifting, she had biceps nearly as impressive as his. "Desiree also said her people were going to come after you and Jasmine."

"How long do you think the feds can keep her locked up?"

"My guess is exactly what you're thinking—it depends."

His belly cramped. "On whether the press finds out about her or the Wanderers put up a stink?"

She frowned. "Are you serious?"

"Do you hear me laughing? Of course, I'm serious."

"Then why are you asking such a foolish question?"

He frowned. "Because I'd like a fucking answer. Or are you saying it's some kind of sacred secret?"

"No. It's something you should already be aware of. The feds always have a cover story for enquiring minds, remember? And you can't possibly believe the Wanderers are going to bring any unwanted attention to themselves. What's the matter with you?"

"Besides you criticizing me?"

"I can't help it. You haven't been gone from the service that long to be asking questions like a rookie."

He hardened his voice as she had hers, knowing where this was heading—a place he didn't intend to go. "Let's keep my stupidity out of this, all right? Now about the feds keeping her locked up—the length of time depends on what exactly?"

"Jesus, Mike, use your head."

"I am. I want to hear it from you, Erica."

"Fine." She sighed. "They'll hold on to her as long as they find her useful. If she doesn't cooperate, and that's always a big possibility—as you well know—they may decide to cut her loose in the hope that she leads them to the group's inner circle."

Exactly what he was afraid of. "And if she disappears?"

"You won't have to worry. She doesn't know who you are. Look," she added quickly to his muttered profanity, "I don't think Jasmine has anything to worry about, either. It's going to be some time before the

feds are through with Desiree. I'll be monitoring the situation and sending you regular updates. No way will you or Jasmine be blindsided. I give you my word as a colleague and a friend."

Satisfied, Mike squeezed her elbow. "I can't thank you enough for the help you provided tonight."

"Gratitude isn't necessary. You know what I want."

"I am not returning to the service, Erica."

"Why the fuck not?" She uncrossed her arms and punched his tattoo. For good measure, she also slugged his scar. "You haven't fully fossilized into a nerdy government consultant. There's still some life yet, I can see it in your eyes. And tonight you proved you could use your power for good. If you don't believe me, ask Jasmine."

He glanced back at her. She'd lifted her face to watch the ambulance. Her eyes held a purity he'd glimpsed a few times these last days, guilelessness, some might have called it. This was the real woman he'd always longed to see and to know. A sweet soul who had saved her inner fire for him.

Or so he continued to wish. You are such an idiot, he told himself. She wasn't the kind of woman who liked his type of man. He was as much of an outcast as Desiree. As tortured.

Jasmine deserved better. He looked at Erica. "I'll think about it, but I'm not promising anything. Now go and give Connor the good news."

"I thought you already did."

"He didn't seem to believe me when I called. You can swing by and talk to him, assure him Desiree's no longer a threat. Go on, you know you love to play the hero." He gave Erica his hardest hug, which she tried to outdo. Smiling, he kissed her cheek.

She muttered, "You're not fooling me, Stearn. You just want to get rid of me so you can go back to Jasmine."

"Do you blame me?"

"Not at all. I think she's going to be good for you."

She was going to say goodbye as soon as he joined her. She was too honest to do anything less.

The ambulance pulled away quietly, no siren, its whirling red light illuminating nearby businesses and vegetation. Two police cars followed. A few onlookers watched, then moved down the street, the drama over.

Jasmine thought of Desiree, captive now, all hope for her future lost. Compassion for the woman brought a new sigh. Desiree's crime had been so tragic. Loving a man she could never have.

So now you hurt? she'd asked. You have no idea the pain I go through...

It sliced through Jasmine, bringing despair as she saw Mike returning for the last minutes they'd spend together.

She lowered her face, not wanting him to see her as she really was, drab and uninteresting.

He went to one knee in front of her as she remained sitting on the sand. "You okay?"

A nod was all she could manage.

"Jasmine." His voice caught. He cleared his throat. "Look at me, please."

She dug her nails into her palms, wanting to refuse while also needing to see him this final time. Her face slanted to his.

Grief pinched his strong features. She saw farewell in his beautiful eyes, an apology that they could never be. A sob caught in her throat.

"There's no need to feel badly about what happened," he began. "It wasn't your fault." His voice continued to catch. "The curse made you do things you wouldn't ordinarily have considered. I didn't help." He hung his head. The wind swept his hair forward, hiding his face. "I acted like an animal. I know you're not used to men like me, and I have no illusions about deserving a woman like you."

A woman like you? Didn't he mean plain and boring? Why was he being so nice? She needed him to be cruel so it would be easier for her to return to the colorless existence she'd always known. "And what kind of a woman am I?"

"You're so damned beautiful and brave and—"

"Stop it." Her voice cut through the night, harsh, mean, truthful. "I'm not beautiful or brave. I'm ordinary and dull. Without the curse, you wouldn't have given me a second glance at the club. You should know that by now. I'm nothing like what you've seen these last days."

His face had already lifted. He frowned. "Screw the curse. You're fucking gorgeous now just as you were before, and there's not a dull cell in your body. Never criticize yourself like that again. I mean it. You're everything a man could hope to get."

"You're lying." She wrapped her arms even tighter, trying to hide what the dress exposed. "I'm not the woman you've been intimate with and you know it. You're just trying to be nice and I wish you wouldn't. It's going to make your leaving me and my missing you that much harder."

He stared. "What?"

She averted her gaze.

"You'd actually miss me?" he asked.

He wanted her to confirm what she'd blurted so foolishly? Why hadn't he left with Erica? He belonged with her, not here. Too defeated to deny what she'd said or to argue further, her words came out in a whisper. "Yes, I'm going to miss you." Couldn't he see how it was killing her?

He said something beneath his breath. Hesitation tinged his voice. "You still want me although everything's over?"

"Want you? Dammit, Mike, I love you even more now!"

"Oh my God." He pulled her into his embrace, crushing her against his chest. "Honey, I adore you."

"No you don't." She tried to push him away. He wouldn't stand for it. Weeping, she hid her face in his shoulder, her tears wetting his tee. "You like the woman the curse turned me into, not the real me."

His hand smoothed her hair. "You're both women."

"No. I never dress like this. I don't go to clubs or bars. I enjoy art galleries and museums, reading, and seeing the latest movies. Boring, drab stuff."

"Then I'm as uninteresting as you, because I like all of that too. The only reason I'm ever at a club is to listen to the music, not to hook up with women."

She ran her hands up his back, gripping his tee. "You're used to excitement. I spend my days going over accounts and my evenings watching cable."

"Yeah—so? I spend my days in front of a computer, remember? When I was with the service, it was five percent excitement and ninety-five percent paperwork or other crap that would put a meth addict to sleep. And don't you dare trash cable. I happen to like HBO and ESPN."

She mumbled, "I hate sports."

"Only because you haven't watched them with me." His caress shifted from tender to wanting. Lips on her biceps, he said, "I'll show you what to look for and which teams I'll expect you to support."

Her giggle cut off her tears, though they returned too quickly, along with her doubt. "You don't know what you're getting into, Mike. You'll be disappointed." In a day or a week or maybe a month he'd realize his mistake and leave, hurting her even more. It had to end tonight. Now. She twisted her body, trying to get away.

His mouth paused on her neck. "You don't like this?"

Her eyes fluttered closed. She whimpered. "Of course I do."

"Then you didn't like the way we made love?"

She'd willingly give up a year of her life to experience it again. Against all reason, her head fell back, exposing her throat to him. Each kiss drew a new moan from her. "I've never known anything as wonderful."

"So, prove it to me. Better yet, prove it to yourself." His hand moved to her breast.

Her lids slid open. She turned her face to his. Beer scented his breath, lust tensed his body. "How?" "I'll show you."

# Chapter Sixteen

He led her to a stand of sheltering palms and positioned her in front of a trunk. Moonlight drizzled through the fronds.

Jasmine's heart thumped heavily, hurting her throat. If anyone came by and chanced a look, would they see his hands on her face, tipping it to his? Would they catch what would surely come next?

As if reading her thoughts, he murmured, "We're alone."

"Someone could still come by."

His eyes glimmered. "Does that excite you?"

To her surprise, it did. She knew Mike wouldn't shame or hurt her. She trusted him completely. There'd be no intrusions, just the threat of it—an exciting illusion, their carnal fantasy. She answered finally, "Yes."

He angled his mouth over hers, his kiss light, still questioning her response.

She flattened her palms against the bumpy trunk, her mind and body powerless to stop this. Accepting his tongue, she drew it deeply inside—wantonly, like she'd been while cursed. Eagerly, as she was now.

Heartened, he pushed the thin straps over her shoulders, lowering the top of her dress to expose her breasts. Damp wind swirled around her nipples, a further reminder of her partial nudity.

She imagined others gathering to witness Mike's hand on her right breast, his mouth now moving away from hers to seek her left nipple. In her mind, she saw the young male servers from the bar and the twenty-something guys they'd served, their youthful eyes riveted and uncivilized, watching as Mike drew her breast between his lips, sucking the areola. Jasmine pictured the rosy circle puckering with his wet embrace.

His resultant growl told her he approved, though he expected more.

Back arched to allow him greater contact, she spread her legs in submission so he could take what he truly wanted, the same as she.

Mike held off. He indulged himself at her breasts, deliberately lingering on each nipple, knowing how naked it made her feel to be enjoyed in a public place, how deliciously used. Her mind wandered between the reality of his greedy mouth and her clenching cunt to the dreamlike world of her thoughts. In them, the male servers urged him to tear the dress from her then trap her hands above her head while he fucked her hard. The college boys grinned at Mike mounting her and Jasmine's breasts quivering with each powerful thrust.

The forbidden images culled a moan from Jasmine, followed by a choppy sigh.

He straightened. The air rippled over her nipples, molded by his tongue into hard, moist peaks. Looking down at her bared breasts, he lifted her skirt above her navel jewelry. "Keep your dress up so I can touch you. And don't close your eyes."

She studied his arousal, which was no greater than hers, her gaze on him as he demanded.

His hand sauntered past the dangling diamonds to between her legs. A muscle in her belly jumped. Blood scalded her throat. Thumb on her clit, he drove three fingers inside, eliminating her ability to think, to breathe.

Her head fell back, lightly bumping the trunk. Above, long leaves shifted with the breeze, partially obscuring the moon. Here, Mike's fingers moved inside of her, stretching, preparing, owning.

"I told you to keep your eyes on me," he said.

She heard the challenge in his voice. The authority. It thrilled and warned her to yield.

Her gaze dropped to his. "I won't look away again."

"If you do, you won't get this." With his free hand on her ass keeping her still, his thumb rubbed her clit.

Her hips jerked. A flood of torment gathered between her legs. His thumb made small, lazy circles. He regarded her to see their effect. She hid nothing—not her delight, arousal, or love. It enriched the act as no fantasy or spell could, his embrace and passion purging every constraint. She came effortlessly and harder than all the times before. Her mouth hung open, liberating a coarse grunt. Though her eyes were still on him, they were unfocused. At last, her mind was at ease. She didn't care who saw. All that mattered was Mike.

He thanked her with a deep, prolonged kiss. During it, his hand moved to his fly. She heard the scrape of metal as he lowered his zipper. Next, his rigid shaft brushed the inside of her thigh, his skin silky and hot.

Impatient, his mouth abandoned hers. He snapped out his orders. "Put your arms around my neck. When I lift your ass, wrap your legs around me. Lock one ankle over the other. Don't worry, I'll have you."

Her arms wreathed him, just as he'd instructed. "I'm not worried. With you beside me, how could I be?"

At her trust in him, a wave of pleasure and pride passed over his face. "Tell me again that you love me."

Tenderness and adoration hushed her words. "I love you, Mike."

He swooped down and kissed her neck, simultaneously cupping her buttocks and pulling her up. Without hesitation, Jasmine clasped his lean hips with her thighs, folding her calves over him, holding her right ankle with her left.

His strength impressed her. More easily than she believed possible, he lodged her between the trunk and himself, which allowed him to guide his cock inside, the angle enhancing his stiffness and length.

Marvelously impaled, Jasmine closed her eyes at his assured thrusts. His short puffs of air competed with the noise of the stubborn wind and lapping surf. She whispered what was in her heart, her desire for him and her love, uncertain whether he heard, untroubled because there would be other opportunities to tell him.

She wasn't alone any longer.

The truth of it freed her even more than Desiree had, allowing her to be wanton and playful. She gave him a lover's bite on his neck, squeezed her inner walls around his cock and groaned loudly at their climax that came within seconds of each other.

Her vagina beat fiercely around him.

Head dropping to her shoulder, he wheezed out his words. "How do you feel?"

Beneath her elation, a calm she'd never known ran through her. Prior to the curse, she'd been self-conscious and unsure after sex, wondering if she'd responded appropriately to her few boyfriends. Not with Mike. He'd given her the confidence to be herself. For him, and for her, the real Jasmine Dante was good enough. "Content. Satisfied. At peace."

His shoulders moved with his jarring breaths. "Because it was as good as before or was it better?"

Surprised at his question and obvious uncertainty, she moved her lips to his ear. "Better. Nothing came between you and me this time."

"I hope nothing ever will. Not even when we go back." He heaved one last breath and tottered. "I have to put you down. My legs are kind of shot."

She lowered her feet. Pulling the top of her dress over her breasts, she moved away from the palm so he could lean against it.

"Wow and whew." With an unsteady grin, he slumped into the trunk, clawing his hair away from his face. The wind blew it right back.

Jasmine gentled a thick strand behind his ear. He chuckled as she eased his limp penis into his underwear and zipped his fly carefully. "Good job. I may let you dress me from now on."

"I'd rather undress you."

"That's a given." He yawned.

"Mike." Eyes lowered to his tattoo and scar, she stroked both. "What did you mean when you said you hoped nothing would come between us, not even when we go back?" Her gaze darted to him while her mind recalled the last few days, events that seemed far removed from the present and too troubling to keep as memories from the past. "If you mean Ben, you don't have to worry."

"I'm not concerned about Ben. Are you?"

"No." Her cheeks and throat went hot. "What happened that one time won't be repeated, I promise you. I've already told him as much."

"If you hadn't, I would have. I'm not sharing you with him or any man."

She smiled at his possessiveness, awed by it. "You never did."

His hand went to her hair, using it to bring her close. She inhaled deeply as their thighs and bellies touched. He asked, "What about your sisters?"

"You mean coming between us?" She hadn't thought about that and wanted to assure him that wouldn't be the case.

"Violet likes you. She thinks you're hot."

"No shit?" His embarrassed smile said he hadn't expected to hear such a thing. He kissed her shoulder. "Remind me to thank her."

"Oh no, don't. She'd be so embarrassed if she knew I told you—wait, are you putting me on?" She slapped his hard belly. It didn't stop his drowsy laughter.

He let go of her hair. "Violet's all right. One helluva cook and not a bad designer, either." He trailed his forefinger between the cleavage Jasmine's dress exposed, sending new tingles throughout her body. "I want her making all of your clothes from now on."

Her brows lifted and an edge of unease gripped her belly. "Without the curse, you expect me to wear stuff like this in public?"

"I'm hoping you won't mind. I sure as hell don't. You're a beautiful, sexy woman, Jasmine. Can't you see it? Why are you trying to hide it?"

"I'm not. I just never thought of myself that way."

He shook his head. The wind snatched the ends of his hair. "Haven't you seen yourself in a mirror recently? You're freaking awesome."

She laughed at his turning her earlier words on her and did the same to him. "Damn, you're right," she said, just as he had when she'd told him to look at himself in the antique mirror.

He smiled. "Has Violet ever thought of designing lingerie?" His finger skimmed her nipple.

"You want me to start wearing underwear?"

"If it's anything like that corset you put on, yeah."

She snuggled closer. "It's her design. She's coming out with more in the fall—eighteenth-century undergarments for a twenty-first-century woman."

His head dropped to her hand cupping his fly. "I can't wait. I want you to model them for me in our bedroom."

Our bedroom. How wonderful it sounded. "At my house?"

His hesitation returned. He lifted his face. "It makes the most sense since you operate your business there and my place isn't large enough for me. We'll share expenses, just like other couples do, if you have no objections."

"Not even one."

"Think Lily will?"

Jasmine's stomach sank. Her youngest sister had always been too obstinate and vocal. When their parents had been alive, it seemed she couldn't get enough of their attention. After the accident, she'd made no effort to hide how she resented losing them and her oldest sister taking charge. At the same time, she competed with Violet for Jasmine's love, although it hadn't been necessary. Jasmine would have gladly died for either of them.

But Lily didn't like to share. She feared change. At twenty-six, she was still the frightened thirteenyear-old at their parents' graves.

Jasmine's sigh said it all. She couldn't bring anyone new into their home unless both of her sisters approved. "I don't know. We'll have to ask. We might have to win her over. Do you mind?"

Mike held her close. "Not at all, I'd do anything for you."

He already had.

At Jasmine's house, they had just reached the gazebo when the kitchen door flung opened. Lily, Violet and Ben rushed as one onto the porch. There they stayed, staring, obviously fearing the worst. That Desiree hadn't showed and if she had, she hadn't lifted the curse.

Mike released Jasmine's hand. "Go on and tell them. I'll wait here."

"No. You should be there too." Not only had he saved her life, he'd given her a future she'd never dreamed possible.

"It's all right." He brushed her cheek with his knuckles. "Tell them what they've been waiting to hear. Once they know what happened, I'll join you and we'll ask them about my moving in."

Reluctantly, she left him. Her sisters and Ben looked so stricken and loved her so much tears ran down Jasmine's face. "I'm okay," she said, climbing the steps. "It's over."

"It's not," Lily argued. "You're crying. What the hell happened?"

Jasmine gathered her youngest sister into her arms with confidence and care she hadn't known in too long. "There's no need for you to be afraid any longer, Lil." She lifted her head and spoke to the others. "Desiree lifted the curse."

Suddenly, they all wanted their turn to hug her, with their questions interrupting each other.

"Where's she now?" Violet asked.

"How'd you convince that freaking witch to free you?" Lily wanted to know.

"Will she be back?" Ben questioned.

Jasmine pulled free of them. "Mike should tell you. We owe all of this to him. He was unbelievable." She motioned for him. "Let's go into the kitchen."

Jasmine and her sisters sat at the table, Ben stood by the door, Mike near the sink as he relayed what had happened tonight.

When he'd finished, Lily pushed her chair back, scraping the legs over the wood. "How do we know we can trust your friend Erica to tell us if Desiree gets loose?"

Jasmine answered for him. "Mike trusts Erica. That's good enough for me."

"And me," Violet said.

Lily crossed her arms over her chest, ignoring them in favor of grilling Mike. "While you had the chance, why didn't you kill Desiree? What's the matter with you?"

"Lil." Jasmine stood, hands on her hips. "That's enough."

"It's all right," Mike said to her. He spoke to Lily. "If she had tried to harm your sister further, I would have done anything to stop her. Desiree didn't want to die, so she removed the curse. To have harmed her after that would have been the coward's way out."

"And murder," Ben said.

Lily's head swung to him, then back to Mike. "But she's still out there. As long as she's alive, my sister won't be safe."

"That's not true," Jasmine said. "Mike will protect me."

All eyes went to her, including his. In his dark gaze was love and gratitude for her confidence in him.

Unconvinced, Lily frowned. "How's he planning to do that?"

He drawled, "The usual way." A recognizable buzz filled the room.

Violet's hands flew to her mouth, Ben choked on his swallow, Jasmine tried not to laugh. Lily's brows met her hairline as Mike's power lifted her from the chair. "Pull your arms and legs in," he instructed.

She gaped at the empty space between her and the floor. "Why?"

"Because I said so." He spun her in a loose circle. She snatched her legs and arms tight to her body. He accelerated the spins until she was a blur, like a figure skater on ice.

"Ready to come down?" he asked.

"Hell no." She squealed, "This is so freaking cool!"

Smiling, he gave her a few more whirls and put her back on the seat. "Dizzy?"

"I can handle it." She gripped her chair so she wouldn't fall off and lowered her head to the table.

He grinned and spoke to them all. "Nothing's going to happen to Jasmine. I give you my word."

Violet's and Ben's heads bobbed in stunned agreement. Jasmine cleared her throat, ready to make her announcement or plea. "Mike and I are going to be together from now on."

Lily's head lifted from the table. The others looked at Mike.

"I love him," Jasmine announced, "and he loves me. I've asked him to move in here—if that's okay with all of you."

Evidently surprised, Ben advanced a step. "I get a vote?"

"Why wouldn't you?" Mike looked at the boy. "You were here first."

His expression said he hadn't expected the consideration and wasn't certain how to handle it. "Right, well, I guess it's okay." He shifted his weight.

"You're sure?" Mike asked.

Ben's embarrassment grew. He straightened his shoulders and tried to sound casual. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be? Hey," he said, without giving Mike a chance to answer, "do you know how to repair stuff? The plumbing in this place is a fucking nightmare. I could use some help with it."

"I'm no plumber, but I'd be happy to do whatever I can."

Ben nodded, then crossed the room and offered his hand.

As Mike shook it, Violet said, "I'm okay with this too. Lil?"

She rolled her forehead over the table's glass top.

Jasmine's heart clenched even as her aggravation grew. "Lil?"

"I don't know." Her sullen tone indicated how much she hated the idea. "It's already crowded with all of us."

Mike started to speak. Jasmine put up her hand to stop him. "If that's how you feel, I understand. I'll pack a few bags tonight and come for the remainder of my stuff tomorrow afternoon."

Her sister's blonde head rose slowly from the table. "What do you mean? You'd actually move out?"

"I wouldn't have a choice, Lil. I won't leave Mike. We'll find a new place together."

"No, you can't," Violet said. She grabbed Jasmine's hand. "I won't let you. You belong here more than anyone else. You kept us together after Mom and Dad died." Turning to Lily, she hissed, "What is the matter with you?" With her free hand, she slapped her younger sister's shoulder.

"Hey," Lily complained, "stop it."

Violet didn't back down. "Quit being such a problem. Tell Jas it's okay for Mike to move in here. Go on or I'll really slug you. And don't think I can't," she interrupted her sister.

The girl's light brown eyes narrowed on Violet then him. "I'm warning you, you better never hurt Jas."

"Even if I do so unwittingly, you can brain me with your skillet."

"Don't think I won't," she grumbled, though her lips turned up in a slight smile. "Yeah, okay." She straightened and slumped back in her chair. "I'm cool with it."

Jasmine went behind Lily, throwing her arms around her. "Thank you."

The girl gripped Jasmine's wrists and whispered so the others couldn't hear. "You wouldn't ever really leave me, right?"

Aw, Lil. Fighting tears, Jasmine hugged her hard. "Never," she whispered. "I'll always be here for you."

"You better be."

Jasmine gave her youngest sister a hard kiss on her cheek and a few more moments before she straightened and offered Mike her hand.

"Night," Violet said first. Ben and Lily nodded.

Jasmine led Mike down the hall and to the stairway. There, he stopped her. "What?" she asked, turning to him.

He studied her eyes, her mouth, her hair. "Tell me about you."

Her smile couldn't have been more pleased. The question didn't scare her any longer. She wanted him to know everything, and she had to learn all she could about him, his smallest dislikes, his greatest joys. "All right. To begin with, I wasn't always as fascinating as I am now."

He settled his forehead on hers. "I don't believe it. You're lying."

"Nope. My date for the freshman dance knew I was a real dud. That's why he stood me up."

"What?" He pulled back, genuinely surprised. "Really? What a prick."

"Oh hey, I couldn't blame him. It was a fix-up from one of my friends. I still wore braces and had zits."

He struggled not to smile. "Impossible."

"I have proof. My dad took a bunch of pictures before we figured the guy wasn't going to show."

"I want to see them."

"Tomorrow. Along with all of the photos that used to go there." She gestured to the wall and went up a step.

He followed. "Go on. Tell me more."

"Okay. Let's see. Elementary school is pretty much a blur, except for the second grade Christmas pageant when I was cast as one of the ornaments on this huge tree and then third grade when I broke my arm."

"Shit. You were hurt?"

"A fourth-grade boy wanted his turn on the swings and pushed me off. Lucky for me I fell on my elbows and not my head."

He smiled. "True. What else?"

She took another step, and so did he. "Well, although I hate to admit it and haven't till now, it took me two tries to get my driver's license. The first time I tried to parallel park, I forgot to take the car out of reverse and accelerated. My dad's Chrysler jumped the curb and almost ran down two cops."

Mike's shoulders shook with laughter.

She continued climbing the stairs. Again, he followed. "I won a math award in middle school. In high school I was school treasurer senior year—not because I was particularly popular—nobody else wanted the job."

"They were too stupid, huh?"

Her laughter floated down the stairway. "I guess that's one way to look at it." They reached the landing. "Pink and blue-green are my favorite colors. I absolutely loathe yogurt. Really, I don't know what other women see in it. The manufacturers can add all the chocolate and sugar they want, it's still yogurt. If I wouldn't gain a ton, I'd eat Cheez-Its and Dove bars all day. I have been known to buy new underwear so I don't have to do laundry. And I was an absolute failure at Girl Scouts. I just couldn't get into earning those badges. Now enough about me for the time being. Tell me about you."

He led her down the hall to their bedroom. "I'm thinking about going back into the service."

"Oh, Mike." She gave him a fierce hug, causing him to stagger back. "You should. You loved it. I saw it in your eyes."

"That may be, but I don't want to fail."

"You won't. You saved me, didn't you?"

"Not from me." Arm around her waist, he opened the door and led her inside. The room was more inviting than she recalled, scented with freshly washed linens and furniture polish. Violet and Lily had probably cleaned while she'd been gone. Anything to keep busy while they awaited her fate.

Mike locked the door, sealing her future. She belonged to him.

Teasing, she asked, "Are you going to spin me around like you did with Lily?"

"Nope. I'd rather use my concentration for something else." He took the handcuffs from the nightstand drawer, suspending them from his little finger. "I haven't used these on you as yet."

No, he had not. Jasmine needed no further prompting. She kicked off her sandals. The dress fell to her feet. She put her hands behind her.

Mike secured the cuffs and came around to her front. His gaze raked her defenseless body; one hand went to her cleft and the other roamed her breasts. "When your sisters and Ben are asleep, we're going back to the kitchen."

For him to take her as he'd said at Haney's Hut. A promise she'd make certain he kept.

Her breath caught. She asked, "Until then?"

Passion greater than any curse flamed in his eyes. "I'm going to get to know you."

"It may take some time."

His smile said he hoped it would be forever.

About the Author

Tina Donahue is a multi-published novelist in contemporary, historical and erotic romance. Booklist,

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## The Concubine's Tale

#### © 2010 Jennifer Colgan

When an ancient papyrus scroll comes up for auction, gallery curator Cait Lang draws the distasteful task of notifying her boss's favorite client, Grant Pierson. The rare art and antiquities collector's arrogance grates on her nerves, but most of all she resents her own weakness for his athletic body and deep brown eyes.

It's the hieroglyphic scroll that draws Grant to a private, after-hours showing at the gallery. But the lovely Cait's narration of the erotically charged story captures his interest. Determined to hear the rest of the tale—and spend more time in Cait's company—he convinces her to join him for dinner.

The intricate, sensual tale transports Cait and Grant's imaginations into the past. And the depictions of sexually charged temple rituals inspire them to explore their own hidden passions—in Grant's apartment.

Even as Grant succumbs to Cait's charms, the drive to own the scroll hums in the back of his mind. If he isn't careful, though, he'll not only lose the chance to hear the end of the story, he'll lose something more precious. The missing piece of his own life—Cait.

Warning: This title contains explicit, forbidden sex, ritual sex, a sex god, and naughty hieroglyphics.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Concubine's Tale:

Cait looked up from her dessert, a decadent chocolate confection laced with liquor-soaked fruit. She felt Nayari's anticipation and her fear, wondering if her master would come for her and see that she was properly blessed by the fertility god, and at the same time entertaining forbidden thoughts about the dark warrior.

Grant filled her wine glass and studied her intently. His gaze was languid and warm. "What was the warrior doing while she waited in her little temple room?"

Gaining control over her emotions, Cait smiled wickedly and took another succulent bite of dessert. "He was thinking about her and trying not to betray the trust Ammonptah had put in him."

"He wanted her."

Cait nodded. "The sultry atmosphere of the temple didn't help. The rites of Min were thought to be quite explicit."

Grant leaned closer again, and Cait floated on the heady scent of his cologne. She smiled when he loosened his tie and wondered if the rest of her tale would have a greater effect on him.

"The warrior took up his post outside of Nayari's room as he'd been instructed. Only a woven screen covered the doorway, so he could hear what went on inside. The women returned to bathe her, and his imagination ran wild. By the time he encountered Nayari again, he was half out of his mind with desire."

When the female acolytes returned, they brought a bowl of perfumed water, cloths to bathe her, and a tray of bread and roasted meat.

Nayari helped herself to some of the food while the women unlaced her sandals and removed her belt. She sighed as they bathed her feet and legs, and the glorious scent of jasmine enveloped her and calmed her rattled nerves. She lay back against one woman while the other opened the top of her dress and rubbed a fine cloth over her arms and her breasts.

"Ammonptah will be pleased," Nayari murmured, trying to keep her thoughts centered on her master. It was difficult, with the sensual feel of the cool cloth riding over her skin, to think of her master's touch. His hurried movements during the times she'd been called to his service always made her wonder if he truly enjoyed coupling, or if it was more of a chore for him, as it often was for her.

If Ammonptah had ever touched her like this, bathed her, smoothed her hair, she might long for him now, not as the man who owned her and had the power to send her back home where she belonged, but the man she loved and wanted. Once again, unbidden, her thoughts turned to the warrior. His hands were twice the size of Ammonptah's, rough from hard work and dark from days spent under the sun. Together his hands could span her waist, and she had no doubt his arms could lift her without effort to settle her over his cock. He could hold her hips in his hands, his long fingers inching between her buttocks as she rode him—

"You're trembling," one of the women said with a light laugh. "And look, Min calls to you."

Nayari's face burned when she realized her nipples stood hard and erect. She hastily pulled her dress up around her. "Leave me. I'll await Ammonptah alone."

"Of course." The women bowed and left with knowing smiles. They took the bathing water with them, but left the remains of the food. Nayari stared at it and willed herself to take another bite, but her appetite had fled.

Perhaps someone else might want the food. It would only attract flies if left in her room all night. Carefully, she lifted the heavy tray and padded barefoot across the floor. She turned and let herself out of the room, backside first to push the reed mat out of the way. When she collided with a warm body, she nearly dropped the tray.

She whirled around and glared up into the face of the warrior. He gave her a curious shrug. "The food isn't to your liking?" he asked.

"I...was going to give it to the oxen." She raised her head in defiance of his tone, but then shifted her arms to cover her chest, aware that her strange excitement still showed in the hard peaks of her nipples that raised the thin fabric of her dress. A cool current of air stirred the hem of her skirt, and a tingle raced up her legs to her inner thighs.

"The oxen have plenty of food," he said. His voice rumbled in his chest, and he stared over her head as if he wished to avoid looking at her.

"Then perhaps you would like it."

"The priests have brought me food."

Nayari sighed. "Then take it away before it rots."

Now his gaze dropped to hers, and she held herself still under his blazing scrutiny. "I am not a maidservant," he said.

"Neither am I."

Their gazes held, battled for a moment, and Nayari swore a faint smile lifted the corners of his lips. "I'll alert the acolytes. Go inside and wait for them to return."

Nayari wanted to stamp her foot in frustration. She leaned back against the cold stone wall and looked up at him. With his arms crossed over his chest and his brows lowered over those onyx-colored eyes, he looked far more imposing than a god. She should have cowered in fear, but instead he made her feel strong and defiant. She had absolute certainty he would never harm her, even if she provoked him.

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"Where is Ammonptah? Please tell me."
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"I do not know."

"Yes, you do!"

"No, I don't. He merely—"

Nayari stepped forward, craning her neck to meet his gaze. "He what?"

"Gave me instructions to follow, and that's what I will do. That and nothing more."

"Tell me your name."

"No."

Annoyed beyond reason, Nayari whirled around and flung herself back into her room. She plunked the tray onto the shelf and fell into the bed, which creaked under her meager weight. The musty odor of it crawled into her nose, pushing aside the sweet smell of flowers that had lingered on her skin since her bath. How would that do? she thought. To smell of mold when Ammonptah came to claim her would be unseemly. He would be angry with the priests and acolytes for not taking proper care of his property.

And that last word echoed in her mind. *Property. I belong to Ammonptah, and I'm bound to do as he wishes.* She fell asleep with that thought battling with visions of the warrior, naked, his skin hot and sweaty, holding his thick, hard cock in his hand and writhing to the beat of the ceremonial drums.

Love. Is it providence, or just a lump on the head?

### **Turbulent Passions**

#### © 2008 Anne Rainey

Sapphire Demas and her twin brother have a secret. Since the awful day their parents were killed, they've been in hiding, fearful the same fate will befall them. Now she's grown tired of living a half-life, tired of lying. She wants something just for herself. When she stumbles across an unconscious man while hiking through the woods and brings him home to heal, she knows she's found it. Even if he's a dangerous outsider.

Investigative journalist Adam Richton trusts only one thing—his nose for news. He's never failed to get a story and doesn't intend to start now. Until a beautiful and mysterious woman rescues him. In an instant, he forgets all about his career. Now all he wants is Sapphire, any way he can get her.

Then he witnesses something extraordinary that puts his reporter instincts back on full alert. Something that exposes Sapphires secrets, challenges him to believe the unbelievable...and to trust in something way out of his comfort zone: love.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for* Turbulent Passions:

So she wasn't wearing a two-piece and she didn't plan to skinny dip, but the bright pink one-piece wasn't anything to sneeze at, either. Full, round breasts filled out the top half, and long shapely legs tempted him beyond reason. He wanted to pull the straps of her suit down her shoulders and watch her pretty tits spring free. His mouth watered as he imagined tasting her soft skin and sucking on her perky nipples.

As he stood in the grass and concentrated on not getting a hard-on, Sapphire slowly descended into the water. The surrounding trees and wild flowers made the little round pond seem more like a private oasis. They were completely alone. Anything could happen.

"Come on," she enticed him, "the water's just right."

He walked to the very edge and was about to step in when she splashed him a good one. He sucked in his breath as the cold water hit his bare chest. "Damn, that's freezing!"

She splashed him again, before ducking under the water and out of sight. Adam took the plunge and dove in. When he resurfaced, she was staring at him, a wicked gleam in her eyes.

He stalked toward her, noting the way she firmed her shoulders. Her nipples were stiff little peaks that he wanted to nibble on for hours. Her dark, wet hair was smoothed back, giving him a good view of her oval-shaped face and those mesmerizing blue eyes. Adam all but drooled. "You're a little minx."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Within inches now, Adam made a grab for her, just barely catching her upper arms before she ducked under the surface again. He drew her against his chest, aligning their curves. Damn, she felt good against him.

"If you aren't careful, you might get more than you bargained for, baby," He growled as he kissed her. He teased her lips and coaxed her to open for him so he could play with her tongue. She tasted like warm chocolate, creamy and sweet and much too addicting.

Adam pulled his lips from hers before ducking under the water. He grabbed her ankle and tickled her foot, careful not to irritate her cut. She squirmed and tried to wiggle her foot out of his grasp. He took pity and released her. When he resurfaced, the sound of her laughter filled the air. She made an attempt to swim away, but he caught her easily. "You want more or do you surrender?"

"I surrender," she said in a husky voice, sending a very clear signal to his cock that she was aroused.

Adam attempted to tame the beast and released her. She put a few feet between them, he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. "This place is like a small oasis," he said as he took in the Black-Eyed Susans and mature walnut trees. "It's so quiet, as if we're the only people on earth. Do you like living out here, away from everyone?"

Sapphire drifted closer to him, her hands moving back and forth just below the surface. "I get a little stir-crazy sometimes, but for the most part I don't mind the solitude."

"I'm so used to having neighbors. Hell, I don't know what I'd do with all this quiet."

"I know what you mean. In college I lived in a dorm. It was noisy twenty-four hours a day. Moving here was a serious adjustment."

Adam moved closer, enjoying the sexual tension growing between them. "I've never lived anywhere but the city. I think I might need to change that some day. For now, living a few minutes from my work is handy."

"I can understand. I miss the city some, but I don't think I could go back now. I'm too used to having my privacy."

Adam was close enough now to touch. He reached out and played with a wet curl. "You and I started something last night that we never got to finish."

"I wanted you desperately," she admitted. "I couldn't sleep for the ache."

"Sending you away wasn't the easiest thing to do, baby."

"Why did you?"

"I wanted to get to know you a little first and I didn't want you to wake up regretting sleeping with me."

"I wouldn't have."

As much as he wanted that to be true, Adam wasn't sure. He didn't think Sapphire was the type for casual sex. "I don't sleep around," he confessed. "I'm no virgin, but I'm no player either. I want you to know that."

Her fingers trailed over his chest and Adam had to suck in his breath when her thumb teased his nipple. "I'm not a virgin either, Adam. I'm a grown woman and I know exactly what I'm doing. Stop protecting me."

"My stay isn't permanent," he reminded her. "I can't offer permanent, Sapphire." He didn't want her seeing things that weren't there. Again he was reminded of the real reason he'd come to Waverly, the real reason he'd been on their land. He pushed down the guilt slowly eating away at him. He'd tell her. Soon. And while he worked to convince her this thing between them would be a casual summer fling, he wasn't sure he was buying it himself. The thought of leaving, of never seeing her again, already didn't sit well.

"I know. It's okay, I'm not asking for permanent." Her fingers moved below the surface, just barely grazing the waistband of his swim trunks. "I need you. I ache for it."

Adam's control snapped. He swung her into his arms, licked a droplet of water from her cheek and kissed her forehead. "Hmm, we certainly can't have that, now can we?"

"No, it could prove very inconvenient."

He held her close to his chest as he left the water and covered the distance to the house. He entered through a back door and took the steps to the upstairs bedroom two at a time. Her lips caressed his throat and his knees nearly buckled. Hell, falling down the stairs really wasn't the way to impress a woman. He forced his feet to keep moving even as her tongue teased his skin. She was so open and uninhibited. It was all he could do to make it to the bed.

He placed her carefully on top of the yellow quilts. The soft light from the lace-covered window illuminated the room. He let her watch as he stripped out of the black swim trunks she'd let him borrow. Her eyes, those magnificent sapphire pools, ate him up. His cock flexed, eager to sink inside the little beauty.

"Come here," she coaxed, a smile curving her lips.

The outline of her pussy lips and the tempting bud of her clitoris beneath the wet suit had him starving for a sip of her tangy juice. Her succulent tits spilled out of the top half, and Adam's hands itched to fondle and squeeze.

He moved closer, unable to deny her sensual request. "What are you planning to do with me, sweetheart?"

"I think I'd rather show you what I want to do," she purred as she leaned forward and kissed the head of his cock.

