

SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*

# Master Me

*Mastersen*  
TRILOGY

MEAGAN HILL



**Masterson**

## **Master Me**

Five years after being kidnapped, Miranda faces an impossible decision: become evil by kidnapping an innocent girl for a sacrificial rite, or allow her captors to murder her. Then she meets Mitch, who offers her a way out. Miranda and Mitch must work together to release Miranda from evil's clutches, while testing the Fates to discover if they are mated for life or if Mitch must choose between loving Miranda and becoming head of his coven.

Becoming as intimate as two people can, both mentally and physically, they must learn to trust each other and those around them as they face death while attempting to rescue the young girls Miranda left behind.

**Genre:** Fantasy, Paranormal

**Length:** 63,390 words

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**Meagan Hill**

EROTIC ROMANCE



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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

**MASTER ME**

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### ***Regarding E-book Piracy***

Dear Readers,

E-book piracy is a lot like pirating music. Most people think it doesn't hurt anyone except the publishing/record companies and they make tons of money, right? Nope. Not really. Yes, it cuts into their income, but it cuts into mine as an author and yours as a consumer, too. Every time someone doesn't pay for the product, the prices increase for those who do pay. That doesn't sound fair to me, and as someone who does pay and has a set budget for buying entertainment, that's just not cool. After all, while I don't expect to get rich writing erotic romances, it's good to be able to justify all my time on the computer to my family, not to mention maybe one day realizing my dream of writing full-time and being able to quit my day job. So do us all a favor: hit the "Add to Cart" button instead of digging around for a free copy.

With deep gratitude,

Meagan Hill

## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my best friend, partner, and husband, Jeff. You believed that not only could I write, but I could get it published, too. Thank you for believing in me.

And for Jordan, who dealt with Mommy working on her computer when you'd rather be playing cars with her. I love you!

# MASTER ME

*Masterson*

**MEAGAN HILL**

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## **Prologue**

Fourteen-year-old Mandy's head swam as she clenched her eyes together and regained consciousness. Her head hurt, her body ached, and her stomach churned. Apparently, she was coming down with the flu. What she didn't understand was why it felt like she couldn't move. She had heard that a bad case of the flu could cause you to feel like a truck had run over you, but this was taking it a bit far. Finally, she was able to pry her eyes open. It took several minutes for her to focus on her surroundings, but when she finally managed to, she was filled with terror.

This wasn't her bedroom, or any other room in her house for that matter. Above her was an ornately designed ceiling with a mural of naked people in positions she had no idea people could actually get into. A glance around the room confirmed her first impression. The walls were covered in lush burgundy velvet hangings, with not a single ray of sun peeking around the edges. The only light in the room came from several lit candles placed throughout the room and a bedside lamp.

Gathering her courage, Mandy finally took stock of her own body. She'd realized almost immediately she was tied to the bed. Her wrists and ankles were tied to each post of the four-poster bed with velvet-



lined shackles. She was completely naked, and nothing covered her body from anyone who might come through the closed door. Relief flowed through her when she realized she had not been molested. But the relief was short lived when she forced herself to realize that while she hadn't been molested yet, her current position hinted that it was coming. She was only fourteen. She knew what sex was, what went where, but she didn't understand why anyone would be interested in her. Her breasts had only just begun to develop, and she still looked much like her guy friends. She didn't even need a bra yet, for gosh sakes! She could only assume that that was what whoever took her was after. Would they let her go when they were done? Would she have a chance for escape? Would they kill her?

Her breath stopped in her chest when the door silently swung open and a figure stepped through it. The man was wearing a black robe, much like the robes those judges on television wore. He had dark hair combed to the side in a style much like George Clooney's. His nose was somewhat large and hawkish. His eyes were jet black with a ring of red just around the pupil. But the worst part of all was his smile. He grinned widely, showing most of his teeth. It was clearly a predator's smile, happy with the success of the hunt. Chills ran up and down Mandy's body as he looked her over before reaching out with one hand to stroke her foot. Mandy couldn't help the instinctive reaction to jerk away, even though she feared it would anger her captor, thus making things worse for her.

Her movement amused the man, who chuckled darkly. He walked to the foot of the bed, centering himself between her feet, taking a long look at her body. Again, he smiled at her ferally. "I love seeing the fear in the new children brought to me, to see them shaking before me, knowing I hold their very lives in my hands. Your old life is over, Mandy. From this moment on, you belong to me. I am and will be your master for the rest of your life. The sooner you accept that, the easier it will be for you. But know this. You will never get away from

me. I will even be a part of your soul. There is no place you can hide, and you cannot escape. You are mine forever.”

By then, Mandy’s sobs had made it difficult for her to hear what she was being told. She knew whatever was coming was going to be bad, really bad. Her fears were confirmed when he shrugged out of his robe, revealing his naked form beneath. From that point forward, she kept her head turned to the side, fighting to push her mind away from her body. She created a mantra in her mind, focusing on the words as if her very life depended upon it, and possibly it did. She repeated the words in her head, going round and round, until they were all she focused on. “I will live. I will not be broken. I will escape.”

## **Chapter 1**

Five years later, Mandy woke up suddenly, bathed in sweat from her memory-laden nightmare. She didn't often think of her first rape anymore. It had happened too many times since, and remembering her innocence and the way it was stolen from her was painful. Unfortunately, she knew exactly why her subconscious was dragging it up again. She'd been sent on a hunting mission to find a young female latent, exactly what she had been when she was taken.

There were different classes of Gifted Ones. The people who were marked with the sign but who were not trained were called latents. These people had no idea they had any additional abilities beyond that of a normal human being. Latents were born with a sign, generally known as an ankh, somewhere on their bodies. Mandy's ankh happened to be at the base of her spine.

Mandy knew very little of the hierarchy and rules governing the Gifted Ones. Males who had completed their training were called Noveos, while females were Novices. Men who mastered every nuance of their powers would become Masters and immediately quit aging. Women couldn't achieve Master status, no matter how much they worked to master their powers. Mandy suspected there was more to their world, but Cabela didn't want his members to know anything other than his own rules so as to ensure his dominion over them.

Mandy was a Novice, having completed her power training almost two years ago. Her behavior training, however, took much longer. Mandy was naturally a strong-willed person with a dominating personality. Such a personality does not learn submission well. She was forced to endure an extra year of behavior training, with six

months of that as a personal slave to Cabela, the head of her coven. Cabela was the first man to rape her, and as of last week, the last. He was also the one who had given her the worst beating, actually requiring hospitalization for several days. The members of Cabela's coven must learn submission to his many wants and desires. Disobedience was punished severely using physical and mental torture. Mandy couldn't count the number of times she'd been raped and beaten by the various men within the coven, and she preferred not to remember.

Members of the coven who made it through training were expected to perform tasks for the coven, in addition to the financial support demanded. The members of the coven worked for several companies owned by Cabela, ensuring them the ability to take off work when Cabela had a mission for them. The women were given less than competitive wages, and half of their meager salary went to the coven, ensuring they would never get enough financial means gathered to get away. The financial aspect of it wasn't the worst part of being part of this coven, though. Cabela was an incredibly smart man and knew that in order for him to maintain his power over his members, he had to taint and brainwash them into believing in and following his instructions. Anyone who was innocent when taken did not remain innocent long. Training for the proper behavior often included abusing other trainees or assisting with the punishment of coven members being disciplined. By the time a coven member was old enough to go out on his own, he was usually so blackened by his association with the coven that he no longer wanted out.

Mandy knew she was at her breaking point. She had somehow maintained a small spark of goodness within herself during the five years of hell that happened after she had been kidnapped, or "liberated from her prior influences" as Cabela liked to call it. She had finally made it through her training, both with her powers and behavior modification. She'd actually enjoyed learning how to develop and control her powers, and she had developed more than

what she'd allowed the coven to know. Unfortunately, the behavior modification training had just about broken her spirit.

Unlike most of the Novices, Mandy had to spend an additional six months as Cabela's personal slave. Those six months were the worst of the time spent in the coven. She'd had to submit to forced sex several times a day, not just for Cabela, but any male coven member or visitor. She was often beaten for failing in some way or other, or just because Cabela felt like it. He loved to see her flinch away from him, to quail before him on her knees, and to beg to be released from whatever torture device he'd dreamed up. The final result was a Mandy who hit her knees with just the hint of unhappiness, cowering before him. It got to be a joke for him to do it in front of others as a show of power. He would laugh at her fear and submission. He had no way of knowing, but it was his laughter that generated the anger that kept that small spark alive in her soul.

She'd finally completed her training the prior week and was on her first mission as a Searcher. Searchers were the members who went out looking for latents to take and train. Cabela liked to use young women as Searchers because the kids were more likely to trust them and come with them willingly, unlike Mandy, who'd been drugged and kidnapped from her room in her family's house. He also preferred that the Searchers concentrate on finding young female latents. Young females were easier to train in submission and a lot more fun sexually, though Cabela wasn't terribly picky about who was pleasuring him. He enjoyed raping men as much as he enjoyed raping women.

Shaking off her gloomy thoughts, Mandy crawled out of bed and headed for the shower. She'd been given several target locations to check out, and the nearest was about two hours away. She would get ready and get some breakfast before getting on the road. After her shower and morning grooming, Mandy stopped to take a long look at herself. Most men considered her beautiful. Her honey blonde hair fell just below her shoulders in layers, framing her face in soft waves. Her hazel eyes were mostly green, with flecks of gray. When she was

using her power, her eyes turned almost completely gray. This marked her as different from the rest of her coven, and she had learned quickly to hide her eyes whenever possible. Those who had turned evil had black eyes when using their powers. Cabela was so evil that his eyes were always black with a ring of red around the outside.

Her facial features were delicate, giving her a very fragile air. Her nose had remained straight, despite having been broken three times. Her mouth was a perfect bow shape and a natural dusty pink shade. She was petite at five feet, two inches, and her servitude, coupled with a lack of regular nourishment, had guaranteed a slender build. If she ever actually got regular meals, her curves would probably fill out beautifully.

Mandy hated how she looked. It brought too much attention to her from the men in the coven. She had been raped and beaten more often than most of the other female members combined. Mandy applied her makeup, doing her best to conceal the fading bruises around her left eye and along her chin. She'd dropped a decanter of wine three days ago and had been punched several times in punishment. When she decided she had done the best she could, she pulled on a light sundress and her sandals. The day was already warm, and because her target location was a children's day camp, she figured anything heavier would make her stand out even more than she normally would.

Three hours later, Mandy's head was pounding, and she could swear she was lost. She was slowly motoring along a two-lane road that wound through the trees and hills, periodically crossing a nice-sized river. The camp was supposed to be on this road, but she hadn't seen another car in over fifteen minutes. Just as she was about to turn around, she came around a curve and saw the sign for the camp. Shaking her head at the isolated location, she wondered if anyone even knew about the camp, much less sent their kids there.

Pulling up to the entrance, she was surprised to see a small shop right next door. According to the advertising signs scattered over the walls, the shop offered candles, potpourri, handmade goods, crystals, and a plethora of other “girlie” type stuff. What caught her eye, though, were the crystals. She hadn’t been allowed to bring any of hers with her, and she hoped to find an amethyst to help with her headache.

Mandy was pleasantly surprised when she opened the door to the shop. The shop smelled wonderful due to the wall full of candles in every imaginable size, shape, color, and scent. The back wall was dedicated to alternative “New Age” lifestyle needs, including aromatherapy oils, incense, and the crystals she was seeking. The rest of the shop was filled with beautiful handmade items. She made her way to the back of the store and looked over the selection of crystals carefully. They actually had a very thorough selection of crystals, and she could feel the power radiating off them. Just being in the shop had already eased her headache, but she decided to go ahead and get a couple of crystals anyway, just in case it should return once she left the shop.

“Can I help you find what you need?” asked a soft voice just behind her shoulder. Mandy flinched sharply. She hadn’t heard the shopkeeper walk up behind her. “Oh, my dear, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s okay. I must have really been concentrating hard,” Mandy stuttered out. A hand pressed against her chest where her heart was still pounding. She couldn’t explain to the shopkeeper it was actually a response she’d developed over the past years to anything that might be considered a threat, including someone walking up quietly behind her. Finally getting her heart under control, Mandy turned to face the shopkeeper. She appeared to be in her mid-forties, with kind eyes and a soft smile. Wisdom, peace, and acceptance radiated off of her.

“I’m Nina. You were studying the crystals pretty intently. Are you looking for something specific?”

“I need some amethyst for a headache I developed looking for the place next door. I thought for sure I was lost.”

“It is a little difficult to find, especially for someone who hasn’t been here before. May I ask what you’re here for? You don’t seem to be the normal visitor they get over there.”

Mandy hadn’t really thought that through yet, so she was scrambling to come up with a half-decent reply. Finally she blurted out, “I’m checking it out for my sister’s kids. They’re coming here for a couple of weeks this summer, and she wanted to figure out how to keep them occupied while here.”

The lie fell flat between them, though Nina’s expression didn’t change. She did seem to narrow her focus onto Mandy a bit, like she was looking through her eyes in search of the truth. After a moment’s hesitation, Nina replied, “That sounds like fun for the kids. I remember taking vacations with my kids. It was either wonderful or terrible, depending on what we found to keep them entertained. It’s still periodically like that, even though they’re all grown up.”

Mandy could only smile sickly and nod her head. She hated lying, especially to people she knew she had nothing to fear from.

“Well, let’s see which of the stones wants to go with you,” Nina commented smoothly, pulling the container of amethyst crystals out of its holder and moving to a velvet-lined board placed next to the display. She carefully emptied the container onto the velvet, making sure the stones were not stacked, but not touching them. “I cleansed them last weekend, and I’m fairly sure no one’s stuck his hands in there. You should be able to get a good reading from them.”

Mandy lifted her hand above the stone, moving slowly and systematically, opening herself to the vibrations of the stones. One of them held a much more powerful vibration than the others, and she knew she had found one that corresponded to her personal vibrations beautifully. “Wow, this one is much stronger than the one I have at the compound.” Mandy moved her hand over the remaining stones, wanting to be sure she had found the one with the best resonance, and



then gently picked up the stone that had spoken to her. Nina picked up a small wooden block, using it to push the remaining stones back into the container before replacing the container in the display.

“Did you want to look at any of the other ones? I can feel the rose quartz and the rutilated quartz calling for you, too.”

Mandy could only stand there and blink at Nina’s suggestions. Clarity, courage, openness to love, aural cleansing, and healing. These were just some of the effects of those particular stones, and exactly what she needed if she was going to survive the week. She had to wonder if Nina herself was a Gifted One. Either way, Mandy wasn’t about to ignore the nudge she’d just received. “Yes, I think you’re absolutely right.” They repeated the choosing process, with Mandy finding stones with a strong resonance with her in each type. Mandy then selected a wired necklace to keep the stones in. She had no pockets, and she needed to have the stones on her to work. After browsing through the rest of the store, Mandy was ready to continue her mission.

She and Nina made small talk about the next-door children’s camp while Nina rang up her purchase. Nina helped her place the stones in the necklace and then place the necklace around her neck. When Nina secured the clasp, Mandy felt a jolt of energy, again making her wonder if Nina might be a GO. Just as Mandy was about to leave, Nina called to her. “Mandy, be sure to speak to Mitch. He’s the owner of the camp, and he can answer any questions you might have. Tell him you saw me, and give him this message—‘Hakuna matata.’ He’ll know what it means.”

“As in the phrase from *The Lion King*?” Mandy was starting to wonder if Nina was messing with her.

“Yes, that one. No, I’m not playing a trick or anything. Just tell him.”

“Um, okay, Nina. I’ll tell him. Thank you for your help,” Mandy replied as she pushed the door open and went outside. She considered moving her car to the parking lot next door, but it was clear she

wasn't in anyone's way, and she really felt like walking the distance down to the river. It felt good to be moving around freely at her own pace. That decision made, Mandy dropped her purse into the car and started her way down the road leading down to the camp.

The road wasn't that long, but it got steep quickly as the land angled down toward the water. She passed what she assumed was the main building, which was really a beautiful, older Victorian-style home with a huge back deck covered in picnic tables and lounge chairs. The land steepened even further just past the deck, and Mandy was glad to see there was a crudely made stairway down the rest of the way. The steps were dug into the hill and laid with railroad ties. They were uneven but still climbable. The scene below her was idyllic. The river flowed gently in the background, with several canoes and rafts filled with preteen boys paddling around. A small group of boys were being instructed on tying ropes, while another set were learning how to start a fire using natural objects. Several adults were scattered throughout the area, watching over and leading the different activities. Everywhere she looked, she saw boys in the dung-colored uniforms of a Boy Scout troop. Mandy was relieved there were no girls around. She would be able to cleanly report she had been unable to find a female latent because there were only boys at the camp.

When Mandy was about halfway down the stairs, her attention was suddenly snared by a man who was waist deep in the river. He was helping the scouts learn how to steer their canoes and had his back turned toward her. As soon as her attention focused on him, his back straightened in awareness, and he quickly turned around, searching the area. It only took a moment for his eyes to lock with hers.

He was shockingly handsome. His black hair was closely cropped over his entire head, and he was sporting what looked like a four-day growth beard, though he probably kept the scruffy look on purpose. Whatever the intention, he was hot. His brows were perfectly arched

over scorching blue eyes. His lips peeked through the stubble, the bottom slightly heavier than the top, one side slightly lifted in a self-assured smile. From the smile lines on his face, it appeared that this was his usual expression. What she could see of his body was phenomenal. He was well-built though not overly bulky, with clearly defined muscles showing through his T-shirt and large, strong-looking hands. He appeared tall, but Mandy couldn't tell for sure because she couldn't see his bottom half, and, oh, how she wanted to see his bottom half.

He radiated a quiet self-confidence, the kind often seen in experienced soldiers, as if saying, "I can handle anything you throw at me. You can trust me." His body appeared ready to spring, even though he seemed relaxed. He was clearly an alpha male, a leader capable of being in charge in any situation. He made her heart pound and stomach clench in excitement. Mandy was shocked by her response to him. It took her a moment to realize what she was feeling was attraction. She'd never been attracted to another human being in her life, other than the usual teen heartthrobs before she'd been kidnapped.

Mandy continued down the stairs after a brief pause, her focus solely trained on the man who stood still in the water. The man briefly took his eyes away from hers, turning to another one of the adults and motioning them to take his place with the group he'd been working with. He then turned his attention back to Mandy, though he still made no motion to move toward her.

Mandy's attention was so completely focused on the Adonis before her that she completely stopped looking where she was stepping. One moment she was moving smoothly down the stairs, the next her foot caught on something and she was skidding down the last step and over the grassy area just below, finally landing on her ass in the river, with the water reaching just above her breasts. The temperature of the water was shocking after the warmth of the sun, and Mandy simply sat there a moment, trying to regain her breath.

Once she'd shaken the shock off, she looked around to take stock of the situation. She now had everyone's attention and it was absolutely silent for several seconds. Finally, she couldn't stop the giggles bubbling up inside her. Reassured that laughter was okay, the entire group began howling, except for the man who'd so thoroughly captured her attention. He looked concerned as he began moving toward her.

\* \* \* \*

Mitch's breath left him in a whoosh as awareness slammed through his body. His back immediately straightened and his shoulders squared, an instinctive reaction to meeting another person of power. He'd been able to sense other GOs around him since he'd finished his training, but he'd never felt awareness this strong. Mitch turned in the direction the sensation was coming from and immediately located the source. It was a young woman, maybe mid-twenties, with honey-blond hair, huge eyes that even at a distance seemed to have seen too many horrible things, and a luscious body. She wasn't tall, maybe five feet, two inches, but extremely thin, much too thin for her frame. A white summer dress hung from her shoulders, accenting the hollows around her collar bones. Mitch wondered if she was one of those girls who thought they had to starve themselves to be beautiful. She didn't seem the type, as she moved as if unaware of her physicality. She was naturally graceful. At least he thought so until she caught her foot on the last step and proceeded to skid down the grass embankment and right into the water. The look of shock when she landed was comical.

The entire group was now watching their visitor sitting just inside the river. Mitch could hear several squelched giggles. The entire thing had been hilarious, but even preteen boys knew better than to laugh at a gorgeous woman. Mitch expected her to start screeching about getting wet or crying from embarrassment, so he was very pleasantly

surprised to hear her begin laughing. A woman who could laugh at herself was rare, and this intrigued Mitch even more. Hearing her laughter was all the permission the others needed as they all began guffawing in their spots. Mitch managed to restrain his own laughter as he began to move toward her, though he couldn't help getting lost in her eyes once again.

"Are you okay, Miss?" Mitch asked when he got close enough to hear her over the raucous laughter still surrounding them. He could see her clearly now with his new proximity, and Mitch was entranced. Her eyes were hazel with touches of gray, an unusual combination. Her features were delicate and gave an impression of fragility. Her lips were perfectly plumped, not abnormally large like some women were having done these days. In fact, it was clear she was naturally beautiful. Nothing was fake about her.

Mandy's laughter died in her throat when he spoke to her. His voice was deep and smooth and made her pulse pound. She bet he could make her shiver just listening to him read a phone book. She forced herself to pull in a breath, finally answering, "I think I'm okay. Just wet. At least I have clothes in my car that I can change into." Mandy moved to plant her feet under her in preparation for standing up, but froze when he lifted his hand up in a "stop" gesture.

"Wait, don't stand up yet," Mitch said, interrupting her movement. She waited, her eyes widening in shock as she watched him pull his own T-shirt off. "Your dress is white and now wet. It's also now transparent from what I can see. As much as the kids might enjoy it, I'd have to guess you're not into giving preteens a free show."

Mandy's eyes widened even more as she realized what Mitch was saying. She automatically crossed her arms over her breasts, though she knew it was too little too late. She could tell that her nipples were hardened from the coolness of the water, and the dress was sticking to her body, clearly outlining each curve. Mandy considered her options for a brief second before taking the offered shirt, swiftly pulling it on.

Mandy couldn't stop the shudder that ripped through her in response to the warmth and scent that clung to the fabric, remnants from the gorgeous man in front of her, whose name she still did not know, she was stunned to realize.

"Thanks, um, sir?"

"It's Mitch. Mitch Masterson. And you are..." Mitch trailed off, asking for her name in return.

"Mandy Cabela." Mandy couldn't stop another shudder, this time in disgust for her last name. Cabela required that all of the coven members use his last name as theirs. She hated it. It was just another sign of his possession of her. "You're the owner here, right? Nina told me to talk to you."

"You spoke with Nina?" Mitch asked, surprise evident in his voice.

"Yes, why are you so surprised? I loved her shop."

"I just didn't know she was up there. She doesn't open regularly. I'll have to stop in and talk to her later."

"Oh, that reminds me. She said to tell you 'Hakuna matata'. whatever that means, beyond the accepted definition."

Mitch couldn't keep the surprise from showing on his face. Last he'd heard, his mother was at his parent's house in Charleston. She only opened the shop on very special occasions for very special customers. Certainly never for someone who'd just dropped in off the highway. However, the surprise that his mother was at the shop was minor compared to his shock at what Mandy had just told him. "Seriously, she said, 'Hakuna matata,' like from *The Lion King*?" At Mandy's nod, Mitch's mind began racing. It was a code phrase, of course. Over the years, they had developed a kind of language all their own so they could talk freely around the regular humans without worrying about revealing their existence. "Hakuna matata" meant "This one is special. Take good care of him." Nina had only used it a few times, and in each case, the subject of the conversation was in

danger of some sort and needed protection. They also tended to end up being very powerful. "Okay, thanks for telling me."

"You're not going to tell me what it means, are you?" Mandy asked in a resigned tone.

Mitch could only smirk and shake his head. "Nope."

"Okay, fine. Be that way. For all I know..." Mitch watched as Mandy pulled her feet beneath her in preparation for standing up. She couldn't stifle the cry of pain as her ankle buckled beneath her, landing her back in her spot on the bank. Mitch was next to her by the next second. If Mandy hadn't been so distracted by the pain, she would have been startled he was there so quickly.

"What hurts, Mandy?" Mitch asked, his voice concerned. He reached out to steady her by her shoulders, wanting to keep her steady and prevent further injury. He nearly jumped back with the jolt that rocked through him as he touched her. He wasn't too shocked, however, to notice an answering jolt go through her, nor her eyes widening in reaction. He also wasn't too shocked to notice how her personal energy and his blended together. That had never happened to him.

Mandy could only blink at him for a moment, appearing to be just as blown away by their connection as he was. Finally, she responded, "Hurt. Oh, it's my ankle. I must have twisted it on the way down. It's really not that bad. I was just taken off guard." Again, she tried to rise from her spot, but Mitch's hands would not let her move.

Mitch mentally shook his head, amused at the stubbornness she was displaying. He wasn't about to let her try to walk on an injured ankle. Certainly not until he'd had an opportunity to look at it. Without bothering to warn her, Mitch stepped up next to her and swept her up into his arms, making sure to get the tail of his shirt so that her bottom was covered, and cradling her to his chest. She was so tiny she felt like she weighed next to nothing. Mitch couldn't help but moan silently at the feel of the woman in his arms. She felt like she

belonged there. Mitch tried to control his reaction to this beautiful stranger as he began the long climb to the house.

Mandy yelped in surprise before allowing herself to settle against his chest and wrap her arms around his neck. "I'll take a look at it up at the house. We have some first aid supplies there. If it's bad enough, I'll take you to County General for an X-ray," Mitch muttered. He could see it was already starting to swell, but it didn't look like it was bruising. From experience, it appeared it was just a sprain, though sprains were still plenty painful.

"No. No hospital. Besides, I've had worse. Way worse. And had to work with it without any type of medical treatment. You can put me down. I'm sure I can walk." Mitch was distracted from savoring the feel of the small woman in his arms when her words finally sunk into his brain. "What are you talking about, no medical care? How did you get hurt and not have medical care?" His normally strong protective streak exploded within him. He couldn't get the image of her injured badly, with no healing help, out of his mind. He had no idea how very close to reality his worst thought was.

"Well, my, uh, the guy in charge of where I live refuses to allow us medical care unless it's a matter of life or death."

"How badly have you been hurt? List your injuries." Mitch's intuition was telling him the information was important for reasons other than his newfound need to protect her. Mitch placed her on one of the loungers scattered around the back deck of the house and pulled up another lounger and sat down to listen to what she had to say.

"Seriously? You want to know about all the stuff I've had hurt?" Mitch nodded his head and didn't miss the way the question was phrased. She hadn't said, "Stuff I've hurt." She'd said, "Stuff I've had hurt." There was a world of difference. Clearly, whatever had happened to her had been a result of someone else. Mandy sighed as she gathered her thoughts. "I guess I'll start at the bottom and work my way up. I've had several toes broken, both ankles sprained multiple times, and once a wrenched knee. My tailbone has been



cracked several times, along with bruised, cracked, and broken ribs. Higher up were a broken clavicle twice, multiple instances of dislocated shoulders,, both wrists broken, and repeated broken fingers. I was always careful to straighten the fingers and toes, and for that matter, my nose, so they'd hopefully heal straight." Mitch's brain swam at the recitation of injury and pain she'd just given, so he wasn't prepared when she continued.

"And those were the ones that didn't get medical care. I actually did end up in the hospital once for several days. The doctors weren't ready for me to leave, but Cabela for," Mandy choked on the word for a moment, before changing to a different one, "insisted that I'd be fine." Mitch noticed what had happened and again filed it away for consideration later.

"How bad was it that you were taken to the hospital?"

"Severe concussion, broken jaw, cracked cheekbone, dislocated shoulders, broken ribs. I'm lucky I haven't lost any teeth yet." She said it so matter-of-factly that Mitch's stomach heaved. He knew exactly what caused those types of injuries. She'd been nearly beaten to death. Her other injuries suggested the beating wasn't a solitary event. Mitch took a closer look at her and noted the bruising under her eye and along her jawline. She was still being beaten. There was no way in hell he was letting her return to whatever situation she was in. Mitch noticed a shiver race through her and realized they were both still in wet clothes, and the sun was beginning to set. He lifted Mandy into his arms again, carrying her through the house before depositing her in the guest bathroom.

"Where's your car? I'll get your clothes for you to change into while you're getting cleaned up in here. I'll take a look at your ankle when you're done." Mandy handed him her keys, indicating that the car was next door to the shop. Mitch left Mandy in the bathroom with a couple of fresh towels before changing into a dry pair of jogging pants and a T-shirt. On his way back through the house, he noticed that the shower was running in the guest bath. Mandy was bathing. He

shook his head violently, trying to rid himself of the erotic images of her wet and covered in soap, standing in his shower, waiting for him to join her. He couldn't suppress the shudder that worked through him at the thought.

Reminding himself of his errand, he jogged over to his mother's shop. His mother was sitting at the counter, clearly waiting for him. "Hello, dear. I assume Mandy passed along my message?"

"Yes, she did," Mitch answered. He didn't bother asking what she was doing there. His mother's greatest power was precognition, but she was always very cryptic with her answers. The basic response was always something along the lines of, "Because it had to happen that way." "Can you give me anymore information?"

"She's hurting and very close to breaking."

"She's being beaten, repeatedly."

"She's being more than just beaten, son. Have you not looked at her aura yet?"

Mitch was startled to realize he hadn't. He'd been so wrapped up in Mandy and what had happened, that he hadn't taken the time to look. "No. I haven't. I've been too distracted by her, I guess."

Nina merely nodded at him. "Brace yourself when you do, son. There is very little of Mandy left. I believe you are her last chance for something good to happen in her life. Her life is not her own and hasn't been for a very long time. I cannot see very clearly with her, but I can sense she has been given a task she abhors. If she follows through with the task, she will become as evil as the person controlling her, and her soul will cease to exist. If she fails, she will cease to live, though by what means I have no idea. The only chance she has is to eradicate the person controlling her."

Mitch struggled with the sinking feeling within him, but he couldn't argue with his mother's words. They matched his own intuition. With a sigh, he resigned himself to the difficult task ahead. He wasn't worried about the fight ahead. He'd been in plenty of battles and knew the rest of his coven would back him should he need

them. He just didn't look forward to seeing the evil he now knew was still to be discovered.

"Do you know who has control of her?"

"Yes, but I cannot tell you his name. She will tell you by the end of the evening, but it is important that you learn it from her. It is not so much the name as the process you must go through to discover it. There is something that binds her, and you must show her how to set herself free. When she is free, she can tell you everything. Just keep your patience, and remember what I've said."

Mitch sighed again, rubbing his hands across his face. It was an old frustration, knowing his mother knew what was going on but was unable to tell him clearly what he needed to know. Every word was important when she was giving him this type of information, though usually, it didn't make sense until after the related situation had been resolved. "Is there anything else I need to know?" It was usually best to ask open-ended questions with his mother.

"No. Just know we'll be ready when you call for us."

"So, this is going to end in a battle?"

"I can't say. I do know she will have the ability to end the situation herself, though she currently does not know it. It will all depend upon whether she is willing to believe in herself enough to take the chance in trusting her power."

With his mother's words swirling in his head, he kissed her good-bye and left the shop. He stopped at Mandy's car, noticing it was rather old and beat up. He wondered how well it ran. He pulled the small case from the trunk as instructed and returned to the house. Mandy was still in the shower, so he slipped her bag in through the door and closed it quickly. Seeking to distract himself, Mitch gathered his first aid supplies and slid the casserole he'd made earlier into the oven. Mitch had to laugh at himself. He'd felt the urge to make the casserole while making lunch for the boys. Even though he'd thought it strange, he'd relied on his urges for too long to ignore them, though

why it was important to make a casserole he'd had no idea. Once again, he was glad he'd listened to what his gut was telling him.

Right now, though, his gut was telling him that the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen had just stepped out of his guest bathroom in a pair of ragged cutoff shorts and a formfitting T-shirt.

\* \* \* \*

Mandy felt much better after washing the river water off. She couldn't dry her hair because she hadn't packed a hair dryer, and she had decided to not wear makeup. She knew Mitch wanted to see the real her, and frankly, she had a feeling she would be crying by the end of the evening. She limped her way out of the bathroom, looking around in search of Mitch, finally finding him in the kitchen. The house was as gorgeous inside as it was outside. Polished hardwood covered the floor, giving the home a warm feeling. The furnishings were simple but comfortable, inviting you to sink in and relax a while. A large rock fireplace dominated the corner of the living room, making Mandy wish the weather was cool enough to allow them to light it. The kitchen was a delight, light and airy, with plenty of space and storage. She could smell whatever Mitch had just slid into the oven, and her stomach growled loudly in response.

Mitch wasn't so caught up in staring that he missed the sound of Mandy's stomach growling. "It just needs to bake thirty minutes, then we can eat. Do you want something to drink in the meantime?"

Mandy thought a minute, wondering when she'd agreed to stay for dinner. She wasn't going to object, however. Whatever it was smelled wonderful, and she was starving, as usual. Mandy told him her choice and limped over to sit on the couch, close to where he had gathered his medical supplies. She lifted her foot to rest it against the coffee table, examining her ankle. It was swollen and had some light bruises but wasn't that bad. If she had been at the compound, she wouldn't

have even allowed herself to limp. Showing weakness there wasn't a good idea.

Mitch sat on the coffee table next to Mandy's foot before taking it in his hands, gently examining it, flexing it gently to test her range of motion. Appearing to accept Mandy's assurances that she wasn't badly injured, he wrapped it in an elastic bandage to keep it from moving too much to allow it time to heal. Mandy simply sat back and watched him examine and treat her foot, seeming amused at his worry.

"You know, the only reason I'm letting you do that is so you won't worry."

"I know. But thank you for humoring me. I can tell you're not used to having anyone take care of you." Mandy simply snorted back at him, implying there was no one who would take care of her. Sitting on the sofa next to her, but far enough away to twist in his seat so he could face her completely, he began. "Tell me about your life, and why you've been injured so severely so often."

"I can't tell you everything I want to. I want to tell you it all, I really do. But I cannot." Mandy whispered, looking down at her hands twisting in her lap. When she looked up into his eyes, hers were glassy with unshed tears. "I live with a group of people headed by a man named Devon Cabela. I was brought to the group when I was fourteen and have been with them for five-and-a-half years."

"You joined a coven at fourteen? That's a little early to begin your training, isn't it?" Mitch appeared a little confused by her wording, but it was nothing compared to the confusion Mandy was experiencing.

"You know about covens?" she whispered. Had she stumbled across a Gifted One?

"Of course I know about covens. I'm a master GO," he replied casually. He was astounded, however, by her reaction. Moving faster than anyone he'd ever seen, she was on her knees in front of him with her ankles flat to the floor. Considering her sprain, the position

seemed most uncomfortable. She sat there with her butt touching her heels, her chest touching her knees, and her forehead touching the floor. Her arms were extended in front of her, with her hands splayed flat on the floor. The position was one of complete submission. From above her, he could now see the crookedness of the fingers that had been broken.

“I’m sorry, Master! I didn’t know! Please forgive me,” she pled, her volume at a whisper, but the pleading no less audible in her voice. When Mitch was able to shake off his shock, he shifted in his seat, meaning to reach down to pull her back onto the couch. He froze, however, when he saw her flinch in response to the sound of his movements. Recognizing the reaction, he kept his movements slow and gentle as he reached out his hand and gently rested it on the back of her head. He could feel her startle beneath his touch, the reaction squelched almost as soon as it happened. He could also feel the fear coming off of her in sickening waves. He had a feeling he’d stumbled upon the reason for her beatings.

Mandy tried not to quiver as she maintained her submissive position, ignoring the screaming coming from her ankle as she’d ignored many other, often worse, injuries. She thought back to how she’d spoken to Mitch and wanted to hurt herself for being so forward. He had every reason to punish her after how she had treated him. Granted, she’d had no idea he was a GO, and perhaps that would mitigate some of the punishment she knew she had coming. She was so afraid, though it made her heart sick to be afraid of the one man she’d ever felt any kind of positive reaction to since she’d been taken. Be that as it may, he was a Master, right now, her Master, and she had not treated him as such.

When Mandy felt his hand rest upon the back of her head, she couldn’t help the instinctive flinch. “I’m sorry, Master!” she whispered again, the tears freely falling from her eyes. She wasn’t crying because she was in pain or was afraid of being hurt. That she

expected. She was crying because she was angry at herself. She had allowed herself to forget her place due to her attraction to Mitch.

“Mandy,” Mitch started, pausing again when she whimpered almost inaudibly, before continuing, “Mandy, please stop that. Sit back on the couch how you were so we can talk.”

Almost before Mitch had finished his sentence, Mandy had returned to her exact former position, though she had clearly withdrawn into herself, her eyes cast down in continued submission. He was again startled at how quickly she moved in her obedience. It made his heart sick to realize what had made her become that way. Mitch realized it was past time for him to look into her aura, her inner energies. “Please stay still for a few moments until I tell you to move.” She didn’t respond to him, simply becoming perfectly still. It was almost eerie how still she became. He could tell she was breathing, but only barely.

Mitch took a deep breath, clearing his mind to allow himself to focus on using other senses. Normally, he could do this without effort, but his awareness of her was interfering with his inner peace, despite the fact he felt oddly content while touching her. Once he was concentrating, however, her aura came into focus easily. It was a good thing his mother had warned him to brace himself. He’d never seen someone’s aura so destroyed. There was just a single spark of life at her very center, above her heart. She had started out good, he could tell. That goodness had been destroyed or overcome by some type of external evil. He’d seen auras like this, from victims of horrific crimes. The more severe and long-lasting the crime was, the more of the aura it destroyed. Mandy had been damaged almost beyond repair. Now he knew what his mother was alluding to and why Mandy was wearing the crystals she had on. If someone didn’t step in to save her soon, she would be lost forever.

Mitch’s repulsion and anger at her treatment couldn’t be contained, making his voice rough when he spoke again. “Mandy.” He stopped when she flinched slightly before regaining her former

position. He fought for a moment and was finally certain he could speak without sounding threatening. “Mandy, tell me about your coven.”

Mandy took a deep breath and began speaking in a soft voice. Clearly, her speaking volume was a part of her submissive stature. “I belong to the Cabela coven. Our compound is just outside El Paso.” Mitch was surprised to hear that the coven was so close. There were only about thirty known covens throughout the US, and he knew the leaders of most of them and certainly the head of the covens closest to them. The Cabela coven’s compound was about ten hours away from his current location outside of a tiny town by the name of Rockland, Texas.

Mandy continued, though her tone of voice changed drastically. “We’re a big family. We love each other and take great care of each other. Cabela is a wonderful leader and has taught me so much. I love getting to live with my coven. If I had my way, I would never leave home.” Mitch had to fight off a shiver of horror. Her voice had become completely flat, devoid of all emotion, as if she was reciting a particularly boring piece of literature. She had clearly been trained to say that.

“Is it Cabela who beats you?” Mitch asked the question, watching her closely. He could actually see her struggle to pronounce the word she wished, nearly choking herself with the effort, before giving up and stating in her flat tone, “Of course not. Even when I don’t do something right, he just corrects me gently and with love.”

Had Mitch been listening just to the words, he might have been thrown off by her answer, but he’d seen her struggle with trying to say something entirely different. He was beginning to suspect the reason for her recitations, but he needed to see her eyes to be convinced when he asked his next question.

“Mandy, please look me in the eye while we’re talking about this.” Mandy immediately raised her eyes to his, and Mitch was taken aback by the amount of pain and sorrow in them. He didn’t need to



hear what her mouth was saying. If he asked his questions right, she would give him her real answer with her eyes, despite what might be issuing from her mouth.

Just as he opened his mouth to continue his questioning, the timer on the oven buzzed. With a deep sigh, he pulled himself off the couch and went to remove the casserole from the oven. He would wait until after they'd eaten to continue the conversation. For now, however, how was he supposed to get her to loosen up? After a moment of thought, he thought that perhaps he had a solution.

"Mandy..." Mitch began before startling again at how fast she was next to him.

"Yes, Master?"

Mitch sighed again. The whole "Master and Servant" thing might be fun for role-playing in the bedroom, but this was getting old fast.

"For the remainder of the evening, I want you to stop acting like you know I am a Master. I want you to answer my questions honestly and how you want to answer them, not how you have been trained to answer. I want you to relax and allow us to just get to know each other. I feel we have a lot of things to discuss tonight."

Mitch could see Mandy struggling within herself before she relaxed her body a bit, seeming a bit more natural. "I will try to do so, Mas...Mitch. Please forgive me if I slip up, though. I have been taught my position well, and it is very difficult to reverse five years of intensive training."

"I understand, and I promise to not get upset with you if you should slip up." Mitch watched as relief clearly flowed through Mandy. Hopefully, the rest of the night wouldn't be as difficult if he could continue to find ways around her training.

## Chapter 2

Despite his promise, Mandy remained somewhat stiff and uncommunicative. Dinner was eaten quickly, neither really wanting to linger overly long. Mitch did notice, however, how Mandy nearly inhaled her dinner before going back for seconds. Considering her size, he concluded she didn't often get to eat her fill.

"You were hungry, Mandy."

"Yes, Mitch. I'm often hungry."

"Do you not get enough to eat at the compound?" Again, Mandy seemed about to speak before literally choking on her words. Seeing her continued struggle to answer him and obey his current command, Mitch released her from the question. "It's okay, Mandy. I understand." The relief shining in her tear-filled eyes was profound as she took several deep breaths. Mitch wondered if the order was so strongly ingrained she would incapacitate herself in her effort to obey, though he didn't really want to find out. He motioned for them to move back to the couch, where they sat at opposite ends but turned toward each other.

"Thank you, Mitch. I am trying to answer you as you wished, but I must also obey other orders given to me by Cabela."

"I understand now. Can I ask you about those orders?" Mandy nodded. "Is the order specific to you speaking?" Mandy shook her head. "Is physical movement included?" Mandy nodded. "Writing included?" Mandy nodded once more. He was making progress, slow as it might be. "Is the order to not communicate anything negative about your leader or your coven?"

Once again, Mandy's mouth began forming an answer before she began choking. Mitch hurried to assure her. "It's okay, I withdraw the question. I can see the answer in your eyes." Mandy took a deep breath, clearly frustrated with not being able to speak freely. "Tell me what you want, Mandy."

Mandy apparently didn't even have to think about what she wanted as she began to answer immediately. "I want to talk to you. I want to tell you everything. I want to spend time with you. I want you. I want you to save me." The last part was whispered so quietly he was amazed he could actually hear it, and he didn't miss the part about wanting him. "I don't want to leave. I don't want to return to the compound. I don't want to complete my mission. I don't want to be evil." With this last part, Mandy had to literally force it out of her throat. Her declarations were skirting the injunction.

"I think I know a way to remove these injunctions for you, but it's going to take some work, and you're going to have to make some decisions. Are you ready to hear my ideas?" Mandy nodded, a small spark of hope shining in her eyes. "The orders you are under sound like loyalty oaths. Is that correct?" With Mandy's affirmative answer, Mitch continued. "You can be released from those oaths by only two ways. One is from the person to whom you swore loyalty." Mandy's eyes grew wide, and she shook her head swiftly. "The second option is for you to change your loyalty to another coven leader."

"Really? I didn't know that was possible. He always told us once we were part of his coven, not even death would release us from the bond."

"No, not even a blood oath can override a change in fealty. This is an option for you. My father is the head of our coven, and I am positive he will offer you an opportunity to join us, if that is your wish. This will release you from your oaths and your required subservience to your old coven. They will never have power over you again. Is this something you would like to pursue?"

Mandy sat in a daze for a moment before falling to her knees in front of Mitch again, this time weeping over and kissing his feet. Mitch was frozen for a moment at seeing her display of gratitude before the anger blew through him once again. They were going to pay for turning this beautiful woman into a petrified slave. Mitch gently took her shoulders in his large hands and pulled her up to sit in his lap. He tucked her head under his chin and held her while she cried out her relief. He could feel her tears dampening his T-shirt while her hands clasped it tightly, holding him to her as if she never wanted to let him go. At this point, he could honestly say he felt the same way. Suddenly, Mandy stiffened, the fear once again flowing off of her in waves.

“What’s wrong? Why are you afraid?”

Mandy struggled for a moment before changing her mind about her words, simply saying, “I can’t say.” She trusted he would know what she meant.

“Are you afraid of something that will result from your change of allegiance?”

Mandy nodded, appearing relieved that he was following her thought path.

“Are you afraid Cabela will be able to hurt you?” This time, Mandy simply answered with her eyes. “Has he threatened you?” Again, she could only answer with her eyes. They’d found a loophole. As long as he kept with yes or no questions and could read her eyes, something she could not control, they could communicate more effectively. “He threatened to beat you if you left the covenant?” Mandy’s facial response to that was clearly r, “Duh.” Mitch was amused at the response, so he smirked and replied, “Okay, that one was kind of dumb. He beats you often. Did he threaten to kill you?”

When Mitch read the answer in Mandy’s eyes and saw she believed Cabela would make good on his threat, he took a deep breath to steady his emotions. He didn’t want Mandy to pick up on his growing anger and think she had caused it. “Has he followed through

on that threat for others?" This time his answer was the pain in her eyes.

"Penny was the only friend I've really had since being liberated." Mitch blinked at the word "liberated." "She was sixteen when she came to us, a little older than the norm. She did not take to her behavior training well. Less than a year after joining us, she didn't return from a shopping trip, though I never did hear what happened to her escort. They tracked her down about a week later."

"How do you know they followed through?"

"Pictures. They always take pictures of their successes and tack them up in the main hallway." Mitch couldn't repress the shudder that worked through him at the thought of a hallway full of pictures of murder victims. "My picture is up there in several places, too, for my accomplishments." Mandy was learning how to talk around her injunction. "My liberation, my indoctrination, when I completed my power training. The most recent is when I graduated from the behavior training, just last week."

"Liberation? Is that their term for kidnapping? You were stolen from your family? How old were you?"

Mandy answered the one question she could. "Fourteen."

"Indoctrination. Is that where you were beaten the first time?" Mandy's eyes showed "yes" before a deeper pain became evident and she, for the first time since he'd ordered her, dropped her eyes from his. Pain and fury lanced through him. He'd been hoping that it had been just the physical abuse. Her response, though, confirmed his greater fear that she had been sexually abused as well. Mitch softly cupped her face in his hands, gently pulling her face back up so he could see it. His voice was thick with pain as he asked, "Mandy, were you raped?"

Mandy's eyes filled with tears once again, telling him what he hadn't wanted to know. "More than once?" Mandy's eyes filled with shame before dropping down to look at his chin.

“How often?” Not a yes or no question, she can’t answer it, idiot, he reminded himself. “Cabela?” Her eyes came up to answer “yes.” “Just Cabela?” No. “Other members of your coven?” Yes. At this point, Mitch decided to back away from the topic. He could see that she was becoming more and more upset. Obviously it was something that she didn’t want to think about. Once she was able to speak freely, though, they were going to revisit the issue, and he told her as much.

“When we can talk freely, we’re going to talk about everything they did to you, Mandy. It’s going to be painful, but if you do not share the pain with someone else, you will not be able to recover from it. You have to let go of the pain for its taint to wash away.” Mandy nodded weakly before tucking her head back under his chin, snuggling deeply into his chest. Mitch could only wrap his arms tightly around her, offering her the sanctuary she desperately needed. He held her tightly, rocking slightly as one might do with a baby, as her trembling finally slowed, and her body began to relax. It wasn’t long before she was completely limp, deeply asleep, content in his arms. Mitch realized he’d never felt so content in his life.

He held her for a while longer before carrying her to his bed. He would take the couch, as the rooms that would normally be bedrooms had been converted into his office and a gym. He tucked her in, pulling the covers up to her shoulders, gently brushing the hair from her face. He smiled when she snuggled deeper into his pillow, pulling it close to her chest.

His own chest was being buffeted by the myriad of emotions blowing through him. Fury at the way she’d been treated, sadness that she’d been hurt so badly, pain for her loss of so much, fear that she would never be whole again no matter how he tried, and determination to make Cabela and the rest of the coven pay for what had been done to her. When he’d thought it was just the physical abuse she’d suffered, he’s already planned to take down the coven. With her revelation of the sexual abuse, Mitch was convinced of the coven’s evil and knew that at least Cabela, if not the rest of the upper

echelon, would have to be eradicated permanently. He needed to talk to his dad.

After setting several crystals around the bed, mirroring the ones she wore around her neck, Mitch left Mandy to her rest. She would need every ounce of energy she could get in the coming days.

His father answered on the second ring. "Hello, son. Your mother told me to be expecting your call."

"Hi, Dad. I'm guessing you already know why I'm calling?" Having a precog for a mother was great sometimes and really annoying others. Right now, he was just glad he wouldn't have to repeat everything Mandy had told him. His mother would have seen it and told his father.

"Yes, she told me about our young Mandy. Are you positive you want to take her on? She's been badly damaged, and even your mother isn't sure she can be salvaged."

"Yes, I'm sure. I won't know how badly she's been hurt until after the allegiance ceremony, but I already know she's worth fighting for. She deserves an opportunity to find some kind of happiness in her life."

His dad was silent for a moment before commenting, "Son, I hear something else in your voice. What are you not saying?"

Mitch was quiet himself for a moment. "I'm not sure what it is, Dad, but she's different. She makes me feel different. Our energy melds so easily, but then it grows to be more than what either of us could reach on our own. It's like my body buzzes when I'm touching her. The urge to protect her is massive, like I would die if I allowed her to be hurt again."

"Sounds a bit familiar, but it's not something we need to consider for the moment. Your mother made your airline reservations before she left Texas this morning, and your plane leaves at ten. We'll have everything set up here by the time you land. Your mother tells me this will not be a simple ceremony. Its success is entirely up to Mandy's

will to change loyalties. Has she been able to tell you who her coven leader is?"

"Yes, it's Devon Cabela. Their compound is just outside of El Paso. I didn't even know there was a coven in that part of the state."

Mitch could hear his father, Malcolm, take a deep breath. "I was afraid of that. We've been hearing rumors about a coven that was badly mistreating its members. We hadn't heard anything specific enough to act on, though."

"Well, what I discovered tonight is enough for me to consider death too good for Cabela and his main minions. She's been beaten repeatedly and only given medical care when she would have died otherwise. She has also been raped repeatedly, though I haven't learned how often or how recently. I do know Cabela rapes his latents immediately after kidnapping them to establish his dominance over them. I've never seen anyone act so submissive, Dad. She was on her knees with her forehead to the floor and trembling almost before I'd finished telling her I was a Master. I've had to be careful of what I tell her because she takes everything as a literal command."

His father was quiet again for a few moments as he considered what his son had said. Mitch was his second in command and actually had the most level disposition of everyone in the coven. For Mitch to verbally condemn a man to death was indicative of how badly Mandy had been treated. However Mitch felt about the situation, as leader of his coven, Malcolm was bound by rules made by the Merlin. In order for Mitch, and therefore, Malcolm, to confront and eradicate the evil coven, he had to have approval from the Merlin. The Merlin required that the accusing coven have indisputable evidence against another coven before moving against them. This kept the various covens from fighting over power or territories. Contacting the Merlin was never easy, and if he was going to protect Mandy from her old coven, he needed the Merlin's permission fast.



“I’ll do what I can to contact Merlin. You know how difficult that can be sometimes. I understand she is on a weeklong task, so we have until Sunday to find a solution?”

“Yeah, I think so. We haven’t been able to talk about what the mission is, other than that she doesn’t want to complete it and that it will likely finish destroying her soul and make her evil. Has Mom told you about her aura?”

“Yes, she did. We’ll work on it while you’re here. Son, your mother also said that Mandy is going to need some physical healing, including some things only the women can do. Apparently, her sexual abuse has caused some severe damage internally. The whole coven will help with her healing ceremony, which we’ll schedule for the day after tomorrow. Your mother is unsure as to what degree we will be able to help her heal. Again, it will depend mostly upon Mandy’s strength and need for the change. You’ll want to explain the ceremony to her so she doesn’t freak out.”

“Good point. I’ll tell her in the morning. Anything else?”

“Son, I’m concerned about how emotionally involved you’ve become with her in such a short time. And beyond that, is she too damaged sexually to even try to see if you’re mated?”

It was Mitch who was silent for a few minutes now. Finally, he answered, “I understand your concern, and I share the same concern. I’m not going to push her into testing us, and not just because of her circumstances. On the one hand, my attraction to her is stronger than any I’ve ever felt, and I revel in just having her in my arms. We haven’t even kissed, though the urge to do so is incredibly strong. On the other hand, I’m not sure how I’ll deal with a failed test and having to be nothing more to her than a friend. I already feel much more for her than that. I honestly don’t know what to do about our relationship, nor do I really know what she wants. She did say she didn’t want to leave me and that she wanted me, but she didn’t exactly expound on what that last one meant.”

Malcolm chuckled before responding, “They never do, son, they never do. I’m over three hundred years old and been married for two hundred fifty, and I still don’t understand your mother, much less women in general. I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon. Take care until then. Try not to leave Cabela a trail he can follow. I have a feeling that her showing up at a children’s camp wasn’t just by chance.”

“Okay, Dad. I’ll see you then.” Mitch hung up the phone still feeling conflicted, though the topic of the conflict had changed. How had he gotten in so deep emotionally in less than twelve hours? He could only wonder and hope things worked out well at this point.

Giving up on his compulsion to try to figure out the issues before him, he decided to go check on Mandy a last time before settling onto the couch. It wasn’t going to be comfortable, but he needed to recharge as much as he could. Mitch walked back to his room, opening the slightly ajar door gently. He was startled to find Mandy curled up into a tight ball pressed into the upper corner of the bed. He could tell she was still asleep, but her posture and whimpers told him that even in her sleep, her abuse haunted her. Moving entirely on instinct, he crept to where she lay, taking care to not make any sudden noises or movements that might awaken her. Keeping his touch featherlight, he placed his hand on her shoulder. She shuddered at his touch before relaxing toward his hand, pushing up toward it. Apparently, her body had recognized his touch as safe and wanted more. She allowed him to gently uncoil her, letting her stretch her body out on the bed again. This worked so long as Mitch was touching her, but as soon as he took his hands away, her frown would return, and her body would start to curl back up on itself.

It didn’t take Mitch long to come to the conclusion that the only way she was going to get any real rest, and therefore, the only way he was going to get rest, was to lay with her. As if that was a hardship. Mitch lay down beside her, still being careful not to startle her. As soon as he was comfortable, she turned over toward him, digging her head into his chest as she pressed her body to his before draping a leg

over his. Mitch's physical response was immediate. His body ignited with a desire he'd never experienced in over 150 years of life. Ignoring the hunger drumming inside him, he merely wrapped his arms around her and settled in to, if nothing else, lay there for the rest of the night watching over her. He knew if they ever explored each other sexually, it would be when she was ready and not a moment before.

"I'm here now, Mandy. You don't have to be scared or hurt anymore. I won't let anyone ever touch you again. I promise."

Mandy sighed deeply, tightening her arms in a hug as if acknowledging what he'd promised even in her sleep. Mitch lifted his head and placed a soft kiss on the top of her head before relaxing back. He continued to think about her and soon found himself asleep.

\* \* \* \*

*Mitch could hear the crashing of waves and smell sea air as he became aware of his surroundings. He took a moment to take in everything his senses were telling him. Besides the sea sounds and scent, he could feel a faint breeze brushing across his body, offering coolness in respite of the warm air that pressed down upon him. Beneath his back, something incredibly soft and relaxing supported every curve of his body. When he was ready, he slowly slid open his eyes, blinking several times as he became accustomed to the light. He was lying on a large bed covered in the softest linens he'd ever felt. Examining the room around him, he concluded he was in some type of beach house. French doors were open to the beach beyond. The finely grained sand was bleached white while the water beyond the shoreline was a piercing blue that was so brilliant it almost hurt to look at. He could see a couple of palm trees off to the left, their leaves swaying in the wind. What captured his attention, though, was the brightly colored beach umbrella stuck deeply into the sand, shading the brilliant sun from the beautiful woman sitting on a white slatted*

*lounge chair. He couldn't see much of her, only from the tops of her shoulders up, but he recognized her hair.*

*Mitch got up, making his way quickly toward the lounge. She turned a page in a book as he came up behind her. The sand had cushioned his footsteps, so she was unaware she was no longer alone. Not wanting to scare her, he softly cleared his throat. She startled badly anyway and swiftly jumped up from her chair, only to lose her footing in the shifting sand and fall directly into his waiting arms. His heart jumped in his chest when he saw she was wearing an ice blue bikini under a white overshirt. Her body was filled out as it should be if she was getting enough to eat. Her breasts had filled out a bit with the extra weight and were the perfect size to fit into his hand. Her waist was still slim, tapering into rounded hips and ass, giving her a perfect hourglass figure. Her legs were lean and well-muscled, looking just long enough to wrap around his waist.*

*Mitch had to shake himself from his perusal of her body before his interest became embarrassingly visible. "Mandy, it's okay. It's Mitch. Calm down."*

*"Mitch? What are you doing here?" Mandy asked, clearly confused by his presence. She looked back at the house before focusing on the man standing before her. His chiseled chest was bare, beautifully muscled and lightly scattered with hair that trailed down the center of a perfect set of abs. She could see that he had an eight-pack, something she'd never cared about before. The tops of his hips peaked out above the top of his white cotton sleep pants, just showing the beginning of his men's "V" that led down to a rather large bulge. As she stared, he grew harder, and she had to force herself to look away from his body so she could concentrate on his answer.*

*"I don't know. Where is here? It's beautiful." The timbre of his voice belied the rest of his sentiment. "You're beautiful."*

*"It's my current happy place. Actually, the scenery changes often depending on my mood and how hot it is outside, but there have never been any other people here before. It's where I go when I can't stand*

*to be in the real world anymore.” Mandy still looked shaken as she sat back down on her chair, her face still a bit pale, and her eyes wide. Mitch began to look around for something else to sit down on, not really wanting to get sand all over his pajama pants, which he was relieved to discover he was wearing, when he was startled by the appearance of another chair behind him. At the disconcerted look on his face, Mandy began to giggle, morphing quickly into a low-pitched laugh that had need tightening low in Mitch’s belly. He sat down as her laughter began to wind down. “Sorry, the look on your face was priceless. It’s my dream, so I can do anything I want in it.”*

*Mitch considered her statement a moment. “You have lucid dreams?”*

*“What does that mean? I didn’t exactly get to finish high school, remember?” Her tone was teasing, though Mitch could detect an underlying bitterness.*

*“It’s where you’re aware that what you are experiencing is a dream, which gives you some control over the dream itself.” He’d heard about the phenomenon and had tried it on multiple occasions, but while he could become aware he was dreaming, he never could control what was happening.*

*“Oh, yeah. I’ve done that for years. It started with nightmares. I always felt so helpless, with no control over what was happening to me. Too much of that crap happens in my real life, so I started fighting back the only way I could by creating a safe place for me to escape to. I visit at least once a night now while I’m sleeping, in addition to any time I need to pull my mind away from my body. Like I said, it’s my escape.” Mitch understood her unspoken words. She mentally escaped here when she was being raped, escaping from the moment the only way she could. He was impressed by her mental strength and ability to focus despite the interference around her.*

*“Wow, that’s powerful. You’ll have to teach me how to gain that level of focus.” Mitch cast a glance around the area, confirming they were completely alone. They could be on an uninhabited island for all*

he knew. *“So, because you’re obviously in control, what am I doing here? I assume you essentially summoned me?”*

*“I don’t know. Like I said, there has never been anyone else here. I’m always alone. What is the last thing you remember? Were you sleeping? Are you dreaming this, too?”*

*“The last thing I remember is going to sleep, holding you in my arms. As for dreaming, I have no idea, though I’m not surprised you would star in my dreams. What were you thinking about a few minutes ago right before I showed up? Perhaps that will give us a clue as to what you might have wanted me for.”*

*Oddly enough, a bright blush spread across Mandy’s face before she turned away to hide her reaction. Mitch became very intrigued. Apparently unable or unwilling to answer his question aloud, she simply handed him her book, open to the page she’d been reading when he’d walked up and scared her. Mitch skimmed the page quickly before freezing in place when the meaning of the words became clear. She had been reading a smutty romance book and was in the middle of a rather torrid sex scene. The realization was like a punch to his gut, making him breathless and hard immediately. Mandy was aroused by what she was reading and had summoned him as soon as he’d slipped into unconsciousness.*

*Mitch’s blue eyes were intense and burning with lust when he raised them to meet Mandy’s. His normally relaxed face tensed with his sexual excitement. A growl of need built within his chest as he gently placed the book down on the ground near her chair, being sure to keep her place. As he started to move toward her, she held up one hand in the “stop” position. Mitch froze immediately before sitting back into his chair.*

*Mandy scooted forward in her chair before leaning toward Mitch, clasping his large calloused hands with her small, delicate ones. Her voice was pitched lower than normal, pulling a shudder of need from him before he could focus on understanding her words. “There are some things you need to know first, Mitch. Yes, I want you, in that*

way. *That is a first for me. I haven't been attracted to a man since I was enamored with \*NSYNC back before I was taken. It took me a bit to figure out what I was feeling. Beyond the physical chemistry that is clearly between us, at least in my dreams, I am drawn to you mentally as well as emotionally. I don't know how to explain it well. I just feel like, well, like I can be who I really am with you, and I crave that. I also feel incredibly safe with you. I know you won't hurt me. Plus, I feel content with you, like I can finally relax. I have hope now, hope that I can heal and become a whole person.*" Mandy took a moment to regather herself before leaning her face into Mitch's warm hand when he reached up to cup her cheek.

*"Mandy, I am drawn to you as well. You are safe with me, I promise you that. I won't ever hurt you. And I also promise to help you heal as much as I can. It's not going to be easy or quick, but I promise to be there every step of the way, as long as you'll let me."* Mitch stroked her cheek one more time with the back of his fingers before reaching to take her hand once more, raising it to place a gentle kiss on the back. He wanted to give her as much time to talk as she needed. He could be patient.

*Mandy gave him a watery smile before continuing. "Thank you. That means a great deal to me. I haven't had anyone I could count on in so long."*

*"You're not alone anymore, Mandy."* She squeezed his hands in silent thanks while a couple of tears tracked down her face. Mitch gently wiped the tears away, smiling softly at her. He watched as her eyes shifted. Some new thought had caught her attention.

*"Would you mind calling me by my entire first name? I've come to loathe my nickname."* Anyone specifically saying her name usually foretold that a beating or a rape was about to commence. When they added her "last" name, she knew it was going to be really bad.

*The sentiment made complete sense to Mitch. "I can see how you could. What is your given name?"*

*“It’s Miranda. My family nicknamed me Mandy as soon as I was born. My grandpa was the only one who used to call me by my full name. I’d forgotten that until now.”*

*“Miranda,” Mitch said, seeing how the name felt on his tongue. “I like it. It might take a bit to get used to, but we’ll get there. So, Miranda, was there anything else you wanted to talk about?” Mitch’s voice rumbled low in her ears as he leaned forward in his chair, moving his body closer to hers and coming very close to pressing his lips to hers before she stopped him again.*

*Miranda took a ragged breath, proving she was just as affected as he was, before continuing, “Yes, there are some more things you should understand before we continue with any kind of intimacy.”*

*Mitch leaned back, giving her room, before saying, “Okay, talk to me. You know you can tell me anything.”*

*Miranda looked down at their entwined hands and took a deep breath. Her face reddened in another blush at her thoughts, but she forced herself to speak “Mitch, despite my experiences with the coven, there are still many things I am completely innocent of. I have never been kissed. I’ve never been touched in a loving manner or been made love to. I have never enjoyed sex, much less had an orgasm. I’ve never wanted to have those things done to me outside of daydreams about my smutty books until I met you. I’ve also never experienced physical attraction. I’ve never felt the need to touch someone else the way I need to touch you. I want to explore your body and discover what gives you pleasure. I’ve never wanted to give someone pleasure before. I can’t wait to touch and taste you all over.” Miranda’s face continued to burn as she shared her thoughts, though she was able to raise her eyes when she heard him moan.*

*“Oh, Miranda. You’re burning me alive with your words. I’ve never wanted someone the way I want you. I promise you, I will not do anything you do not want. You will set the pace.” Once again, Mitch brushed his hands across Miranda’s face gently, almost lovingly. The soft look on his face held a hint of sadness to it.*



*“There’s something else we need to talk about, Miranda. How much do you know about how Gifted Ones are mated?”*

*“I didn’t know there was something specific about it. I just assumed it was like regular people. They meet, fall in love, get married. Why?”*

*Mitch sighed before answering, “It’s nothing like that for Gifted Ones. Our lifemates are chosen by the fates. When a pair is mated, a ring of flesh rises around their necks. The crest is unique to each pair. The process is quite painful, so there is no doubt as to their mating.”*

*“So, how does a GO find their lifemate?”*

*“The mating takes place only during sex. To find one’s lifemate, a GO must, essentially, sleep around, testing each possibility. And because it happens during the first time a pair is together, if it doesn’t happen, there is no need for the pair to continue relations. That is why the Merlin made the rule about not having sex with a person more than once. So people don’t become too attached to someone they cannot permanently mate with.” Miranda’s face showed her confusion regarding the rule he’d just stated. “You’ve never heard of the rule?” Miranda shook her head. “There are rules that govern all Gifted Ones. One of those rules forbids having sex with a person more than once unless mated. It’s a rule that really isn’t enforced that often because people do fall in love and decide to stay together, even if it’s against fate’s dictation. They simply stop looking for their intended. Of course, it’s not exactly fair to their intended, since they no longer have the opportunity to mate and have children. The parties involved in a non-mated union have to accept they will not be able to have children of their own and may be ostracized by their coven. It doesn’t happen often, the ostracizing, but it has happened.”*

*Miranda caught onto what he was saying quickly. “That is not an option for you, is it?”*

*“No. Not as second-in-command and heir apparent. It doesn’t matter how much I might love someone, I will still have to continue searching for my intended. And I don’t see how any woman could*

*stand by while their husband is forced to go “testing” as many other females as possible. Plus, I couldn’t do that to someone I loved anyway. I could never hurt them like that.”*

*“Where does that leave us? Is there an ‘us’?”*

*“I don’t know. It leaves me conflicted. On the one hand, I have never craved a woman more than I crave you. I’ve never felt for anyone else what I feel for you, even after so short a time. I feel I could easily love you, if I don’t already. On the other hand, I am scared if we should make love, it would fail the mating test. After that, I could never be anything more than a friend to you, and I already want to be so much more. As it stands, there really isn’t anything we can do about it. I know you need time to heal, emotionally and physically, so we can put off a decision until after that.”*

*“I understand what you’re saying. I’m just afraid something will happen to split us up, and if we put off being together, it will be too late. Do I understand correctly it is only during intercourse that the test occurs? So we could please each other physically as long as we didn’t become one?” Mitch nodded. Miranda stood up from her chair, indicating she wanted Mitch to stand up as well. “What about here? Can we be fully intimate in our dreams?” Miranda tugged Mitch’s hand, leading him back toward the house.*

*Mitch thought deeply for several moments, almost unaware of where Miranda was leading him. “Yes, I think we can be intimate without triggering the mating test or disobeying the law. We wouldn’t physically be doing anything, just loving each other with our minds. Are you sure you want to explore that, though?”*

*“Absolutely. I want you to show me how it feels to be loved, Mitch. Emotionally and physically. Can you do that for me?” Miranda whispered, pulling herself onto the bed before widening her knees enough to allow Mitch to step between them.*

*Mitch stroked his hands over her hair before bringing them forward to cup her face in his hands. “Yes, Miranda. I can do that for you. But if at any time you begin to feel uncomfortable, you must stop*

*me immediately. Like I said earlier, you are in charge here. We will only do what you want, when you want it. Okay?"*

*Miranda looked up into Mitch's eyes, seeing the gentleness there, along with an emotion she couldn't place, wouldn't place, but which she suspected was shining from her own eyes. Miranda nodded her agreement. Her heart was thundering in her chest in excitement and anticipation. There was no fear. Miranda knew that she had nothing to fear from Mitch, other than the possibility of losing him. She had no idea how she could have come to care so much for another person so quickly, but she had. She wasn't about to waste time on what-ifs, not when they might not have much time.*

*Miranda reached up, running her hands up Mitch's bare chest. She'd been dying to touch it since she first saw him in the river. She could feel Mitch's chest rumble in a low moan, which set off her own. Miranda continued the path upward, finally reaching his neck to pull him the last few inches toward her. Mitch's lips met hers hesitantly, softly. There was nothing gentle about the thrill that went through her, though. Miranda moaned deep in her throat again, desire burning through her every thought until all she could feel was Mitch and what he was doing to her.*

*Mitch's reaction to their chaste kiss took him by surprise. His body blazed for her, aching to feel every inch of her pressed against him. He somehow managed to keep the kisses gentle and slow, not wanting to scare her. He couldn't remember ever feeling this enflamed over something as simple as a kiss. Finally, he couldn't stop himself from pushing for something more. He slid his tongue out, lightly licking her bottom lip, asking for entrance. Immediately, Miranda groaned deep in her chest, opening her mouth and melding herself to him. Their tongues dueled, exploring each other's mouths, sharing their breath. Mitch wasn't sure how it happened, but he became aware that he'd pushed Miranda back onto the bed and half-covered her body with his own. He could feel her breasts pushing into his chest, and her hip pressed against his thigh. He thought he might*

*combust from the feel of her body pressed against his own. Miranda pulled her outer leg up, her foot dragging along his leg before hooking her ankle around his knee and pulling him even tighter against her wet heat and his hard cock into her hip. He'd been trying to keep his hardness from touching her, fearing it would trigger bad memories, but she only moaned again, pressing herself even harder against him.*

*Miranda couldn't believe the heat rushing through her veins. She felt like her body was on fire, and she was desperate to feel Mitch's hard body pressed even tighter against her own. She could not get him close enough, not even if she unzipped his skin and crawled in. She allowed her hands to roam his chiseled chest and shoulders, lightly caressing each ridge and bulge of muscle and sinew. The man's body was sinful, and Miranda couldn't wait to explore it further. She pushed against Mitch's shoulder gently, meaning for him to turn them over, but instead he froze before beginning to carefully pull away. Miranda clutched at his shoulders, not allowing him to move further away.*

*"No, baby, it's okay. I just wanted us to roll over so I could be on top. I didn't mean for you to stop." Mitch hesitated a moment longer, looking into her eyes to assure himself she really was okay. He also took a moment to revel in her use of a loving pet name. No one had ever called him that except during the throes of passion, and even then, he'd always wondered if it was because they'd forgotten his name. Mitch smiled at Miranda before rolling them over so he was now on his back and she was sprawled on top of him. It felt really good to have her slight weight resting on him, like he'd been crafted to hold her. Unsure of where to allow his hands to settle, he finally placed them on the bed beside them. Miranda was apparently not content with that, however, as she pulled both hands up to clasp her hips as she moved to straddle him. They both moaned loudly at the feel of their groins pressed against each other.*

*Miranda enjoyed the feeling of control being on top gave her, and she fully intended to take advantage of it. She leaned back down to continue their kisses, her hardened nipples brushing across the sparse hair on his chest, before she began trailing her lips across his chiseled jaw to the delicate flesh below his ear. She licked the spot, causing Mitch to moan and shift under her. She continued her explorations, licking her way down his neck, stopping periodically to nip and suck at a particularly sensitive area, often causing him to gasp or twitch. She could feel Mitch's breathing become heavy and fast and his body grow even harder beneath her. She pressed her dripping pussy down along his length, shuddering at the feel of having him pressed so intimately against her.*

*She continued her kisses down his chest, stopping to lick and nibble at his flat nipple, teasing it to a hard little point. Mitch shuddered beneath her when she gently bit down on it, before blowing cool across the wetness left behind. His moans were nearly continuous now, coming with each exhale. His hands on her hips, despite his efforts at keeping them gentle, held tightly to her, helping her grind her wet heat down onto his hard cock. She could feel him as she ground her throbbing pussy against him rhythmically, the length and breadth of his still-covered member making her body beg for more. Her own body was trembling, the tension within her coiling.*

*"Mitch," Miranda gasped out between kisses. "Is it possible to have an orgasm with what we're doing?"*

*Mitch groaned loudly as his hands tightened convulsively on her hips. "Yes, baby, it certainly is, though I didn't know that until just now. You're going to make me explode in my pants if we keep doing this. Oh, God, Miranda, please don't stop," Mitch finally ground out. His voice was low and gravelly when he answered her, making her shiver as goose bumps spread up her back from where his hands held her. She could feel her body tighten even more with his words. Instinctively, she lifted from her almost horizontal position above his*

*chest until she was sitting upright on him, her weeping cunt perfectly positioned over his rock-hard cock.*

*“Aargh! Never going to stop.” She loudly groaned, the sound echoed by Mitch a beat later. The change in position pushed them both a step closer to the edge they sought. Miranda wrapped her hands tightly around Mitch’s wrists, holding tightly as he continued to help her grind her body down onto him. She opened her eyes and looked at the man shuddering beneath her. His entire body was tensed, his lips pulled back almost into a snarl, his blue eyes glowing in their intensity. He was almost feral in his need, and rather than scaring Miranda, it only made her revel in her ability to do that to this man.*

*Mitch couldn’t believe what they were doing. He hadn’t been this close to the edge so soon since he was a teenager. They’d barely kissed, and he hadn’t even touched her beyond the outsides of her hips, and yet her lithe body worked above his, grinding down as he thrust upward, their rhythm perfect together. She was exquisite, with her hair tumbling around her shoulders, her eyes glowing a bright green, a flush working its way across her breasts that threatened to spill out of her bikini top, and her stomach clenching with each stroke. He could see her bikini bottoms were drenched with her desire, and he longed to taste her.*

*“Are you close, baby? Are you going to come for me up there? God, Miranda, please let me touch you, I can see how wet you are through your bottoms. You have to come first, baby, and I can’t last much longer.” Desperation colored Mitch’s growl.*

*“Unngh, yes, Mitch, please touch me! Please make me explode, baby, I feel like I’m so close!” She groaned back at him. Just the thought of him climaxing beneath her nearly pushed her over the edge. She felt one hand leave her hips, so she released that wrist before leaning back a bit, bracing her loose hand on his thigh behind her. Mitch wasted no time moving his hand to her center, gently brushing over her mound before finding her clit behind the material.*

*He wanted to just yank the material aside and begin exploring her soft folds, but felt that she might not be ready for that yet, despite what they were currently doing. They had already gone much further than what he had expected they might, and he didn't want to push her, especially not when she was so close to her first orgasm. Using his thumb, he gently but firmly began working her bundle of nerves while keeping up the thrusting rhythm they'd both so enjoyed. With the loss of the help of his other hand, she wasn't able to grind down on him quite as hard, allowing him to back down from his precipice some so he could concentrate on helping her find hers.*

*Almost as soon as Mitch began stroking her flesh, Miranda's body began shaking violently, and a long, loud moan echoed through the room. She was so close she was nearly insensate with pleasure. "Mitch! Please!" Miranda begged him, though she couldn't say what she was begging him for, beyond release.*

*"Are you ready, Miranda? Are you ready to come all over my hard cock?" His rough talk only made her tremble that much more. She was ready.*

*"Yes, Mitch!" Miranda nearly sobbed, desperate to attain the release just out of her reach. "Please make me come!"*

*Mitch moved his fingers so that his thumb and forefinger flanked her distended clit, before glancing up at her once more, making sure she was ready for what was coming. Her body was nearly vibrating she was so tightly wound. At the bottom of her next down stroke, he pinched the flesh between his fingers gently but firmly, and she shattered above him.*

*Miranda's mind fractured as the tension that had been coiled at her center suddenly exploded within her, flooding every molecule in her body with pleasure. Her cries of his name filled the air as her body clenched down tightly. Her pussy spasmed frantically, quivering in the waves of pleasure as she pressed downward with every ounce of strength she had.*

*As soon as Mitch saw Miranda explode above him, throwing back her head and her body convulsing as wave after wave of pleasure pounded into her, Mitch was desperate to join her in release. He continued to watch her as her orgasm flowed through her. He moved his hand back to her hip and continued his upward thrusts. She was locked into place above him, pressing down onto his hard cock, and it took only three more thrusts before he toppled over the edge after her. Mitch's mind disintegrated into a million pieces, each one painted with the sight of Miranda in ecstasy above him. A primal yell issued from his chest as his back arched sharply, thrusting his hardness up against her harshly as his cock spasmed with each pulse of liquid shooting out of him and soaking his pants and abdomen with wetness.*

*Miranda felt his last thrust blast into her as she continued to tremble above him. Dimly, she was aware of him yelling her name as harsh shudders shook his large frame. Miranda's body began to release its clenched state, and she found she no longer had the strength to hold herself up. She slumped forward just as Mitch's body relaxed from its arched position, though his arms rose to wrap themselves around her. Her trembling melded with his until they both fully relaxed. It was several more moments before they could catch their breaths as they lay basking in the glow of the love they'd made.*

*When Mitch could gather the energy, he raised his head enough to press a kiss to the top of her head. "I need to clean us up," he rasped, almost too tired to talk, much less get up and walk to the bathroom. He startled a bit as he felt his pants shift around him before he realized that Miranda had just wished them clean and in fresh clothes. Mitch was wearing another pair of comfortable cotton sleep pants while Miranda was clothed in a soft-looking shift nightgown. He pulled her to him in a brief hug before snuggling his face into her hair and allowed himself to fall asleep, content with her in his arms.*

*Miranda could only melt into Mitch's chest where she'd landed. It felt so good to be lying with him, completely relaxed and sated, all of her body's needs met for once. She felt him lean up to place a soft kiss*



*to the side of her head, the only place he could reach, before settling back into the bed. When he mentioned needing to get cleaned up, she decided she really didn't want to move, and so she used her long-practiced control of her environment and cleaned and changed them in an instant. She could feel when Mitch jumped in response to the switch then bounced on his chest gently with his resulting chuckles. When he'd finished, he pulled her in for a quick hug before relaxing completely into sleep, though his arms never unwrapped from around her. She knew she would soon be following him into sleep, sprawled atop him as she was. She was utterly content and relaxed. Gathering the last bit of her energy, she tilted her head over enough to press a kiss to his chest before whispering, "I love you, Mitch." Miranda lay her head back down on Mitch's chest, closing her eyes and allowing herself to succumb to sleep.*

As the two lovers fell into a deep sleep in their dream world and slid deeper into sleep in the tangible one, a soft wind began to sweep through the room in which they lay, though no fan was on, and no window was open. As the wind continued to swirl above them, the crystals Mitch had placed about the room with the bed as their center point began to glow. Brightly colored sparks of energy and power began to burst, the resulting sparkles falling upon their skin before sinking into their sleeping bodies.

## Chapter 3

Mitch awoke a few minutes before his alarm clock, which was set for six o'clock. He reached over Miranda's sleeping form to turn it off before it could disturb her. He was one of those lucky people who were clearheaded first thing in the morning, so he had no problem recalling the prior day's events and the vivid dream from the night before. He allowed himself several moments to savor the feel of her relaxed and snuggled against him. He wondered how she would react to him when she awoke. The dream had been so real he couldn't help but feel like the progress made in their relationship was real. His own emotions certainly seemed to have progressed accordingly.

Cognizant of the fleeting time, Mitch knew he would have to wake her. He gently brushed the hair away from her face with his free hand, his other arm still wrapped around her. "Miranda? Baby? It's time to wake up."

Miranda stirred briefly, tightening her arm that was draped across his chest. "Mitch?" she mumbled.

"Yes, baby, it's me. We need to get up soon to get to the airport in time." Mitch couldn't stop himself from continuing his caressing of her face. Miranda's eyes fluttered open, immediately focusing on his eyes. They continued to stare into each other's eyes for several moments, with Mitch still stroking her face, eventually moving down to brush her lips with his fingertips. The awareness between them thickened and deepened. "Miranda," Mitch murmured as he gently pulled her toward him. Their lips softly touched, brushing against each other before settling firmly against each other. Mitch, using the arm still wrapped around her, pulled her up onto his chest more fully.

He gently thrust his hands into her hair, angling their heads so he could deepen the kiss, which she responded to immediately. Their breathing began to deepen as their bodies responded to the rise in excitement.

Suddenly, Miranda stiffened against him, pulling away. Mitch immediately let her go, wondering what had triggered her sudden unease. Her eyes were wide as she took in his face, searching for something, though Mitch had no idea what it was. “Baby, what’s wrong? Talk to me, Miranda.”

Miranda blinked at him a moment before answering. “You called me Miranda. Why?”

Uh-oh, Mitch thought to himself. How was he going to explain this? “Sorry. I had a very vivid dream last night about you. You asked me to call you Miranda because your grandfather used to call you that. We were at a beautiful beach you called your happy place and...”

“I know. I was there. I just wasn’t expecting you to continue the closeness we’d gained while there...”

“Wait a minute. What do you mean, ‘I was there’?”

“I was there. It was my dream. You showed up out of nowhere while I was reading a smutty book. We talked about some stuff and then went to the house and...” Miranda trailed off and blushed, looking down at her hands, which happened to still be resting on Mitch’s naked chest.

“Miranda, I don’t think that was a dream. I think maybe we were on a transcendent plane, one which you created and control. It’s the only thing I can think of that would explain why we both experienced it and remember what happened there.”

“So what does that mean?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t ever encountered that type of power before. Maybe my parents can tell us more. Which reminds me, we need to get going. We need to throw anyone tracking you off our trail

before we go to the airport. Are you supposed to call in and report anytime soon?"

"Yeah, in fact, I was supposed to call in last night, but I got distracted."

"Good, you can throw them off our trail more and give us a little more time."

"I can't lie to them, Mitch. They'll know immediately."

"Well, let's see if we can come up with something truthful that would work. What would you normally tell them if we hadn't met?"

"That I found the camp but there was a Boy Scout troop there this week. I would then be on my way to the next target."

"Just tell them that, then. It's more or less accurate. You're not on your way to their next target but ours. Would that work?"

Miranda thought it over briefly before nodding in agreement. She got up to dig around in her purse. Finally finding her cellphone, she sat back down on the bed near Mitch so he could listen in. She dialed the number, and released a deep breath when the voice mail picked up, clearly relieved she wouldn't have to talk to anyone directly. Miranda left the message and hung up quickly.

She and Mitch quickly dressed, working around each other as if they'd been married for years. The only moment of awkwardness came when Mitch was exiting the shower and Miranda walked in to work on her makeup. They both froze for a moment, staring at each other, before Miranda pivoted on her heel and quickly left the room, leaving Mitch chuckling behind her.

They took Miranda's car to the Dallas airport where they parked it in long-term parking. That, and the earlier message, would hopefully keep Cabela off their trail for the remainder of the week. After a rather large breakfast, they boarded the plane for Charleston and settled in for the four-hour flight. Mitch knew this was the best time to talk about what Miranda would be experiencing when they landed.

"Miranda, we need to talk about the different ceremonies we can expect, but we have to be very quiet about it."

“Okay, I know I’m pretty ignorant of what’s coming.”

“It’s not just that you’re unaware of what is involved, it’s that the ceremonies have parts that are rather intrusive. Especially for someone who has been through what you have.”

“Are you trying to tell me I have to have sex with your father?” Miranda gasped.

“No! No! Not at all. Ick. And keep your voice down!”

Miranda was immediately submissive, lowering her eyes to her hands. “I’m sorry, Mitch.”

Mitch felt like a heel. He hadn’t meant to snap at her like that. “No, Miranda, I’m sorry. Please forgive me. Please don’t back away from me now.” Mitch lifted Miranda’s chin with a finger, bringing her eyes up to gaze into his. “Baby, please don’t go back to that. You’re doing so well. I’m sorry I snapped at you. You didn’t deserve it.”

“It’s okay, Mitch. I understand. Are you sure you want me to not be submissive?”

“Heavens, no. I love your attitude and sass. It rips my heart out when you revert to acting like that. Miranda, I love how you are for real, not how they trained you to be.” Miranda took a moment to search Mitch’s eyes. She found only truth. He did want her to be herself. She smiled at him gently, warmed with the knowledge he cared for her as she was.

Upon hearing the ding signaling that the passengers could unbuckle their seat belts, Mitch raised the armrest from between their seats and pulled Miranda into his arms, arranging a blanket around them both. They sat that way for several minutes, letting the peace that was always generated when they were touching move through them. Mitch adjusted them in their seats so that Miranda was reclining along his torso and their heads were right next to each other. They could speak freely to each other without fear of others overhearing and without straining their necks uncomfortably.

Miranda allowed him to adjust her body how he wanted it. When he’d stopped moving, she adjusted slightly to a more comfortable

angle that allowed her to rest her head with her lips nearly touching his ear. “Tell me what I need to know,” she whispered, her breath brushing across his ear, causing him to shudder beneath her..

“Behave, Miranda. I might be a Master, but I am still just a man. You’re going to kill me if you keep that up.” Mitch realized the moment the words left his lips that she might react negatively to him, so he was extremely relieved when she just chuckled huskily in his ear.

“I think I like being the real me, Mitch. I feel mischievous, like I want to play with you,” she murmured in his ear while dragging her fingernails down his abdomen.

Mitch groaned deep in his throat as erotic images of her “playing” with him blasted through his mind. His body completely ignored his pleas as it stirred strongly beneath her. There could be no doubt he wanted her, badly.

“Mmmm, you are so hard beneath me, Mitch. I never thought I’d feel this for anyone, but I want to touch you, to feel your cock in my hands. Can I do that, Mitch?”

“God, Miranda, you set me on fire! My body is yours. Do what you want, so long as we don’t get caught. And keep talking. I love how you talk dirty to me.”

“I’ll try. That’s new, too, though I love how you react to it. Just lean your head back like you’re sleeping, and let me do the rest.”

Mitch pulled back to look Miranda in the face, searching for any hesitation or fear, but found nothing but passion and need. He kissed her deeply, reveling in her taste, before leaning back to appear to be asleep. Miranda adjusted how she was seated atop him to give her access to his already straining cock. Before she released him from his confines, she pulled some wet wipes from her purse in preparation for the mess she knew she was about to cause.

Finally prepared, she carefully unbuttoned and unzipped Mitch’s shorts, before pulling the shorts and his boxer briefs down enough to allow her free access. Mitch, of course, had to help her by lifting his

ass, but they managed to do it with very little visible movement. Mitch couldn't help the sigh of relief he released when his hardened dick was freed from the painful constrictions of his clothes.

Miranda paused a moment, trying to picture what was below the blanket. She wouldn't be able to see what she was doing, so she would have to rely solely on feel and the responses Mitch gave her. Gathering her courage, she gingerly touched the base of his cock, eliciting a jerk and a soft grunt.

At her gasp of surprise, Miranda looked up to find Mitch's eyes boring into hers. "Miranda, you don't have to do anything you're uncomfortable with," Mitch ground out "I'll live."

"No, it's not that. I just didn't expect you to react so strongly. Mitch, I told you. You're the only man I've ever wanted to touch. I love how I affect you. It just makes me want to touch you more. Please, let me bring you pleasure while we still have time to ourselves."

"Are you sure?" Mitch asked. Miranda nodded her head, her eyes steadily gazing into his. He kissed her his agreement before leaning back again.

Miranda returned her hand to the base of his cock, expecting its twitch under her hands this time. Mitch groaned silently, so that only Miranda could hear. His reaction emboldened her, and she began stroking along the shaft, moving gently at first before wrapping her hand around him fully and continuing the rhythm she'd set. He was so thick she couldn't close her fingers all the way around him, so she added her other hand. She continued the stroking for a few moments. She could feel Mitch's breathing become deeper and faster, evidence of his further excitement.

After briefly glancing around the cabin to ensure no one was paying attention to them, she refocused her gaze upon his face. His eyes were closed, and to anyone else, he would have looked relaxed. She, however, could see the tension in his eyes and in how his mouth was set. She watched carefully as she ran a finger over his head,

finding a bead of wetness already there. His body tensed under her again, and he moaned low in his throat, though he kept it quiet enough. Miranda couldn't help the satisfied smile that played across her lips as she leaned close to his ear. She continued stroking him with increasing speed, running a finger over the top of his head to gather the moisture that continued to spill from his slit.

"I wish we were alone so I could take your hard cock in my mouth and taste that sweet wetness you're giving me. I want to taste every square inch of your body and feel you hit the back of my throat as I try to swallow every inch of you."

Mitch grunted, and his body spasmed, trying desperately to stay quiet and still so as not to raise suspicion about what Miranda was doing to him beneath the blanket. Mitch opened his eyes, looking deeply into Miranda's, trying to communicate what he was feeling. He jumped again when he felt Miranda wrap something moist and slightly cold around the top of his dick, though it did nothing to lessen his need to come.

"It's okay, Mitch. It's just a wet wipe to contain what you're about to spew for me. Relax and come for me, Mitch. I want to feel you erupt for me."

Mitch had relaxed slightly at Miranda's reassurance concerning what he was feeling, but the reduction in tension didn't last for long. Her hands continued moving over him, quickly now, as she squeezed him with everything she had. He was right on the edge, and Miranda knew it. "I can't wait to feel your hard cock plunge into my hot, wet pussy."

Her words, coupled with the image of him burying himself into her beautiful body, pushed him right over the edge. Pulling his hands from under the blanket and sinking them into Miranda's hair, Mitch pulled her to him for a deep kiss, allowing his shout of completion to be muffled by her mouth. His body spasmed hard several times, while his cock jumped and spurted his release as his world exploded around



him. He continued to gasp for breath as he reveled in the pleasure she'd brought him.

Miranda gentled her movements when she sensed he had begun to come back down from his peak. She stopped altogether when his body fully relaxed beneath her, his hands falling from where they'd been buried in her hair to fall limply at his sides. She gently cleaned up the mess, discarding the used wipes in the seat pocket in front of her. They would have to remember to put them in the trash later. She pulled his underwear and shorts back up his body after spending several minutes trying to raise him from his stupor. Finally comprehending what she wanted, he lifted his rump just long enough for her to arrange and refasten his clothes before collapsing back downward. Miranda was proud she was able to bring him that much pleasure, and she'd enjoyed doing so. Seeing that he probably wouldn't be moving anytime soon, she snuggled back down onto his chest.

Several minutes later, Mitch opened his eyes and surveyed his surroundings. They seemed to have only caught the eye of a woman one row forward and sitting sideways in her empty row with a blanket covering her lower half. When his eyes met hers, she merely raised an eyebrow and mouthed, "Yummy," to him. He felt himself blush a bit but couldn't help the arrogant smile that played across his lips. She settled back into her seat and closed her eyes, though he thought he saw movement coming from beneath her blanket. Apparently they had inspired her.

Brushing the woman from his mind, he placed a sweet kiss on Miranda's jaw before murmuring, "Thank you, sweetheart. You never cease to amaze me."

Miranda smiled against his neck, planting a quick kiss there before purring, "I thoroughly enjoyed that. I can't wait until I can touch your magnificent body without restrictions."

Mitch moaned at her words, a shudder working through his body. He was shocked his body could respond with need again so soon after

his release. “Naughty thing. You love seeing what you do to me, don’t you?”

“Oh, yeah. I love feeling how badly you want me,” Miranda responded, brushing her hand across his re-hardening cock.

“Cut that out, Miranda. I can’t concentrate when your hands are on me, and it’s my turn to touch you. Do you want me to touch you?” Mitch asked, giving her the option. He would always give her the option.

Miranda didn’t hesitate with her answer. “Yes, Mitch, please touch me. My pussy is on fire and dripping for you. I need your hands on me,” she whispered fervently to him.

At her response, Mitch adjusted her to lay flat on her back against his chest, giving him access to her lower body with both hands. He could feel every motion of her body like this and would be able to tell immediately if something made her tense or uncomfortable. He was grateful she’d worn another sundress. A skirt made this much easier.

Very aware of her history, he kept his movements slow and gentle. He began by stroking her shoulders and arms, relaxing her further against him, though her hips and legs began to shift in her need for release. Finally, he delved under the blanket, skimming his hands down her torso and over her hips until he reached the hem of her dress, which rested at mid-thigh. He continued to caress her bare legs, eliciting a low moan from her as he felt her breathing quicken. When she seemed ready, he moved up her thighs, pulling the hem along with him. He allowed his fingertips to brush the sides of her hips, testing to see how comfortable she was with what he was doing. He was gratified to feel her open her legs, giving him room to do as he liked.

“Are you ready for me to touch you, Miranda? Are you sure?” he breathed into her ear. He had to be sure and needed to hear it, not just from reading her body.

“God, yes, Mitch. Touch me already. You’re driving me crazy,” Miranda murmured back to him.

Satisfied with her reassurance, Mitch continued caressing her soft skin, moving toward her pussy and pushing her lace panties to the side. They both quietly moaned when he brushed against her soft curls the first time. He ran his fingers through the fine strands, noting their sparseness and the moisture clinging to the tuft. She shifted against him again, pushing her hips toward his hand, clearly communicating her need to have him touch her there. Acquiescing to her urging, he ran the tips of his fingers over her damp folds, learning how she was built. Miranda's breathing continued to deepen, and Mitch could feel her excitement tightening her back muscles.

Mitch continued to lazily stroke her folds, stopping to circle her bundle of nerves several times before delving downward again. Miranda brought one of her arms up to grasp Mitch's neck, pulling him down so she could hiss into his ear, "Damn it, Mitch, quit fucking around with me, and make me come!"

A lightning strike of excitement blew through him at her words, and he was unable to react for a moment. When he was, he whispered, "You better hold on, sweet girl. I'm going to make you explode around my fingers in a minute." Still being gentle but not moving as slowly as he had been, he circled her entrance with his left hand. She pushed down toward it again, so he slowly entered her with a single finger. When he was as deep as he could go, she moaned deep in her throat again before gasping, "More."

He thrust his finger within her several times before adding another digit, stretching her a bit. With his right hand, he returned to stroking her clit, testing several different moves before finding what she responded to the most. Her entire body had tensed, and gentle tremors were rolling through her. Knowing that all she was experiencing was pleasure, Mitch allowed himself to quit holding back and gave her what she was begging for. His fingers began plunging deeply into her, curling up at the end of his stroke as quickly as he could move without making the blanket move noticeably. He continued caressing her nub quickly, adding pressure as she got closer. With both hands

busy, he could only use his mouth for further stimulation, so he began to pepper her neck with kisses, interspersed with nips from his teeth. Her trembling became more pronounced, and he could feel her back trying to arch. Mitch used his forearms to keep her torso still before shifting her slightly to the side so that he could reach her lips with his own. Before moving his lips to hers, he breathed into her ear, "I can't wait until I can taste your sweet pussy and then plunge my hard cock so deep you'll swear you can feel me in your throat."

He quickly took her mouth in a deep kiss, swallowing her cries of ecstasy as she had for him. Beneath his hands, he felt her body clench down as a gush of fluid bathed his hands. Several hard spasms wracked her body as wave after wave of pleasure broke over her. When she had stopped voicing her pleasure, he released her mouth so she could gasp for the air she desperately needed. Mitch gentled his movements on her sex, allowing her to come down from the apex of her orgasm slowly. The tremors flowing through her body slowed as he removed his hands from her, carefully moving her panties back into place. Mitch could feel the languidness seep into her muscles as she became completely limp against him. He couldn't help his smile of satisfaction as he opened a couple of packets of wet wipes from where she'd tucked them under his thigh and cleaned his hands and her groin as best he could. He wished he could suck the juices from her off his fingers but felt that was probably not advisable, considering they had caught the attention of a couple more people.

Hoping to divert the attention being paid to them, he began shushing her rather loudly. "Sssshhhh, baby, it's okay. You're having a nightmare. You're okay. I'm here." He brought his arms up to wrap around her upper body and began rocking her, as if giving her comfort.

Miranda was stiff for a moment, confused by what Mitch was doing until comprehension hit, along with embarrassment and amusement. She turned her body to bury her face into his chest, giggling hard but silently, making it seem she was crying due to her

nightmare. Mitch continued to rock her, holding her tightly and stroking her hair lovingly. He had to bury his face into the side of her neck so her hair hid his face as he too was overcome with amusement at the situation. Finally, when they had both calmed, he glanced around to find no one was paying attention to them anymore.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Better than okay, though I never would have dreamed of doing this in an airplane full of people,” she answered, amusement still dancing in her eyes.

“Me, too. I can’t believe we did that, but you’re just too much for me. I hunger for you.” He leaned in for a slow, deep kiss.

Miranda sighed before pulling away. “I want you, too, Mitch. Very much. But don’t go getting started again. We’ll never talk about all the stuff we’re supposed to.”

Mitch grimaced and then nodded his agreement. They had maybe two hours left before they landed, and he wanted to make sure she was prepared. They adjusted in their seats again, getting comfortable for a long, very quiet talk. Considering the subject matter, they placed their cheeks together, so they could speak directly into the other’s ear, ensuring a low enough volume others in the cabin could not hear.

“Okay, I guess I should start off explaining what I think you’ll be doing and then describe each part as best I can. Just remember I haven’t seen an allegiance ceremony in close to thirty years and have never been present for any of the women’s only ceremonies.”

“I’ll need to do both?”

“Yes, though for different reasons. The women’s only ceremony is strictly for you as a cleansing and healing rite and focuses on your sexuality. Nina has called upon all the female healers in our coven and possibly a few from other covens we know well. Their focus is going to be on cleansing the damage from you, including your aura, your mind, and your body. They will also work on healing those areas as well. The hope is that, while we can’t completely eradicate the damage done to you, we can heal the effects. You’ll still remember

everything, but hopefully you will no longer suffer from it. I think you've made incredible strides on your own with wanting me to touch you and being so open with yourself physically, but there are always things that are hidden deeply that can affect you later. Additionally, Nina shared with me that you were deeply scarred physically, and they will attempt to lessen, if not eradicate, that. If the scarring is as bad as she suspects, you may have trouble bearing children later. They may need to actually insert healing objects into your vagina to aid in the healing. If that is needed, they will discuss it with you prior to continuing the session. But that ceremony is the third in line."

Miranda nodded her understanding, so Mitch continued. "The first ceremony is the allegiance ceremony, which Nina has already cautioned me might be more difficult than usual. The entire coven will bear witness. I will be right there beside you as your sponsor. The ceremony will take place at the altar in the middle of the room. My father and mother will stand in front of the altar. You and I will approach them. I will introduce you formally and explain why I wish you to join the coven. I will also explain the injunction Cabela has on you. My father, Malcolm, will ask you a few questions regarding why you wish to join and how you feel about changing your allegiance.

"In all the ceremonies, honesty is essential. Any type of prevarication or omission can negatively affect the rite, making completing the ceremony more difficult, if not impossible. If he asks something that the injunction forbids, just respond you cannot answer due to the injunction, but that you will explain it all as soon as the allegiance ceremony has released you from it. That will probably be very uncomfortable for you, especially with all of us there. I really wish you could share it with just me in private, but I can't do anything to change that. You don't have to go into great detail or anything, which we can talk about later if you want, but you do have to relate what all happened there.

"Going back to the ceremony, once you have answered all his questions, he will ask for a sign that you are willing to subject

yourself to his rule and that you renounce your former coven. Again, this is going to be hard for you. You will need to remove all of your clothes and kneel before him. You do not need to go all the way to the floor, just to your knees. The removal of the clothes is symbolic of the removal of Cabela's rule over you, and going to your knees is your submission to your new Master. When you have been released from Cabela's rule, the stones bordering the dais will begin to glow. Dad will touch your shoulder, indicating that you may rise, and I will give you my cloak to wear. At that point, he will hand you the ceremonial knife, which you will use to make a small cut in your skin, just enough to bring blood. You will return the knife to him, at which time he will do the same. You will then press your wound against his, mixing your blood. That is the conclusion of the ceremony. At that point, the injunction will be gone, and you will tell us about your time with them."

"Your mother said the ceremony wouldn't go as easily as planned. Does she know why?"

"If she does, she cannot say. I suspect it will be from parting yourself from Cabela's rule, considering how ingrained your obedience to him is. There is no time limit involved, so take your time if you need it. You'll need to go within yourself to eradicate all ties to him. I know it sounds easy, but sometimes it can be scary. You have to be absolutely sure this is what you want. It also doesn't help you haven't met the man you're pledging your allegiance to. Most of the time, people who wish to join our coven know Malcolm well in advance."

"This is what I want, I am absolutely sure of that. If this doesn't happen, I won't survive the week." Miranda looked away for a moment, thinking about what would be expected of her. Having to disrobe made her uncomfortable, though she understood its need as part of the ritual. Mitch had not yet seen her without a shirt on, other than in her transcendent plane where she bore no scars, and she feared his reaction when he saw what lay underneath. Cabela and the rest of

the coven had been careful to not leave scars where someone would be likely to see them, but her lower chest, breasts, stomach, hips, and her entire back had been fair game. She wished she could see what his reaction to her would be. Would he not want her anymore? As much as she knew that the odds of them being mated were against them, she couldn't change the fact she'd fallen desperately in love with him and would give anything to be with him. When she'd gathered herself, she turned back to him. "Tell me more."

Mitch allowed her a moment of introspection, wondering if there was something in her former life she was going to miss. He could tell she felt insecure, but he couldn't tell what was causing the emotion, and if she didn't tell him, there was nothing he could do to help alleviate it. His arms tightened around her, giving her the only reassurance he could.

"For most people, the allegiance ceremony would be the end of it. But for you, we'll begin the healing rites tomorrow. We will alternate between your overall cleansing and healing and your sexual healing. The alternations are necessary due to the amount of damage you've received and the strength and health of the healers. You will be lying on the altar, naked, for both types. There is nothing you need to fear as far as someone being attracted to you in a sexual manner. If someone does find themselves experiencing that emotion, they will remove themselves immediately."

"What about you? Will you be there? No one's shoving anything up me without you being there," Miranda responded, allowing a hint of panic to enter her voice. Her entire body tensed up with her distress. Clearly, she was uncomfortable being so vulnerable to a bunch of people she'd never met, no matter if they were in her new coven or not. It was understandable, considering how her old coven's members had treated her.

Mitch took a moment to answer her. "I shouldn't be, simply because of the strength of my want for you. However, it is essential you be able to focus on healing. If you feel you will be unable to



focus properly without my presence, we can work something out.” Mitch could feel the relief stream through her body as it relaxed back against him.

“That sounds good. I’d feel better if you were there. No offense to everyone there, but...” Miranda trailed off, feeling bad for being uncomfortable around her new coven family.

“No, Miranda, I understand completely, and so will everyone else. Don’t worry about it. It’ll work out. I promise you.”

Miranda looked deep into Mitch’s eyes, seeing truth there once again. How she felt was truly okay. She pressed her lips to his in a long, sweet kiss. “Thank you, baby.”

The rest of the plane ride was spent talking about the various members of the coven, getting her as comfortable as possible with people she’d never met, but who would be witnessing her nudity later in the day. Miranda did a good job of putting that bit of information out of her mind and focused on learning as much as she could about the coven.

## Chapter 4

Mitch's parents met them at the airport to give Miranda some time to get acquainted with Malcolm and Nina before the allegiance ceremony. This helped Miranda relax some about the whole thing but didn't help when she automatically went to drop to her knees in front of him in the middle of a crowded airport. Mitch had to grab her before she got there and played it off that she'd tripped. Miranda blushed bright red, keeping her eyes on the floor in front of her until she heard Malcolm chuckle and remark, "Wow. It's not every day I get a beautiful woman to drop to her knees in front of me without at least some dinner."

The ribald joke did exactly as he wished. It shocked everyone into loud laughter and broke the tension. They went to the luggage pick up, where Mitch grabbed their checked luggage, swinging both straps over one shoulder before taking Miranda's hand in the other. The move did not go unnoticed by his parents, but no one mentioned it. They made small talk as they moved toward the car. Nina insisted Mitch sit up front with Malcolm, making Miranda distinctly uncomfortable because she couldn't touch him. She needed the reassurance. The two men talked about the plans for the remainder of the week, getting reacquainted while Nina studied Miranda intently in silence.

Miranda withstood the scrutiny for several long moments before she couldn't take it anymore. She shifted sideways in her seat, reaching around the seat in front of her to rest a hand on Mitch's shoulder. Mitch immediately reached up and squeezed her hand in reassurance before placing a quick kiss on it, before returning to his

conversation as if there had been no interruption. Again, his parents did not miss the move.

Miranda immediately felt the peace Mitch gave her flow through her body and mind, and once she was no longer as intimidated, she found herself rather perturbed. “Okay, Nina, spit it out. You weren’t this quiet yesterday.”

Silence immediately reigned in the car, and Miranda began to wonder if she’d just killed her chance at a life with Mitch. Her fear continued to grow until she caught the smile Nina was trying to suppress. “It took you long enough. I’m glad to see you’re doing so well today. Your aura looks much better. We might not have as much work to do as I’d originally thought.”

“Mitch is healing me. I can feel it,” Miranda stated simply. Mitch jerked around to look at her, getting ready to object, but Miranda stopped his retort with a hand held up. “I know you think you’re not doing anything, but you’re wrong. You’ve given me something to look forward to, something to hope for, something to work for. I didn’t have that before you, and so I never really cared to work on myself. I allowed myself to drown in the hopelessness that had pervaded my life. I knew that this week would decide whether I was able to break away from the c—” The word was cut off as the injunction triggered Miranda’s throat to close.

“Miranda, pick a different word. Remember what we figured out last night,” Mitch urged her, his eyes on her face as she fought with her own throat. Unable to think of a word to continue her thought, Miranda eventually gave up as her lungs burned for air. As soon as she stopped trying to speak the thought, her throat slowly loosened, allowing her to drag in breath after breath. Mitch reached over the back of his seat to gently brush the hair from Miranda’s face and cup her cheek, helping to calm her breathing. When she had fully recovered, he reached down and threaded his fingers through hers, refusing to let her go again.

“Was that the injunction you were talking about?” Malcolm asked Mitch.

“Yes. Her throat closes off, and she can’t breathe any time she tries to communicate anything negative about Cabela or the coven. And that communication includes any type of movement and writing. We figured out how to talk about it in a basic way. If I stay with yes or no questions, I can read her true answer in her eyes, which she cannot control, and thus cannot trigger the reaction. That’s how I was able to discover all I did.”

The car was quiet for a moment before Malcolm caught Miranda’s eyes in the mirror. He commented, “That isn’t going to make the allegiance rite any easier. I’ll try to phrase my questions so I can be given a response and not ask about your background as much as I might otherwise.”

“I understand. I will do what is necessary to complete this. My life depends upon it, and I actually want to live it now.” She smiled warmly, squeezing Mitch’s fingers.

“You should know there is a possibility the Merlin might be there. I was able to get in contact with him, and he mentioned being in the area, but that doesn’t necessarily mean he’ll show up. I reported exactly what you told me. He needs to hear your testimony firsthand to actually permit us to move in to destroy the coven. If he is not there for the ceremony, he’ll be conferenced in on the phone for your testimony part.” Miranda could feel her eyes were open as wide as they could go. “Don’t worry about meeting him. He’s a very nice guy, almost like a grandpa. Considering his age, he looks upon all of us like little children. However, he is not afraid to take on evil when he needs to, though he prefers the covens to manage themselves.”

They soon pulled up to Malcolm and Nina’s house. Mitch led Miranda up to the room he stayed in when he was there. The room in which the rites were done was in a separate building buried deep in the woods behind their house. As Malcolm and Nina left them to rest and prepare for the coming events, Nina pulled Miranda aside for a

moment. “Mandy, everything will work out. Just have faith, in yourself, in Mitch, in us, in magic, in good. You’re going to be fine.”

Miranda wasn’t sure if Nina was speaking from something she’d seen or if she was just being reassuring, but it didn’t really matter. It was exactly what Miranda needed to hear at that exact moment. “Thank you, Nina,” Miranda whispered as she allowed herself to accept the loving hug Nina offered.

“You’re quite welcome, my dear. Now go freshen up. We need to leave here in about an hour.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Miranda responded, immediately turning to reenter the room Mitch had led her to.

The next hour passed quickly and quietly as Mitch and Miranda were somewhat lost in their own thoughts regarding the coming events. When the clock struck the hour, signaling it was time to leave, they stood staring into each other’s eyes. Both of them struggled with what they should say and what they should leave unsaid. Finally, Mitch knew he couldn’t hold back anymore.

“Miranda, I need you to know some things before we start this. First is that, no matter what happens today, no matter what you say regarding your past, I will still care for you and want you. I’ve come to realize what I feel for you is all-encompassing and permanent.” Mitch stepped nearer to her before taking her face in his hands. “You have changed me, Miranda, and I love the changes. The same way that I love you. I don’t know what to do about the whole ‘fates deciding on mates’ thing, but I now know there is no way I can leave you. If I have to step aside and let someone else take over as leader when my father is done, so be it. It’s a small price to pay for being able to stay with you.” Mitch brushed the tears from Miranda’s face before leaning in for a soft, soul-filled kiss.

Miranda wound her hands into Mitch’s shirt, keeping him pressed tightly against her. Her body shook against his, her entire being overcome with her happiness and joy at the moment. She poured every ounce of love she had into the kiss, needing to make sure Mitch

knew how she felt about him. With a few small kisses, they separated only slightly just enough for her to speak. “Oh, Mitch. I love you! I never imagined I would ever feel this way about anyone. You make my heart want to burst right out of my chest. I will do whatever is necessary be with you. But, Mitch, I don’t want you to have to give up leading the coven. I understand you will need to continue searching for your mate, for the opportunity to have children, if nothing else. I refuse to keep you from becoming everything you’ve worked so hard on.”

“Miranda, don’t you understand? None of it means anything to me if I have to give you up to do it. What is the point in living if I cannot love you?” Miranda pulled him back to press her body against his, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck as he wrapped his arms tightly around her torso. They held each other for several long minutes, absorbing the love and peace they always felt in each other’s presence, before breaking apart to face the upcoming events. “Are you ready?” Miranda nodded. Mitch placed one last kiss upon her lips before they departed for the ceremony.

\* \* \* \*

Miranda shifted nervously from foot to foot as she stood next to Mitch in front of the altar. Malcolm had prepared the circle, and Mitch had already done his part. The rest of it was up to her.

“Mandy, do you wish to join this coven?”

“Yes, Grand Master, I do.”

“Why do you wish to join our coven?”

“I want to be good and do good, Grand Master. I want a chance at having a happy life. I want to learn more about my powers. I want to be safe and protected, as I protect those around me. And I love your son.” The last part was met with a few murmurs from the members surrounding them and a raised eyebrow from Malcolm.

“Do you wish to join us even if you cannot have Mitch?”

“Yes, Grand Master. I have found this coven to be intrinsically good, willing to step up to help others, even when they may seem like a lost cause. I wish to learn to be like that and to repay the kindness that has been offered to me.”

“What can you tell us about your current coven?”

Miranda was stunned for a moment because Malcolm had said he would try to stay away from anything that triggered the injunction. She continued looking into his eyes and saw the support and encouragement there. Suddenly, she realized he needed her to invoke the injunction for the others to see. “I belong to the Cabela coven. The compound is just outside of El Paso, Texas. Devon Cabela is the leader. My last memory before joining the coven was of my bedroom. I was fourteen. I awoke unable to move and sick, still feeling drugged.” The last word she’d had to work to get out. She was again skirting the injunction, but she wanted to say more. “Cabela came in and informed me about my situation and about my requirements for behavior, especially obedience. He then initiated me into the coven using a sexual rite. He rap—” Miranda was able to get that much out before her throat closed up completely. Nevertheless, she continued to fight it until her vision began to darken, and both Mitch and Malcolm reached out to keep her upright.

Mitch couldn’t help the tears streaming down his face as he listened to Miranda describe her entry into her coven. He knew it was something she had endured, and that he would be hearing much worse by the end of the evening, but he couldn’t stop his heart from shattering in his chest. He also couldn’t stop himself from reaching out to her as she struggled to say what she needed to, pushing far longer than he’d seen before. Mitch glanced up at his father, seeing that he, too, was concerned about how long Miranda had been fighting for breath. Finally, Malcolm spoke. “Mandy, stop. We will discuss it further later. Quit trying to force yourself and draw a breath.”

Mitch drew a sigh of relief as he heard Miranda finally draw in a deep breath. She stood in place, swaying slightly as she panted before finally regaining her breath and steadiness.

“I have never seen an injunction so extreme, Mandy. Are you ready to fight it?”

“Yes, Grand Master. I am ready to fight it.”

“Are you ready to take the next step, Mandy? Are you willing to show us that you renounce your old coven and plead your allegiance to myself and this coven?”

“Yes, Grand Master.” Keeping her eyes locked on Malcolm, she proceeded to remove every piece of clothing before dropping into her fully submissive pose, forehead to the floor. She knew she did not have to go down that far, but she felt that because she had bowed before Cabela in such a way, despite it being forced, Malcolm deserved the same respect. Despite her focus on Malcolm, she could hear the reaction from the group standing behind her as they all saw the scars covering her. She could vaguely make out gasps, some crying, and even a couple of retches, making her dimly wonder if it was so bad she’d made someone vomit. She could clearly, however, hear the indrawn breath from Mitch.

Mitch dropped to his knees beside Miranda, no longer able to hold himself upright. His stomach heaved as he took in the scar tissue covering her back, but that was nothing compared to the killing rage that filled him when he caught sight of the blackened skin on either side of her ankh. He reached out to touch the damaged skin, causing her to jump slightly before submitting quietly to his examination. “He branded you?” Mitch finally managed to spit out past the lump in his throat. Two “C’s”, each almost two inches high and one inch wide, bracketed her spine, the skin blackened and long since healed.

“Yes, Master. It is his chosen method of demonstrating submission to his rule,” Miranda answered Mitch. She knew she should be focused on Malcolm at the moment, but concern about Mitch filled her mind. She could hear his stuttered breathing, feel the



rigidity of his body next to hers, and she had to wonder if he found her disgusting.

Mitch pulled Miranda upright onto her knees and hugged her to him tightly. “Oh, God, Miranda. I’m so sorry. I’m never going to let him touch you again, baby.”

Miranda held him to her, trying to absorb his upset into herself. It had happened so long ago she almost didn’t remember the pain, especially not with so much more happening since. “Shh, Mitch, it’s okay. It happened a long time ago, part of the initiation rite. Baby, please, calm down.”

When Mitch had calmed somewhat, he pulled back in her arms, bringing his hands up to cup her face and looking deeply into her eyes. “I see all of your scars, Miranda. Physical, mental, emotional, sexual. I will not turn my back on you because of them. They are a part of who you are and have each been intrinsic in creating the woman who stands before me. I hate that you suffered, but I cannot change the past. I can only help you heal in the present and promise to stand beside you in the future. I love you, Miranda.”

Miranda could only smile widely at him before pressing her lips to his. After a moment, she withdrew, whispering, “I love you, Mitch.” She continued looking deeply into his eyes, showing him every emotion in her eyes. When they were again settled, she returned her attention to Malcolm, who had been waiting patiently, observing everything happening around him. Miranda locked eyes with Malcolm once again, taking a moment to gauge his reaction before resuming her position at his feet. Once the assembly was once again silent, Malcolm continued. “Mandy, at this point, it is all up to you. You must renounce your old coven with everything within you. Once you have done that, the stones surrounding the altar will begin to glow, and we can finish the ceremony. You may have to reach deep within yourself to break yourself free from your past. Are you ready to begin that process?”

“Yes, Grand Master.”

“You may rise, sit, whatever to get comfortable, as we will do. Just do not step outside of the circle of stones. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Grand Master.”

“Begin. We will wait for you.”

“Thank you, Grand Master.”

With those last instructions, Malcolm stepped to the side, along with Nina, who’d stood silently beside him throughout the ceremony. Tears flowed down her face as she thought about all the things that had happened to the sweet young woman before her. Malcolm gently smiled at her as he wiped away the wetness. “She’s going to be just fine, sweetheart. You said so yourself.”

Nina offered him a wobbly smile. “I know. I just can’t help but hurt for her, and for Mitch. The love between them simply shimmers, Malcolm, and I can’t see how it’s going to turn out.”

“I know. I’m worried about it, too. He knows if he chooses to take her to wife, he will no longer be able to be second-in-command. It’s not fair, but those are the Merlin’s rules, and He made them for a reason.”

“Are you planning on speaking to him about it?” Nina asked, even though she already knew what the answer would be, not from her abilities, but from having lived with her husband for two hundred and fifty years.

“No, I’m not. He knows what his options are. If he marries her, she will continue to grow old and eventually pass on while he stays young. If he turns away from her, he may be giving up his one chance at truly loving another person. The odds of finding one’s mate are so slim I personally cannot see giving up that kind of love for a one-in-six-billion chance. If I had to choose between you and leading the coven, I would choose you with no regrets.”

“Oh, Malcolm. I’m so glad we weren’t faced with that problem, though my heart hurts for our son. Do you think they’ll test the fates soon?”

Malcolm chuckled under his breath a moment before responding, “I’m surprised they’ve managed to hold out this long. The passion they feel for each other is very strong.”

“Yeah, I noticed. I’m surprised the whole plane wasn’t humping like bunnies with the lust streaming off of them when they disembarked. I wonder what they were up to in there.”

“Knowing our son, plenty,” Malcolm replied, laughing softly with his long-beloved wife.

\* \* \* \*

An hour had passed, and Miranda was getting frustrated. She’d stayed on her knees the first half hour before turning to sit back against the altar with her legs wrapped in a tight pretzel position and her arms wrapped around her chest, effectively hiding her nakedness. Mitch did his best to keep focused on the task at hand but found himself distracted by brief glimpses of her body.

“I don’t get it, Mitch. Why haven’t the stones glowed yet? It’s not like I have anything that is holding me to them other than hatred. I’ve thought perhaps I needed to try to forgive them, but I just don’t know that I’ll be able to do that. That’s a lot to ask of a person after five plus years.”

Mitch reached over and took Miranda’s small hand, cradling it between his large ones. “I know, Miranda. I agree. I was actually a little surprised they didn’t react immediately, even with the warning from Nina. Is there any thing or person you might regret leaving behind or miss? A friend, maybe?”

“No, not at all. I would like to free the latents in training, but that would be it. I brought with me anything I would want to keep because I knew better than to think it would be there when I returned. They won’t let anyone take any tools, but there was nothing I felt a particular affinity for. I’m beginning to think it’s not me hanging on to them as much as them hanging on to me.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to think you’re right. It’s almost like their possession of you is ingrained into your bones, it’s so powerful.”

Miranda was quiet for a moment, pondering Mitch’s observation. Something in his words was circling in her head, like the answer was there and was trying to break through. Suddenly, she jerked her head up and sat up straight, her eyes wide in realization. “That’s it! You’re right! It’s the...” she began before her throat closed up, refusing to allow her to finish the thought. The injunction had been triggered much more strongly than she’d ever felt it.

Mitch immediately grabbed Miranda’s shoulders, concerned. He could see Miranda had the answer and that the injunction wasn’t going to let her say it or even hint around it. “Baby, stop. Stop trying to talk. We’ll figure it out!”

Miranda continued to struggle for breath, even though she had stopped attempting to talk. She moved her mouth, forming the alphabet, trying to get the squeezing to lighten up, but the injunction seemed intent on punishing her for figuring out how to perhaps overcome it. She was lying limp in Mitch’s arms by the time her throat opened up and allowed her to gasp for air. Malcolm and Nina had hurried over to kneel next to her, alerted by Mitch’s concerned voice. The remainder of the coven silently watched on, their own conversations forgotten.

Once Miranda had caught her breath, she sat up, though she held Mitch’s hand tightly. She was thinking fiercely on how to tell Mitch what she’d realized when he queried, “You figured it out, didn’t you?” Miranda nodded her answer. “Is it their hold over you?” Again she nodded. Mitch sighed, frustrated. He began mumbling under his breath.

“What are you mumbling about, Mitch? Talk to me.” Miranda tugged on his hand, bringing his gaze back to hers.

“Huh? Oh, I was just wishing we were both asleep and in your happy place. I’m pretty sure the injunction doesn’t work there,” he replied before looking away, racking his brain, searching for what

Miranda might have discovered. His attention was diverted for only a moment before he could feel Miranda's body go limp next to him. His arms reached out to catch her reflexively before his mind had even comprehended she was no longer conscious. He pulled her body into his lap, his arms cradling her limp form as he called her name. "Miranda? Miranda! What's going on, baby? Wake up, Miranda! Miran—" was as far as he got before he too became limp and collapsed to the side. Malcolm and Nina were only just able to catch both of them before they could be injured.

"What the hell is going on?" Malcolm growled, speaking to no one in particular. He and Nina adjusted Mitch and Miranda's bodies to a more comfortable position before attempting to wake them up. Nothing seemed to work as they tried tapping their cheeks and bathing their faces in cool, wet clothes. Not even smelling salts worked. Malcolm's eyes were very frightened when he looked into Nina's worried ones.

Suddenly, a deep resonating voice spoke from a dark corner of the room. "Do not worry. They are unharmed. She has taken their consciousnesses to a different plane. They will return when they have completed what they went there to do." Silence reigned over the entire assembly before the figure from which the voice came stepped out of the shadows. Immediately, people began dropping to their knees and bowing their heads. The all-powerful Merlin had joined them.

Malcolm scrambled for his thoughts before gathering himself enough to bow low before his master. He'd known it was possible for the Merlin to join them for the ceremony, but he hadn't known that he'd arrived. "Master Merlin, thank you for joining us today. You bless us with your presence. And thank you for the reassurance regarding Mitch and Mandy."

Merlin chuckled to himself, seating himself in a chair just off the dais that a considerate coven member had brought for him. "You're quite welcome. She is powerful. Much more powerful than anyone

has yet perceived. Yet, she was quite right in the belief that if she fell to evil during this time, she would be destroyed.”

Nina could not prevent herself from asking, “Master Merlin, will we be able to complete the allegiance ceremony?” She was clearly concerned for both Miranda and Mitch.

“Yes, though not without difficulty. Have faith, my daughter. All will turn out well.”

“Thank you, Master,” Nina replied, bowing deeply before him before returning to hover over her son’s inert body.

“I cannot say more until after the ceremony is complete. We will wait together,” pronounced the Merlin. Everyone bowed their head in acknowledgement and returned to waiting, this time silently, gazing at the still bodies.

## Chapter 5

*It took Mitch several moments to recognize where he was once he regained his senses. Once he did, he glanced around quickly, looking for Miranda. His entire body relaxed when he found her sitting with her back against a tree, twiddling with the stems of some wildflowers. She seemed to be patiently waiting for something.*

*Mitch arose from his spot and moved to sit down next to her. “You changed your happy place again,” he commented, taking a moment to look around. They were in a beautiful meadow bursting with spring grasses and tufts of wildflowers in a myriad of colors. A dense forest circled the meadow, making it still and peaceful, protected from the outside world. Mitch could hear a small stream trickling nearby, along with songs from several birds. The air was rich with the scent of growing things, clear of the taint of human habitation. The temperature was just a touch cool, but the sun beating down on them from a clear blue sky warmed them gently.*

*“Yes, this is another one of my favorite places. It’s just so peaceful and protected. I always feel safe here.”*

*“How did we get here? We weren’t asleep. Or am I hallucinating?”*

*Miranda smiled gently at him before reaching over to take his hand. “No, not hallucinating. I am able to withdraw my consciousness from the tactile plane at will now. It took years of concerted effort to achieve that. I didn’t know, however, that I could pull you in whenever I wished. I just took a chance at it.”*

*Mitch cupped Miranda’s face, stroking along her cheekbone with his thumb. “You’re amazing, Miranda. I am in awe of you. I love*

*being here with you, away from all the stress and danger of the real world. I just love being with you. You make me feel so complete,” he whispered huskily, his heart showing in his eyes before he leaned in to press his lips to hers. “I love you, Miranda.”*

*“I love you, Mitch,” Miranda murmured in reply before pressing her lips back against his. They continued kissing for several moments before they pulled apart with a sigh. They’d stolen too much time for themselves as it was. They needed to return to the problem at hand.*

*“So, does the injunction work here?”*

*“I don’t know. We’ll have to test it.” Mitch could see Miranda cast around in her mind for something to say before settling on something. Miranda’s eyes returned to gaze into Mitch’s, before saying, “Cabela likes to hurt people. He is a murderer. He is evil and must be removed from this earth.” She broke into a wide grin at the proof the injunction was unable to touch her in their private sanctuary.*

*“Yes! Wonderful! I love being able to talk to you without that looming over us. Now you can tell me exactly what you really think, and not have to try to talk around the restrictions. So, what do you think is holding you back from completing the renouncement?”*

*“As I said, I think you’re right it is his hold on me, rather than my hold on him. I think he infused the allegiance oath, and therefore the injunction, into the brands he gave me. I think we’re going to have to remove the brands to remove the injunction and allow me to finish the renouncement.”*

*Mitch was quiet for several moments, looking away as he considered Miranda’s conclusion. As horrified as he was by the branding, he could see how Cabela had used it to permanently possess his coven. It would take someone extraordinarily strong and determined to break away, characteristics Cabela would not allow to flourish. Finally, Mitch returned his gaze to Miranda, who was patiently awaiting his conclusion. “I think you’re right. Especially considering how evil he is. I know a bit of the dark arts from my*



*battles with them, and there are rites that could do that type of binding. I hate the idea of adding more pain to what you've already experienced, but I think you're right. I think we're going to have to cut them out before you can finish the ceremony."*

*"Obviously I can't reach them, so someone else is going to have to do it for me. Mitch, I trust you more than anyone I've ever met. Will you do it?"*

*Mitch was astounded at how calm Miranda was about the whole thing, but he knew what was coming was nothing compared to her past experiences. It was Mitch who had to steel himself to face the new development. "If that is what you wish, Miranda. You know I would do anything for you, though cutting pieces out of your flesh is really counter to anything I'd ever imagined. Are you nervous at all? You seem too calm."*

*"Mitch, this is nothing compared to what I've dealt with. Plus, there is something positive resulting from the pain. You could compare it to childbirth, I suppose. It's painful while it's happening, but the results more than make up for the pain. I get a new family and a chance with the love of my life. Of course it's worth it."*

*"Okay then, Miranda. Let's go back and get on with it. I imagine they're probably getting worried. Just remember, baby, I love you," he breathed out, before capturing her lips for a searing kiss.*

*Miranda's heart was pounding before he released her from his sensual spell. Giving him one last small kiss, she replied, "I love you, Mitch. Let's go set me free."*

\* \* \* \*

A moment later, Miranda's eyelids fluttered open before focusing on Nina's worried gaze. She sat up quickly, glancing around the room, her attention briefly snagged by a new face that seemed much more wizened than his physical appearance suggested, before

refocusing on a still unmoving Mitch. Miranda moved to kneel over him, concerned that he hadn't awoken yet.

"Mitch, wake up. You should have woken up before me." Miranda shook his shoulder firmly but got no response.

"What do you mean he should have already been awake, Mandy?" Malcolm asked, a bit tersely.

"Well, it took him a couple of minutes to get there when I pulled him in, but he should have woken up before I did. I think. That's the first time I've tried pulling in someone else who was awake." They could see Miranda concentrating hard, trying to reason out the problem, before she suddenly burst out, "Oh shit! I left him there! I didn't even know that was possible. Okay, baby, hang on, and I'll come get you."

Miranda didn't bother to change her position, so when her consciousness left her body, it immediately plopped gracelessly on top of Mitch, narrowly missing his nose with her forehead. Less than a minute later, Mitch began to awaken, moaning slightly before wrapping his arms around Miranda as she, too, began to awaken.

"Oh, God, baby, don't ever do that again! That was horrible!" Mitch croaked out, clearly shaken by what had happened.

"I'm so sorry, Mitch! I had no idea I could leave you behind like that. I just assumed when I released the plane you would come with me. Why are you so upset? Didn't you just stay in the meadow?"

"No. God, how I wish I had. When you disappeared, everything started to shimmer and then suddenly went black. I couldn't see, hear, feel, smell, or taste anything. Complete sensory block. How long was I there, because it felt like years."

"A few minutes, at most, before I realized what I'd done. I'm so sorry, Mitch," Miranda sobbed against his chest, aghast at what she'd just done. Mitch, who hadn't released Miranda from his arms even as he moved to a sitting position, just held and rocked Miranda as she continued to cry.

“It’s okay, Miranda. I knew and still know you didn’t do it on purpose. We’ll just make sure from now on that I exit first. Baby, stop crying, I’m fine. I forgive you, Miranda. I’m okay. Shhh.” Finally, with more urging and rocking from Mitch, Miranda began to calm.

Everyone around them had continued to silently watch, taking their cue from the Merlin. They would patiently wait until the couple in front of them was ready.

Finally, Miranda lifted her head from Mitch’s chest after giving him a brief but strong hug. She looked him in the eye before saying, “I’m ready.”

Mitch closed his eyes and sighed before opening them to gaze down at her. “Okay, Miranda. Let’s get this done.” With Malcolm’s help, Mitch stood up, bringing Miranda with him. Mitch couldn’t bring himself to let go of her until he absolutely had to, no matter what the coven thought. Mitch addressed Malcolm, though the entire coven could hear him clearly as quiet as they were. “Miranda has come to the conclusion that her allegiance oath to the Cabela coven was imbedded in her brandings. I agree with her, due to what I know of the dark arts. We believe she will be released from their oath only after the branded flesh is removed from her body.” He waited quietly as everyone in the room reacted, mostly in gasps and murmurs.

Miranda took a small step away from him but kept her hand held tightly in his. She stood up straight, bravely facing Malcolm in front of the altar. “I cannot excise the flesh myself, so I have asked Mitch to do it for me. If we are correct in our conclusion and successful in my renouncement, I ask, Grand Master, that the wounds be used in the binding portion with you. Unlike the others, I will carry these scars with honor.”

Malcolm, still looking stunned by their revelation, took a moment to respond. “I must agree with your assessment and agree to use the wounds made in the eradication of evil’s hold on you in your oath-taking for our coven.”

With Malcolm's words, a flurry of activity began as the healers gathered together. They were not entirely prepared for such an occasion as this because they had been preparing to heal old damage, but they would make do with what they had available.

At Mitch's questioning glance, Malcolm gestured to the altar. With a last hug, Mitch lifted Miranda onto the altar. He stole a last quick kiss before helping her to lie down on her stomach, her body arrow straight, her face turned away from him. He wouldn't be able to continue doing what needed to be done if he caught the sight of pain on her face.

When everything was readied, Mitch took a few moments to center and calm himself. He found he was more nervous about doing this than he'd ever been going into battle. When he was ready, he held out his right hand to Malcolm, who placed the ceremonial knife into it.

Continuing his calming breathing, he placed his opposite hand on Miranda's back, letting her know he was about to begin. She did not react at all. He realized she had returned to her sanctuary in her mind, easing his own tension greatly because he now knew she would not feel the pain as he worked. Focusing on the task at hand, he made the first incision. He kept the cuts as neat as possible, going only as deep as the branding required. It began to be difficult for him to see due to the blood that flowed from the wound, but his mother was there to dab it away as much as possible. He heaved a sigh of relief when the last of the ruined skin was removed, though there were now two roughly rectangular raw wounds bracketing Miranda's spine. She continued to bleed steadily, though the healers worked over her, trying to slow it and induce the skin to close over.

Mitch moved to the end of the altar where Miranda's head rested. Going to his knees, he leaned against the altar after taking her hands in his. They had discussed how she was to know when he was done, and they had agreed to a two-point strategy. If he finished in less than thirty minutes, Mitch would attempt to join her on the plane through

meditation. They obviously hadn't gotten a chance to test whether it would work, so they had agreed on the backup plan that she would wait for the thirty-minute mark and then pull out of it. Neither of them saw the procedure taking longer than that, and it wouldn't be the first time she'd awoken to pain.

Mitch again centered his thoughts and slowed his breathing, moving easily into his meditative state. It only took a moment before he smelled the meadow again. He opened his eyes and found Miranda lying next to him, watching alertly. "It's done, Miranda. Come back so we can finish this and get back to our room. I need to be alone with you."

"Okay, baby. I need the same thing. I love you. Go wake up so I don't leave you again."

With a quick kiss, Mitch returned to his meditative state and then quickly to full awareness. He rose to his feet, still clutching Miranda's hands as he waited for her to return. Miranda lay there still for several more minutes as the healers continued to work over her before she began to stir. She didn't moan or even whimper, but he could see the tension enter in her body as she tried to absorb the pain. He could not miss that, as soon as she had regained consciousness, the stones circling the altar had blazed to life. They'd been right.

Malcolm hurriedly moved to the altar, anxious to conclude the ceremony so Miranda could be attended to more easily. He took up the knife that had been used to release Miranda from her branded oath, making a small slice on the backside of his forearm, next to eight other identical marks. He quickly mixed his blood with hers and said the words that concluded the ceremony. Miranda had responded in the proper places in the proper way, but her grip on Mitch's hands was beginning to lessen, and her voice seemed weak.

Mitch's concern for Miranda grew as the healers became more frenzied in their movements, and Miranda didn't react to anything they did. Clearly, something wasn't right. Finally, Nina raised her eyes to his. "Mitch, her bleeding isn't stopping like it should. I think

the wound is just too wide for the skin to properly close over. We may need to take a couple of strips of skin from another area to bridge the gap in these. I'm worried, though, that creating more wounds would just weaken her further."

Mitch didn't have to think about his response, it came immediately. "Take mine. Use it instead of taking more of hers."

Nina considered the option for a split second before asking, "Are you sure? It will scar."

"I don't care. I wouldn't care if you needed to completely skin me alive. Just do what you must to help her, Mom. I love her. I can't lose her so soon, not after I just found her."

Nina nodded before motioning to the men awaiting her instructions. They immediately ran to set up another table next to the altar, allowing the healers to work on the two of them simultaneously. "Where do you want me to take from?"

"Over my heart. She has it already. While you're doing that, I'll try to see if she's in her sanctuary or if she's fully unconscious." At Nina's nod, Mitch focused inward, closing his mind to what was happening around him. He was so worried about Miranda that it took several moments to achieve his meditative state, and he soon realized that Miranda was, in fact, not in her sanctuary. He returned to consciousness to find they had finished harvesting his flesh, and one of the healers was tending to his wounds while his mother worked on placing the donated strips on Miranda's wounds. As hoped for, her flesh began to knit immediately, the sides growing together quickly in response to the strength of the healing magic being used. Mitch's own wounds were already closing up too, not that he was concerned about it.

When he was allowed, Mitch rose from his table and returned to his place near her head, taking her hands in his. She immediately began to stir, awakened by the energy she and Mitch always shared when they touched. Mitch's relief knew no bounds when she opened her eyes, searching for his immediately.

“What happened?”

“It worked, baby. Your allegiance ceremony is complete. The wounds on your back wouldn’t quit bleeding, though, so they took a couple of small strips from me. That worked, too, and your back is healing properly now.”

“It worked? I’m free of them?”

“Yes, Miranda, it worked. Try saying something bad about him.”

“Cabela is an evil man who should die. Yep, you’re right! I’m free!” Miranda wiggled in happiness, her smile as bright and wide as she’d ever done. Her eyes fell to the bandage covering Mitch’s chest, and her heart swelled with the knowledge this man had given a part of himself to her. She gazed lovingly into his eyes, saying, “Thank you, Mitch. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me. I love you.”

Mitch returned her expression, allowing all of his love for her to shine in his eyes. “You’re welcome, Miranda. I would do anything for you, baby. I love you.” Mitch leaned in and pressed his lips to hers.

As soon as their lips met, there was an explosion of sound, rivaling the loudest thunder ever created. A fierce wind circled out from above the altar, knocking everyone on the dais off except Mitch and Miranda. They were lifted into the air until they hovered above the altar, Mitch holding Miranda against him in an attempt to protect her from whatever it was that seemed to be attacking them. Another thunderous clap echoed through the room. Before the last of the sound had trailed off, twin screams of pain were heard coming from both Mitch and Miranda. While one hand maintained its grip on the other, their free hands clawed at their throats, scratching deeply but unable to affect whatever was happening to them.

After a moment of the most intense pain either had ever felt, it slackened greatly. With the lessening of the pain, a bright ball of energy appeared between them, level with their chests. The wind continued to howl around them, and the stones circling the altar glowed with such strength the others had to shade their eyes from the brightness. The ball of energy grew, quickly encompassing both of

their bodies. As the energy crackled around and through them, they again cried out in pain, their bodies convulsing, though they were able to keep a grasp on the other. The wind reached a fevered pitch, the sound of it loud enough to shatter glass. Simultaneously, the ball surrounding them flashed into a supernova of light. The light and sound maintained its apex for the space of two heartbeats before abruptly disappearing.

The silence after the monstrous crashes of sound was stunning. Mitch and Miranda, still stunned and trembling from the pain and energy flow they had just experienced, held each other tightly. They realized with a start they were still floating in the air.

“Um, Mitch, why are we still floating? Are you doing that?”

“Only Grand Masters and Mistresses can levitate, so it’s not one of my powers.”

“It is now,” answered a gravelly voice coming from the only person not stunned or frightened by the event. The Merlin rose from his chair, where he’d calmly sat and observed the explosion of power around him. “That was the most powerful mating I’ve ever seen. Both of you were powerful before your union, but you’ve now become exponentially more. Use it carefully, and use it well.” The Merlin turned to speak to Malcolm, who’d come to stand next to them. “You have my permission to eradicate the Cabela coven. You must destroy Cabela and his top people, or it will rise again and become even more evil. Blessed be, Malcolm.” There was a brief flash of light, and then the Merlin was gone.

Stunned eyes returned to the couple still floating above the altar. Mitch and Miranda were staring at each other in shock. “We’re mated? How did that happened? I thought it was strictly through sex?” Miranda asked, examining the ring of raised and darkened flesh circling Mitch’s neck, knowing that her own was identical. The design was intricate and beautiful. Seeing the continued confusion on Mitch’s face, she turned to Malcolm, searching for his answer.



“He gave you a part of himself through his skin donation, and it bonded with yours. It is essentially the same act during sexual union. At least I think that’s what happened. I’ve never seen or heard of it happening another way. Mitch, picture yourself and Mandy descending slowly to the ground. Landing is the hardest part and takes some practice.”

Mitch nodded his understanding as he mentally pushed aside his shock to focus on the task ahead. Going slowly so as not to frighten Miranda or cause a hard landing, he visualized them descending from their lofty perch. It took a moment before they began to move, finally landing gently on their feet in front of the altar. Mitch immediately pulled his cloak from his shoulders and moved to drape it around Miranda’s body before suddenly freezing in place.

Miranda, seeing his sudden stillness, asked, “Mitch, what’s wrong? What’s going on now?”

Mitch stood still for a moment longer, his eyes roving across her still-nude body. He could see she’d gained a bit of weight, filling out her proportions perfectly, mimicking her shape in her transcendent plane. He reached out and gently turned her around so he could examine her back. Disbelief and happiness colored his voice when he answered her while wrapping the cloak around her. “Your scars are gone. All of them, except the place where my flesh was fused with yours, which is completely healed now. It’s like your body, at least externally, was completely cleansed of all the bad things that happened to you.”

“It’s internal, too. Mandy, your body is completely free from the effects of your time with them,” Nina added, staring at Miranda intently. “Your aura has been completely cleansed as well. If I hadn’t seen its original state myself, I’d never believe that you went through what you did. It’s completely clear and shining brightly. There is no need for further rites,” Nina announced happily.

Miranda threw her arms around Mitch, hugging him to her tightly as tears streamed down her face. Mitch returned the hug emphatically,

before pulling away enough to gently wipe the tears from Miranda's face. "Happy tears?" Mitch asked. At Miranda's nod, he pulled her back into his arms tightly, burying his face into her hair and placing soft kisses on her mated ring. "I love you, Miranda. I don't think I've ever been happier. I'm never letting you go."

"Good, because I have no intention of going anywhere unless it's with you." Miranda began to say something else when Malcolm cleared his throat next to them.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your moment, but we need to do one more thing before we can retire for the evening, something I'm sure all of us would like to do. Mandy, I need you to tell us about the Cabela coven. Even though we already have the Merlin's approval, I still want to document why we are going into battle with them."

"Okay, I can do that. But first, I'd like to ask a favor, if I may?" Malcolm nodded, looking intrigued. "You've noticed Mitch calls me Miranda, I'm sure. I would like everyone to call me that from now on. I would like a new name to reflect the new life I have been given."

Malcolm nodded his understanding before responding, "I'm sure we can do that, Miranda. Let's get comfortable while we talk, shall we?" Malcolm suggested, gesturing to the waiting chairs that had been set up while Mitch and Miranda were wrapped up in each other.

Mitch sat in the chair next to his father, rightfully taking his place as second-in-command before pulling Miranda into his lap. Nina took her seat on Malcolm's opposite side, and the rest of the coven took their chosen seats scattered about the room. Again, they were completely silent as they waited for Miranda to begin.

Settling comfortably into Mitch's arms, Miranda considered where to begin before deciding to simply start at the beginning. "I was fourteen when I was drugged and kidnapped from my bedroom. I learned later the Searcher who found me was a substitute gym teacher who had subbed at my school several days earlier. I didn't have her for a class, but she saw me changing in the locker room and spotted my ankh. I woke in an opulent room decorated with pornographic

images. I was scared and still sick. I was chained to the bed, spread-eagle and nude. Cabela came in shortly after I'd awoken, explained what my situation was, including that he now owned me. He then proceeded to rape me. When he was done, he called in some other coven members who helped him move me to the place where he performed his rites. He branded me while chanting something in a language I still can't place.

"I figured out pretty quickly what was going on. Despite that, I had a hard time obeying the people around me. I've always been strong-willed and mouthy, so I was often in trouble. Punishments included being whipped with wire, sometimes even barbed wire, being beaten, not being fed, being locked in a closet in the basement, you get the idea. We were never given any type of medical treatment. I was raped daily, not just by Cabela, but by the other male coven members. There were also times when Cabela had guests, and I was required to submit to their demands as well. Some of the other girls would put on a show for them sometimes, but I always chose to take the punishment rather than engage in that.

"I actually enjoyed my power training, though I suspect it was not as thorough as it should have been. Mitch and I will have to figure out what I've missed and fix that. I have always been a fast learner, and so I learned what they taught quickly. Toward the end, I was able to explore my powers further than what they had taught, and I was extremely careful to hide my advancement from them. I'd hoped one day it might give me the opportunity to escape. Several more latents were brought in after I was, each treated the same way. Two of them died from injuries sustained during beatings. One girl committed suicide.

"I somehow managed to hang on, despite my difficulty in learning the required submissiveness. I finished my power training, but the behavior training continued. I should have had just one more year after the power training, but my attitude didn't help me there. I got very angry one day and slapped Cabela. That was the day he beat me

so severely they had to take me to the hospital. I was bleeding from both ears from a severe concussion, several bones in my face had been visibly broken, including my jaw, both arms were dislocated, and several ribs were broken, causing me to vomit blood. Normally they would have just let me die, but Cabela enjoyed dominating me. He took me to the hospital, claiming I'd gone out the night before and had come home like that. I stayed for three days before Cabela was convinced I would live and forced me to leave against doctor's orders. When we got home, he beat me again, but focused on my lower half.

"After that, I became Cabela's personal slave for the duration of my training. As Mitch can tell you, I'd learned my lesson. The abuse was even worse now that I was constantly attending to him. After six months, he was convinced he'd successfully forced me into submission, and he was right. Last week, he announced I had graduated from my behavior training. I was then assigned to become a Searcher. I was given a list of places to check out, searching for another female latent, the younger the better. Mitch's camp was on that list. I packed up everything I had, which wasn't much at all. I knew I was about to break. If I did as I was commanded and took another girl from her family and brought her into the hell that was my world, my spirit would have permanently broken, and I would become just as evil as Cabela. Yet, I knew if I returned alone, I would probably be beaten to death. I knew I couldn't just run away. I've seen it happen twice, and both times they tracked the person down and brutally killed them. I know what they did because they took pictures and tacked them to the hallway walls.

"I had just about decided to kill myself when I decided to go to one last place. I didn't intend to actually scout for anyone but went through the motions to buy myself a few more days. That was yesterday. It seems like much longer than that, so much has happened since then.

"We don't have a whole lot of time to prepare to confront them. If I don't check in by tomorrow at noon, they'll know something is up

and will begin searching for me. Also, I wasn't the only Searcher out this week. If Carl succeeds in finding someone, another person will become a victim.

"Cabela will not be easy to destroy. He is very powerful. From what little I've heard about his past, he was not a Master when he turned evil, though his power grows with each person he destroys. I have heard gossip that he is bound to the devil and that is where all of his power comes from. Right before I left, I learned he's scheduled a rite for Saturday. All members are required to attend. That is why he wants a new female latent. He wanted to use her as a sexual sacrifice, though I've actually heard rumblings he's considering a full virgin sacrifice. If we don't bring him a latent this week, he may simply snatch a child off the streets for the sacrifice. It wouldn't be the first time he's taken a regular child for some type of rite and then just dumped them after he's done."

The entire room was silent after Miranda finished. She could sense shock, outrage, anger, sadness, and a few more less intense emotions floating about the room. The strongest emotion by far, though, was determination.

Malcolm looked around the room, measuring each member's expression. "It's now Wednesday evening. I would prefer we attack when everyone is there so we don't miss anyone. Unfortunately, that doesn't give us a lot of time to prepare for a full-scale battle. Do you think we can pull it together and get there in time to prevent Cabela from taking another person victim?" Immediately, everyone in the room began nodding.

One member asked, "What about getting our sister covens to help? It sounds like the numbers are fairly even right now, and we're going onto their home turf."

Malcolm considered the question for a moment before answering, "Excellent point. I will speak with John and James when we conclude our discussion tonight. If they agree, I want the healers to stay in the background during the battle, though we will need them once the

fighting is over. Anthony,” Malcolm turned to address his personal assistant, “I need you to make transportation and accommodation arrangements for the entire group. Try to get us there as early on Friday as possible. Assume that John and James’s groups are joining us. It’s easier to scale back than expand outward.” Anthony nodded his head in understanding, so Malcolm turned back to the group. “Anyone else have questions or comments?” At everyone’s negative response, the group broke up to go begin preparations for the battle to come.

## Chapter 6

Mitch and Miranda were silent as they rode back to the house with his parents. Once there, Malcolm turned to them. “Miranda, I hate to say this, but we’re going to need you to be a part of the attack.” Mitch immediately began to protest before Malcolm cut him off. “I know, Mitch, I don’t want her there either, but she’s the only one who will know the layout of the house and who each person is. I’ve tried to think of other ways to do it, but it’s the only way I can come up with that ensures we get the right people without putting our own members in additional jeopardy.”

Mitch was silent for a moment before answering grudgingly. “You’re right. I know, tactically, it’s the only solution. You’ll need to get John or James to be your second then because I’m not leaving her side. There’s no way I’m going to let anything happen to her again.” Mitch turned to look at Miranda, gauging her reaction to the plan.

“I never expected to not be part of the attack. I may not know how to fight, but I know that compound inside and out. Besides, this is, at its heart, my fight. I’m not going to ask someone to go into battle if I’m not prepared to do so myself.”

Malcolm and Mitch nodded their understanding before Nina spoke up. “Miranda, I think you have more of an arsenal than you realize. I know you now have powers you haven’t explored yet, and you shouldn’t rely on those in a pinch, but like the Merlin said, you were already very powerful. I cannot see anything specific about the fight except that it will be decided by you doing something you already know you can do.”

Miranda was silent for a moment as she thought about what Nina had imparted before drawling, “Well, damn, Nina, thanks for all the extra pressure. As if I don’t already have enough on my mind.” The entire group laughed heartily before splitting up, with Mitch and Miranda heading to the kitchen for food, and Malcolm and Nina going to his study to call James and John about joining them.

After eating their fill, they returned to their room, the electricity between them thickening in anticipation. As soon as the bedroom door clicked shut behind them, they slammed into each other, their mouths meeting hungrily as their hands roamed across each other’s body. Clothes were quickly discarded as their moans and sighs filled the room.

Mitch pulled back a bit, trying to cool his reaction so he could concentrate more fully on her pleasure. “Miranda, I love you. I can’t believe we’re mated. I’m so grateful for you coming into my life.” Mitch backed her to the edge of the bed before helping her move into the center. He sat back on his heels for a moment, looking over the perfected body of his lifemate. She was absolutely beautiful, and now that she’d stopped aging, she always would be. He was astounded at the blessing he’d been given, and he planned on worshipping her as often as she would allow him.

“No, Mitch, I’m grateful for you. You saved me in every way possible.”

“Then I guess we saved each other. We can spend the rest of forever thanking each other.” He leaned in for another deep kiss. Mitch stretched out next to her, bracing his upper body slightly over hers with his left elbow as his right hand began to caress and explore. He started at her neck, stroking the skin covering her thrumming pulse softly before trailing downward to gently cup her left breast. Miranda’s hands roamed over Mitch’s chest slowly, lining each ridge of muscle so softly that goose bumps followed her touch.

Mitch brushed her nipple with his thumb, causing it to tighten into a hard nub, and he just had to taste it. He continued to fondle her



breast as he kissed a line across her jaw and down her neck, finally reaching his current goal of her right breast. His tongue laved the pale skin surrounding her nipple, pausing to nip on occasion before flicking her taut nipple. Miranda moaned deeply and arched her back, instinctively offering him more. He continued his attention to her breasts, switching back and forth until both were swollen and heavy, the nipples incredibly hard and sensitive. He continued his explorations downward, his hand drifting across her abdomen before sliding around to grasp her perfect ass. He continued to kiss his way down her stomach, nipping lightly at her hip bones before nuzzling the top of one thigh. His hands stroked the soft skin covering her legs before gently widening them.

Mitch wedged his shoulders between her silken thighs, finally getting a good look at her womanhood. She was as beautiful there as she was all over. Her folds were glistening with her excitement, the sparse blonde hair accenting the plump pink flesh below. He swallowed heavily, suddenly ravenous to have this sweet part of her in his mouth. He raised his eyes to hers, finding her staring back at him with surprise and desire. Mitch lowered his mouth slowly, keeping his eyes locked with hers, watching her reaction. Clearly, no one had ever touched her like this before. He breathed in deeply, inhaling as much of her scent as possible, his body thrumming with his need for her. Finally, he let his lips graze against her tuft, brushing against it slightly before placing a soft kiss on her nether lips.

Her eyes rolled back in pleasure before she arched sharply against his face, pushing her mound against him in a request for more. She moaned loudly before calling his name. "Mitch! That feels so good. Please don't stop, don't ever stop." Her breath quickened as her excitement rose, soon turning to pants.

"I have no intention of stopping until you come against my tongue, Miranda." Mitch thrust his face back against her wet flesh, earning a hoarse cry. His tongue explored her folds while he eased a finger into her entrance, beginning to stretch her tissues to be ready

for his coming invasion of her body. He found her extremely tight and knew he would have to be patient in his preparations of her. He began thrusting his finger inside her gently while his tongue found the bundle of nerves at the top. Her clit was swollen with her need, and her body shuddered under him as he teased it with his tongue and lips. Miranda's hips began to move in concert with his hand's thrusts. Feeling her release approaching, he added a second finger, more focused on wringing her climax from her than on preparing her for him. He continued his ministrations on her clit, pausing to nip and suck her lips on occasion before returning to tease her higher.

Miranda's moans were constant now between utterances of Mitch's name, partially formed thoughts, and the occasional naughty word. Her knees were spread wide, giving Mitch as much room as possible, while her hands were fisted into the sheets beside her. Her hips continued their thrusting, though she had no conscious control of it. Her need was coiled tightly in her stomach as her muscles clenched tighter, preparing for the explosion to come. When Mitch added a third finger, Miranda could no longer hold on.

Mitch could feel the tremors start as soon as he'd added the third finger. They spread and strengthened until he had to hold her hips down to keep from being bucked off of her. Even with his efforts, her back arched sharply off the bed as her body convulsed with pleasure. The sound of his name echoed around their room as she howled out her release to the world. Mitch maintained his movements against her body with his tongue, her inner muscles clamped down so tightly on his fingers that he couldn't move them without causing her pain. She remained at the apex of her climax for several long seconds before finally relaxing back down to the bed. Her body continued to tremble as she gasped repeatedly, trying to regain her breath. Mitch had stopped his movements when she'd begun to relax, and he was finally able to remove his hand from her. He sucked the juices from his hand before cleaning her up with his tongue as best he could. Mitch's body was also trembling due to the overwhelming need he was fighting. He

pulled Miranda into his arms, trying to quell the flames within him as she recovered from her explosion.

\* \* \* \*

When she was able to, Miranda blinked open her eyes, finding Mitch watching her closely. His eyes shone a vivid blue, the color deepened with lust. She could feel the tremors running through his body as he fought his desires, his cock hard and throbbing against her hip where he'd pressed against her in an unconscious attempt to ease the pain. Seeing him so enflamed sent a charge through Miranda, instantly reawakening her own need.

Miranda moved so that he rolled onto his back, bringing her with him so that she lay sprawled on top of him. His arms wrapped around her shoulders to bury his hands into her hair, where they clenched and released rhythmically. Miranda leaned forward to kiss him, but he resisted her for a moment, reminding her where his mouth had just been. He was giving her the opportunity to decline tasting her own fluids. Instead of being disgusted as he'd feared, it only made Miranda more excited. She dived into him, pressing her mouth against his tightly, licking and tasting. They both moaned deeply as their kiss became animalistic. Pulling her mouth from his, she continued to lick and nip at his chin and jawline, cleaning the last of her fluids from his face before moving downward. She ran her tongue across his mated ring, discovering the flesh was highly sensitized as he shuddered beneath her.

She moved so she was straddling his hips, his jutting cock pressing against her lower stomach as she bent over him. Miranda moved across Mitch's chest, dragging her tongue across the hard planes before flicking at his flat nipple, bringing it to a hard little nub. She didn't pause long. She could feel Mitch's desperation for his release as he shifted and jerked under her, along with the continuous deep growls.

His breathing stuttered in his chest as she dragged her teeth across his abdomen to one of his hip bones, placing a sharp bite on the skin there. Mitch was hanging on by just the smallest bit of control, and he feared losing his mind before she was done. He pulled his hands from her hair gently, not wanting to accidentally pull it in his excitement, before reaching up to grasp the iron headboard. He almost lost it completely when she moved even lower, her hair dragging across his straining cock. “Miranda! I’m so close, baby. Please, just touch me!”

Miranda didn’t bother to answer him. Instead, she turned her face to nuzzle her cheek against his throbbing shaft before bringing her lips to his tip. Miranda raised her eyes to his, finding him looking feral and out of control. She found the idea of him losing control because of her incredibly thrilling and decided to see if she could push him to do so. Keeping her eyes locked on his, she opened her mouth so that her tongue peaked out before slowly licking the moisture accumulated on the head of his cock. As soon as her tongue touched his skin, his body convulsed, and he grunted loudly, like he’d taken a hard hit to the gut. Taking pity on him, she wrapped her lips around him, sucking lightly, before moving her head down, taking him as deep as she could, wrapping one hand around what she couldn’t reach. She bobbed her head several times, running her tongue along his shaft before swirling it over the highly sensitive head. Mitch’s shudders became harsher, as did his breathing. With her next pass upward, Miranda dragged her bottom teeth gently up his shaft.

Every muscle in Mitch’s body clenched down for the space of several heartbeats, all of his energy drawing in to focus low in his stomach as his cock turned to steel in her mouth and thickened. Suddenly, the energy exploded outward, shattering him as his back bowed, and he threw his head back, releasing a resounding roar. Miranda wrapped her arms around his hips, clutching his succulent ass in her hands as she fought to hang on to his body. His cock spasmed as he hit the back of her throat, his release exploding out and

jetting down her throat, barely giving her the opportunity to swallow before filling her mouth once again. Long moments later, Mitch began to relax downward, though his body still twitched with every move Miranda made with her mouth. She gentled her movements, allowing him to descend from his peak slowly, before pulling him from her mouth. She made sure to clean up the last of his fluids before crawling up his body to rest herself on his still-heaving chest.

After a moment, she realized she might be making it more difficult for him to regain his breath and shifted to move off of him, but she was stopped when Mitch wrapped his arms around her, resting his hands at the small of her back. She settled back down into him, sighing in contentment. Several long moments later, Mitch's breathing and heart rate had returned to normal. His fingers gently stroked the slightly raised skin where his flesh had fused with hers. Miranda shivered against him, her need for him growing insistent. She needed him inside her. Mitch immediately sensed her shift in focus. He brought his hands up to bury themselves again in her hair, bringing her mouth back to his for a long, deep kiss that set both of their hearts pounding. Miranda's hands roamed over Mitch's body frantically, her body clamoring for his.

Mitch rolled them over until Miranda was lying on her back once again with him propped above her. He continued the kiss as his hand purposefully moved down her body, stopping only once he'd reached her dripping slit. He dipped two fingers into her wet entrance, causing Miranda to thrust up against his hand as she cried out his name. Convinced she was as ready as she ever would be, he spread her thighs wide before settling his hips between them.

"Are you ready, baby? I want to be inside of you so bad."

"Yes, Mitch! Please! I need you inside me, now!" Miranda's hands grasped repeatedly at Mitch's shoulders, trying to move him upward into her body.

Mitch moved upward, positioning himself at her entrance. He shuddered at the feel of her wet heat pressed against the head of his

dick. Gathering every ounce of control he had, he began to press inward, watching Miranda's face for any sign of pain or difficult memories. He pulsed against her, moving in a bit before backing out, to move in a bit further. He continued this cycle until he came up against something that had both of them freezing in shock. Her hymen had regrown. Mitch looked down into Miranda's shocked eyes, shaking as he tried desperately to stay still.

"What the..." she began.

"I don't know. I guess when your body was fixed..."

"Makes sense. Don't stop, Mitch."

"I don't want to hurt you, baby."

"It's gonna have to happen at some point, and I'm never going to be more ready than I am right now. I need you!"

Seeing Mitch's continued hesitation, Miranda brought her legs up around his waist, digging her heels into his ass. When he still didn't resume his movements, she kissed him deeply, waiting until he'd become lost on the kiss before abruptly pulling him into her, burying his cock inside her to the hilt. The pain was minimal and immediately disappeared as the fire inside of her flared up to consume her.

"Miranda!" he ground out, his body trembling at the feel of finally being fully enveloped inside of her. He could feel her inner muscles tremble around him, telling him she was already right at the cusp of another release. He pulled out gently before slowly moving back in, the motion taking every ounce of control he could muster. Miranda moaned deeply, her hands and legs moving frantically, trying to pull him even deeper into her. Mitch, reassured she was fine, pulled almost all the way back out before thrusting into her strongly. Miranda lifted her hips to meet his thrust, desperate for the pleasure only Mitch could give her.

"God, Mitch, just take me! You feel so good inside me," Miranda managed to groan out between her pants for breath. Mitch could no longer resist. Every bit of his control disappeared at Miranda's words.

He pulled back before slamming forward, burying himself in her as deeply as he could go. “Oh, yes, Mitch! More!”

Mitch began thrusting into her quickly, building the strength of his thrusts until he was plunging into her as hard and deeply as he could in their current position. Every bit of their attention was focused on where they melded together, the pleasure of their union setting off sparks within them and pushing them insistently up the mountain of ecstasy they were working for. They continued to moan as they gasped for breath between kisses, the sounds of wet flesh slapping and the headboard rhythmically slamming against the wall accompanying them.

A deep, feral growl began to rumble deep in Mitch’s chest as he fought to hold on to his release until Miranda achieved hers. He slid one hand down under her ass, tilting her hips slightly, changing the angle of his penetration just enough to begin to rub that sweet spot within her body. She immediately began to tremble under him, her arms and legs gripping him tightly as she buried her face into his neck. Mitch bent his head down, dragging his tongue across her mated ridge before gently biting the raised skin. The move pushed Miranda right over the edge. Her body convulsed around him, the muscles throughout her body becoming impossibly tight as she screamed his name into the air. The feel of her inner muscles clenching and releasing him felt almost like she was sucking him deeper, like her pussy was milking his cock. The sensation pitched Mitch past his own precipice, and his body shook violently while it continued to plunge wildly into Miranda’s. He bellowed out Miranda’s name as his soul splintered in pleasure.

As he was launched into the stratosphere, he became aware he was not alone. Miranda’s soul was there as well, shattered into many pieces as well. Their spirits clutched each other as much as their physical bodies did, sharing the explosion wracking them. The pieces of their souls floated around them, each shining brilliantly. Piece by piece, they reentered Mitch and Miranda as they began to descend

from the incredible height they'd reached. They could see the two sets did not differentiate but instead simply entered the spirit of whichever of them was closest. Mitch and Miranda's souls had mixed, joining them at the most basic level.

It was several long minutes later before they were able to catch their breath and stop trembling. Miranda's arms and legs, which had still been clamped around Mitch's body, finally loosened before falling limply back to the bed. It took Mitch a few more minutes to gain enough strength to move himself back enough to allow his body to slip from hers, both groaning at the loss of the connection, before rolling over onto his back next to her on the bed. Their hands reached for each other, needing to maintain contact even when they were completely exhausted and sated. They rolled their heads so they could look at each other. No words were needed. Everything they were thinking and feeling was showing clearly in their eyes.

Mitch could see the exhaustion taking over Miranda and knew he needed to clean her up before they went to sleep so she could rest better. Gathering the last of his own energy, Mitch pulled himself from the bed. He got a clean cloth and ran it under hot water before returning to Miranda. She watched him through half-open eyes, curious as to what he was doing. When he pressed the warm cloth to her overly-sensitized flesh, she moaned quietly. The warmth was soothing.

When Mitch had finished cleaning her, and himself, up, he crawled back into bed, pulling the covers over them on the way. He settled on his side next to her as she turned herself to back into him. Mitch wrapped his free arm around her waist, pulling her firmly against his chest.

"I love you, Miranda," Mitch murmured.

"I love you, Mitch. Thank you for everything you did for me today."

"It was my pleasure, baby. I meant it when I said I'd do anything for you. I always will."



“Me, too, baby. I hope you know that.”

“I do. Shh, baby, you’re exhausted. Let’s get some sleep. We’ll need all the energy we can get.”

“Okay...” Miranda’s voice drifted off as she slipped into sleep, with Mitch following her quickly. Neither of them had noticed that not a word had been spoken aloud.

## Chapter 7

*The first thing Mitch became aware of was the difference in temperature on the opposing sides of his body. The right side of his body was nice and warm, but the left side was chilled. He noticed more as his mind slowly woke up. He could hear and smell a fire crackling near him, leading him to assume it was the source of the warmth he was feeling. He also became aware he was lying on something hard, such as a floor or the ground, but with a blanket or some type of softening material between.*

*“Open your eyes, baby.”*

*Mitch startled slightly before opening his eyes to search for Miranda. She was sitting near him, curled up on several blankets near the fire, sipping what smelled like hot chocolate. He sat up immediately, scooting closer to her. “Hey, baby. Where are we?” Mitch glanced around the room quickly before his full attention was captured by the massive window next to the large fireplace. The window gave a beautiful view of the mountains beyond covered in tall pine trees lying under a blanket of snow. He’d never seen a more picture-perfect panorama. “Wow! It’s beautiful here.”*

*“We’re in a cabin on a snow-topped peak surrounded by mountains. I’ve never actually been on a mountain, but I saw a picture much like this in a book one time. It’s another one of my favorite scenes.” Miranda handed Mitch a cup of hot chocolate before snuggling against him. “I love it that you can come with me here now. I’ve always been kinda lonely in my happy places, even with the beauty and peace.”*

*Mitch wrapped his free arm around Miranda, gently pulling her into his lap before tucking her head under his chin. "I love being here with you, baby. The peace and contentment I feel with you are everything I ever dreamed of and yet had no idea I'd ever experience." Mitch took a sip of his cocoa, abruptly moaning as the flavor hit his tongue. "Oh, my God, Miranda, this is wonderful. Tell me you know how to make it like this for real."*

*Miranda laughed merrily. "I have no idea. It's not like I had many opportunities to make hot chocolate in El Paso." Mitch shrugged while nodding his head. She had a point. "However, I do vaguely remember how I mentally developed it, so I might be able to mimic it."*

*"Thank heaven. I'll be happy to taste-test each and every batch." Miranda giggled softly. Mitch put down his cup, having quickly drained it, and wrapped his arms around the soft woman in his lap. He couldn't remember ever feeling so at peace and content. "Miranda, I love you. I have no idea what I did with my life before you came. I knew I wasn't complete, but I also knew the chances of actually finding my mate. I'm so very blessed to have you now."*

*"I love you, too, Mitch. I'm the lucky one here, though. I never imagined I would be so blessed as to have found my mate, or any mate for that matter. I never thought I'd be able to get away from them. I know exactly how fortunate I am to have escaped. That's why I want to go back and help the others who haven't totally turned dark get away."*

*Mitch couldn't help but tighten his arms around her in a subconscious need to protect her from the evil she had been subjected to. "I know, baby. We're going to take care of it."*

*"Are you worried about it?"*

*"Only about having to have you go back there. Otherwise, not really. We've dealt with evil warlocks before, though the situation he's created is a first. My father is almost three hundred years old*

*and has been our leader for over a hundred of that. He is very powerful, as are James and John, though they aren't as old."*

*"Three hundred years old? How..."*

*Again, Mitch was shocked at how little Miranda had been taught about the Gifted Ones. "Wow. They really did not teach you much, did they? We'll sit down and figure out what all we need to go over when we're finished with this battle." Miranda looked down at her hands as she pulled out of Mitch's arms to sit nearer to the fire, feeling ashamed she knew so little about her own people. Mitch was immediately mortified he'd made her feel like that. He gently lifted her chin to return her eyes to his before taking her hands in his. "Miranda. It's not your fault you haven't been taught. I didn't mean to make you feel bad about it. I'm sorry." Mitch didn't try to pull her back into his lap, feeling they needed to be able to see each other's expressions while they were talking.*

*Miranda sighed lightly before responding, "It's okay, Mitch. It just makes me feel stupid I know so little. Plus, I never got to go to high school, so my education is severely lacking. I used to be a really good student."*

*"What would you like to do to fix that? You can do anything you want to now, Miranda. All you have to do is decide to do it, and we'll make it happen. Do you want to go back to high school?"*

*"Not at twenty-one. I'd feel so weird having those young kids around me."*

*"Yeah, I can understand that. They have classes online these days. You can get your high school diploma and even continue on to college if you want. You're a smart woman, Miranda. I'm positive you'll do wonderfully, no matter what you decide you want to do. Plus, I'll be there every step of the way should you need help."*

*"Online classes? Seriously? Yeah, I think I'd like to look into that when we're settled down. I assume we're going back to the children's camp in Rockland?"*

*"We don't have to if you don't want to return to Texas. I'd gotten tired of being on the Eastern seaboard, so I decided to try out Texas for a little while. I'd been toying with the idea of starting a coven of my own instead of waiting for my father to tire of ours, but now I don't think I want to do that just yet. I don't want to have anything that will divert so much time and attention from us while we're still so new."*

*"I think a change of scenery might be nice. Let's talk about it again after the battle. I'll be thinking about it in the meantime."*

*"That sounds like a good idea. We can settle down anywhere we want. We could stay close to your family, if you wanted." Mitch cut off as Miranda tensed. "What's wrong, honey? Do you not want to go see your family?"*

*"Yes, I do. I'm just scared of their reaction. I know they're going to insist on knowing what happened to me, and I know that it will hurt them deeply. And I'm afraid they'll try to insist I stay with them. I love them, Mitch, but I'm not going to leave you. I was fourteen when they last saw me, and they may still see me as a child to be told what to do."*

*Mitch was quiet a moment as he thought over the matter. "Well, I do know I'm not letting you go anywhere without me, but I don't want to cause problems with your family either. They're going to have a hard time with you coming back, no matter how they think of you. Maybe we should talk to my mom about it and see if she can see anything that might help give us some guidance." Mitch could feel Miranda perk up immediately.*

*"That's a great idea. It will be good to have an idea of what is going to happen ahead of time."*

*"Yeah, having a precog has its good points, but it can also be annoying as hell. I couldn't get away with anything when I was a kid."*

*Miranda laughed gaily at Mitch's disgruntlement. "Speaking of being a kid, how old are you?"*

*Mitch snorted in amusement at the way Miranda had circled back to her previously unanswered question. "I'm one hundred and sixty-eight years old. I reached Master level when I was thirty-seven, so that is the age I was frozen at, though when a man reaches Master level, he is transformed to look younger, so I appear to be in my early-thirties. Now that we're mated, you've stopped aging at your current age, though you could pass for mid-twenties since you've filled out so beautifully."*

*"What? I'll always be twenty? With this body? I'm now immortal?"*

*"Yep. You'll always be twenty with a perfect body. We are essentially immortal, but we can be injured and killed. We heal much faster than regular humans, even without our healers available, but basically anything that could kill a human can kill us."*

*Mitch then proceeded to recap for Miranda the basic details regarding the Gifted Ones, some of which Miranda knew, and some she was completely surprised at. When Mitch was done, Miranda was quiet for several minutes, clearly sifting through the information Mitch had given her. "I'd always wondered why no one was ever worried about us getting pregnant or passing along sicknesses. So I can get pregnant now?"*

*"Yes, now that we're mated, we can have children. We're limited to two children every fifty years to not become conspicuous to the rest of the world, though large families aren't the norm for GOs. Your age will be a big positive for you during pregnancy. My parents were mated when Mom was forty-one, which made her pregnancies more difficult."*

*"Why aren't large families normal for GOs?"*

*"Unmated children live a normal life span. Since women cannot attain the master level without being mated, they cannot achieve immortality on their own. The result is, way more often than not, the parents outlive their daughters."*

Miranda was silent for several minutes,. *“How many siblings do you have?”*

*“Just two, a sister and a brother. John, my brother, is one of the coven leaders we’re asking for help from. He made Master at forty-five, which is fairly average. I was one of the youngest in our history.”* Mitch was drawing a breath to continue when Miranda interrupted him.

*“Wait, wait, wait. Are you saying I’m going to have to put up with having a period for eternity?? That’s gonna suck big time.”*

*Mitch laughed loudly, amused at Miranda’s disgust with the thought. “No, you won’t have to deal with that forever. My mom can perform a rite for you to stop the reproduction process until we’re ready to have children. Then, she’ll do the reversal rite. It can take some time for things to get back to normal before conception can take place, but a few months of it is nothing compared to having to put up with it for years and years.”*

*“Phew! That’s good.”* Miranda was quiet for several moments before asking quietly. *“Mitch, do you want children?”*

*“Yes, I do. I love kids, which is why I started that kid’s camp in Texas. But, Miranda, if you don’t, that’s okay. I’ve lived this long without the possibility. I can live longer with the same. And it’s not something we have to think about immediately.”*

*“But did we become fertile with the mating? We’ve made love since then.”*

*Mitch was quiet for a moment, stunned by what Miranda had pointed out. “You’re right. It’s improbable, but not impossible. We’ll need to get Mom to do the rite for us tomorrow, and it’s probably best to refrain from making love again until it’s done. You never did answer my question about whether or not you want to have kids.”*

*“I honestly don’t know. I’ve never really given it much thought. I do know I would rather not have one so soon. I want you all to myself for a while before I have to share you.”*

*"I feel the same way. We have plenty of time later. Right now, I want to concentrate on just you." Mitch leaned down to place a soft, loving kiss on her lips as he pulled her back into his lap, angled so that she was mostly facing him. They kissed for several long minutes, just loving each other. Mitch pulled back slightly, resting his forehead against Miranda's, looking deeply into her eyes. "Miranda, how do you feel about marriage? I know it's kinda just a formality, but—" Mitch was cut off by Miranda's finger being pressed to his lips.*

*"I do want to marry you, Mitch. I'd like to wait until after we talk with my family. I've always wanted my father to walk me down the aisle. Does that answer your questions?"*

*Mitch nodded, grinning widely, pressing a firm kiss to Miranda once again. "My father knows a jeweler who can make our wedding bands with the same design as our mating crest. Would you like that?"*

*The smile gracing Miranda's face was brilliant. "Absolutely! That's a wonderful idea."*

*"I don't get the credit for it. It's actually pretty common for mated pairs to do that, if they can find a good enough jeweler who won't ask too many questions. Luckily for us, one of John's coven members can do it, so that won't be a problem. I'm guessing he'll be joining us tomorrow, so we can talk about it then. Does that sound good to you?"*

*"That sounds wonderful," Miranda murmured before yawning. "The only bad thing about coming here is we don't exactly get rest while we're here. We have to sleep for real to recharge. Otherwise, I'd love to stay here all night every night."*

*"I was wondering about that. We went to sleep while in here last night, and I didn't get left behind, so I guess it's okay if we do it again?"*

*"I think so. But still, I'd rather not risk it until we've explored it a little more. I can't stand the thought of you being trapped in total sensory deprivation for hours until I wake up."*



*“Yeah, that’s a good idea. I would really prefer not to do that again.” This time, Mitch was only mildly startled to suddenly feel a soft mattress appear beneath him, though Miranda still giggled at him. “You do that on purpose now, don’t you?”*

*Miranda’s giggling turned into full laughter as she nodded her head. “It’s your face! You look so disgruntled, like someone just walked up and goosed your ass or something.”*

*Mitch chuckled along with her, shaking his head. When Miranda’s laughter had calmed, they stretched out on the mattress, snuggling into each other as they did on the temporal plane. “Good night, my love,” he whispered, placing a sweet kiss on her perfect lips.*

*“Good night, Mitch. I love you,” Miranda breathed back. She closed her eyes and mentally let him go from the plane. She waited several minutes before releasing it completely, confident she hadn’t left him behind.*

*Mitch’s body shifted in his sleep, a soft smile held on his face as he slipped deeper into other dreams.*

\* \* \* \*

It was mid-morning before either of them awoke. Mitch began shifting first, though Miranda wasn’t far behind. Mitch felt Miranda shift around until they were facing each other. Upon opening his eyes, he saw that Miranda’s eyes were also open, and a happy smile bloomed on both their faces. “Good morning, sweetheart. Did you sleep well?”

“Good morning, Mitch. Very much. I don’t think I’ve ever slept as well as I do when I have you near me. You?”

“Excellent, actually. You have a wonderful imagination, by the way. So detailed and thorough. I could spend days in your places. What do you call them, in general? ‘Happy Places’?”

Miranda snorted at Mitch. “Well, it’s more of just an image in my mind than a label. Since we’re actually talking about it now, though,

we should probably come up with a name so we at least know what we're talking about. What do you think?"

"Well, 'My Personal Heaven' is no better than 'Happy Place' as far as length goes, not to mention the possible innuendo others could perceive. We could do 'Heaven', 'Nirvana', 'Utopia'..."

"No, can't do 'Heaven' or 'Nirvana'. Those could be confusing because we might actually have a conversation referring to the real thing. I kind of like 'Utopia'. It stands for an 'ideal place and life', right?"

"You're absolutely correct. I like that, too. Shall we go with that?"

"Sure. Sounds good to me. So, since we're not supposed to engage in any lovemaking this morning, I would suggest we get the hell up and out of here before I can't take anymore." Miranda leaned in for a quick peck on the lips before leaping out of bed and hurrying for the bathroom. Mitch chuckled behind her, delighted he wasn't the only one suffering through their self-imposed restrictions. He heard the shower turn on and moaned loudly at the image of Miranda wet and slick with soap. Unable to help himself at this point, Mitch quickly left their bed and made his way quietly into the bathroom and up to the shower.

"Mitch? What are you doing?" Miranda drawled when he appeared. He loved it when she drawled her words. She'd been in Texas long enough to pick up on the twang.

"Well, I thought I'd join you. Just because we can't have intercourse doesn't mean we can't have some fun."

"Hmmm, sounds very tempting. Are you sure you can keep from slamming it into me?" Miranda was appeared to be having a blast teasing Mitch, who moaned loudly before jerking the door open and stepping under the spray. He pulled the door shut behind him with a quiet click. His eyes blazed with passion.

"Yes, despite my astoundingly strong need to be inside you, I think I can refrain. I didn't get to be one hundred and sixty-eight, much less a Master, without learning some self-discipline, though

you're sorely testing it, Miranda." His hands had begun to wander over her slick flesh while he spoke, beginning his worship of her. Mitch lightly grasped Miranda's shoulders and maneuvered them so she stood under the spray, wetting her golden hair. Once she was sufficiently wet, he moved her head out of the spray, keeping her body in the stream so she didn't catch a chill. Charleston could still be a bit cool during March. Mitch picked up her shampoo, pouring a dollop into his palm before returning the bottle to its place. He then proceeded to wash Miranda's hair for her, gently massaging her scalp and running his thick fingers through her long locks. A purr began to sound from deep in her throat as she leaned forward into Mitch's body, bracing her forehead against his strong chest. *I love you, Mitch. And I love how you love me. You make me feel so cherished.*

"I love you, too, Miranda. I want to cherish you every day for the rest of our lives," Mitch murmured back to her, massaging her neck where some of the tension from the preceding day still lingered. Suddenly, Miranda stood straight up with a gasp, staring into Mitch's eyes. "What's the matter, baby?"

"You answered me."

"Um, yes, I normally do. Why is that odd?"

"No, you don't understand. I didn't speak that out loud. My mouth never opened." Mitch stood there silently, trying to understand what she was saying. *"Mitch, look at me."* Mitch raised his eyes to hers. *"Watch me closely. Can you hear what I'm saying?"* Mitch's mouth dropped open in shock. Miranda hadn't spoken aloud. Her mouth hadn't moved at all.

"How are you doing that?" he whispered, the faint volume the best he could do at the moment.

*"Try saying it to me in your mind,"* she thought at him again.

*"Okay, is this working, or can I only hear you?"*

*"I can hear you, too, baby. I don't think I'm getting all your thoughts, just the ones you "speak" to me. You?"*

*"I'm getting what you're saying, but no stray or background stuff, like I normally have going on in my head. That's good. Full access to my brain would be fucking intrusive!"*

Miranda laughed and nodded. *"No shit! This is cool! I wonder if it's just between us, or if we're fully telepathic, or just one of us is telepathic."*

*"You're right, this is kind of cool. I guess it could be either way. But one thing, I want to hear your voice while we make love. I love your noises. That okay with you?"* Miranda nodded her agreement. *"I guess we'll have to go downstairs to figure it out."* Mitch paused as they both considered their current circumstances. *"Now, do you want to finish what we started here or wait?"*

*"Hmmm, I can tell you want to finish what we started,"* she responded, glancing down at his still-hard cock. Mitch just shrugged. The response was clearly, *"Yeah, I'm a guy. Of course I want to come first thing in the morning."* *"Finish my hair."*

Mitch did just that, rinsing the last of the shampoo from her hair before slathering it with conditioner. While her hair absorbed the cream, he lathered up a washcloth and proceeded to gently cleanse every square inch of Miranda's skin. By the time he'd reached her feet, with him on his knees before her as he softly massaged each toe, Miranda's breathing had become deep and fast, and her mind had cleared of everything but Mitch's touch on her body. Mitch smiled in satisfaction, filled with manly pride that his touch could do that to her.

Staying on his knees, he angled her body so the stream could rinse her clean before lifting one foot and placing it on the half-seat behind him. The position opened her sex to him, though not as well as if she were spread-eagle on his bed. Still, he could achieve his goal with the current circumstances. *"I'm going to devour your pussy now, Miranda. That is what you want, right?"*

*"God, yes, Mitch. Please do something, and do it now!"* Mitch could tell from the tenor of her thoughts she was nearing her orgasm quickly. Mitch ran his fingers down her dripping slit, easily able to

discern between the water flowing down her body and the juices that came from inside of her. He continued to tease her for several moments, chuckling to himself as her demands got more animated in his mind. Finally, just when she was about to give in to her frustration and get angry, he slid two fingers into her deeply, before pulling them back and thrusting them in again strongly. Miranda's back arched sharply, smacking her head against the shower wall, though she didn't notice at all. Miranda placed her hands on Mitch's shoulders to keep her balance, her grip tightening strongly as Mitch continued to pump his fingers into her. She was moving steadily toward her climax when he leaned into her and began to suckle her clit with his mouth. The sensation pushed her right to the precipice, where she hovered for just a moment. Mitch's tongue continued to work over her as his hands maintained their movements. Miranda barely felt when Mitch moved his free hand around her ass, but she felt it when he began to stroke her back hole. The added stimulus pushed her up again, though she held on to her climax just barely, wanting to climb just a bit higher. Her body was trembling madly, and her moans were constant while she maintained a litany of half-thought words and flashes of emotion in his head.

Finally, she could take no more. She shouted aloud and in his head, "Fuck me!" Her hands grasped his shoulders tightly, trying to pull him up, confirming her intent in her words. Without another thought, Mitch stood up, pulling her into his arms and slamming his rock-hard cock into her body in one swift movement. The change was enough to push Miranda far into her orgasm, her body convulsing in Mitch's arms while she screamed out her pleasure. Mitch pivoted where he stood and slammed Miranda's body into the back shower wall. Placing both hands underneath each ass cheek, he lifted her to the perfect height and began pistoning frantically in and out of her. His hard-fought battle with his own desire was quickly lost as her body milked his aching cock. He continued to pound into her as his climax whipped through him. His back arched as his head angled

sharply backward, his mouth open in a primal roar. Long after his breath ran out, Mitch continued his thrusting, still completely wrapped in his orgasm. He could dimly feel as Miranda's body shuddered a few more times before finally relaxing, hanging limply in his hands, sandwiched between him and the shower wall. Finally, when Mitch was sure he was going to pass out from the rapture coursing through him, his crest waned and settled downward. Mitch's legs could no longer support their weight, resulting in the two lovers collapsing slowly into a tangled heap in the bottom of the shower stall.

They stayed there for a few dazed minutes until they were finally able to regather their senses. Miranda opened her eyes first, surveying the sated man sprawled with her. His body shuddered occasionally as aftershocks rocketed through him, though he lay completely limp otherwise. Like Mitch had felt earlier, Miranda was thrilled she had made him lose control like that. It made her feel powerful.

*"You're always going to be able to do that to me, baby. You'll always be the only woman who has power over me. The same as I'll be the only man who has power over you. And I promise to never use that power against you,"* Mitch said, responding to her thoughts.

*"I didn't realize I was projecting. Or are you picking more up?"*

*"I'm not sure. It was kind of faint, like the only reason I could hear it at all was because my own mind was so blank. Were you feeling that strongly? Maybe strong emotion leaks through."*

*"That sounds about right. Still, we need to talk to Malcolm and Nina. Come on, hot stuff, let's get moving. We have stuff to get done today."*

*"Okay, okay."* Mitch glanced up at the water still cascading down upon them. "It's a damn good thing they put one of those infinity water heaters in or we'd be freezing by now." Miranda chuckled as he stood up carefully from his spot on the floor before reaching down and helping Miranda to her feet. He turned her back into the water,

helping to rinse her overly-conditioned hair before handing her out the door and turning back to finish his own cleaning.

As she dried off, Miranda pictured him helping her out of the shower and indicated “Why?” with her emotions. She was curious if they could only communicate in words. Apparently, Mitch received exactly what she was trying to say because he answered, *“I’ll always do stuff like that, baby. It’s just part of who I am. I’m always the one to offer help to little old ladies and stuff like that. Plus, with you, just the thought of you being hurt rips my chest open, so if I can do anything to prevent that from happening, I will do that. Does that bother you?”*

*“No, I’m just not used to it. Just don’t get to the point where you want to keep me at home wrapped up in Bubble Wrap or something. We both know that shit happens and so do accidents. If something happens, we’ll deal with it. We’re a team now, Mitch. I know I’m not exactly an equal member, not yet anyway, but I’ll do what I can.”*

Miranda didn’t need to read his mind to feel the frown on his face as he stepped out of the shower behind her. *“What the hell are you talking about, not being an equal partner? You might not be as developed or as powerful as I am, but that’s just in magic, Miranda. We are very much equal when it comes to loving each other and being new to the whole relationship thing. You may be young in years, but you have endured and survived more than most people could in five hundred years. As much as it sucks, your time with Cabela has taught you some valuable lessons. You know pain, so you’ll be more compassionate than most people who have never hurt. You are patient with others. You seem so accepting of other’s faults and yet so impatient with your own. We can’t change the past, even if we have eradicated the physical effects of it. It’s up to you on how you want to use what’s happened. You are smart, loving, strong, courageous, compassionate, and beautiful. Don’t allow your past to ruin your present and future.”* Mitch’s little rant wound to a finish as he finished drying himself off. Looking up, he was surprised to see tears

in Miranda's eyes. He immediately dropped his towel and pulled her into his arms. *"What did I say? I'm sorry, baby, I didn't mean to..."*

*"No, you didn't say anything wrong, Mitch. You said everything right. Thank you, Mitch, for having such faith in me. I know, with you by my side, I can be exactly who I want."*

*"I'll always be right here beside you, Miranda. You can count on that."*

*"I will."* Miranda gave him a sweet kiss before turning back to the sink to finish getting ready. They worked together and around each other well, reminding themselves of the rather awkward moment the day before. *"Was that seriously just yesterday?"*

*"Yeah, I know how you feel. We've actually only known each other just over two days. But, you know, I knew immediately you would be someone important to me. And I'm really glad we fell in love before our mating occurred."*

*"Me too. I'm also glad, though, we're not having to force you to decide between me and your rightful place in the coven. I would have never stopped feeling guilty."*

*"I know. I'm glad, too, though I would still make the same choice. It would have been painful, though, to watch you age while I stayed the same. We would have had lots of wonderful years, but just the thought of losing you wrenches my gut."*

Miranda stopped brushing her hair for a moment, thinking about that part. *"You're right, that would have really sucked. I hadn't even thought about that. I would have left you all alone."* The thought brought tears to Miranda's eyes again, which were gently wiped away by Mitch.

*"Quit thinking about the what-ifs, baby. We don't have to worry about anything like that ever again. Now, are you almost done?"* he inquired as he pulled on his pants and grabbed his shirt.

*"No, my hair is totally fried now. Will you grab me something out of my bag? There's not much left clean in there, so it shouldn't be difficult to find something."*



“Okay...” Mitch trailed off as he walked to inspect her small suitcase. He found she had bagged her dirty clothes and really did only have two more clean outfits. He frowned for a moment before saying, “Miranda? *Is this seriously all the clothes you have?*”

Miranda walked out of the bathroom as she finished tucking her hair into a messy bun. “Yes, *that’s all of it. And most of those are hand-me-downs.*”

“*When we’re done with all this, we’re going shopping. Actually, I know my mother would probably love to come, too.*”

Miranda shrugged her shoulders as she pulled on the pair of jeans he’d pulled out for her. They were pretty snug on her now more-voluptuous body. She found her bra was just as uncomfortably tight. “Okay, *but you’re not spending a bunch of money on me, Mitch.*”

“*Get over it, Miranda. What’s mine is yours, starting yesterday. As soon as we get back, I’ll be working on getting you access to all of our accounts.*” Mitch pulled Miranda into his arms again, sure she wasn’t done arguing.

Miranda sighed, sensing there was no way she was going to win this battle, not that she had a leg to stand on in the first place. “*I just feel like I’m coming into this relationship with nothing to offer. I...*”

“*Miranda! Baby, I love you, and I don’t care if you’re rich or poor, fat or thin, ugly or beautiful! All of that is just the wrapping. It’s your heart and soul and spirit that have captured me. You’ve given me so much just by being alive and with me! You mean everything to me, and if I have to give everything up to convince you of that, I will, though we’ll have way more time together if you’d just accept what I’ve built up over the last one hundred fifty years.*”

Miranda leaned her head against Mitch’s chest for a moment before saying, “*Okay, Mitch. I won’t make a big deal about it anymore. Should I even ask what our financial status is?*”

“*Of course you should, and I love that you called it “ours”. And we’re wealthy. We’ll never have to worry about finances as long as we manage it carefully.*”

*“I’d like you to teach me how to do that.”*

*“I’d be happy to do so. Now, let’s go talk to Malcolm and Nina.”*

## Chapter 8

Malcolm and Nina were in the kitchen nursing a cup of coffee and talking about the things they needed to get done that day. When Mitch and Miranda walked in and saw the breakfast waiting for them, they eagerly piled food on their plates and grabbed a cup of coffee before sitting down with Malcolm and Nina.

“Thank you for making breakfast, Nina. It’s delicious,” Miranda complimented as she settled in to consume her rather large breakfast.

Nina and Malcolm chuckled, causing Miranda to raise an eyebrow in question. “Actually, I can’t cook at all,” shared Nina. “Malcolm does all the cooking for us. In fact, he insisted on building me a separate spell-casting kitchen out back so I wouldn’t burn down the house if I lost control of a spell.”

A faint blush covered Miranda’s cheeks. “Sorry, bad assumption.”

“Don’t worry about it, my dear. We don’t ascribe to the typical family structure anymore, not after two hundred fifty plus years. So, how are you feeling this morning?”

“Great, actually. I never realized how much pain I was always in until I didn’t feel it anymore.” Silence reigned for a moment while Nina and Malcolm tried to absorb what Miranda had shared while Mitch tried to control the murderous rage that had erupted within him. Miranda immediately fished around for a change in topic to try to take Mitch’s mind off of her past injuries. “Have you made any headway with the arrangements?”

“Yes, everything is ready. We will fly out tonight at eleven, which will put us in El Paso around four in the morning. That should get us in without being noticed by anyone from the compound. James and

John will be joining us, along with three to four of their coven members and their best healers. That will put us around twenty people ready to fight with five good strong healers. Anthony was able to get us all into a hotel on the outskirts of the city. Miranda, when we're finished here, we need to go over the compound's location and try to draw up a schematic of the compound itself so we can do some strategic planning. Also, you're going to need to call in so they don't suspect something is up before we're ready." Miranda nodded in understanding of what was needed of her. She knew it was up to her to give them as much information as possible to decrease the chances of her new family being injured.

Nina spoke up then, motioning to several shopping bags on the floor near Miranda's seat. "Those are yours, Miranda. It's just a few outfits to get you through until we can really go shopping."

"You bought me clothes? How'd you know...Never mind, stupid question. Thank you so much! In all honesty, my bra is killing me." They all burst out laughing, though a faint pink tinged Miranda's cheek. "Sorry, TMI."

"That's okay, dear," Nina assured her, patting her wrist. "When you've known and lived with someone as long as we have, there's not much in the way of secrets or modesty that can be kept. Now, what questions did you have for us? I know some of it, but the vision was fragmented. I don't think I got all of it."

Miranda glanced at Mitch, telling him to start with her eyes. "Well," Mitch began, "We need you to perform the non-fertility rite as soon as possible. We talked it over, and we're not ready to have children just yet. We want time with just each other first."

"Ah," Nina hummed as she shook her head. "Always trying to close the stable door after the horse has already escaped."

The panic on Mitch and Miranda's faces was comical, and Malcolm and Nina controlled their laughter as long as they could before they simply couldn't hold it in anymore.

*“Is she serious, Mitch? Am I already pregnant?”* Miranda screamed at him in her mind, loudly enough he physically flinched.

*“Miranda, calm down, baby. If you are, we’ll deal with it, remember? I’m more concerned about having you go in with us on Saturday. If you are pregnant, you’re not joining us. Dad’ll just have to figure something else out. And before you ask, I have no idea why they’re laughing like loons.”*

Nina and Malcolm’s hilarity died off as they observed Mitch and Miranda’s silent communication. “No, Miranda, you’re not pregnant. I did the rite yesterday immediately after you mated, because if I hadn’t, you would have conceived last night. Over the years, I’ve begun doing it as soon as possible after seeing too many newly mated couples face parenthood before they’ve even gotten comfortable with being mated.” Nina chuckled silently at Mitch and Miranda’s relieved expressions.

“I take it the telepathy has already initiated?” Malcolm queried.

“Yeah, a warning would have been nice there. We both thought we were losing our minds. Is it only between mates or with everyone?” Mitch asked.

“Unless telepathy is one of your new powers, it will be just between the mated pair. We don’t tell people about it because not every couple develops it, and a lot of people would rather not know more about a situation they don’t have much chance of achieving.” Mitch and Miranda nodded in understanding as Malcolm continued. “You probably won’t hear each other’s every thought, but you may be able to communicate in a nonverbal manner.”

“Mitch was able to figure out what I was asking when I concentrated on a specific image and added an emotion to it.”

Malcolm and Nina raised their eyebrows before glancing at each other. Nina spoke this time. “It’s pretty unusual for a new pair to be able to communicate that effectively so quickly. One or both of you might be developing more skills in that arena. After we take care of

Cabela, we're going to have to do some exploration on what new things you can do."

"It's going to take a while for me," commented Miranda. "Before I can start exploring what new things being mated with Mitch brings me, I need to go back and relearn everything properly that a Novice should know."

"You'll do just fine, Miranda. Mitch will be able to teach you as quickly as you learn, and you'll be up to speed in no time. And I've already seen you'll do beautifully in school. Don't be afraid to tackle it."

Miranda rose from her place and moved to give Nina a hug. "Thank you, Nina. I have to ask, though. Is it your precognition that leads you to believe that or your mother's intuition?"

Nina laughed lightly. "Sometimes I can't tell between the two. Now, you three get to work. I'll take care of the dishes." Miranda began to object before Nina cut her off. "Miranda, you're going to need the rest of the day to get everyone prepared. Go." Miranda immediately nodded her head in obedience and followed Mitch and Malcolm out of the kitchen area and up to Malcolm's study after a short detour to change into the much more comfortable clothes Nina had gotten her.

The first order of business was calling the compound to check in. Luckily for her, Miranda could now lie to her old coven, though they didn't know that yet. Malcolm and Mitch waited silently as Miranda dialed. Once the phone was ringing, she put it on speaker so everyone could hear easily.

"Mandy, where the hell have you been?" a voice Miranda instantly recognized as Carl's growled. It took Miranda every ounce of control to force herself to answer in the meek manner she would have prior to being released.

"I'm sorry, Carl. I just didn't have anything to report. The car broke down yesterday, but the mechanic says it should be ready tomorrow."

“Mechanic, huh? How are you paying for that? No, let me guess. You’re fucking him, right? Just what a slut should do.”

“Yes, Carl. It was my only option. I’m sorry.”

“Why should we care who you fuck? Just get your ass back here tomorrow. Devon has scheduled the ceremony for midnight tomorrow. Obviously you failed in your mission, but I didn’t. Got him a succulent little piece of ass for his sacrifice. She’s only ten years old. So innocent. I can’t wait for my turn at her. Devon wants her unmarked, so I can’t even have fun with her until after the ceremony.”

Miranda fought to not throw up or show any kind of reaction in her voice, though her face expressed just how horrified she was. Mitch and Malcolm’s faces mirrored her feelings, fear, outrage, and disgust twisting their handsome features.

Finally, Miranda was able to get herself gathered enough to answer Carl. “Wow, congratulations, Carl. I’m sure Devon is most pleased with you. Where did you find her?”

“Came across her in a restaurant I stopped for lunch at. Her sign is on her neck, clear as day. So easy.”

“Sounds like it. I should be there in plenty of time. As soon as the mechanic gets the car going again, I’ll be on my way.”

“Yeah, why don’t you go suck him off to get him moving faster? You were always good at that. You’ll have to give me a good one if you’re able to move after Devon gets a hold of you for failing your first search.” All three of them winced at Carl’s reference to the abuse Miranda had suffered before finding Mitch. Despite knowing Mitch knew what had happened to her, Miranda still stiffened in fear. It was one thing to know about the abuse intellectually, but a whole different story when faced with the details of that abuse.

Mitch, reached out and took her hand in his, squeezing it in reassurance. He caught her eyes and opened his mind to her, showing her he still loved her deeply, and she had nothing to fear.

The relief Miranda felt was extreme and enabled her to complete the call. “As you wish, Carl. You know I live to make everyone happy, whatever that takes.”

“Yeah, whatever, Mandy. Just get your skinny ass home,” Carl instructed before hanging up.

Mitch immediately pulled Miranda into his arms, giving them both comfort after the disturbing call. Malcolm simply sat in his chair, his face in his hands. Miranda felt a higher sense of urgency, with maybe a bit of desperation included. They had to get that little girl away from them before they hurt her any more than they already had.

The rest of the day was spent pinpointing the compound’s location, a task that was not as easy as Miranda had expected, and once John and James had joined them, sketching out a schematic of the compound’s layout. Luckily, Miranda had some talent with drawing she’d completely forgotten about and so was able to render a fairly good depiction of the compound’s many rooms and passageways. As Miranda described the layout of the compound to the men, she explained what the various rooms were used for and some of what had happened in those rooms. She didn’t want them going into those rooms without some sort of preparation for what they very well might see.

As they worked through the day, Miranda’s concern about being less than helpful or equal to the other members disappeared as the men took the information she gave seriously, along with the suggestions on the best way to enter and where to look for the various members of the household. Her forgotten drawing ability again came in incredibly handy as she was able to sketch a decent likeness of Cabela and the other members of his coven who needed to be eradicated rather than captured. Miranda didn’t need Mitch’s thoughts to know he was very proud of her ability to set aside the emotional pain that accompanied her sharing of the necessary information. By the time Nina called a halt for their take-out dinner at seven, Miranda



had a raging headache and felt completely empty of knowledge. She had shared every bit she could think of and then some.

Miranda didn't even have to ask before Nina was handing her a specially brewed cup of tea and a couple of aspirin. Mitch, however, was staggered when he reduced his focus on the fight ahead and became aware of Miranda once again. "Miranda! How long have you been hurting like that, baby?" Mitch ground out as he winced at the pain he was pulling from her. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, guiding her to rest her forehead against his chest. He then loosened the bun at the top of her head and began to massage her scalp and neck with his strong, warm hands. He could feel an immediate release of some of the tension from her body, followed by a reduction in the pain gripping her head.

"It's just a headache, Mitch, though don't stop what you're doing. That feels so good," she mumbled as she began to lean more heavily against him. Mitch was silent for several minutes as he continued to rub. When Nina came to call them to dinner again, he motioned they would be there in a bit and to start without them. She nodded and left them to continue. Mitch continued to monitor Miranda's pain levels through their connection, grateful he could sense it and not be forced to ask and then wonder if she were minimizing the depth of the pain. He knew she was no stranger to physical pain and probably ignored more than most people could take without passing out, but he didn't want her to hurt at all if he could help it.

Several minutes later, Miranda was mostly limp lying against his chest, and much of her headache had disappeared beneath Mitch's skillful hands. Mitch lowered his hands to clasp around her back, leaning his cheek down to rest upon the top of her head. They stood that way for a few more minutes, absorbing the peace and contentment that always flowed between them. They were interrupted by Mitch's stomach growling for its nightly meal, causing them to pull apart, chuckling.

*“Thank you, Mitch. I love you so much, and I love how your hands make me feel.”*

*“You’re welcome, my love. You should have said something earlier, though, before it got so bad.”*

*“I honestly hadn’t noticed it until just a few minutes before you did. I was too focused on what we were doing.”*

*“I know how it is. I do it, too. I’m just glad I was able to help, along with the tea and aspirin Mom gave you. Speaking of, we’d better join them for dinner soon before there’s nothing left and we’re stuck with sandwiches again.”*

Miranda pulled back out of Mitch’s arms, lifting her face up for a sweet kiss, which was immediately granted. *“I love you, Mitch.”*

*“As I love you, Miranda. Always.”* Miranda smiled softly at him before turning to pull him toward the dining room.

Mitch was almost right about there not being any left for them. If Nina hadn’t prevented the rest of the guys from eating it, there wouldn’t have been enough for Mitch and Miranda to share. The dinner was lively with conversation, with them all telling stories about Mitch growing up with a mother who always knew what trouble he was getting into and his many accidents as he tried to learn how to use his powers. Miranda laughed so much she was breathless by the time dessert was served, and Mitch, who’d started off scowling in embarrassment at the information being shared, was guffawing right along with them at his more idiotic moments.

Appearing to feel a little bad for Mitch, Miranda told the story of how she’d skidded down the last bit of grass at the bottom of Mitch’s stairs and had landed in the rather cool water of the river and nearly gave a bunch of preteen boys a good look at her breasts. Everyone else was laughing uproariously while Mitch and Miranda shared a soft, loving look of remembrance.

Dinner broke up shortly afterward, with cleanup being simple considering it was all in boxes or on paper plates. Everyone went their separate ways as they made their last preparations before having to

leave for the airport at nine thirty for their eleven o'clock departure time.

Mitch and Miranda returned to their room. They quickly packed the little they had with them, though Miranda threw most of the clothes she'd brought from the compound away because they no longer fit. When they were done, there was still over an hour to wait.

Mitch sat on one side the bed, pulling Miranda between his legs to hold her tightly against him while her arms wrapped themselves around his broad shoulders. They didn't need to speak, aloud or telepathically, to know what the other was thinking and feeling. They were both nervous about what would happen the next evening and knew this time would likely be the last they would have together alone.

Miranda moved back a bit so she could gaze into Mitch's blazing blue eyes. She lifted her hand to gently trace his face. Her thumb skimmed along his eyebrows, across his cheekbones, and then ghosted over his lips. She pressed her palm to his cheek as he leaned his head into it, absorbing the love and comfort she offered with it. Mitch loosened his arms around her waist and raised his hands to bury themselves into her hair. Slowly, ever so slowly, he pulled her face toward his while never allowing his gaze to wander from hers. They paused for a moment just as their lips were about to touch, sharing their breath. Then, with a tiny movement from them both, they pressed their lips together in a soul-shattering kiss. They shared every emotion, every thought regarding each other in that kiss. They both moaned as the kiss deepened, their tongues dueling before delving into the other's mouth.

When they had to part for breath, Mitch kissed a line from Miranda's mouth across her jaw to her ear, where he nibbled on the lobe before moving down to the soft flesh below. Miranda's hands bunched his shirt in her hands as she sighed in pleasure. Mitch slid his hands down her back to the hem of her shirt before leaning back just far enough to allow him to tug the fabric over Miranda's head, leaving

her in a sexy blue lace bra. “Oh, fuck! I love that color on you,” he groaned out. Mitch brought his hands around to palm each lace-clad breast, brushing his thumbs against her hardening nipples through the fabric. He leaned forward again and began showering kisses along her chest as he moved down toward her breasts. When he couldn’t comfortably lean any further downward, he reached around to swiftly unclip the bra and pulled the scrap of fabric from her body. He then grasped her around her waist and pulled her body up onto the bed, settling her on her back near the center.

Mitch rolled over on top of Miranda, settling his hips between her thighs, which opened automatically. He returned to his worship of her breasts, laving, pulling, and nipping at the skin around her nipples before finally suckling on the nipples themselves. Soon, her breasts were swollen and tight with need as her hips and legs began shifting beneath him.

Mitch pushed away from Miranda to stand up beside the bed. Miranda’s eyes glittered with need as she watched him, her eyes hooded with passion. Mitch hurriedly undressed, stripping himself bare before doing the same with the remaining clothes Miranda had on. When they were both completely nude, Mitch crawled back up onto the bed, though this time he lay down at Miranda’s side, giving his hand the room it needed to continue to explore her body. Miranda reached up and clasped Mitch’s head firmly, bringing his lips back to hers. As they kissed, Mitch’s hand returned to Miranda’s breasts, pulling and tugging on her nipples until they had returned to their fully aroused state. He then skimmed it downward, brushing over her silken stomach before reaching his final destination, her silken curls. He brushed his fingers through her tuft, finding her dripping with excitement, the flesh plumped from the additional blood flow. Parting her folds gently, he stroked her with the tips of his fingers, circling her swollen bundle of nerves before firmly brushing across it.

Miranda could not stay still anymore as the pleasure Mitch was bringing her swept through her body. Her back arched as her hips

pressed her mound against his hand, a cry of need escaping her as she fought for breath. Taking her uplifted chest as an invitation, Mitch bent his head down to nibble and suck on her breasts, pushing Miranda ever closer to the explosion she could feel building inside. Mitch continued to fondle her wet center, using his thumb to manipulate her clit while the rest of his fingers delved downward. Miranda cried out again when he thrust two fingers into her tight wet hole, her hips responding with a thrust of their own, before finding a rhythm both could follow. Miranda could no longer keep quiet as she murmured and breathed out her feelings and half-formed thoughts, telling Mitch repeatedly how much she loved him.

Mitch knew he couldn't keep this up much longer. His cock had been hard since he'd pulled her into his arms after finishing packing, and his cock now throbbed painfully. He had to be inside of her now. Mitch pulled his fingers out of her wet heat, causing Miranda to cry out in disappointment. Licking his fingers clean quickly, he then moved above her once again, wedging his hips between her thighs and rubbing the head of his swollen dick along her wet slit. Miranda began to tremble below him, telling him she was very close to her first orgasm. Mitch positioned himself at her opening and gently but firmly pressed his way inside until he was fully buried, his balls pressed against her ass.

They both groaned out in pleasure at the feel of him being buried deep inside her. Miranda wrapped her arms and legs around him, holding him tightly to her as Mitch propped his upper body up with his elbows and spread his knees to stably brace their bodies. When they were comfortably situated, Mitch pulled back, leaving just the very tip of his cock at her opening before slamming back into her body. That one hard, deep thrust pitched Miranda into her orgasm. She screamed loudly as the energy burst within her, causing her entire body to tremble. Mitch groaned loudly at the feel of her body clamping around his but was able to gather enough of his control to keep from releasing his own orgasm so soon. He began thrusting

strongly within her, keeping a steady pace that prolonged Miranda's orgasm and pushed him toward his own. Her body began to relax once the climax had released her, though Miranda never let go of her clasp on him. She did not allow herself to fully relax into the orgasmic afterglow either but instead focused on Mitch's movements, feeling him moving deep within her. Her need for Mitch soon reignited, and she joined him in working toward another peak.

Mitch felt Miranda's body begin to respond to his again, her hips pushing up to meet each thrust. After a few moments, Mitch decided he wanted a slightly different position. Not wanting to lose the connection of being face-to-face and chest-to-chest, Mitch pulled his knees up under her ass so he was sitting on his heels. He then wrapped his arms around her torso, pulling her up to press her body against his so that she was essentially squatting over him. Miranda wrapped her arms around his neck, holding him tightly against her as she pulled her feet under her some so she could move her hips along with his. As he had wanted, they were hip-to-hip, chest-to-chest, and face-to-face. They began moving in this new position, quickly finding a satisfying rhythm, as Mitch gripped Miranda's hips in a bruising hold. They enjoyed the new angle for a while before finding the position soon tired out the rarely used muscles it required. Miranda pressed one hand against Mitch's shoulder, silently telling him she wanted him on his back. Mitch moved to comply immediately, his body shaking with the need pouring through him.

Miranda wasted no time crawling up Mitch's body before positioning herself above his straining cock as Mitch's hands again gripped her hips. Miranda stared deeply into Mitch's eyes as she slowly impaled herself with his turgid flesh. The sensation caused both of them to moan loudly. When Miranda was able, she began moving over him, keeping the strokes slow but strong and deep. Soon, they were both gasping as their bodies tightened in preparation for the coming eruption. With Mitch's help, Miranda began slamming her body down on his, grinding down on his pubic bone at the bottom of

each thrust. Her juices continued to flow, and soon Mitch's hips and balls were covered in her sweet honey. Mitch was on the edge, hanging on as tightly as possible to make sure Miranda came with him, but he knew he would soon lose control.

"Miranda! Baby, you have to come now! Come for me, baby, cover me in your sweet juices," Mitch managed to growl out. The command had its desired result, pitching Miranda over the edge. Her body clamped down hard upon his, her pussy squeezing his hard cock tightly as her back bowed, and she howled her pleasure to the room. The tight clenching of her inner muscles upon his hard flesh pulled his orgasm from him, forcing him to slam upward into her body several times as he convulsed below her, roaring out his own release.

Their bodies moved instinctively for several more moments before collapsing in a heap. They lay there for a while, recovering and fighting to regain their breath, Miranda sprawled across Mitch's body with her head resting on his chest. His hands continued to rest on her hips, stroking the skin gently on occasion. When she was able, Miranda pulled her head up to rest on her folded arms, gazing lovingly into Mitch's eyes. "I love you, Mitch. No matter what happens, I will always love you."

Mitch's arms moved to wrap her in his embrace, holding her tightly against him. "I love you, Miranda. I'm not going to let anything happen to you, and I'm never going to let you go. I waited a very long time to find you, and I'm going to keep you, no matter what happens tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay. I'm just worried. I still have a hard time grasping that so many people are willing to take on such a dangerous task for me."

"It's not just you, baby. Yes, we're prepared to go into battle for you, but also for all the other innocents they have damaged. If it was just you, we'd still do it, but we have a much bigger responsibility than that." Mitch took a moment to focus on their mental connection, searching for whatever it was causing Miranda's distress. "Baby, you can't blame yourself if someone gets hurt. You heard what the Merlin

and dad said. They had heard rumors about the coven and were about to move against it anyway. You simply gave them the definitive proof they needed. We would likely be getting ready to fight them even if you had never left the compound. If nothing else, you saved whatever innocents that would have been hurt in the delay. We would have never had the kind of information you gave us, making it much more dangerous for us when we attacked. No matter what happens, you've done well. You have nothing to feel guilty about."

Miranda thought through Mitch's words for several seconds, considering them deeply before accepting their truth. "Thank you, Mitch. You're right. I hope we get there in ..."

Miranda was cut off by a quick knock at their door followed by a voice informing them they needed to leave in ten minutes.

Mitch and Miranda looked deeply into each other's eyes for a moment before closing in for a sweet kiss, conveying everything in their hearts for each other. They both whispered, "I love you," as they broke apart. Mitch pulled Miranda tightly against his chest before releasing her completely. Miranda moved herself off of him, both hissing and shuddering as his body was dislodged from hers.

Moving quickly, they rose to clean up and re-dress. As they moved, they were very aware of each other, the energy between them pulsing with the strength of their love for each other. Mitch picked up both bags as she finished pulling her hair up in another bun. "I love when you wear your hair up. I can see your crest easily." Miranda just smiled at him, making him realize it was the reason she'd pulled her hair up in the first place.

They joined the rest of the coven at the airport as they boarded the coven's private jet. The Masterson coven had been around a long time, and its leaders had managed its finances well. The coven was no longer dependent on the support from its members. The flight to El Paso passed quietly as they all tried to get some sleep and gather their energy for the coming battle. They landed in El Paso just after four in the morning. A small fleet of vehicles waited for them. They piled



into them and made their way to the hotel. There, they split up again to go to their assigned rooms. Mitch and Miranda called for room service immediately. After eating their fill, they lay down to get some much needed rest. The plan was to rest until five and then convene in the hotel's meeting room to go over the information Miranda had given them the prior day.

\* \* \* \*

Mitch and Miranda entered the meeting room a few minutes past five. Miranda looked over the people assembled there. All of them were dressed in black. Miranda was the only one dressed in colors. This was important to the mission they were about to undertake. There were eighteen men and six women, not counting herself and Mitch. *"The women are healers that are staying behind, right?"* Miranda asked telepathically.

*"No. Two of the men are healers, and three of the women are warriors. With the two of us, there will be twenty-one people ready to do battle and five healers. And don't worry about the female warriors. They're all well trained and have plenty of experience."*

*"Okay, that's a load off my mind."*

*"Miranda, I should have mentioned this earlier, but you're going to have to tell the group about what to expect when they get in there. Dad and I will do what we can, but they need to know what to expect. Other than us and the other leaders, the rest really don't know anything other than we have been given the task of eradicating a highly abusive coven."*

Miranda cast her eyes down as she sighed. After a moment, she raised her eyes back to his and nodded.

With that, they moved to the front of the room where Malcolm had the house layout and her sketches tacked to the wall. Mitch kept her hand clasped tightly in his as he took his place as second-in-command. There were several gasps throughout the room as they saw

the mated crest circling their necks, but other than that, the group was quiet.

Malcolm started the meeting off by conducting the blessing ceremony and then introducing them to the gathering. Eventually, he got to the explanation as to why they were gathered. “I know my members already know the reason why we’re here today and have probably already shared that with the rest of the group, but I want to go over it again, to make sure everyone knows exactly why we’ve been given the task of eradicating this coven. The leader’s name is...” Malcolm trailed off as Miranda lifted her hand in the “stop” gesture.

“May I?” she asked of him. At his nod, she turned to face the bulk of the group. She could feel Mitch’s pride and amazement in her, and it gave her the strength to say what she knew she had to. “My name is Miranda. I was fourteen when I was drugged and kidnapped from my own bedroom and taken to the Cabela coven. Once there, I was raped and beaten by Devon Cabela, the leader of the coven. After that day, I was raped and beaten every day, multiple times a day. The only days I was not were when I was too injured and in the hospital. That was three days. Last Friday, five and a half years after being kidnapped, I finally graduated from my ‘behavior’ training. I was trained on the basics of magic but have since learned what I was taught is spotty at best. The behavior training is intense and is meant to completely break one’s spirit. It almost broke mine. I was given my first assignment to find a young female latent, the younger the better. I knew if I succeeded in my assignment, I would turn as evil as Cabela. I also knew if I returned unsuccessful, he’d likely kill me. I wasn’t sure what I would do. I knew, however, that if I didn’t find a way out, I would not survive the week, either by Cabela’s hand or my own.

“Two days later, I went to check out a children’s day camp, specifically, Mitch’s camp, that was on the target list I was given. He quickly figured out the situation I was in and decided to step in to rescue me. We conducted the allegiance ceremony on Wednesday, which turned into much more than was anticipated. Mitch and I were

mated during it, even though we hadn't had sex yet. During that event, all of the scars I had carried from being in the coven were removed. There were a lot of them. You can ask the Masterson coven members if you're curious. The only scars I carry now are where Mitch donated two strips of his own flesh to help heal the wounds left behind when the brands Cabela gave me were excised." Miranda stopped a moment, regathering her focus on the present instead of the memories from the past. "I spoke with a Cabela coven member yesterday morning, trying to keep them from realizing I'd left the coven until we could initiate our attack tonight. He shared some important information with me.

"Cabela is conducting a ceremony tonight at midnight. It must be extremely powerful. The Cabela member I spoke to bragged he'd found exactly what Cabela wanted for the ceremony, a ten-year-old latent female. The whispers about the ceremony are he will be conducting either a sexual sacrifice, in which he will rape the girl on the altar during the ceremony, or a full sacrifice, where he'll likely rape her and then kill her. Either way, we have to get in there and stop that ceremony before they can hurt her." Miranda stopped for a moment, glancing about the room again. The majority of the group had expressions of shock and disgust, which eventually hardened into resolve. The remaining people, mostly the healers, seemed to be stuck at horror.

"All of the coven members are required to be at the ceremony, so we will have a chance to get them all at one time, but that also gives us more people to fight. There are fifteen coven members, not counting myself or the latents. The latents will likely be chained in their room here." Miranda pointed to a room on the layout Malcolm had had blown up large enough so everyone could easily see. "They may also be in the various 'discipline' rooms here, here, and here. Brace yourself when you enter these rooms. They are bloody and rancid and have unimaginable stuff in them. The ceremony room is here, and these are Cabela's private chambers. I've heard rumors

there are secret passages and doorways, but I've been all over that house trying to find a way out and never found anything. Then again, with Cabela, there's no telling.

"I'll tell you a bit about Cabela and his main group of men. His full name is Devon Cabela. He was not yet a master when he turned to the dark side, but he has gained incredible powers from his willingness to hurt and destroy. He deals with the devil, so don't underestimate his powers or his willingness to do horrible things. There were five latents that were brought in after me, not counting the new girl. Two of them died from beatings they received. Two more are fighting their training, as I did. The last one broke quickly but hasn't finished her magic training yet. They are regularly beaten and raped, just as I was, by every member of the coven, not just Cabela. It wasn't unusual for me to service Cabela, his top six guys, and anyone who was visiting him and wished it on any given day. Like I said, their goal was to break the spirits of the people they took. It gives them power and a new minion. The longer a person is with them, the more destroyed the person's soul becomes, until at some point, there is nothing left of his old self, and he becomes just as evil as Cabela is. With that said, do not trust anyone who comes from that compound. They will not be able to renounce their loyalty and obedience to Cabela until their brands are removed, just as I wasn't."

After that, Mitch and Miranda moved off to the side and allowed the leaders to conduct the remainder of the session. They were all given assignments based upon their strengths and the information Miranda had given them. John briefly attempted to assign Mitch and Miranda to different teams, but Mitch stopped him immediately, making it clear he wasn't going to be moving away from Miranda at all. John smiled good-naturedly at his brother, saying, "I wondered how fast he would object," and causing the room to erupt in laughter. They desperately needed that moment of levity to ease the stress of preparing for the battle to come. When everyone had calmed down

again, Miranda could literally see the difference in the mood of the room. It had gone from tense and worried to relaxed and focused.

At nine, everyone was confident they knew exactly what to expect and what was expected of them. They spent the next hour eating a late dinner in the hotel's restaurant. Everyone wanted to make sure they had built up as much energy and power as possible. At ten thirty, they all piled into their assigned cars and headed toward the compound.

## Chapter 9

Mitch held Miranda's hand tightly as he drove her beat-up old car toward the compound. He'd had one of the guys from the camp get her car and drive it to the hotel as soon as it became clear Miranda would have to return to the camp. He could feel the tension rolling off of her, but she managed to stay focused and calm.

When they were less than a mile from the compound and just around the last curve before they could be seen, Mitch pulled over. He hated this part of the plan, despite knowing that it was imperative. They sat there in silence for a few seconds before they both reached for the door. They met in front of the car, wrapping each other in their arms tightly. *"You're going to be okay, baby."*

*"I know. I'm just scared to go back in there. I never wanted to go near that place again, and I hate that I'm dragging you back here, too."*

*"Hey,"* Mitch admonished her as he lifted her face up to accept a soft, reassuring kiss. *"Where you go, so do I. You know that, Miranda. Just be careful, and stay low until we can get in there, okay? I hate that I'm letting you go in there alone."* Mitch sighed heavily, wishing once again they had come up with a plan that didn't include Miranda having to return at all, much less going into the compound by herself.

They stayed there for several minutes whispering sweet love words to each other and making promises for the future. Eventually, the radio on Mitch's belt chirped, indicating the other teams had reached their positions. He gave her one last long, deep kiss as he poured all of his heart and soul into her before releasing and helping

her into the driver's seat. "Be careful, my love. I'll be right behind you," he reassured her audibly, knowing they both needed to hear the words. "I love you."

"I love you, Mitch. Be careful, too," Miranda answered, a little shakily. With a wan smile, she put the dilapidated car into gear and drove away.

\* \* \* \*

Mitch thought he'd go insane as he watched her drive away from him. Shaking off the fear that this would be the last time he saw her alive, he turned and began loping towards the brush that bordered the back side of the compound. Miranda had identified five different places where they could enter the compound with a reduced chance of detection, and he was assigned to the entrance closest to the ceremony room.

Less than five minutes later, Mitch was in place, and they were waiting for Miranda. Mitch had turned his radio from audible to earwig, allowing him to hear what the others were saying without being overheard. Groups One and Two reported they had seen Miranda moving about the compound and opening their points of ingress. John, the leader of group Two, mentioned that her behavior was drastically different from what they had seen earlier, asking if that was a cause for concern.

"Is it extremely submissive?" Mitch murmured, knowing his microphone would pick up the slightest noise.

"Yeah. A guy walked by, not one of the top ones from what I could tell, and she hit the floor on her knees with her forehead to the ground faster than I've ever seen anyone move."

"That's her trained behavior. It's what they expect their members to do to a higher-ranking member."

Complete silence reigned for several seconds before John responded. "That's just wrong."

The radio was silent for several more seconds before Group Three reported she had opened their entry point. The remaining two were the front and back doors, which were always unlocked. They were ready to move in on the compound.

Mitch and his group moved as quietly as possible, sticking to the shadows to lessen the chance of anyone catching sight of them. The healers stopped at the tree line, ready to enter when the danger was past. As soon as Mitch got to within thirty yards of the compound, he picked up Miranda's mental voice. She sounded worried.

*"Mitch! Can you hear me? Damn it, we should have tested the distance we could go before doing this. Mitch? If you can hear me, watch out. There's something off around here. Most of the coven isn't here, and no one can tell me why. They just keep saying they'll be back in time for the ceremony. Mitch, can you hear me?"*

*"I got you, Miranda. I'll tell the others. Just be careful, and don't arouse anyone's suspicions. We'll be inside in less than five minutes."*

*"Phew! Okay, just watch yourself. It just feels weird in here, like everything is muted and dull. I've never felt anything like it."*

*"Okay, hang on."* Mitch keyed his microphone immediately, passing the information along to the remainder of the group. Malcolm, John, and James conferred quickly before deciding to move forward with the plan. Either way, Mitch was going in to at least get Miranda out, and they knew it. The groups crept forward, carefully watching their surroundings before entering their assigned points. It was black in the rooms they entered, and they were forced to move slowly to keep from stumbling into something that would raise the alarm. The members who could produce light with their magic tried in vain, confused as to why something so simple would suddenly become impossible.

Suddenly, every light in the compound blazed to life. Each team was confronted with a number of armed men. The warriors tried to fight back with their magic but soon found, to their horror, that their



magic had been muted. That must be the dullness Miranda had warned them of.

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Miranda returned to the main room after opening the last entry point, still wondering where everyone was. Seeing no one, she considered whether she should wait there, her designated point to wait for Mitch and the rest of the team, or if she should continue looking around. The decision was taken from her when someone grabbed a handful of her hair and yanked her head backward to a painful angle, forcing her to her knees, before pressing the tip of a very sharp blade to her throat.

“Argh!” she moaned, unable to stop the sound.

“Well, well, Mandy, you’ve been gone five days and have already forgotten your training,” a husky voice muttered. Fear blew through Miranda as she immediately recognized that voice. It was Cabela himself. “In a way, I should reward you for bringing me so many powerful people, but I just don’t have the time to take all of their souls, my dear. You betrayed me.”

“No, no, Master, I have not betrayed you. I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about all these people, Mandy, that you just let into my spider’s lair.” At his signal, people began pouring into the room from every possible direction as Miranda looked on, horrified by what she was seeing. Everyone, including the healers, was being pushed and prodded into the room by armed men. There were twenty-six members of the Masterson group being held at gunpoint by thirteen of the fifteen coven members and seven men that Miranda recognized but could not place. “Welcome to my humble abode, ladies and gentlemen. I hope you enjoyed your life because it ends tonight, for all of you. You will make the perfect sacrifice for what I am doing tonight, for tonight I bring to life five demons with which I can rule

the world!” Cabela cackled madly as the rest either looked on in fervent adoration or horrified fear.

Miranda’s mind was screaming in panic, her eyes locked with Mitch’s. His own eyes were filled with fear as he watched the crazed warlock hold a wickedly sharp knife to his mate’s throat. He tried to mentally tell her to calm down and give her reassurance, but her own inner panic was making it impossible for her to hear him. Finally, Mitch mouthed the words “Calm down. Listen.” to her several times before he could see her reining in her terror and something more than the screaming panic began to come to him. Unfortunately, Cabela caught the exchange and motioned to the nearest thug.

“Bring that one here. He’s talking to Mandy.” The guy prodded Mitch’s shoulder painfully with the butt of his gun, forcing Mitch to move toward Cabela and Miranda. He kept his eyes on Cabela, watching his every move, though he could feel Miranda watching him as closely.

*“Be patient, baby. We’ll find a way out. Just keep calm, and keep thinking.”*

*“Why doesn’t anyone blast him or something?!?”*

*“There is some sort of spell on the compound. As soon as we entered the walls, all of our powers were gone. That’s why you felt like everything was muted. It literally is.”*

*“Oh, my god, Mitch, what are we going to do?”*

*“I don’t know, baby, but we’ll figure something out. Remember what Mom said. You can finish this all on your own, doing something you already know you can do. We just have to figure out what that is.”*

*“What the fuck am I gonna do that any one of you can’t?”* Miranda shrilled, panic closing in on her again.

*“Miranda! Stay calm! We have no chance if we can’t think, and we can’t think if we’re panicking. We’ll figure it out.”*

Their conversation was cut short as Cabela jerked Miranda to her feet, mumbling, “I don’t know what you two are up to, but quit. It’s

time to get everyone ready for their sacrifice.” Cabela, keeping his hold on Miranda’s hair and the knife at her throat, forced her to walk through the door and down to the ceremony room. The rest of the people followed at the prodding of the armed men.

Once in the room, the hostages were crowded into a small side room and told to strip. Cabela, needing to go prepare himself for the ritual, passed Miranda off to Carl, who was smiling widely. “Well, well, Mandy. You thought you were so smart, didn’t you, you little bitch? I bet you still have no idea how we figured out what you were doing.” He laughed again as she shook her head. “Strip, and I’ll tell you how.”

Miranda heard Mitch growl in response to Carl’s command but knew she needed to keep Carl talking. He might give them some clue of how to fight back. Mitch picked up her thoughts immediately and calmed himself, knowing she was right, no matter how difficult it was going to be to have to watch her strip in front of all these people.

Miranda began to remove her clothes, taking her time, hoping to draw it out long enough for one of them to figure out a way out of their situation. Seeing that Miranda was going to obey his directive, Carl began talking. “You are stupid, bitch. You and your new coven. We tracked you with the GPS on the cell phone. At first, when you flew to Charleston, we were really confused, but when you said you were broken down in east Texas, we figured out you had somehow managed to jump ship and joined up with another coven. A little research and we figured out exactly who your new coven was. We weren’t expecting quite this many people, but hey, the more the merrier when it comes to sacrificial rites. It was quite humorous to watch your group realize their magic was impotent here. White magic always is, but you probably didn’t feel that until you came back, all shiny and clean.” Carl broke off his gloating as he noticed Miranda’s back. “How the hell did you get the branding off your back? And where are all your pretty scars? You know, most of those are mine, other than Cabela’s. They marked you for the whore you are. Too bad

you're not going to be around long enough to earn some new ones. Is the tattoo around your neck their mark of obedience?"

Miranda froze in shock a moment, realizing that Carl had no idea that the crest she now wore meant she was mated. She felt the same shock ripple through the rest of the group who were quietly listening as they moved to obey their latest order. Finally, all of them were completely nude, including Mitch and Miranda. It was a strange time to feel it, but Miranda could feel a definite tightening in her body in response to seeing Mitch naked again. Apparently, Mitch was similarly affected as his flaccid cock twitched in response, and he smirked at her before shrugging.

Carl ran a hand down her back and cupped her ass as Miranda struggled not to react. Mitch couldn't help his responding growl as Malcolm and John put a restraining arm on his shoulders, whispering to him to keep calm. "Hmm, your new master is rather possessive, isn't he? How come not everyone in the group has the tat?"

Miranda knew she couldn't tell him the truth without giving away weaknesses within the group, so she quickly answered, "Sister covens. They don't require the mark."

"Interesting. That must have taken quite a while to put on and hurt like hell."

"It went faster than anyone imagined. I'm used to pain."

Carl nodded in agreement. "Yes, you sure are. You've filled out some, too. You're not as skinny as you were," he murmured as his hand continued to explore her skin. Mitch could only look on in fury as he watched Miranda being molested by another man, but she held his eyes, telling him she was okay and that they had to figure a way out. Carl had just cruelly pinched and twisted one of Miranda's nipples when Cabela entered the room.

"It's time. Please escort our guests to the altar," he instructed, completely ignoring the tension in the room. Malcolm and John continued to hold on to Mitch as he quivered in rage at the abuse Miranda was receiving. Miranda, on the other hand, kept her face

impassive and her eyes on Mitch, even as she screamed in pain in his mind.

*"I'm okay, I'm okay, Mitch, calm down! Don't pull their attention to you, please! Keep calm, and keep thinking!"* Miranda begged him with her mind as Carl jerked her away from the group and up to the altar.

"We'll be beginning with you tonight, Mandy, since you thought you could outsmart all of us. Stupid bitch. I'm going to murder every one of your new friends and then chop them up into so many pieces no one will ever be able to put them back together." Cabela motioned for Carl to move her to the altar, which he immediately did, forcing Miranda to lay flat on the altar as he chained her to it. Miranda's new position didn't allow her to see much, but she could just make out Mitch, whose face was twisted with anguish, and Malcolm standing next to him, holding him in place. Nina stood just behind Malcolm, looking at Miranda intently, like she was trying to convey a message. Miranda returned her stare for several moments as Cabela moved around the altar preparing for the ceremony he was about to conduct.

Nina's words circled around her head as she tried to reason out what Nina had meant. *"You already know how to do it. You decide the fight."* What was she able to do that she already knew she could do that would be useful now?

Cabela began his rite, chanting in the strange language she'd never been able to figure out, though Mitch, Malcolm, and the other leaders obviously knew what it was, considering their reaction to it. Miranda continued to concentrate on Nina, willing herself to figure out what she had to do to end this tragedy in the making.

When Cabela began to draw his blade across her body, carving symbols into her skin, Miranda fought to maintain her mental calm, though she was no longer able to keep from writhing on the altar and screaming out loud. Cabela had been right about one thing, being away from the pain for the few days had made her much more susceptible to it.

Mitch couldn't take watching as the woman he loved was carved up like a Thanksgiving turkey. Her screaming echoed throughout the chamber and blasted through his mind, driving him to his knees. Unable to imagine her taking more pain than she already had, and knowing that she didn't have to, he bellowed out to her, "Miranda! Go to Utopia!"

Miranda's screaming stuttered when he called her name, indicating she heard his voice. Mitch was unsure if she understood his instruction until she became very still and quiet. Mitch was relieved she would be protected from the rest of the pain and could only hope he would be allowed to join her there when his own heart stopped beating.

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Miranda's mind sharpened in focus when Mitch called her name, bringing her attention away from the pain. She understood immediately Mitch's order and knew his meaning behind it. They weren't going to find a way out, at least not in time for her. Miranda centered her focus and pushed out a message to Mitch. *"I love you, Mitch. I'm so sorry it's ending like this. I wish I hadn't met you, but only because it led to losing all of you. I will always love you!"* she exclaimed as she wept in her mind.

*"I love you, Miranda. I always will. And I can't bring myself to regret meeting you, if even it was for just a few wonderful days. Don't forget that, wherever you go, okay? Now go, before he gets any further. Create a place for us to meet again in the next life."* Mitch's mental voice was weepy as well as he tried to tell the love of his life good-bye.

*"I wish I could take everyone with me so y'all don't have to suffer, too!"* Miranda wailed as the pain of leaving Mitch behind came on fully. It took Miranda a moment to realize Mitch had gone completely still, mentally and physically.

*“That’s it, Miranda! That’s it! Can you pull Cabela and his guys into a plane and then leave them there?”*

Miranda considered the idea for a moment. *“It can’t hurt to try. There are so many of them, though. How am I going to know who to pull? I don’t know all of them.”*

*“Try not going completely under before you start. Create the plane, and then come back enough to see them.”*

Miranda mentally nodded before narrowing her focus further. Fortunately, Cabela was doing a bunch of chanting and had quit cutting while Miranda and Mitch had been talking, allowing Miranda to focus more easily. Miranda began to breathe deeply, moving further into her trance. She did as Mitch had suggested, creating a plane as she always did, but not bothering to decorate it. She pulled slightly away from the plane, testing to see if the plane would continue to exist as she pulled back. She was very relieved to see that, yes, it did hold. Miranda then pulled back closer to the physical plane, spreading her awareness of the spirits around her.

Miranda almost completely lost her focus when she realized she could easily see the spirits of the people surrounding her, both good and evil. Miranda fought to refocus herself, knowing their survival was hinging completely on her ability to do this. Mentally, she reached out and grasped the tail of Cabela’s spirit, holding it tightly as she mentally moved about the room, gathering the tails of the rest of the evil people. There were two left when Mitch screamed in her head, *“MIRANDA! NOW!”*

Miranda didn’t bother to try to determine what the problem was. Whatever it was had Mitch panicking. She pulled the spirits swiftly into the barren plane, essentially yanking their consciousness right out of their bodies. She heard pandemonium break out all around her, including the sound of gunfire. Miranda moved as fast as possible, gathering the remaining evil spirits and thrusting them into the plane. Miranda immediately returned to the temporal plane, opening her eyes to see that she had been successful. Each of Cabela’s minions,

and Cabela himself, had collapsed where they stood. Unfortunately, the two she'd had to leave behind on the first round had managed to fire their guns several times before she could pull them from the plane. Two of the people from her group had been shot, though Miranda couldn't see who or how badly they were hurt.

Mitch hurried over to the altar, releasing Miranda from her chains before gently lifting her off of the altar and carrying her back to his mother. Nina was busy working on one of James's coven members. It appeared he had just been grazed by a bullet but was wailing in pain. Nina rolled her eyes up to Miranda's, smirking at the way the guy was carrying on.

Nina was able to get the guy's wound to stop bleeding and turned to begin working on Miranda. Luckily, Miranda's cuts were fairly shallow, though they were quite painful, not that she was going to let that show, especially with Mr. Whineypants still whimpering next to her.

"Who else got hurt?" Miranda asked, directing the question at Mitch. She could see another group huddled over a prostrate body, though she couldn't tell who was on the ground.

Mitch hesitated before answering her. "It's John. The bastard was aiming for me, and John stepped in front of me. The guy must have been a lousy shot though because he hit John in the leg. He'll be fine. They already have the bleeding under control, and we're hoping we won't have to take either of them to the hospital."

Miranda nodded, relieved no one had been seriously hurt. "What are we doing with them?" She pointed at the unconscious bodies lying around the room.

Mitch's face hardened as he considered them. "The Merlin mandated that those who could not be saved were to be destroyed. Each of the healers examined their auras closely while we were waiting for Cabela to start. All five agreed none of them could be rehabilitated. We will take care of the bodies once we get everyone else out of here, and then you can release the plane. That should either



trap them in the plane or send them on to hell. Either way, they get what they deserve.”

Miranda merely nodded, glad the crisis was over. Once the three injured people were attended to and everyone was once again clothed, the majority of the group moved back into the main room while James, Malcolm, Mitch, and Miranda stayed in the ceremony room. All three men had objected to her presence at first but had soon enough agreed that, of anyone, she had the right to see her own justice. “I can feel them trying to push out of the plane. They have to be completely destroyed if the world is going to be safe from them.”

Understanding her meaning, the men moved through the bodies still littering the floor. They first put a bullet into each of their brains and then finished the gruesome responsibility with cutting off each of their heads. When the last one was done, Miranda, who hadn’t participated but watched over them closely, visibly relaxed. “They’re gone. The plane is clean.” They could all feel the removal of the dark magic spell as their powers returned to them. Miranda then left the room, knowing that the three men still had to do a clarifying rite and whatever else was needed.

When Miranda reached the main room, she was pleasantly surprised to see someone had brought the cars around, and the two injured men had already been taken back to the hotel with two of the healers. The remaining three healers were busy working over the two latents who had been found. They were all saddened to discover that the latent who Miranda had indicated had been completely broken had chosen to end her life while Miranda had been gone rather than continue to be abused.

“Miranda!” The call came from the back of the building. Miranda followed the direction of the voice, eventually finding Nina in the doorway to Cabela’s favorite initiation room, the room in which Miranda had first been raped. It took Miranda only a moment to take in the scene. A young girl, obviously the girl Carl had boasted of kidnapping, was chained to the bed, naked. She was completely

catatonic, just staring off into space and blinking occasionally. Miranda could see immediately the girl had not yet been violated internally, but there was no telling what Carl had forced her to do before returning to the compound.

“Can you try to pull her into a plane and talk to her? With the white magic blocker gone, I can’t get near her. She has a very potent physical shield.”

Miranda nodded her head, lowering herself to the floor just outside the door and resting her head against it. It took only a moment to create and enter a plane, going back to the meadow in the woods where she always felt so safe. Once ready, Miranda pulled out enough to find the girl’s spirit tail and pulled her in. The little girl, now clad in a pair of Hannah Montana pajamas, appeared next to her on the floor of the meadow, resting in the wildflowers. Eventually, the girl became aware of her new surroundings.

“*Where am I?*” she asked, sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

“*You are in a safe place. Actually, you’re in my safe place. This is where I would go when bad things were happening to my body.*” The girl studied Miranda for several minutes before deciding she was being truthful and could be trusted.

“*What happened to you?*”

“*The same thing that would have happened to you if we hadn’t gotten back in time. I was kidnapped when I was fourteen, almost fifteen. I’ve lived in this compound for the last five and a half years, until last week. They sent me out to find another little girl, just like you. Instead, I found the man who would rescue me and, eventually, everyone that was trapped here.*”

“*You didn’t search for another little girl?*”

“*No, I didn’t. I went through the motions, but I knew I couldn’t do it. If I had, I would be just as bad as them, and I would rather have killed myself than do this to another person.*”

“*So it’s safe to come back now?*”

*“Yes, it’s safe. My mother-in-law-to-be, Nina, and I are just outside your door. You’re quite powerful, you know. You have a very strong physical shield, and it’s keeping us out. That’s why I pulled you in here so I could talk to you. Are you ready to come back?”*

The girl thought it over for several minutes. Miranda didn’t rush her, knowing the girl deserved to take the time she needed to feel comfortable with the situation. Finally, she lifted her face back to Miranda. *“You promise you’re right outside the door?”*

*“Yes, I promise. Nina and I are just outside, waiting for you whenever you’re ready to leave.”* Miranda broke off, tilting her head as she listened to Mitch inside her head, before turning back to the girl. *“I hate to rush you, but the men need us to vacate the compound so they can finish destroying it. I told him I was in here with you, and they’ll hold off as long as possible, but it’s really best to not let all that dark magic float around unbound.”*

*“Magic? Like, real magic?”*

*“Yes, real magic. I’ll explain more later, okay? Actually, I’ll let someone else explain, and we’ll both learn. How’s that sound?”*

*“That sounds good. Can I go back to my family, too?”*

*“As far as I know, yes. You’re awfully young to have to keep such a huge secret, but if you want to go back, you’ll have to hide what you know about magic. It’s dangerous to all of us if you don’t.”*

The girl considered Miranda’s words before nodding her understanding. *“Okay, let’s go.”* Miranda released the girl from the plane, making sure to wait until she was completely detached before leaving the plane herself. Miranda opened her eyes, pleased to hear Nina moving around the room behind her and talking to the young girl. Miranda got up, slowly due to the painful cuts scattered across her torso, before moving into the room. Nina had already released the girl’s ankle chains and was working on one of her hands. Miranda moved to work on the other hand, glad to see the girl aware and watching them closely.

*“What is your name?”* Nina asked the girl.

“Melanie. Melanie Howards. I’m from Albuquerque. You’re Nina, right?”

Nina smiled at her and nodded. Melanie turned her head to look at Miranda. “What’s your name?”

“My name is Miranda Masterson. Or, rather, it will be once Mitch and I get married. It’s been so long since I’ve thought about my real last name that I nearly forgot it.”

“So, I have some kind of magical power?” The two women chuckled at the little girl’s exuberance as they helped her get dressed in the clothes they’d found in the adjacent bathroom.

“Yes, that mark on your neck is actually a sign that you are a Gifted One. When you’re older, and if you want to, you’ll be able to join a coven and learn how to use the magic you have. Until then, you can’t say anything about it to anyone, not even your parents. Do you understand why?”

Melanie thought for a moment before nodding. “Yes, we just went over the Salem witch trials in history. Something like that might happen again if it was discovered there were people who had extra powers. Is that right?”

Nina smiled at her softly. “Yes, child, you are exactly right. That was a horrible time to live in for anyone, but especially bad for those who were blessed with extra abilities.”

“Okay, I’ll keep quiet about it. How am I going to explain what happened to me?”

“I’m not sure just yet, but we’ll figure it out back at the hotel. Go to the restroom if you need to, but hurry. The guys need us out as soon as possible,” Miranda told her. Melanie nodded before skipping off to the bathroom. She emerged a couple of minutes later, and the three ladies left the room. They joined the men in the main room. Everyone else had left the compound, leaving one vehicle for the six of them.

Without a word, they left the compound. Nina directed Melanie to stand off to the side while they completed the final rite that would

finally destroy the compound and all of the horrible things it contained. The five of them stood in a line, with Malcolm in the middle, Mitch to his left, Nina to his right. James stood on the other side of Nina, and Miranda stood on Mitch's left. Malcolm began a chant, using the language Miranda was slowly starting to understand. The rest of them joined into the chant, following Malcolm's lead as he raised his hands even with his chest with his palms facing outward. Miranda could feel her magic flowing freely through her before joining with the others to create a massive flow of energy. Their chanting increased in speed and volume as the energy flow doubled then trebled in size. Finally, they were shouting the words as their powers reached their apex. Suddenly, Malcolm shoved the power flow directly into the compound. The wind and noise was deafening as their power poured into the structure, filling it with their good magic.

Then, suddenly, everything was silent and still as the light from the magic drew down into the heart of the compound, allowing the glow to fade before blasting outward. The entire compound was instantly wiped away, along with the dark forces that had continued to drift around it even after Cabela had been destroyed. The force of the cosmic blast knocked all five of them onto their backs, the noise of it deafening their ears for several long seconds before, just as suddenly as it had happened, it was gone. The night, which Miranda was shocked to see was already starting to bleed into day, was quiet once again. The compound was completely destroyed. Not even the foundation still stood. There was rubble scattered everywhere, with small bits still falling around them.

They began to get up to their feet, the men helping the women up, when Miranda suddenly remembered Melanie was standing near them. Fearing that the blast had injured the young girl, Miranda looked around to find that Melanie was standing near the back of the car, grinning as she maintained a visible shield around her. Obviously,

the girl had protected herself during the explosion and subsequent fall of debris because she was still clean and uninjured.

Miranda moved to hug Melanie, relieved she was unhurt. Melanie allowed her into her protected circle. Miranda bent down to give her a gentle hug when, suddenly, two shots rang out. Miranda, who was facing the direction from which the shots came, saw the bullets bounce off Melanie's shield. Had Melanie not still maintained her shield around them, Miranda would have been hit.

Mitch, Malcolm, and James immediately leapt into action upon hearing the gunfire. Malcolm pushed Nina down behind the car to protect her from any more shots while Mitch lurched toward Miranda and Melanie to do the same, only to be knocked backwards onto his ass when he got to within three feet of them.

*"We're fine, Mitch! She's shielding both of us. Help Malcolm track those two down. They must be the two coven members who weren't there for the ceremony."* As Miranda reassured Mitch, she grabbed Melanie and moved to crouch behind the car and motioned to Melanie to expand her shield around the rest of them.

Melanie was able to extend her shield to include Nina but was unable to push it outward to include the guys. "I can't get it to go further! I think we have to be touching or really close for it to work."

Miranda clutched Melanie to her before replying, "It's okay, Melanie. Don't worry about it. They'll be fine. Just worry about you, okay?" Melanie could only nod as she burrowed her head into Miranda's neck, her little body quivering in fear.

Mitch recovered quickly, jumping to his feet to move to the rear of the car. He peered around the back of it, searching for the shooters. While the rising sun did shed a bit of light for them, the surrounding woods, from which the gunfire had erupted, hid the men well. Mitch glanced to the other end of the car to check on Malcolm and James. At Malcolm's nod, Mitch drew on his power to create a small ball of light at his chest before thrusting it outward toward the area from which the shots had come. The ball flew into the trees, gaining

altitude quickly. Once it reached the line of trees and was about fifteen feet in the air, the ball expanded quickly, shedding a bright light throughout the entire area, easily highlighting the two men attacking them.

Malcolm and James knew from past battles that Mitch would be able to maintain the light for as long as was needed, but he would be unable to assist in the retaliation attack. Mitch had other offensive powers, but it took all of his concentration to maintain the ball of energy. Miranda, quickly assessing the situation, reached out to wrap her hand around Mitch's knee, hoping Melanie would be able to extend her protection to him without interfering with what he was doing. Miranda drew a deep sigh of relief when Melanie was able to do just that.

While all of this was happening, the two men in the trees continued to pepper the group whenever one of them showed movement from behind the car. All of the bullets either hit the car or ricocheted off of it. Malcolm, now angry at the threat to his family and the unnecessary destruction of the rented vehicle, decided it was time to fight back.

"Miranda! Can you pull them?"

"No, I've tried. They're too far away from me."

Malcolm nodded his understanding and turned his gaze back to the two men. Malcolm knew all of them had about tapped out their energy destroying the coven, and he didn't know how long Mitch would be able to hold the light, though he knew Mitch would hold it as long as possible. "James, what about fault lines?"

James was able to move earth. If there were fault lines in the area, he could cause them to rupture, opening a line in the earth and, hopefully, causing their enemies to fall in. James thrust his hands into the ground at his feet, feeling for the weak spots he needed. After a moment, James looked back up at Malcolm and shook his head. There was nothing there that would be helpful besides some downed trees scattered through the area.

Malcolm nodded his understanding again before glancing over at Mitch, seeing the strain he was unable to hide. They needed to do something quick.

Miranda was very aware of the stress Mitch was dealing with as she felt his energy drain. Looking at Malcolm, she could see he was out of ideas. Glancing back at Mitch, her eye caught on something tucked into the back of Mitch's pants. Leaning forward a bit to see better, she realized it was the butt of a handgun. Suddenly, Miranda knew exactly what to do. She passed Melanie to Nina and got to her feet, moving silently behind Mitch. Placing her hand on his back so as not to startle him, Miranda pulled the gun from his pants.

*"Miranda, what are you doing?"*

*"I'm getting the gun. It's time to end this. You're almost out of energy, and Malcolm is coming up empty on ideas."*

*"We're both more defensive than offensive, so we're rarely on the frontlines of a battle."*

Miranda nodded her understanding as she checked the number of bullets the gun held. Mitch watched her from the corner of his eye, surprised at how comfortably she handled the gun. She'd obviously been well trained. He was curious at how she'd gained that skill but knew it was best to wait until later to get that answer.

Miranda nudged Mitch's legs, getting him to widen them, before crawling through and wiggling forward under the car. Once she was in far enough to make the shots, she stopped and braced herself, taking in the scene before her. Both of the shooters were hiding behind tree trunks. She needed them to pull out enough to take a shot themselves.

Mitch, having read her thoughts, murmured the information to James. Glad to finally be able to do something, James fed his powers into the dirt, channeling that energy forward into one of the fallen trees directly behind one of the shooters. The tree lurched toward the man, knocking him into view for Miranda.



Miranda didn't hesitate. She squeezed the trigger twice, hitting the man once in the chest and once in the head, exactly as she had planned. The shot man squeezed his own trigger reflexively before collapsing to the ground, dead. Miranda adjusted her stance, zeroing in on the second shooter before mentally telling Mitch she was ready for the second one.

It took Mitch a moment to react as he stared at the now-dead man. Miranda was a hell of a shot, something he'd never been able to achieve. Shaking himself out of his daze, he glanced over at James and nodded. Mitch could see that Malcolm and James were just as stupefied as he had been, and Mitch felt a huge swelling of pride for her explode within him.

"Today, gentlemen!" Miranda's voice came from beneath the car, startling them all out of their dazed state.

James shook himself before concentrating on the area around the second shooter. There wasn't a fallen tree near this one, so he searched the area, hoping to find something that would work. Finally, James spotted a large rock, a bit bigger than a basketball, about ten feet away. James gathered the last of his energy and surged it toward the rock. The rock trembled as his energy hit it before rolling toward the man, who was unaware of the movement. The rock hit the man in both legs, knocking him forward and away from his tree coverage.

Again, Miranda didn't hesitate. She quickly squeezed off two more shots, hitting exactly where she wished to place them, one to the heart, one to the head. This one didn't even get a last shot off before falling to the ground. Miranda scrambled out from under the car, keeping her gun trained on the two men as she and Mitch, who wasn't about to let her go out of cover by herself, moved to check the men. Once satisfied they were in fact dead, Miranda switched the safety on and motioned to the others that everything was fine.

"They were the last two. There's no telling if Cabela had them posted out here or if they were just late for the ceremony and got here just in time to see us destroy the compound. What are we going to do

with the bodies?” Miranda asked as she went through the guy’s pockets and examined the guns they had used. After gathering all the ammunition they had on them and pulling the cash they had on them from their wallets, she turned back to her new family. She stopped short when she realized that they were all staring at her. “What?”

Finally, Mitch asked the questions that were going through all their minds. “What are you doing with their guns and their money?”

Miranda looked down at the guns and cash she had in her hands before looking back up at them. “I’m keeping their guns because I like them. I’ve always been partial to the Smith and Wesson 9mm and the Walther P99, which these are. In fact, I’m the one who picked out the weaponry for the coven because I knew the most about it. My dad is an avid gun collector and taught me all about it, including how to shoot. It was our “father-daughter” time. I’ll have to regrind the bore so nothing they did will come back to me, but otherwise they’re really good guns.”

“And the money?”

“Well, they don’t need it anymore. Besides, both of these guys have been my managers at work. Because Cabela required a fifty percent tithe, my income was really small, but these guys took even more, something I think Cabela didn’t know. Basically, if I made a hundred dollars, I got to keep thirty of it. I figure I’m just taking back what they stole from me, though this doesn’t cover anywhere near that amount. If it bothers you, I’ll leave it here.”

Mitch blinked a couple of times before turning to Malcolm. As the leader of the coven, it really was up to him. Malcolm shrugged his shoulders and said, “I have no problem with it. Like she said, they don’t need it anymore, and it sounds like they owed her.” Malcolm then turned his attention back to the two bodies they needed to deal with.

Miranda hesitated before turning to Mitch. “What about you? If it bothers you, I won’t take them.”

“No, baby, it’s okay. I was just surprised, that’s all. You have every right to take what you want from them after everything they stole from you.”

“Okay, as long as you’re all sure it’s okay,” Miranda said hesitantly, glancing around the group.

Everyone nodded in reassurance.

“Now that that’s settled, anyone have any ideas on how to handle Frick and Frack?”

Miranda startled everyone when she began howling in laughter at what Malcolm had said, followed shortly by Mitch, who’d pulled the reason from her mind. When he could, Mitch explained, “Their names were Rick and Jack.” The rest of the group began chuckling at the unintended rhyme.

After the merriment died off, they still stood there, staring at the two bodies. “I wish Roman was here. He could just incinerate them,” muttered James, referring to one of his coven members who hadn’t been able to join them.

Miranda turned to Mitch and said, “You mentioned you could do other offensive things. What are they?”

“I can throw balls of energy that immobilize the target, and I’m able to call down lightning to strike where I wish. A few other minor things, but those are the major things. I’m more of an electrical wizard than anything.”

“Do you have to have a storm nearby to call down a lightning bolt?”

“No, why?”

“Why not use lightning to incinerate them? Will that work?”

Mitch thought about it for a minute, glancing around the area. “Yeah, that would work, though we’ll need to move the bodies into the center of the clearing so we don’t set the trees on fire. I don’t use the bolt in battle much because I can’t hit moving targets, just stationary ones. Good thinking, Miranda.”

Miranda smiled in thanks, proud she'd come up with the idea. She joined the three men in dragging the two bodies into the center of the clearing, as Mitch had indicated. The five of them stepped back, allowing Mitch to concentrate. Miranda could feel the power beginning to swirl around her. She peeked into her link with Mitch, not wanting to distract him. He was tired and getting frustrated, unsure whether he had enough power left to do what they needed. Miranda immediately stepped up behind him, placing both of her hands on his shoulders, and began pouring her own power into him. They could tell immediately that the stream tripled in strength. Mitch allowed it to swirl for several seconds before thrusting his hands in the air. A sharp crack echoed from the sky above as a massive bolt of lightning blasted down through the air and struck the two bodies. There was a strange sizzling sound, and then a cloud of noxious odor emitted from the target area. The bolt dissipated, though it took several seconds for their eyes to recover from the sudden brightness. Once they were able, they could see a massive black mark on the ground where the bodies had been, but that was all. The bodies were no more.

Mitch swayed on his feet, having used every bit of energy he had and quite a bit of Miranda's to get the bolt big enough to do what was needed. Miranda wrapped her arms around his chest, steadying him until he was able to gather his waning energy again.

Malcolm walked up to Mitch, clapped him on the shoulder, and said, "Good job, son. That bolt was massive, the largest I've ever seen an energy witch pull. Let's get out of here so we can go rest."

Everyone murmured in agreement and walked over to the shot-up rental. Malcolm surveyed the damage before getting behind the wheel and trying to start it. The engine must have been hit because it wouldn't even try to turn over. They all looked at each other and then back at Miranda's old beat-up car. It was the only car available since the Cabela coven's cars were in the destroyed compound.

They crammed into the small vehicle after Miranda tucked the guns and ammunition into the trunk, with Malcolm driving and Mitch in the passenger seat. James, Miranda, Nina, and Melanie sat in the back, with Melanie perched in Nina's lap. It was a tight fit, but they made it work. The ride back to the hotel was quiet, everyone lost in their thoughts and exhausted. They soon pulled up to the hotel and got out, thankful to be released from the small confines.

They found the rest of the group gathered in the conference room they'd used the evening before. The tension in the room eased as everyone saw the leaders were fine. Miranda was relieved to see John and the other man who was injured appeared to be doing well, each being watched over by a healer, as well as the two latents they'd freed.

Malcolm moved to the front of the room with the rest of them, collapsing into the nearest chairs, exhausted. "We have been successful in destroying the evil coven and freeing the kidnapped latents. We will return to Charleston tomorrow morning, so everyone take the day to regroup and recharge. I have a friend who is a private investigator who will return the children to their parents and attest he was working on another kidnapping case when he came across the cult and figured out the three children had been kidnapped. He was able to rescue them from the compound. When he leads the police back to the compound, they'll speculate the cult blew up the compound because they'd been discovered and had fled. That should keep the police plenty busy. He'll be here in about an hour and will take them straight to the hospital and initiate the cover story."

Everyone nodded their understanding. Malcolm looked straight at the other two latents, saying, "Do you two understand the situation and why we can't tell others about magic?" Both girls nodded, the older one saying, "Yes, sir. It was explained to us, and we will not tell anyone about how we were really rescued. We're just grateful to be away from that place and those people. When asked, we'll say we were kidnapped and abused by a cult, not a coven. We won't betray

you, and we especially won't betray Miranda since she took such a big risk in coming back for us." The younger girl nodded along with the first one.

Miranda pulled herself wearily to her feet and walked over to the two girls, dropping to her knees and gathering them close to her. "I'm sorry it took me so long to figure a way out. You must be careful to not let the evil that was done to you become you. Like Mitch told me recently, don't let your past become your present and future. Do you get what I'm saying?" Both girls nodded before pulling Miranda in for another long hug.

One of the healers who had been watching over them caught Miranda's eye and said, "We've been working on cleansing them as well as healing them. The evil that had built up inside of them has been mostly eradicated. The rest will heal as their bodies heal."

Relieved, Miranda hugged them close one last time before turning back to address the group. "I wanted to thank all of you for helping to destroy the evil that has tainted my life, and theirs, for far too long. I am so relieved and happy that everyone came out fine, barring the couple of injuries that were sustained. If there is anything I can do for you, please don't hesitate to ask."

James stood up to answer for the group. "Miranda, there is nothing we won't do to help protect a Grand Mistress, especially a new one who hasn't developed all her powers yet. From what I can sense, Miranda, you will become one of the most powerful Grand Mistresses of all time."

"I don't know how I feel about that, but thank you," Miranda replied before turning back to Malcolm. "Sorry I interrupted, Malcolm."

Malcolm waved off the apology, obviously not bothered by it. He caught the eyes of the three latents again, addressing them directly. "Before you go, we will embed a transmitter under your skin. If you are in trouble, such as being kidnapped again or something like it, press on it. It will notify us that you need help and give us your

location. We will be watching over you until you are old enough to decide on choosing a coven. Don't use it unless it's a real emergency, though, because it might alert your families that something isn't quite normal about us showing up to help out. Do you have any questions?"

The three girls glanced at each other before the oldest spoke up. "Yes, I do. How are you planning on 'embedding' the transmitter? And how old do we have to be to choose to join a coven? And what is supposed to happen when we do?"

"We'll embed the transmitter using Sally's magic. You won't feel a thing. We're just waiting on Charlie, my PI friend, to bring them with him. As for joining a coven, a normal member coming in is at least seventeen, if not older. We prefer the latent be out of high school and able to leave their parent's home. Once you've chosen a coven, you will either live with or near your mentor, who will spend several hours a day with you teaching you how to explore and control your magic. We take turns within the coven training the latents, and others often assist when the primary mentor needs help."

The girls nodded their understanding again, glad they wouldn't be hurt any more than was necessary and that the coven would be watching over them. That knowledge was very reassuring. Melanie then popped up with a question. "Can we stay in contact with Miranda?"

Malcolm thought a moment as a soft smile spread across Miranda's face. "I don't think there's a problem with that. You'll just have to be very careful about what you talk about. Your parents will likely be very protective of you now and will monitor everything you do closely. Be careful about what you say and what you do, even when you think they're not watching. I know it's hard not to use the magic you already know, but it's important you don't. You're not going to be able to tell them about it anyway, so keep that in mind." The three girls nodded again. Miranda got Mitch to write down his email address since she didn't have one of her own yet and gave a copy to each of the girls, promising to keep in touch as much as they

wanted. Of anyone, Miranda would be the person who could best understand what they had gone through and were feeling.

A soft but firm knock sounded at the door. Mitch, who happened to be closest to the door, got up and opened it a bit before allowing it to open fully. A large black man with a bald head strode through, carrying several small boxes. He walked up to Malcolm, who gave him a hearty handshake and introduced him to the group as Charlie, his PI friend.

Charlie opened the boxes and pulled out three very small transmitters. Malcolm brought each girl to the front so Sally could embed the transmitters just behind their left ear. The girls were surprised it didn't hurt at all and thanked Sally profusely. They then hugged the entire group as everyone moved outside to watch them leave. When they were done, they piled into Charlie's car, waving frenetically as he pulled away.

Once the girls were gone, the group looked toward Malcolm, waiting to be released. "We're done. Meet back here at nine a.m. tomorrow to fly home, Anthony," he said, stopping the man before he left. "I need you to get with the rental company about buying the car that was destroyed and get a tow truck out there pronto to get it away from the scene. Charlie will give us as much time as he can, but it's best to get it done as soon as possible."

Anthony nodded his head in understanding, and seeing that Malcolm was done, hurried off to get the matter taken care of. They needed to ensure nothing could be connected back to the coven.

Mitch and Miranda climbed the stairs to their room, moving wearily, but knowing they wouldn't be falling asleep until they'd both had a shower and made love. Miranda needed Mitch to wipe away the memory of Carl touching her so intimately. Mitch did just that, gently washing the dried blood and the feel of the other men's touches from her skin before claiming it again as his own.



## Epilogue

Miranda stared into the mirror, looking over her perfected body, other than the scars she carried from her last battle with Cabela. The symbols Cabela had carved into Miranda's skin had completely healed, leaving behind thin white lines. She had wanted to try to have them removed until Mitch had explained Cabela had actually made her more powerful through them. When he was pulling down all the power he could, he imbued the power into her body through the symbols with the plan that the power would then become his when he killed her. Instead, he had made an already powerful Grand Mistress even more powerful. That is what James had sensed after the battle.

Shaking her thoughts away, she pulled on the ivory undergarments she'd chosen before wrapping a soft robe around herself. A soft knock came from the door, not opening until she bade them to enter. Nina and Miranda's mother, Clarisa, came through the door, along with Libby, Mitch's twenty-seven-year-old sister. They immediately began to work on Miranda as planned, with Libby working on her makeup while the two moms worked on her hair. While the three women worked, Miranda thought back to the day when she saw her family for the first time since being kidnapped.

*Mitch held her hand tightly as the tension rolled off of Miranda in waves. She was nervous about seeing her family for the first time in so long. She worried about how they would take her sudden reappearance and about how they would treat her and accept her decision to stay in Charleston with Mitch while they worked on their training. Mitch said she'd already advanced through a great deal of her basic magic training, having already learned most of it intuitively.*

*“You’re going to be fine, Miranda,” he murmured reassuringly before lifting her hand to place a soft kiss on the back. “I’ll be right there with you. I’m not going to leave you.”*

*The words calmed her greatly, though she already knew Mitch would never, could never, leave her. She’d just needed to hear the words. “I know. I guess I’m just scared they’ll reject me after everything that happened to me.”*

*“I know. Just remember that I love you. We’ll deal with whatever happens, okay?” Miranda nodded her head in agreement before pointing out the house to Mitch, who pulled the rental to a stop at the curb.*

*Taking a deep breath, Miranda climbed out of the vehicle, Mitch there to offer a hand almost before she could get her feet out. She clutched his hand tightly as they made their way up the sidewalk and to the front door. Miranda was stunned to see a picture of herself at fourteen, taken just before she was kidnapped. The picture was mounted on wood which held the inscription, “We will never forget, we will never lose hope.” Miranda choked up at the very visible sign that her family loved her greatly. With a trembling hand, she reached out to ring the doorbell.*

*A moment passed before the door opened, revealing Clarisa, Miranda’s mother. Miranda could tell her disappearance had badly affected her mother. Clarisa looked like she’d aged twenty years in the last six since Miranda had last seen her. Clarisa stood there, framed by the doorway for a moment, her eyes blinking repeatedly like she was having difficulty convincing herself that her long-awaited daughter was actually standing there in front of her. Finally, she breathed, “Mandy? Is that really you?”*

*Miranda nodded as tears flowed down her cheeks. “Yes, Mom. It’s me, Miranda.”*

*Finally convinced, Clarisa threw herself into Miranda’s arms, clutching her tightly. Miranda was glad Mitch was holding her, as her mother had nearly knocked Miranda off her feet. Suddenly, another*

*figure filled the doorway. Her father, Bob, stood there staring, not understanding the scene in front of him. "What's going on? Clarisa, what are you..." He trained off as he finally comprehended what his eyes were telling him. "Mandy? Baby, is that really you?" At Miranda's nod, he joined the two women, wrapping his own arms around them both as all three of them cried.*

*After several minutes, Clarisa gathered herself enough to suggest they all go inside. Mitch followed along quietly, maintaining his hand on Miranda's back. Once they sat down in the living room, Miranda looked around dazedly. "You haven't changed a thing in here."*

*"No, nothing. Your room looks just like it did after you left. I had to do some cleaning from the police searching it, but other than that, it's exactly as you left it. Mandy, what happened? And who is this? Is he the person you left us for?"*

*Miranda glanced at Mitch as she gathered her thoughts. "No, I didn't leave willingly. I was drugged and kidnapped, right from my bed." Clarisa's hands covered her mouth as she began crying once again. Miranda chose to continue, to get it all out at once so they could get past it. "I was taken by an evil cult run by an evil man. I was abused constantly, and they tried to brainwash me. About two weeks ago, they deemed me sufficiently brainwashed to go hunt for another young girl to bring back to suffer like I had. I knew I couldn't do it, but I also couldn't just leave the cult. They would track me down and kill me and then do the same to you. I considered just killing myself, to escape them and still protect you. But then I met Mitch." She smiled as she glanced at him, telling him she loved him without words. "He and his family helped me escape the cult and took it down in the process. We were able to save three other girls who'd been kidnapped after me. We fell in love as we worked together to make that happen, and we're now engaged."*

*Clarisa and Bob sat there, stunned by what Miranda had told them. Miranda was saddened that all this time, they'd thought that she'd left willingly. Mitch read her sadness immediately and wrapped*

his arm around her in comfort. After several moments of silence, Bob asked, “You were abused by a cult? Like Charles Manson?”

Miranda had to smile at her father’s question. “Yes, just like that.”

“Why did it take you so long to come home?”

Miranda hesitated a moment before answering. “We were working on bringing the cult down. I’d left three younger girls there, and I had to go back to rescue them. Afterward, I had some healing to do, and Mitch had to rearrange things at his children’s camp in Rockland. Plus, I was nervous about coming back to see you. I was worried you would try to insist I come home and treat me like I’m still a child. Obviously, I’m not anymore, and with everything I’ve been through, I’m much older psychologically than my age indicates. It saddens me you thought I’d run away.”

“It was more that the police believed that than we did. They just thought that, since there was no sign of a struggle in your room, you must have left willingly. And I can understand your fear about us trying to push you into staying here because that is exactly what I feel like saying.”

There was another brief silence before Bob turned his attention to Mitch. “You helped get her away from that cult?”

“Yes, sir, myself and my family and a few friends.”

“Why didn’t you go to the police?”

“We did, after we got the girls out. That was our main concern. Miranda knew the leader had the local police under his thumb but didn’t know how far his influence reached. If they had gotten wind they were about to get raided, they would have killed the girls before disappearing, only to start up again somewhere else.”

“Mandy—” Clarisa started to ask before being cut off by Miranda.

“Mom, Dad, please call me Miranda from now on. The cult members called me Mandy, and I’ve learned to hate the name.”

*“Oh, I’m so sorry, Man... Miranda. I can understand how that could happen. You mentioned you needed time to heal?”*

*“Yes, I had several injuries that needed time to heal before I could comfortably visit you. I won’t tell you everything that happened to me there. You don’t need that knowledge to haunt you as it can haunt me. Let’s just suffice it to say that I was abused before I was rescued.”*

*They watched Bob and Clarisa struggle to accept the information, knowing that whatever they came up with as the worst case scenario was nothing compared to what had really happened. Finally, Bob nodded in understanding. “So these people will never hurt you again?”*

*“No, not me or anyone else. We made sure of that.”*

*“How so? If they paid off cops, they could pay off the justice system.”*

*Mitch decided to speak up here. “I can assure you, sir, they will never bother anyone again.”*

*“How can you be so sure?” Bob responded, a bit belligerently.*

*“Because they’re dead, a” Mitch replied flatly, clearly conveying personal knowledge of the status of the cult members.*

*Bob sat back in his chair, not expecting that answer. Finally, he asked, “All of them?” Mitch nodded. “You and your family did that?” Again, Mitch just nodded. “Your family must be very powerful to not have to worry about the repercussions.”*

*“We can be when we choose, though we much rather work behind the scenes to achieve our goals.”*

*“I’m glad they’re gone, and I’m glad you did whatever you did to rescue Miranda and keep her safe,” Clarisa interjected. “Obviously, somebody needed to do something about them so this didn’t happen to anyone else.”*

*“Mom, Dad, you can’t share that with anyone. If asked, all you can say is I was abducted and finally escaped after five and a half years. That’s it, otherwise you could jeopardize Mitch and his family and me.”*

*Bob and Clarisa nodded their heads, understanding what Miranda was saying and what she wasn't. They knew immediately that if they caused problems for Mitch and his family, they would likely not see her again. They might not have seen her in almost six years, but they certainly remembered how strong-willed she was.*

*Mitch and Miranda stayed and talked for several more hours before Miranda pled exhaustion. As expected, Bob and Clarisa hadn't wanted to let her leave again but quickly understood that Miranda's place was with Mitch, as Mitch's place was with Miranda. The two would not be separated.*

*After that day, Miranda spoke on the phone with both of her parents daily as they got used to having her back in their lives. It wasn't always smooth sailing, but Miranda always handled it as well as could be expected. Clarisa was very excited to meet Nina as both of them helped Miranda plan their wedding. The thought brought her back to the present.*

"There, you're perfect," pronounced Libby. Miranda and Mitch's sister had instantly bonded and had grown quite close. Miranda was all too aware of the passing of the days for Libby, who was still aging and would continue to age if she was unable to find her mate.

Pushing her worry for her friend and soon-to-be sister aside for now, Miranda opened her eyes and examined herself in the mirror. They had done an exceptional job on both her hair and her makeup. The makeup was light, simply highlighting her best features. Her hair was piled on top of her head in a twist with a nest of curls at the top. They would attach her veil just under the back of her curls after she was dressed. "You did an exceptional job, ladies. You have made me beautiful."

"You were already beautiful, my dear. We just highlighted it," responded Nina with a warm smile and a gentle hug.

Miranda removed her robe as Clarisa and Libby readied her dress for her to climb into. Miranda was reminded that Clarisa hadn't yet seen her scars when she gasped suddenly, nearly dropping her side of

the dress in her shock. Seeing the horror in her mother's eyes, Miranda placed her hand against Clarisa's cheek, drawing Clarisa's eyes to her own. "Mom, it's okay. It's over and done with. These are just a reminder that I am stronger than anyone ever imagined." Of course, Clarisa couldn't know it, but Miranda wasn't just referring to her inner strength. She was also referring to her magical powers. Mitch and Miranda had barely scraped the surface of what she could do, and they were already amazed and, to tell the truth, a bit scared. Miranda had gained power over fire, and learning how to control that had led to them investing heavily in fire extinguishers.

Clarisa regained her self-control with effort, before offering her daughter a watery smile. Nodding her head, she continued to help Libby lift the dress over Miranda's head, being careful to not muss her hair, and settling the gown around Miranda's hips. Nina zipped up the back as Miranda adjusted the dress to lie correctly against her body. It was absolutely exquisite. The strapless bodice bared her shoulders, though her arms were covered in close-fitting lace studded with crystals in many different colors. The bodice accented her curves as it hugged her torso and down over her hips before flaring out into a full skirt that was also covered in crystal-studded lace. The effect of the differently colored crystals on the white lace was stunning as Miranda literally sparkled. Miranda bent over slightly to allow her mother to place her veil in her hair, and with that, Miranda was ready.

"Last check. Something old and borrowed – the pearl necklace Mom let you borrow. Something new – everything else you have on. And something blue – your garter. There's a penny in your shoe and a linen handkerchief tucked into the bottom of your bouquet should either of you start crying. Don't want a bunch of Kleenex lint all over you for the pictures," Libby quipped, causing all of them to laugh and relax a bit, exactly what she'd intended.

The three ladies finished fussing over Miranda before checking their own appearances one last time. Soon enough, Malcolm was knocking on the door, which Clarisa opened. Miranda had to chuckle

at her mother's reaction to her father-in-law. Clarisa had been unable to speak for a full five minutes after meeting Malcolm the first time, and she still had difficulty keeping from giggling like a schoolgirl every time she saw him. Malcolm, fully aware of and greatly amused by his effect on her, tried his best to keep from flustering her further by speaking directly to Miranda. "Miranda, my dear, you are absolutely beautiful. You're almost as beautiful as my own bride on our wedding day so very long ago." Nina just snorted at his backhanded compliment.

Miranda simply chuckled her amusement before replying. "Thank you, Malcolm. That is a wonderful compliment considering how beautiful Nina is."

"Ladies," Malcolm nodded at Clarisa and his daughter, "you are lovely as well. Clarisa, Nina, it's time to take your places. I will escort you to your seats and then join Mitch at the altar."

"Is our boy nervous?" asked Nina.

"Not at all," Malcolm responded with a grin. "He's quite anxious to get started, actually, though I can't tell if it's more for the wedding or the honeymoon." They all laughed gaily as Malcolm escorted Nina and a blushing Clarisa from the room. Libby fussed with her hair for a moment before handing Miranda her bouquet as she grabbed her own. "Are you ready?"

"Absolutely. Let's get this started already." Libby was laughing at Miranda's impatience when she opened the door at Bob's knock.

He was speechless for a moment before murmuring, "You are beautiful, Miranda. Just beautiful. You remind me of your mother at your age."

"Thank you, Dad," Miranda whispered back as she kissed his cheek.

"Are you ready? Everyone's waiting on us now." Miranda nodded as she wrapped her arm around her father's. Libby helped Miranda carry her train through the door and onto the path that led to the stand of oak trees that created a natural bower near the water's edge. Once



on the path, which was covered with white fabric to protect her dress, Libby helped Miranda arrange her skirt properly before taking her place in front of them. Miranda had chosen to have the wedding and reception at the Litchfield Plantation on Pawleys Island, near their house in Charleston. The plantation offered plenty of room to host the wedding under the trees right on the water with the reception following in the large halls inside afterward. Considering the wedding planner the site provided and all the work she did, planning the wedding hadn't been all that difficult or demanding. Of course, Miranda didn't want to even begin to think about how much the wedding had cost, and she had decided to not worry about it. What was important was that she and Mitch were joining their lives together in front of all their families and friends. Of course, the Mastersons were an important family in Charleston, which meant there were a lot of their friends in attendance, and a great many of those Miranda hadn't met yet.

Miranda followed Libby as she led the way around the house, stopping just out of sight of the chosen altar area. Bob cleared his throat nervously, bringing Miranda's attention to him. "Are you absolutely positive this is what you want, Miranda? Are you sure it's love and not gratitude for getting you out?"

Miranda was touched by the question, knowing it had taken a great deal of courage for her father to speak. He was still unsure about how to act around Miranda, not having the opportunity to really watch her grow up. As an adult woman with a mind of her own, she scared him sometimes. "I love him, Daddy. I'm positive of it. He is my other half. We just didn't meet in the best of circumstances. I'll always be grateful to him, yes, but not enough to tie myself to him forever if I didn't truly love him."

Miranda's father nodded his relief, glad to have asked the question anyway. Clearly, Miranda knew exactly what she wanted.

Soon enough, the musicians began Pachelbel's Canon in D minor. Libby began her walk as Miranda and her father made a few last-

minute adjustments to their appearances. Finally, it was time for her to go. With measured steps, Miranda and Bob began their way down the long aisle. The large crowd of guests rose from their seats, murmuring their approval of the bride's beauty. Unfortunately, since the altar wasn't raised, Miranda wouldn't be able to see Mitch until they were almost there. Miranda did notice, however, that the large candles lining the aisle had not been lit as planned. Miranda reached out a quick hand and touched the nearest one as she passed. Instantly the candle flared to life, along with its mate across the aisle. Then, the candles flared forward to the altar, preceding Miranda as she went. The guests, startled by the occurrence, were delighted with the effect, though the wedding planner was completely stumped on how it had happened.

After feeling like she'd walked half a mile, they finally reached the front, and Miranda could finally see Mitch. His blue eyes shone brightly with happiness, every ounce of love clearly showing for all to see. Miranda opened their mental connection. She'd closed it first thing this morning, trying to maintain the tradition that the groom could not see the bride before the wedding. Instantly, Mitch's happiness and excitement rocked into her as her own rocked into him. With their eyes locked, Miranda reached for Mitch just as he reached for her. Bob took both of their hands in his, signaling his giving over of his daughter to Mitch. The minister started the ceremony with the traditional asking of who gives the bride, and Bob answered as he'd planned before stepping back and sitting down with the quietly weeping Clarisa.

The rest of the ceremony seemed to blur by until they got to the part for the vows. Mitch and Miranda had chosen to write their own vows and had been working on them almost as much as their new powers. Now that it was time to say them, Mitch seemed to find himself choked up forcing him to clear his throat several times before he could begin.

“Miranda, I am so blessed to have found you. You are everything to me, my sun, my air, everything I need to live, you give to me. I cannot and will not live without you, always. Wherever you go, whatever you do, I will always be right beside you, loving you, taking care of you, for our eternity. Our relationship was dictated by the fates, but also by our love for each other. I pledge to you my heart, my mind, my body, my soul, and my spirit. Every piece of me is for you. I love you, Miranda.”

By the time Mitch had finished his vows, tears had begun to trail down from his eyes, though he seemed unaware of it because his entire focus was on Miranda, who had also begun to cry. He let go of one of her hands to reach up to gently wipe away her tears and so was a bit startled when she reached up to wipe away his own with a cloth handkerchief. Both of them chuckled a bit, amused by Mitch’s little jump.

After a moment, Miranda’s face grew more serious as she gazed intently into Mitch’s eyes. Her voice came out quietly, broken by the tears building in her throat as she tried to fight them. “Mitch, you came into my life when I was at the lowest point anyone could be. You picked me up and rescued me, with no regard to how it would affect you. You are everything any woman could ever hope for. You are gentle, compassionate, loving, loyal, selfless, strong, stable, humble, considerate, and so much more. I am truly blessed that not only did you rescue me, but you also love me. I will never forget what you have done for me, what you have made me feel, and I will live the rest of my life showing you how very much I love you in return.”

The officiator then asked for the rings, taking them from Malcolm and Libby, who were standing in as the best man and maid of honor. Holding them up, he said, “Circles have no beginning and no end, and so in the long and sacred tradition of marriage, rings have come to symbolize eternal love and endless union of body, of mind, and of the spirit. They have been given by lovers to each other as tokens of faith, trust, and hope, as well as a tangible sign of a promise given and kept

through the days of their lives together. We are here to witness the making of this promise, and giving of all the intangibles of their heart and spirit; love, trust, faith, and hope; not just in each other but also in their relationship. They are making a declaration before all of you that from this day forth, they are united before the world in a promise that spans the years of their lives.” He then placed Miranda’s ring into Mitch’s outstretched hand.

Mitch took Miranda’s left hand, placing the ring at the tip of her finger before reciting the rest of the vows they had agreed on. “Miranda, I give this ring to you as a token of my love and devotion to you. I pledge to you all that I am and all that I will ever be as your husband. With this ring, I gladly marry you and join my life to yours.” Mitch moved the ring up Miranda’s finger to rest at the top, where it fit perfectly. He then lifted her hand to his mouth, placing a soft kiss directly onto the ring, declaring his devotion to all. Mitch couldn’t help the wide grin that spread across his face..

Miranda took the other ring from the officiator’s hand before taking Mitch’s large left hand in her own. Taking a deep breath, she recited her vows. “Mitch, I give this ring to you as a token of my love and devotion to you. I pledge to you all that I am and all that I will ever be as your wife. With this ring, I gladly marry you and join my life to yours.” Miranda then lifted Mitch’s hand to her lips, copying his action before smiling widely back at him.

“With the exchange of vows and rings, Mitch and Miranda have pledged their love to each other in witness of every person here. Therefore, with the powers invested to me by the state of South Carolina, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Mitch, you may now kiss your bride.”

Mitch gently grasped either side of Miranda’s face, staring deeply into her eyes before bringing their lips together in their first married kiss. They gently moved together as the guests were startled by a loud crack of thunder coming from the absolutely clear sky and the flaring of the candles. When the wind began to pick up speed and the candles

burned despite the wind, Malcolm inconspicuously nudged Mitch, reminding him they needed to rein in their powers. The wind abruptly died off, and the candles returned to normal, leaving the unknowing guests wondering if they'd imagined the whole thing.

Eventually, as the catcalls finally broke into their focus of each other and the officiator cleared his throat loudly, the couple pulled apart. Miranda glanced at Malcolm, mouthing, "Sorry," to him as he shook his head and laughed.

Mitch and Miranda turned to face the audience, their arms linking automatically, and stood still while Libby handed Miranda back her bouquet and adjusted her skirt. When they were ready, the officiator raised his hands above them, calling out in a loud voice, "I am pleased to introduce to you for the first time, Mitch and Miranda Masterson."

The audience clapped and cheered as the newlywed couple strode down the aisle, Miranda stopping briefly to press a kiss to a weeping Clarisa's cheek before doing the same with an equally weepy Nina.

The rest of the day flashed by quickly. They first had to pose for their pictures while the guests roamed the breathtaking grounds and explored the large carriage house where the reception was being held. After the photos, they all gathered in the dining rooms for a wonderful dinner that neither Mitch nor Miranda could have said what it was they were so focused on each other. The regular traditions were followed, with the cake cutting, which neither of them shoved cake into the other's face as agreed and decreed by Nina, and the toasts were made, bringing many to tears during Malcolm's moving toast. Miranda threw the bouquet, which landed neatly into Libby's hands while Mitch tossed her garter after spending quite a bit of time playing under Miranda's skirt, both embarrassing and enflaming her. The man who caught the garter, apparently accidentally since he was not facing Mitch and simply had his hand up in the air as he talked with another man, was unknown to both of them. He was a nice-looking guy, though, and had been watching Libby all evening. Her

blushes as they danced their required dance showed she was not immune to him, either. The Mastersons could only hope.

**THE END**



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