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MONICA JACKSON

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Baby



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By

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Prologue: Waiting

Estella Myers willed herself not to die. She had to hang onto life through the start of spring until the sweet, yellow daffodils pushed out of the ground. Estella asked the hospice nurses to fill her bedroom with them. Their fragrant lives were short. Hers had been long enough—fifty-nine years of hard work and duty. Not enough passion, but never mind, she was ready, and only a little sad about leaving this world. She sighed as pain throbbed through her body.

The nurse put her pain pills in one hand and a cool glass in the other on cue. Estella smiled at her, grateful. Nobody ever said dying was easy. “Get me some more fresh daffodils from the yard, dear.” She only had to endure a little while longer.

She sent the flowers tiny bits of her death. They dried and withered as they accepted it, their heads drooping and petals drifting down.

“Allie Boulton insists on seeing you,” the nurse said. “I told her you weren’t feeling well, but she wanted me to ask you anyway.”

“It’s fine. She can come.”

The townspeople came by often, using a sickbed visit as an excuse to ask for one last favor, a drop of insight, or a bit of help. Folks fretted about themselves and

their own. They were worried about who would give them guidance when she was gone. Who would conjure and provide them with spells and charms? She felt their anxiety as they first saw her, a shadow of the husky, vital woman she'd been a short time ago.

Estella lifted her head and listened. The spirits whispered. Every day the sounds of that world grew more intense as her soul drew closer to it. She'd done what she could as she faded, but there was only one thing she was staving off death to complete.

Her niece would be back in Mississippi soon. Estella caressed the old leathered cover of the book next to her in bed. She would tell the child the history of this book...and of the family. She'd finally tell her what needed to be told. Once her niece accepted the book, she'd be done with this world.

Chapter One

It didn't seem right Aunt Estella's small, white shotgun house looked exactly the same as always when I knew she didn't. I lifted my hand to knock on the door, hesitant to face the grief inside. A nurse dressed in white answered. She didn't smile. "She's been waiting for you," she said.

My eyes adjusted to the dimmed light in my aunt's room. It was full of dead and dying daffodils, the air cloying and sweet. I bit my lip hard as I saw her in the bed, shriveled and frail, wrapped in cocoon-like white sheets. "I've been waiting for you," she said, her voice a wisp of its former strength.

I touched my lips to her cheek. Her skin felt like ashes. She smelled as if something was burning within and consuming her.

"I'm glad you're here," she said. "Sit down."

I sank into the chair next to the bed, grateful for its support. My eyes filled. I blinked fast to hold back the tears. What could I say to someone who was dying? Someone I loved?

Aunt Estella had called me day before yesterday. She said she needed to see me. She told me she didn't have much time. It was a punch in the gut. I'd gasped, and it hurt to suck in air. Aunt Estella was more of a mother to me than my

mother. I'd lived with her from the time I was fourteen, a bookish teenager who made straight A's.

"I'm ugly," I'd once said to my aunt with a hollow laugh that pretended my words were a joke.

"Your beauty is the kind that blossoms, child."

"Beauty?" I'd asked, disbelieving.

"Beauty. You're a rare beauty." She handed me a mirror. "Look at yourself. Can't you see it?"

I barely glanced at the mirror, knowing my brown face well. I had beauty defined to me differently. I wanted to be a thin and delicate woman with skin like cream instead of chocolate, with light gray eyes that reflected the light instead of absorbing it like my dark brown ones. I wanted a nose that looked as if a knife carved it and wavy honey colored hair that flowed down my back when I let it down instead of short, wild black corkscrew curls. I would have given my soul to look like that—like my mother. "My mother is beautiful, but I don't look like her..."

"Children sometimes think a glittery, rhinestone bauble is more valuable than a perfect diamond," my aunt told me, nodding with conviction.

It took me a while to believe her. But eventually I grew up and accepted who I was. I loved my brown skin, my hair, and everything that made me who I am. My

features were strong and soft at the same time, like I felt inside. Aunt Estella had been the one who gave me that strength when I needed it, who reinforced my self-worth my parents continually knocked down. She told me I was beautiful when nobody else believed it. She told me I was valuable and I could do anything. She'd been the one who was proud of me, who'd loved me. I used to pray that God would make her my mother instead.

I tried to blink away the wetness blurring my vision. Even when I was far away, simply knowing she was there and she cared was my sanctuary, my strength. I couldn't bear losing her.

"You listen," Aunt Estella said. "I have a lot to tell you, and I don't have much time. You need to listen real good. Lean close."

Her voice was thin, but tense with urgency. She took a deep breath. "All the women in the family have power, every single one of us."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about magic, baby."

I knew about my aunt's business of providing divination, potions, and spells to the townspeople. I thought it a quaint and quirky business that suited my aunt perfectly, but down deep I also thought such superstitions were nonsense.

"You dream dreams. I know you do. Occasionally, you know what is going to happen before it does. And sometimes you hear whispers." Her voice was soft

and compelling.

My muscles tensed as the chill in the room grew more pronounced. It was as if the temperature dropped ten degrees. Was Aunt Estella confused?

“Even your mother has power. But you must understand that the power hides and protects itself. Magic can never be revealed to people who don’t understand it and seek to use it— outsiders.” Aunt Estella lifted her hand. “Bring me my book.” She pointed to a large brown book that looked ancient. “Go and get it. And get that blanket off the chair and wrap it around your shoulders.”

“I’d rather put it over you. Aren’t you chilled?”

“No, baby. You get it. The spirits don’t bother me.” Aunt Estella’s smile did nothing to warm me.

I’d never been allowed to touch the book before. It was forbidden, one of Aunt Estella’s few rules. I hesitated to touch it. I wrapped the blanket around me as I settled back in the chair and balanced the book on my lap. The book was bound in dark brown leather and with no markings on the cover.

“Open the book,” Aunt Estella ordered.

I darted a glance at her, but obeyed. The pages were made of what seemed to be thick brown parchment and were entirely handwritten, full of recipes for potions, charms and spells.

“This book is our family’s magic, along with the spirits that go with it. It’s

passed down from female heir to female heir. My grandmother gave it to me, and I'm choosing to give it to you. It's a great responsibility, along with an honor."

I stared down at the book, feeling both awed and confused. I ran my hands over the pages. It felt old. I started to speak.

"Don't talk, listen child. I don't have much time. Our ancestress, Oni, was a part of a proud people. We had our own land, language and traditions. She had the power too, much power. She stewarded her people wisely with the guidance of the spirits. But like all power, hers was coveted.

"Her lover was a magician from a neighboring village. He betrayed her and her people. They traveled a terrible voyage. Those who survived were scattered and stripped of everything, their language, their traditions, and their pride—even their humanity. But our ancestress retained her power, her craft, her mind and her ability to procreate."

I drew in a breath. "You're talking about slavery."

She went on as if I never interrupted her. "Oni taught her daughter the magical arts. Her daughter was almost a woman when she was sold. She realized that if the knowledge was to be preserved, she would have to put it somewhere that could survive the vagaries of the master's whims and the slave's fates, something that could be hidden for years, even centuries.

"She worked strong magic and the book came into being. It's said it taught

her how to read and write. In time she bore children, and our line and power has continued since, unbroken.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. A part of me had always known my aunt’s magic was real, but another part also always ran away. I didn’t want to believe. Could it merely be a fanciful story to explain an old, beautiful book of magic?

“The knowledge the book contains is ancient, far older than this country. It’s a great responsibility I’m giving you.”

What if it were true? The book was a national treasure. Few slave-written documents survived. If it were authentic, it belonged in a museum. If the document’s authenticity could be proven, I could publish it. It would be a sensation and my position within academia secure. Visions of tenure danced in my head.

My aunt frowned as if she knew what I was thinking. “The book grows over the years. Blank pages appear as needed. The book is passed to our heirs and we add to it.” She gave me a sharp, penetrating look. “It’s a magic thing. And magic can never be revealed to outsiders, no matter how much you desire to do so.”

I had to respect her wishes, regardless of my own. It might be the last thing I’d be able to do for her. I blinked away tears as I stared down at the old volume.

Aunt Estella was looking at me. My beloved aunt was passing away and that

mattered far more than any heirloom book or all the magic in the world. “Why can’t magic ever be revealed?” I wanted to keep hearing her voice.

Aunt Estella sighed. “That’s another tale for another day.” She moved restlessly in bed, her fingers plucking at the sheet. “I’ve given you a curse along with the blessing. The legend says that because her heart had been broken and her people destroyed, Oni vowed never to love again. For that reason, the one who holds the book never marries or bonds with a man permanently. No man will ever hold that sort of power over us. Oni’s daughter was sold away from her mother and she didn’t want the same fate for her children. So she worked powerful charms for her line. We also can never leave this land.”

I became concerned over my aunt’s growing agitation. “It’s all right,” I said, my voice as soothing as I could make it. “Are you in pain?”

“No. And it’s not all right. This is a burden I’m giving you, a heavy one. You have to understand it to accept it fully.”

I touched Aunt Estella’s dry, wrinkled cheek, once so fleshy and round. “I understand. Why don’t you rest? I can read to you.”

“I’ll rest soon enough. The book can’t be taken by anyone. It must be given willingly. People, even your own family, will covet the power and possibilities it contains. So guard the book, Mia. Promise me?”

“Let me get you some sweet hot tea. It’s chilly in here, and I remember how

much you love hot tea.”

Estella held out feeble hands to me. “Promise me,” she repeated.

I could deny her nothing. I grasped my aunt’s hands. They were ice cold. “I promise.”

I almost dropped Aunt Estella’s hands as I felt a tingle pass through them to me. My aunt’s grip tightened and ghostly whispers filled the room. The chilly room became frigid. My aunt clutched my hands with surprising strength, not letting me pull away. What was happening? My breath fogged white in the room and grew harsh with fear.

The tingle in my fingers turned into a buzz and something zinged through my body like an electric shock.

My aunt’s eyes were glowing with excitement and triumph. “They say you’ll do fine. It’s my time now, been my time for a while. The book is yours.” Her tight grip loosened and fell away. Her eyes closed and her body relaxed.

Panic filled me as I reached to feel the pulse at my unconscious aunt’s throat. Was she dead? Her pulse was slow, so slow. But it was as if she’d already left.

Chapter Two

Aunt Estella died the next day.

I made my way to her house holding my mother's special champagne pound cake in both hands. I trailed my mother, Sara, and my sister, Eve. The daffodils in front of Estella's house were so yellow they glowed. The wind blew through them, and their heads bobbed as if in greeting.

The small house overflowed. Everybody else was there already. As usual, Sara had timed her entrance when she'd gain the most attention.

My father wouldn't show although he'd known Aunt Estella well. He had his own family, a white one. The arrangement my father had with my mother was no secret, but handled Mississippi style. She, my sister and I simply didn't count in the whiter scheme of things. My half brothers and sisters and I knew each other, our eyes would meet if we ran across each other in the street, but we didn't speak.

I gave a pained smile at the overly perfumed air kisses and loud greetings of my mother's sisters. I was known as a competent, take-no-guff woman at the university, but with my family I was reduced to a silent, shamed child. I sniffed a hint of cinnamon in the air. It reminded me of Aunt Estella. Her specialty was apple pie. It seemed as if she'd pop in from the kitchen any moment now, wiping

her hands on a dishcloth, plump and ruddy with life and heat from the cooking stove. I closed my eyes against the memory.

“Mia?”

I opened my eyes and looked at my mother’s two sisters. They were smiling, but their eyes were narrowed and held no hint of warmth. My mother and her sisters were so different from Aunt Estella—they didn’t seem related.

“It’s been so long since you’ve been back to see us.”

“How long has it been exactly since Mia’s showed her face around here, Jenna?”

“Do you plan to stay more than a minute this time? I hope we don’t bore you, dear.”

“Your visits are usually so short, darling. Your mother misses you.”

Their words sounded friendly but were laced with hostility. I’d done nothing to earn their enmity but be named my mother’s enemy.

“Where should I put this pound cake?” I asked, desperate to escape them.

“The food is in the kitchen, dear.”

I wheeled and fled.

“I outdid myself with my champagne cake this time.” My mother’s shrill voice followed me. “Wait until you taste it. You all will think you died and went to heaven.”

I deposited the cake on the kitchen table. My cousins were in there gossiping. I got a beer, nodded and spoke, but I didn't feel like socializing. It felt as if my real mother had died, and I was in a house full of strangers.

I moved to Aunt Estella's bedroom as if drawn. Her bed was neat, made with taut white sheets. The bed's emptiness mocked me. I lay on my belly, cradling my head in my arms.

A sob worked its way up from deep within my stomach. I surrendered to the grief. I didn't care if I drowned in it.



Aunt Estella was vibrant, back to her old self. Light shone through her skin. She stretched and laughed. "I feel so good."

She changed, looking like a young girl in her teens. "No more pain, and I'm so rested, chile. More rested than I ever was in life. You'll see one day."

"Are you happy, Aunt Estella?"

Suddenly, she appeared as if she were in her late thirties or forties. "I always was fairly happy. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I felt a full belly and a person to love was enough for this life. I had you to love. You satisfied me and that's not a lie. Don't ever think I wanted for anything."

She laughed. “There’s more baby. Life never ends.” Her gaze fastened on something I couldn’t see, and joy transformed her features with light. “I have to go now.” She faded.

I tried to run after her, but I couldn’t follow. “Aunt Estella, come back. Please. I need you.”

“Mia, wake up.” I blinked, pushed my messy hair out of my eyes, and focused a bleary gaze on Brenda Stetson, one of my cousins.

“Oh, hi.” I wiped my eyes. “I haven’t been sleeping well lately.”

“Me neither.”

I knew little of my cousin beyond memories of childhood games. She was Aunt Jenna’s daughter, a nurse at the local hospital.

I wondered what Brenda was still doing here in Paradise, Mississippi. She had long, straight auburn hair, skin that looked merely kissed by sun, and endless legs topped by generous curves that graced a tall, slender body. She looked nothing like a nurse from a small Mississippi town.

“What’s been going on?” I sat up and glanced at my watch. Thank goodness. I’d only been asleep an hour.

“More of the same. Gayla told us Aunt Estella gave you the book. Is that true?”

What did Brenda know about the book? Did any other family know about

it? I planned to have it examined at the university and to research it carefully. But did the family feel the book belong to the entire family or was it mine?

“Yes, Aunt Estella gave me the book. We were close.”

“My mother said sometimes Estella lost touch with reality and told lies,” Brenda said.

My lips tightened. Her sisters couldn’t even manage to let the dead rest in peace without lashing them with their evil tongues. “It sounds as if your mother is the one out of touch with reality.”

Brenda laughed. “I’ve always thought that about my mother, too. I liked Aunt Estella. She did a lot of good around here.”

I softened. “Yes, she did. I’ll miss her.”

“Did you see her much? You aren’t around very often.”

I was unwilling to tell Brenda about all the times I traveled to Paradise and only visited Aunt Estella. “A lot of people will miss her,” I said, dodging the question.

“Yeah, especially her clients. With the book, you could take over her business. She was good, too. Everything she did worked.”

I remembered what Aunt Estella once told me, real magic never fails. I inhaled and wondered how long it would be before my grief went away. “You really believe that stuff?”

“Of course. I’ve seen it in action. Aunt Estella did a few things for me.” She moved closer. “I had something important to ask her, before ...” Brenda sniffed.

I reached for the box of tissues by the bed and handed her one, touched by the first emotion I’d seen any of the family exhibit for Aunt Estella since she’d passed. The party atmosphere outside this room repelled me.

Brenda blew her nose. “It has to do with a man.”

Didn’t it always? More trouble than they’re worth, Aunt Estella would say.

“I don’t know what to do. I can’t think, can’t plan, everything’s spinning around crazy in my head.”

“What’s wrong?”

Brenda drew in a breath. “I’m pregnant.”

I touched Brenda’s arm, feeling a sense of déjà vu. Heaven knew the help I gave my sister in the same situation wasn’t any good. Sometimes when you think you know what’s right for a person, you have no idea.

“The man I love doesn’t want me or our baby.”

“He told you that?”

Brenda sniffed again, blew her nose and nodded.

I can’t stand those jerks who sleep with women and then disavow all responsibility of the most obvious consequence.

“I wanted to ask Aunt Estella for a love charm. Then he’d love me and the

baby. He'd take care of us. We'd get married and everything would be all right."

"Do you really want a man who..." Doesn't want you, is what I wanted to say, but I couldn't utter the too-cruel words.

"I want to do this. I've loved him all my life. He said... he said..."

I pulled out another tissue and handed it to her.

"He said I should get rid of it! I can't. I just can't!"

I remembered what I'd urged my sister to do in the same situation. It had been the wrong choice for her. I'd vowed never to make the same mistake again. The wrong decision is a permanent one. "It's your body. He can't make you do anything you don't think is right."

"I'm weak. I know it. I'm not like you. I can't cope by myself. But if he loved me, I know I could make it work, I know I could." Her eyes were wide and pleading. "I need the love charm. Please."

My lips tightened. What she was asking made no sense.

"If you make the charm for me, I'd have the baby. Otherwise, I think I'm going to have to get rid of it..." Brenda's voice trailed away.

I raised my brows. So she was telling me if I didn't do some stupid love charm, she'd have an abortion? "That doesn't make any sense."

She shrugged.

Well, if she believed a love charm would help her, it probably would. Self-

fulfilling prophecy works even though I didn't believe in charms, especially silly love charms. But it bothered me that a fully-grown woman could be so childish.

"It doesn't seem as if you're thinking things out." I said the words slow.

"What would it hurt? I have a lot to cope with, and it would make me feel better."

My cousin was crazy. But I'd bowed out of the advice giving business after what happened with my sister. "I don't mind doing this little something for you." After all, how hard could it be to do a love charm?

Brenda giggled with delight and hugged me.

I swallowed as I hugged her back, because for some reason a bad taste in my mouth lingered.

Chapter Three

I squinted at the spidery writing in the old book. “It says I need twenty-one hairs. Pubic hairs are supposed to work better, but any will do.”

“Twenty-one pubic hairs! What kind of man is going to let somebody pull twenty-one hairs from his balls?” Brenda asked.

Frankly, I didn’t think any would. “Hairs from his head will have to do.” I showed my cousin the book. “It says I need a small square of cloth soaked in your menstrual blood. Ugh. Why do these things have to be so gross?” I wrinkled my nose. “Thank goodness that’s out since you’re pregnant.”

“Any blood will work,” Brenda said.

“If you believe in this so much, why don’t you simply copy the instructions and do it yourself?”

“The magic will only work for the one whom the book’s been given. Anybody who takes possession of the book when it’s not given freely,” she paused, “usually dies.”

That’s what Aunt Estella had said. Dandy, I had a killer magic book. “How do they die?”

Brenda didn’t answer. She ran her finger down the page. “Look, it also says

that mad passion will come if the charm is constructed in the light of the moon where he sleeps.”

” I let my prior question go. I really didn’t want to know how the book killed people. If it did. Of course a book couldn’t kill people—that would be ridiculous. “I have to have mad passion. You can do it at his place when he’s gone for the night on call. You can get the hairs you need then.”

“You have a key and permission to enter his place?”

Brenda shook her head.

“Huh, that’s too bad. I guess this isn’t going to happen then.” I took the book from her and snapped the cover closed.

“Not so quick. You can get into his place when he’s working call. He always sleeps at the hospital.”

“Nope. What we need to do is to think of a better way for you to cope with your situation than doing some silly love charm.” I had enough of humoring Brenda.

Brenda’s eyes narrowed. “The only way I can cope with this without Grey is to have an abortion.” She smoothed the front of her dress and stood. “It seems as if you want me to go the same route as you urged your sister to travel. Fine then. I’ll get rid of it.” The whispers I’d been laboring to ignore rose to a crescendo, and panic along with anger stuck in my throat. Every cell in my body screamed Brenda

had to be stopped from aborting the baby, despite my intellectual inclination to shrug and retort, Excuse me, it's not my body or my baby—it's your decision. Guilt was my master and I its slave.

“Okay. Okay, I'll do it if it'll make that much difference to you. But if I do this—if I promise to break into some strange man's apartment and do some insane crap, you're going to have it. No matter what.”

“Deal,” Brenda said, looking pleased.

I stifled the urge to shake my cousin. She was acting like a child. All this for a love charm? It made no sense.



The next night, I swore as a splinter dug into my palm when I pulled myself up over Grey Taylor's windowsill.

“Heave yourself through the window, dammit.” Brenda panted as she tried to shove me up. “You must think your hefty rear is featherweight.”

I tossed the bag I carried with the book and supplies for the charm through the window, and then struggled through the windowsill. I fell on the floor of the darkened room.

Shaking my head to clear it, I looked around the man's moonlit bedroom. He kept it very orderly.

Well, I'd best get to it. I took the book out of my bag and laid it on the bed,

followed by a large square of white silk.

Then I heard Brenda's car door slam and the engine start. I rushed to the window. The red flash of Brenda's taillights moved down the street. A surge of anger mixed with my overall irritation and nerves. How dare she drive off and leave me here? How was I supposed to get home?

I pulled out my cell phone. "You just up and left me here?" I said as soon as she said hello. "What's wrong with you? Come right back and get me!"

"Call me when you're done and I'll pick you up," Brenda drawled, a yawn in her voice. "It's way past my bedtime and I need to nap. I'm pregnant, you know. Later." She clicked off.

I stared at the phone in disbelief. My cousin twisted my arm to get me to break into her would-be boyfriend's apartment to make a love charm, and then drives away to take a nap? I wanted to walk out of the front door, trudge home, lie and tell my cousin; sure, I did the love spell.

But something in me wanted to test the book and do the love charm. If it didn't work, and there was no way it could, I'd be free; free of Paradise. Free of magic.

I moved my flashlight around the room and spied a brush on the dresser. I got it and started to take out the other things I needed. I placed a black, pink and red candle on the floor around the bed, marking a triangle.

In the middle of the square of white silk on the bed, I placed a small silver bowl. Into the bowl went a piece of red cloth soaked in Brenda's blood, a claw clipping from a female cat in heat, and a sprinkle of grave yard dust.

The moon shone through the bedroom window blinds and fell across the bed in stripes. The night felt unreal, as if I were in a dream. Soft murmurs reminded me that I was never alone anymore. Aunt Estella dying was enough to deal with. Hearing voices, spells and spirits was way too much.

No, I'm not crazy and I don't believe in spells and spirits. I held that statement close, as if it were protection. I know denial ain't no river in Egypt, but sometimes it's the only thing that keeps us together.

I picked up the hairbrush and started picking out hairs one by one and dropping them into the bowl. When I was done, I opened the book and picked up the box of matches to set flame to the contents.

Then I froze as I heard a car approach. A split-second later, a garage door opened and shut. Panic caught in my throat, choking me, as my gaze darted around the room. I had to hide somewhere.

I heard a key jangle; go into a lock, turn. Heavy steps inside the house. Shaking, I rolled under the bed.

Steps moved closer to the bedroom. I closed my eyes as I realized he'd see the stuff on the bed and the book. The open book.

A switch clicked and light flooded under the bed. I didn't die on the spot, but I wanted to, at least temporarily.

"What the hell?" a masculine voice rumbled. He moved toward the bed. I could see his feet and ankles. He wore thick white cotton socks, white Nikes and green scrub pants. He moved to the window and shut it.

"La cucaracha, la cucaracha," my cell phone tone sang. Horror flooded me. With fumbling fingers, I reached into my pocket, but he was already peering under the bed, his ice-blue gaze locked with mine.

He grabbed my arm. I yelped as he hauled me out from under the bed. He flipped me over and immobilized me flat on my stomach with his knee pressed into the small of my back.

I concentrated on not peeing my pants. Heaven knows I wanted to let go.

"What are you doing in my house?" he said with a growl. The pressure on my back intensified a fraction and I moaned. What could I say?

"What did you steal? Who was that on the cell phone? Your accomplice? I'm calling the police."

"Please don't!"

"You should have thought of that before you broke into my house. What is that stuff over my bed?"

"It's for-for a... a spell, a love charm." His knee pressed harder on my back. It

was starting to hurt. “I’m telling the truth. Look at the book.”

To my relief the pressure on my lower back disappeared. He got to his feet.

“Don’t move or I’ll pin you again. Save your story to tell to the cops, lady.”

He moved toward the phone.

I’d be handcuffed and hauled off to jail. My mother and aunts would leave me there—for at least a while. My sister didn’t have any money. “Look in the book, please. The page that shows the spell I was doing is open.”

He glowered, unmoved.

It was time to beg. “Please, please don’t call the cops. Reach into my pocket and pull out my phone. The call was probably from Brenda. Your lover, Brenda Stetson. She’s my cousin.”

“Are you talking about Brenda Stetson from the stepdown unit?”

“Yes, my cousin.”

He looked more irritated. But I almost sobbed in relief when he bent over the page, showing his profile. I recognized him. We’d been in high school together. Along with all the other girls in my freshman class, I thought that particular senior basketball player was too fine. It figured that he went on to med school.

He looked even better than the handsome, gangly boy he’d been in high school. Full-grown, he was breathtaking. Tall and fit with black hair, a bit too long, a scruffy shadow on his chin, too long lashes that did nothing to detract from

the masculinity of his face and ice-blue eyes. A tingle settled in my lower belly. It went well with fear and panic. Here was a man who'd never need any love charm to coerce passion. I understood Brenda's desperation a tiny bit better now. Poor, crazy Brenda thought a love charm would solve all her problems after this man got her pregnant.

Grey Taylor was probably as spoiled by women, as he'd been in high school, never bothering to take responsibility for the consequences of his promiscuity.

Irrational anger crouched inside me, crowded against fear and equally irrational attraction. "You pushed Brenda to this stupidity," I said, my hands clenching. "A real man would take responsibility for his actions."

"Pubic hair? You were trying to get my public hair? Yikes," he muttered, peering at the book as if I hadn't said a word.

"All this is your fault," I said. It felt better to be pissed than scared.

He looked up from the book. "You're saying it's my fault that you and Brenda Stetson concoct some adolescent scheme to illegally break into my house, invade my privacy, and pluck my pubic hairs to make a love spell?" He rolled his eyes.

"You're the one who knocked Brenda up and threw her away like she was nothing but a piece of garbage!"

He stared at me. "Knocked her up? What are you talking about?"

“C’mon. I know she told you.”

“She told me nothing.” His voice was soft and dangerous.

The fresh anger rushing through me wouldn’t let me back down. This man was no better than the young boy who got my sister pregnant and left her. No better than every man who had fun with a woman and walked away without a second thought.

“All you wanted was an easy lay. When you got it and she told you she was pregnant, you bailed, you no-good son—”

“And her resolution to this fictional dilemma is to send you to do some mumbo-jumbo to work a spell on me?” He tossed the book down in disgust. “I’ve been out of high school a long time, Mia Washington. You must be as nuts as she is. Does it run in the family?”

Okay, I admit it didn’t look good. But Brenda was going to be the mother of his child, and this was the extent of his concern? I struggled to my feet. “Just because you’re good-looking, you think you can get away with anything? You can’t!”

The voices of the spirits rose along with my anger. The spirits would make the spell work, they told me. It was the right thing, what he deserved. I said the words that would make my intentions real. I visualized retribution. Let the right thing be done.

I felt something swell up within me like a bubble, and then it went out with a whoosh. The spirits screamed as the figurative wind in my mind became literal and blew through the room with a force that almost knocked me off my feet.

It whirled through the apartment, knocking items from surfaces and pictures from the wall. Then it died down to nothing, an eerie waiting still. The silver bowl and the ashes inside it were untouched. I wrapped it tight in the white silk. I had one thing left to do.

Grey sat on the floor with a look of stunned horror on his face. Good. The special effects shut him up. I refused to dwell on my own fear. I had plenty of time for that later.

I stuffed the book and everything back into the bag and headed for the door. I glanced back at Grey. He was surveying the wreck magic made of his home and held his stomach as if somebody punched him there.

Chapter Four

I'd made it a couple of blocks away from Grey's house. I slowed down to catch my breath and to dig out of my bag the white silk square that wrapped the bowl and ashes. Don't bury the ashes. I swung around. Who said that? I wasn't to bury the ashes in the earth with Brenda's intent in mind as the book instructed? I was supposed to do something else? Yes. It was as if I were in a dream. I removed the silk covering from the bowl and held it aloft. The wind rose, and caressed me as if it were a living thing. It picked up the ash in the bowl and carried it away.

I heard approval from the spirit voices. I'd done the right thing. I put the bowl back in my bag and looked at my watch. Two in the morning.

Paradise was a small town, and my mother's house was less than a mile away. I still had the key. I'd walk and be home long before the town's lone night taxi showed up. I moved down the sidewalk at a brisk pace. I wasn't afraid of the dark or spirits. Flesh and blood threats made me more nervous, especially as I was out of place on the white side of town. Still, Paradise was relatively safe, only ruffled by the occasional robbery or domestic disturbance.

A few minutes later I reached Sara's house. My hands shook as I dug in the bag for the key. I let myself in and locked the door behind me, leaning against it,

my back pressed against the wood. There was an atmosphere I didn't like about Sara's house. I couldn't really define it. My mother was a cleaning fanatic, but somehow the house didn't feel clean, although it looked immaculate.

The cold wind of spirits swirled around me. Then I felt a brush on my cheek, and I slid down the door, tears welling in my eyes. I wanted it to be Aunt Estella so badly. But I remembered my dream. Hadn't she already moved on? A part of me hoped she was still with me. But I sensed direct communication between the dead and the living was something forbidden and difficult. After all, if folks could still hang out with their loved ones after they died, the world would be awash with ghosts instead of the rare thing supernatural phenomena seemed to be.

I needed Aunt Estella now more than I ever did. I needed her to tell me what was going on and how to cope. Why hadn't I believed when my aunt was alive, rather than brushing off talk of spirits and spells as eccentricities?

Light flooded the living room. "Who's there?"

"It's just me," I answered my sister Eva, relieved it wasn't Sara.

Some people think I don't get along with my mother because my sister is her obvious favorite since my sister resembled her. But there's more, much more.

"You just getting in?" Eva asked. "What did you find to do this late in Paradise? I know you're not dating anybody this fast."

"I was out with Brenda."

She darted me a look I couldn't interpret. "Want some tea?" she asked. "I can't sleep tonight. I have bad dreams every time I doze off. It must be the full moon."

I settled at the kitchen table and watched my sister fill the teakettle. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

"All us small-town Southern women believe in ghosts."

I nodded. It was true for the most part. I thought I'd left Paradise forever when I moved to Atlanta. I'd become a big-city professor wrapped up with scholarship and writing, academic wrangling and publishing. But maybe a part of me never really left. Why hadn't I headed back to Atlanta as soon as Aunt Estella was buried? She gave me the house, but I could have left it in the capable hands of a realtor and auctioneer.

The life I built in Atlanta was starting to seem like a fading dream, while the whispers of ghosts seemed real.

"They say if you hang bottles in the trees, they'll catch the spirits," Eva said.

I stared at my sister. "What if you don't want to get rid of them? Besides, Aunt Estella would hate being stuck in a bottle."

"Are you telling me that you think Aunt Estella is haunting' you?" Eva sat the tea in front of me. "You took her death pretty hard. You were closer to her than any of us." She leaned closer and lowered her voice to a whisper. "I heard Mama

and the other aunts talking about it. They said you took her place.”

I swallowed. “What else did they say?”

“They don’t talk about it much. The only reason I know is because I listen.”

Eva listened well and seldom had anything to say. She worked part-time at Wal-Mart and did housework for Sara along with anything else she was ordered to do. That was the whole of her life as far as I knew. The guilt I felt about my sister tore off its scab. If it weren’t for me, Eva would be a mother. She would have made a great mother. But the boys and men she’d had used her and ended up leaving. I’d abandoned her when I was fourteen and went to live with Aunt Estella. I never returned, not even when I grew up. I don’t know if I’d ever forgive myself.

Sara couldn’t stand little kids. If Eva had a child, she’d have her own place by now, her own life. Maybe she’d have taken my offer to come to Atlanta. I never envied Eva for being Sara’s favorite. The price was way too high.

“What were you and Brenda doing out this late?” Eva asked.

I sipped tea instead of replying right away. I decided to tell her the truth. “Brenda wanted me to make a charm from the book.”

“I was afraid of that.” Eva frowned. “Those recipes in the book, they work. They really do. Everybody around here knows it. Brenda didn’t waste a lick of time getting to you. Aunt Estella would never have made a charm for her.”

“I wish I hadn’t,” I said, remembering how Brenda abandoned me.

“What’s done is done,” Eva said. “And if it’s Aunt Estella that’s haunting’ you, don’t let it worry you none. She was a good woman. But—” Eva looked away.

“But what, sis?”

“Sometimes they lie, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sometimes they ain’t who they say they are,” Eva whispered. “Sometimes they ain’t what they say they are either.”

Chapter Five

I drove back to Aunt Estella's house and dressed for bed, exhausted. But when I crawled between the sheets, I couldn't sleep. I thought about Grey Taylor. I didn't think he'd call the police after what happened even though after I left his place it looked as if it had been ransacked. It would be interesting to know what had gone through his mind, how other people dealt with magic.

If magic always hides itself, as Aunt Estella had said, why was it so apparent at Grey's house? A twinge of apprehension filled me, and I knew it wasn't over yet.

I should have been dismayed by the thought, but I wasn't. My cousin was pregnant with Grey's baby and in love with him. But I couldn't stop thinking about his full, mobile lips and the sexy stubble covering his chin. His eyes were large, fringed with long lashes. And deep dimples creased his cheeks even with his lips twisted into a sardonic look of disbelief. Grey should have looked girlish, but there wasn't a thing feminine about him. He oozed masculinity. His hands were long-fingered and elegant, a surgeon's hands. I felt a touch of envy for Brenda. The man was probably fantastic in bed.

What was wrong with me? I had to stop thinking about my cousin's man. I closed my eyes with a sigh.



It felt like two seconds later, I opened my eyes to the doorbell, followed by pounding on the door. I rolled over and looked at the clock with a groan. It's eight in the morning. Eight! I closed my eyes and stuffed my head under the pillow. Maybe they'd go away if I ignored them.

No such luck. The banging got louder. My eyes flew open when I heard Grey's voice. "Mia, I know you're in there. Open this door."

I rolled out of bed and grabbed my robe from off the chair. I'd barely cracked the door when he pushed past me.

"Hey! You can't just come in here."

He swung around, glaring. "Why not? You just came into my place."

I didn't have a retort to that. "What do you want?"

"I want to know what's happening to me and how you're going to fix it."

I ran a hand over my hair, mirroring his motion. Self-conscious, I knew I looked wild. Normally, I would have questioned him, eager to know what happened, but now I wanted to roll back the clock because I knew what he had to say next would change everything.

"I have to go to the bathroom." He followed me, frowning. I slammed the door in his face and locked it.

I considered a shower, but somehow I knew he wouldn't tolerate waiting

through that. I could hear him on the other side of the door. It was disconcerting to try to pee with someone pacing outside your bathroom door. I washed my hands, face and brushed my teeth. Then I walked around him and went into the kitchen. I paused, sniffing. He smelled of roses. It was an odd choice of cologne for a man.

“I take my coffee black,” he said, but I wasn’t listening. Sexual awareness tingled through me without any warning. Moisture trickled between my legs and my nipples stiffened. It was sudden, urgent and pressing. My lips, parted, my breath hot between my moistened lips. I wanted his touch, needed it. I wanted his hard dick inside me. A part of me watched horrified as I moved toward him and pressed myself against his body. My God, was I humping the man? He gently held me away with both hands and looked down at me, exasperated.

“See what I mean? It seems as if every woman in the city has gone stir-crazy,” he said.

I backed away, stricken. This was something I’d never imagined doing. I don’t launch myself at men I barely know and frantically hump them. Hell, I don’t even do it with men I do know. Sexually inhibited is my middle name. “I have to shower. Coffee is in there.” I motioned toward the kitchen cabinets, turned and fled.

A few seconds later I stood under a too-cold spray of water in the shower,

wondering whether I could lock the bathroom door for a few hours until he finally gave up and went home.

I was humiliated, but what happened couldn't have been natural. I suspected the love spell went awry, and now Grey Taylor was a hot property indeed. At least I hoped that was what was going on. At least then, I'd have an excuse for humping him like a horny hound dog. I pulled on jeans and a baggy sweatshirt and entered the kitchen with much trepidation.

He was sitting at the table reading my paper and drinking a mug of coffee. I flinched at the faint smell of roses and stayed as far away from him as the kitchen would allow, determined to ignore the burning growing between my legs. "What's going on?" I asked, trying to be nonchalant.

He put down the paper. I bit my lower lip hard, welcoming the pain. It should be against the law to make a man so desirable.

"When I got up this morning and went to work, nothing seemed different at first," he said. "I'd stepped out of my car when an ob-gyn approached me about a consult. About thirty seconds into the conversation, she launched herself at me in full view of the world and God while trying to dig both of her hands down the front my scrubs. The fact that this woman is in her fifties and appears happily married to a judge made her actions even more incomprehensible. I extricated myself and decided poor Dr. Fox had a psychotic break and made my way into the

hospital.”

He cleared his throat. “Then I was almost raped in the elevator by two women, a nurse and somebody else who worked in dietary, an act made more embarrassing by the fact that there was another gentleman in there, a male ER nurse, who kindly assisted in subduing the women. I had a full morning of surgery scheduled. I scrubbed in blessed solitude, but the circulating nurse broke sterility in her eagerness to get under my scrubs as she helped me to gown.”

I started to speak, but he held up his hand. “I’m not finished. The nurses were like mad dogs in heat. My colleagues looked at me as if I’d lost my mind. I barely escaped to my car with my scrubs intact, but my dignity was in shreds. I said I’d become deathly ill and cancelled my surgeries and my partner had to take up the slack. I shudder to think of the sexual harassment suits I’m going to have to face from embarrassed nurses, not to mention Dr. Fox.”

He stared at me, his jaw tight. “Fix whatever the hell you did and fix it right now.” He stood and moved close to me, fury in his eyes. I backed away, out of the kitchen. He followed me, looking as if he wanted to strangle me. The scent of roses bloomed around me and I moaned, not in fear, but in arousal. I’d backed into the living room and tripped on the sofa. Oh god, oh god, oh god, he was only a few feet away. I sat on my hands to keep from touching him.

“I can’t,” I said.

“What?” His voice was low and dangerous and so damn sexy I almost gave up all restraint and lunged at him.

“I don’t know how to fix it,” I said, a gasp in my voice. “Will you back up off me? Whatever—whatever is happening affects me, too.”

He looked surprised and annoyed as he moved away. “You have to fix it. Anything that can be done can be undone. My career, everything, depends on it. How am I supposed to function with this?”

I moistened my lips. If he didn’t get further away from me, I didn’t know how I was going to function. “Let me... let me go look at the book. Don’t follow me.”

I retreated to the bedroom, shutting and locking the door behind me. I opened a window to get the scent of roses out of my nostrils. The arousal faded away with the fresh air.

I pulled the book off the shelf and opened it, sitting on the bed.

There was a tap at the door. “Do you mind if I get something to eat?” he asked. “I’m starving.” I stared at the door, the need drag him bodily to the bed flaring up again.

“I want to talk to you,” he said. “I need to talk. I don’t see how we can through closed doors.”

“I can’t think with you in the same room with me. I have to think about

what can be done to reverse whatever's happening." I could barely think with him in the same house with me. "Help yourself to anything you want."

I couldn't help but wish that it would be me he wanted. I heard him moving away and forced my attention to the book. I hadn't taken the time to read it yet. I kept telling myself I was going to get to it, but after the love charm I'd barely touched it. It scared me. I stared down at the pages, the words blurring. It felt as if the thing owned me rather than the other way around. I focused and started to read, my own stomach grumbling a bit with hunger.

Thirty minutes later, the scent of frying bacon was working its way under the door, making my mouth water. My phone rang. "I can't wait to see if Grey is finally in love with me," Brenda said without replying to my hello.

"Uhhhhh."

"I've been paging him all morning. I just heard he left work sick. Do you think that has anything to do with it? Maybe he's confused about not being able to get me off his mind. I can't wait—"

"Brenda, hold up. I've seen Grey."

"What are you talking about?"

"He came over. He's sitting in Aunt Estella's kitchen now. Things haven't worked out as planned."

"What do you mean?" Brenda's voice was low and laced with warning.

“He’s not in love with you. He—”

“He’s the father of my child. But you don’t care about that, do you? You wanted him for yourself.”

I took a deep breath, determined to remain calm. “That’s not what happened.”

“Then why is he over your house instead of mine? Your mother’s right about you, you’re nothing but a slut.”

My mother’s right about me? “Don’t call me outside of my name,” I said, my grip tightening on the phone.

“I’ll dare that and more. Bitch, who do you think you’re dealing with?”

I replaced the receiver on the cradle, my heart pounding. She didn’t even give me a chance to explain, but jumped to a conclusion, assumed the worse, then went off and started name calling and threatening. I wasn’t as angry with Brenda as I should have been though. I felt guilt instead. I might not have done what Brenda accused me of doing, but right now I wanted to real bad.

What was my mother saying about me to the family? That thought made me angrier than any of Brenda’s ranting, because I knew.

“Do you want me to make you a plate, too?” Grey called.

I closed the book and put it in my suitcase I’d never unpacked. Every morning I woke, I intended to go back home to Atlanta, but I always stayed

another day in Paradise. I wasn't sure why.

I walked to the kitchen. The smell of cooking food overshadowed the rose scent, but it was there. I closed my eyes against the onslaught of desire.

"That was Brenda on the phone. I bet she's on her way over. There's going to be a scene, an ugly one."

"Open your eyes. And if you dig your nails any deeper into your palms, they're going to start bleeding."

I opened my eyes. His back was turned to me. He was wrapping a heaping plate with aluminum foil.

"We can take the food. Let's get out of here. We have enough to deal with."

"Where are we going?"

"To my place. I'll drive. Get the book. Hurry. We're leaving now."

Was I psychic when I grabbed my entire suitcase? I must have been.

Chapter Six

I rolled down the window as soon as I got in the car, but roses still bloomed. I needed Grey Taylor more than I needed to take my the next breath. This really sucked.

“What did you say?” he asked. I didn’t know I said it aloud.

“Nothing worth repeating.”

We’d arrived at his house. He pulled into the garage and I was out of the car before he’d put it in park. He reached for my suitcase in the back seat. I dragged my eyes from his body and put them back into my eye sockets. That’s what it felt like, anyway. “It’s making me crazy. I can barely keep from touching you.”

He moistened his lips and an unmistakable look of desire in his eyes mirrored my own. Was he trying to kill me? I stifled a groan. “This isn’t going to work,” I said, following him through the door. “I can’t even think straight, much less—” I gasped as he dropped my suitcase, turned, and pulled me against his body.

“Then we need to clear your mind,” he said, his breath hot against my ear.

Reason fled as he claimed my mouth. His tongue tangled with mine, and I tangled my fingers in his hair. My legs opened and I rubbed myself against the

bulge of his bone-hard erection. I didn't care if he'd knocked up the entire cheerleading section of the Atlanta Falcons at that point, much less my cousin. The urgency was incredible, white-hot. I'd never felt anything like it before. My clothes were instruments of torture. Every inhibition I ever had disappeared. I ripped at my clothes, hating the instant it took me away from his arms.

The feel of his naked skin against mine rocked me. I was shaking, my entire skin surface as sensitive as my clit. I don't know how we got to the bedroom, but the mattress was at my back, his fingers playing over my nakedness.

"You're beautiful," he said.

I wasn't interested in conversation. I wanted it inside me, right now. Shifting, I took his heavy, hard penis in my hands, my thumb rotating the bead of moisture at the end. He was so big, so hard, so good.

He sucked air through his teeth. "You're going to make me unravel."

"Come inside then." I guided him, settling down on it. Bliss shot through me. I arched back, my hips churning against his hardness as his swollen, plum-like head moved against my wet walls. My thighs tight against his, my vagina clenched against the width of him, it felt as if I could feel every vein. I worked it in and out, throwing my head back in abandonment, overflowing with pleasure I'd never imagined before.

He started to tremble, then groaned and flipped me over. I wrapped my legs

around his waist, burying my face into his warm neck. The scent of musk and roses filled my nostrils. He didn't miss a beat, pushing it like an engine piston, stroking it back and forth inside me just right. The world narrowed to the friction, the sensation. In and out, a delicious stretch. The smell and feel of him surrounded me, saturated with roses. Don't stop, slam it to me, baby. Give it to me hard. Was that me making all that noise?

I imploded against him, hurting so good, the convulsions of my walls milked him. He shook and shuttered within me, pushing it to the limit. Everything went black, my body seized with an intensity I'd never experienced before. And oh my Lord, he didn't stop. In and out. The sharp excitement of his throbbing penis jumping and shaking within me sent me back, and I shuddered as a second orgasm slammed into me, twisting and squeezing with agonizing pleasure.

I was as wrung out as a dry dishcloth. He was kissing my neck, so tender and gentle it made me want to cry. How could anything so sweet be a spell? "That was incredible." I hesitated, feeling shy. "I've never had it like that."

He kissed the tip of my nose and smiled. "Can you concentrate now?"

I kept my features still, but his words cut. Had he only made love to me so I could focus on solving the problem? I sniffed. I smelled no scent of roses. "Yes, I can concentrate now, thank you."

He gave me a wicked grin. "Good. I'm going to have to make sure you keep

on being able to concentrate over and over.” His hands played over the planes of my face as if memorizing them. “You turn me on, too.”

Sick guilt filled me. Guilt is my nemesis, I swear. I can’t seem to escape it. This man I just screwed without a condom was the father of my cousin’s baby. What had I done? Everything Brenda said about me was true. Worse, I was making my mother right about me. I pushed his hand away.

“What’s wrong?”

“What are you going to do about Brenda’s pregnancy?”

“Why should I do anything?”

My eyes narrowed. “You’re the father. It’s your responsibility.”

He propped himself up on an elbow and stared at me. “You got it wrong. If Brenda told you I got her pregnant, she lied.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve never touched Brenda Stetson.”

I sucked in a breath. “You’re lying.”

“I don’t lie.”

“Why would Brenda lie then? She seemed sincere. She begged for my help—said she’d have an abortion if I didn’t do the charm. I thought the whole thing was crazy, but I figured, if a love charm would make her feel better, what the hell?”

He sighed and rolled on his back, his hand behind his head. “She’s bold.

She's been coming on to me ever since I came back to Paradise. I told her a few days ago that I wasn't going out with her. Not ever."

I drew in a quick breath. Was it because she was black? Not that she looked it, but she never hid that was what she was. "Why wouldn't you go out with her?"

"She's not my type. It might be shallow, but I've always preferred to be the hunter. Women who come on too strong turn me off."

I let out my breath, a slow exhale. I have my own hang-ups, mostly due to the white men my mother kept company with. I didn't want to make the same mistakes my mother had.

"Humping your leg is coming on pretty strong."

He shifted and turned toward me with a lopsided grin on his face. "That's different. And you are my type."

"So why would Brenda tell me she's pregnant?"

"I was pretty blunt with her. I left her with no doubt I wasn't interested. I have no idea why would she tell anybody I got her pregnant."

"She knew the charm would work," I murmured to myself. Brenda knew that he'd fall in love with her if I did it right. She only had to get me to do it. She knew what happened with my sister. She knew that the threat of an abortion would get me to do it. Was I that much of a sucker?

Why would Grey lie? We just met. He'd gotten laid without an ounce of

exertion on his part. Why should he care if I believed he boned my cousin?

He sat up on the side of the bed, his back to me and sighed. “This situation is insane.” He got up, and a few seconds later I heard the toilet flush, water run.

I turned on my side and drew up my legs, wishing I’d disappear and find myself back in Atlanta. This could be the tail end of a fantastic and detailed erotic dream.

I heard Grey turn on the shower. He told me I turned him on, but it didn’t erase that he’d just tossed me a pity-screw. He wanted to get back on with his life. It wasn’t that I blamed him; even though casual sex wasn’t something I normally indulged in. What bothered me was for some reason, was that our connection was only magic. It seemed too strong for that to be all there was. Grey walked out of the bathroom nude, drying his hair with a towel. I never thought only visual stimuli could excite me, but his fine naked body made my heart pound. If I wasn’t satisfied yet, I’d never be satisfied. I’d always be wanting more.

I rolled out of bed. “I’m going to take a shower, too.”

“There’s a linen closet in the bathroom. Towels are in there.”

I nodded. I didn’t smell roses anymore, but his attraction hadn’t faded, although the urgency was gone. I was still under his spell.



After I showered, I examined the contents of his medicine cabinet. Hey, I’m

human. There was nothing interesting in there except a box of condoms. A frisson of regret mixed with fear ran up my spine. Too bad we hadn't thought to use them. I stood in front of the mirror. I'm average height, 5'5", and average weight, around 135 pounds, but that varied with the time of the month and my appetite. I was comfortable enough with my body. It served me well. I'd never used it to attract men. I'd had boyfriends, but nothing intense. I'd certainly never experienced the overwhelming sexual attraction I was dealing with now. Or the multiple orgasms. It was like a glimpse into heaven. For the first time I understood why some of my women friends lost their minds over a man.

That I turned such a beautiful man on was heady. Intoxicating. Even if this was only magic, it could be addictive. I heard him moving around the house when I left the bathroom. My suitcase was by the bed. I dressed quickly and took out the book.

Food was on the table when I went into the kitchen, eggs and bacon and thick slabs of buttered Texas toast. My mouth watered.

"Do you want coffee?" he asked and smiled at me, sending a ripple over my skin. Our fingers touched; their contact electric. I nodded, disturbed that it was more than sexual arousal attracting him to me now. I sipped the coffee he handed me, trying not to look at him. I couldn't, every move he made drew my glance. He seemed to know what he was doing in the kitchen as well as he knew in bed. His

movements were sure and deft, getting the job done without an iota of wasted energy.

This was like an unrequited crush, a bittersweet pull. I hated it and loved it at the same time. It's only the effects of the charm, I told myself yet again. I refused to lie to myself, no matter how tempting to pretend his passion for my body was more than sex. It wasn't real. Sure, he might have decided I was fuckable. He probably was on edge after so many women throwing himself at his body...Grey and I were two adults. I wanted it bad. Sex was a sensible solution. I could move forward, dealing with the problem at hand. I prided myself on being a sensible woman, didn't I?

"Aren't you going to eat?" he asked. I nodded and picked up my fork. "Tell me more about this love spell business of yours," he said it nonchalantly.

My chin lifted a fraction. "Love spells are not my business. I teach English and African-American Studies in Atlanta. I didn't know for certain spirits and ghosts existed until after my aunt died. Now I hear the damn things all the time!"

Grey raised a brow.

"Yes, that's what I thought, too," I continued. "Maybe I'm crazy. In fact, I hope this is all some sort of cosmic joke, or ridiculously long dream. I wish I could drive back to Atlanta and wake the hell up."

"I tend to be logical," Grey said. "I believe what I can discern with my senses.

I think science can eventually explain everything, even what we call magic.” Grey sipped his coffee. I noticed his food was untouched. “Ancient peoples would have thought many of the realities of our everyday world were magical.”

“You have a point,” I said. “But my reality stood on its head when the spirits spoke and the winds came through your house, I was as surprised as you.”

“Tell me about the book, how you got it. Why did you do the love charm instead of your cousin, and most of all, why was Brenda was so certain it would work?”

“My aunt’s spells and charms have always worked and she left me her spell book. That’s when I started hearing spirits. They whisper. Even now.” I shook my head, trying to clear it. “I’m getting used to it. It’s becoming background noise. I should be relieved that the spell did work, since it means that maybe I’m not as crazy as I thought.”

“No, you’re not crazy. I heard something, too, when you lit whatever was in that bowl.” I could tell he struggled not to shudder. “Voices, very soft, but a lot of them. When you went, the voices left with you.”

“They follow me. I made an appointment with a psychiatrist in Atlanta next week.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about. The insane don’t calmly go and make appointments with psychiatrists—and other people never hear the

voices they hear.”

“What am I going to do?” I said it mostly to myself, the magic-as-real concept almost more difficult to absorb than the idea of being crazy.

“We are going to figure out what’s going on, and we’re going to fix it.”

For a moment I believed him. “I didn’t follow the instructions in the book,” I said. “I was supposed to wrap the ashes in the silk and bury them where they’d be undisturbed. But I didn’t bury them.”

“What did you do?”

“I lifted the bowl in the air and the spirits took the ashes. The spirits told me to.”

He leaned back in his chair, his plate clean, and regarded me. “Why did they tell you to do that?”

“When I said the words after lighting the fire in the silver bowl, it felt as if my thoughts and intentions were going out of me and being made real. I don’t know if I’m making sense, but that’s the best I can describe it. What I wanted is the right thing to be done in regards to the situation. And it was. It has to be. That’s why they told me to do what they did.”

“That isn’t very logical.”

What could I say? “No, it isn’t.”

Grey raised a brow. “Then I suggest you get started looking for the spell or

charm that will reverse the effects. I have surgeries scheduled in the morning.”

He stood, took his plate to the sink and scraped the food in the garbage disposer, his back to me.

I bit my lip as the spirits moaned in dismay.

Chapter Seven

Grey turned from his sink and was going to say something when the doorbell rang. Then there was banging on the front door. “I know you’re in there!” Brenda yelled.

“I’ll handle it,” he said.

I nodded, relieved.

“Let me in!” I heard the door open and Grey’s soft words, obviously pitched to calm my cousin, blended in with the whispers of the spirits.

Welcome reality. Spirit voices, a crazed-lovesick cousin whose object of affection was screwing me silly, and spells that really worked, albeit not as intended.

“So? I told you she was a liar. Are you believing her word over mine?” Brenda yelled.

I prayed he wouldn’t let her in. I wasn’t up for it right now.

Another long pause.

“I know you’re here, you treacherous, lying, two-timing whore! You better watch your ass—” The front door slammed, cutting off her tirade.

“That wasn’t a good scene,” Grey said as he entered the kitchen.

“Didn’t sound like it.”

“I feel like I’ve entered Twilight Zone. I don’t care for it much.” Grey raked his hand over his shaggy black hair, a gesture I found endearing.

He loaded the dishwasher, lost in his own thoughts. A cloud of depression hit me so suddenly and hard, I swayed in my chair a little. It was as if an abyss opened before me. “Excuse me.” I rose from the table.

He gave me a distracted glance and nodded. I took my dish to the sink, scraped the remains into the garbage disposal and rinsed it. Then I poured myself another cup of black coffee, picked up the book and retreated to the living room. I had to drag myself from the brink of the pit and figure out how to deal with this thing. Magic induced passion sucked. But I was telling myself a lie. Magic induced passion was the best and most addictive thing I’ve ever felt in my life. I never tried crack, but I’d bet money it had nothing on Grey’s body in action.

Not having it would be as if I’d been allowed to taste the ambrosia of the gods and then had it snatched away forever. Knowing he didn’t, he couldn’t, feel the same way about me was what sucked double balls. I sat the book aside and sipped the hot black coffee. It was good, high quality beans.

I looked around Grey’s home, wanting to understand him. Even with the mild disarray from last night, I could tell that he was an orderly man. Organized, logical, methodical. He liked bright colors and bold, masculine prints. Nice. But

very different from me. I hire a cleaning service. I tend to be messy, cluttered and disorganized. I'm a creative sort. I've always been attracted to emotional men, beta types who like to talk about their feelings and pride themselves on not being ashamed to cry. But an orderly, intellect-centered surgeon delivered the best sex I've had in my life. I thought multiple orgasms were a myth. Could that really be only magic?

I relaxed and let the soft chatter of the spirits soothe me. It was not unlike a radio tuned to a news station in another room, so low I could barely hear. I listened to Grey putter in the kitchen and soaked up the atmosphere of his home. I picked up the book and laid it on my knees.

The right thing. I want to do the right thing. What is right? Desire? Pleasure? Freedom from wants or worry? The book fell open on its own, pages fluttering. I drew in a sharp breath as I saw the title of the spell, Undoings. That had to be it. I bent over the book, squinting to read the spidery handwriting. I wondered, what would it be like not to want Grey? Not to have him make love to me again? I couldn't imagine.

It isn't real. It's nothing but an illusion. You've never run away from reality. Don't start now. I read the words and sucked my breath. The spell couldn't be done until the next full moonrise—almost a month away.

Delicious baking smells drifted from the kitchen. I had to tell him. I picked

up my empty cup and went back into the kitchen. He was pulling a cookie sheet from the stove.

“Do you like chocolate chip cookies?” Grey asked.

“Who doesn’t like chocolate chip cookies?”

“You’re just in time. The coffee is fresh, too.”

“You’re very domestic, a lot more domestic than I am.”

“It is strange, but I bake when I’m worried. I get it from my mother. She must have worried a lot. But all I can bake are cookies. “

“Ah.” I was from the other side of the tracks from where he’d be raised, a matter of a mile or two in distance, a lot further away socially. We didn’t mix with his sort and vice versa, but I knew his father was a doctor, too, his mother a housewife.

He slid a plate of cookies in front of me. I bit into one and stifled a moan of pleasure. The cookie was melt-in-your-mouth delicious.

“If you say that cookie is better than sex, I’m going to be pissed.”

I laughed. “Not hardly. But these are fantastic.”

I set the cookie down and peered at him over the edge of my coffee cup. “I found something. Let me get the book and show you.” I retrieved the book and set it on the kitchen table. The book opened on its own, pages flipping. A shiver went through me and Grey tensed, eyes narrowed.

“There’s no need to fear the spirits,” I said, moving to the book. “There it is. The same spell it showed me in the living room, Undoings.”

“How is that supposed to help?”

“It un-does what the book has done. But there’s bad news.”

“What?”

“It can only be done on a full moon.”

“When is that?”

“The full moon just passed. I can’t start in over three weeks.”

He raked his hand over his hair. “This is crazy. Maybe my perceptions are skewed about the women freaking out over me. Maybe it’s something else. I need to make sure. I want to get your input, too.”

I raised a brow.

“I want you to come out with me. Let’s go around people and you see what happens.”

“You’re willing to brave hordes of zombie women trying to rip off your clothes?”

“As long as you’re there to protect me.”

“I’ll need to stop home and get my guns.” I laughed at his alarmed look. “I’m joking.”



As soon as I walked into Wal-Mart with Grey, I could tell something wasn't right. Every female head turned in his direction, exactly as if he were giving off a strong and irresistible odor. The women were the honeybees and Grey was a flower, dripping with nectar.

"Do you want to get out of here?" I asked.

"No. Let's do this thing. Is there anything you need?" He pushed the shopping cart forward, determined.

We got to the end of the produce aisle when a woman tripped and fell against him. He automatically caught her. I rolled my eyes at the dramatic, staged fall.

"Excuse me," Grey said as he tried to step away. The woman stayed attached to him as if glued. While he extricated himself, I studied the women around us, edging closer.

Panic touched me. The aisle we stood in was getting crowded—and there weren't that many people in the store. I was starting to feel it again myself, a strong sexual arousal, along with the compulsion to touch him.

"We'd better go," I said.

He nodded in agreement.

We left the cart and walked toward the doors. Some women abandoned their carts to follow us.

We quickened our steps to a trot. It wasn't exactly as if it was hordes of zombie women chasing us, but it was a terrible feeling.

Grey clicked the car unlocked and we tumbled in. He locked the doors the moment we got in and put the keys in the ignition.

The adrenaline rush of fear combined with the heady sexual arousal... I reached for him and pressed my lips to his. I couldn't help himself. He tensed for a moment, then relaxed and returned the kiss, his mouth opening, our tongues intertwining. I was desperate to make love in a cramped car surrounded by horny women in a parking lot under the blazing sun. My hand drifted to the hard bulge between his legs when somebody banged on the window. I looked up. The woman looked mad, but not as mad as I felt.

"Do you know her?" Grey asked.

I shook my head, my mouth tight. He motioned for the woman to get away and turned the key in the ignition, moving away from the press of women that suddenly appeared outside the car, then burning rubber once he was clear of them.

"I think public appearances are out of the question," he said.

I didn't care. All I wanted was ... "Grey."

"Hmmmmmm?"

"It affects me, too."

He looked over at me, a ghost of a smile playing over his lips. "Good, we'll be

home in a few moments.”

As soon as the garage door closed behind us, my body took over. He seemed as heated as I was, pushing me to the bedroom. We fell on the bed. I closed my eyes, abandoning myself to the sweet, sticky longing roiling through me. He straddled my body and undressed me. His hands played over my skin slow, savoring the moment. I bit my lower lip, panting in the effort not to rush to completion this time. The scent of roses enveloped me, like velvet against my senses. “You make me wild, woman” he said, his voice husky, as he unhooked my bra. He cupped my breasts, his thumbs rotating around my nipples as he kissed the side of my neck, tiny kisses, traveling down, nibbling and licking. When he reached my breasts, he suckled at my nipples, drawing them one after another in his mouth, swirling his hot tongue around them. My hips bucked of their own volition. I was pushed to the edge by only his touch on my breasts, the aching between my legs igniting to flame.

His tongue trailed over my heated skin, his hands easing my panties over my thighs. Now, now, now, oh God, give it to me now. Fuck me baby; fuck me hard.

He rumbled against my lower belly. “Soon, baby, soon, but not yet.”

He parted my lower lips with his mouth and the feel of his lips and tongue against my most intimate parts shook me like thunder.

His tongue tortured and teased me, leaving me poised on the sharp

pain/pleasure edge of a razor. It was like the moment before death. Then he pushed me off and I crashed into the oblivion of pleasure.

I came back to myself with a raw throat. I'd been screaming. I never screamed before, but had always took my completion stiff and silent. I barely finished the thought, when he drove into my warm, sopping body. His big, hard dick filled me all the way up as he stroked it in and out, rolling it against my clit. His cock handled my pussy like a fine-tuned instrument, expertly playing me. He worked me, plunging and thrusting. I cried, my body clutching around his driving dick, begging for mercy. We groaned, gasped and swore, our fires raging out of control. I burned so completely, I nearly disappeared.

He broke like a damn, shuddering his release within me as if a flood. We clutched each other tight, as if we needed to hold each other together.

Light filtered through the blinds, the day still strong, but I was spent. The spirits snickered and murmured, suddenly seeming voyeuristic and vulgar. Uncomfortable, I closed my eyes, but that didn't block out their sounds. How would I live with this?

Chapter Eight

I opened my eyes to sunlight filtering through the blinds, but it wasn't the early evening sun. I blinked at the morning light. We'd slept through the entire night.

"Good morning," he said, propping himself up on one elbow, considering me. I met his gaze, and decided that waking with Grey was a pleasure I wanted to experience again. "Did you sleep well?"

I nodded. "How long have you been awake?"

"An hour or so. I've just been laying here thinking."

I didn't ask what about, because I knew. I moved my legs over the edge of the bed and went to the bathroom.

"It makes no scientific sense," he said to me after I returned and crawled back under the covers. "What could influence women en masse like that?"

I didn't sigh. A woman wants to talk about things of love. We want to discuss feelings, emotions, and promises after lovemaking like he'd given me last night. But a woman doesn't always get what she wants.

"It's like a scent," I said. "I think of it as roses, but that's not it exactly—but it has the same heavy, sweet essence. The scent is an incredible turn-on."

“Pheromones,” he said.

“Maybe that’s it. Grey?”

“Hmmm?”

“It’s gone for a while after we make love, but it comes back. How can we function like this?”

“Believe me, I can cope.” There was the hint of laughter in his voice.

“I don’t know if I can. I can’t control myself sexually around you. You can’t go on being my personal sex toy.”

“Why not? Don’t I make a good one?”

I couldn’t help smiling back at him. “You make a fabulous sex toy, but you don’t really care about me.”

“I beg to differ. Mia, I like you. I like you a lot. As far as all the other emotional stuff, well, I don’t think you care about me either, not really. Like you said, it’s only magic.”

I started protest, but he raised his hand. “It’s not the time to try to untangle and figure out our emotions. They’re being manipulated by God only knows what.”

“But that doesn’t make the feelings less real.”

“We need to take this as it comes. I enjoy being with you. You enjoy being with me. There’s no need to analyze anything and try and figure out our relationship right now. It’s unfathomable and impossible. Let’s just get what we

need to do done and go forward from there.”

I bit my lip. Sometimes a woman does get what she wants. We’re talking about our relationship, but it didn’t feel nearly as sweet as I imagined.

He made sense. He was perfectly logical. So why was I feeling this way? Why was I hurting because he didn’t whisper sweet words of love in my ears rather than talking about what we need to do?

All I really needed from him was that delicious, hot, and sweaty sex. Then I could function, my body satisfied.

I had to break the charm’s hold. Because no matter how much I rationalized, Grey’s logical, cool approach broke my heart.

But all I said was, “Yes, you’re right, we have to do what we have to do.”

He nodded, moving to lie on his back, his hands behind his head.

“I know so little about you.” It bothered me that a man so intimate with my body was a stranger.

“I’m divorced. We lived in Jackson. I returned to Paradise only a year ago, after we split up.”

“Dating anybody?” I wanted to cut off my tongue when the words slipped out.

“I haven’t dating anybody since my divorce. I needed a break.”

“Why?”

He shifted. “I married the last woman I thought was special. I don’t know how I could have misinterpreted a woman that badly. I put her on a pedestal. I believed she really loved me.”

Envy streaked through me. But I watched him, attentive, willing him to tell me more.

“She never was into sex much. She was delicate, frail and often ill. When she told me she was pregnant, I was excited, but scared for her, too. We hadn’t made love in a while, but I figured she’d been pregnant a couple of months at least. Then I got a note at my office. No return address. It was just a slip of paper and three typewritten words: It’s not yours.”

I drew in a sharp breath, wondering what sort of woman wouldn’t desire this man above all others?

“It was a rough pregnancy. I was overjoyed at my son.” His fingers clenched. “I don’t know what made me go and have him tested. No, I know why I had the paternity test done. The timing wasn’t right. I didn’t admit it to myself at the time, but I knew the child couldn’t have been mine. She hadn’t let me touch her for months when she told me she was pregnant. The baby came too late for it to be mine.”

“The baby wasn’t yours?”

He gave a little shake of his head as if it still pained him. “It was if a

mountain fell on me. Crushed me. I confronted her. She denied it. Then I showed her the test results, the proof. She left.” He turned on his side to face me. “What gets me is that she wasn’t frail and delicate as I imagined her. She was seeing another man. She said she liked danger and tough men. She called me a pussy. Said I was nobody but a bitch who paid her bills.”

I blinked. That had been harsh. And the pain was raw in his voice, the hurt too fresh. I closed my eyes against the realization it was too soon for him to love again. He’d have to trust again first.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I said.

Then he broke my heart when he said nothing, but kissed my lips then, soft and tender. Smoke and mirrors; magic and illusion. Our reality was nothing more than shifting sands beneath our feet. All lies.

He rolled out of bed and came over to my side, taking my hand. “Let’s shower.” He took my hand and led me into the bathroom, then under the warm water.

We didn’t talk and soon I couldn’t talk. He soaped me thoroughly, paying special attention to my nipples, and working the slick bar of soap between my legs, a steady slick rhythm against her clit.

A balloon expanded in my lower belly. I turned my face up to the spray, warm fingers beating against my cheeks. I could barely stand. My legs gave way

and he caught me, turning against his hard dick, pulling my ass against it.

He entered me, sliding in smooth, and working it fast. I imploded with the sweet pressure, quaking and shaking in his arms. He didn't relent, pounding into me from behind. He reached for the handheld shower and held the stream directly to my sensitive clit. He was killing me. I would surely die. "No, no, no, no," I yelled as he pushed me over that cliff, freefall. He joined me with a harsh cry.

I collapsed against the cold tiles, spent. Anything that good has to be bad. Sex with Grey was probably taking years off my life.



Grey was in the kitchen, cooking eggs for breakfast. I turned my purse upside down on his dresser to find my eyeliner. The cell phone vibrated against the hard wood of the dresser. I stared at it with a sense of dread, and then reached for it. Brenda. I almost laid it down again, but realized I was going to have to talk to her sooner or later. I answered the phone.

"You tricked me didn't you? You wanted him for yourself all along," Brenda said as soon as I said hello.

"We're done. Don't call me again," I replied.

"We're not done by a long shot. Aunt Sara told me you weren't home last night. You're with him, aren't you?"

"That's none of your business. He's made it clear how he feels about you."

“When I have his baby, it’s going to be my business for damn sure.”

“He said he never touched you.

“Yeah, right. Be careful, bitch. He’ll say the same thing about you after he knocks you up.”

I hung up. Dealing with her was a waste of time and she pissed me off, but I felt guilty. No doubt about it, I took the man she’d wanted, even if it was only for a short time.

One trip down the wrong path and my life had careened off a routine and well-maintained highway to an unknown destination. I had a feeling I needed let go of the wheel and trust to the universe to lead me, but I didn’t know anything about spirits and metaphysical stuff and I had no desire to learn about it now.

I went into the kitchen. Grey was putting plates on the table.

The book was open on the kitchen table. The page was headed Reversals. It was a spell that reversed love potions, spells, and charms. I bent over the page. It only reversed the effects of love charms on a specific person where Undoings reversed all the effects of any magical spell or potion. There was no time requirement on the love spell reversal. It was bittersweet when I realized I could soon be free of the thrall Grey held over me.

That was as soon as I found some cat pee. Why did these things have to be so gross? It was as if magic was making fun of us. I looked at Grey. He sat at the

table, staring at his plate, not meeting my eyes.

“Are you going to start that reversal spell after breakfast?” he asked.

I didn’t answer his question. “Did you find the page with the potion?”

“No, it was open to that page when I came into the kitchen.”

The spirits wanted me to be free of the sexual compulsion Grey held over me. The problem was that now I wasn’t sure I wanted to be. “Yeah, I’ll start after breakfast.”

The omelet was good, oozing with cheese, bacon and onions, the biscuits dripping butter. I tried to make a show of enthusiasm over the food, but I couldn’t quite muster it. There was the slightest whiff of roses. After we made love, we would have a few hours, but then my arousal would rise again. I couldn’t expect Grey to make love to me every few hours. He was doing an excellent job keeping up with me so far, but I assume any man has his limits.

I rinsed off my plate, put it in the dishwasher and returned to my seat and the book. “The spell is pretty simple.”

“Good. What do you have to do?”

“I have to take a piece of your dirty shorts, cat pee and angelica root, mix it all together, burn it in a bowl with a white candle flame and invoke it with the spell written here. It says your blood will make it more effective. Then I have to mix the ashes in something and drink them.”

“You’re joking.”

“Nope.”

“Cat pee, blood, and dirty shorts? That’s ridiculous.”

“Yeah, I think whoever is in charge of this magic business is screwing with us as far as the disgusting ingredients. But I have to go through the motions if I want it to work.”

“And you have to eat it?”

“Just a sprinkle. It won’t kill me. I hope.”

Grey looked as if he might disagree, but said nothing.

“I bet Aunt Estella has some angelica root in her root cellar. I need to call on one of my old friends. I think she has a cat.”

Chapter Nine

“I thought you went back to Atlanta ages ago,” Janine said when I arrived at her place.

We’d been close in high school even though she was far more popular. She’d been a cheerleader on the black squad at Paradise High—yes, our cheerleaders were segregated. It’s Mississippi after all. She married right after graduation and I went off to the big city to college. I’d sometimes give her a call when I was in town for the holidays, but we weren’t close anymore. Definitely not close enough for me to ask her for cat pee.

“Nope. Classes don’t start up until after Labor Day, and I’m sticking around for a while.”

“Come on in, sit down. I’m dying to catch up with you.”

A small, crying child clung to her leg. Janine looked down, her long, straightened hair falling in her eyes.

“On, this is Buddy. His little brother, Stephen, is down for a nap right now.” She picked him up.

I smiled at the child. He glared back.

“I’m really sorry about your aunt. I was at the funeral, but I couldn’t talk to

you at the time.”

“I understand.” I did. The funeral was a fiasco with my mother and her sisters in high drama mode, screaming, crying and falling over the casket. They didn’t give a damn about Aunt Estella when she was alive, but played the funeral card for all it was worth. I couldn’t stand it and left. I’m sure Aunt Estella left, too, her spirit thoroughly disgusted.

She settled on the sofa, and I sat on the chair adjacent. There was something hard and uncomfortable under the cushion. I dug out a toy.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

“Um, whatever you’re going to have.”

“How about a martini? Apple?”

A martini was pretty hardcore for barely after noon, but what the hell. “That sounds good.”

“Great!” She put Buddy in a playpen and went into the kitchen. Two cats came to investigate me. Buddy cooed at them from his pen. He was really quite adorable.

I considered digging the plastic bag out of my pocket and holding it under one of the cat’s butts, but I doubted they’d pee on demand.

“It’s been a long time,” Janine said, returning with huge triangular glasses filled to the rim

I gingerly took a sip of the martini and blinked. If I finished that drink, somebody would have to drag my drunken rear back home. I sat it down carefully on a coaster on the coffee table.

“Is it good?” she asked.

“Delicious.”

“It’s so great to see you,” Janine gushed again, guzzling the martini.

I smiled weakly, worried about how I was going to ask the woman where her cats peed.

“I’m happy you came over. Because of my rug rat, I’ve been trapped in the house.”

She sounded so grateful for my company, I felt guilty.

“From what everybody says, you have a great job.” Her voice was wistful.

“I love my job. But Atlanta traffic takes some getting used to.”

“You could stay here in Paradise. I’m sure you could find work in Jackson and that’s not a bad commute.”

“I probably could.” But the thought of not returning to my job almost caused me physical pain. I didn’t realize how much my job defined me until I was gone. I was dying to talk about it, but held back because I realize it would sound like bragging to Janine. “But I’m eager to get back to work.”

“Eddie doesn’t want me to work, and I’m grateful for it. I think a mother

should raise her kids instead of letting someone else do it, you know?”

I had no idea, but I nodded, amazed that half her huge martini had disappeared already and girlfriend wasn't slurring her words. I picked mine up and took a sip

“We've come a long way since high school, haven't we?” she said.

I nodded again. An awkward silence fell between us. “Can I use your bathroom?” I asked.

“It's down the hall, to your left.”

I prayed there was a kitty litter box in there. There is, whispered a spirit.

I locked the bathroom door and pulled out the plastic bag I had in my pocket and scooped up a clump. Ick.

I wrapped it carefully and stuck it deep in my packets. I flushed and washed my hands.

When I returned to the living room, buddy was screaming in his playpen. Janine was staring off on space, a good two-thirds of the martini demolished. I picked up Buddy to comfort him.

“Ouch!” I cried.

“He bites,” Janine said.

I prudently returned the child to his playpen.

“Uh, maybe I better go,” I said.

“Oh, stay. Jerry Springer is going to be on in five minutes. And you haven’t finished your drink.”

I’d rather gouge my eyes out than spend the rest of the afternoon watching fight and yell TV, no matter how much gin she gave me. “Janine, sorry I can’t stay, but I told somebody I’d get back. I need to finish something.”

“Oh, okay.” Buddy started wailing again and she raised her voice to be heard over his cries. “Keep in touch. Don’t worry; I’ll finish your drink for you.”

I bet she would.



The smell of roses hit me when Grey opened the door. I kept my eyes averted from his body, starting to ache for it.

“I got everything for the potion. Uh, could you make yourself scarce while I whip it up?” I asked.

I peeked at him. His eyebrow was raised. I know I had nerve to ask the man to vamoose in his own house, but we’d never get anything done otherwise. “I can’t concentrate with you around.”

“Hmmm. I’ll be in the bedroom reading. There’s a white candle on the kitchen table. Call me when you’re ready. I’d like to see the ritual.”

Shaking my head to clear it from roses and gin, I headed to the kitchen and got to work.

After I finished burning the stinky ingredients, I pondered what to mix them in to drink. It didn't help that I felt nauseous from the smell already. I settled on Coke. That stuff dissolved nails so it would likely neutralize cat pee, wouldn't it?

The Coke foamed like crazy when I added the ingredients. I poured a bit into a shot glass, hesitated, got the book and went to Grey. My knees almost gave way as I saw him stretched out on the bed. Sexual awareness shot through me like giant thorns, pain and pleasure. I wanted to cry at the thought of losing this—losing him. I sat the book and the shot glass on the dresser and started unbuttoning my blouse. One last time.

My breath came fast through my lips and my panties soaked through by just looking at him. His eyes darkened and when I saw the bulge grow between his legs, I lost it. I dropped my clothes on the floor.

He pulled me on the bed. “I want it hot and hard and right now.” I was a she-cat in heat. The urgency was melting through me like delicious warm, melted chocolate.

Grey delivered. His clothes were gone between one of my eye blinks and the next. He slammed it to me just like I wanted. Sliding his big dick into me hard and frantic, sliding it in and out of my slick, wet walls like a piston. It was so fucking scrumptious I thought I was going to die. It took about five seconds for the first

convulsions to shake me, my pussy clutching and grabbing at his dick. The earthquake broke me in two and I came together with a gasp, aware of his sweat-slick skin, his sweet musk and his tense moans and he worked his penis in and out of me. I started to crack again, pieces of me cracking away. I gasped, screamed, met him as he roared and shoved into me.

How was I supposed to live without this?

We lay there for a while, breathing hard. He touched the tip of my nose. “I’m getting used to this love spell.”

I closed my eyes against the wanting, worse because it was no longer sexual. “Hmmm, you’re getting used to women chasing you down the street with the hope of tearing your clothes off and having their way with your body?”

“I’m getting used to you. You and me.”

My breath caught. You and me. My heart twisted with the pleasure/pain I was growing to associate with Grey. I reached for him, caught myself and withdrew my fingers. “It’s only magic.”

“Are you sure? It feels like—”

I rolled out of bed, not able to bear what he said next, knowing it wasn’t real. “I have to go the bathroom.”

I gathered my clothes. I took a quick shower to rinse off and dressed, resolute. I still had to finish this mess out. I’d return at the next full moon and

work the charm to release Grey. But I needed to move on.

I had a life in Atlanta. Friends, a job I loved, and an on and off again man, whom I hadn't spared a thought about until this moment. I needed to put Aunt Estella's house up for sale and go home. I had to leave this magic stuff behind. I'd figure out what to do about the voices and the hallucinations when I got to Atlanta. They were probably nothing a stiff antipsychotic cocktail couldn't fix. I had to get going. Grey Taylor was emotional dynamite. I sensed he was more dangerous to me than the magical world could ever be.

He was still nude, propped up against the headboard, a sheet around his waist. He studied the dark liquid in the glass when I returned to the bedroom. "This looks nasty."

I took it from him without a word and gulped. It was nasty. I waited for something to happen, remembering the bells and whistles the last time I completed a spell.

Nothing happened.

"Did it work?" he asked.

"I don't know." After sex, the rose smell dissipated anyway. Maybe my idea for one last stand wasn't such a good one. I'd need to wait a few hours.

But one thing had changed. I'd never considered simply leaving and going home to Atlanta for some reason, now it was my prime option, spell or not. "I need

to go to Aunt Estella's and take care of some things. Why don't you come by for dinner and we can check if the spell worked then?"

He looked quizzical. "I thought you were going to stay here."

My fear of my attraction to him now outweighed my need. "I need to get some things done."

He nodded. "I'll be over around six, all right?"

"I'll have dinner ready."

I moved toward my bag, my mind churning with everything I needed to do before I left. When I got back to Aunt Estella's house, I realized I hadn't checked the voice mail on my cell phone in ages. The dean wanted me to give him a call. A few friends had left messages. My life back in Atlanta rushed at me. There were also messages from Brenda, my mother, my sister. I called Eva.

"Everybody's wondering about you," she said.

"I'm all right. I'll be going home soon."

"Brenda said you stole her man. She's pretty mad."

"I know." I guessed Eva wanted to hear more, but I left it at that.

"How is the book?"

"It's here, what about it?"

"Have you tried to leave Paradise yet?" she asked.

"No," I answered, irritated by her abrupt subject changes. "I have to go and

make some more calls. I'll talk to you later."

My dean wanted me back to help out a new professor with her unexpectedly large and unruly summer English class. I said yes. It would give me something to do. He wanted me back Monday so I'd need to rush. I got the yellow pages down to look for the phone numbers of a realtor and an auctioneer. It was time to move on, to leave Paradise behind in more ways than one. It wasn't as if I had much of a family here except my sister. Maybe I could get her to come with me this time.

Chapter Ten

I cooked a down home southern dinner. There was some catfish in Aunt Estella's freezer, so I fried catfish, doused in seasoned cornmeal, made cornbread, and greens full of onions and pork fat. I made rich macaroni and cheese, and sweet tea. I dug around in the shelves until I found three kinds of hot sauce. By the time six rolled around, I couldn't believe how much I missed a man I'd known for so short a time. The spell probably hadn't worn off.

At six sharp, the doorbell rang. I rushed to the door and was taken aback all over again at how good he looked.

"Hey," he said, and handed me a bottle of wine.

I motioned for him to enter, feeling nervous. It felt like a first date. We'd never gotten out of bed long enough to go anywhere, even if we could have.

I sat the wine on the table. "Did you go to the liquor store?"

"I got it from my stash."

"Thanks." Then I squeaked, as he swept me in his arms and pulled me to him. He lowered his head and his lips met mine, firm and demanding. I stiffened, and then surrendered, melting into the kiss, my arms winding around his neck.

His tongue plundered my mouth. His kiss became more hungry and urgent,

his hands roaming my body more insistent. I met him with my own passion, our tongues intertwining, tasting each other.

The familiar urgency pulsed and I pressed against his body. We broke away, panting from the sweet, hot kiss.

I touched my lips and stared at him.

“I realized that we’d barely kissed and I wanted to,” he said, his voice husky.

“It was nice.”

“It was. Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Do I still turn you on?”

I glanced up at Mr. Tall, Lean, Masculine and Gorgeous. “Are you kidding? How could you not turn me on?”

“Good.” A satisfied smile touched his lips.

“But I don’t smell roses anymore. And I didn’t need to rip off your clothes until you hit me with that luscious kiss.”

“So you think the spell doesn’t work on you anymore.”

I nodded.

He gave me a lopsided grin. “Good. As long as I still turn you on. Let’s eat. It smells great in here.”



It was nice to sit across the table and eat a meal with him without that undercurrent of need and longing. The best part was afterwards we were in the living room, soft jazz on the stereo, a wine glass in my hand. I could talk to him like a normal person instead of groping his body like a sex fiend. Not that I didn't miss the sex fiend part a little.

"I'm planning to head back to Atlanta day after tomorrow."

Grey frowned. "I thought you were going to stay until you set things straight with the effects of this love spell?"

"I'll come back at the right time and do it."

"I'd rather you stayed."

"I can't. The dean called me. He wants me to help with a class."

He set down the glass. "That isn't going to work. You're going to have to tell him you can't make it."

I lifted my brows. "Excuse me? I've already told him I'd be there and I'm going to be. I'm going home."

"You got me into this incredible mess. It's your responsibility to get me out."

Grey's eyes were narrowed, his jaw tight.

My heart pounded. I forced my breathing to slow and not to utter the retort on my tongue.

"I said I'd be back."

“But what if something happens you can’t control, Mia? This is my life on the line. Disappearing without notice from my practice and having to seclude myself for almost a month puts a severe strain on me as it is.”

I couldn’t quell the guilt. Guilt and I were close companions. The bad thing was Grey was right. I felt bad for him, I really did. But I felt worse for me. Something in me wanted to flee this town and this man... while I still could. I’d be back.

“I have to go,” I said. “I’m sorry. I promise I won’t let anything stop me from returning.”

“That’s not good enough and you know it.” He sighed.

Silence strained between us for a few moments, then he touched my chin and turned my face to his, gazing into my eyes. “What are you afraid of?”

The answer slipped from my lips without thought. “You.”

“There’s no need to be.” He traced my lips with his finger, and I couldn’t breathe. He didn’t need a love potion to put a spell on me. “Please don’t run away. I need you.”

I closed my eyes, something like pain warring inside me. I wanted to stay with him. I wanted him more than—Lord, it felt as if I wanted him more than I wanted to breathe. But I was terrified of losing my life I’d worked so hard to build. I craved my job, my comfortable apartment, everything familiar. I needed to get

away from my family and this town. Every day here was like a knot pulling in my gut, tighter and tighter.

“I’ll see.” I couldn’t talk about it anymore. I reached for the remote and turned on the television. “There’s a good movie on that I wanted to see tonight.”

His lips tightened but he seemed to understand. We stared at the screen.

That night I slept in Grey’s arms for the first time without sex. It was still good. Real good. I cared and he cared. But everything was going to change. I couldn’t stop it. Nothing was all good or all bad; life is a mixture of both. And that’s scarier than hell.



“Come with me. You can hole out at my place in Atlanta just as easily as in Paradise,” I said to Grey over breakfast.

“You got it all figured out, don’t you?”

I grinned at him. “My philosophy is there’s a win-win solution to almost any reasonable scenario. You just have to find it. So what do you say? Are you down?”

“I guess it makes sense. Though I hate going somewhere like Atlanta and being stuck inside.”

“The women in Atlanta will sweat you to death even without a love spell. And once they find out you’re a MD, too? Goodness. You better stay inside, for real. You might start riots.”

He chuckled. "Wouldn't want to do that."

"So we're set. I'm ready to get out of here. Everything's set and my few things are packed. All I have to do is wash up these few dishes and we can run by your place—"

"What about your family? Aren't you going to tell them goodbye?"

I cocked my head and regarded Grey. "Eva knows I'm going. We've said our good-byes."

"You've got more family than that. What about your mother, your father, your aunts, your cousins?"

I stood and started gathering our plates. "What about them?"

"You know what I mean. You've barely visited them and now you're going to leave town without a word?"

"I'm not that close with my family."

He still looked puzzled. He wasn't going to let this go. Southern folk tend not to understand the lack of family ties. "What happened?"

I sighed as I scraped the plates into the garbage disposal. "It's mainly about my mother and me. We don't get along, never have. And she and her sisters are tight."

"What does this have to do with the rest of your family? That's your mother."

I squirted dish soap into the water. “Yeah, it is.”

“I don’t understand,” he said after a moment.

“You know what, Grey? I don’t either.”

I guess by the tone of my voice he finally figured out he needed to leave it alone, because he picked up the clean dishtowel off the drain and started to dry.



Grey was a light packer, and more organized than me. He packed a few pairs of jeans, shirts, a jacket in case it rained, socks, underwear and one casual sort of suit with slacks. He was rummaging through his bathroom for toiletries now. The whole thing that took me hours took him less than ten minutes. Men.

“I’m ready.” He emerged with one of those nifty shaving kits men use.

He drove. As we approached the edge of Paradise, I noticed the spirit voices which had become unnoticeable, mere background noise the past few days—were becoming louder and louder. Then they—the voices started screaming. If that wasn’t bad enough, I saw something black and filmy in the distance. I had no idea what it was but it terrified me as nothing had ever terrified me before. It was as if I was looking at my own death. “Stop!”

Grey immediately pulled over. I cradled my head in my hands, doubled over.

“Mia, what’s wrong? Are you in pain? Where? How severe?” The timbre of his voice changed. I felt him slipping into doctor mode.

The spirits quieted. “No, I’m not in pain.” I lifted my head. Tears streaked my cheeks.

“What is it, then? What is it, baby?”

“I don’t think I can leave. I’m afraid I’ll die if I try and you’ll die if you take me.”

His jaw tightened. “Why? That doesn’t make any sense.”

I gave a bitter, hysterical laugh. “What makes any sense anymore? There’s something up ahead. It’s black and big. Bigger than a man, but it’s the same shape. I can barely see it—it fades in and out. If you look out of the corner of your eye like this it comes into better focus.”

My heart sped up again when I looked at it again. My fingers clenched. Then I forced my breathing to slow. I knew it was coming no closer.

“I don’t see anything.”

“It’s there.” I felt my eyes fill with tears again. “My aunt warned me but I didn’t pay her any attention. Because of slavery back then, the fact nobody could take us from this place wasn’t a curse, it was a blessing. We could never be sold away. We could not travel over the town’s borders and live to tell the tale. I can never leave, Grey.”

My voice broke and I started to sob—big, gulping sobs that tore out of my chest. I had no more control over them than I did a storm. Grey tried to take me in

his arms, awkward as it was in the car.

I held on to him, the only thing worth holding on to, as my life crumbled around me.

I don't know how long it took to calm myself, but the sun rose higher in the sky. "Try one more time," I asked him, my voice hoarse and strained. "Drive real slow."

He got about half a block before he put on the brakes and turned to me, pale, his hands trembling. "There's something there. I can't go any further."

My face was buried in my bag to keep from screaming. I could only nod.

Grey put the car in reverse and turned around. "I'll try another way.

But it was on the other side of town, too. And the other. It was everywhere. I was never going to leave Paradise, not for the rest of my life. Tasting tears, I felt the truth of it all the way to my bones. He took me to Aunt Estella's house. My house.

I stumbled in like a blind person and curled up on the couch. "You can go back home if you want," I said.

"You need me now. I'm not going anywhere, no matter what." Then he took my hand and sat beside me. His touch made what I just realized almost bearable. "I'm worried about you," he said. "What are you going to do?"

"The house is paid for. I have a little savings."

“I wasn’t talking about that. As far as I’m concerned, you don’t have to worry about money. I was talking about how eager you were to get out of Paradise, back to your life.”

There was that. The shock was as if my limbs were chopped off, bam. A huge part of what made me was over, just like that. “School was everything, ever since I started elementary. I clung to it like a lifeline,” I said. “I dived into it. Wallowed. When I left Paradise it was for more school.” I glanced at him. He was listening, rapt.

“And I’m still wallowing. I spent eight years at the university, including a fellowship. I’ve been teaching two years and I just got appointed full professor. I’m twenty-seven years old and they’re already talking about tenure.” I took a deep breath. “My job defines me, Grey. School defines me. I’ve worked hard to get where I am. And I’ve just lost it. It feels as if I’ve lost myself. I don’t know what to do with my life without the poles I hung it from.” I blinked fast, determined not to cry.

Grey opened his mouth and shut it. His eyes lowered, his facial expression closed and shuttered. “Don’t give up,” he said. “If that’s what you want, I’ll get you out of here. I’ll get you back.”

I shook my head hard. “No, you’re not. I saw what’s out there. It’s real and it’s not letting me go anywhere. This is more than you can handle.”

“Maybe it’s only fear that’s holding us back,” he said.

“Maybe. But hearing the spirits and seeing the results of magic—to many fears and what I’ve always believed was illusion is real. Are you willing to really risk crossing that black thing on the edge of town?”

Grey took a deep breath. “Not right now. What are you going to do next?”

“I’m going to live. That’s all anybody can do. Take one breath, then the next.”

He nodded, as if satisfied with my answer.

“Maybe I should become the town witch like my aunt. She made a decent living.”

He moved to the stereo and looked over the music. He put on a CD and music filled the room. Marvin Gaye. Aunt Estella didn’t have bad taste.

He drew me to my feet and into his arms. I melted into him as we swayed to Marvin Gaye’s Sexual Healing.

I sent a blessing to Marvin’s spirit for that song, because he’d gotten it so right.

Chapter Eleven

We exchanged tender and playful kisses. I didn't feel the frantic urgency that accompanied our previous couplings. No more roses, only the heady scent of Grey. He plundered my mouth, owned it—deep, sweet kisses that I'd been too frantic to tolerate before.

"I want to make love to you for real," he whispered against my ear and my knees almost gave way. "I want to take my time."

He led me to the bedroom. Although the feverish arousal was missing, the slow, delicious honey-butter trickle seeping through me was more than sweet.

The soft sounds of R&B drifted in from the living room. He unbuttoned my shirt with practiced fingers, his lips not leaving my skin, raining silk kisses down my neck.

I arched my back as he set my breasts free, my bra drifting to the floor behind me.

"You're gorgeous," he said.

I felt self-conscious, something I'd never felt before under the spell. I started to cross my hands across my breasts but he caught them and drew me to him.

"I never thought I was gorgeous."

“Incredible. But I’m happy nobody else managed to pull you away from those books.” He brushed my hair back from my face. “You’re all mine.” He ran his fingers over my nipples, and they hardened in anticipation. “Aren’t you?” He pulled back and looked in my eyes.

I realized I’d never told him if I had a boyfriend or lover waiting back for me in Atlanta. “Yes. Yes, I’m all yours.”

And God help me, I meant it. I wanted to be his with a sudden yearning so strong it could cut flesh. He bent his head to mine and our kiss became hungry, demanding.

He eased me on the bed, and swirled his tongue around my nipple, hardening it, then the other. Then he drew them in his mouth and sucked, pulling a response from deep within my core.

My fingers fumbled at his shirt, and he pulled it over his head and tossed it away. I rubbed my breasts against his lightly furred chest, and he moaned. The familiar outline of his hard dick made me want it.

I pushed him back on the bed. “Your turn.” I unzipped his jeans and moved them down, letting his gorgeous masculinity spring free. He was blessed in so many ways.

I kissed the sensitive strip of skin in the back of the head, flicking it with my tongue and he drew in his breath. I teased him, licking his balls, kissing his shaft

before I wrapped my lips and hand around his hard straining dick, moaning at how good he tasted and felt. I swirled my tongue around the head, as I worked his shaft.

His hips started to shake and a little growl came from the back of the throat. He withdrew from my mouth and flipped me on my back, pulling my jeans and panties off and throwing them to the side of the bed in one motion.

He grabbed my lips in a hot and savage kiss. “You were gonna make me come, baby, and the only place I want to come is inside you.”

The head of his hard dick was working over my clit, dipping into my pussy juices and back again, like a giant finger. It felt so good. My hips bucked against him, wanting it inside me, wanting an end to the tease. C’mon, baby, do it, do it, do it, do it to me now.

He hooked a hand under my knee and drew it up, suckling at my breast as he pushed it in slow, a fraction of an inch at a time.

I went wild, almost screaming as I begged him to slam it to me. But he withdrew just as slow and as the tip was almost ready to slip out, he asked, “Is it as good?”

I was too far-gone to hear what he had to say at first. “What?”

“Is it as good to you, baby?”

I was beyond speech, but I could show him how good it was. He groaned

and pushed it in and out fast and hard. A bubble expanded within me as we pumped and bumped against each other.

When I popped, I shuddered as the wave hit me as hard as ever. As if slamming me into the ground hard, it took my breath and turned the world dark.

When I came back to myself, he twitched inside me, and that was enough to tilt me back where the convulsions ripped through me again.

We were panting and sweat-slicked, collapsed against each other. “That wasn’t the best time to ask me questions. “What did you say?” I asked, remembering a question and a certain look in his eyes that said it was important.

“I asked, was it good for you? I was worried that before, maybe your sexual response was only due to the spell.”

I ran my finger down his lean, muscled chest. “It was as good as always. Maybe we’re just good together.”



The next day, I sat across the table from my sister, an untouched banana nut muffin in front of me. Eva was on her second one. “I didn’t think you could leave,” she said, wiping her fingers on a napkin.

“What?”

“The ones who have the book never leave. You’d think Aunt Estella would have told you that.” She picked up her cup of tea and peered at me over the rim.

“Y’all never marry either, although you do sometimes get knocked up.” She sipped her tea. “Guess you better forget about hooking up permanently with that fine doctor you stole from Brenda.”

My eyes narrowed. This wasn’t like my sister. She usually never casually let words trip off her tongue that she knew could hurt. That was our mother’s role. For a moment it seemed as if Sara possessed her body.

“When is Sara coming back?” My mother worked part-time at the bank and had irregular hours. Apparently, she didn’t have to work full-time. I’d only come because her car was gone. I needed to talk to Eva about what was happening to me. Maybe she had some ideas and insight Grey and I missed. In a small town like Paradise, the few restaurants didn’t allow for private conversation.

“Sara won’t be in for a few hours.” Eva was looking at me sideways with something like scorn... or was that contempt?

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked.

The expression that crossed her face was as if a volcano bubbled and erupted. Eva clenched her fists, and then unclenched them slow.

I flinched at her obvious fury.

“Why does it always have to be you? You have everything. You get everything, and all for not doing a thing but breathing,” she hissed.

I stared at her, astonished at her reaction. “What are you talking about?”

“You got the best man in town, snatched him from Brenda. You got the book. Now you got a free house and you can do as you please. You got away from here.”

I flinched, stricken at her last word. “I got away from here?” I echoed, feeling as if I were tumbling in free fall. She’d opened the trapdoor to my secret, greatest guilt. I’d left her behind.

“Don’t look so innocent, you know what I mean. You left me here and you didn’t come back and get me. I waited when you left to live with Aunt Estella I waited when you went to Atlanta. I waited for a long time. When you finally deigned to say I could come, it was too late for me.” Her voice dripped venom. Eva pushed back her chair, got up, and stalked from the kitchen. A moment later, I heard a door slam.

I sat a moment longer until I was sure my legs would hold me, and then I stumbled to my car, numb with shock.



I needed the solace of Grey’s arms. Verbally spewing my pain doesn’t help me much. What would help was the comfort of Grey’s arms and the smile that lit his face when he looked at me. I don’t know why, and I don’t know how, but his presence took away my pain in a way nobody else but Aunt Estella could.

I opened the door and stillness struck me like a blow. He was gone. I almost

started to panic until I saw his note on the kitchen table, “Ran home for computer game fix. Come by or give me a call. Love. G.”

I moved to the living room, his note in my hand and sank down to the sofa. I held the paper to my chest. One little word. It meant a lot to me, too much. Then I curled up into a fetal position and cried for my sister and myself.



A while later the phone rang. I lifted my head from the couch and answered it, hoping it was Grey.

“Are you Estella’s niece? I wondered if you were carrying on the family business?” the woman whispered in my ear. I started to speak, but she didn’t let me get a word in. “I need some help. I don’t know what to do or who to turn to and Estella was always there for me.”

“I’m not sure if I can help you.”

She grabbed my words as if a lifeline. “But maybe you could. It’s not for me; it’s for my daughter. I’ve always tried to do the right thing by her, but she just looked in my eyes and told me she hated me and she was going to leave for good.” The woman’s voice cracked and broke.

I sat up. Her voice reminded me of how I felt after my sister said what she did.

“I just wanted to do the right thing,” the woman said, sobbing.

“I can meet with you,” I heard myself saying. “But I can’t guarantee I can do anything.

“Thank you, thank you so much. I’ll bring you Estella’s usual fee.”

Curiosity tugged at me. I never knew how much my aunt received from the people who came and went, usually in the wee hours of the night.

“Estella’s fee was three hundred dollars for a consultation.”

After I picked my jaw up off the floor and hung up the phone, I marveled that my aunt had a thriving business in a poor, small Mississippi town charging big-city shrink prices. Dang. No wonder she’d never had to have a job.

I’d been too flabbergasted to tell the lady she could keep her money. What did Aunt Estella do for three hundred dollars? But I knew what she did. Magic. And now maybe I could do it, too.

I guess three hundred dollars was a bargain if you thought about it. Could I give winning lottery numbers to people? That didn’t make much sense though, because then everybody would be winning the lottery. For three hundred dollars every single person in this town could be rich. Everybody could have the mate of one’s choice. But what if the mate of one’s choice wanted another? Did Aunt Estella give people health, beauty, wealth, and love? Folks in Paradise didn’t seem any healthier, wealthier, more beautiful or in love than in anyplace else. Could I do things like obtain retribution, rightful revenge or extract punishment? Could I

heal? Could I make people sick?

A shiver went through me as I wondered if I could tell the future. I didn't want to know the future unless I could change it. And if I could change it, wouldn't I be a god? I didn't want to be a god, because being me was hard enough.

I went to get the book. Mrs. Hopkins would be here tonight and I needed to read it through and find out what I could and couldn't do.

Chapter Twelve

I'd become engrossed in the book and was feeling spooked. The phone rang and I startled.

"Hey, you know I'm not used to sleeping alone anymore," Grey rumbled in his sexy voice. I glanced at my watch and couldn't believe that it was almost nine. Time flew.

"I'm going to have a midnight visitor."

"Oh?"

"One of Aunt Estella's old clients."

"Why midnight? Aren't older folk like your aunt in bed by then?"

"Apparently not. This lady told me that my aunt's clients came to see her late at night, usually after midnight. And get this. Aunt's Estella's consultation fee was three hundred dollars.

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"What did she do for three-hundred dollars?"

"Magic."

There was silence at his end. "I think you should leave it alone, Mia. Look at

the mess we're in now."

"I'm not going to take the woman's money. She's really upset. I'm just going to listen to her. But I was reading the book. It's fascinating. There was an oral tradition of African-inspired conjure that came down through the slaves, but most is gone now. "Fascinating or not, I have a bad feeling about it. I think you should leave it alone."

"You're just scared," I teased.

He chuckled. "Damn straight. I'll be over in a bit."

After I hung up, I slapped together a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and glass of milk and returned to the book. The things it told me I could do were amazing.



When Grey arrived around nine-thirty; I let him in, reached up and gave him a quick kiss. "Make yourself at home. I'm going to get back to the book."

He caught me and pulled me against him. "Is that all the lovin' I get? You know I want more."

"Mrs. Hopkins is coming."

"We have time. You said she wouldn't arrive until midnight."

The spirits grumbled and a flash of irritation burned through me. Didn't he understand how important this power was? "Damn Grey. Other things than sex

exist in the world. Can't you back off? You act like sex is all you want from me."

He stepped away, his face frozen except for a pulse pounding at his jaw. "So it's only fine when sex is all you want from me?"

"Don't go there. You know I couldn't help that." I cringed inside at the memory of how insistent and blatant my sexual overtures to him had been. "Are you going to hold that against me every time I'm distracted, tired or simply not into sex the moment you are?"

He sighed and ran his hand over his hair. "We need to talk."

I nodded, but my movements were tense. The voices chattered, aggravated and angry. "Say what you want to say." I perched on the chair adjacent to the couch and crossed my legs.

"We're great together, aren't we? It's been the best I've ever experienced and you told me it was that way for you too, right?"

I nodded again, trying to relax.

"We started hot, but it was all about the sex. We barely knew each other's names. But we like each other. We want to spend time together."

"Yes, we do." I couldn't meet his eyes.

"I think it's been a funky start to what could be a long-term thing and leaves all sorts of stuff unresolved between us—such as how do we really feel about each other without the fantastic sex?"

Startled, I looked up. The look in his eyes was open and honest. He was trying to make this work. He was a good man, a caring man, and right at this moment, more than I deserved. Why was I so blessed? I remembered what my sister said, and my eyes started to fill.

“Thank you for understanding,” I said. “I’m sorry for being a bitch.” I ran my hand over my hair. “When I’m into the book—everything else fades away.”

He leaned closer. “If we want to make this work, really work, we need to start all over.”

“What do you mean?”

“Get to know each other, deepen the relationship... without the sex.”

I was sure I hadn’t heard him right. “Without the sex?”

“Right.”

“But we’re together all the time. How are we going to manage that?”

“It won’t be easy, but I think it’s necessary. You think I only want you for easy and convenient sex rather than your other charms.”

I started to open my mouth, and then closed it, speechless. I couldn’t remember what had made me say what I said. It was as if the book had grabbed my attention and refused to let it go. It was taking all my energy to concentrate on this conversation. And it was important to me. “Shut up!” I said.

“What?”

“I’m sorry. I was talking to the spirits. The racket their making is ridiculous.”

Grey frowned at me.

“Please continue. I’m a little distracted. I apologize,” I said.

“I’m not sure if it weren’t for the spell you’d choose to be with me either. How much of my attraction to you is merely the residue of magic-induced lust for my body?”

This guy should have been a shrink instead of a surgeon.

“So we should lay off the sex, no matter what, until the effects of the charm are resolved and we’ve decided the permanent status of our relationship—together or not.” He looked at me expectantly.

“Uh, it’s a lot to take in, but it sounds reasonable.” The words “permanent state of our relationship” rang in my ears.

“You agree? It’s not going to be easy.”

The more I thought about it, the more Grey had a point. What we had together was too precious to squander on stupidity triggered by any insecurity. “I agree,” I said.

“Shake on it?”

When his hand touched mine, I shivered at the sexual awareness even the feel of his fingers on mine caused to cascade through my body. Our fingers

intertwined and he pulled me to him. My eyes closed as his lips touched mine, a feather-light kiss, as tender as a butterfly.

“I better go back home now. I’ll let you sleep in, but come over to eat when you get up,” he said, his voice husky.

I thought about how it would feel to slip my hands under his T-shirt and run them up the lean, taut muscles of his belly. His muscles would tense under my fingers and his breath would quicken. He would instantly harden and press himself against me, and I’d feel the rock-hard ridge of it against my tummy. This was going to be more than hard. The spirits complained. The book burned in my mind. I had to get back to it.



The doorbell rang at the stroke of midnight. Mrs. Hopkins wasn’t nearly as old as I thought, no older than Sara. She was a plump woman in her forties, pleasant looking, but her eyes were red and her features drawn.

“Please come in, Mrs. Hopkins. Can I get you something to drink? Some tea?”

“That would be nice. And call me Maude.”

I’d already set up the tea service in the kitchen with a few cookies. I brought the tray to the coffee table. I’d moved the book from the living room. The spirits whispered the book wasn’t for other eyes but my own.

I didn't quite know how to start, but I didn't have to worry, Maude started for me by opening her purse and removing a fat envelope.

"Estella preferred small bills," she said.

I raised my hand. "Please keep your money. I'm new at this, and I'm not sure if I can do anything for you."

She made an anxious movement. "But you'll try?"

"I'll try."

She looked relieved. "My daughter is seventeen. We don't get along. I love her dearly, but I can't tell her anything. She gets involved with the bad boys, drugs, failing in school." Maude stopped, twisted her hands and took a handkerchief from her purse. She dabbed at her eyes.

"She's my only girl and my only child left at home. She won't listen to anything I say. I can't control her. Now she tells me she's pregnant and she's going to move in with her boyfriend. He's a drug dealer."

"I'm sorry," I said. It was a sad story, but a common one in this day. "What do you want me to do?"

Maude cleared her throat. "I want you to make the boy go away and my daughter stay at home."

I set my tea cup down on the silver tray. The voices of the spirits swelled to a crescendo. I'd become so accustomed to them; my facial expression remained

unchanged as I listened. The spirits knew what the book could do. “I can get rid of the boy and keep your daughter in your home until you choose to let her go,” I said.

Maude smiled. “Thank you.” She opened her purse and withdrew the envelope. I took it this time when she pressed it into my hand. A rush filled me, a feeling akin to pride. I had power. I could change the path of lives.

Then Maude leaned forward to listen closely as I told her what I was going to need from her.



I had two piles in the kitchen table in front of me. A thick circle of salt was sprinkled around me. The spirits insisted for some reason.

One pile consisted of the hair of a black tomcat, the daughter’s essence in the form of her hair mixed with various roots and feathers I’d obtained from Aunt Estella’s cellar. The other pile was the boyfriend’s essence and graveyard dirt, different roots, a dead spider and a rusty nail.

I wrapped a silk around each pile, making two bags, brown for the daughter, and black for the boyfriend and tied them tightly at the top with thread.

Maude was in the living room, moaning gospel tunes and praying loudly, as if she were in church instead of a conjure woman’s house past one in the morning after a run to the graveyard for dirt.

She’d have to go back to the graveyard tonight and bury the boyfriend’s bag

in the graveyard. She'd have to bury her daughter's bag under the front steps to her house and as long as it stayed there, her daughter would stay there.

I opened the book and said the words to call the spirits that would work through me to bind the charms. A tingle of power went through me and out again. For a moment I felt like a goddess, full of infinite power, able to do of anything. And the pay wasn't bad for an hour's work either.

A short time later, I showed a thrilled Maude the door. Now, I knew what I could do. Petty things. Mean things. Fearful things. Bugs, worms, snakes and spiders. I could manipulate emotions and cause mishap. I could make love charms and revenge mojos. I could kill, but I couldn't resurrect.

I couldn't win lotteries for others or myself. I couldn't cure cancer. I couldn't do anything that would make a difference in cloth of the world; I could only make a difference in the threads of individual lives. But there was considerable power in that.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning I sat on the front steps sipping a cup of coffee, savoring the day. Aunt Estella's house was in the black end of town along with Sara's and the homes of my other relatives. We couldn't live anywhere else until a short time ago. Some things change and some things stay the same.

An old woman walking a poodle waved at me as she made her way up the street. A car gave a friendly toot of its horn and some kids on bikes shouted a greeting. People still stopped and spoke. It was a big thing to speak down here, something that had been lost up north and was dying in our big southern cities. We were once careful to acknowledge each other as human because in so many ways we were ignored and passed over. I'd written a paper about it once. That was something I'd hate to see change. But some changes were for the better. Grey and I were a part of a new generation. The old racial mores were dissipating like a foul odor in the breeze. It was a good thing.

I called out a greeting to the two teenagers, each one carrying a basketball.

"Good to see you back, Miss Washington," one replied.

The entire landscape of my life had changed in a too-short time. I'd rejected this place all my life and now I couldn't escape it. I guess I never escaped it. These

were my people, this was my place. The calm acceptance that came over me made the phone call I needed to make to the university dean a bit easier.

An hour later, I sat across from Grey at his dining room table, not quite where I wanted to be, which was in his arms, but it was close enough.

“I went to meet with my partner today,” he said.

“What did you find out?”

“I said I had a family emergency and I’d have to take off for a while. Next week we’re bringing in a new surgeon into the practice. We weren’t going to, but now ...” He shrugged.

“At least you won’t have to worry about your patients.”

“No. But there’s something else, something worse.”

We didn’t need one thing else on top of what we had to deal with already.

“I thought it was just women affected by the spell or whatever it is, but it isn’t. It’s men, too—at least some of them.”

He looked shaken. I guess I understood. As hard as it was for him to fend off the women throwing himself on his body, at least he usually was stronger than they were. “What happened?” I asked.

“My partner is over fifty. A southern good ol’ boy who worked with my father for decades.” Grey took a deep breath.

“He tried to...well, you know...touch me. I know it’s not even ten in the

morning, but I think I need a drink.”

“You think he’s been in the closet all these years?”

“Maybe. What a miserable thing for him to have to live a double life. He has a wife, four kids, and a big house on three acres right outside this nosy little narrow-minded town.”

“Maybe he made a conscious choice—maybe he’s putting aside his desires to be there for his family.”

“That sounds like Charles. I’m taken aback because I thought I knew him, and now this.”

“You can overlook a sexual overture, can’t you? The spell’s compulsion is almost beyond conscious control.”

He shook his head. “It’s not that. Yeah, I could deal with that. But he told me he loved me. He meant it. The man was practically in tears. I can’t go back there. Now I know, I can’t put him through it. It wouldn’t be fair to him, his family or the decisions he’s made about his life.”

The pulse at Grey jaw was throbbing, the one I only saw if he was controlling strong emotion. I reached across the table and touched and the heat it generated between us almost burned my fingers. Our eyes met.

He withdrew his hand. Fantasies of Grey throwing me on the table and having his way with me to soothe our mutual work-related wounds flickered and

died. “I talked to the dean today and told him I wouldn’t be able to take over the class this summer,” I said, mainly wanting to fill the silence.

“Did you tell him you weren’t going to be back this fall either?”

I studied my hands. “Not yet. I was thinking I’d write and request a leave of absence before resigning my position.”

“That sounds prudent. A scary black ghostlike-figure is shaky grounds for giving up a position that will lead to tenure.”

“Put like that, I guess it is.”

He sighed. “You know what I wanted to do? Take you to a movie. Popcorn and the works.”

“We’ll be able to go soon. Just a couple more weeks.”

He grinned at me, a boyish, crooked grin that made my heart pound. “Yeah. How did your mumbo jumbo with the lady go?” he asked.

“Pretty good. Actually, it was a head rush. I used my own power to do some good.”

“What did you do?”

“Two fairly simple charms. One to keep a pregnant teenager home at her mother’s and away from her triflin’, gang-bangin’ boyfriend, and the other to get rid of the boyfriend.”

“What do you mean, get rid of the boyfriend?”

“So he doesn’t bother Maude’s daughter again.”

“Do you know his name?”

“No.”

“I was watching the news before you arrived. A young man, only eighteen, died in a freak accident on his way to class today. He tripped and fell. They found him face down in a puddle, either drowned or strangled by the common garden snake that was wrapped tightly around his neck.”

“It can’t be the same guy,” I said

“You should check.”

I opened my cell phone and punched in the numbers. When Maude answered, I asked her the question, heard her reply and replaced the receiver.

“It’s her daughter’s boyfriend. He’s dead,” I whispered, numb. I felt my body start to shake. I couldn’t stop it, couldn’t control it.

“How could this be?” Gray asked.

“The book always works,” I said in a whisper. But I couldn’t face that it bought death. That was too much. My mind turned away.

“If the boy you worked the spell on is the one who died, it’s too much to be coincidence. That book might be dangerous. Mia, I’ll say it again—you need to leave that book and what it contains alone.”

The book gleamed in my mind’s eye. I recoiled from his words. How could

Aunt Estella's legacy, her gift of love, be evil?

I moved away from him, looking out the window onto a bright day, suddenly darkened. Was the book evil? Aunt Estella used the book for years. The boy's death was a coincidence. It had to be."

Grey shook his head. "You know better. You know it works. What did you think, getting rid of him meant?

I blinked, still unable to face the dark reality. "I wasn't thinking of anything but what Maude wanted and the power I had to make her desire real. I didn't connect collecting a little graveyard dirt and sundry items in a bag and saying a few words over them to a young man's accidental death." I had to give up the book? On top of everything else I'd already given up, it wasn't fair. It was all I had left of my Aunt Estella. A spell couldn't cause death. What would be, was. His death must have been destined. Maybe he was a bad person...

I had to put it out of my mind and go on with my life. I was following in my aunt's footsteps, doing what she wanted, what it seemed the universe wanted.

Maude had insisted on giving me \$600 last night, \$300 per charm. And the news must have spread that I was in business because my phone rang that morning. I had two appointments set up tonight and I was going to keep them.

I said, "It won't happen again." The lie dropped easily from my lips. An addict's lies, my lies. Magic had me in its snare. The spirit's murmurs comforted

me.

“Good.” Grey approached me from behind and pulled me to him, his body hard and strong against my back. “It’ll be all right.” I relaxed his masculine form. Grey was right. Everything would be fine. It had to be.

Chapter Fourteen

I never realized a kiss could be so hot. Our bodies strained against each other sticky-sweet, our pulses jumping, satisfaction too long denied. The scent of his body was chocolate to a starving woman. I pulled away. “I better go.”

He ran his hand over his hair, frustrated. “Yeah, you better.”

I fled what I wanted most.

But as I walked into Aunt Estella’s house, now my own, it was as if I walked into another sort of seduction. I walked straight to the book I’d left closed on the kitchen table and it opened, its pages fluttering, a faint light emanating from them. The spirits whispered among themselves, pleased. I made a sound of pleasure as I touched the book and felt its power.. When I opened the door for my first client, a shadow crossed the moon. The spirits told me the client’s request would be to work evil and it would be to his detriment.

The man was in his fifties, big and handsome, with the solid, strong build of a laborer. His head was bald and he had a trimmed gray beard that contrasted against his chocolate skin. His grip was hard, almost hurtful. But it was without fear that I bid him inside and waved him to sit adjacent to me on the sofa. Nothing human could hurt me now.

“What can I do for you?” I asked, steeling for the worse.

“I want to stay with my wife. She’s tired of me and I’m afraid she’s going to leave me.”

I was surprised. There was no darkness in that request. “I can help you,” I said.

He slid an envelope over to me. “I know.”

“Let me get us some coffee before we start. Do you take cream, sugar?”

“I like my coffee like my women, black, sweet, and hot.” His eyes moved over my body with appreciation.

I moved to kitchen, unperturbed. After all, most men feel called to make some sort of overture when alone in the presence of an attractive woman. It meant nothing, especially as he just told me he wanted his wife. I tilted my head to listen as they told me he was a controlling wife-beater and his wife was desperately trying to find a way to leave him before he managed to kill her.

I stilled my face so as not to show reaction when I returned. I smiled at him, my teeth showing the lie of my grin. “Let’s get started, shall we?” I said.

Needless to say, Mr. Wife Beater would not be kicking his wife’s ass again. Well, he might try, but he’d be the one to end up getting hurt. I took his strength from him and made him weak, weaker than any woman. It was all I could do not to laugh as I closed the door behind him and imagined his reaction the next time he

raised his hand to his wife. I took his three hundred dollars—cash, small bills—from the crisp, white envelope and put them in my purse. His money was well earned.

The second visitor, a young girl, wanted a routine love potion. A love potions hadn't worked out well for me, but somehow that didn't bother me. Only the magic mattered.

I yawned, looking at my watch. It was past two and I was eager to get to bed. But I was restless, with a nonspecific fear laced with uncertainty roiling within me. I got out of bed to retrieve the book and put it on my bedside table, hoping that its power would help me feel safe. An hour later, I realized it didn't. The feeling of menacing presences close by unsettled me. I slipped the book into a drawer.

I finally dozed with the light on.

Too soon, my eyes opened. I blinked, bleary-eyed and headed for the bathroom. I had a feeling it was going to be a hell of a day. The spirits concurred; telling me things that could happen to that might change the fabric of my life. Dandy.

What was the value of the spirits telling me the future? I'd really rather not know, thank you very much. The power that is yours, they reminded me. I could wield life or death to the benefit or detriment over those who came to me for my

services. I need fear nothing and no one, not even the unseen. The unseen were my allies. Euphoria filled me. I was the equivalent of a queen of this domain, this town. Then, I pulled up, frowning.

This wasn't me. What did I care about power or destiny? My only previous concern with the unseen had been that they stayed that way. I'd cared about my job. My few friends. I'd cared about my aunt and my sister. I cared about Grey, but that felt normal, healthy, attraction and sex. Now, I was consumed with the book, magic, unseen voices and power. It felt nowhere near normal.

I couldn't pinpoint how or why, but I was changing somehow and with a feeling of foreboding, I realized that I wasn't sure I liked it.

Chapter Fifteen

A little later, I stood on Grey's porch. He looked at me and cocked his head. "You're different," was all he said. A shiver went through me. I was different. Exactly how and why I was different scared me. I followed Grey to the kitchen, silence lying heavy between us. "The food smells great," I said.

"I made a big breakfast."

"I'm not that hungry. Just coffee would be fine." The sight of the eggs and greasy bacon made me nauseous.

He shrugged. I remembered a bird crashing into the glass this morning and felt as if I might cry. How could I face this...this new thing within me?

I coughed instead. "You want to talk?"

"All right. But I'm hungry. I'm getting a plate."

Was he ignoring me? What had I done to him? How dare he judge me?

I closed my mouth, determined not to speak angry words. These feelings were unreasonable. They weren't me. I sat down across from his chair "It's been bothering me a lot."

"What?" He mumbled the words, his mouth full.

"That boy dying."

He nodded.

“It had nothing to do with me. His death was his destiny. It had to happen that way.” “Are you sure? You seem to be changing somehow, and I’m not sure I like it.”

I looked away. He was right. I didn’t like it either, but wasn’t ready to utter the word out loud. It made them too real. “Is that all you have to say to me?”

“No. But you don’t seem to want to talk about it.”

“Once upon a time you could think and talk at the same time.” Where was this nastiness within me coming from? I was appalled at myself, but the words had seemed to tumble out without my volition.

He frowned. “We’ve discussed the need to be open. It’s a big deal to me.”

I sipped my coffee to cover my expression. Emotions roiled within me. I heard the dark mutters of the spirits outside trying to drown out my thoughts.

“I have a feeling what you’re doing is more than dangerous, Mia.”

I swallowed. “No, it isn’t.” My voice was supposed to come out strong and decisive, but it sounded like a hoarse whisper.

“It seems as if you’re under their control,” he said. “It’s scaring the hell out of me, pardon the pun.”

I flinched. How could he know? He was striking too close. The voices of the spirits turned into an insistent roar, bidding me to leave the house, to come to

them. I looked away. I rose from the table. "I'm sorry, but this is too much. I'm gone."

"We're not done."

That's when the tears finally spilled from eyes and over my cheeks. "Yes, yes, I think we are." I fled from Grey, starting to choke on the sobs I refused to let out. I fumbled for my keys but I had to take a moment before I started the ignition and pulled away. I slammed the car locks shut. I needn't have bothered. He never tried to follow me.



I swallowed hard before I rang the doorbell to my mother's house. I didn't want to face either her or my sister, but the spirits drew me there. Was I their puppet or their mistress? They told me everything was for a purpose. They said I needed patience and the power that would be mine was unimaginable.

My mother pulled open the door, no sign of welcome on her face. "What do you want?"

"Eva here?" I knew she probably was. The hours she worked at Wal-Mart were usually in the evening.

"In the kitchen fixing something to eat."

I stifled a sigh as I followed my mother to the kitchen. I wished I had a mother who smiled when she saw me. I wished I had family who cared. I thought I

had a sister, but I guess I'd been wrong about that. Eva's words at our last meeting still cut deep. You got away. She'd been right, but no longer. Now I was trapped in Paradise, too. I felt overwhelmed and lost. I thought of Grey and my mind skittered away, the pain too great. The spirits chattered among themselves and offered no comfort. I needed family. I needed my sister.

"You," Eva said when she saw me.

"Yes, me. We need to talk."

"I said all I had to say to you." Eva wiped her hands on a dishrag. Sara lit a cigarette, settling in a chair.

"Good, then you won't mind listening." I sat across from Sara. "I want you both to know I didn't ask for any of this. I didn't ask for the power or the book. I never knew such things existed and if I had..." I took a deep breath. "I never asked for this," I repeated.

"But you got it," Sara said, blowing smoke. "And I'd never guess you didn't want it. I hear business is good."

I looked away, unable to meet her gaze. "Business is good. I'm stuck here in Paradise and I'm doing the best I can to carry out Aunt Estella wishes."

"Bullshit," Eva said. "You love it. You love the power. It's written all over you."

The voices of the spirits swelled, murmuring in agreement.

“That’s not true. I want my life back, too. I’ve lost everything.” My eyes moistened, but I wasn’t thinking of my job or my old life in Atlanta. I was thinking of Grey. “What is happening to me?” I asked, partially to myself. “I don’t understand all this. It’s too much. What should I do?”

Sara stubbed out her cigarette and leaned forward. “You should give the book to us.”

I lifted my head and met her gaze, every cell of my body-screaming no. “I can’t.”

“Then we don’t have anything to talk about,” Eva said.

Sara held up her hand to Eva. “Calm down.” She shifted her gaze to me. “Why not? You said you’ve lost everything. That doesn’t have to be the case. Give the book up and you will be free. You can return to Atlanta and take up your life again. There’s danger here that you don’t realize yet.”

“You want the book.” My voice was flat. Of course she did. Sara wanted anything of mine that was worth having. She resented my every success because it wasn’t hers. Sometimes I thought she resented the air I breathed.

She shrugged. “I was trying to help you out.”

“You’ve never wanted to help me a day in your life.”

Sara’s eyes narrowed and she lit another cigarette.

“Why didn’t Aunt Estella pass it to you if she knew you wanted it?”

“Estella was always jealous of me. She took my child for her own. You were always to be the heir.”

“Then why didn’t she explain about my heritage?” I’d risen out of my chair, my hands clenching the edge of the table. I caught myself on the edge of hysteria. No, these women would not see me break. I sank back into my chair. “Why didn’t she explain it to me?” I asked again, my voice a whisper.

“Estella always liked surprises.” Sara blew smoke in my face.

“She got you good, didn’t she?” Eva leaned over and got in my face. “You’re not worthy. You don’t deserve the book.”

I stared at them. I didn’t know these people at all, not even the sister I once loved. And I didn’t want to.



I drove back to Grey’s house. I had to make it right. I had to make him understand.

He answered the door almost before I pressed the bell. I walked past him, closed the door and walked into his arms, the sobs tearing out of my chest.

“It’s okay, baby, let it out.”

I cried, cradled in Grey’s arms. I cried for my innocence, cried for my ignorance, cried over my wrongness, ‘cause I knew that what it was. I’d give anything not to know again, not to know the power, the spirits, and most of all,

not to know my future. A woman without family or friends. A woman wrapped in power, with spirits watching every move and thought.

Grey wiped my face with tissues as I subsided. "Everything's going to be all right, you'll see. The book isn't going to be easy to destroy, but we'll do it together."

I stiffened. "Destroy the book?"

Grey pulled back and looked into my eyes. "You realize that it must be destroyed? It's an evil thing. I sensed it the moment I laid eyes on it."

I pulled away from my lover's arms. "They aren't going to allow it to be destroyed."

"Who are they?"

I hesitated. "The spirits."

Grey stared at me, his brow creased.

"What do they have to do with it?"

"Everything, I think. Absolutely everything."

The spirits moaned and complained. I wanted to close my ears to them. I wanted them gone. I wasn't going to be their slave. Not one moment longer.

Chapter Sixteen

The doorbell rang before Gray could answer. Brenda and Eva stood there.

"I only want to talk to my sister a moment, Dr. Taylor," Eva said, slipping inside the door, Brenda following.

Grey nodded and disappeared before I could gather my surprise and answer.

"What do you want?"

"I thought about how Mom and I treated you, and I want to apologize."

I raised my chin. I hadn't expected that.

"Can we sit down?" Eva asked. I motioned her toward the couch "Brenda, how about you?"

"We need to clear the air, too," she said

"I want to help you," Eva said after she sat down. "The book is a burden and I want to take it off your hands. I understand what you're going through."

"You do?"

"I know you hate it here in Paradise. You can be free. Go back to Atlanta and take up your life."

"I can only be free if I give you the book, right?" I asked.

She nodded.

“That was the same song our mother was singing. I don’t like to repeat myself and I think I gave you my answer at Sara’s place. That answer is no.”

Eva’s face transformed into a mask of hatred that pierced me to my soul. “You’re going to be sorry.” She wheeled and walked out the door without a backward glance.

“I didn’t know she was going to ask you for the book.” The words almost tumbled out of Brenda’s mouth. “I came with her because I thought you’d be more likely to hear me out if she was with me.”

I sank into a chair, bone-tired. “Go ahead and say what you want to say.”

“First, I wanted to apologize about Grey. I have no excuse except I usually get what I want, and I’ve wanted Grey for a long time.”

She said the right thing to me, talking about no excuses. I waved a hand, accepting her words. “Seems to me you need be talking to Grey though. It wasn’t me you lied on. Lying about being pregnant was pretty foul.”

Her gaze dropped to her feet. “Yeah, but it’s easier to say it to you. I’ll apologize to Grey one day. I do have something else I want to tell you about.”

“As long as you’re not asking me for the book.”

She looked nervous. “You didn’t know about the book, our family or the town?”

“Is that a question? And? Aunt Estella told me about our family and Paradise

before she passed.”

Brenda shook her head. “Then you know our family runs this town.”

I wanted to laugh. Brenda had apparently taken a leap into the deep end and didn’t know how to swim. “Really? Then why aren’t we all living in big houses on the white side of town?”

“Because the power is concentrated here, near the old slave quarters on the black side of town. Didn’t you notice that nobody in our family works unless they want to but all our needs are always provided, our basic bills paid?”

“You work. Sara and Eva work.”

“I work because I like it, and I was bored shitless sitting at home. Sara and Eva both only work part-time, and they work for extras, not necessities.”

“If you think a part-time job constitutes control of the town, your premise is really flawed.”

Brenda leaned forward. “We have control. We have power. Nobody pisses any of us off without getting hurt. Nobody pleases us without reward. The spirits will it. You have the most power of all. The one who holds the book holds the power over lives.”

I frowned. I hated to admit it, but it was starting to make sense. Aunt Estella had been treated like a queen by both whites and blacks. And the people who called on me awarded the same regard and respect to me.

“Why are you telling me this, Brenda?”

“Your sister wants the book because she wants the power. I know you don’t. Don’t give it to her because Paradise will suffer. Aunt Estella respected the power, but she wasn’t drunk on it. I don’t think Eva can handle it. But that’s not why I came here, I wanted to warn you.”

“About what? “

“You know by now you can’t leave town. But do you know the rest? Aunt Estella never had children, never had any relationship other than raising you. You can raise a girl too, a relative to pass on the book. But that’s it. You can never keep Grey.”

“So this is about Grey after all. Figures.” I started to stand.

“It’s not about him. I thought you should know.”

“Know what? That our family has some sort of occult power to control the people in this town and the price I pay is any relationship and my ability to leave?”

Brenda nodded. “I’m leaving Paradise tomorrow. The U-Haul is loaded. I’m moving to Jackson. I want to get away, just like you did. But I won’t be coming back.” She stood.

“Well, good luck.” Good riddance, I wanted to say. I still felt as if I couldn’t trust Brenda.

“I need it. The spirits seldom let us go after adulthood. But I want a crack at

that happiness I hear about.”

She sounded sincere, and I felt a pang of sadness for her. I touched her hand. “Good luck,” I said again, this time meaning it.

She nodded.

“Be careful, Mia. You need to be the stewardess of the book, and don’t give it to someone who will work too much evil. Like I said, Aunt Estella did a good job. But the price is high. Too high I think.” And with those words she walked out the door.

I looked after her. I think Brenda was telling the truth, as she believed it. Why hadn’t the woman I loved as a mother prepared me for this? She knew I didn’t believe in ghosts, spirits or spells that worked. She had to know all this would rock me to the core. The price is high, Brenda said. Aunt Estella should’ve let me make the choice to pay it.

I went to the bedroom, got the book, balanced it on my knees and leafed through the pages. I soon found the spell, the one that read: To Summon Back the Dead.



The rite was too much like summoning a demon for my comfort. I needed to talk to my aunt, but knew in my heart she wasn’t with the spirits. She’d moved on to where the dead go. I sprinkled a thick circle of salt in the basement to stand

within. Why would I need protection against Aunt Estella? The book said the dead crave the bodies of the living, but Aunt Estella would never try to possess me. But nevertheless, I followed the book's caution to follow the instructions to the letter.

The room was to be only lit by black candles. I felt trepidation as I lit the candles then crossed the room and turned off the light switch. The candles threw eerie lights against the gray concrete block basement walls. The spirits chattered, obviously excited. I'd put the book on a stool within the circle of salt. I stood behind it and lit the incense that was the first step of the rite to summon the dead.

The smoke filled the room with a sickly sweet odor as I uttered the words that would bring my aunt back into this world again.

It was only a few moments before light started to issue from the concrete basement floor and a filmy object started to form. I drew in my breath, awe filling me as the face of Aunt Estella formed.

"Why have you disturbed me?"

I wanted to rush to her, but the cautions of the book stopped me. Besides, she seemed somewhat insubstantial for a hug.

"I want answers Aunt Estella. I want answers about the power and the book you left me."

"And a great gift it was. Speak."

I hesitated. Aunt Estella didn't talk like that. But the question that filled me tumbled from my lips. "Why didn't you tell me what was going to happen when you gave me the book? Why didn't you tell me how it was going to change my life, how I could never go back home? Why didn't you tell me about all I have to give up? Is it true that I can never have a family?"

"You are home."

"Why, Aunt Estella?" I almost wailed.

"Because you were the one I choose. Be glad. The book is a great gift."

The words fell against my ears like hard pebbles thrown with force. Aunt Estella had cared more about the book than me?

"The book is your destiny," the apparition said.

"Is what Brenda said true? Do we control Paradise?"

The spirit seemed to preen. "Yes, we do. It is our legacy."

"What about my happiness? You were never really happy, were you?" As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew they were true. Aunt Estella had never been happy. She'd just lived day-to-day and did what she had to do, but she never had the spark, the glow or the ready smile of a happy person.

"Why do you worry about such inconsequence? I fear you're not worthy of the gift."

My mouth dropped open, hardly believing my ears. Aunt Estella used the

word inconsequence in a sentence and in context too. Did they have vocabulary lessons up in heaven?

“Do not disturb my rest again with such stupidity. You know what you have to do. You’re here to serve the people and in so doing wield power over them. Do not disappoint me or you will regret it, spoiled whelp.”

The apparition faded away, its harsh words ringing throughout the small basement, rattling the jars of ingredients for the potions and charms.

Tears burned my eyes. Spoiled whelp? That couldn’t have been my Aunt Estella talking like that. But who was it? What was it?

Chapter Seventeen

I decided to go to church. That seemed the logical thing to do when scared by the supernatural. It wouldn't hurt to get bigger and better supernatural beings on your side. I'd dressed in a church lady suit and dug out a feathered hat from Aunt Estella's closet. We may not have a Starbucks in town, but we had quite a few churches. One thing highly unusual about our family church was that it was a traditional black church, but integrated, too, half and half black and white. It had been like that as long as I could remember. Church integration is nearly unheard of, especially in the South. Sunday morning is usually the most racially segregated time in America.

Heads bowed to me in what looked like homage as I entered the church. It felt familiar though. I remembered this was how Aunt Estelle had been treated. Pastor Hunt gave my shoulder a fatherly squeeze when I asked to speak to him after the service. My mother sat with her sisters on the other side of the church, all three of them staring at me with surprise. Eva was thankfully absent. I waved at them, nodded at my cousins and went to sit near the front. Brightly colored hats adorned with feathers, rhinestones and every other shiny bauble filled the church. I recognized many folks, including my tipsy old school buddy, Janine. She made

her way over to sit with me, dripping children off both arms. Her toddler, Buddy, bared his teeth at me and I edged away.

The organ swelled and the choir filed in. I hadn't realized how much I missed old time gospel music. The choir was good, backed up by a complete band—electric guitars, drums, piano, organ and two horns. The walls of the church vibrated and people were tapping their foot, nodding their heads. As the music rose to a crescendo, folks started shouting and dancing in the pews and aisles, real down home church.

Things calmed down when the announcements began. Ladies in church suits and hats moved to the pulpit next to the choir, one after another. They introduced visitors, talked about fundraisers and who was sick; who had a baby and other minutiae of the town. Then a big deal was made over the offering. The pastor talked about how giving makes money multiply.

After that, the choir stood again. Had that been the entirety of the sermon? I looked at the program. Guess so. The church walls shook with selection after selection. People were gyrating, singing, dancing, waving their arms in the air and tossing their heads back and forth. Church clothes grew sweaty and fancy hats askew. The music was infectious, I felt myself being caught up into the rhythm and emotion, too. The insistent beat stirred my blood.

Suddenly a shriek went through the church and a woman threw herself to

the floor in the aisle. She was shaking, eyes rolling back in her head, foam and spittle appearing at the corners of her mouth.

Attendants in white gloves rushed to the woman. The music kept pounding. They'd hardly bent down over her when another shriek rent the air. Then another. Folks were getting taken by the spirit.

I realized what this reminded me of — the voodoo rites I'd once witnessed when I was researching a paper at the university—the drums, the beat, the dancing. But they'd worshipped African pagan gods, not the Most High Lord. They worshipped Damballa, Erzulie, Baron Samedi, and more, many more. In the voodoo rites they danced with the drums and the beat. Then they allowed their gods to possess them, to enjoy the body for a time. It was like this.

My mail carrier, Mr. Bronson, yelled and started to tear off his clothes. The attendants moved to him and stayed his hands. He jerked and trembled. He threw himself to the floor by my feet, bowing and screaming gibberish. Suddenly other folks, seized by the spirit, were racing toward me.

I stood, panicked. Mr. Bronson's head raised and his gaze met mine, and he smiled a perfectly evil, knowing smile. I saw superimposed over his face other visages, twisted ones, and they all were grinning and leering at me. Legion. Laughing at me.

I had enough. My feet didn't fail me, high heels or not. I wheeled and fled,

leaving my spirits behind.



Grey opened the door and peered at my face. “What’s wrong?”

“Can I come in?” I looked around me as if the demons of hell had followed me out of that church.

He drew me in and closed the door behind me. I felt safe with him, safer than I felt anywhere else. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“I need a coffee,” I muttered. “No, what I need is a drink.”

He poured coffee in a cup and added a splash of whiskey. I took it, grateful. “Will you help me destroy the book?” I asked.

He blinked. “That’s a turnaround. You got pissed at me when I told you I thought the book was evil.”

“I’m thinking it’s more than the book.”

He raised a brow.

“I went to our church for the first time since I was a child. There was no mention of God or Jesus. But my spirits were there and more of the same.” I took a sip of my drink. “They possessed people and started to attack me. They were all zombies!”

Grey took the drink out of my hand.

“Hey!” I protested.

“Really, Mia? Zombies?”

“Okay, I didn’t know exactly what was happening, but that church freaked me out. And I know it’s connected to my spirits.” I shot a look at him. He was trying not to laugh. I had undergone the worst trauma in my life and he was sitting there trying not to crack up. I threw a napkin at him.

He caught it neatly. “Don’t go zombie on me now.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. Sometimes you have to let go and flow with the funny or you’ll go bonkers.

After a while I sobered and met Grey’s gaze. Our fingers touched, and he gathered up his hand in mind. Could I face off against the spirits that ruled our family and this town for generations?

“There’s a choice in the universe,” I said, my voice quiet. “Not many have to make it, at least not right away, but here and now, mine is set before me.”

“Good or evil, it’s on you, baby. Choose,” he said.

“If you have a clear choice like that, who’d pick evil? He’s the losing team, right?” But I knew plenty could choose evil and did every day. I remembered the thrill of power over others. Evil’s addictive and seductive, a skilled lover you know is no good but you can barely resist. Once I knew for sure what was right and what was very wrong, once I remembered the awful faces of the spirits overlaid on postman’s face—familiar spirits, my spirits—the choice was simple, at least to me.

Grey grinned at me. “That’s what we hope for. If you want to do the right thing, no matter how hard it is—I’m with you all the way.”

“I’m not sure, but I’m feeling that magic is ancient and it works. But there’s a reason the ancient Israelites were forbidden it. No matter whether it’s called white, black, gray or multi-colored, magic always, always brings you under some sort of external supernatural control. You have to rely on other gods or powers to use it.”

“And you’re not seeing that external supernatural control as a good thing any longer, I gather?”

“No.”

He touched my cheek. “I’m glad. You were changing in a way I didn’t like.”

“That’s why we have to destroy the book.”

“What about the spell you cast over me?”

“If the book and the powers of the spirits that go with it are gone, I don’t see how any of its spells or charms could have any power. “ The demons controlled me through the book and from what I could see; nothing good had ever come of it, no blessings, no peace, and most of all, no happiness. I wanted to remove it from the world.

“We could burn it.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“I have an empty galvanized steel trash can out back. “

“We can get some charcoal starter fluid from Aunt Estella’s. That would do it.” It was easy to be blithe and cheerful about it because the voices of the spirits were gone. I’d not sensed any presences since I ran from church this morning.

A few minutes later, Grey pulled up in front of Aunt Estella’s house. The daffodils were long dead and the flowerbeds were untended and scruffy looking. I meant to hire somebody because I’m no gardener. The house looked deserted as if its heart had gone. It never was my house, and never would be. Then I gasped as I realized the front door was ajar. “Somebody’s been in the house, see the door is open.”

“Where’s the book?” Grey asked.

“On my bed in the guestroom.”

“Stay in the car and call the police.” Grey handed me the keys. “Somebody might still be in there.”

“Why don’t you wait in the car with me?” I asked, but he’d already gone.

Alfred and his partner pulled up a few minutes after I called the police, lights flashing. Alfred used to be the only black cop on our tiny force, but now there was a new younger black guy with him.

“Hello, Miss Washington. This is Rasheed. So you say someone broke into your Aunt Estella’s house?”

“The door was open when we pulled up. Grey just went in.”

Then I looked closer at Alfred. His face was solemn, devoid of his customary grin. He wouldn’t meet my gaze.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“You haven’t heard about your cousin Brenda Stetson?”

“What about Brenda?”

He took off his hat. “We went to the church to tell her mama a little while ago. I’m sorry to have to be the one to tell you, but Brenda was in a car accident on the highway. She was driving one of those rental trucks. She—she didn’t make it.”

I sagged against the car.

“I’m real sorry.”

I want a crack at that happiness I hear about, Brenda had said. Now she’d never get the chance. It wasn’t fair. I wiped at my moist eyes and Alfred proffered a tissue.

“The book isn’t on your bed,” Grey said, approaching us. “Hello, officers.”

Alfred shook his hand. “Sorry to have upset Miss Washington.”

“What happened?”

“Brenda was killed in an accident on the highway,” I said.

Grey’s lips tightened. “She called me to apologize this morning. Said she was moving out of town.”

“She apologized to me, too. She never made it out of town.”

“I’m sorry, Mia.”

I nodded and made my way up the walk. I’d mourn for Brenda after I did what I had to do; after I got the book she’d warned me about and burned it. Grey and the policemen trailed me.

I searched for it everywhere, but the book was gone.

The police took my statement. Relief filled me as Grey told me to get my suitcase, because I was staying with him from now on. It would have been a motel room otherwise; because there was no way I was going to spend a minute more in that house alone.

“What do you think happened to the book?” Grey asked, once we were on the way to his place.

I shook my head. “I have no idea. Brenda told me when I first returned to Paradise that the book can’t be stolen, and whoever takes it against the will of the owner, dies.”

“Do you think Brenda took it?”

“Brenda knew the owner of the book gets power...not the happiness she wanted. She said she didn’t want the book and I believed her.”

Suddenly, I knew what happened. “Eva wanted the book. She wanted it badly. I think she took it.”

“I thought Brenda said whoever takes the book against the owner’s will dies?”

“Maybe Brenda’s death was the sacrifice that was required,” I said slowly, remembering what looked as if dark rites were taking place to darker gods at the church. I took a deep breath, resolved in what I was going to do. “If Eva has the book, I’m going to get it back. That thing needs to be destroyed. ““I agree, the book needs to be destroyed. But we need to move cautiously, especially if your sister has anything to do with Brenda’s death. Let’s go home and regroup.”

I leaned back in my seat, weary, and let the tension drain out of me. Grey was right. I had been on edge for too long. “Okay.”

But there was something else. The book was no longer mine. I could feel it. The spirits were gone, bound to another. “I’m free,” I said, my voice a whisper. “I can leave Paradise now.”

When I arrived at Grey’s house, I moved wordlessly into his arms, craving the sort of comfort only he could give me. We fit together well, my yang to his yin, moon to sun. We shifted in each other’s arms in a controlled dance that we knew by heart.

Our lovemaking was a symphony this time rather than the crash of rock and roll we often preferred. Touch melded with touch, blended with soft sighs and warm kisses. When he finally entered me, it was if he came home. We stared into

each other's eyes, dark velvet brown and light blue, as if we were trying to memorize each other's souls.

"What makes this so good?" I asked afterwards.

"It's something about you."

"No, it's something about us."

"I can't argue with that."

"I didn't tell you exactly what I saw at that church," I said.

"You didn't have to. You looked as if a horde of demons were after you when you came to my door."

"That's about right."

I felt Grey's body stiffen. No doubt this stuff scared him as much as it did me. "Demons?" he asked. "Did you really see—?"

"Yes. They were the spirits that were with me."

"What did they look like?"

"Horrible and somewhat transparent."

He ran his hands through his hair. "This is wild. I never imagined I'd be taking anything like this seriously. But look at it this way, transparent is a lot better than horrible and fully opaque."

"You still can't take this seriously, can you?"

"I'm trying. But Mia, what am I supposed to do with the concept of demons?"

I was just getting used to spirits existing.”

“Yeah. Me, too. The spirits went with the book. It wasn’t ever as if I owned the book, they did. Or the book owned me. The book has passed on.”

“You’re relieved?”

“Not really.” I remembered what Brenda had said about Eva not being good for the town. “The book is powerful. Too powerful to be in the wrong hands.”

“If it’s evil—and you were changing when you were involved in doing all those spells and whatever, you’re well rid of it. But one thing is worrying me.”

I turned and looked at him.

“What about that spell you still need to do for me?”

“Maybe the original charm is void now that the book’s passed on. We need to test it.”

“And if I still affect people?” He sighed. “I’ll have to ask Eva for her help. What did you say the fee was, \$300?”

If only it was that easy. “That’s what Aunt Estella charged,” was all I said. “What brought you back to Paradise, Grey?” I wanted to know, but most of all I needed to change the subject. If Eva took the book and lived, somehow she had to have engineered Brenda’s death. The thought of somebody like that having that much power, especially that much power over Grey made me nervous to the point of hyperventilation.

He sighed. "I told you I was figuratively kicked in the stomach by my ex-wife. I'd lost the boy I thought was my son. I needed to lick my wounds. It seemed a good place to regroup and start over."

"Was it?"

"I guess so. I'd only recently realized how isolated I'd become. I was thinking about dating a couple other women."

"What other women?"

He chuckled. "You looked fierce for a moment. Nothing serious, these were women my partner's wife wanted to set me up with. But nobody flipped my switch until I meant you."

"You mean our instant attraction wasn't set off by the fact I could barely restrain myself from ripping your clothes off?"

"I can't say that didn't speed things along, but I would have asked you out regardless. There's something about you that fits me just right."

I wrenched my mind away from what about him fit most right in me. "We haven't known each other that long."

"Nope. But so far, so good."

"What if..." I hesitated, my gaze broke away from his.

"What if what, baby? Are you asking what if we don't work out?"

I nodded, not looking up.

“I don’t see it happening from my end. We’ve spent plenty one-on-one time together, with both of us under a huge amount of stress and it still feels right.”

“Me too. Our personalities seem very compatible. But that doesn’t sound very romantic.”

He half-smiled at me and my stomach did another dip. “We got romance aplenty, if you measure it by mere heart-pounding sexual attraction. But I’ve learned the flash of infatuation and attraction eventually burns out.”

“I can hardly imagine it now, but intellectually I know it’s true.”

“It’s true. I had a lousy marriage.”

“Did it start with heart-pounding attraction?” The words were hard to say. I’d not yet had the serious relationship experience Grey brought to our table. He was the first man I’d ever felt this way about.

“Yeah. We started out hot. I guess many would say the romance was great. But romance is like beauty. After a while you get used to looking at it. Then before you know it, your heart no longer pounds and the attraction is gone. What was once a beautiful woman to you is transformed to a commonplace woman. That’s why men cheat on beautiful women. If that’s all there is and nothing else grows to replace it, what you have left is nothing.”

“You fell out of love with her?”

He nodded. “But I had enough to hold me into the marriage—mainly my

idea of what family means to me. Once she told me she was pregnant, I knew I was in it for life. It renewed by commitment to her. How I felt about her when we started was long gone, but I was determined to make it work.”

“She broke your heart...”

He shook his head. “Initially, when I was feeling sorry for myself, but when I saw the results of the paternity test, I realized she broke my expectations, the hopes I had about the family I was trying to build and most of the all, the child I’d thought was my son. She wounded my pride. I’d been making excuses for her. Once I saw what she was, that respect and love I was trying to feed and nurture for the woman I thought was my wife blew out—just like that. All I had left was the feeling that I’d been a fool.”

Brenda had also lied to him about being pregnant with his child. My hand drifted to my abdomen.

“Integrity is important to me,” Grey continued. “Taking the time to get to really know and like somebody is important to me. I want a real relationship this time with a foundation of friendship. I don’t want to rush.”

My mind was racing past his words. What if I were...? I couldn’t even think the word. In our headlong sexual frenzy occasionally we’d forgotten about a condom. Talk about rushing. I knew with every cell of my body that I didn’t want him to feel trapped or obligated to me in any way. I wanted the foundation of

friendship and respect he was talking about. I wanted his love for real.

“Are you worried about getting back to your practice?” I asked, remembering what he told me about his partner Charles being in love with him.

Grey looked away. “No. I saw the strain and embarrassment in Charles. We would avoid each other where once we were comfortable with each other. I’m thinking about moving on.”

“Maybe we can move on together.”

“I was thinking about doing that. I’ve always liked Atlanta.”

“So do I. But I want to tell you that Brenda told me that our family essentially controls the town through the book. Crazy isn’t it?”

“As crazy as spells that work and spirits we both can hear.”

“I’m believing her more after I saw how it was at the church. There was nothing good or Godly there.” Evil was rooted in Paradise, festering and oozing as it spread to every nook and cranny of the town. “The book has to be destroyed. I should have listened to you when you first warned me.”

“Are you saying we should still try to destroy the book?”

I nodded.

“Then we leave. Sounds as if we have a plan.”

Chapter Eighteen

Was that the doorbell? I opened sleep-swelled eyes and groaned. What time was it? My eyes fixed on the clock on Grey's bedside table—8:30. I'd slept very late for someone who'd gone to bed so early.

The doorbell chimed again. I heard Grey's footsteps. Then, I heard a loud voice. Was that my sister? I drew on a robe and hurried to the door.

Eva stood on the porch arguing with Grey. "Mia, there you are! Your man won't let me into his house and I need to talk to you."

I drew my robe closer to my body. "What do want, Eva?"

"Aren't you going to ask me in?"

I looked at Grey. He gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

"It's not my house," I said. "Wait on the porch a moment. I'll get dressed and come out."

"She must not have the book," Grey whispered.

"I don't know if she does or not. Why didn't you invite her in?"

"I don't know if she's evil. She sort of feels it. I read that evil needs to be invited in. I figured better safe than sorry." He winked at me. "Besides, I'm not one for drama first thing in the morning."

“All right. Let me go and feel her out.”

As soon as I stepped foot on the porch, I heard the spirits. They were angry, accusing. No words, just a rush of vituperation.

The spirits were no longer with me. They were with Eva, thank you, Jesus.

My sister hadn't said a word. “The book is gone.” I said.

“I know. I took it,” Eva settled down on Grey's porch swing.

I folded my arms. “I thought it couldn't be taken, it had to be given.”

“The spirits were sick of you and the spirit of Aunt Estella deemed you unworthy. You're weak, Mia. I just had to make the sacrifice—”

“Sacrifice? You had to make some sort of sacrifice? Brenda said if somebody took the book they would die.”

“Brenda always said too much. She was a fitting sacrifice.”

I drew in a breath. “Are you telling me you killed Brenda to get the book?”

“I didn't kill her, the spirits take life and give it. It's as they will. I'm just the medium they work through sort of like a paintbrush.”

“Work through?” I stared at her, aghast. “Brenda was family.”

“Would you have rather it been you? You should be thankful it wasn't.”

I sank down in a rocker, my face in my hands. It was too much. Sacrifice and spirits, death and magic. “May the Lord forgive me and you, too.”

Eva laughed. “I don't suppose God is dead as Nietzsche hoped, but he sure is

a decrepit old fart.”

I lifted my head and stared at her, shocked.

“That’s your problem,” Eva continued. “You got too much baggage. The spirits didn’t like it.”

I blinked, not sure I could trust my eyes. When I glanced at her out of the corners of my eyes, a mist covered Eva’s face and her feature were obscured with evil and ugliness. The face of a demon. Something was on her and in her. Horror filled me as I stood and stepped towards the door.

“I have the book,” Eva said again. “I came to tell you out of sisterly love and all it would be best to make yourself scarce. Go back to Atlanta. The spirits aren’t pleased with you.” She smiled, the demon fangs protruding out of her mouth. “Or I’ll have to do away with you, too.” She turned to go and stopped. “By the way, leave that man here. I’m claiming that fine piece of ass.”

“He doesn’t want to be with you,” I said, terrified into numbness.

“Who says he has a choice? He’s gonna love me, don’t you worry.” Eva grinned as she moved off the porch to her car. The spirits followed her, screeching and muttering at me.

I darted into the house and leaned against the door for a moment to pull myself together. Grey drew me into his arms for a hug.

“I heard what your sister said. She’s as crazy as a cat in a room full of rocking

chairs. Hey, why are you shaking?”

“She has the spirits.”

“Isn’t that a good thing? You didn’t want them, did you?”

I shook my head. “She has some sort of demon, too. It’s in her. Did it do that to me?” I grasped Grey’s arms, my fingers digging into his flesh. “Did it possess me?” I demanded.

“I think if something possessed you all the way, you couldn’t have turned your back on it all the way you did. Maybe that’s why it and the others left. They couldn’t. You got a streak of good in you. I can feel it.”

I wanted to cry, but buried my face in his chest instead, trying to control my trembling. He smelled of warm skin and soap. He wrapped his arms around my waist.

“I’m not good, Grey. I was into it, you know that.”

“You didn’t know what it was. And once you found out, you pushed it away.”

I raised my head. “You think they’re demons, not the spirits of the dead?”

“I have no idea.”

“You heard what she said. She told me to leave, but to leave you here.”

He shook his head. “She’s nuttier than a bowl of Poppycock popcorn.”

“Yeah, but I believe she had the power to kill Brenda.” I pulled away from

him and wrapped my arms around myself instead, pacing. “I’ve been running all my life. I escaped rather than pay attention. I need to get the book back and destroy it. I want to finish this.”

“I’ll help.”

“Afterwards, we should get out of here. This town isn’t right.”

Grey sank into his easy chair. He ran his hand over his head. “I grew up here. I thought it was a normal place since I didn’t know any different, but... Do you know my mother used to visit your Aunt Estella?”

“No.”

“She did. I knew because she was always so tired the next day because of the late night hours your aunt kept. Mama always said I’d have a charmed life. She said she made sure of it.”

“What are you saying?”

“Things always went my way. Just think; it could have been because of all those spells and potions your aunt conjured. But nothing ever comes for free. I wonder what price my mother paid?”

“She paid \$300 per consultation.”

“It was more than that. Both she and my father died too young.”

I sat beside him on the couch. “That couldn’t be the reason.”

“How do you know? This town does run on old time root conjure. I know it

and at some level, I've always known it. And the price is high."

I couldn't deny it. "If we destroy the book, the town might go back to normal."

"Assuming we can. But this place hasn't ever been normal." He sighed and stood. "I'm going to."

Grey cooked when he was stressed—although breakfast or cookies were all he had in his repertoire. I loved that about him. There were far worse releases. "Great. After Eva goes to work, I'm going to get the book. She always goes in early on Mondays, around noon. I want to do something about Brenda, too. Eva basically admitted she did it."

"By way of the spirits. The authorities here won't do anything to your family. I think the only thing you can do for Brenda now is to pray."

"I'm going to lie back down. I'm tired." One more moment and I'd start babbling.

I went back to bed and curled up in a fetal position, the covers wrapped around me. Eva wasn't going to hand the book over and I was frightened, pondering approaching her and the spirits that surrounded her now. A moment later, I opened my eyes to the sound of roars, screeching and screams, both animal-like and human. I sat up, realizing I was no longer in Grey's bedroom or even his house. I was lying on something that appeared like a cloud suspended in the night

sky. But clouds weren't solid as this.

Okay, I was dreaming, but I never had a dream before that felt so real. I was experiencing every sense—the sound of otherworldly caterwauling and agitated voices, the sight of the stars in the moonless night sky, acrid smells I couldn't identify, the spongy support against my back, the feel of air drawing in and out of my lungs.

I carefully leaned over the edge of the cloud thing and peered down. I was over a town where light from without was surging into the darkness within it. Innumerable creatures were engaged in what seemed to be physical combat. And creatures were the right word for what was fighting in the dark shadows.

They were misshapen, horrific beings, some man-shaped, but deformed like goblins, and some were shaped like animals or bugs. They were fighting what looked like humans that were haloed with light. These humans could do fantastic things. They leapt and flew like superheroes. They fought the things with mighty blows and flares of light that came from within them.

Suddenly I was closer, suspended in midair. The town was Paradise. The horde of monsters was inside the town. My sight fixed on a handsome young man who reminded me of Grey. He bounded through the air, dispatching monster after monster with beams of what looked like jets and streamers of blue flame.

Then as a foggy backdrop, I became aware of another image of the town,

superimposed against the battle. It was daylight there, with filmy images of the regular people of Paradise going about their day-to-day activities. They faded in comparison with the more real sight of monsters and super humans battling across the empty town and night sky with arcs of deadly light and dark flying through the air. The townspeople were the apparitions.

The man I was watching flew down and landed in front of Sara's house. I drew in a sharp breath as Eva came out of the door, appearing more solid than the other Paradise townspeople seemed.

She also seemed older, much older. I understood this was a future time, years away. The demon still rode her, towering almost twelve feet in the air, covering her with darkness. It looked like an insect. Its fangs dripped venom and many arms grasped my sister tightly, piercing her skin. I felt nauseous. Worst, was how familiar it seemed. I knew that thing had once been close to me.

The young man attacked it, blazing blue-white light. The demon screamed and Eva echoed the sound. I bit my lower lip in worry as bubbling dark from the demon flowed toward the young man, the ground hissing as if it were acid eating away the earth. Would he be killed?

Light flowed from the man and met the noxious substance. Brightness and shadow were locked in struggle. My sister was silent, reflecting the demonic blackness. Suddenly, I was beside the man, joining my light to his. It was

instinctive as I channeled pink light through my heart toward the thing. We fired bolt after bolt into the demon.

It shrieked and collapsed. My sister moaned and fell with it. The demon writhed like a stepped on bug and exploded in black slime. The substance hissed and disappeared into the light we both radiated.

The man, Eva and I looked at each other. Eva's wrinkled eyes were wide and disbelieving. "Mia, it's you really you, here in the astral plane. You haven't aged. How is that possible?" The young man reached out and touched my hand. He was solid and warm. "Mother, is that you?"

I stared at him, knowing him with every essence of my being. He was our son, Grey and mine. I didn't know his name but I knew he was my son. "This is a dream," I said, reassuring both him and myself.

He said nothing, but stared at me as if he were trying to drink me in.

Eva was the one who broke the silence. "I can't see you, Mia, but I know you're still here. You've always been the lucky one, haven't you?"

"What are you talking about? I've never been against you. I only want us to be family."

"It's over now and I'm not waiting for my judgment," Eva said as if she didn't hear me. She looked past me, into space.

I followed her into the house. The man who said he was my son hesitated

and trailed us.

“I’m going to go and meet my destiny,” Eva said as she put the gun in her mouth.

“No!” I flailed at the gun, my hands going uselessly through it. Eva didn’t see or hear me. “Please don’t,” I whimpered as Eva’s finger tightened on the trigger. “No, no, don’t do it.”

Brains flew out the back of her head, spattering against the wall. Her body dropped to the bed and slumped to the floor.

I turned to my son, my eyes wide with shock. He wasn’t looking at Eva’s body; he was looking at me. “I’ve missed you, Mom.”

I shook my head, too aghast to take his words. “I couldn’t do anything. Why couldn’t I do anything?”

“Your actions can’t affect those in the physical world,” he said. “Don’t worry about my aunt. She’ll soon wake with the rest.” He embraced me. “I wish I could stay here with you, but I must go. They’re calling for me. I’m needed in battle.”

I glanced at my sister’s body and looked away. “What do you mean, sleeping? Isn’t she really dead?”

“Yes, she is, for now.” He cocked his head as if he were listening. “I have to go.” He kissed my cheek, a lingering, wistful touch, and flew through the walls.

I focused on my sister’s fading body. Suddenly, I was back on the cloud. The

battle raged. Light was flowing over Paradise, pushing back the darkness.

Suddenly, I sat up, back in Grey's bed, feeling as if I'd never been asleep at all. I remembered every detail of the dream. A dam burst in my mind and my hand drifted to my stomach. I was going to have a son. I knew it was a certainty. Somehow, the dream was true, a vision of an unimaginable future, a war fought on a different dimension, a war most of mankind might be unaware, but a war that waged with humanity's existence in the balance. Man and the spirits would fight for the world.

My charge was to raise my son and keep him safe. I might not live to see it, but Armageddon was real. It was coming like a freight train. There was no stopping it.

Chapter Nineteen

I lie back in bed and soaked in the dream. A true dream. I held the face of my son in my memory, a precious thing.

A tap at the door. “C’mon in,” I called.

“I wanted to let you know breakfast is ready.”

A little while later, I was tucking into one of Grey’s delicious omelets.

“I’m thinking about us,” he said.

And so am I, baby, so am I, I thought as I nodded.

“It’s been a wild ride with you and me. But we got something good here. We should think about making this permanent,” he said.

I blinked. “What?”

“You and me, together.”

“Uh.” I thought it was unbelievable, totally unexpected and fabulously fantastic. Then nausea roiled inside me.

“What’s wrong?” Grey’s voice faded away as I darted to the bathroom and bent over the bowl.

Heaves racked me and he was there, holding my head, handing me a moist towel.

"I've never gotten sick like that before," I said, panting. "It must be something I ate."

"When are you due?"

"What?"

"Your period?"

I stared at him.

"The simplest explanation is usually the right one. We've been having a lot of unprotected sex. You should take a test."

I froze inside and out. "You think I'm pregnant?"

"I don't know. That's why I think you should take a test."

He'd said about his ex-wife, Once she told me she was pregnant, I knew I was in it for life.

I was not that woman. The woman he settled for because she was pregnant with his child. "No. I'm not pregnant."

"Why not? It's possible." He tilted my chin and looked into my eyes. "I'm going to do the right thing, whatever happens."

It was exactly the wrong thing to say. I didn't want him to do the right thing. I wanted him to love me. I got to my feet and started to head for the door.

He caught me. "I don't understand why you look so upset." He frowned.

"Let me go and leave me alone," I said, my jaw tight.

He let me go instantly. “Oh, I get it,” he said. “Hormones.”

I wanted to kick him. But I grabbed my purse, raised my chin and left instead.

Fifteen minutes later I sat in McDonald’s nursing a chocolate milkshake. The anger faded and melancholy sank in. I wanted Grey to love me madly. I didn’t want a permanent relationship based on a pregnancy, but based on declarations of undying love. My breasts felt heavy and swollen and I was late. Very late. My body knew what my mind was afraid to acknowledge.

Maybe I wanted too much. I slurped my sadness to the end of my milkshake, and then got up to order another one. I noticed a fast movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned, focused. Then I gasped, my purse falling to the floor.

A monster was at the other end of the restaurant, staring at me. Now, I’m not the type to broadcast my own insanity, so I didn’t screech and run. I remembered the things from my vision and the church. It was one of those.

I sank back down in my chair and stared at it. It winked at me, slow. Then it reached below its waist and pulled out what could have been a large, misshapen phallus out of some sort of fold—did I mention it was naked? The thing started to jack off.

This would be even too much for Freud to handle, so I decided to ignore it. But I couldn’t resist for long and glanced at it out of the corner of my eye. It

grinned at me. All right. That's enough. I grabbed my shake and fled.

On the way to my car, wings were beating above my head. Big wings, too large for birds. I looked up, resigned to what I might see. Winged batlike creatures hovered above me with skull faces and skeleton bodies, like the ones in my dream.

Why me? I got in the car, slammed the door and locked it. Apparently, I could now see the spirits that I once only sensed and there were far too many of them for any sort of comfort.

Everybody has a certain tolerance level. Mine had been reached some time ago, so yeah, I could be blasé about flying demons. For Christ-sakes, I was pregnant. Flying demons paled in comparison.

As I burned rubber back to Grey's place, I wondered why I was now seeing the spirits. I no longer had the book and had eschewed magic. Why had the unseen suddenly come within my line of sight?

I truly hoped there were no things like that in Grey's house. I closed the garage door and held my chocolate milkshake close as I went inside.

"That you, Mia?" Grey called.

"I'm back." I walked into the kitchen. "You know those spirits? Well, now I can see them. They're everywhere."

Grey's eyes widened, but it was testament to what he'd been through that he didn't blink twice. "What do they look like?"

“They look like monsters. Of various sorts.”

“Oh.” He looked kinda nonplussed.

“They can see me, too,” I added.

“Er, okay. I don’t think they’re going to bother you if they haven’t so far. Um, I thought I’d go out and get a pregnancy test or two.”

Seeing monsters obviously had no inside track over my potential pregnancy.

“You’re right, I’m late.”

He waited for a while. “And?”

“I’ll take a test.”

He beamed. “But I’m not going to be with you or marry you just because I might be pregnant. That’s not a good enough reason for ever after. Understand?”

Did he look hurt? “If you have my child, I’m going to be involved.”

“Fair enough.” I retreated to the living room to suck down the rest of my milkshake and nurse my inner wounds. He didn’t follow.

I felt sick after I finished the extra large chocolate milkshake. Sick and still worried, I didn’t need to hole up in Grey’s house worrying about being pregnant and sulking, I needed to take care of business—devil business. Somehow it felt as if this mess started with me even though I know it started untold generations ago. I had the chance to destroy the book once, and I’d refused to do so. I needed to make this thing right; I needed to confront my sister and burn the book.



Sara opened the door. She didn't look surprised to see Grey and I standing there. "Can we come in?" I asked.

She nodded and stepped aside. As soon as my eyes adjusted to the dim light inside the house, I suppressed a little scream. There were demon monsters everywhere. Demon monsters were sitting on the couch and talking, demon monsters were hanging from the ceiling, demons monsters flying around like birds and scurrying along the floor like rats. Sara's house was a monster demon Paradise. Worst of all, when they talked to each other, I recognized their voices. They were my spirits, the things that once had been around me all the time. I felt itchy.

"What's wrong with you?" Sara asked.

I gurgled a little, but couldn't get any words out. "She's been a little nauseous lately," Grey said, ever helpful. If he told Sara I was pregnant, I'd kick him for sure.

"It seems a little crowded here," I finally croaked out. The demons looked up and nodded in agreement. Oh my Lord, they could hear me and see me. Apparently they couldn't touch me though. I tested my theory by waving my hand through an ugly flying demon that looked like a Chihuahua skeleton with wings.

Grey raised a brow.

"Is Eva here?" I asked. Apparently the demons were as powerless against

people, they work through somebody saying a spell or working a charm. I didn't want to think about the possession angle. There were so many of them.

"She's at work," Sara said. "She turned in her notice. She's working her two weeks out and that's it."

"Really? Is it because she took the book from me?"

Sara frowned. "I know she took the book, but I didn't approve."

"Do you also know what Eva told me about Brenda?"

Sara walked to the sofa and sat on a demon, sinking through it. It stuck out its tongue at her and moved. I clung momentarily to the thought that they were hallucinations, but knew that was only my wishful thinking.

"Brenda's funeral is tomorrow," Sara said, ignoring my question.

"Nobody bothered to tell me?"

Sara looked at me and sighed. "Nobody wants you there, Mia."

I flinched. "I'm a part of the family, too, whether anybody wants it or not."

"It's not that. You need to leave, for your own safety. Nobody, and most of all me, wants you to be Eva's next target."

I needed to sit down. I walked to a chair and glared at the spider-looking demon until it moved. Grey was leaning against the door, shifting from foot to foot, staring at me with a worried look on his face. If he only knew. If he saw what was in the room with him, he'd be more than worried.

“What do you mean?” Grey asked my mother.

“Eva killed Brenda with black magic to get the book, she as much as admitted it to me,” Sara said. “There had to be a sacrifice. But it isn’t right for it to be family.”

“What do you mean there had to be sacrifice?” I asked.

Sara wouldn’t meet my gaze. “The book has a curse,” she said. “It has to be willingly given and accepted. Sometimes the ones who held the book died before expected. Whoever takes the book without it being given to them always dies then and so on until the book is given and accepted. But there’s a workaround, you can sacrifice a family member and thus take the book yourself.”

She raised her head and her gaze fixed on mine. “We all begged Estella to pass the book on before she died, before the possibility of an accident or some other way she might die suddenly. She could have passed it to you even when you were a baby. She would have to stop using the book herself, but we would all have been safe. Estella was stubborn, always wanting to have her own way.”

I drew in a sharp breath. “Are you telling me you were all afraid of her? Is that why you treated Aunt Estella and me so badly all these years?”

“We were all terrified. We knew one of us could die, or worse, our children, because of Estella.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“For what? It wouldn’t change anything if Estella didn’t tell you and pass over the book. You choose to turn your back on us and leave us, poisoned by Estella. You would have thought any of us crazy if we’d told you what your Aunt really was doing.”

“I knew she did conjure for the town.”

“But you never believed it was real.”

I couldn’t deny that. I ignored the demon monsters as I pondered. My family had always seemed like the enemy, people who hated me for merely being, but instead they were simply scared? My reality shifted.

Sara stood and paced, treading on the smaller monster things who shot her nasty glances and scampered out of her way. “We were so relieved when Estella managed to pass the book on to you before she died. But death came anyway and because of the greed of one of my children. Jenna’s daughter is dead, a sacrifice.”

“I thought you hated me.”

Sara shook her head. “You didn’t understand. Estella took you for her own and with her power—I couldn’t do anything about it. She was threatened by me. I wasn’t allowed to be your mother. What if I angered Estella and she discarded you and took one of your cousins in your place, or even your sister? We all felt like hostages.”

I buried my face in my hands, so much suddenly clear to me. I’d thought

Aunt Estella loved me.

“Estella did love you,” my mother said. I didn’t realize I’d spoken the words aloud. I felt Grey’s hand on my back.

“We need to put an end to this. We need to destroy the book,” he said.

“You can’t destroy it,” Sara said.

“I can take it and try,” I said, lifting my head.

“Have I been talking to the wind? If you take the book, you will die. Do you realize that Eva wanted to kill you, not Brenda? I said no. I never thought she would go so far...” Her words trailed away and I saw tears on my mother’s cheeks. She cared? I could barely believe it.

“What are you going to do about Eva?” Grey asked Sara.

“I can’t do a thing. She has the book and the power. She has the spirits. They’re always with her.”

Regardless of what my mother said, I had to try. I stood and pulled out the small container of lighter fluid I stashed in my purse for the purpose of burning the book. “Is the book in her room?”

She stood also, getting into my face. “Don’t take it, don’t. I’ve never wanted to lose any of my daughters. No.”

“I’m not going to take it.” I strode to Eva’s room.

The demons giggled and laughed as I threw the book into the metal trash

can and doused it with lighter fluid. Grey and my mother entered the room and stood beside me. I didn't look in their direction as I lit a match and dropped it the trashcan. Flames rose far higher than I expected, singing the window curtain.

Grey grabbed the can and pulled it to the center of the room while my mother beat out the curtain and opened the window.

I watched the fire in the trashcan with satisfaction. It crackled and burned hot, ash flying out. The book was history.

In a few minutes, the fire died down. The book was still in the center of the trashcan, untouched, and surrounded by the burned remains of the other trash. The demon monsters laughed.

"I told you it couldn't be destroyed," Sara said.

I looked at Grey. "What are we going to do?"

Sara answered. "What you should do is leave Paradise now. The spirits will tell Eva exactly what happened here if they haven't already. She's always been jealous of you, Mia."

"Mother, I'm sorry about all this."

She nodded. "I know. It's all right, no fault of yours. We do the best we can do."

We embraced and my mother kissed my cheek. For the first time ever, I felt like my mother's daughter.

Chapter Twenty

Grey and I drove from my mother's house. I was numb, as if I'd been bruised inside. How could I have been so wrong about so much for so long?

The twilight hour was blue and it matched my mood. I was hungry and tired, yet keyed up from all the impossible revelations I'd experienced. My mother loved me?

I leaned back in the car seat and sighed. "My Aunt Estella took me from my mother and there wasn't anything she could do about it."

"No, it didn't seem there was."

"I hated my mother and my aunts, my whole family. I idolized my Aunt Estella. I buried myself in books and school and was blind to what was happening around me."

We were in the garage, the door closing on us, darkness falling.

"C'mon, let's go in."

"Everything I've believed about my family, my life—is a lie."

He took my hand. "I understand. But all you can do now is live a moment at a time, one after another, and keep on going on."

He was out the door and reaching for me, helping me out of the car. I clung

to him, smelling the male warmth of his body. I couldn't help it. I was drowning.

His mouth met mine in a too-hungry kiss. His tongue sent shivers of desire racing through my body. I kissed him back, savoring every moment.

"You must be mine," he said.

"Yes," I answered without hesitation. "I'm yours."

But what if I was pregnant? Why now?

He stepped away and it was as if somebody took away my breath. But I followed him inside the house, silent and waiting.

"I think your mother is right," he said. "We need to get out of here."

"You have a house and a medical practice. And what about your people?"

"My parents are in Florida. My sister is my only family left in town and she has her own life. It's time to move on. The house is paid for. We need to walk away and start over, Mia. Don't worry, I can work anywhere." He grinned at me and my heart turned a flip. "I got skills."

"That you do."

"What about the book?"

"Doesn't seem much we can do now that it's passed from your hands."

The flames hadn't even touched the book. "I agree."

"And as much as I hate to say the words aloud, if your sister had anything to do with Brenda's death...It's best to stay away from her."

“She’s gone crazy. The power sucks you in.” I shuddered, remembering. “It starts to matter more and more. You listen to the spirits more; start to depend on them. She could do anything.”

“More reason for us to get out of Dodge.”

“You’ll come to back to Atlanta with me?”

He smiled. “That’s what I was thinking.”

His beeper went off. He pulled out his cell phone. A moment later, he snapped the phone shut. “ They said my partner Charles was in an accident. He’s asking for me. He’s been a business colleague and friend for a long time. I have to go, Mia.”

“What about the spell?”

“It might be gone. Even if it isn’t, As soon as I take care of this, we’ll leave.”

“I’ll go with you to the hospital.”

He stood and dropped a kiss on my forehead. “No, it’s not necessary. I might be home late. Don’t wait up.”

And then I was alone. I sat rubbing my stomach, thinking about how I couldn’t imagine life without him, whether he was with me only because it turned out I was pregnant or not.

I turned on the television, and then turned it off, feeling restless inside. Tomorrow was Brenda’s funeral, but that wasn’t all of it. I was dealing with the

realization my estrangement from the family was Aunt Estella's doing. I closed my eyes for a moment. It was as if the air was made of water and I was miles deep. I saw Grey gasping, not getting enough air, his face turning dusky. Overlaid was the laughter and taunts of Eva. I sat up in the bed, heart pounding, my skin covered with a thin film of cold sweat. It was a true dream, like the other I had. I knew it in my bones. I had to get in touch with Grey.

I fumbled for the phone. My fingers trembled as I punched in the numbers to page him, then the number for the hospital.

"I need to find Grey Taylor. His partner was in accident. I need to leave a message."

"Just a minute. I'll check the Emergency Room."

I waited breathing hard, images of Grey struggling and gasping glued in my mind. I had to reach him. I had to know he was all right.

"Dr. Taylor is not in the ER and his partner Dr. Charles Rowe was never admitted to the hospital."

"But he was paged and called into the hospital because his partner was in an accident." "He wasn't paged unless a nurse paged him about one of his patients."

"Thanks, could you transfer me to the surgical floor?"

The charge nurse there said nobody paged Grey.

I threw the covers off me and swung my feet to the floor, frantic. I knew the

call was to lure Grey...somewhere. I had to find him. I would find him.

I threw on my clothes and ran to my car. I peeled out of the garage into the night, driving fast, my heart pounding as if it would jump out of my chest. I went past Sara's house, but I didn't stop. Something told me he wasn't there and neither was my sister. I drove to the graveyard in my dream. My hands were clammy-wet with sweat and my nerves were drawn as tight as a bowstring. There were no voices in my head, no mysterious whispers, only a certainty that Grey was here somewhere.

I saw a faint light under a large tree in the distance. That was where I needed to go.

I set off at a jog. There were fewer demons monsters hanging out at the cemetery than I'd supposed. The ones there seemed to be concentrated over by the tree, too. I didn't have a plan, simply letting the feeling of rightness spur me on.

As I came closer, I heard Eva's voice winding around the voices of the demons. The light came from a candle on a box she'd covered with a dark cloth. I saw the book on the box along with some other items I recognized. She must have raided Aunt Estella's root cellar.

Then I stifled a gasp as I saw Grey on the ground. His eyes were closed and he was tied to stakes, spread-eagled, and a pentagram was outlined in dark dirt against the green grass surrounding his body. A lot of demon monsters were

sitting on him. I ran to release him.

“He’s bound by the spirits at my bidding and as soon as I finish the conjure, he’ll be mine, not yours,” Eva said.

I struggled with the ropes. I wouldn’t be able to get him loose without a knife.

“Let me have your knife,” I told Eva through gritted teeth.

“You’ve got to be kidding.” She bent over the book and started chanting some gibberish.

The demons bounced on Grey and grinned evilly at me, some of them chattering taunts. I tried to push them away, but my hands went through them. I started to panic. Then suddenly, I shifted. The world faded away and the demons came into sharp focus. They were real. I could smell them and I was certain I could touch them, while Grey was a transparent apparition, and Eva’s gibberish sounded like a static-filled, far-away radio station. The demon monsters stared at me with something like consternation.

I remembered what me and the young man who said he was my son did in my dream. I raised my hands and channeled energy from my heart through them toward the monstrosities sitting on Grey. The results were immediately satisfying. Beams of pink fire streamed from my fingers and the demons screamed and scattered.

One of them arced oily black streams at me, but I rose in the air, flying, and blasted him back with pink fire. He screamed and exploded. The rest of the demons didn't seem to have much stomach for battle. Most were hurrying away as fast as their claws, wings, stumps, or whatever, could carry them.

I tried to untie Grey, but my hands went through the ropes and his body too. Then I noticed my body was slumped on the ground. That was me? How could I be here and there, too? Was I a spirit? I only hoped this didn't mean I was dead.

Eva was still bent over the book, looking see-through. The book was lying on the box. I glared at it. Then, I raised my hands and streamed pink flames toward it. With glee, I saw the pages crisp and burn. I blasted more of my energy toward it.

Eva went over to my body and shook it. Then she darted to her makeshift altar and picked up a dagger lying there. She returned to my body. Oh no, she was not going to stab me while I was unconscious. How could my sister do that to me? The big buggy demon monster on her back growled at me. The flames from my fingers died as I watched Eva draw near my body. She went down on her knees next to my body and raised the dagger. The demon whispered in her ear, urging her on.

I ran toward my body, willing to become one with it. Suddenly I shot inside

it. My eyes opened and meet Eva's. She gasped. I grabbed the knife, yanking it out of her hands. I got to my feet, dropping the knife on the ground. She went for it and I tackled her. We struggled, rolling in the dirt.

"You always thought you were so much better than me," Eva yelled. "Now I'm the one with the power. You're nothing."

"I never—"

She hit me in the face. Hard. Then it was on. We rolled over the ground hitting, kicking, screaming and hair-pulling. It was the fight we'd never had when we were younger. Then I heard Grey call me. I hit Eva with a right uppercut to the jaw and she slumped over. I got the knife and cut Grey's bonds. Eva jumped on me again, but I batted her away as if she were a fly.

He pulled himself free of the ropes that held him.

"Get out of the pentagram," I said. "The demons are starting to do something weird. Weirder, I mean." Eva was screaming and cursing, but her words meant nothing to me. I'd looked toward the book, expected to see it burned and blackened, but it sat there as before, untouched.

But I know a part of it was damaged, the magic part of it that was in that other world that paralleled this one. The world where the demon monsters lived.

"Let's get out of here," Grey said.

"The car is this way." We ran toward it.

Eva didn't follow. I looked over my shoulder and she was staring at the book. Did she know what I did to it? Could she tell? She was shaking the book as if she expected that to make it work. Maybe she could tell.

We got to the car and I burned rubber out of the cemetery. I glanced over at Grey. He looked shaken and shocked. "What happened?" I asked.

"When I got to the hospital and pulled in my parking space, Eva was standing there with a box. Before I could get out of my car, she got in. She told me to drive to the cemetery and somehow I couldn't refuse her anything. She told me to lie down, and I had to obey. It was as if concrete bricks were dropped on my chest. I couldn't breathe. I think I passed out." He touched my hand. "The next thing I saw was you sprawled on the ground. She was going to stab you, and I was tied up."

"I can't believe she wanted to kill me. I always thought we were—" I sighed. "I've been so blind for so long. I thought Eva was my ally and my mother was my enemy when it was the other way around."

"She was jealous of you. She's not your caliber, Mia."

"Everything that happened tonight had a reason. I learned something, Grey."

"What was that?"

"I can fight the demons. I can kill them." I pulled into the garage.

"How can you fight spirits?"

“We can both fight them. We have to cross into their world.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Where is that?”

“They live in another dimension parallel to this one. We can send our minds there and leave our bodies here. “

He shook his head. “Make sense, please.”

“It has to do with magic. Aunt Estella told me before she died that magic has to remain hidden. The demons remain hidden, too. I thought about why. It’s because if people start believing in magic and demons, it’s a lot easier to believe in God.”

“No argument there.”

“But we know about magic and demons now, that it’s real, that they exist. That’s why I was able to see them. And why I always could hear them. You heard them too. Open your mind and you can cross over to their realm, and there we have the power to fight them directly and destroy them.

“What if they have the power to come here in the flesh and destroy us, too?”

I didn’t think about that. “Maybe that’s their weakness. Maybe they can’t do that.”

“What if we can’t manage to cross over to them either?”

I remembered my dream, where hundreds, thousands of humans, including my son, were fighting demons. “Someday we’ll be able to do so. I’m certain of it.”



I owed it to Brenda to pay my respects. But there was no way I was going to attend another ritual presided over by our town minister of evil, the pastor. Grey and I went to the funeral home early. The mortician ushered us to the body and left us alone. I kissed her cold cheek. Brenda was free. She was resting now, but I hoped the time would come soon when she would have that happiness she craved.

Sara and Jenna, Brenda's mother, entered as Grey and I turned to go. "Mia, I'm glad to see you here," Sara said and kissed my cheek. My eyes burned with tears because I'd never had such a greeting from her.

"Mom," I said, something I seldom called her. "We're leaving Paradise."

"That's a good thing," Aunt Jenna said. "You'll be safe. I don't want Sara to go through what I'm going through now."

I took Aunt Jenna's hand. "Brenda came to see me. She wanted to make things right between us. She warned me about Paradise and said she wanted a shot at happiness."

Aunt Jenna dropped her head. "She was a good girl." Some of the demons surrounding her snorted and I wanted to shift and kill every last one of them. Instead, I hugged Aunt Jenna and my mother. I had to leave them to the demons for now, but I knew soon things would change. Evil would be banished from Paradise, never to return—and my son would help do it. My destiny was to raise

him and keep him safe until then.

Grey and I left everything behind, including my beat up old Toyota Tercel. It was time to move on to better things.

We'd loaded up Grey's Navigator early this morning with the few things he felt were irreplaceable. Now we were on our way, leaving Paradise behind.

We drove to Jackson, put Grey's things in storage and left the car at the airport. Hours later I was standing in a luxurious Vegas hotel room. A test had just confirmed what I'd known in my heart. I was pregnant. "I know you want a child but I want more, Grey. I want your love, not your obligation."

"Who says you don't have my love?" He turned me toward him. "You have all my love and I thought you knew it. Don't you know you're the air I breathe, woman? I need you. I was hurt over how it seemed you didn't want to be pregnant by me. How you blew off my invitation to be together forever. "

I searched his face. Was it true? Did he love me, whether I was pregnant or not? Sincerity and love shone from his eyes. My heart finally broke out of the webs of worry and doubt and knew Grey told the truth.

I touched his lips with mine. "I love you, too, with all my heart. Know that."

We leaned on each other, warmth suffusing my body. We were together and for the first time in my life I felt complete.

"Marry me?" Grey asked.

I smiled at him, my heart too full to speak.

“Marry me right now, tonight?”

I drew in a breath and knew I didn’t want to wait. A Vegas wedding would be perfect. I grinned. “Order the champagne, and I’ll go to that boutique downstairs and get a dress.”

He whooped. “Rent me a tux while you’re at it.”

The End

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Author Bio

Monica Jackson lives on the Land of Oz side of Kansas. She fully embraces diversity (including Wicked Witches, Munchkins, and that goody-two-shoes Glenda, the Good Witch) since she resides on the far edge of the diverse divide too. Monica Jackson's books, known for quirky humor and attitude, often wander from well-trod plot pathways. She spends far too much time online, loves bubble baths, and avoiding both productive activity and moderation.

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