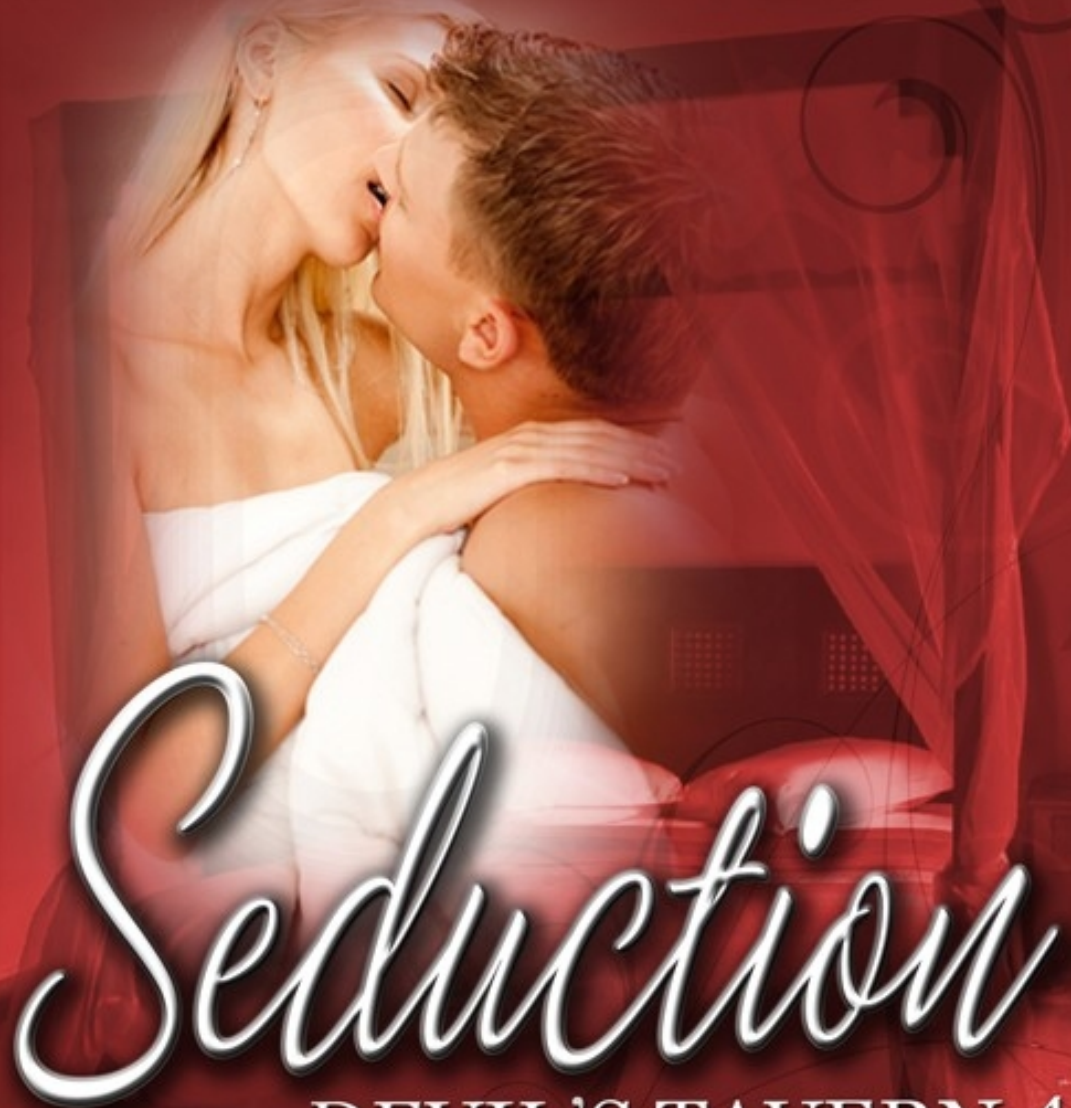




Aspen Mountain Press



DEVIL'S TAVERN 4

CRYMSYN HART

Devil's Tavern: Seduction

Devil's Tavern IV: Seduction

Crymsyn Hart

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Devil's Tavern IV: Seduction
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Chapter One

The scent of cloves and oranges wafted through the room. She turned her face to the perfume and inhaled deeply. The spicy aroma signaled that he wasn't far behind. Her anticipation level rose. A soft sigh escaped her lips. The warmth of the room put her in a languid state. The velvet of the comforter beneath her caressed her skin. *I know he's coming soon. Is it so horrible to want him to be here sooner? I crave him every second of the day.* The bouquet of the citrus and earth drew closer. The increase in the fragrance made her wet. Her heart picked up a few beats. She drew in a breath savoring the scent. A cold blast of air slid over her body. Her skin prickled from the introduction of his presence in the room. The ache of her expectation wound along her nerves and it took all she had not to strain against her fetters and mar her skin. He liked her perfect every time he came to see her. Bare and naked. Silent and compliant waiting for him. Always waiting for him. It was always about pleasing him. That was what she had been told since the beginning. That was what she had agreed to. All for him. All because he made her feel like no one had before.

"Hello, lovely one," he purred against her ear.

His hot breath blasted against her neck. A coil of yearning unfurled inside of her. This was what she craved. Her time with him was precious. They had so little of it together. Everything he did only brought her more pleasure. His fingertips trailed over her belly making her squirm. The tips of his sharp nails pressed into her skin ever so slightly alerting her to the pain they could cause if he chose. Tonight she hoped he

would be gentle. Sometimes he made her scream until her throat was raw from the orgasms he brought her. Other times he would be cruel, winding her tighter and tighter, leading her to the precipice of ecstasy, and then leaving her wanting. She hated it when he was cruel, but knew there were times she just had to be punished.

Valerie knew better than to respond to his haunting voice. The last time she did, he had hit her ass with a studded paddle until she cried for mercy. For a moment, the skin of her buttocks burned from the sensory memory of the paddle. The joy of disciplining her was what had made the experience worth it. The pain faded away from her thoughts when he slid his finger over the satin blindfold that obstructed her view of him. The desire to see him gripped her soul. She'd never been permitted to glimpse his face. It was only his touch, smell, and taste that she was allowed. They had agreed, when he started coming to her, he would be the one to set the rules. He governed her world while they were together. She had consented to all of his requests and never thought twice about it. When they were together, she became his. The only problem was she never knew when their rendezvous would be.

The bed depressed from his added weight. His body heat warmed her naked flesh. The pad of his thumb glided over her bottom lip. Everything in her ached to suck it into her mouth and taste him, but she remained motionless.

"You remembered. Good girl. Maybe this time I won't have to beat you."

Something cold slid along her stomach. *Oh God, what is he doing to me? Whatever it is, I don't want it to stop.* He pulled another trail of cold and by the pops and cracks she heard, she figured he was using ice on her flesh. She squeezed her eyes tight, under the blindfold, desperately needing to contain the moan building inside of her. The tremors that ran along her muscles were uncontrollable. She grasped the iron bedrails she was tied to for support. Her fingers were beginning to cramp from holding fast. Her back arched off the bed when his tongue lapped at the wet path the ice had left. Another cube circled her nipple puckering it faster as he rounded the pert pea. The subtle pain caused from the frozen cube numbed her brain but raised her temperature. Beads of sweat slid down her forehead. Her throat was parched

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For an instant, everything stopped. She didn't sense him. The cold went away. Her heart ceased to beat in that frozen second of time. The air was dead around her. It seemed she was in a bubble of no sensation. *What have I done? Where did he go? Why did he leave?* She was about to break her silence and call out for her master, but then his body heat rubbed against hers. The tip of his tongue flicked across her frozen nipple. Relief flooded through her. Tears of joy slipped from her eyes.

His mouth enclosed her nipple. He wrapped his tongue around it and bit down gently. One hand glided between her legs finding her buried bud. Every time he came to her, his flesh was always so cool. She didn't understand why, but his coldness only forced her body into overdrive. Nothing else mattered except satisfying him. Her master's fingers rubbed her clit slowly, delicately, making her experience tortuous. Valerie was aware of each small stroke he bestowed upon her. He was slow, not in a hurry to bring her to an orgasm. With the added pressure on her clitoris, the muscles in her stomach clenched. She bit her tongue until she tasted blood. Uttering a sound at this point would mean he would stop and leave her wanting. The velvet beneath her was suddenly pressing against her skin and engulfing her in its warmth. It was no longer soft, but each individual fiber pierced her skin. She needed the release that only he could bring. The scent of roses suddenly permeated the room, but his exotic musk filled her senses. The cloves and citrus overwhelmed her. Valerie curled her toes and fought the rising state of bliss. The blood from her bitten tongue slid down her throat. It took all of her control to stay focused and not give in to the trembles snaking along her nerves. Her dream lover chuckled.

"Trying so hard to stay quiet. I love it when you please me so. You have my permission to give into the lust heating you up."

Relief washed over her. He stopped tormenting her clit and twisted one of her nipples until she broke her silence. "Ahh, Master. Please fuck me!"

"Yes. That's it, Valerie. I love hearing your cries. They make me so hard. Your voice is wonderful. You obey me so well. For that you'll be rewarded." He licked her neck and nipped along the skin. He delved his two fingers deep into her slick pussy. Inside

her depths, his fingertips found her G-spot. Black dots appeared before her eyes even under the blindfold. He rubbed her pleasure node deliberately while his mouth settled right above her heart. His tongue licked circles over the spot where it hit her breastbone the hardest. With each stroke, a tugging sensation started inside of her. His lips found the perfect point and then he began to suck.

“More!” She begged. Her muscles were so tight she needed to hit an orgasm. Whatever he was doing to her, pulling on her warmth, feeding from her, made the pleasure so much more intense.

He pumped his fingers faster while he sucked. Valerie didn’t know why he did it, but since the beginning he had. Her pussy gripped his fingers and the ecstasy transported her to a different realm. Her mind separated from her body and she became his slave. It was always this way. Tonight was no different. Her hips lifted off the bed. The sound of the creaking springs filled her ears. She tried to get free from the cuffs on her wrists, but he made sure her shackles were escape proof. She watched herself being put through the sensuous torture. She was an animal lost in the moment of pure instinct. It was overwhelming. In her state, she tried to see the being who ruled her, but his form was obscured. Even then she wasn’t able to see him.

“Come back to me, Valerie. I know you’re trying to sneak out and see me. Feel what I do to you. Come back to me. “

She tried to resist the impulse, but suddenly she was aware again. His musky aroma hit her. The sound of her pulse thundered in her ears. Her body altered between hot and cold. His sucking on her chest grew incessant. Her heart struggled to keep up with the pace he had set.

“Please, Master, make me come.”

His deep laughter brought her to heaven. He was pleased with her. The last time he hadn’t been. She’d spoken out of turn. He circled her clit. Her breaths escaped in pants. His fingers slid into her depths, plunging further into her pussy, until the rush of pleasure took her over. She longed to have his cock buried in her pussy, but he’d kept that from her. Finally he licked small circles over her chest and kissed her lightly on the

lips. He seemed out of breath too. His rhythm was slowing inside of her. She breathed heavy from her experience and knew he was satisfied with her performance.

"You taste so good, Val."

"Thank you, Master. Please, I want to see you?"

He smoothed the hair from her forehead. His cold hands helped her to focus through the emptiness that now gripped her. It was a hollow feeling almost akin to hunger, but something deeper. "You know the rules." He kissed her again and tugged on her bottom lip. "Besides, I have so much more planned for us. When the time is right, you *will* see me. For now, you are my one true slave."

Valerie struggled to answer, but his voice was drifting away. She reached out to him and found her hand passed right through the fur-lined cuffs. The room came into view, but it was blurred in her vision. She saw his outline, but it wasn't clear.

He smiled. "Don't worry. You'll see me soon."

Valerie went to answer him, but her dream switched. She was no longer in the room, but standing in a cemetery. The chill of the night clung to her bones. Spinning around, she wondered what was going on. The landscape was familiar. She'd been in this dream before. A light was coming toward her. The environment blurred and she felt time moving forward. *I hate it when dreams do that.* Valerie found herself outside of a crypt. She poked her head inside of the door and saw a man with dark brown hair peering around the interior and talking into a small digital recorder. *At once she recognized him. Why do I keep dreaming about a vampire who likes to go ghost hunting?*

Before she could think of the answer, the ground gave way beneath her feet. She clutched the air, but had nothing to hold onto. At that moment, the vampire looked at her and a look of shock registered on his face. Valerie wished to speak to him. But before she could, she fell.

Chapter Two

"Val!"

She sat up in bed, opened her eyes, and clutched her chest at the sudden shock. Her heart throttled against her ribcage from being awakened so abruptly. Pinpoints of sunlight shone through the holes in her velvet curtains. The light pierced her eyes and made her wince. It took her a moment to get her bearings. She was back in her bedroom. A quick check and she found her hands were not tied, there was not a mark on her, and she wasn't in a cemetery. Sometimes, when she awoke from her dreams, she carried the echoes of the sensations with her, especially those from her dream lover. Blinking, she saw the sheets were tangled around her legs. She ran her hands over her face only to feel the sweat that had dried on her skin. Her blonde hair was plastered to her head. Once her heart stopped its race and her eyes adjusted, she was able to focus on the real world. Standing in the doorway was her niece dressed in a Blue Devils T-shirt James had left in her bottom drawer.

"Hi, Kennedy. What's the matter? Is everything okay, sweetie?"

Her niece stepped a little way into the room. Her fingers were wrapped in her strawberry blonde hair. Waiting there, the little girl reminded Valerie of herself when she was a child, running into her parents' room when something scary woke her up. "I heard you yelling and I wanted to be sure the boogiemani wasn't hurting you. He's scary when he comes to you. Why don't you make him go away?"

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She tried to hide her smile. *Oh boy, it wasn't a bad dream at all. It just sucked I had to wake up. I'd love to stay all day with my dream guy to see what he can do to me. How does she know about the dreams? I guess I must be screaming in all of them. There's no way I'm going to get rid of him when he makes me feel the way I do. I can't believe it's only been a couple of months that I've been having these dreams.* When she did awake from her dream lover's sessions, there was a hollow ache left behind inside of her. She brushed it off as being such an awesome dream that her body hadn't caught up to her mind yet.

"Oh no, hon. It wasn't a nightmare. There was no boogiemán. I was having a good dream. Why don't you come in here and lay down? I have to get up anyway and I know how much your mom snores."

Kennedy eyed her and gazed around the room. The little girl climbed up on the bed. She ruffled her niece's hair. "Aunt Val, why do you like it when he comes to you?"

Valerie opened her mouth to respond, but then closed it thinking about her answer. She couldn't explain how he made her body feel. Or the pure act of submission that she enjoyed and wasn't able to do in the real world. Never in a million years had she ever thought about letting someone dominate her, but in the dreams it was so right. She thought back to the first time she had found herself in the bedroom. He hadn't been there. It was just his presence. He had offered her pleasure beyond anything she could fathom just so long as she gave herself to him. At first she was hesitant, but then he showed her the ecstasy he could bring. And then, with her walls crumbling, she had said yes. A shiver of delight ran through her remembering that initial delectable time. There was no easy answer to give her niece.

"Well, sweetie, sometimes a person's unconscious makes up different things so they can explore things that they want. Kinda like the imaginary friend that you had a couple of years ago. Remember?"

Kennedy stared at her. "Ellie wasn't imaginary. Neither is that man in your dreams. He's mean most times, but he makes you feel happy."

Valerie sighed. "I can't help that. I'm not asking him to go away. Now I'm going to get up. Why don't you try and get some sleep before your mom drags you out of bed again?" She got out of bed and found her legs were still wobbly.

Stretching, it was time to hit the shower. She glanced at the clock. Her first client was going to call in an hour for her reading. Valerie wasn't too worried about her because the customer was a loyal one she'd been servicing for years. Once her appointments were over, she had a coveted date with James. The time they had together was precious and she made the most of it especially now with her current living situation. Under the water, Valerie forced herself away from the dream and back to the real world. It didn't help to keep rehashing the few hours of submission she had and then finding herself in a graveyard. She had to relax enough to get into the zone. The water helped. Then her mind drifted toward James. He made her insides turn to mush and her head spin. An overwhelming sense of love gripped her. She would do anything to keep him in her life. He was a kind man who tolerated her strange lifestyle. If he could deal with her crazy sister, then she knew he could put up with anything that she brought him including her vocation. *Soon we'll have the whole night together. Then I can unwind and not have to worry about Niki yelling at Kennedy. I only wish she had it easier. My sister can be such a bitch. If Kennedy were mine, then I'd treat her so much better.*

After getting out of the shower and dressing, she padded into the living room to see the mess that was her small apartment. Niki and Kennedy were sleeping on her pullout couch. Niki had come to her door and begged for a place to crash for a while. The sofa was too small for two people. Her niece wasn't complaining. *Poor kid's been through hard times with my sister. Why can't she get it right? Everything she touches always turns to shit. It wasn't that way when we were kids. Things were good. It all started when she met Tony. He was the one who got her involved in all the drugs and booze. God knows what else she's into. I can lecture her all I want, but she's not going to listen to me. I found that out the hard way.*

She crept quietly into the kitchen and started brewing coffee. At once the heady aroma of it filled the small space. Just the perfume began to wake her up even more. While she waited for the liquid to percolate, she went into her office and looked over

her agenda for the day. Three readings were scheduled. *Hopefully no one else will call. I'm not in the mood for a marathon session today. Sometimes, giving advice to people seems like the same thing over and over again.* Next to the calendar was her dream journal. She opened to the place where her pen was wedged into the binding. The last date was three days ago. Each dream was more vivid than the last. Her cheeks burned when she read the details and was thrown back into the last dream. His phantom caresses moved across her body and made her wet again. Her eyes fluttered shut when she heard his voice in her mind. Her body suddenly responded with a rush of warmth. Her back arched in the chair. A loud beeping sound brought her back to reality. The coffee was ready.

Man, I can't let myself get caught up in these fantasies. It's bad enough I'm having messed up dreams about fallen angels, biker werewolves, and atheistic vampires. What next piano-playing poodles? They always have a tendency to pop up right at the end of my dreams with him. I wonder if they're connected. Who knows? Why can't I have normal dreams like everyone else? Why can't I be normal? That was the question she had asked herself since she was a child. She had never gotten an answer that would satisfy her. It was hard enough dealing with her family and with her gift. The only thing she could do was embrace it.

Valerie shook her head and closed her dream journal. She had to push all of her reveries from her mind. Grabbing her tarot cards, she started to concentrate on her upcoming reading. However, the overwhelming urge to pull cards on the characters she normally dreamt about came over her. Envisioning the burly werewolf, she shuffled the deck wondering what, if anything, this would accomplish. *They're just dreams for Christ's sakes. Who would believe in a tattooed, evangelical wolf man who had eaten his last congregation? Or a vampire who didn't believe in the afterlife when he went ghost hunting for a hobby and had encountered demons in his existence? If these guys are real, and I meet them, I swear I'm going to stop questioning the universe.*

"Aunt Val, whatcha doing?"

She jumped. The cards flew from her hands. They drifted to the floor haphazardly. "Sweetie, what are you doing up again? I thought you were going to go back to sleep." She bent down to gather the fallen cards.

Kennedy snagged the card she was reaching for before she could. "I saw your light on and I had a strange dream about a wolf riding a motorcycle. He had someone with him and then it got all scary at the end. Before I woke up another man was there. He had this bright light all around him and told me not to worry about it."

That stumped Valerie. *Niki didn't tell me that her daughter might take after us. How is it that she's dreaming about the same things I am? The universe has to be telling me something. But there can't be such things as werewolves and vampires. I can believe in ghosts. And who is the man with light around him? I haven't dreamt about him. Or maybe I have and I just don't know it yet.* She knelt down and tugged on her niece's braid. "Do your dreams come true sometimes? Do you talk to people that others can't see?"

The little girl chewed her lip. She studied the weave of the carpet. "Mom says I shouldn't talk about it. That it's not real and people will say I'm psycho. The ghosts tell me that you can see things too. That's what Ellie told me when we used to play together. She used to like it when we would come here. The people that I see, they've told me that Mom's been doing bad things."

Her heart dropped when she heard that. It was bad enough her sister was screwing up her own life, but it wasn't a good thing to get her daughter involved. *Niki, what are you doing? I always thought you were a good mom. It had better not be drugs again. Mom and Dad can't go through another bout of putting you in rehab. Hell, I can't handle it. I'm going to have to have a serious talk with her when I get a chance today. Sometimes I wonder why my twin had Kennedy in the first place.* "Yes, I can see things too. When your mom's not around, I'll teach you to control it. She's not into this stuff anymore. You don't have to worry about what anyone thinks of you. Whatever you know is real, that is the most important thing. Now go get some breakfast. There are some bagels in the fridge if you're hungry. We can go shopping later to pick up some of your favorite cereal, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, Aunt Val. The cards you want are under your desk." She wrapped her arms around Valerie's neck and gave her a quick hug. Then Kennedy handed her the card she was holding and smiled. After that she skipped out of the room.

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Valerie glanced under the desk to find several upturned cards. They were Death, the Priestess, the Fool, the World, and the Tower. She got up and studied the card that Kennedy had left behind. It was the Devil. *What in the world do these mean? I'm not stuck on any personal possessions. I don't lead a materialistic life. So what do the other cards symbolize?* She ran her hand over the line of the cards wondering which one belonged to which character she had been dreaming about. Sadly, her intuition wasn't kicking in to give her any clues. Instead the phone rang.

Recognizing the number, she added the cards back into the pile. A cold shiver ran down her back. It seemed someone was behind her. She checked over her shoulder but didn't see anyone. The sensation grew stronger. She pushed the door closed so not to be disturbed by her guests and waited for someone to be behind it. *No one is there. I'm just imaging things. There are no ghosts in this house. I keep it protected enough for that.* Still, it seemed that the walls had ears and were pushing in around her. Brushing the feeling off, she grabbed the phone to do her reading. The voice on the other end was high-pitched and full of hope. Valerie sighed and honed in on her client's reading. Before long, she was so caught up in another's life she forgot about her own.

Six hours later, she'd emerged from her office. All of her readings were done; including a few that had called in at the last minute. Her head was starting to pound from the extra energy she had burned. Even though she didn't have any more appointments, the universe knew she needed the money. Not able to say no, she had done the phone readings and given her psychic advice. Sometimes when she wanted to relax her life would take a different turn. Such as when Niki and her niece had shown up on her doorstep. James and she had been getting ready to take off for a long deserved weekend together when her sister had appeared needing a place to stay. Needless to say, she didn't get the long weekend and he had dealt well with the situation. Tonight was part of the makeup session she promised him.

Now she sat watching Kennedy eating a pizza and listening to Niki arguing on her phone with her landlord. Her stomach rumbled. Tonight they had dinner plans so she didn't want to spoil her appetite. Valerie checked the clock on the stove and saw she

had half an hour to get ready for her date with James. The night away from the house was going to do wonders in recharging her batteries. Her sister's morose mood was beginning to rub off on her.

"Son of a bitch!" Niki threw the phone across the room. It hit the wall, denting the plaster, and then shattered on the tile floor. The blonde roots were starting to show against her dyed black hair. She brushed a piece of it out of her face. Her eyes were the same color as Valerie's, but she saw something darker in her sister's gaze for a moment that hadn't been there when they were kids. Something was off about her sister.

"What's the matter now, Nik?" Valerie stood up and stretched.

"That bastard. He won't let me back into the apartment to get our things!"

"Well you *do* owe him three months back rent. Besides, didn't you get most of your things out and stash them at Mom's?" She began picking up the pieces of the cell phone. Niki came over and put her hand on Valerie's.

"It's not that. There's some...personal items there that I have to get. There could be trouble if I don't."

The color drained from Valerie's face. The skin prickled on the back of her neck signaling the bad news her sister was probably going to tell her. *I knew it. She's back to using again. Or she has another guy chasing after her. I bet that's why she's hiding out here.* She tried to focus on the psychic link she shared with her twin, but found it was blocked. When they were children, they could always tell when something bad had happened to the other one. Even though Niki didn't believe in the supernatural, she had always believed that they shared a bond and never tried to keep her out. The wall between them was new and unnerving. "You're not pregnant again are you? Is it drugs this time?"

"No. It's nothing like that. Can I borrow some cash to pay him off at least to get back in there? It's important. I'll pay you back."

"I'm sorry. I can't. You know I don't have any extra money. I gave you what little I had when you first came here. I make ends meet and that's it. I'm sorry. You guys can stay here for as long as you want but—why don't you ask Dad? I'm sure he'll break

down and give you some. You could always get your way with him being the favorite and all."

Her sister laughed. "Not anymore. I'm not the apple of his eye. Dad'll say the same old thing. I'm a no good loser. Mom's so lost in her drunken stupor she doesn't even know what's real anymore. She still thinks her dead cat is sleeping on the bed with her. At least you have some sanity."

"You know Whiskers might actually be sleeping on the bed next to her. Animal spirits have been reported for centuries. I've had a few encounters with them over the years."

Her sister gave her the evil eye. "Oh don't start on that psychic bullshit of yours, sis. I get it, you make a living telling people what they want to hear, but don't get into the mumbo jumbo when we both know that it isn't real. Mom can have her cats and you can keep your ghosts. Okay."

Before she could answer, there was a knock on the door. Valerie glanced between it and Niki. *Why do you have to be so damn stubborn just like Dad? Why can't you admit that what you can't see is real?* She glanced at Kennedy who had stopped eating her pizza and stared intently at them. A pang of guilt went through her heart. It wasn't good for the little girl to see them arguing especially about the same gift that her niece had inherited. Niki finished cleaning up the rest of the cell phone and waved her off. She felt bad, but there wasn't anything she could do.

Opening the door, James stood in the entrance with a bouquet of roses in one hand and a pink teddy bear in the other. Her smile widened. Her sister's troubles fell from her mind when she saw him. She flung her arms around him and sunk into his embrace. This was where she belonged. With him and no one else. This was the real world and not one created by her unconscious to work out whatever twisted fantasies that she needed to. James smelled of musk and sweat alerting her he had come straight from work. He was a cop who had been on the force for three years. They had been dating for two and a half. The first time they had met was when the department had reluctantly called her in to work on a cold case at the behest of a dead girl's mother.

James was the officer who had been assigned to give her whatever she wanted. His superiors hadn't wanted her there, but during the process they had become quite close. She had tried not to get attached to him, but it didn't work. When she was done with the case, he had asked her out officially.

"You look wonderful."

"Thanks," she beamed. "But I have to change."

He scowled. "I wasn't talking to you. Hey, Ken." He winked at her niece.

"Pervert." Kennedy giggled when he handed her the bear. He patted her on the head and then gave Valerie the flowers. She pressed them to her nose and inhaled the smell. For a moment they whisked her back to her dream. James's hand around her waist brought her back to herself.

"I hope you're starving." He kissed the back of her neck.

"Give me five minutes." She took the flowers into the kitchen and put them in a vase. Then she pranced by him and headed into the bedroom. She came out wearing his favorite wine colored skirt and a black top. "Don't wait up."

Niki dashed out after them. "Can't you give me a ride?"

Valerie's gaze darted between her sister and her boyfriend. "No. I'm sorry. You have to work this one out on your own. You know I've been planning this all week. Besides, you have to watch *your* daughter. I'll be back later." She looped her arm through James's and prayed she was doing the right thing. *Niki can be a good mom when she wants to be. I hope she remembers that. Ken knows I'm not going anywhere. I just hope my sister doesn't do anything to screw it up. Whatever you're doing, sis, just stop it before it gets any worse. I don't want to be working on your cold case.*

James hugged her to him. At that contact, she forced her sister from her mind and thought about the night ahead.

Chapter Three

Valerie snuggled further into James' arms. He made her feel comfortable and safe. Her heart swelled when she thought about him. She trailed her fingers over his cheek feeling the stubble of a growing beard. She gazed into his blue eyes trying to read him. All she got was a blank wall. He was one of the very few people that she couldn't read. It was a good thing. She didn't need to know all of his deep dark secrets unless he told her. The only thing she could see was his aura. Right now the energy field surrounding him was a deep blue signaling he was relaxed. He was also enjoying the alone time they were having. After they left her apartment, they had gone to dinner and then went to see a movie. Now, they were lounging on the couch while he played with her hair.

"You think Kennedy will be okay?" James asked.

"I don't worry about her much. She's a good kid. If it were up to me, I'd take care of her," Valerie answered sleepily. The rise and fall of his chest lulled her closer to slumber until she felt his lips on her neck.

"Yeah, but whose going to take care of your sister?" He nibbled her throat.

She roused herself enough to peer into his eyes and saw the seriousness of his expression. "What're you saying?"

He sighed and sat up a little on the couch. The back of her neck prickled. "You're not going to like this."

"You're going to tell me anyway. I know you."

He looked at the wall and then back at her. His body stiffened underneath her. "I had a few suspicions about Niki from everything you've told me about her. So I did some digging on your sister. She's not who she says she is. In the past she's been involved with a really bad dude. How well do you really know her?"

She hit him on the shoulder.

"Oye! That hurt."

"Damn right it did." She got up from the couch and began to pace the room. Her rising anger could make her say things she would regret later if she wasn't careful. Val's temper was one of the things which helped splinter the relationship with her sister in the past. "What the hell kind of question is that? Do I know my sister? Of course I know her. She's my *twin* sister. We pulled each other's hair when we were kids. We both have the same gifts even if she doesn't accept hers. We swapped in high school and dated the other's boyfriend. That's what being identical is. Why are you doing background checks on her anyway? Did you do one on me too? Suddenly I don't pass muster for our relationship? Do you think I'm fucking around on you behind your back? Next you'll tell me, you have one of your goons following me." She flicked off the television and tried to quell the rage boiling up inside of her. Niki had always been the rebellious one sneaking out at night and getting into trouble with their parents. Early on she had met Kennedy's father and gotten pregnant. Then after Kennedy's birth he introduced her to drugs. Niki didn't know what she was doing. When they got her into rehab she was barely alive. She spent five months in the clinic before she was able to resume her life. During that time, their parents had taken care of Kennedy. In the past few years her life had taken a turn for the worst, but she wasn't a junkie. *At least I hope she's not again. Kennedy said her mom was into something bad. What could it be?*

He put up his hands. "Hey. Hey. No. I'm not having anyone following you or doing checks on you. I-I'm just telling you so you'd know. I know how much you care about her. She's into some messed up shit. I thought you had the right to know. I don't know what to call what's she's doing. Voodoo. Santeria. Devil Worship. It's worse than what you do."

She stopped pacing and glared at him. This time her inner volcano was about to blow. "What I *do*! What's that supposed to mean! Now all of a sudden I'm into witchcraft? We've had this discussion before and you were perfectly fine on me being psychic. It's how we met. Remember?"

"I remember very well. You know I love all of you, including your special abilities, but she's practicing something a lot darker. I thought you'd want to know." He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her into him.

Her first instinct was to always protect her sister no matter what. The bump of his erection pressed against her back. Her temper simmered some. He was trying to shield her from any danger Niki might be involved in. It didn't get him off the hook. She turned in his arms and gave him a sly smile.

"Dark hmm? I wonder how dark she really is compared to me." She kissed him and ran her tongue over his lips. His hands slid down her back and clutched her ass hard. His fingers dug into her butt cheeks which made her deepen the kiss. She rubbed his firm cock through the material. Their tongues met and entwined. A hunger began to rise from inside of her. The lust he churned in her had to be sated. It had been too long since they had been together. The fibers of her very soul needed to feel him buried inside of her. She needed to be reminded this was not some waking dream. Every time they tried lately, they ended up being interrupted.

"Do you really want to do this? I thought you were mad at me," he murmured.

"I never said I was mad. I just ..."

He captured her lips. Valerie flashed back to her dream lover, but James eclipsed him because he was warm and real. He unzipped her skirt and pushed it down over her hips. She jumped when he skated his fingers under her lace panties and then he shimmied those off her legs too. His kisses were frenzied working down her neck while his hands explored her ass, thighs, and her pussy. It had been over two weeks since they'd had enough time to spend together for more than a couple of hours because he had gotten called into work or Niki wanted something.

Her hands snuck under his shirt feeling the flat stomach and the subtle ridges of his defined muscles. He was in awesome shape and sometimes she wondered what he saw in her. They were from two different worlds, but he accepted her without question including her gifts. He plucked his shirt off and threw it on the couch. Valerie undid his pants. She was always thrilled when he had nothing on underneath them. *He planned for this to happen. I know him well enough by now.* He stepped out of them without breaking their kiss. She wound her fingers through the strands of his thick red hair.

Her other hand glided down his stomach. James broke their kiss and began laughing. "Tickling me is not part of the deal. You do that, then we won't be doing this."

She winked at him. "I say it is. Besides, with that pointing at me, I have to be able to do something to get it in the position where I want it. Someone has to manhandle you."

"Really? I like the sound of that." He raised his eyebrow at her. She bit her lip.

"Mhh...hmm." She pushed him lightly onto the couch. His eyes widened with surprise when she straddled him. She perched her hands around his neck while he began kissing one of her breasts. His hands slipped down her back and rested on her ass, spreading her hips wider and scooting her closer to him. His cock settled against her belly. She began to gyrate against his leg. His expression changed from eagerness to concentration.

"Are you going to sit there all night and tease me?" He licked her nipple sending shivers through her. She didn't stop her teasing. Enjoying his torture, she only increased her rhythm.

"If you're not good, then maybe. It all depends on what kind of a mood I'm in. I should let you suffer for running those background checks on Niki."

"What do I have to do to get back in your good graces?"

"You have to spread'em and surrender to me. I want to ride you, James. I want you to scream my name."

"I can do that." His voice was filled with unspent passion. He lifted her up and Valerie was impaled on his length. She was so wet he slid easily into her pussy.

"God, Val. You feel so damn good. Fuck me, baby. Ride me until I come."

He thrust up while she clutched his shoulders. She closed her eyes and let him set the pace between them. Their combined body heat made their coupling even more intense. Each time he plunged into her, her mind drew her back to her dreams. To the cool skin of her dream lover. Even with James pounding into her, it seemed that her dream lover was with her too, sharing their coupling. Her breathing began to increase. James' fingers dug into her hips. The pain made it even more akin to her dreams. Her back tickled making her wonder if her dream lover was more than she thought.

I'm as real as you want me to be, his deep voice whispered in her mind.

The lust he created in her awakened completely. She opened her eyes and took control of their lovemaking. Sweat rolled down her neck and onto her breasts. Increasing their tempo, she began to ride James hard.

"Yes, baby. That's it. Fuck me good." His eyes opened and a strange expression appeared on his face.

She grinned. Her muscles clenched around his cock. James made a small moan. He was close to coming inside of her. She kissed him hard on the mouth. When she did, a pins and needles sensation rolled over her tongue. Before she could grasp onto it, the world exploded in light and dark spots. Her nerves were on fire from the orgasm hitting her. James cried out and fell back against the couch cushions. She ran her hands over her breasts and licked her lips. The prickling energy was still against her back. It was cold just the way her dream lover was. She continued to grind her hips against James drawing him into her. She needed more. She needed to fuck him until he was hers completely. He would bow down to her and call her master.

Valerie. A cold puff exploded against her ear.

She shivered and dug her fingers into James's shoulders. *I need more.* She plunged her tongue into his mouth drawing him into a fevered kiss. But he pulled away and grabbed her wrists. That drew her back.

"Val, are you okay?"

She saw the confusion on his face. "Yeah fine. Why?" She slipped off him and padded toward the shower. Her body was on fire and her heart beating faster. She tried to brush off her sudden mood change.

James caught her around the waist. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine. Was I not good enough? Maybe I should have been a little harder on you. Maybe next time I can tie you up and beat you."

He chuckled. "No. You were wonderful. Tying me up might be something we can think about. Come on. I'll wash your back in the shower."

"You'd better. I think I earned it." She sauntered into the bathroom. While she was waiting for him, she couldn't drop the feeling that someone was with her. Her back still itched. The puff of cold air against her ear had her worried. She stared in the mirror and for the first time tried to discern what was truly going on in her dreams. Her intuition didn't ping. However, a lust so raw gripped her that she drew in a breath to steady herself. A chuckle echoed softly in her mind. At that moment, Valerie wondered what exactly she had gotten herself into by submitting to her dream lover. Only time would tell.

Chapter Four

Valerie stood outside her apartment door with her keys in hand. During the drive home, all she could think about was who or what was appearing in her dreams. Her mind kept flashing back to the Devil card she had pulled earlier that day. She didn't think it was the devil, but maybe something darker along those lines. *It can't be. I don't believe in creatures like that. There are no demons. So what if I heard his voice in my head. It's just some part of my fractured unconscious making itself known. Or maybe some powerful spirit who's wandered the dream planes or something. Who knows?* That thought didn't settle well with her either. She rested her head on the door and groaned. On the other side, she heard her sister singing in a monotone voice. She pressed her ear against the wood and listened harder. This time her sister was louder.

"Accedo Dominerus." Come to me, Master. "Exspecto Tu." I await you.

What the hell is she doing? If she has anything to do with the being who's coming into my dreams, I'm going to kill her. Here she was spouting off that she didn't believe in any of the psychic stuff. Now she's calling on demons. Oh hell no! Not in my fucking house. Valerie turned the key in the lock. The door swung open. Her sister was on the floor sitting in a circle of black candles. A cool wind blew through the apartment but no windows were open. It was forty degrees out and her sister liked the warmth. Niki's back was to her, but the heady tang of incense filled the room. Under that she smelled something metallic. After a moment, her sister turned around. Blood coated her face, shirt and

hands. Valerie rushed in, fell to her knees, and forgot all about what she had heard and thought. She started patting down her sister.

"Oh my God! What did you do? What happened? I'll call an ambulance." She got up, dug into her purse, and pulled out a cell phone. Niki grabbed her sister's hand.

"It's okay. I'm not hurt."

Valerie's mind quickly switched to her niece. "Ken!"

Her twin covered Valerie's mouth. "Hush. It's nothing to worry about, sis. Kennedy's fine. She's sleeping so don't wake her up. We don't want to scare her. Everything's all right. I need you to calm down. Now I'm going to take my hand away and you're going to listen to me, okay?"

Valerie nodded. Her sister removed her hand. The blood from Niki's hand lingered on her lips. The taste was foul. She spit it out. Peering around the apartment, she noticed small things which happened to be there that weren't there before she left. A scuffed and dirty cardboard box lay near the television set with a dark cloth over it. A blue bowl with smoke wafting from it sat on the nearby table. She sniffed again and smelled the deep scent of sage. A small black book lay open before her sister on the floor. Each page had bloody footprints smeared on the paper. *What did you get yourself involved with? It's worse than I thought.* Dread ran the blood cold in her veins.

"What the hell is all this? What are you doing?"

"I told you I needed to return to my apartment for a few things. Frank, the landlord, was being his usual dickwad self and wouldn't let me in. So I took care of it."

Valerie stood up and backed away from Niki. "Took care of it? What exactly does that mean? Sis, what did you do?" It was then she noticed the bloody knife on the outskirts of the circle. She extended her senses and felt the darkness in the house. It pressed down upon her from all sides. It seemed as though even the walls had a living consciousness about them. She couldn't drive it from her senses. Staring into the shadows, she thought she saw faces pushing out from the walls.

Her sister flashed her a sinister smile. "You know exactly what it means. The darkness feels good, doesn't it? Let me help you embrace it. Why don't you run to your

cop boyfriend and tell him what happened? Tell him where to find the body if you want. They'll lock me up and you'll never see me again. Won't that make you happy? You've been trying to get me out of your life for a long time now."

James was right! She stared at her sister seeing the crazed gleam in her eye. Her twin had never been this way. *This isn't my sister. Whatever she's doing, this isn't her. She'd never hurt a fly. This darkness has affected her mind.* "Nik, I've never wanted that. You're my sister. We can fix this. Don't worry about it. Just tell me how to get this to stop." She tried to keep her voice steady, but her entire being was flooded with fear. Valerie ran her hands up her arms to ward off the chill. She breathed out and saw the vapor formed by her breath from the sudden drop in temperature. Her apartment had never felt this way. Her space was always calm. Now it was disturbed and filled with a presence that she couldn't describe.

Her sister clapped. "Fix this. No. Why would I want to fix this? We don't have to do that. Now you'll get to meet my Master. He's been waiting to meet you for a very long time."

"What shit are you into? What kind of spirits have you been calling up in my house? You know how bad that can be. I don't care if you deny your psychic abilities, but this is way beyond things going bump in the night or bending spoons."

"Come and meet him with me. He's much more than anything you've ever dreamed. He'll make everything bad all better. All you have to do is let him in. Come on." She held out her hands and giggled.

Valerie glanced at the circle. A red haze was forming next to her sister. *What is that? What is manifesting in my apartment? I can't let this happen.* She lunged and grabbed a couple of the candles. The hot wax scalded her fingers and stuck to the backside of her hand. She yanked them from the floor, breaking the circle. Once that happened, a sudden gust blasted through the apartment forcing her backward into the coffee table. The sudden pain from the point of the table jabbing into her calf brought her attention away from the broken circle. She dropped the candles and saw the red mist had dissipated. Her sister wailed. Valerie tried to shake off the pain in her calf, but her sister

came at her with her nails curled, ready to gouge her eyes out. She ducked. Niki tripped over her foot and stumbled into the door. It took her a moment, but she got back up and shook her head a little stunned.

"I can't believe you'd do that. You could've had it made with me. I would've introduced you and made arrangements for the both of us. You would have had his favor. Now you've angered him!"

"What the hell was that thing? What've you been dabbling in?"

"Dabbling. Oh no! This is more than dabbling. I'm using my abilities to do the right thing. Not like you. You're skirting around ghosts and predicting the future for chumps. We have so much more power than cheap sideshow tricks. You've never let yourself delve into the wondrous gifts that we have. If you opened yourself up completely, you'd be able to access the mysteries which surround all of us. I cried out into the darkness and he answered. Once he came to me, I discovered how many powers I truly had. You fucked this up!"

Niki straightened up and spread her arms. A cold wind burst through the apartment, called up out of nowhere, toppling over pictures, plants, and her lamps along with blowing out the rest of the candles. The living room was plunged into complete darkness. She sensed the presence of something dark all around her. She tried to shake it off. The shadows in the room expanded and covered every visible place the light filtering in from the windows did not. Valerie was mostly in the light, but one of the tendrils of the shadows slithered across the carpet and began to wrap around her ankle. She jerked her foot away. It released her. The wind died down and the shadows cleared. When it did, Niki had vanished. *Where the hell did she go? The door and the windows were locked. How could she get past me?* A sense of dread washed over her. Her instincts said that whatever happened next was not going to be good. The floorboards creaked. Kennedy stood in the hallway with a blank expression on her face. Valerie snapped out of her daze and fought the sense of evil which permeated the air.

She rushed over to her niece, about to draw her into a hug, but Kennedy pointed at her. "You must beware." Her voice had taken on a deeper manly tone.

"What must I beware of?" She tried to override the fear gripping her. Once she touched Kennedy, the sense she got from her was not evil. It was blank. She'd never had that happen to her before. Whatever possessed the little girl she wasn't sure what kind of entity might be inside of her.

"He shall summon you, but you must not go no matter how much you wish too. The evil one wants you. You must resist him no matter what he says or does."

"What about my sister?"

Kennedy's arm dropped. She leaned closer to Valerie and whispered. "She has written her own destiny and been marked. There's no help for her. You can't save her no matter what. The greater good is more important than your sister."

Her eyes widened. She shook her niece, but the slack expression was gone. "I won't accept that. She's my sister. There's gotta be a way to save her."

"Aunt Val, where's Mom?" Kennedy blinked and came back to herself.

What does that mean? Who or what is talking through her? Where is Niki? I can't leave Niki to fend for herself. No matter what she said. I just won't. She hugged her hard. Her niece wasn't scared. Seeing her being used for an open conduit for the other side wasn't something which should be happening with a child. She had to teach her to block out the spirits. It had to be done soon so Kennedy wasn't put in any more danger. Valerie didn't want to think what Niki had exposed the girl too. *God knows it had to be something dark and evil.* "I don't know, baby. I don't know. Wherever she is though, we'll find her."

Chapter Five

Valerie clutched the cigarette in her shaking hands. It was crinkled and partially flattened from being in a side pocket of her purse for the past six years. She had kept it as a reminder that she had stopped smoking. She quit the same day she found out one of her best friends had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Hilary had died a year later after intensive chemotherapy. Sitting with her in the hospice, she swore to Hilary, she would never smoke again. Now, staring at the smoke, the craving to light it up was running along her nerves. It hadn't been this bad in years. She ran her hand along the cigarette trying to straighten it out and talk herself out of lighting it up. Another part of her was trying to make sense of everything she had seen.

Kennedy was in her bedroom drinking a cup of hot chocolate. The encounter didn't seem to have fazed her. She was happily unaware of the possession. When Valerie asked her about the message, her niece had no recollection of what had happened to her. She had been sleeping and then suddenly found herself in the living room. Once she had Kennedy settled again, she called James.

Now, she and James sat at the kitchen table. Having him with her helped ease her panicked brain. Her gut instinct was to flee the apartment, but she didn't want to leave either. Her sister might return. The sense of evil saturating the space earlier had diminished. But the oppressive feeling hadn't left her living area. When this was all over, she decided that moving was the only thing to do. *I can't continue to live and do*

business here knowing about the being Niki summoned. It gives the place a gritty feeling. This will never feel like home again. God, apartment hunting is such a bitch.

James sighed and studied the bloody dagger. It was now encased in a plastic bag so he could take it to the police station with him. He glanced at her. The concern on his face was real. When he showed up she wasn't exactly sure what to tell him. So she told him what she had seen. He hadn't commented on it. Sometimes she really wondered how much he believed in her abilities no matter how many times he told her that he did.

"I thought you didn't smoke anymore?"

"I don't. But I'm seriously starting to think about it after what I saw tonight." Her hands were still trembling. Her heart still raced. She needed to be in his arms to drive away the darkness she'd seen. He was real and tangible. However, in the back part of her mind, the whisper of her dream lover was with her as well. He could make her safe. One soft touch of his cool flesh and he could chase away any demons lingering near her. *No. I can't think about him right now. For all I know he's what Niki summoned and now he's attached himself to me.*

"I thought you were used to seeing all that dark kind of stuff? Isn't that part of what you do?"

Uncontrollable laughter spilled from her lips. She shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair. Having James even think that was unbelievable. The smell of the tobacco called to her. She ran the butt under her nose and inhaled deeply. It would be so easy to light it and inhale. That was her a long time ago. She examined the butt again and then crushed it in her hand. Now would not be a good time to start this habit again. "I don't do *black* magic. Whatever she's dealing with is dark. I've never seen anything like it before. The evil was tangible. I see ghosts. I don't conjure demons. Poor Kennedy has been around *that*. Why didn't I see it before?" *How can Nik have gotten so lost in the evil? And how in the world did she disappear? What was she been summoning? What has she promised it in exchange for what she can do now?* Without being able to process anymore she began to sob.

James got up and began rubbing her shoulders trying to calm her. He kissed her cheek and then gave her a half smile. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I know that you haven't crossed over to the dark side. Everything'll be okay. We'll find Niki. I'll take this to the station and see if it's human blood. Hopefully she's into sacrificing cats or something. I already called so they'll send someone over to her apartment. And—" His cell phone went off. He flipped it open. "Hello. Yes this is. You did. Okay. Thank you. Yes."

His expression darkened and he began to shake his head. Dread washed over her. Her sister really had killed a man. James continued to talk on the phone, but she barely heard his words. *I know she did it. I know it. Why did you do it, Niki? What consequences do her actions have? Does it feed the darkness she's involved with?*

"Val. Did you hear what I said?"

"Hmm. What did you say??"

"I said they found Niki's landlord dead in her apartment. He was in the living room with his throat slashed. You're going to have to come with me and give a statement. They're going to ask you what happened. If you tell them you walked in on your sister summoning a demon, I don't think they will believe you. Your reputation at the precinct is shaky at best. I know you've done some good work on helping us solve cases, but not many of the cops want to believe that you have abilities. You should hear what they call me. Many of them don't understand what I see in you. Half of the force thinks I'm insane. The other half thinks you're smokin' and that you're crazy. They'll want to come here and gather evidence. I'm sure there are things here that you don't want them to see. I didn't tell you this, but if you don't want them to find anything, I suggest you take it with you. You tell them that you walked in on your sister doing some crazy ritual. You got into an argument, which is true. You got a little physical and then she ran off. You have no idea where she is. I'll get Kennedy."

Valerie nodded. The shock of what he said hadn't worn off yet. He was telling her to lie to his coworkers. He was protecting her the best way he could. A bolt of love so strong enveloped her, it brought tears to her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she scanned

the living room. A deep sense of evil emanated from the book her sister was using. Not wanting to touch it, she grabbed the cloth from the box and wrapped it around the book. Then she tucked it into her purse. Next was the box. The feeling she got from it wasn't as bad. Inside the box were candle stubs, crushed herbs, a bottle full of broken glass and nails, and some loose coins. A small velvet sachet was crammed in the corner of the box. Something about it seemed important. She heard James's footsteps on the rug. She crushed the bag inside her fist and got back up. When he came back in, he was carrying a half asleep Kennedy in his arms. He grabbed the dagger in the bag. Val picked up her oversized purse with the book and stuffed the packet inside too.

As they walked out to the car, Kennedy woke up. "Where are we going?"

"Don't worry about it right now. We'll talk more about it later."

"It's about Mom isn't it?"

Valerie frowned. "Yeah. It's about her. We'll figure it out."

At the police station, James took Kennedy over to his desk. Valerie sat with them for a few moments. Her niece kept nodding off in the chair. Finally, an officer came out and led her into an interrogation room. She sat there for several minutes before anyone came in. She knew the routine of letting people sweat. Valerie's head began to pound. She closed her eyes and tried to will the events of the night away. She kept seeing her sister, the red mist, and Nik's crazy expression. It saddened her. A cop came in and handed her a cup of coffee. She slid her fingers around the Styrofoam trying to pull in the warmth of the coffee. The stench of the liquid was burnt. Flecks of curdled cream floated along the top. The appearance and aroma turned her stomach. The cold temperature of the room lifted small bumps along her arms. The warmth of the cup did nothing to raise her body temperature. The detective across from her was new. His dark gray eyes peered into hers while she tried to stifle a yawn. His face remained blank. He was unreadable. That and her abilities were nearing nil because she was so tired and nearly at her breaking point.

"So you say your sister left and you have no idea where she'd go."

She waved her hand and covered her mouth. "Yeah. That's right. After we got into our argument, she ran out. I don't know where she is. We aren't that close anymore. Our parents washed their hands of her after she broke into my father's safe, stole all their money and my mother's jewelry. I've been watching my niece lately because my sister has been flaking. I let her stay with me for a bit, but it was only until she could get on her feet."

"So then you *do* know where she might go? If not, I'm sure the kid knows where her mother is. Should I go and get her? Since you're being *so* uncooperative."

Valerie slammed her hand on the table. The coffee cup jumped, sloshing some of the liquid onto the stainless steel table. *I can't believe this jackass keeps asking me the same fucking questions. I've told them plenty of times that I don't know where she is. Hell, if I knew then I wouldn't be here. I'd be out looking for her no matter what. I don't need this. I need to find my sister. I need to figure out how to put that thing back where it belongs.* She took in a deep breath and tried to calm her frazzled nerves. The cop narrowed his eyes. He didn't believe her. Then again, just by studying his face she already knew that. Valerie was beginning to see how many of the other cops didn't trust her abilities. Sometimes she wasn't sure she trusted them. Like now. Her abilities were going off. The heightened emotions of the cops were pressing down upon her mind. She tried to push the feelings away, but it was nearly impossible. Exhaustion was weighing on her eyelids. "No. Sorry. She doesn't know. She was asleep when I came home to find my sister covered in blood. Once she left, I called James. Now here I am."

"And you didn't know your twin sister was into Devil worship? Even though she was staying with you. And what about the tarot cards we found at your house? Isn't that the same thing? I think that you and your sister are in on this together. I know the rumors around here about you. How you put on a show and pretend to help solve cold cases. I know the truth though. How you and others in your line of work take money from the weak and tell them lies. Now where is she!"

"Yo, Eastman. Take a hike. You're done here."

Valerie glanced over. James stood in the door holding his coat. She gave him a bright smile and was glad he had come to her rescue. That was what he did when they first met. She had been interrogated by another asshole at the station because she knew too many details about the cold case that she was brought in on. James had gotten the guy off her. They had hit it off right away. She had loved him from the moment he had scooped her up and whisked her away for a break. They had started talking and realized they had a lot in common. He wasn't too keen on her gifts at first, but when she started giving more clues on the murderer, he was convinced. In the end, from her information, they had been able to find the killer and pin him to two other killings.

"The captain's going to want to know –"

James leaned in almost touching the other detective's nose. "The captain already does know. If you read the file on Ms. Booker, you'd know she's an asset to the force. She's worked on several high profile cases over the past three years and helped us apprehend the suspects because of her information. Do you really want to have the captain on your ass because you insulted one of our assets? The captain happens to appreciate Ms. Booker. I know for a fact she has helped the captain a few times along with his wife. I wouldn't piss her off unless you want to be back on foot patrol. So stop chewing out my fiancée."

Valerie's eyes widened. *Did he just say what I think he said? Oh my God. I never would've seen that one coming. How do I react? I mean we've talked about getting together in the past, but I never assumed he was ready to take that step. He loves me.* Tears gathered in her eyes from the happiness blossoming in her heart.

The blood drained from the other man's face. He began shaking and slipped out of the chair. "Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. Please don't say anything. I'm sorry ma'am for being so harsh. It won't happen again."

She didn't respond, but watched him scurry out of the room. James drew the other metal chair over to her side of the table. "He's such a dick. I don't know how he ever passed his exam. He thinks he's a hot ticket now since he got promoted. Did he hurt you in any way?" He looked down at the coffee and scowled. "He gave you this day old

shit. Damn him. I'll give him another piece of my mind. Do you need another cup? Water maybe? I'll be right back with it."

"Did you just say I was your fiancée?"

He chuckled nervously but didn't meet her eyes. James ran his fingers through his hair. "Yeah. I guess I did. Look, I'll get that water for you and —"

She placed her hand on his. He stopped. "You're sure. I mean even with my crazy sister and we probably have to take care of Kennedy and —"

He stepped in, kissed her, and vanished all her worries for that brief instant. His tongue traced along her bottom lip. Valerie longed to do so much more with him, but he pulled away before she could be caught up in the lust he stirred in her. "It doesn't matter to me what you do for a living. You've saved lives and convinced me. That's all that matters. Your sister is not part of us. The craziness that's going on at the moment, we'll get over it, but it's not going to stop me. I've been thinking about this a lot. My schedule has been so crazy that when I don't see you, I start to go a little mad. I know this isn't the best way to ask you, and I don't have the ring on me, but —" He got down on one knee and lifted her hand. "Valerie Brooks, will you marry me?"

Emotions choked her up. Her eyes burned from the tears. Time froze around her. The demon in her apartment and her dream lover didn't matter. Her sister evaporated from her mind. It was all about this one perfect moment. Even her inner sense hadn't hit on this. She nodded without being able to say anything.

"Yes. Of course." She finally squeaked out.

He stood up and she threw her arms around him. Their lips met in a kiss. Valerie couldn't believe what had just happened. They had talked about getting married, but she had imagined a romantic night with flowers and soft music. Never when her sister was wanted for murder in the middle of a cold, dreary interrogation room. James deepened the kiss. His fingers slid down her back and rested on her ass. He squeezed the rounded mounds. Valerie pressed against him molding her body to his.

"Ahh... excuse me, but you're needed in the other room."

James let out a small groan, kissed her one more time, and then hugged her tight. "Duty calls."

Her cheeks burned from them being interrupted during such an intimate moment. When the other officer looked at them, it all came rushing back. She had to deal with reality now. There was no more hiding from what she had to face. The darkness ahead of her was uncharted waters. She hoped she would be ready for it.

Her fiancé pressed his car keys into her palm. "I meant to tell you that they want to go over your apartment for any more clues about Niki. Take Ken back to my place for now. I'll get a ride with one of the guys. By the time you wake up, I'll be home cooking you breakfast."

"Thanks."

She gathered her things and headed over to Kennedy who was asleep and covered up with James's jacket. Valerie shook her awake and headed for the car. During the drive, she barely noticed her surroundings. Her mind was on automatic pilot. It hurt too much to think. It was easier to focus on the road and let her mind drift away. When a thought did come into her head, she brushed it away like a cobweb. Lack of sleep made it hard for her to grasp anything too hard.

Once inside, Kennedy curled up on the couch. Valerie grabbed a blanket from the linen closet and tucked her in. Her niece gave her a sleepy smile and closed her drooping eyes. She checked the clock. It was three thirty in the morning. *No wonder I'm so tired. Then again, a lot has happened in the past few hours.* The sight of James's bed was a lifesaver. Her body ached. Her head still pounded. Valerie slid out of her clothes, put on an old T-shirt of James's from his academy days, dragged her purse onto the bed, and dug out her sister's book. The first few pages the writing swam before her eyes into little black squiggles until she forced herself to focus. Then a fourth of the way through the volume, she shut it and shivered.

"What the hell were you into, Niki?"

The book spoke about dark rituals summoning creatures from the shadow world and pulling them into this one. The first passages were about awakening ancient spirits,

wish granters who wanted to rule the world. Her sister had djinn written in the margin of the book in capital letters. Once the spell caster called upon these dark beings they would be bestowed with three wishes. After each written page was a journal entry showing her sister's progress with the creatures. Once she had called upon the djinn, it had made her do things before it granted her wishes.

After her third diary entry and a little more history of the creatures, her sister had drawn one of them at the bottom of the page. It was a horrible twisted thing with pointed teeth and horns sticking out on all sides of its face. Its eyes were orange. The longer she stared at it, the more she felt its intense power staring at her. Its face seemed to press against the paper. Valerie jumped and threw the book across the room.

Niki, I don't know where you are, but please be safe. Whatever you've conjured up we can find a way to fix this. I won't let you down. Her eye lids began to droop. She couldn't evade sleep any longer. Fumbling for the light switch on the nightstand, she turned off the lamp. She readjusted the comforter. Her body was already floating away. Once her head hit the pillow she was gone.

Chapter Six

She opened her eyes immediately to find herself bathed in sunlight. The warmth of the rays seemed real enough. *I can't have slept that long already. Where's James?* She gazed around and saw that she was no longer in the apartment, but in a lush tropical garden. A sense of anticipation and dread washed over her. The unconscious side of her yearned for her dream lover, her master, to touch her. The other half needed to know what this being was. The fight between both sides of her nature wasn't something she could win. In the dream world, her unconscious ruled.

A gentle breeze caressed her face and the rest of her body. The intoxicating scent of the flowers from the paradise made her dizzy. The humidity stuck to her flesh. She looked up and saw large vines with orchids hanging above her. Small drops of dew plopped around her, but didn't settle on her skin. He was in control here. Humming birds hovered over her. When she tried to move her hands and feet, they were bound. Panic rippled through her, but before it could take a complete hold, something soft ran over her breasts.

She shivered at the sensation. Biting her lip, she squirmed in her standing position. After a few more strokes, she couldn't help the giggles that rippled from her lips. *What have I gotten myself into? I need more from him. Maybe I can get him to answer some of my questions this time? Maybe he'll let me see him? No, I need to wake up. I can't be caught under his spell anymore. But, oh God, I want him so much.*

"I love it when that bubbly sound slips from your throat."

Valerie hissed in a breath when she heard her master's voice next to her ear. She tried to twist her head to see him, but he looped his arm around her throat, pushed her hair out of the way, and began nipping at her neck. The instant his teeth pulled on her skin she was caught in his pleasurable web. Her eyes fluttered shut. She leaned back against him, letting her head fall back into his shoulder. In this world, James didn't matter. He was the dream. Her dream lover tugged on her ear and cupped her breasts. He twirled the nipples between his thumbs and forefingers building the orgasm inside of her.

"Please let me see you, Master."

He chuckled and lifted her head. His fingers twined in her hair, stroking it. The sensation made her wet. She tried to open her eyes and peer into his, but his power wouldn't let her. "I love it when you call me that, dearest. But now is not the time for that. Now is the time for pleasure. I need to hear you scream for me. I need you, Valerie. Don't you need me too?"

He backed away from her removing his body heat from her back. When he did that, she was able to open her eyes. The garden scene hadn't changed. What he said was true. She wanted to please him. It was all she yearned for. *No I can't think this way. He's probably one of the creatures my sister called up. Whatever he is, he isn't something I need to be around.* "What do you want from me? Why have you brought me here? I won't let you control me anymore." She tried to wake herself up, but the dream weighed down upon her. She was trapped with him until he let her go or someone pulled her from this world.

"I only desire to bring you pleasure beyond your earthly body. To break you out of the confines of the flesh so your soul can soar. I have no aspiration to control you. I was honest with you when I first entered your dreams. I told you what I wanted. Unquestionable access to your entire being in exchange for ecstasy. I would only do what you craved. All of my ministrations have been plucked from your subconscious. I've never gone back on my word. You're the one who has created this world and our encounters. I'm not the one controlling you. You're the one controlling me. My little

rule of you not seeing me is the only thing I have power over. Haven't I only brought you bliss? Don't you crave to be touched in the real world the way that you are here? You're afraid that your vanilla fiancé will cave when you suggest that he ties you up. Or if he fucks you harder. I know you want me. And I promise one day, I'll bury my prick inside of you and everything you have asked of me will happen."

Her dream lover's lips slid over her collarbone. They were silky and his body was still cold. The tip of his cock pushed against her ass. She backed up against him yearning to feel him buried inside of her. Lust stirred within her heart.

"That sounds wonderful and all, but you're just using me for your own gain. Any evil creature does that. No matter if I sold my soul to you." She hung her head finally understanding that was what she had done. Her subconscious self had sold her out for pleasure. Still the words of her phantom lover rang true in her ears. She did long for the satisfaction outside of the dreams. James was vanilla and she yearned to introduce him to more sexual appetites, but had been afraid too. She had been a little surprised about her comment to tie him up.

"Now, now, you didn't sell me your soul. If you did, I'd be doing very dark things with it. I don't bring pleasure to many only pain. You're very different from the others I have appeared to. Your longings called to me in the abyss. I have no plans to hurt you. What I want from you is for you to say my name. Hear you cry out for me. I want my name hanging on your lips when I make love to you. Your gifts gave me the doorway to come to you." His tongue took the same path his lips just had and wound around her neck. He trailed his fingers from her breast and rested his palm above her heart.

She quaked. "Why me?"

"Does it matter after all we've shared?"

"Yes." His fingers began to circle around her heart.

"Stubborn. Human. And pure. Such a good mixture. You shine brighter than most mortals. Your aura is strong. One night while you dreamed and your soul was walking along with other souls, I saw it. You were seeing visions of vampires and biker

werewolves fighting demons. I followed your thread and found you. An angel among the darkness.”

“How do you know about the other dreams?”

He placed a finger on her lips. All at once a shock ran through her. Her toes curled into the soft earth. She hung onto the velvet bindings keeping her in place. A bolt of pleasure so sharp sliced her heart she didn’t know if she could hold onto consciousness. All of her questions melted away. Nothing else mattered now except the lust inside of her that needed to be quelled. She needed another orgasm. The sensation was going to drive her mad if she didn’t. Valerie sucked his finger into her mouth and swirled her tongue around his finger. His nails were sharp. This time he was the one who moaned.

“So tricky. Are you ready to get back to twenty questions, or do you want me to punish you for being such a bad girl.” His pressed his lips against her neck and then he sucked on her earlobe. A quiver ran through her. He slid his palm across her chest. Her heart skipped a beat. She was doused in cold for a moment as the warmth was pulled from her body.

Valerie screamed at her dream self not to give in, but she was locked inside of her mind. Her subconscious needed to be taught a lesson for disobeying. Wetness dripped down her legs from the intensity of the sensations gripping her. “Do I taste good?” she asked. It wasn’t the real question she wanted the answer to. She needed to ascertain if he was one of the beings that her sister had called up. If he was, then she was already screwed. When she tried to ask, a moan slipped from her lips.

“Oh yes. Better than I ever could’ve imagined. And now I have something to make you scream. You want that, don’t you? You want to be punished, to be mine completely?”

“Yes, Master! Punish me!”

A sharp sting etched across her back. A scream erupted from her mouth. Hot waves overtook where the whip touched her flesh. It came again before she could fully recover. Her body arched forward and she clutched the bindings on the posts. Her eyes fluttered shut. Her whole body was electrified. The tail of the whip hit her back again.

The lash wasn't very hard, but it was enough to make tears come to her eyes. Valerie squirmed. The pain was a wonderful pleasure that she didn't want to stop. It only reaffirmed that she had been very bad and needed to be disciplined. He flicked her again. This time not so hard. The tail of the whip wrapped around her leg and pulled tight. He jerked and pulled her back against him. His tongue ran the lines of where the whip was.

"So ripe. So good. The taste of your spice inside of your blood stirs even my cold heart. You're such a good specimen. One of these days, you won't even want your human lover. You'll just want me." He licked her again. The sensation of his scratchy tongue against her back made her shiver. She'd never give up James for her dream lover.

"Stop please!"

"Oh no, little one. You're mine now. No matter how much you deny it. I'm part of you. We're bonded so deep now that when you call out to your lover, it's really me you want."

The whip cracked again this time winding around her body. He used it to yank her closer so his cock jabbed her ass. He slipped his arm around her breasts until his hot breath blasted against her ear. His other hand trailed over her belly and lower dipping between her nether lips. His finger settled on her clit and began to rub slowly. The tingling above her heart started again. The lashes on her back were cooling from the touch of his skin.

"Ahh..." She stood on tiptoe trying to get away, but he wasn't going to let her go.

"Yes. I know how you feel. I can make all your wishes come true."

He withdrew himself from her body and another lash struck her this time hitting her leg. The sting on her sensitive flesh between her inner thighs made her cry out but not from the pain. He had never whipped her before. He always tied her up, while he had her blindfolded and tortured her into pleasure. She couldn't help but love it. No matter how much she wanted to deny it. He was correct in everything he said. She was his slave.

"I won't let you have me."

He chuckled and slid a finger inside of her pussy. "We've been over this before. I have no desire to possess you. All I want is to give you satisfaction beyond belief. You yearn for that too. My lovely, Valerie."

She began shaking from the orgasm that blossomed in her body. He pulled his finger from her depths and slowly inserted something long and hard. Her muscles wrapped around the ribbed surface. Her nerves were alive. He began to pump into her slowly making sure to rub her clit every time he did. Her head was light. She really did want what he gave her. She wanted the sheer abandon he was calling forth in her. Moans broke out from her lips as he pumped the handle of the whip inside of her going faster and faster. This was the closest he had come to penetrating her. The hand around her waist drew her into him. Each time, his cock slid in-between the crack of her ass cheeks. He was the one in control of their motion.

"Yes. You're almost there. Come for me, my sweet one."

"Master. I-I—" He sunk the whip handle into her once more and she came hard. His sharp nail pressed against her belly. At the moment she came, he bit down into her shoulder. It only made the pleasure more unbearable. He hadn't come with her.

"Let me finish you off. Please. Let me fuck you."

He breathed heavily. "No. Not yet. Soon. I promise. Remember when you need me, I'll be there. I'm always with you now. We're bound so tight. You're part of me. One day, my sweet and I'll reward you with everything that you desire." He grabbed her breasts and pinched the nipples hard. Valerie's mind was awash with pleasure and bright light. She tried to hold onto the impressions, but she was falling.

When she landed again, it was on the pine needled floor of a large forest. *I hate it when this happens.* It took her a moment to overcome the sudden vertigo which came from changing realities so quickly. Glancing around she recognized her new environment from the times she had dreamed about the biker werewolf. This was his home compound. She looked down and saw she was dressed in an old nightshirt that was covered in debris from where she landed. She inhaled and smelled the slight stench

of burning flesh. The sky above held only a half moon. The atmosphere around her was filled with evil and a great sadness. For an instant, she heard screams and felt warmth encompass her flesh.

Valerie looked around and saw the shimmering images of spirits walking toward her. At the head of them was an older woman who looked like the werewolf she had dreamed about.

"You mustn't let him out." Her voice was hollow.

"I-I won't."

The spirit shook her head. "Look at all the evil he caused here. It will be worse if you let him out."

Valerie turned and saw that she was surrounded by spirits. She tried to answer, but they rushed at her. She covered her face with her hands and felt as though she was falling.

* * * *

When she opened her eyes, she was on the floor. The frantic beats of her heart were still slowing from the fright she had encountered in her dream. *This is all too messed up.* When she moved, her shoulder began throbbing from where her dream lover had bitten into it. Her back burned as well. Before she could think more on her dream, Kennedy started screaming. She tried to get up, but stumbled. Her legs were watery. Clutching the wall, she made it into the living room. It seemed as if part of her was still in the dream or she hadn't come out with part of herself. *I can't do this now. Ken needs me.* Bending over to shake Kennedy, she hissed when a jolt of pain awakened across her back where the whip had slashed her. *That's never happened before. Nothing he's ever done has come out of the dreams. What changed?* Her niece whined again and began thrashing.

"Kennedy, wake up. It's okay. It's just a dream." *I hope Niki didn't promise her daughter to those things. Oh God, what if she did. I need to find her and get the truth out of my sister.*

Her niece opened her eyes. They contained the same blank stare she remembered from the other night. *This isn't a coincidence. Niki used to wake up with the same expression*

when we were kids and predict something. It scared her so much that she shunned the ability. At least I thought she shunned it. Apparently there are many things about my sister that I don't know. Now Kennedy has the same gifts that we do. Niki was wrong to tell her to brush them off. Poor girl has had to deal with all of this on her own.

"You must not give in to him. You mustn't seek his assistance. He'll only use you. You must not bring him out of the darkness. He has other plans for this world. Heed the warning you were given in your dreams."

"How do I know you're not some creature taking over Kennedy or the thing Niki conjured? How do I know you're not the being from my dreams. You have no right to invade the body of this poor child."

Her niece smiled a knowing grin that was beyond her years. "I'm not the life form your sister now worships. In addition, the beast who haunts your dreams is keeping the djinn from corrupting you. Your dream lover has another agenda. I cannot come to you personally because of the darkness which surrounds you. So I protect the child the way I did her mother until she turned away from the light. I brought you the other dreams, of the vampire, werewolf and fallen angel. He needs an invitation back into this world. Don't give him one. Deter him from your thoughts. He feeds from you and grows stronger. Do not let him back into this realm. If you do, chaos will ensue."

"Who is he? What does he want with my sister? How do I stop her?"

Kennedy blinked and grabbed a hold of her neck. Valerie hugged her back. "It's okay, sweetie. You don't have to worry about your dreams."

"But I do. You don't see them. They said you need to know. You need to know what's going to happen so he can't come and get you."

Valerie wiped the tears from her niece's face. "What do I need to know? Who's talking to you?"

"He's really pretty with red hair and a white dress."

"You're seeing a man in a dress?"

Kennedy nodded. "He's special. The dreams he shows are really creepy. He said that he doesn't want to scare me, but you can't see them anymore. So he came to me and showed me. He says that you have to know."

"What do I need to know?"

"You can't go to the tavern. It would be bad. There was a man. He changed into a wolf and fought a bad man with red eyes. And there's a pretty woman with wings. There was another man with fangs. I think he's a vampire. He's a good vampire though. I don't think he would hurt anyone on purpose. He says you'll know when the time is right, but you can't go and meet the others."

"Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere. We'll figure it out. I have to take care of you, remember?"

"What about Mom? She did something really bad, didn't she?"

"Yeah, she did. We'll try to find her. Do you know anything about where she is?"

"I wish I did 'cause I miss her. You're great and all, but—"

"I know. I'm not your mom. She was always the cool one when we were growing up. Now you go back to bed and we'll have chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast. 'K?" She tucked Kennedy back in and headed into the bedroom. It was seven in the morning, but she was exhausted. Try as she might, she couldn't get back to sleep. Her chest still felt empty. Kennedy's words rattled in her mind. She sighed in frustration, not able to make any sense out of her words. She spied the book she'd thrown across the room laying on the carpet. There had to be more answers in it. And no matter what, she was going to find them. *It's the only way I'm going to save my sister and get rid of the being who's haunting me.*

Chapter Seven

Valerie closed the book with tears stinging her eyes. The journal's entries haunted her. She wiped away the tears and stared at the black book. It showed the progress of the downward spiral her sister had found herself in. All she wanted was a better life for herself and Kennedy. *Why didn't Niki just come to me and ask? She probably would've thought I was going to reject her or think she was wanting money for drugs. The same things I had already accused her of.* But she'd finally come to the realization that she wanted to provide a better life for her daughter. She was willing to do just about anything that wasn't illegal. The writings started off where she tried to use her abilities to make more money. Except no one would hire her. Niki had even cast a few spells to see if that would work to draw money closer to her. With her choppy job history and criminal record, no other employers would hire her. She was desperate. Then, on a hunch, she went into this old bookstore. Her instincts had led her to the very back under a pile of old books shoved into the corner. At the very bottom of the pile, she discovered an old tome. Niki had thought her luck was improving and maybe even her abilities were kicking back in. The book drew her until she almost became its slave.

While she was working her way through it, she began to keep the journal to show her progress. She tore out pages of the book and copied verses that correlated to what she needed. The first rituals began to yield promise and her life improved. She was caught deeper in the spell of the djinn. The beings began to call out to her in her sleep.

Valerie understood that the being haunting her dreams was one and the same. Even if her dream lover denied it.

None of this deterred her sister. She kept on going through the book, feeling a deep need to complete the rituals. The entries toward the middle of the journal showed a change in her sister's mind set. She was slowly starting to be taken over by the evil. Valerie had sensed it in the desperation of her diary entries, but didn't know how to stop it. The urge to press on with the rituals and delve further into the volume she bought was overwhelming her. Valerie was horrified at all that she read. Her sister's handwriting grew erratic and hard to read. It seemed at points that she was almost another person or possessed by something.

Valerie wanted to pull herself away from the journal, but found even though it was disturbing, it was also intriguing. She'd never heard of djinn before. Only in books and movies that portrayed them as happy wish granters. However, they were more evil and twisted than anyone could ever imagine. Banished to a world between the mortal realm and the astral one. The shadow world. The horrors they could bring were legendary. The book didn't go into any detail, but her sister had speculated that it wouldn't be good. Near the middle of the book, there was a page of lucidity. Niki had written that she knew what she was doing was against nature, but she couldn't stop. She couldn't tell anyone because no one would believe her. She feared for her life and for her daughter's. The evil had bound itself to her soul and made itself part of her. The genie made her do things. She had shed blood to please the djinn. Finally she had taken a life and sealed her fate.

Niki had broken through the barrier of shadows and called forth the djinn. Once she had contacted it, the monster began to seduce her. Near the end of the diary, her sister had cut and pasted whole pages of the old book. Some of the pages had bloody fingerprints from where she used it more. The summoning ritual was like that. It showed a diagram of how to place the candles and what else was needed to be used to call forth the djinn. Off in the margin was a note about how to keep the creatures from dreams. Certain ingredients combined together and left under the pillow. Valerie dug

in her purse and brought out the bag. She opened it and drew back quickly from the foul odor. *I don't even want to think about what's in this. Smells like dead men's feet or something. From all that I've read, I wouldn't put it past her that it really is.* At last she shut the book and tried to absorb everything she had read. Her sister had been at this for over six months. The last pages of the diary said the djinn was close to coming through the veil. Niki had promised it something, but she didn't say what. *I don't know if there's any way to help you out of this, sis, but I'm going to try.*

"Val?"

She stiffened and slipped the bag under the pillow. James appeared in the doorway. "Hey!"

"Find anything at the apartment?"

He laughed. "Nothing that the police can use. What about you?" He sat down on the edge of the bed and picked up the black book. He thumbed through it. His expression changed, but he sighed and placed the book back on the covers. "Anything in that book?"

She shrugged not sure if she should mention her encounters. He was good at accepting all the strange events of her life, but she didn't think he could swallow her dream lover. Heck after her most recent dream, she wasn't sure she could accept it either. When she thought about it, the stirring of passion from her dream Master rode along her spine. Fire spread everywhere inside of her igniting her nerves and nearly blacking her out. He had been true about one thing. Her body craved him even in the real world.

"Nothing that I understand. What're we going to do? Jail is one thing, but I can't lose her to some evil spirit. She's in way over her head. I fear she's drowning and I don't think I can rescue her. What does that say about me?"

James ran his hand over his face. She saw the frustration in his eyes and the dark circles surrounding them. He was pushing himself too hard the way he normally did when he was involved with a case. "Shit, Val. I'm trying here, but this is turning into some Goddamn horror show. I love you, but this is beyond the scope of normal."

"Don't you think I know that? This isn't my cup of tea either. I believe in ghosts. I see the future and help people through their awful breakups or with their financial situations. I don't understand why she would go to such lengths. Her journal talks about dark creatures. I'm, not sure, but I think it might be in my dreams too? Us being twins and all." She buried her head in her hands. She couldn't bear to see James's expression when she told him that.

James rubbed her shoulders. "Are you sure?"

"I don't know." She sniffled. "It's all messed up." Drawing in a deep breath, she told him about the conversation she had in her dream. Not about the sex part. She wasn't ready to admit that she didn't want it to stop. It brought her too much pleasure. She also told him what Kennedy had experienced and her theory her niece had inherited the same gifts she had.

"So you think your dream spirit and the creature your sister has summoned are one and the same?"

"I think so."

"Can you conjure whatever she did?"

"Following the instructions in her diary. Yeah it would be easy. I don't think it's a good idea. Even if I did, it might not come to me. Maybe—" *Why didn't I think of it before?* Valerie shook her head and smiled. "I know a way that I can find her. It's something we used to do when we were kids. We thought it was neat. Do you have a map of the city?"

James nodded and went to get it. Valerie took off the necklace that her sister had given her years ago. The pendent was a small golden unicorn lying under a tree. A crystal would be better, but her pendent would do. James laid the map on the bed. She drew in a deep breath and let the necklace dangle over the map. Clearing her mind, she thought of Niki. She envisioned her sister the way they were as kids. Building her up in her mind, feeling the love she had for her, and then the image of how she was the night before took over. James opened his mouth to say something, but she gave him a stern stare. He quieted down. The chain began to spin in a circle while she moved it over the

map. It slowed in some places. She went over the map inch by inch until she got to the very edge of the city. Finally the pendent slowed and came to a stop over a particular block. James peered at the paper.

"Is there anything there?"

James squinted to read the street name. "I know the area. There are a couple of industrial warehouses. Some bodegas, a goth night club, nothing too big. Why would she want to go over there?"

"I don't know. I'll have to see."

He put an arm around her. "We'll find her and bring her back. Don't worry. Are you hungry?"

Her stomach gurgled. "Yeah. I promised Kennedy chocolate chip pancakes. I know you keep your cabinets stocked for me. I'll make some for you too."

He kissed her slowly and pulled her against him. The warmth of his arms and the firmness of his body anchored her in the real world. "Sounds good to me. Although, I could eat something else."

Valerie blushed. "I'm not sure I'm up for that at the moment. Besides, Kennedy's in the next room and you know I can get really loud."

James leaned her back on the bed. He took off his shirt and pulled off his shoes and socks. Before he got out of his boxers. He closed the door. "She knows to knock and she's still asleep."

Valerie lifted off her T-shirt and slipped off her panties. The anticipation of being with him wound through her and drove the darkness of her dreams away. He was her knight. He was the one who would save her in the end from all the evil in the world. She loved him beyond belief and no matter what her subconscious self wanted, he was real. He pulled off his boxers, put his hands on his hips, and gave her a winning smile. She began to laugh at the pose.

He chuckled and then crept over the end of the bed. The twinkle in his eyes always meant he was up to something. He captured her right foot and began to kiss along the inside of it. His kisses were light and tickled. He came to the bend of her knee. He slid

his tongue along her flesh. His other hand trailed the same path along her other leg. The small caresses made her wet. James knew how to arouse her with just the barest of sensations. She balled her fists in the blankets and tried not to move.

James began to bite along her inner thigh slowly nipping at the skin until she squirmed. He looked up before he came to her patch of curls. "We can stop right now. You said you wanted to make those pancakes."

"Eat food later. Fuck me now."

"Oh no! That isn't an option." He buried his face in her pussy and slid his hands under her ass. He found her clitoris and began sucking on it. The sudden suction lifted her hips off the bed.

Valerie squeezed her eyes shut and focused all of her attention on James. His tongue flicked across her nether lips tasting all of her. He was lightning quick. She yearned to have him inside of her, to know he was there for her. To feel his heartbeat pounding against his chest when he entered her time and time again. He nipped on her pleasure center, and swirled his tongue around it. Slowing his torture, she tried to take in a breath, but it was too much. Her taut muscles ached from being stretched so tight.

"Yes, come for me, baby."

Her gasps of pleasure grew louder and louder. Everything but pure white was driven from Valerie's mind. There was no more sister. No more evil. Just her and James and the way he made her feel. This was one of his ways of expressing how much he cared about her. He once proclaimed himself the pussy eating king. It was one of his favorite forms of foreplay. She loved that he always cared about her satisfaction. Now he began faster and faster licking away her sweetness. She pushed herself against his face encouraging him.

"James, please!" she eked out.

He didn't respond, but let her orgasm build. He clawed at her ass. He redoubled his efforts until her entire body quaked. The white behind her eyes was growing brighter and brighter. She was outside of herself watching James pleasuring her. Her expression

was locked in ecstasy. Her hips ground against his face. She had no control of her body's movements. She had become this wild thing.

Amazing isn't it?

She turned, but didn't see anyone. However she felt another presence with her.
Who's there?

You know who I am, my sweet.

You're one of the things that my sister conjured up and are now lurking in my dreams.

Her dream lover sighed. *You know I'm not. I am nothing like the djinn. Please don't insult me again. I'm only here because your lust called to me. The side of your soul that's bound to me pulled me here. Oh to be the one tasting you. Fucking you. One day you will know my body. I will claim you for my very own.*

I'll never let that happen.

When the time comes, you won't have a choice.

His laughter and his presence faded away. Valerie was aware of her body again. She hovered right on the brink of orgasm. One more, quick stroke was all she needed. James plunged his tongue into her pussy. She couldn't resist it anymore. The ecstasy washed over her and she came. Her breathing was erratic and the fire inside of her returned to a slow burn as it wound all around her nerves. James continued to lick her folds. Each time he flicked over her throbbing bud, she shook again from another bolt of pleasure. Finally he looked up, out of breath too.

"You taste wonderful. I love eating you up." He rested his head on her stomach and played with her hardened nipples.

Valerie drew in a breath to make sure that she wasn't dreaming. Her dream lover was no longer around, but the thought he had come disturbed her. It only proved they were linked together no matter how much she wanted to ignore it. She contemplated what he'd said about not being a djinn. From the sound of it, he had been disgusted at the thought. *Maybe he isn't one of them. If he isn't, then what exactly is haunting my dreams?*

Chapter Eight

They spent the rest of the afternoon lounging around. It was nice to stay at home and relax. Kennedy was keeping up a good front, but she wanted to find her mother. Valerie felt somewhat normal having her fiancé with her. Her body hummed from all the pleasure he'd shared with her. If she didn't think too hard, she was able to let herself slip into a picture where they were a perfect family. There were no ghosts. No demons. No djinn's and nothing haunting her dreams. But as the night grew closer, James announced he had to go back to work. Besides her sister's case, he was working on others that needed his attention to be solved. She didn't want him to go, not because she feared for his safety, but because she feared for her own. The more the night surrounded them, the more the ominous feeling of dread descended upon her.

I can't stay here and do nothing while Niki is out there. I can't let her do anything else which might hurt others or cause injury to herself. I have to stop her before she does anything else with that creature. She took a deep breath and focused on her sister. Valerie followed the link they had between them as sisters. It had been so long since she had done this; it seemed she was shaking off dust from the mental link. Since they had been having so many problems lately, Valerie had turned her back on it. Niki had originally not wanted to explore their gifts so she had shut hers down. Valerie couldn't get a sense of where she was, but once she made the connection a darkness so heavy hit her she gasped. It encompassed her sister. It was attached to her soul. *Sweetie, what have you done. It's like there's nothing of my sister left.* She tried to batter her way through the foreboding evil

that surrounded her sibling, looking for a shred of goodness. Right when she was going to give up, she felt something. It was a tiny spark of light inside. There was hope that she could be saved. That hope bolstered Valerie's strength.

I won't let you rot from what the djinn has made you do. I'm going to come and save you. She pulled away and came back to herself. Standing up, she glanced around the apartment. James was in the kitchen making a last minute sandwich. He looked at her and smiled. *He can't know what I'm going to do. He wouldn't approve of it. He doesn't understand the bond between twins.*

He came out of the kitchen and kissed her on the cheek. "Take care while I'm gone. I forgot to tell you, I talked to the captain earlier. You can go back to your apartment if you want."

She screwed her nose at him. "I think I'll stay here for a while. I'm not too sure I can deal with the thought of living back there again. I'll have to find another place."

"You can always move in with me?"

She eyed him. "Seriously? I thought you liked your space?"

He swallowed a bite of his sandwich. "Well I do, but with us being engaged and all. I was thinking we had to move in together anyway. And in my free time, I've been looking at houses. Trying to get an idea of what we may want. I know that you like having a garden and would want your own room to do your business. What do you think?"

Hearing the admission he had been looking for houses floored her. She hadn't even seen it coming. "Th-that would be great. But are you sure?"

He kissed her quickly and grabbed his jacket. "Yep. There's plenty of time to think about it. Later on I'll show you some of the ones that I've been looking at online if you want."

"Okay."

He smiled. "It's settled then. Take care. I'll be home late." He walked out the door. Valerie was overjoyed hearing that. Then reality snapped back. She had to find Niki. She was somewhere in the industrial side of town which meant it probably wasn't the

safest. She had to try anyway. She got her purse and was about to tell Kennedy to get her things when she saw her niece was by the door waiting for her.

"I'm going with you. You don't have to tell me you're going to find her. I already know. I can help you because I know where she is. The man in my dream told me."

"Okay." She wasn't about to argue with her niece when it was clear something was using her to help. Valerie didn't appreciate it, but when Kennedy was taken over by the other presence; she didn't get a bad vibe from it. Valerie grabbed the map, locked the door and headed out into the cold night.

James's place was on the other side of town. It took them thirty minutes to drive. Valerie had entered an address into the GPS that she thought would be close enough to where they were headed. The computer generated voice brought them to an abandoned building. She didn't think it was the right place. Her gut said her sister was further up. She went slowly up the road passing other warehouses until Kennedy yelled. "Stop!"

She slammed on the brakes. They were outside a rundown factory. It was an older mill with crumbling smokestacks from a bygone era. A lot of these had been torn down or real estate developers were turning them into upscale condominiums. However, this one was too far out in the slums for that. Once she put the car into park, her stomach dropped. This was the place. She peered into the darkness and saw a flickering light in a third story window.

"She's up there." Kennedy whispered.

"Yeah." The evil gritty feeling which had come over her when she had connected to her sister wound along her soul. "So is something else. I want you to stay here." She shook her head to shut down the link to her sister that she had opened. Taking a deep breath, she envisioned herself bathed in light. It was one technique she used when she did readings to keep the evil away. Light was protection and she strongly believed in that.

"No. I am not staying here. Besides you might need me."

She sighed, trying to decide if it was more dangerous to leave her underage niece in the car, in a rundown part of town, or to bring her inside a deserted factory to face who

knew what kind of old evil. There was no easy answer. At least inside she would be able to keep an eye on her and not have to worry about her when she was alone in the car. She stowed the GPS to deter any thieves and then got out of the car.

"Come on."

They squirreled their way into the factory through a boarded up door. Valerie was able to lift the board enough they could fit through the opening. With the help of her keychain flashlight, they were able to get a look at the inside. Pieces of the ceiling were falling in. The floor was cracked. Paint was peeling from the walls. Animals scurried in the halls. The windows were all broken out. Sharp jagged spikes of glass sprinkled the floor. Valerie shivered. The entire place smelled musty. Kennedy stayed behind her. As they searched for the stairs a feeling as though something was following them raised the hair on Val's neck. Footsteps echoed behind them. She swung the light around to the sound and saw a dark form skitter into an abandoned room.

Valerie had been trying to ignore the ghosts that were in the factory, but it seemed they had found her. *I'm so not in the mood for spirits right now.* She tightened the mental image of the light around her. It helped to calm her some. The playful phantoms weren't giving up though.

"I don't like it here. There are a lot of mad people that make my head hurt. They're all screaming at us to get out. Why are they so mad?"

"I don't know why they're mad. Probably because they died and they can't leave this place. Don't listen to them. Picture a wall of light around you that no one can get through. Kinda like you're in a giant bubble."

Kennedy squeezed her eyes shut. When she reopened them, her face was a little smoother. "Thanks, Aunt Val. You're the best."

"You're welcome. Now let's go see if we can get your mom out of here, okay?"

They made their way to the third floor. At the end of the hallway, the light flickered against the wall. Valerie heard voices echoing down the corridor. One was her sister and the other was a deep guttural voice she didn't recognize. She walked as quietly as she could, balancing her weight and trying not to step on anything, right up to the very

edge of the doorway. There she motioned for her niece to stop. Valerie peered around the corner and saw Niki with her back to the door. She put her hand to her lips when she looked back at her niece.

"You have failed me," the other occupant of the room said.

"Please, I've done everything you wanted. You still owe me two wishes. That was our bargain. I was to pull you out of the shadow realm and then you would grant me three wishes. I did all the rituals as the book said. I gave you three lives. Isn't that enough?"

Three lives? Who were the other two that you killed, sis?

"It doesn't work that way. I told you I wanted your daughter. She'd make a wonderful vessel for one of my kind. Who cares what some dusty old book says? Our kind aren't bound by books. Most of what you did was useless. Now give me your daughter!"

"Kennedy is off limits. You can't have her!"

"Then your sister. She would do nicely. I've already felt her. She will make one of my kind very happy. She's more powerful than you."

"I-I tried the other night. She broke the circle. Please."

"I gave you power beyond your wildest dreams and yet you can't influence her with that? Why not? Why hasn't she submitted to your will yet?"

"Because there's something blocking it. She's protected somehow. I swear to you that I will try harder. I'll discover what's keeping her from you."

The creature growled contently. "Fine. Maybe you aren't useless. Make your second wish. Use it wisely. You know what our agreement is."

"Yes, Master." Her sister's voice died down.

What happens after all the wishes are made? Niki no matter what you do, I'm not going to be possessed by one of those things. She turned to Kennedy. "Stay here. If you sense anything bad you run to the car and call James. If you see anything, you do the same thing. I don't want that thing to get its claws on you." She pressed her purse and the keys into her hands. Her niece nodded. Valerie hugged her, sent a fleeting thought to

James, reinforced the light around her, and then walked into the room. A few candles were scattered around the room, but they weren't in a circle like before. The evil in the room had intensified. Her throat went dry breathing in the air. It seemed like the walls were pressing down even more, closing in around her and there were beings present. Darker than the ghosts in the place. Even glancing around, she hadn't encountered any spirits in the hallways, before she had gotten in this room. Maybe even the ghosts were afraid of the djinn. Standing before Niki was a dark form with bright orange eyes with the figure of a man. He was nearly eight feet tall and didn't cast a shadow. The sense of malevolence she got from the djinn made her gag.

"Niki, don't make that wish! Come on, sis. Let's get out of here."

Her sister turned. The shocked expression on her face melted to one of concern. "What are you doing here? Is Kennedy here? You shouldn't be here. You have to go."

"Oh good, the sisters are reunited. Come to me, Valerie, and I can give you whatever you wish."

"Go to hell! Nik, come on. Let's get out of here." She hugged her sister glad to feel she was alive. Her hands went over the rest of her back feeling for any wounds.

"I can't, sis. You don't understand." Niki stepped back. Her face hardened.

"I read the journal. He doesn't own you until you make all three wishes. Please. I know things have been difficult between us these past couple of years, but that doesn't mean that I stopped loving you. Kennedy wants her mom. I'm not a good substitute. Besides, I need you to be my maid of honor." Tears streamed down her face.

"No, *you* don't understand. It's more than the wishes. Once you pull them from the shadow realm, they attach to your soul. They own me now."

"That's right." The djinn snarled. "She made a blood oath to us. We are her masters and soon to be yours too."

Shadows elongated in the room, reaching for her. They began to twine around her legs. She moved and found they weren't able to hold her. The light she clung to in her mind, shone brighter. She was not going to let any of them in. Niki stepped out of her embrace. Valerie glanced at her and saw the alien expression. Panic flooded her. She

knew then that she would not be able to save her sister tonight. She needed more help than what she had. Before she could escape, Niki caught her and held a dagger against her arm.

"They can change our lives, Val. One drop of your blood is all it takes to let them in. Once you give yourself to them, you'll never want for anything."

The blade pressed against her flesh. Energy prickled along her back. Hands trailed along her spine. No one was behind her, but a small lick of pleasure ran through her. She sensed another presence in the room, it was different from the djinn. Peering into the darkness, she tried to see who or what was there. Faces were pushing outward from the shadows against the fabric of the realm they were waiting to break out of. The darkness was so thick it blanketed everything and blocked out the windows.

Invite me in, the presence behind her purred. *I can get rid of them.*

No, she cried to the other being. She knew then who it was that was with her. That part that was connected to him, screamed for to give into him, but she couldn't.

"Momma, don't do it!"

Niki looked over at Kennedy. Her glazed expression returned to normal. Valerie tried to get to her, but her sister shoved her out of the way. She stumbled through the shadow djinn and tripped over a broken pipe. She tried to break her fall, but it all happened too quickly. Pain exploded in the back of her head and she lost consciousness.

* * * *

When Valerie opened her eyes, she expected to find James wiping her brow. Instead there was a man with olive skin and dark eyes. His brows were thin, but his face was chiseled. He had no beard. His lips were full. He flashed her a warm smile. When he did, she knew those were the same lips that had kissed her many times before and brought her pleasure. He ran his fingers along her cheek. A shiver went through her. She couldn't help but relax a little under his touch. Here was the one who ruled her. He put a finger to her lips when she tried to speak. A cold cloth rested against her forehead.

"I know you're wondering what's going on."

Her eyes widened. She tried to scramble away, but her head hurt too much. So she nodded. The last thing she remembered was Kennedy coming into the room with the djinn. After that everything was blank.

"Calm yourself. I won't harm you. You're hovering between life and death at the moment. The blow to your head really did a number on you. This is the only time I can come to you where we are on equal footing. It's nice for a change. We've had so much fun together and you've given me back the strength I need to help you. For a thank you, I will push you back into the world so you can live again. Your wound will be almost healed by the time you go back." He removed his finger.

"You're one of them! One of those things my sister summoned!" She didn't believe a word he said.

He laughed. "Hardly. I'm nothing akin to those lowlifes. I've already told you this. I don't exist in the shadow realm. I'm in every realm. I revealed myself to you so we could talk face to face. No seduction or sex involved. Even though you move so wonderfully and your cries are exquisite. I can't miss out on what we have together because you escaped into the next realm where I can't go."

"So what do you want to talk about? Why am I worth saving?" She had to change the subject to take her mind off the growing lust in her heart.

"I love that about you. Right to the point. I can get the djinn away from your sister, break the blood oath, and clean up her police record. Even give her a good head start in life."

"What do you want in return for saving Niki and helping me heal? I don't trust you as far as I can throw you."

His eyes glistened with excitement. He slapped his knee and chuckled. His throaty laugh filled the room. It was the same one which got her wet even when he wasn't trying to seduce her. "Of course you don't. Humans never do. You don't owe me anything for healing you. That's a freebee for being so delicious. For your sister, well all you have to do is invite me in. I can take it from there."

"I won't let you possess me."

"I don't want to *possess* you. I have other plans for you later on. If you accept, of course. You could have anything you wanted when the time comes. You could have me all to yourself. I know you've wanted that. Me making love to you. Hearing me call your name."

Valerie thought about what he said. She didn't trust him. What he said was true. She wanted him to make love to her. But her sister was what mattered. She didn't know of any other way to break the hold the genie had on her sister. She opened her mouth, but he put his finger to her lips again.

"Don't say yes now. When you want, I'll come. Just say my name."

"What's your name?"

He leaned in close to her ear. A cold shiver ran through her. He kissed her cheek and tugged on her earlobe. "I can't tell you now. Knowing my name is having power over me. However, when you really want to know it, you will." He kissed her gently and ran a hand along her inner thigh. A gasp escaped her lips. She clenched her thighs together tight to stop the gush of wetness that drenched her panties. His touch had never been this powerful. He kissed her neck. She wanted more from him, but he was already retreating.

"See you later, alligator."

Valerie wanted to respond, but she was being propelled forward. The world blurred. When she opened her eyes again, she found herself in an expensive looking lobby. There was a large desk and a picture above it of a woman laced up in a corset. The sounds of a whip and pleasure filled screams echoed down the hallway. Intrigued, she wandered toward the sounds. She came to an open door. Inside, she saw a man tied to a rack, a woman with black hair was whipping the man's chest. Near his heart was an intricate tattoo which reminded her of a dream catcher with a sword through the middle of it. The tattoo emanated a blue light. She leaned in the doorway enthralled by the tableau. The man's face was locked in ecstasy. So was the woman's. It seemed they were both enjoying one another's pleasure. It reminded her of her situation.

After a moment, the woman stopped lashing the man. They both looked over at her. Once the woman's eyes met hers, Valerie knew that she had seen her before in other dreams. This was supposed to be the fallen angel whom she had seen in other visions along with the werewolf and the vampire. *What the hell is going on here?*

The woman smiled. *Why don't you tell me, Valerie. This is your dream.*

Dreams weren't supposed to talk back. Before she could answer, the world around her dissolved.

Chapter Nine

It took her a moment, but she opened her eyes to a white, stale hospital room. It stunk of disinfectant and illness. The stench of evil that had clung to the atmosphere in the factory was no longer around her. That was a plus. She took in a deep breath and relished the clean air even though the tang of the sterile atmosphere sat on her tongue. She glanced over and saw James. He was in a chair next to the bed. His head rested on her legs. She suspected that his back had a crick in it from the position of his body. *God look at him. He really loves me if he's making himself this uncomfortable.* A monitor beeped next to her from a device connected to her finger. The sound began to irritate her. Her head throbbed when she tried to move. It wasn't as bad as she feared. Val thought it would be worse. James's red hair was shaggy and needed to be cut. She ran her hand over James's head. After a moment, he stirred and looked up sleepily and smiled.

"Hey, you're awake."

"How long was I out?"

"Three days. You had a bad concussion. You tripped and fell knocking your head on the floor. The doctors had a hard time bringing you back. They said that you almost died. Your brain was hemorrhaging and swelling. It was a miracle that you came back and that you're healing so fast. The doctors say that it's amazing. What happened? Did you do some magic or something? You didn't make any kind of pact with that thing did you?"

Her eyes widened. Why in the world would he think that? A puff of air moved by her ear. It brought back the dream she'd had. But then she realized that it wasn't a dream. It had been real. Even the part about the woman. Fear rolled through her. Her dream master told her that he wasn't going to let her die. He was going to heal her because she had done so much for him. She wanted to know exactly what she had done for him. And then he wanted her to invite him in, by calling him to her. She had to know his name to call him, but she didn't want to know his name. She didn't want anything to do with him.

"Val?"

She blinked and focused on James. With a small smile, she looked at him. "Yeah. Sorry. I was just thinking. Wow, coming back from the dead." She hit him lightly. "And hell no I didn't sell my soul or do any voodoo. It's just luck I guess."

"Sorry, hon. I didn't mean anything by it. It's just the doctors said how bad it really was. I guess I was lucky." She craned her neck to check out the empty room. "Where's Kennedy?"

"She's staying with a friend of mine. You don't have to worry about her. You know she called me like you told her too. It was great. Niki was gone when we got there and so was whatever she called up. There were remnants of the candles and whatever else she used in her ritual. What do you remember?"

"Do you really want to know?"

James glanced at the door. She glanced at it too. No one was there. She suspected that he didn't want anyone to come in and overhear what they were going to say. Then again who would believe her if she told anyone besides him.

"Yeah. I really want to know. As fucked up as it is, I can't deny there is something beyond this realm anymore. I used to before I met you. Now I want to push it all behind me and think that there isn't anything, but I know there is. I guess my belief in God has hardened. Although that's a good thing because it keeps the evil at bay. Right?"

She nodded. "Yeah. It should. So do you want to know what I saw?"

"Yeah. Sorry, but only if you feel up to talking about it."

She patted his hand. "It's okay. The being my sister called up is a genie. Not the happy fluffy kind, but the mean ones who own your soul. It wants me next. It's huge. Eight feet tall at least. Red eyes and my sister made her second wish. I'm not sure what that means, but if she makes one more wish, then it opens a doorway to their world. I don't want to know what happens after that. It's evil. Like you can reach out and touch it. I've never felt anything so horrible. I don't know how my sister can deal with it. She came at me. I went through the being and it was like falling through fabric. I couldn't catch myself. We have to find a way to banish it. She only snapped out of it when Kennedy came into the room. I told her to stay outside, but I'm glad that she called you. Thank you for coming."

James met her gaze and she saw his concern. "Have you figured out yet if the thing that your sister is involved with, is the same thing that's in your dreams? Is it attached to you?"

"No. It's not attached to me."

James's body relaxed. He was visibly relieved. She wasn't sure if she should tell him about the other creature which was haunting her dreams or not. It would make things easier, but how would he take it? How could he begin to understand that she had been resurrected by a demon and now she owed him a boon? She didn't understand it completely herself yet, but it was obvious when he came calling he was going to want his favor to be returned. Valerie moved her head a little and found it didn't hurt much anymore. Her demonic healer was still using his magic on her to be sure that she was stable. She felt anchored in her flesh. Tentatively, she ran her hand through her hair where she had hit her head. It was still tender, but it wasn't so bad. Feeling the spit, she didn't think it would be a good idea to tell James about her dream visitor.

"Well that's good to know. Are you feeling okay?" James asked.

She was just opening her mouth, when at the same time a doctor spoke from the door as he walked in with her chart.

She eyed him wondering if there was any taint of evil in him. However, she didn't get anything from him. He appeared to be just an average man. He gave her a small smile.

"Are you here to tell me that I can go home?" She gave him her best smile.

The doctor didn't respond. Instead, he stood over her and then made her follow a penlight with her eyes. The stinging light hurt her eyes, but she didn't look away. Finally he took the light away and slid it back into his labcoat pocket. He cracked his knuckles and then began to feel along the back of her head. His deft fingers touched her head right where she had hit it. She hissed in a breath when he found the small remaining tender spot from her fall.

"You had a nasty wound. We weren't sure that you were going to make it. You were touch and go there for a while and then your heart stopped. We jump started it to get you back. Your recovery has been phenomenal, but we need to keep you here one more night for observation. No matter how fast you have been healing we have to be sure there's no brain swelling. We wouldn't want you to leave here and then die of a brain hemorrhage."

"I'm fine. You don't have to worry about it. I feel great," she huffed.

The doctor gave her a knowing smile. "That may be true, but we have to be sure. We don't want you coming back and suing us. That would really suck if I had to lose my medical license." The doctor laughed, but she didn't respond. His smile dropped when he seemed to realize that no one was getting the joke. "I'll have someone come in every couple of hours to make sure everything is fine." He gave her one more once-over and then he left the room.

Valerie wanted to flip him off. She didn't need to be in the hospital when her sister was doing God knows what. She ran a hand through her hair and gave James a tired smile. Everything about her was fine. She didn't need to stay overnight any longer. Wracking her brain, she had to figure out a way to break the spell binding her sister. There had to be a way to do it without using the help of whatever phantom was in her dreams. She had to find something.

"You know I really wish that you hadn't left the safety of the apartment," James couldn't meet her eye.

She could sense the I told you so. He had every right to say it, but if she hadn't left and gone after Niki, then she might never have discovered her sister. She stuck her tongue out at him. He was right. "Yeah I know. I should have stayed, but I had to find her. She's my sister. I'm not going to just let her rot."

"So what do we do?" James asked.

She slumped back in her hospital bed. Her gown crunched underneath her. The temperature of the room dropped. A cold draft snuck under the thin blanket and wrapped around her body. The sense of someone else coming into the room washed over her. She opened herself up psychically and probed the space. Something else was with her. It wasn't evil, but lighter. For some reason it seemed to be familiar. *Who are you?* She asked.

Valerie waited for an answer. There was a glimmer of a response, but it wasn't verbal. It was a feeling. Purity washed over her. *Are you the same being that's been possessing Kennedy?*

"Val, what's going on? Is there something here?"

She glanced at him surprised that he had sensed something. "Yeah."

"What is it? There's a light in the corner of the room. It keeps winking in and out." She heard the disbelief in his voice. He was a skeptic who didn't see ghosts so she knew this was blowing his mind.

Staring at the corner of the room, she saw the sudden flash of light. She probed harder into the heart of the presence with her mind. *Who are you? I command that you answer me.*

The presence laughed. This wasn't a spirit. It was something she had never encountered before. It was lighter, higher than the normal ghosts she dealt with or her spirit guides who helped her sort out information when she was doing readings. The light twinkled again and then came flying towards the two of them. It stopped and

hovered above the bed. James reached out slowly to touch it, but it danced out of his reach.

"What's going on? What are you? Answer me?" Valerie said aloud.

There is much that could be said, but then if I reveal exactly what I am then you will not act of your own accord.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

The being sighed. *It means that I shall continue to watch over the young girl, but I cannot alter the course of the destiny which has been written for you. We have tried to warn you, but you do not listen. We can only guard, we do not interfere. There are others for that. They will know soon. I'm sorry I couldn't perform my duty to keep you safe.* The voice died down and then the light blinked out.

James squeezed her fingers. "What did that mean?"

"I wish I knew. It wasn't anything I've dealt with before. It wasn't an evil being. It's the same thing that has been speaking through Kennedy. I should've realized it before. I think that was an angel."

"Don't angels have halos and white fluffy wings?"

Valerie shook her head. "I have no idea. I don't encounter them on a daily basis. Besides I can't think about that right now. We have to focus on Niki. I get the feeling that our time is running out. Whatever my sister has planned or the djinn has planned it wants it done soon. She's already made her second wish. Whatever that was. She's going to make her third wish soon. That's what my gut says. We have to stop her when that happens. Do you still have her journal I was reading at the house? I read a passage which said once she makes the third wish, the djinn will break through into this world. I don't know if that means it will possess her, or the others will come into this realm. The djinn said I would make a perfect host so I think it's going to possess her."

James grabbed her purse and dug inside of it. He drew out the black book and handed it to her. "I tried to make sense of this, but a lot of it was gibberish. I agree that Niki has lost it. Those things are evil. I'll do anything you want me to do. What can I do to stop them?"

"Scour the Internet for anything you can find. Check out Pagan shops to see if they know about this kind of thing. I don't know. I've never come across evil genies before. The closest thing I've gotten is Aladdin and his blue companion. Even the thing in my dreams isn't anything like this. I doubt that you can do a normal exorcism or bring in a priest. I think if we tried doing that, it would only piss off the genie. We don't want that to happen. See what you can dig up. Even if it doesn't sound feasible. We need to try everything."

He sighed. "I know. I understand you want to save Niki and I couldn't imagine you being some evil genie's sex slave. I'll see what I can do." He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

She grabbed his hand and he stopped. The overwhelming love linking the two of them surrounded her. At that moment, Valerie knew they were connected no matter what happened between them. It pushed the thought of the demon from her mind. She wanted to hold onto the notion that she would have come back from the dead for James. The only bad thing was, when she was with her dream Master she hadn't even been thinking about James while she was dead. All that had infiltrated her mind was the lust her dream lover called forth in her. That and his proposition. *No I can't think of that now. I love James. He's facing his fears of the other realm and is going to help with Niki. That is the most I can ask of him. It shows how much he loves me. And we're going to get married.* That simple thought hitched her heart. "I'm sorry about all of this. I didn't mean to ever get you involved. I-I just don't want to lose her."

He smiled. "I know. I get how you feel about your sister."

"I love you."

"Love you too." He gave her hand a squeeze and then left the room.

Chapter Ten

As the night wore on, the nurses came in every couple of hours to check and see if she was still conscious. The routine was getting old. Her head didn't even hurt anymore. Whenever she moved nothing throbbed. To be honest she hadn't felt better in her life. She wasn't sure exactly what magic had been used on her, but it seemed he cured everything that was hurting. *I can't stay here. I have to find Niki.* Another nurse came in to check on her. She submitted to the poking and prodding. When the nurse was gone, she pulled the diary out from under her pillow and looked over it hoping to find something that would kill the djinn, drive it back into its realm, or just separate her sister from its evil clutches. Nothing within the pages Niki had pasted or written were pointing her in any particular direction. It was all about summoning the djinn and not getting rid of it. She never gave a thought about consequences and by the time she did, it was already too late. During the night, she was hoping James would come back with some information, but he hadn't returned yet. The more she thought about her dream lover's proposition it seemed to be the best of all. *No, I can't give into that line of thinking. I'll find something. I have to. I can't let evil win over good. There has to be another way.* Then it dawned on her. That was what the angel was talking about. It was guarding her, watching out for her, but since her dream lover had come into play it hadn't been able to watch over her. It wasn't in him to change the course of destiny and tell her what decisions she could or couldn't make. Dread washed over her at that point. *Does that mean, my decision is already preordained? That I'm going to choose my dream lover's help. No I*

won't do that. I can't do that. No matter what happens, I'll die before I give into the evil that has been plaguing my dreams no matter how he makes me feel. No matter what my subconscious says. It won't happen.

Valerie sighed and looked through the pages of her sister's journal again. There was nothing. She slipped the journal under the covers and laid her head against the pillows. She closed her eyes for a moment listening to the sounds of the hospital. Nurses' sneakers squeaked on the tile floor outside of her room. The beeping of her heart monitor still echoed in her ear. A voice came over the loudspeaker summoning a doctor to the floor. None of this was doing her any good. The creak of the door opening caused her to open her eyes.

"James, is that you?" she asked of the shadows not able to break the obscurity of her room. She squinted trying to see if it was another nurse coming to examine her or not. The form got closer. A sense of foreboding washed over her. Niki's form came into view.

"Sis, what are you doing here?"

Her sister put her fingers to her lips. The light above her head suddenly snapped on. It blinded her, so she had to put her hand to her forehead to see. Niki came another step forward. It was at this point she saw the glint of something silver in the light. She realized it was a syringe.

"Whoa, Niki. What are you doing with that?"

"Nothing you have to worry about, Val." Her sister's expression remained blank and her tone flat. Her eyes were crazed. Valerie pulled the heart monitor from her finger and pulled the blanket back from her body. She swung her legs over the hospital bed. She tried to move, but her sister mirrored her movements. "You know that you can't get away from me. No matter what you have protecting you. And right now, it's not here."

Valerie tried to duck around behind her sister, but Niki caught her arm. She tried to yank away from her, but she was unable to break the hold. *How can she suddenly be stronger than I am? What was the other wish she made with the djinn?* She yanked again, but

wasn't able to get free. Twisting and turning, her sister threw her back against the bed. She held the syringe and kept it coming closer to her neck. Valerie's eyes grew wide.

"You don't want to do this. Stop and think about what you're doing. You don't want to bring me back to the dark djinn. I read your journal. I know that you regret everything that's been going on. Come on, Nik, think."

Her sister tilted her head to the side. A wide grin spread on her face, her features twisted into something almost inhuman. Valerie stifled a cry. Her face seemed to elongate. Her eyes took on a red tinge. The shadows of the room morphed and twisted around her creating a halo of darkness. They wound around her arms and legs making her seem bigger and swelling her aura. The evil radiating off her made Valerie gag. She grabbed Niki's arm, but her sister was faster. She felt a prick and then the coldness of the drug inside of it washed through her. At once her vision began to blur and her head went woozy. Her tongue was fat in her mouth and seemed to be filled with cotton. Before she could even say anything, darkness descended over her.

* * * *

For Valerie to get back to consciousness, she had to claw her way through the undertow of the drugs Niki injected her with. This time when the darkness took hold of her, her dream lover wasn't there to greet her. Relief filled her too. She was so used to having him around when she fell asleep she wasn't sure how to react to his absence. It was good on one hand, but as her sister had said she wasn't being protected. She felt so alone now, she was coming into consciousness and it was disconcerting. But she had to shake it off. *It's only a reaction to the drugs. It has nothing to do with my dream lover.* Finally the grogginess began to clear. She opened her eyes. Her head was pounding. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust. Valerie glanced around. She was no longer in her hospital room. Where ever she was, the room was dark except for a few lit candles. The windows were covered with plastic sheets or boards in other places. Construction equipment was scattered around the space. In a corner she could see stacks of old wheelchairs and a filing cabinet. The shadows created by the flickering flames were not empty. Faces thrust against the darkness trying to break out of the prison they were in.

The darkness stretched and waited for it to rip. She tried to move her arms when she realized she was sitting in a wheelchair. Her arms and legs were Duck Taped to the chair. She only succeeded in rocking the chair. She had to stop because she was losing her balance.

Wonderful. How am I going to get out of this? Her head began to pound from the sudden movement. She closed her eyes and when she opened them her sister was leering at her.

"Hello, sleepyhead. I wasn't sure if you were going to wake up or not. I figured the dose I gave you wasn't that much. Guess that blow to the head really messed you up."

"Niki, why are you doing this? Let me go and we can get beyond this."

"We both know it's gone too far for that. You saw me in your room. You know what I'm capable of. My Master is so happy that you're here. It's good that you're compliant."

"Where are we? What's happened to you? The shadows at the hospital seemed as though they were part of you."

"It's time. He's given me my second wish. I have to obey. Doing so made me his vessel. The shadows empower me. They are reading me and filling me with his strength. It's wonderful not to be alone. He wants you to be a vessel for another of his kind. You'll never be alone again. Even when we'll both be djinn, I'll still be able to find you. That was my second wish."

"Why would you wish to be able to find me when you can already do that? When we were kids we used to play hide and seek all the time. We're twins. We can always find one another. How do you think I found you the other night?"

Her face twisted. "You're trying to confuse me. We haven't been that close in years. You shut off the link that we have. Liar! Kennedy found me. You don't have any sway over me now. Enough talking. My master desires you, Val. You don't know how much joy he can bring you. It's like he's rubbing on the insides of my skin. He's all soft and velvety. It's wonderful. He'll do more for you than your little dream lover."

Her eyes widened.

“Yes. I know about him. He’s a lower level demon who’s infiltrated your dreams. An incubus has been giving you pleasure. It’s such a shame that you’ve fallen for it.” Her sister walked around the back of the wheelchair and pushed her forward.

Valerie shivered knowing that she had no idea how she was going to get out of this. The djinn was taking her sister over one wish at a time. It was not going to happen to her. She had to make Niki listen to reason. “He lied to you. He’s been lying to you all along. Somewhere deep inside you know that. Come on. Think about all the things we’ve shared. Think about your daughter. You have to remember your humanity.”

Her sister didn’t answer. It was apparent by the look on her face that anything else she said was lost on her. Niki was completely under the genie’s power. She flexed her fingers and tried to move her hands, but the tape cut off her circulation. A hot wind moved through the room encircling her. Valerie focused on the center of the room. Directly before her the more solidified form of the djinn had taken shape. There was no circle of candles here either. Its orange eyes were brighter. When it moved its head, she saw the impression of scales and horns on its body. He licked his lips and slid a thin tongue over pointed teeth.

“Welcome to your destiny, Valerie. Soon you’ll come to value the true pleasure of serving a djinn.” He stepped forward and examined her. His tongue snaked out a foot and licked the side of her face. Its breath smelled of mildew and rot.

She cringed. Howls and hisses erupted around her. The other genies were laughing. Panic folded around her. She was stuck. After she was drugged, she had no idea if anyone knew where she was. Her heart slammed against her chest. She tried to think of something to stall the djinn. Anything to get her out of this predicament, but nothing came to mind. She needed more time. She needed James to burst in and save her. Valerie held her breath and counted in her head, but the door didn’t open and her knight with the shining police badge hadn’t come. *I bet he doesn’t even know I’m here. No one knows I’m here.*

I know you're here. Her stomach fluttered at the voice she knew so well from her dreams. A tingling sensation ran up her back. All of a sudden she was cold all over. Her dream lover was trying to manifest by pulling the energy from her body.

She shut her eyes. *I can't summon him. That's what the angel meant. I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place. What am I going to do? Which evil is better than the other? The lesser of the two? But which one is that?*

I've never lied to you, sweet one. I've always been honest.

Valerie almost laughed, but bit her tongue. "I'll never bind myself to you. You won't have me the way you have my sister. I know what you truly are."

The djinn peered deep into her eyes. It cupped her face with its long talons and then began to squeeze. "You won't have a choice. One drop of your blood, and a couple of words. Then you'll be another vessel for my kind. It's been so long since we've been in the flesh. You're both pretty enough that when we're done with your skins, you won't recognize yourself."

Valerie spat at the genie. It squeezed her harder until the bones in her jaw began to creak. Its eyes became slits in its grotesque face. The longer it was near her, the more she could make out details of its appearance. Behind the thin lips were uneven, sharp fangs. Fur and scales covered most of its body even down to the two pronged penis she could see dangling between his legs. It leaned in and whispered close to her ear before releasing her.

"You think you know all about us, girl. Well the one thing that wasn't in your sister's journal or that she didn't tell you, is that unlike demons, we don't devour souls or push them from our human hosts. Oh no, you'll be along for the ride while we bring this world to its knees."

Cold metal pressed into her throat. Niki held some kind of dagger against her flesh. Her gaze darted to the being before her. Hearing what it said, she couldn't fathom being locked inside her own flesh with it too. She couldn't let that happen. She closed her eyes and focused on the situation. Her instincts told her letting her dream lover in was better than the other alternative of being possessed by a djinn. *I can't give into him. This is what*

Kennedy meant. But I have no other choice. If I don't let him in, I'll be bound to one of those things. They're the worst of the two evils I have to deal with. It's either this or be a slave. I won't let that happen. I can't.

"God, forgive me," she whispered.

The djinn smiled. "God? There is no God anymore for you or me."

Valerie reached along the connection she shared with her dream lover. He was with her now, stronger. The tie between them blasted open. She could feel him there with her and wondered if the others could too. They didn't react so maybe they couldn't. Now the link was open, something brushed across her ear. A name, in a language she didn't understand, slipped through her mind. She said it automatically. Her mouth formed around the unfamiliar syllables. It came out as a guttural sound from her throat. Once she spoke it, the name blew from her memory as if it had never been there. The djinn froze.

"What did you say?"

"N-nothing. I didn't say anything."

Before the genie responded, a gust of wind erupted in the room. The plastic sheets were ripped from the ceiling. The howls of the other genies were drowned out by the sudden storm. Her wheelchair was pushed backward a few inches from the sheer force. The metal blade fell from her throat and onto her lap. She heard a sudden groan. Then the wheelchair stopped because something was blocking it. She tried to look behind her to check on Niki, but her hair was in her face and she couldn't see anything. Things crashed around her, but she wasn't hit. Many of the other djinn screamed. The noise ripped through her head and tried to tear at her soul. The cacophony of sound and wind finally died down. When it did, she was able to maneuver her head a little closer to her fingers and brushed the hair from her face. Standing next to her was a man facing off the djinn.

"You have no power here," the djinn said.

"It's been a long time, Ezekiel," replied the man.

"You have no claim to these two humans."

"Actually, my claim is first and so much deeper than yours." He flashed Valerie a smile and ran a finger down her arm. Her lust fired along her nerves. She needed him to touch her again.

Goosebumps rose on her flesh. She tried to suppress the shiver overtaking her. With just that small touch she recognized this was indeed her dream lover come to her rescue. A sense of dread and longing overtook her. She hoped that her soul wasn't damned because she had pulled whatever demon who had seduced her from her dreams into this realm. "You promised," she whispered, not able to meet his red gaze.

Her dream lover drew in a breath and sighed, almost disappointed. "I did. You kept your word and I'll keep mine."

"Whatever claim you think you have, isn't valid any longer. Her blood was spilled and now she belongs to me."

"Zek, you never were one to listen even back in the good old days. Just because her blood was spilled doesn't mean anything. She didn't give herself to you. Valerie, did you in any way say yes to this creature?"

"Hell no!"

He rested his hand on her shoulder. "Good girl. So sorry. It's really been fun, but I'm afraid this is the end for you." He snapped his fingers.

At that moment, the door burst open letting light into the room. She winced at the brightness. In the doorway, Valerie saw James with his gun drawn. The djinn let out a scream. A loud crack thundered in the room. It shook everything around her including the floor. When the noise died down, the genie was radically different. He was no longer a shadow but appeared very much a human man. Jagged scars lined his face like a road map to hell and his eyes remained orange. The evil which radiated from him was enough to make her want to gag.

"You can't do this to me," the djinn wailed.

He launched himself at her dream man. A loud pop sounded in the room. The genie stopped. He peered down at the small neat hole now in his chest. He touched the trail

of crimson leaking from the wound. The look of confusion on his face was almost comical considering Valerie figured he never thought he could be hurt.

"Freeze!" James commanded.

Her dream lover put up his hands. "Officer, he's got a gun. He took the three of us hostage."

The djinn stepped toward the two of them. Two more shots rang out in the room. The genie stumbled with a shocked expression on his face. He fell to his knees and then lay still. After a few moments, blood began to pool around his chest from the gunshot wounds. James knelt on the floor to check her sister. Her dream lover took the knife that had fallen in her lap and slid it through the tape to free her. Staring at him now, there was so much that she wanted to say to him. Nothing left her lips. Instead, she rubbed her wrists to get the circulation back. James took her into his arms and squeezed her tight. Relief washed over her now she was free and safe, but she still didn't take her eyes from the other man in the room. James released her.

"Are you okay? When I went back to the hospital and couldn't find you the worst went through my mind." He ran his fingers down her face. He lifted her wrists and turned them over checking them out.

"I'm fine. How did you find us?"

"Kennedy. She had a dream that you were kidnapped. She called me up from my friend's house hysterical. Ken said some angel told her where to find you and Niki. She was worried I wouldn't get here in time. Thank God I did. You're alive."

Valerie smiled seeing the relief painted on his features knowing it was coursing through her too. "She has an amazing talent. Thank you for getting here so fast." She pressed her lips to his.

He returned the kiss. "I assume that was the djinn. Is he dead?"

Her dream lover bent over and checked the genie's pulse. "He's quite dead and won't be bothering anyone else. Your sister was knocked out. She'll be fine."

"Thank you, doctor, for watching over them. If you could watch Val for another minute, I have to call this in."

"Of course." Her dream lover smiled.

James nodded. "I'll be right back, hon." He kissed her quickly and walked out of the room.

When they were finally alone, Valerie knelt down by Niki to check to be sure she was breathing. She was. She peered up at the man before her. He was more handsome in person than in her dreams. He wore a white lab coat and had a badge on, but she couldn't make out the name. His short dark hair was spiked in the front. Dark brows arched over heavy eyelids. His intense red eyes stared into hers. She shivered and dropped her gaze. He chuckled and helped her back up. When he did, he slipped an arm around her waist. His hot breath tickled her neck. She clenched her thighs together and her pussy began to throb with unspent pleasure. He planted kisses along the curve of her neck. Valerie tried to fight the intensity of the feelings moving through her. This was nothing to what he had done to her in the dreams. Having him here now, it seemed the pleasure of her dreams was muted compared to this. Her head fell back against his shoulder. He tugged on her earlobe. She felt the hardness of his cock poking into her ass. The more he held her, the more she realized she was slipping into a trance, being pulled by the power that he had over her. She tried to resist, but it wasn't working. Her subconscious self was reacting to its master and she wasn't sure how to separate the two.

"It's such a travesty to leave you this way. I'd fuck you right now if I could, I know you want me."

"Why don't you? Take me away from all of this. I'll do anything you want, Master." The words left her lips before she could stop them. He had tapped into the part of her that was his slave. His hand slid along her stomach and for the first time she became aware of how exposed she was dressed only in her hospital gown. Her nipples ~~hardened and~~ rasped against the thin material.

—"Don't tempt me, sweet one. Taking you now would be too much of a treat. I could have your fiancé join us, but I want you all to myself." He bit the exposed flesh of

her shoulder. The pain that shot through her was exquisite. She moaned feeling the building orgasm rising inside of her.

"Please." She slid her arm behind her and ran it the length of his cock. He shivered and tightened his grip on her waist.

"I keep my promises, Valerie. Taking you now would be against that. Even though our seduction has been wonderful in the dream realm, all of you must want me. And right now, it's just that subconscious part of you that calls me master. Once it's all of you, and our task is complete I'll give you what you desire. I'll fuck you and claim you as mine. You won't remember anything about your beloved fiancé. Do you want that?" He slid the material of her gown up her thigh. His fingers left trails in her skin. She wanted him right there. God she knew it was wrong, but her body couldn't be swayed. Now that he was touching her in the flesh, he was lust incarnate. Her head still pounded and he was making it even harder for her to concentrate being so close.

"Yes."

"I thought so. Now listen to me and come back to yourself. Now that the djinn is dead, your sister is free of his hold and his wishes. She won't be implicated in any crimes, and she might find a little something extra in her bank account to get her back on her feet. I'll see to it she has a clear path to jump starting her new life."

Valerie blinked feeling more grounded. The lust he called forth in her was still there, but as he said, it seemed she was back to herself and not within a trance. Try as she might to fight the disgust rising in her, she couldn't. Part of her was his and even more so now than she ever wanted to admit. "And what do you want for all of that? What will you want of me?"

He chuckled. "Only that you'll come to me when I call you. When that happens, you and I can be together finally."

"Call me for what?" she whimpered.

"You don't need to worry about that now. Go and be with your fiancé. He is worried about you. Take out all of that lust on him. For now, the bond between us will

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be dormant. Until I call you again." He rested his other hand on her forehead. A coolness washed over her that cleared her head and then he was gone.

Chapter Eleven

"Hey, Val."

She blinked. *What the heck is going on?* It seemed her head was full of cobwebs. "Yeah."

"You okay?" James asked.

She took in her surroundings. They were back at her apartment. *How in the world did I get here? The last thing I remember was being in an abandoned part of the hospital with the djinn dead on the floor and my dream lover holding me. We were talking and then...* "Umm... how did we get here?"

James laughed. "Seriously? I brought you back a few hours ago after you were discharged from the hospital. Then we went to the police station so you could give your statement. Niki's in the hospital. We don't know how she got involved with that guy who kidnapped you, but I have a hunch that he was the one who killed your sister's landlord. I'm sure it'll all clear up in the end."

"Great. That's wonderful. What about the dead djinn?"

"Djinn? What's that?"

Valerie realized her dream lover must have altered everyone's memory and did something to hers too because she couldn't recall the last few hours. However, everything before that was clear. She tried to remember his name, but it was on the tip of her mind and she couldn't pull it up. Whatever she had said at the police station must have been okay because they had let her go. *It wouldn't be a good idea to bring it back*

up. It's better to play along. She searched for her dream lover's influence over her, but didn't find the connection she had with him. It seemed that it was muted. When she thought about the pleasure and the lust he brought out in her, nothing of that surfaced. It seemed even her dream sensations were toned down. *Odd. I wonder why he did that?* She tried to remember and the only words she heard go through her mind was that he would see her in her dreams. *That's nothing new. Maybe it's for the best.* She flashed James a smile feeling lighter. "Nothing, just part of a bad dream I was having. Where's Kennedy?"

"She's at the hospital. I told her we'd be back later. I have Eastman with her."

"Great! I'm sure he loves watching over the niece of the station nut job."

"No one thinks you're a nut job. A lot of people respect what you do even if they don't tell you that. I know that I do."

"Well that's good to know," she muttered.

James smiled and then suddenly she was in his arms in a crushing bear hug. The comfort of his embrace relaxed her. She had forgotten what it was like just to be with him. Now she didn't have to worry about her sister or her niece. Her problem was solved. Things could finally go back to normal. He released her after a moment even though she didn't want to be parted from him. Valerie noticed his eyes were wet. Her heart swelled seeing him crying. She was about to say something, when he went down on one knee and held out a small black box. She began to shake.

"I know I should've done this the right way the first time. Seeing you at the hospital today taped to that chair made me see how close I had come to losing you. I can't let that happen. I don't know what I'd do. I love you so much. I can't begin to tell you." He took her hand and this time the tears were glistening on his cheeks. "Valerie, will you become my wife?" He opened the box to reveal her grandmother's ring. The one her mother had always worn and she admired.

"Where did you get this?"

"I went to your parents and asked their permission. Your mom gave me this. I had to have it resized. I think your father just about had a heart attack when I asked for your

hand. Your mom couldn't stop crying. So what do you say?" He took the ring and held it out to her.

"Of course!" She placed her left hand in his.

He slid the ring onto her hand. It fit her perfectly. She threw her arms around his neck. James kissed her lightly on the lips until she deepened the gesture. In that moment, everything was perfect in her world. There were no more evil djinns, dream lovers, or nightmares. It was only her and James locked together, forever.