

JODI REDFORD

**THE
SEVEN
YEAR
WITCH**


SAMHAIN

After this much foreplay, something's bound to combust.

That Old Black Magic, Book 2

As head mistress of Beaumont coven house, Clarissa Miles has perfected two things: keeping her sister witches from accidentally turning innocent bystanders into toads, and resisting the sexy overtures of her familiar, werewolf Logan Scott.

But her resolve is vanishing—fast. Seven years ago she sold her soul to save her father, and that contract is coming due. The allure of spending her last days indulging in some dirty, naked loving is too tempting to resist.

Logan has patiently ridden out the past seven years, content to do Clarissa's bidding and ignoring his consuming need to mark her as his. Now that the ban on witch/familiar fraternizing has been lifted, he's off the leash and ready to launch a full-on sensual assault on her defenses. They're destined mates, and he'll do whatever it takes to convince her.

It's delightfully easy to get her in bed. Get at her heart? Not so much. Especially when a deadly predator stakes its claim on her...and Logan faces a battle not only to win her heart, but save her soul.

Warning: This book contains a villain with more personalities than Sybil, a witch in search of redemption and a dirty-talking werewolf hell-bent on claiming his mate in every wicked, sexy way possible. Spontaneous howling may occur.

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The Seven Year Witch

Jodi Redford

Dedication

To Kelli, for always being there for me exactly when I needed it most. You're an awesome CP and an even better friend. Love ya, chickie.

And to Sasha, the best editor in the whole world, and breaker of a certain werewolf's heart. Someday your epic love affair will come to pass. Someday...

Chapter One

Nothing sucked more than having your soul on a seven-year layaway plan. No, scratch that. Having the layaway plan on the brink of expiration? *That* really blew the big one.

Her exhale loaded with extra weariness, Clarissa Miles turned her Miata down the rutted path that was trying to pass itself off as an actual road. There were a million and one more productive things she could be doing than destroying her shocks on the dusty back roads of Georgia, looking for a nonexistent address. But no matter how many times she reminded herself of that little factoid, she kept repeating this pointless mission.

The reason? Her damn fixation with tracking down Seventy-seven West Seventh Street. Locating it had become something worse than an all-consuming obsession in the three months since receiving the letter from Seven that called in the marker on her life.

Almost as if it were an irresistible force drawing her focus, she glanced toward the passenger seat, where a single sheet of paper fluttered against the edge of her purse. *Your seven years is almost up. Collection is expected in full.* She'd looked at the damn summons countless times, and it still rankled that her soul only warranted two lousy, freaking sentences. Not even a paragraph, for goddess's sake. Apparently that would have required too much effort and ink.

Thunder rumbled, and she slid her sunglasses down to stare at the azure, cloudless sky just as a fat raindrop plopped onto the polarized lens. "Great." Pressing the brake, she pulled toward a thicket of snake grass overtaking the shoulder of the road. She reached for the button for the retractable hardtop, and the screen on the GPS suddenly lit up.

"Turn left at the next street, and you will have reached your destination." Despite the GPS's perky announcement, Clarissa gaped at the unit like it was possessed—a perfectly logical conclusion, considering the circumstances.

Shaking her head, she returned both hands to the steering wheel and gripped it tight. "I'm probably going to regret this, but...here goes nothing." Stepping on the gas, she cruised past the bend and veered left at the almost-hidden side street. Her pulse accelerated in tandem with the Miata's speed at her first glimpse of the imposing Greek Revival mansion tucked behind a massive gothic iron gate.

She'd traveled every square mile of these back roads. No way in hell that building was there before today. There could only be one reasonable explanation for a house instantly materializing overnight.

Seven was back.

Despite knowing this day would come—hell, the letter had given her plenty of warning—cold dread still prickled the nape of her neck. She wasn't ready to face what waited for her in that mansion. Not yet. Maybe not ever. Self-preservation kicking into high gear, she punched the car into reverse, aiming for the narrow tractor path she'd spied earlier. She glanced in the rearview mirror—on the lookout for the turnaround—and nearly jumped out of her skin when she spotted a silver-haired man dressed in a butler's uniform blocking the road. Yelping, she slammed on the brakes. The tires squealed in protest, sending up a choking cloud of dust.

Heart threatening to catapult right out of her chest, Clarissa stared at the figure emerging from the billowing dust. Strangely enough, not a speck of dirt clung to his black jacket or pinstriped trousers. He stopped beside her door and clicked the heels of his immaculately polished wingtips together before sweeping her a curt bow. "Ms. Miles?"

It took a moment to find her tongue. "Err...yes?"

"I'm Harrison, Master Seven's majordomo." He reached into an interior pocket of his jacket and extracted a manila envelope. "This is for you," he announced, passing the missive to her.

She frowned down at the correspondence. Terrific. Another letter. Apparently Seven wanted to become some twisted version of a pen pal. Shit. If only that were the case. "How did you know I'd be out here?"

A whistling breeze the only response, she lifted her gaze to discover she was alone on the road. Whipping her head around, she looked for any sign of Harrison. From the corner of her eye, she caught a flash of black moving on the mansion's expansive porch. The shadowy figure disappeared behind the distinctively red front door before she could verify whether or not it was the butler.

Bemused, she returned her attention to the letter clutched in her grip. Swallowing a lump of apprehension, she tore open the envelope and unfolded the paper stashed inside. *Tatum's. Tomorrow at seven p.m. Don't be late.*

A heavy anchor of dread plunged inside her chest. Of all the places for Seven to choose, it would have to be Tatum's. She hadn't stepped foot within the establishment in the past seven years, for a multitude of reasons. Top one being that there was too much chance of running into her mother. Crumpling the offensive paper in her fist, she tossed it on the floor and backed the Miata up.

Twenty minutes later, she pulled into the Beaumont coven house's driveway. A hodgepodge of vehicles blocked the entrance to the garage. Typical. For one tempting moment, she debated punching the gears in reverse and hightailing it into the city. It'd be easy enough to squirrel away in the dusty back room of Charmed Moon, the coven's metaphysical store, and pretend to be busy logging inventory. But unfortunately Constance was running the shop today. With Con's strong intuitive skills, she'd instantly know something was up and would dig for details.

Left with no alternative, Clarissa parked behind Jade's beat-up yellow mustang. Even from where she sat, she could make out a fresh ding near the car's tailpipe, testimony of yet another fender-bender racked up by the teenager. At this rate, they'd have to take out a damn loan just to afford to pay Jade's insurance bill every month. Abandoning the Miata, Clarissa took the porch's steps two at a time. She yanked open the door and collided with the solid wall of muscle that was Logan Scott.

Electrical pulses of energy zinged across her skin, and she shuffled a safe distance away from Logan. Damn it, the last thing she needed to deal with was her body's annoying reaction to her werewolf familiar. She crossed her arms over her camouflage tank top, portraying an air of chilly indifference that she most definitely didn't feel as she took in the snug, navy blue T-shirt that molded to Logan's broad chest. "I didn't see your truck outside."

"Probably because I left it back at the dealership, shug. Though it means I'll have to find someone to drive my truck back to my place later, I couldn't resist taking my new ride for a spin."

"New ride?"

Logan's mouth curled into that boyish grin that always managed to make her tummy do a funny flip. "Finally decided to put my mourning aside and buy a new hog."

She'd wondered how long it'd take him to replace his prized Harley after one of Antoinette Delacroix's zombies rode the bike to an early grave back in June. If nothing else, Logan was unbelievably loyal when it came to his hog. Too bad the same couldn't be said for the countless women who'd warmed his sheets. Her werewolf familiar brought a whole new meaning to the word horndog, and as such, he moved on from a woman pretty much the second she rolled out of his bed.

More than enough reason for her to scold her hormones whenever they decided to sit up and beg for a little werewolf attention. In Logan's case, that pretty much equated to all the freakin' time. She might have had a shot in hell of getting over this ridiculous obsession with him if he hadn't kissed her—*twice* now, damn him—and verified that the chemistry between them was set somewhere between nuclear and apocalyptic.

Yeah, apocalyptic seemed most likely. Because goddess knows, allowing Logan into her bed would turn her life tilting on its axis. Even more than it already was.

"Got the new Harley warmed up and ready to go whenever you are."

She blinked at him, her fuzzy brain taking a fraction too long to process beyond the "warmed up and ready to go" part of his declaration. Mentally shaking her head once she realized he wasn't referring to her constant state of arousal where he was concerned, she stepped around Logan and plunked her purse on the Queen Anne secretary resting in the corner of the entry.

"I don't have time to take a joyride with you." She picked up the small stack of mail and rifled through it, giving her mind something to concentrate on other than the steady clomp of Logan's motorcycle boots on the marbled tile as he approached.

“Come on, shug. It’s been way too long since I’ve gotten you on a bike.” Warm, strong hands settled with lazy assurance on her hips, and the catalog she’d been aimlessly leafing through plummeted from her fingertips. Logan’s spicy, masculine scent wafted around her, making her dizzy. Her lightheadedness intensified when his palms coasted dangerously close to her pelvic bone. He nuzzled the side of her neck. “Plus we both know how you love the vibration of 3000 rpm between your thighs.”

She sucked in her breath at the sexy edginess of his tone. Her cheeks burning hot, she flashed back to the near orgasm she’d almost fallen victim to during their last ride, all thanks to the wicked rumbling of his Harley’s engine. It hadn’t helped at all having her breasts squashed against Logan’s back at the time, either.

“Damn you, did you peek inside my mind while we were riding that day?” Given their witch-familiar link, it was certainly something he could do. Obviously she’d have to be more prudent from now on about safeguarding her X-rated musings.

“Don’t be angry, shug.” The pads of his thumbs swept distracting circles over her hipbones, heading toward the zipper of her jeans. “My nose was filled with the scent of your wet pussy. Do you have any idea the hell that put me through? I damn near went loco with the need to bury my tongue between your legs and lap up all your sweetness.”

A tremor ran through her, and her clit throbbed in reaction. “D-don’t say things like that.”

“Why? It’s true. I told you once before I’m done pussyfootin’ around our relationship.”

“We don’t *have* a relationship. Not beyond a witch and her familiar, anyway.”

“Not yet. But we will. Now the ban’s been lifted, there’s nothing keeping us from doing dirty, naked things with each other.”

Her pulse kicked into high gear at the wicked promise in his gravelly tone. Times like this, she didn’t know whether to rejoice or wallop each member of the guild with a two-by-four for their decision to lift the decades-old ban that’d forbidden any emotional and physical love between witches and their familiars. Although she’d never truly supported the ban, it’d certainly made it easier to keep her distance. And it’d given her a perfect excuse to tell Logan to keep his hands to himself—something he seemed to require constant reminders of every other second. Particularly lately. “I know it’s hard for your ego to hear this, but we’re not having sex.”

“Yet.”

“Ever.”

“And it’s not ego,” he continued as if he’d conveniently not heard her firm denial. His lips brushed her earlobe. “It’s destiny.”

“Now you’re just being delusional.” Ignoring his husky chuckle, she shoved free from the tempting cage of his arms and pivoted toward the hallway the same instant a gunshot boomed outside. Her shoulders jerked. “Who the hell is shooting out there?”

“Ms. Peach. She’s brushin’ up on her marksman skills.” He said it as if he weren’t the least bit perturbed by the idea of a seventy-five-year-old woman with cataracts handling a loaded weapon.

Good goddess, protect us all. She pushed past him and streaked out the front door and down the steps, heading toward the rear of the coven house, where the gunshot seemed to have originated. The steady crunch of gravel behind her announced that Logan was following her. They rounded the corner of the house, and she spotted Peach taking aim at an improvised target fashioned from an old fertilizer sack that’d been tossed over a sawhorse. She had no idea how the woman managed to haul the bulky contraption on her own. Unless...

She spun and pinned Logan with an accusing glare. “Did you carry that out here for Peach?” Guilt flushed Logan’s cheekbones, and she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from growling. Pivoting, she shot a spark of energy at the rifle, causing it to jam in mid-fire.

Ms. Peach frowned and checked the safety before glancing over her stooped shoulder. Soon as she spotted Clarissa, the older witch groaned. “Son of a bitch. Shoulda known the grim reaper of fun would show up.” Lifting her free hand to shade her eyes, Ms. Peach squinted in Logan’s direction. “Would ya do the rest of us a favor and give ole broomstick-up-her-butt over there a tumble now and then? Maybe if she got laid once in a blue moon her main goal in life wouldn’t be making *ours* miserable.”

A low, sexy chuckle rumbled from Logan. Not trusting any response he might have forthcoming, Clarissa cleared her throat. “Would you put that rifle down before you shoot your toe off? Or worse.”

Uttering an irritated grumble, Ms. Peach tossed the gun aside. “Fine. I need to take Floyd for his first training class in an hour anyway. He’s got a lot of work ahead of him if he’s gonna be the ring bearer at Jemma and Griffin’s wedding come Friday.”

Oh, sweet goddess. Ring bearer? “Do Griffin and Jemma know about this little plan of yours?” Clarissa sucked in a deep breath when Peach gave a dismissive shrug. “Well forget it. We both know allowing Floyd within ten yards of a wedding cake is a recipe for disaster. Furthermore, you seem to keep forgetting the dog doesn’t even belong to us. It’s way past time we start putting out flyers to track down his owners.”

Ms. Peach’s wrinkle-lined face scrunched into a stubborn expression. “Don’t you think they woulda tried to claim him long before now?”

Clarissa dug deep for her last reserve of patience. “Not if they have no clue where he might be. Hence us passing around a few flyers.”

“You just don’t like Floyd.” Peach’s lower lip stuck out in a petulant pout. “Admit it. You’re a big meanie who has no heart. I bet you liked to kick puppies when you were a kid. Probably still do.”

Clarissa rolled her eyes. “Yes, Peach, you’ve found me out.” Despite her sarcasm, the crack about her not having a heart stung. She knew damn well what everyone whispered about her behind her back. On

more occasions than she could count, she'd overheard her coven sisters jokingly refer to her as the ice mistress. Hell, that nickname was tame compared to some of the others she'd been gifted with.

No one understood that she had no choice but to be tough and hardened. Being mistress of a coven required long hours and massive amounts of discipline. The responsibility resting on her shoulders could be staggering and wearisome at the best of times.

She turned and caught Logan watching her, his usual cockiness absent. The tenderness in his amber eyes threatened to do her in. Not about to give in to the tears prickling at the backs of her eyelids, she began walking toward the house. The faint *scritch* of Logan's jeans riding against the metal hardware of his boots let her know she wasn't alone. Not in the physical sense, anyway. But in just about every other way, she was all on her own. She'd learned a long time ago that it hurt a hell of a lot less if she gave in and accepted the realities of her life.

"Ms. Peach shouldn't have said that. About you not having a heart. It isn't true."

"How do you know?" She snorted. "Maybe I'm the world's first living heart donor." Her self-mockery managed to spackle the hairline crack that'd started to weaken her defenses.

"Shug, it's okay to be upset."

"I'm not."

A tiny, frustrated sigh fizzled from Logan. "I still think you need to blow off some steam. Let me take you on that bike ride."

And be surrounded by him and that vibrator on wheels? Can anyone say torture? "I already told you I can't."

"Why? You've taken care of the problem with Peach."

"Yes, but there are a ton of other things I need to take care of." Not the least of which was figuring out how to handle her upcoming meeting with Seven.

Faster than she could blink, Logan stepped in front of her, blocking her path. "You're afraid to be alone with me. Admit it."

She gave a laugh that sounded forced, even to her ears. "Don't be ridiculous. We've been alone many times."

"Not so often lately." His eyes sparkled with challenge. "Not since I kissed you in your office."

Her face uncomfortably hot, she swallowed. Hard. Damn him, he would have to dredge up memories of the kiss that'd shaken her more than a 6.0 earthquake. "You're imagining things."

"Am I?" He brushed a strand of her hair behind her ear, the soft glide of his knuckles along her skin making her shiver. The gold specks in his irises seemed to glow with an inner heat. "Or maybe you're scared shitless about the way I make you feel."

"Honestly, your ego is out of control."

"Then prove it. Come ride with me." He twined the wayward, springy lock of her hair that refused to stay in place around his forefinger. "I promise I'll behave."

"Please, we both know that's physically impossible for you."

A noise that sounded suspiciously like the cluck of a chicken broke from him, making her teeth grind. "Thank you for proving my point."

His cackle grew louder, and she wagged a finger in warning. "I'm perfectly capable of shutting you up. Permanently, if I so choose. Might want to remember that."

He grinned. "Ah, shug, you know you'd miss the sound of my sexy voice."

Damn it, he was right. Not that she'd admit it out loud. "How about we compromise on the bike issue and you give me a rain check for later?"

Cocking his head to the side, he stroked his goatee, apparently mulling it over. "Okay. Tomorrow then. We can go for a quick spin before going out for dinner."

Of all nights for him to choose...

"Tomorrow isn't good." She had no idea how long her meeting with Seven would last, but better to plan on it being most of the evening. Logan's eyebrows slashed low, and she scraped her teeth across her lip before letting her exhale leak free. "Don't give me that look. I fully intend to keep my word." Just not tomorrow.

An angry growl rolled from Logan. "I can't believe you're skipping out on our anniversary."

She gaped at him. "Our—" *Oh shit*. She'd totally forgotten about it, their annual dinner to commemorate the day she and Logan signed their witch and familiar contract. No wonder he was so pissed. "I'm sorry. We'll do it the following night, all right?"

"No, it's not damn well *all right*. I turned down Frank Champion's offer to ride in his yearly poker run so I could stay home and be with you."

"You didn't have to do that."

"No shit. But I wanted to. It's important to me." A muscle twitched in his clenched jaw. "But obviously I'm the only one here who gives a fuck."

"Logan..." Hopeless frustration welled inside her when he turned his back on her and stalked off.

Great. She hadn't even had her meeting with Seven, and already things were headed down the crapper.

Chapter Two

Logan parked in his customary spot behind Champion's Bar and yanked his helmet off. With an unholy passion, he hated how his foul mood had spoiled what should have been a perfect ride. He hated even more that he was head-over-ass insane for the stubbornest woman on the planet.

Insane. Yeah, about summed it all up. He'd hit the nail dead center when he admitted to Clarissa his propensity to go loco whenever he caught a whiff of her arousal. Fuck, who was he kidding? She didn't even need to be turned on to make him howl like a moon-crazed lupine on the hunt for a she-wolf in heat. When it came to Clarissa, he was horny enough for the both of them. But the real damnable part was that he not only suffered out-of-control lust where Clarissa was concerned, his heart was tied up in knots too.

That last part didn't set well on him at all. He'd always lived by the motto of keeping things light and flirty. Particularly since offering your heart to someone tended to be more dangerous than slathering yourself in honey and strolling into a bear's den. It was a million times more dangerous when the woman you ached for guarded her own heart like it was damn Fort Knox.

Gritting his teeth, he locked up his helmet and strode through the restaurant's back entrance. Usually he preferred to stay away from Champion's on his day off, but the prospect of numbing his heartache anywhere else didn't feel right. Besides, Frank sure as shit didn't have any problem with his employees spending their hard-earned dollars at the bar, even if Logan preferred not mixing business with pleasure. When it came to drinking, anyway. Fuck knows, he'd certainly brought home his fair share of ladies after they'd passed him their phone numbers while he'd poured their tequila shooters and Screaming Orgasms. Still, those women had never meant anything to him beyond a mutually good time. That arrangement had worked out fine in the beginning, each party getting exactly what they wanted from the other. But then the day came when he'd realized he wanted something more. Something real.

Or more specifically, *someone*.

Intent on exorcising Clarissa from his mind, he stalked the remainder of the way down the short hall. The noisy clatter of dishes and the incomprehensible exchange of curses between Paolo and Victor, the cooks, didn't quite drown the wailing rhythm-and-blues number that blared from the jukebox. He was halfway to the bar area when he spied two familiar faces.

Changing course, he moseyed to the booth where Marabella Blanchard and Willa Jameson were absorbed in their little powwow. Both witches were so preoccupied with their discussion they didn't even

glance his way when he halted beside their table. Not one who believed in being ignored, he cleared his throat. Loudly. Willa and Marabella jumped before jerking their gazes in his direction.

“Evenin’, ladies.” He looked over his shoulder and caught Tully’s eye. The young bartender held up a bottle of the local brew they were pushing that month, and Logan nodded. Hell, he didn’t give a rat’s ass. So long as the beer was cold and dulled the edges of his irritability. Forcing a grin that felt far from authentic, he slid next to Marabella and stole an onion ring from her plate. He bypassed the veggie burger. Anything made from bean curd wasn’t normal and probably tasted like gorilla shit. “So what’s got you two hunkered in this corner? Girly chitchat about shoes and soap operas?”

Willa leveled him with a peevish squint. “Believe it or not, our lives don’t revolve around Jimmy Choo’s or *Days of Our Lives*. Any other sexist misconceptions you need dispelled?”

This time his grin was genuine. He finished polishing off the absconded onion ring and licked the grease from his fingers before replying, “Nope, I’m good. Besides, if I discover you ladies don’t really have lingerie pillow fights, it’d break my heart.”

Willa muttered something beneath her breath that sounded suspiciously like “delusional werewolf”. In that moment, she reminded him of a smaller version of Clarissa, minus the red hair.

“We were talking about Jenny Cavanaugh,” Marabella said softly, breaking though his musings. “I feel so awful for her poor family. After everything they went through with the gambling scandal, now this.” Apparently reading his confusion, she frowned. “Don’t tell me you didn’t hear what happened? I would have thought it’d be prime gossip at the bar.”

“Not that I recall.” Besides, he’d been too preoccupied with thoughts of Clarissa every damn waking and sleeping second to pay much attention to anything lately.

“She’s the fifth mysterious coma case that’s hit in the past couple of days. The doctors can’t figure out what’s going on.”

Willa shivered suddenly, drawing both his and Marabella’s attention. She glanced at them, a shadowy specter of fear creeping into her eyes. “There’s something...wrong...in the air. I can feel it.”

Dropping her fork, Marabella reached across the table and squeezed Willa’s hand. “What do you think it could be?”

“I’m not sure. But it’s not good, whatever it is.”

Tully chose that moment to arrive with Logan’s beer and two refills on Willa and Marabella’s glasses of sweet tea. “Surprised to see your ugly mug around. Thought for sure you’d be getting that new bike broke in for the poker run.”

The reminder of the charity event he’d bowed out of because of his stupid, misguided notion of loyalty rubbed like salt in a festering wound. “Not goin’ this year.”

“You’re shitting me.”

He offered Tully a stiff shrug. “Somethin’ else came up. Maybe next time.”

“Oh, that’s right. It’s your and Clarissa’s anniversary.” Marabella dunked the wedge of lemon into her tea. “I was planning to stop by the coven house and get her opinion on the web store I’ve been thinking of setting up, but tomorrow night’s probably not good, is it?”

Renewed bitterness anchored in his chest. “Accordin’ to her, she’s busy.”

Marabella blinked. “Um...I know. With you.”

“Nope. Not me.” Unable to endure another second of Marabella, Willa and Tully’s bemused stares, Logan hefted to his feet and dug his wallet from his rear pocket. He flipped a wrinkled ten dollar bill onto the table and swiveled.

“Whoa, you didn’t even drink your beer.”

Ignoring Tully’s astounded observation, Logan strode for the exit. Outside, the glare of the sun threatened to blind him, and he tugged his shades down over his eyes before crossing to his bike. Straddling the seat, he stared off into space. He’d known from the very first second he’d set eyes on Clarissa seven years ago that she would likely change his life forever. Possibly in a way that he wasn’t prepared for, much less would welcome. Still, that hadn’t stopped him from signing the familiar contract with her. No force on earth would have prevented him from putting his Hancock on that paper. Because he’d felt it, even then. An electrical charge of chemistry that was off the charts. Every day since then, his need for her had imbedded itself deeper and deeper into his skin.

Almost as if it were taunting him, the barbed-wire tattoo ringing his upper arm started itching. He dug his fingers into the sleeve of his T-shirt, but the stinging didn’t stop. Course not. The damn tat was a fucking symbol of his downfall. It wasn’t about to let him forget it.

Cursing his apparent propensity for self-flagellation, he gunned the throttle and shot out of the parking lot. Less than twenty minutes later, he was cruising toward Tybee Island’s north beach.

The earthy brine of fresh salt air filled his nostrils. Usually the familiar sensation acted as an instant stress reliever. Not today. He coasted into the driveway of the tiny oceanfront cottage that he still considered a work in progress. The vacationers occupying the two rentals on either side of his property were noticeably absent. Either they were visiting the more touristy section of the south beach, or they’d already packed up and headed home. Either way, he planned to take advantage of his unexpected solitude and go for a skinny dip.

What he really longed to do was shift into his wolf and run along the shore, just the salty breeze and the rustling of sea oats for company. But that would have to wait for later, after the good citizens of Tybee were tucked into their beds.

Stepping into the cottage’s small entry, he plunked his helmet onto the front end table and tugged his T-shirt over his head. Bending, he shucked his boots and dropped his shirt near his bare feet. Half a second later, his jeans and boxer briefs joined the pile. He padded across the room, the tile cool beneath his toes, and unlocked the sliding doors. Beyond the low rise of the dunes he could make out the white-capped

waves of the Atlantic. The surf was strong today, alive with an energy that called to him. Mother sea would no doubt enjoy battering the hell out of his hide.

He'd welcome it, compared to the battering his heart was taking.

Releasing a howl that came from the very depths of his soul, he bounded across the gray, weathered planks of the back deck and easily cleared the railing. He landed on the sugary sand with the barest thud and continued sprinting toward the waves cresting in the distance, unmindful of the gathering of purple sandpipers that scurried out of his path. The brisk, foaming tide lapped over his feet and calves. He plowed deeper into the wave until water crashed into his shoulders. The tide reversed, hauling him away from shore, and he effortlessly rode the current. No wimpy dogpaddling for him. Six years ago, when he'd purchased the cottage and begun his extensive remodel on it, he'd learned the best way to burn off excess energy was to pummel his body in a nightly swim.

Course, there were other enjoyable ways for burning off excess energy. Sexy ways that coincidentally enough also entailed sweating his ass off and getting his cock wet. Whether that last part came about from a woman's mouth or her pussy, it was all better than fine by him.

As always happened whenever his thoughts turned toward sex—and face it, when the fuck *didn't* he think about sex?—Clarissa popped into his mind's eye. The vision of her seemed so real, he could practically feel the wet glide of her soft curves beneath his palms. Without thinking, he moaned, and his mouth filled with seawater. He surfaced, sputtering. The relentless waves dragged him under again, and for several minutes he fought to escape the sucking grasp of the deep swells. Finally he pulled free and began the long swim to shore.

The tide spat him onto the sand as if he were a toy it'd grown bored with, and he flopped onto his back with a weak groan. He took a few seconds to regain his breath before staggering to the concealment of his palm-shaded deck. Exhausted or not, the last thing he needed was a beachcomber tripping over his buck-naked body.

His muscles screaming over their rough treatment, he sprawled onto the lounge, ignoring the dusting of sand that instantly scattered into every nook and cranny of the padded cushion. The sun beat against him, its persistent heat easing his aches, even while it fed the flames of an entirely different ache that burned at a constant simmer. He closed his eyes, the residual white glare from the sun leaving spots behind his lids.

Once again, Clarissa's image superimposed itself on his mental big screen like a taunting mirage. Only this time she was as naked as he, straddling his bike. And his cock. The fantasy was familiar—one he'd replayed and jacked off to at least ten thousand times since that day her arousal teased his senses while his Harley rumbled beneath them. Judging from the rising state of his erection, the grand tally for masturbatory titillation was about to hit ten thousand and one.

In his present fantasy, he gunned the throttle, triggering fierce vibrations that traveled through his balls. Clarissa gasped, her pussy fluttering around his shaft.

Though it was a poor substitute for the vivid scene playing out in his head, he wrapped his hand around the base of his cock and dragged his fist up along the shaft, his strokes slow and indulgent. He battled with the opposing need to make it last and the equally powerful need to come. When fantasy Clarissa began riding him harder, the silky walls of her pussy providing a tormenting friction, he pumped his dick faster, his hips arching into each downstroke. He was strung tight, panting, the promise of a blinding release pounding down on him. In his mind, Clarissa bucked against him, the sweet sound of his name tumbling from her lips as her slick channel milked the come right out of him.

It was enough to push him over the edge, and the orgasm slammed into him, tearing a strangled moan from his throat. Like it'd been propelled by a damn rocket booster, his semen splashed over his fist and tensed abdomen. His heartbeat slowly returning to normal, he slumped into the cushion. Despite feeling like every bone in his body had liquefied, a heavy weariness washed over him. Good as his orgasm was, it still left him hollow, aching and hungry for the real thing. But for the first time in his life, the idea of sex with just any available and horny woman held zero appeal.

The only one he wanted was Clarissa. As if on cue, the damn tattoo began tingling, and he ground his teeth together.

He couldn't keep going on like this, playing these stupid games that got neither of them anywhere. Which left him with only one option.

He had to turn up the heat and burn down Clarissa's defenses. The stubborn witch would have no choice but to finally admit she wanted him too.

Chapter Three

Momentarily switching focus from the notes she'd been transcribing for the past hour and a half, Clarissa peeked at the brass clock ticking near the corner of her desk. Exactly five minutes had passed since the last time she'd checked the stupid thing. Grumbling beneath her breath, she tossed her pen aside and rubbed the nape of her neck. In addition to the crick there, a knot of nerves close to the size of a damn baseball was giving her a major fit. It'd be a miracle if she didn't psyche herself out by the time she had to leave for Tatum's.

Not good. She needed to be clearheaded and calm during her dealings with Seven. She knew all too well that revealing the slightest weakness could lead to dangerous consequences.

Life-altering consequences.

Refusing to dwell on things she couldn't change, she flipped to the next page in the ancient grimoire. A knock sounded on the door, and she looked up just as Griffin stepped inside the office. He glanced at the book propped in front of her and mumbled an apology for disturbing her before backing through the entry.

"Wait." Desperate for any opportunity to get her mind off her upcoming meeting, she slammed the text shut. She scrambled from her seat and banged her kneecap on the underside of her desk. Wincing, she hobbled toward the doorway. "I thought you weren't due to come in until Wednesday or Thursday."

"Jemma's been a nervous wreck doing this last-minute wedding planning from a distance. I decided to do her—and me—a favor by driving us out here sooner." Humor tugged at the corners of his mouth. "This way, I figured I'd have backup in case Jem decided to go bridezilla all of a sudden."

A pointed cough sounded behind Griffin and he jumped, his face taking on a guilty flush. He swiveled sideways, revealing Jemma standing behind him, her arms stacked above the slight swell of her belly. She arched one blonde eyebrow. "Bridezilla?"

"Don't get mad, Jem. It's not good for the baby."

Jemma snorted. "That excuse is only going to last you so long, buddy."

"Then I'll just have to use it to my full advantage for the next four and a half months, won't I?" Flashing a grin, he leaned down and banished Jemma's scowl with a kiss.

When he leaned back, Jemma curled her palm around his jaw. "I really, really hate it when you make it hard to be pissed at you." The loving adoration in her gaze counterbalanced her stern tone.

The pair's easy affection stoked a strong flare of envy within Clarissa. Seeing their obvious love and devotion stirred up every wistful desire she thought she'd safely locked away. Rather than pander to the

traitorous longings that did her absolutely no good, she shifted her scrutiny to Jemma's stomach. "How is the pregnancy going?"

"The doc says everything looks good." Jemma's hand automatically dropped to her baby bump.

The tenderness in the gesture rubbed at the all-too-fresh scab of Clarissa's shameful envies, peeling back the edges to expose her hidden vulnerabilities. With sickening clarity, a memory popped into her head—her mother throwing empty beer bottles at her, screaming slurred words of hate. "*I wish you'd never been born, you little bitch.*"

Somehow, she yanked herself from the painful remembrance and buried the tide of emotions threatening to surface. Once the familiar numbness filled the ache in her chest, she glanced at Griffin. "Would you mind asking Gloria to put together some refreshments for us?"

Griffin's expression hinted that he knew her underlying reason for the request had more to do with getting him out of earshot for a moment than any sudden thirst, but he dutifully ducked from the room. Once he was gone, Clarissa abandoned the doorway and invited Jemma to take a seat on one of the twin French armchairs. "I've been meaning to ask how things have been between you and the guild. They aren't still hounding you about testing your abilities, are they?"

Jemma smoothed the hem of her peasant-style blouse and grimaced. "No. I think they got the point after Griff threatened to make a few of them his chew toys at the last meeting."

"It's good that he's protective of you." And it gave her one less thing to worry over. The guild's overenthusiastic interest in exploring Jemma's latent magical skill could have become a giant headache.

Jemma shifted in her seat, obviously trying to get comfortable. "Enough about me. What's the latest excitement around here?"

"Not much," Clarissa lied.

"I suppose that's not necessarily a bad thing. Personally, I'm thrilled my life has become boring again." Jemma's lips twisted in irony. "Well, as boring as it can possibly be when I'm shackled up with one tiger and months away from popping out another. Not to mention all the wedding planning that's been driving me loony. I'm just thankful Griff has been so patient with me."

The tiger in question chose that minute to stroll back into the room. He handed Jemma one of the glasses of lemonade and a cookie. "Did I hear someone singing my virtues?"

"It depends. Are you going to fork over the other cookie you're hiding from me?"

Grunting, he placed the tray on the desk and fished the treat from the pocket of his flannel shirt. "I have no idea how you do that. Your nose is practically better than mine when it comes to sniffing out sweets."

Her smile angelic, Jemma snatched the cookie and added it to her stash. After taking a sip of her beverage, she glanced at Clarissa. "Speaking of world-class sniffers, where's Logan? I thought for sure

he'd be hanging around. Especially today of all days." Jemma shrugged in response to Clarissa's frown. "Griff told me it's your anniversary today. I think it's nice that you guys celebrate it."

The reminder of how she'd let Logan down soaked into Clarissa with all the subtlety of a two-by-four. The awful sensation intensified when she recalled how angry and hurt he'd looked before he'd turned and stalked away from her yesterday. She hadn't seen him at all since then. Probably just as well. He needed space to cool off. And she needed time to figure out how to make things right again between them.

Plastering on a smile that she prayed didn't appear as pained as it felt, Clarissa rose from her seat and crossed to the built-in bookshelves. She pretended to be busy searching for a particular tome, using the time to compose herself. "Our celebration had to be postponed, unfortunately. No doubt he'll be swinging by sometime in the coming week though." Hopefully. If he hadn't finally decided that he'd had enough of her.

The possibility tightened the vise in her chest. She turned back around and met Jemma and Griffin's all-too-shrewd expressions. Oh shit, had she somehow revealed too much? The last thing she needed was the entire coven knowing about her chaotic emotions where Logan was concerned. She'd never hear the end of it.

Sucking in a deep, steadying breath, she pivoted toward her desk. The clock caught her attention and a splinter of dread pierced her fragile bubble of calm as she took in the time. The rest of her burdens immediately exited stage left as the hour of her judgment glared her in the eye.

Seven years had come down to this.

It was time to face her fate.

Chapter Four

The interior of Tatum's was exactly as Clarissa remembered. Dark and dingy. Still, a twinge of relief scuttled through her. The dim, smoky gloom provided a modicum of obscurity. Not that she expected her mother to be working the floor tonight. And even if she was, not much chance the woman would race over, ready to dole out a hug and a smile.

A waitress who appeared to be poured into a slinky black leather halter dress tottered up to the hostess stand in her sky-high platforms. "Here for the band tonight?"

"No. I'm meeting someone. I don't think they're here yet, but can I grab a spot near the back?"

Responding with a nod, the waitress led Clarissa toward a vacant table a safe distance away from the smoke-filled bar. "We're expecting a packed house tonight. Might want to put your order in now, before the kitchen gets swamped."

She doubted her stomach would agree to the idea of food, but she accepted the grease-splattered menu anyway. Soon as the waitress wobbled off, she ditched the menu and wiped her fingers on the available paper napkin. Obviously Seven chose Tatum's out of a twisted sense of sentimentality and not because of its two-star luxury.

Then again, dark, dismal places seemed to be Seven's preferred hunting ground. Places where oblivion could be found in a bottle—and any soul could be bought for the right price. She was all too familiar with that last reality.

Leaning back in her seat, she watched the noisy quartet who'd wandered in off the street tromp toward the crowded bar. None of the four appeared to be old enough to drive, much less drink. Still, she doubted Tatum's was the sort of establishment that looked too closely at their patrons' drivers licenses.

"Foolish children, walking straight into the devil's den." The melodic, raspy voice managed to crack through the aura of calm Clarissa had so painstakingly worked on for the past twenty minutes, causing her shoulders to jerk. Silently berating her jumpy nerves, she tipped her gaze upward. Seven stood close enough to her chair the immense heat radiating off him nearly scorched the fine hairs on her forearm.

Truthfully, Seven wasn't exactly a *him*. Or even a *she*. More like a conglomerate of personas that took multiple personality disorder to an extreme new level. The little she had managed to glean during her limited dealings with Seven all those years ago hadn't shed too much light on the creature's mysterious origins. To this day, the only thing she knew with absolute certainty was that Seven held an insatiable hunger for one thing above all else.

Souls.

Today, the creature wore the trappings of an average, everyday Joe dressed in tailored khakis and a navy polo. She was more acquainted with this personality than the others, although she'd met them all during that harrowing week seven years ago, when she'd hammered out the contract on her soul. But for whatever reason, the personality standing before her had seemed to be the one most intensely interested in her. As seemed to still be the case now, judging from the way those black, reptilian-like irises focused on her.

Seven's head cocked to the side. "What, you don't agree?"

It took her a moment to remember the creature's earlier observation. "That this is the devil's den? Or that they're foolish children?"

Slipping on a smile that didn't reach those cold eyes, Seven brushed by her and lowered into the neighboring seat. "Both."

She stifled the urge to shiver as Seven watched her intently. Her overwhelming unease didn't just stem from the fact this creature held the contract on her soul. Although that small detail certainly was enough to pump anyone with dread. No, there was also something oddly, frighteningly hypnotic about Seven. A magnetic force that simultaneously repelled and beckoned. She'd seen firsthand that power in action and how it'd lured in victims. Even so, that in no way made her immune to its draw.

Somehow she pulled her stare from Seven and glanced toward the young quartet up at the bar. "They're teenagers. It's a requirement to be foolish at that age."

"Tell me, Clarissa, were you ever foolish? Or young?" Once again, that dark, fathomless gaze seared into her as if trolling her subconscious for the memories she preferred to keep submerged in the deepest recesses of her mind.

Maybe that was the secret to Seven's allure, a telepathic skill that amounted to a twisted version of a Jedi mind trick. She battled to resist its potent pull. "We were all young once."

"Not you. Those parents of yours made sure of that, didn't they?"

A suffocating sense of vulnerability washed over her, and she swallowed. The interior of her mouth felt dry, gritty. She searched the table for a glass of water before remembering that the waitress had never returned for her order.

"How is your good ole pops doing these days, anyway? Perhaps I'll stop by and say howdy, for old time's sake."

Her panic dissolved, replaced instantly with blistering fury. "You stay away from him."

"Still protecting the very ones who robbed you of your youth? An admirable, if not foolish trait." A taunting smile curled Seven's mouth. "Deprived of youth but not foolishness. Pity, that."

Her hands clenched in her lap. "Why did you bring me here? To amuse yourself and torment me?"

"Am I tormenting you, sweet Clarissa?"

She winced at the mocking, silken purr of Seven's voice. Damn it, after all her talk about not showing any weakness, she blew it within the first five minutes of their meeting.

"Imagine. Me having the ability to do that to you." Something resembling hunger flashed in the bottomless black depths of Seven's eyes. "You who refuses to crack under any pressure. Who contains more strength and power than her entire coven combined."

An icy sliver of fear trickled down her spine. She didn't know which to blame more for the sensation—the intensely covetous way Seven stared at her, or hearing this strange and disturbing creature speak of her coven. There was no reason to interpret a hidden menace there, but the fine hairs standing to attention on the nape of her neck didn't seem to agree with the assessment. She swallowed past the thick apprehension clogging her throat, desperate not to reveal her anxiety. "Flattered as I am by this conversation, I'd prefer if we just cut through the bullshit, and you tell me exactly how long I have before you call in my marker."

"Seven days."

She might have known. If nothing else, Seven was consistent with the freaky symbolism. "So that's it? You brought me all the way here to tell me I have a week? Wouldn't another of your infamous letters have been easier?" And less painful. But she knew with every fiber of her being that Seven wouldn't have had it any other way. No, much better to lure her to this hellhole, where memories were like daggers piercing her guilty conscience.

"I'm afraid it isn't that easy. Since our contract isn't fully sealed, a letter wouldn't have sufficed."

She blinked, trying to digest the implications of the startling revelation. "Isn't sealed? You mean..."

A scratchy chuckle rumbled from Seven. "Don't get too excited, sweet Clarissa. The contract laid down the groundwork, so there's no going back. Your soul is still mine to take." Another glimmer of that covetous lust flared in Seven's dark pupils, making her shiver. "I trust that you're a woman of your word. Come to me willingly, and there will be no complications."

She frowned. "Complications?"

"For those you hold dear. Your coven sisters. Your father. Others whom you may not be willing to allow admittance to your heart."

Her pulse leapt at the unmistakable threat. "I've already given you my agreement. I'm not breaking the contract."

"Good. Then you only owe me one more thing to complete the seal."

"What?"

The smile that stretched Seven's thin lips made her skin crawl. "A kiss."

Logan grunted as he struggled not to drop the heavy amp for Kegan Justice's Stratocaster. "Son of a bitch. Would you get some fuckin' wheels bolted on this thing already?"

"Why? That's what the dolly is for."

Logan's eyebrows slashed low. "What dolly?"

A chuckle came from Mica Chaffour, Kegan's band mate and fellow familiar. "The one sitting inside the service entrance over there."

Logan's gaze swerved to the back wall of Tatum's and the *Employees Only* sign hanging over a propped-open door. He shifted his attention back to Kegan and noticed the grin stretching his mouth. "Shithead. I'm tellin' Constance you tried to bust my nut."

Kegan's smartass grin instantly vanished. "Hey now. No need to get your jockeys in a twist." Looking suitably worried, he dashed in the direction of the doorway, presumably to snatch the dolly and avoid a potential scolding from his witch. For a bear shifter, he could hustle his ass pretty damn fast when he wanted to.

"That was mean and sneaky, man." Mica's lips twitched. "I'm gonna have to remember it for future reference. Might help score me a month of kitchen duty from Keg. And his Coltrane collection."

Logan crooked his arm, using the sleeve of his T-shirt to wipe the sweat from his brow. "I don't know how you guys manage to get along so well, much less live together." Mica and Kegan were one of the few familiars who shared a witch. The typical competitiveness that existed amongst familiars usually prohibited doubling up, for everyone's sanity.

"Yeah, it's a miracle. Especially since Keg is such a damn slob."

"Spreading vicious lies about me again, dickhead?" The rattling of metal announced Kegan's approach with the dolly. "Think you can maybe hold off for a few and actually give me a hand setting things up?"

"If I must." Mica glanced at Logan. "You gonna stick around for a set? We'll buy you a round if so."

"Well, shit, who am I to pass up free beer?" Besides, not like he had anywhere else to be. Shoving that dismal thought to the rear of his mind, he left the two bear shifters to finish situating their gear. He stepped into the service entrance of Tatum's and bypassed the kitchen, following the corridor to the main section of the restaurant. He coughed, nearly hacking up a lung as the acrid smoke from what undoubtedly amounted to ten thousand packs of cigarettes ambushed him. His heightened lupine senses always made walking into a bar a dicey prospect. Thankfully Champions had a state-of-the-art smoke-filtering system—something this joint was in dire need of. If not for the promise of those free beers, he would have walked his ass right back through the exit.

Steeling himself, he strode toward the jam-packed bar. After elbowing a path through the throng and requesting a beer from the bartender, he moseyed out of the way and scoped the room for an available seat.

The majority of tables close to the stage were already taken, but he spotted a vacant booth that still afforded a decent view.

Hoping to sweet talk his way into the primo spot, he swiveled toward the hostess stand, only to slam to a standstill when he spied Clarissa sitting at a table near the back of the dining room. She wasn't alone. Even while his brain scrambled to process that disturbing revelation, he watched the stranger's hands bracket Clarissa's face, right before the guy leaned in and kissed her.

Numb disbelief froze him. *What. The. Fuck.*

Jealous fury detonated inside him, instantly eradicating every thought but the one screaming in his mind—the fucking asshole had his tongue rammed in Clarissa's mouth. *His* woman.

Fists balling in preparation of punching the dickwad's nose off kilter, Logan growled low in his throat and stalked in Clarissa's direction. A seat suddenly swerved in front of him, almost jabbing him in the hip. He snarled at the clueless guy straddling the chair before shoving the seat out of the way. Ignoring the guy's sputtering retort, Logan jerked his focus back to Clarissa. And did a double take.

She was alone.

He took a quick scan of the dining room, not seeing the dickwad anywhere. It was almost as if the dude had vanished into thin air. Another possibility knocked against his consciousness and he grunted. *Or maybe I imagined the whole thing.* The idea wasn't completely out in left field. Fuck knows this obsession with Clarissa had messed with his head on more than one occasion. Tunneling a shaky hand through his hair, he continued forward. When he was less than two table lengths away from Clarissa, she looked up and locked stares with him. Every ounce of color leeches from her face. Her gaze darts sideways, toward the back hallway, and he lengthens his stride, fully intending to tackle her if her butt so much as inched off her chair.

Apparently reading his intention, Clarissa muttered beneath her breath. He didn't need to be a lip reader—or rely on his acute hearing—to make out the words “*Fuck me.*”

Her irritability, along with her choice of words, stirred the wicked beast within him. Drawing to a halt at her table, he awarded her his best wolfish smile. “Just name the time and place, shug.”

“You know damn well that isn't what I meant.”

“No? Because I'm thinking that's precisely what I'd like to do.”

Her cheeks bloomed with a vivid splash of red. “I'm not in the mood for this tonight.”

Clarissa's testiness only managed to rekindle his anger. “Well, now, I'm real sorry you feel that way, shug. 'Cause the last thing I'd wanna do is piss on whatever urgent plans preempted our dinner tonight.”

“There's no need to be a prick.” She stood, her eyes narrowing as he strategically blocked her path. “Or make a scene. Please move.”

“What are you gonna do if I don't? Whammy me? Might be kinda hard explainin' that one to everyone here, darlin'.”

“Logan, please.” Her voice broke on the last word, stunning him. She glanced down, but not before he caught the faint glimmer of moisture in her eyes. The sight hit him like a sucker punch in the gut, making him feel like the prick she’d accused him of being.

If there was one thing guaranteed to shred him to pieces, it was a woman’s tears. Having that woman be Clarissa only made it a thousand times more terrible. “Clarissa...”

Without saying another word, she rushed past him and hurried toward the rear hallway. Even her strongest holding spell wouldn’t have kept him from chasing after her.

He caught up with Clarissa before she could duck out the door or into the ladies’ restroom. Not that either location would have deterred him. He tugged her into his arms, the ferocity of her expression revealing just how much she hated showing the vulnerability hidden beneath that legendary icy exterior she’d perfected. Tucking her against his chest, he nuzzled her forehead. “Rissa, I’m sorry.”

She stiffened. “Please don’t call me that. I—it’s very inappropriate.”

“Hush.” Unable to help himself, he followed the delicate, silky arch of her eyebrow with his lips. She trembled and sighed, making both man and wolf silently growl in triumph at her tiny show of capitulation. Holding her this close was both heaven and hell, a heady torment that teased every single one of his heightened senses. She smelled luscious and feminine, a delicious main course he could easily feast on all day and night. His hands slid down the slopes of her shoulders, a not entirely unconscious marking of his territory.

Her breath stuttered in her throat. “This isn’t the place to be doing this.” She must have caught her slip of words because she jerked her gaze up to his. “I mean we shouldn’t be doing this at *all*.”

Tuning out her weak protest, he traced her mouth with the pad of his thumb. “That’s where you’re wrong. Right now, I need to kiss you more than I need to breathe. I wanna taste you. Eat you up.” *Make you mine*. The thought sprang full born from the most primal part of him, where wolf overruled man.

Clarissa’s eyes widened, but she didn’t draw back as his head descended. Their lips met, clung briefly, before he gave in to the fierce hunger burning low in the pit of his gut. Intent on making his possessiveness—and his desire—known, he nudged the hard ridge of his erection between her thighs. “Feel that, baby? That’s what you fuckin’ do to me.”

He filled his palms with her ass and squeezed, deliberately rolling his hips against hers. Yeah, he was dry humping her against a wall right outside the damn restrooms. But if the frequency of her gasps were any indication, she was enjoying the hell out of it just as much as he was.

His tongue slicked past the nonresistant barrier of her lips, and he relished the soft, breathy moan that escaped Clarissa. She was even more intoxicating than he remembered. Her magic shimmered around them, mingling with his energy and creating a charged buzz that tingled across his skin. He broke off the kiss, his breath ragged against her cheek. “Come home with me.”

She licked her lips. “That would be an epically bad idea.”

“Why?”

“Because we both know where it would lead.”

He ducked his head and nibbled a path along her jaw before exploring the soft hollow behind her ear with the tip of his tongue. “If you’re referrin’ to you tied to my bed, then yeah, damn straight.”

Her shallow exhale whispered against the side of his face. “Th-that’s not what I...” She swallowed. “You want to tie me to your bed?”

“More than you could imagine. God knows *I’ve* imagined it more often than I can count.” He released the tempting swells of her ass and glided his palms up along her hips, taking his time to properly enjoy her lush curves. “You’d be spread-eagled, your whole body tremblin’ and your nipples unbearably tight.”

“W-why would I be trembling?”

He grinned against her neck. “Don’t you also want to know why your nipples are tight?”

“I figured you’d get around to telling me, regardless.”

“Aw, shug, am I that predictable?” Yeah, he was. No way in hell he could temper the urge to tell her everything he wanted to do to her. In precise, Technicolor detail. “You’re tremblin’ because I’m eating your pussy. Lickin’ you inside and out, nice and slow. Savoring you.”

Her pulse skittered beneath his lips. “Logan, please—”

“Yeah, those are exactly the words you keep repeatin’ while my tongue is workin’ your clit and your sweet honey is filling my mouth.” He groaned and shifted, resting his forehead against hers. The fantasy had him hard as granite and desperate to sink into her softness. “Christ. Have mercy on me, Rissa. Say you’ll come home with me.”

Chapter Five

A massive, epically bad idea.

The inconvenient fact that the Miata was currently cruising toward Tybee was the only thing that stalled Clarissa from banging her forehead against the steering wheel. There could only be one explanation for why she was giving in to this insanity. Having only a week left to live was severely messing with her reasoning powers.

Then again, her shortened lifespan might have a hidden benefit. If this thing between her and Logan spiraled into an enormous disaster—as she suspected it would—she wouldn't be around long to bemoan her stupidity.

She glanced in the rearview mirror and noticed Logan's Harley still tailed close behind. No doubt he was afraid to let her out of sight, in case she decided to make a break for it. Thanks to the wind, his white T-shirt was plastered to his torso, which only made her all the more hyperaware of just how breathtakingly gorgeous he was. While she'd been pinned between the wall and Logan's delectable body, she hadn't failed to notice how unbelievably good all those rippling muscles had felt rubbing against her, everywhere. It also hadn't passed her inspection how one particular muscle of Logan's had been beyond raging hard and possessed a wicked talent for making her forget all else during their bump-and-grind session.

It wasn't like she'd never seen Logan's cock before. For goddess's sake, the werewolf went out of his way to show off that particular pride and joy every chance he got. But seeing wasn't the same as feeling. And he'd definitely made sure she felt every inch of that bad boy, up close and personal.

Smothering a groan, she shifted in her seat. This is what she got for abstaining from sex the past two and a half years. Her trusty stash of vibrators was no substitute for the hot, steely length of a hard cock sliding deep inside—

A blaring horn intruded on her private fantasies, and she jumped. Jerking her gaze to the passenger-side mirror, she spied a scowling driver sitting in a white Taurus busy making obscene gestures in her direction. It took a second to realize the driver's rudeness stemmed from the fact that she'd just blown a red light. Her heartbeat racing at the near miss, she returned her attention to the road, determined not to put her life—or anyone else's—at risk because of her own stupidity.

The irony of that thought didn't escape her, but she chose to ignore it in favor of staying alert for the remainder of the drive.

Five minutes later, she pulled into Logan's driveway. She barely had time to shift into park before Logan's Harley roared up beside her. He must have been driving like a total maniac to have caught up with her so fast. Bemused, she watched him rip his helmet off and storm to her side of the car.

"Were you tryin' to get yourself fuckin' killed back there?"

She should have been pissed as hell at being shouted at by her familiar, much less having him yell at her like she was no better than a child who deserved a good scolding after taking a box of crayons to the living-room walls. But the truth was she deserved his fury. "N-no. I wasn't paying attention. It was utterly moronic of me."

His jaw still rigid, Logan swung open her door and leaned inside the Miata. Killing the engine, he yanked the keys from the ignition and pocketed them before tossing his helmet onto the passenger seat. Giving her no time to so much as blink, he hauled her into his arms and slammed his mouth over hers. The kiss contained enough smoldering anger to set her on fire. But there was also a degree of desperation too. She sensed it in the way he tunneled his fingers in her wind-whipped hair and hugged her close.

She hadn't been with many men, and certainly none of them came remotely close to stirring these wildly chaotic feelings inside her like Logan did. He represented everything she'd run from her whole life. Wanting something—*someone*—with this kind of intensity was dangerous. Destructive to her entire being.

So why was she even considering this lunacy? She should walk away right now, before she became addicted to the taste of the forbidden.

As if he sensed the indecision warring inside her, Logan cradled her cheek in one hand and pulled back slightly. He looked into her eyes, his expression both fierce and tender. "Scare me like that again, and I'll damn well spank you."

And just like that, the forbidden ensnared her with wicked, sensual promise. Her breath hitched. Attempting to cover the telltale sign of her arousal, she glared at him. "Excuse me?"

"You can lose the phony indignation, shug. I smell how soaked your panties are."

One of the disadvantages of having a werewolf for a familiar—that damn nose of his. Not granting her long to stew in silence, he twined his fingers through hers and dragged her toward the entrance of his cottage. After fishing out his keys, he unlocked the door and stepped aside, allowing her to precede him inside. The overhead star-shaped chandelier clicked on, raining soft prisms of light across the entry. She managed no more than two steps before Logan's arms encircled her from behind, stalling her short. His lips settled on the sensitive juncture where her neck and jaw met at the exact moment his prominent erection nudged her ass. She gasped at the exquisite twin sensations.

He gave a deep, rumbling growl that tickled her skin. "This is one of the reasons I've always loved how tall you are—how perfectly we align. I could fuck you standin' up, just like this." His palms coasted to her hips and held her flush against him while his cock rode the seam of her jeans.

She bit her lip in an effort to stifle her moan. "Y-you've thought about fucking me like that?"

“I’ve thought about fuckin’ you every way imaginable, and several that haven’t been invented yet.”

Any lingering chance she might have possessed of walking away shriveled at his words. He’d never made any bones about the fact he lusted after her, but somehow feeling the murmured breath of his admission brush along her skin made it more real. Countless times she’d lain in her bed at night, her body on fire with need while Logan brought her to indescribable heights of pleasure in her mind. And his too, from the sound of it. Tonight, she would give in to the fantasy. If a week was all she had left, she was damn well going to wallow in every sinful moment Logan could give her.

Apparently sharing a similar sentiment, Logan slipped his hands beneath the hem of her shirt and caressed her abdomen. His palms were warm and strong and just a tiny bit calloused. Her tummy quivered in response, and he grazed his forefinger in a lazy circle around her bellybutton. “Slip off your top so I have more room to work.”

She must have hesitated a fraction too long, because Logan stopped tracing his distracting patterns across her skin. “Now, Rissa.”

The unmistakable authority in his tone elicited a strange shiver of excitement. Again, she decided it was better to hide her unexpected reaction. “You’re forgetting which one of us is boss.”

“In every other way, you claim rights to that title. But not when it comes to this.”

“So you think you get to be boss in the bedroom?”

“I don’t think. I know. Now ditch that top before I spank your ass.”

She wouldn’t have thought it possible, but her pussy became even wetter. Damn. She shouldn’t like—much less be turned on by—this chauvinistic, caveman, alpha bullshit. But it didn’t stop her fingers from shaking with a forbidden thrill as they fumbled to remove her shirt.

Her disgruntled musings immediately shuffled to the back of her mind when Logan slid her bra straps down her arms. She swallowed as he unhooked the front clasp on the bra and peeled back its lacy white cups, revealing the beaded, rosy-pink tips of her breasts.

Logan stroked her nipples, earning her moan. “Tell me, darlin’, are these pretty little babies puckered because you’re anticipatin’ how warm your rump would feel after a few swats?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s chilly in here.”

“There’s nothin’ wrong with being aroused at the idea of being spanked. Christ knows, I’m hard just imaginin’ you getting wetter and wetter each time my palm lands on your ass cheeks.”

The vivid imagery instilled by his seductive words created a sharp ache that seemed to begin at her nipples and coalesced into a persistent throb in her clit. She swayed, almost lightheaded from the undiluted excitement pumping through her bloodstream. An animalistic sound broke from Logan, and he swept her up into his arms. Rather than haul her in the direction of his bedroom as she’d expected, he crossed to the leather sectional in the living room. He lowered her onto her feet so she faced the arm of the couch, away

from him. A rustling noise whispered behind her. She started to turn, but firm hands settled on her hips, holding her still.

“Stay.” Judging from the location of Logan’s gruff voice, he’d dropped to his knees.

“But—”

“Rissa.” The dangerous note of warning underscoring his tone provoked another of those delicious shivers. He reached around her for the zipper tab on her jeans and tugged it down. A millisecond later, her jeans followed suit, along with her sopping-wet panties.

“Lift your foot.”

She did, and Logan freed that leg from her tangle of clothing before assisting her with the other. Leaving her strappy heels in place, he caressed the backs of her thighs before kneading the globes of her ass. She didn’t stand a prayer of curbing her moan.

“Feel good, baby?”

She barely managed to squeak a “Yes.” Sweet goddess, just the seductive glide of his hands was enough to melt her into a puddle of goo. How was she going to survive anything else he had in store for her?

“I’m gonna make it even better. Lean forward, across the arm of the couch.”

She was past balking at his commands. Why should she, when his touch and his gravelly voice promised everything she had never realized she desired? Craved. Stretching across the couch’s arm, she hugged the suede sofa pillow to her chest and closed her eyes. The scent of warm leather swam in her nose, mixed with the woodsy musk she always associated with Logan. He was everywhere at once. The phantom essence of him filled her nostrils, and the very real presence of his mouth suddenly pressed between her legs. She bit her lip, her cry muffled by the pillow as his tongue burrowed between her swollen labia.

The leisurely devouring he’d spoken of back at Tatum’s was nonexistent. Instead, he ate her with enough ravenous intensity to make her head spin. There was something decadently forbidden and naughty about being bent over a couch, naked except for a pair of high heels and being gorged on with more hungry relish than if she were the prime-rib special at the Boar’s Head.

His thumbs holding her wide open, Logan probed inside her channel, fucking her with his tongue. She squirmed and gasped, her greedy pussy clenching around the intruder.

Logan’s satisfied growl vibrated through her flesh. His tongue momentarily retreated and licked the length of her slit, making her shiver. “Do you have any idea how fuckin’ delicious you are? I’m havin’ you for breakfast, lunch and dinner from here on out.” His entire mouth closed around her, and an overwhelming kaleidoscope of sensations crashed over her. That wicked tongue plying her clit in unrelenting wet sweeps and swirls. The soft scrape of his goatee abrading her sensitive tissues. His big hands constantly massaging her raised buttocks. She dug her nails into the couch cushions, her vision blurring as she struggled with the simple task of remembering to breathe.

Apparently determined to send her screaming into climax, Logan darted his tongue with concentrated flicks across her clitoris. The orgasm welled inside her, holding her suspended for one blinding moment, before she shattered with devastating impact. She cried out, her body shaking so uncontrollably she thought her knees might buckle.

Eventually the quakes subsided and she slumped on the couch, boneless. She heard Logan whisper something that sounded like *beautiful* before he rose to his feet. His fingers traced the curve of her spine in a gentle, almost-reverent caress. He came into view as he walked toward the pine coffee table. Her climax hadn't left her so shell-shocked that she couldn't appreciate the spectacular visual of Logan's sculpted chest covered with a fine sheen of sweat. He'd removed his T-shirt, but his jeans remained in place. Although it looked like he'd unzipped them at some time to relieve the pressure on that mouthwatering hard-on.

He flipped open the lid of the decorative metal box resting on the coffee table and reached inside, extracting a condom packet. A mix of contradicting emotions raced through her. Excitement over the prospect of finally having his cock buried inside her and disbelief that she was about to engage in sex with someone who kept an available stash of condoms on their coffee table. For goddess's sake, where else did he hoard them? The cookie jar in the kitchen?

All of her doubts took an inconvenient siesta the minute Logan rucked his jeans down and his cock sprang free, all rosy and engorged. A single drop of precome glistened from the plum-shaped cap. Her mouth dry, she watched him kick free of his clothing and rip the foil packet with his teeth. It was then that she noticed that the lower portion of his face was glossy with her wetness.

He caught her stare, and she licked her lips. "Can...can I put the condom on you?"

"No, shug. You touch my cock, and I'll come before even gettin' to feel your pussy grippin' me."

"That would be a shame."

He offered a lopsided grin. "You're tellin' me." Unfolding the condom, he smoothed it onto his shaft. The responding quiver of his washboard abdominals fascinated her, as did the intriguing way his biceps flexed with his motions, drawing her eyes to the barbed-wire tattoo encircling his upper arm. For as long as she could remember, she'd harbored a secret fantasy about licking that damn tat. Now was no exception.

Truthfully, she also wouldn't mind licking his beautiful cock like it was a tasty popsicle, either. But judging from his confession regarding his thinly leashed control, that pleasure would have to wait for later. She tried to shove from the cushion and grimaced when her wobbly legs refused to cooperate. "As much as this pains me to admit, you'll have to carry me to your bedroom. I don't think there's any possible way I can walk yet."

Logan's smile turned wicked. "That's because I totally annihilated you with my oral warfare. Your pussy didn't stand a chance."

"Annihilated?" She wrinkled her nose. "Just when I think you can't possibly get any cruder..."

"You weren't complainin' while you were comin' like crazy on my tongue."

“On second thought, don’t carry me. I don’t need that ego of yours swelling any more out of control than it already is. You might rupture something.” She struggled to get up, but before she could do anything more strenuous than lift onto her elbows, Logan boxed her in from behind.

“Got news for ya, shug. My ego isn’t the only thing swellin’ out of control.” He rubbed his latex-sheathed cock between the cheeks of her ass, and she whimpered. His fingers slid between her legs and skimmed over her clit. Despite having just experienced the most mind-blowing climax of her life, a hot flush of need trembled through her. Logan’s cock slipped lower and teased the entrance to her slit. “The wolf in me wants to fuck you like this.”

“You mean doggie style? Sweet goddess, you truly are a walking cliché.” The tremor in her voice destroyed any shot she had of him taking her sarcasm seriously.

“Yet somethin’ tells me you won’t complain this time either.” The thick head of Logan’s cock eased inside, stretching her. He groaned. “You’re so fucking tight, baby. I’m not hurting you, am I?”

Speech was impossible. Gnawing on her lip, she settled for giving a frantic shake of her head instead.

“Good, cause I’ve gotta move.”

“Sweet goddess, *yes*. Give me more.”

“Mm, I like the sound of you beggin’ for my cock.” Logan’s adroit fingers slicking over her clit, he thrust deeper.

The fullness of him filling her superseded all else—even taking him to task for his arrogance. Besides, it’d be damn impossible to challenge his claim when she was bucking against him, mewling worse than a cat in heat. The head of his cock prodded her G-spot, and she jerked, nearly biting her tongue as a fierce wave of pleasure crested toward a dazzling peak. Logan retreated slightly before nailing that sweet spot again. And again. On his fourth pass she thought she would die from the ferocious flood of sensation building inside her.

It was too intense.

Too earth-shattering.

Too everything.

She tried to escape it, but Logan held her firm, neither his cock nor his fingers relenting in their quest to drive her over the edge. “Come for me, Rissa. Now.”

The excruciating pleasure erupted, and she opened her mouth in a silent scream. Dimly, she heard Logan’s strangled shout as he came with her. She could feel her magic break through its barrier, and it physically manifested a second later in a radiant shower of lavender shimmers that sparked from her skin.

Her last coherent thought before passing out was now she knew how a freakin’ overworked firecracker felt.

Chapter Six

The screech of a nearby gull snapped Logan awake. He blinked at the ceiling, the lingering remnants of his incredible dream slowly disintegrating like a spider's web caught in a downpour. But even as the dream dissolved, his senses returned in a rush as Clarissa's sweet, intoxicating scent reached out to him. He rolled onto his side, his hungry gaze devouring her.

Who needed a dream when the woman he wanted above all others was lying beside him all warm and naked?

Clarissa sighed in her sleep, her palm curling next to her cheek on the pillow. She looked so peaceful. And vulnerable. The hidden layers she was reluctant to expose called to him on a deep, primal level. He hadn't been entirely surprised when she'd responded so well to his dominance. It didn't take a PhD in psychology to figure out that a woman with as many responsibilities as Clarissa shouldered might secretly long to hand over the reins in the bedroom. No, what had thrown him for a curveball was *his* response.

He'd played the dominating alpha with his fair share of women. Plenty of females got off on it, and he'd been more than happy to accommodate their fantasy of being fucked by the big bad wolf. But with Clarissa, he hadn't been role-playing.

It hadn't been so much about bending her to his will—or over the arm of the couch, as it were. Though he'd certainly enjoyed that part. But at the core of it was something more elemental. He craved her trust, her willingness to let him take care of her. For now, she might only consent to both when it came to sex, but that would change. He'd bide his time and be patient. Seven years of waiting proved he possessed a mammoth storehouse of that particular virtue.

His attention drifted from Clarissa's face, down to the perfection of her creamy breasts. Her nipples were pebbled. Much as he liked to think it was because she was having her own sexy dream about him, he reluctantly acknowledged that the sea-soaked breeze ruffling the curtains was probably the culprit. Still, that didn't keep his wolf from salivating in anticipation. A few things in their relationship he didn't mind waiting for. Savoring those luscious nipples wasn't one of them.

Inching forward, he blew a stream of air across her breasts. Clarissa murmured in her sleep before arching her back like a saucy kitten. It was all the invitation he needed. Swirling his tongue over her nipple, he sucked the distended nub into his mouth. Her eyelashes fluttered before she blinked at him. "What are you doing?"

He released her nipple and worked his way toward its mate. "Havin' my breakfast."

She glanced toward the window. “What time is it?”

Not trusting the flash of worry that clouded her expression, he swung his leg over hers, keeping her pinned in place. “It’s time for you to stop frettin’ and let me enjoy the next course.”

“I’m not fret—” Her lips pinched together when he gave her a stern look. “I’m supposed to join my father for breakfast.” Her cheeks took on a pretty pink flush. “The real kind, I mean.”

He traversed the slope of her breast and licked her nipple. “This is the real kind too. A Rissa meal. My favorite.” She snorted, and he grinned before tracing her areola with his tongue. “You told me the nursing home never keeps on schedule. Which means it’ll be at least another hour before your pops gets his tray delivered. I promise you’ll get there with time to spare.”

“Is that your way of telling me you’re going to rush through *your* breakfast?” Her eyebrows arched. “Not exactly much incentive for me agreeing to your plan.”

“Nah, just means I have to work extra hard at givin’ ya a dozen orgasms in thirty minutes.”

“Only a dozen? Slacker.”

Chuckling, he scooted backward, his mouth blazing a trail down her stomach. He dipped his tongue inside her bellybutton briefly, before continuing his trek south. Coaxing her thighs wider to accommodate his shoulders, he settled in place and inspected his treasure trove. A thin landing strip of fiery red curls covered her mound. He already knew from prior exploration how downy soft they were. Actually, she was soft everywhere. And silky. Recalling where she was silkiest, he lowered his focus. She was already wet, dripping honey for him. His mouth instantly pooled with saliva.

“You know, I get a less thorough examination from my gynecologist.”

Ignoring Clarissa’s breathless, albeit dry tone, he slid his thumb through her wetness. Holding her gaze, he sucked his finger clean.

Her breath stuttered. “Dr. Freeman doesn’t do that, however.”

“Good. ‘Cause I’d rip his fuckin’ balls off.” Ducking, he licked up and down her slit until she was undulating against his mouth and panting. Working his way north, he found her clit swollen and slick. He swirled his tongue across the sensitive nubbin, and she cried out, her hips arching. Holding her steady, he sucked on her throbbing flesh with soft, rhythmic pulses. Her fingers sifted through his hair as she gasped his name, over and over. A fierce tremor ripped through him. Groaning, he raised his head and retraced his previous path with his lips until he reached her mouth. He glided his tongue over hers, sharing her taste. Some women hated that, but Clarissa only caressed his chest and allowed him to deepen the kiss. Her thighs parted, her wetness bathing his cock. Another scalding frisson of pleasure washed over him. He slid inside her pussy and indulged in the three most blissful strokes of his life before realizing he hadn’t donned a condom.

Sonofabitch. Unprotected sex sure as shit wasn’t the way to go about earning her trust.

Pulling from the snug heaven of Clarissa's pussy proved to be one of the toughest things he'd ever done. Particularly since her inner walls hugged him tight, almost as if they were reluctant to release his cock.

Balancing himself on one arm, he tugged at the drawer pull on the nightstand and snatched a condom. Clarissa blinked before staring in the direction of his cock. He quickly sheathed himself. "Sorry. I swear to you, though, I'm one hundred percent clean. You don't hafta worry about catchin' an STD from me."

The tension eased from her body. "I wasn't worried."

"Liar." He stopped her protest with a lingering kiss. His palms slipped down to cup her ass as he sank back inside her. "In this day and age, you'd be foolish not to insist on a guy usin' a condom."

"You'll get no argument from me there."

He pumped deeper, his eyes almost crossing at the tight squeeze of her inner muscles. Moaning, he buried his face against her neck. "That bein' said, I've gotta admit the thought of ridin' you bare again is all I can think about. Any chance you're on the pill?"

She shook her head. "No reason to be, since I haven't had sex in over two years."

Her frank admission caused him to lose his rhythm. "Uh, *what?*"

Clarissa's gaze slid from his shocked one. "Can I help it if I've been a little too busy for sex lately?"

"For two years? Shug, nobody's that busy."

"It isn't like I was completely depriving myself."

His head spun from the possibilities inherent in that provocative statement. "Vibrator?"

"A drawer full. My favorite is a sparkly blue one that has a little dolphin-shaped attachment that I use to buzz my—"

A massive groan escaped him, and he shuddered. "Darlin', there are certain things you shouldn't say to a man when he's balls-deep inside you. Not unless you want him blowin' too soon."

Her fingertips danced along his spine before smoothing over his tensed glutes. "Hm, then I guess you don't want me mentioning how good your cock feels." She massaged his ass. "So thick...and...hard. Mmmm."

He growled. "You're messin' with the king of tease, baby. Sure you wanna take me on?"

"Definitely." She arched her back, deliberately tempting him with those scrumptious nipples. "I'm ready for you, big boy. Give me your best shot."

Awarding her his most wickedly feral smile, he hiked her thighs over his shoulders and watched her eyes widen as he bumped against her cervix. "What do you fantasize about when you're playin' with your vibrator?"

It took a moment for her glassy stare to focus on him, and he could tell from her dazed expression that she was trying to determine why their sexy talk had taken this particular fork in the road. "I-I don't know."

"Yes, you do. Tell me."

She bit her lip. "Sometimes I...think about you."

"Yeah?" The word came out husky as he circled his hips, brushing her clit with his pubic bone. The notion of her masturbating while she thought about him was a heady, massive turn-on. "Did you pretend your little dolphin buddy was my tongue while it kissed your sweet spot?" He increased the tempo of his thrusts, keeping pace with her quickened breaths. "Baby, you're not the only one who's been busy fantasizing. Do you have any idea the number of times I've jacked myself, wishin' my fuckin' hand was your mouth or pussy instead?"

"Logan..." She gasped, her slick walls rippling around him. Closing his eyes, he basked in the pure pleasure of her orgasm. He managed two more short strokes before he came with a broken groan.

Heart pounding from exertion and some other indefinable emotion he didn't care to overanalyze at the moment, he slumped, rolling them both sideways so he didn't crush her. He flopped his arm over her waist. "I win."

A derisive noise huffed from the back of her throat before she poked him in the center of his sweaty chest. "Only because you cheated with your sneaky hand-job confession."

"Never said I play fair."

After an admonishing sniff, she pushed away from him and sat up. "Now I really need to go take a shower."

"How about if I join you?"

She shot him a look over her shoulder. "Right. I wouldn't get over to the nursing home until dinner."

Licking his lips, he ogled her heart-shaped ass. "Good point."

She strutted to the bathroom, and he reluctantly abandoned the bed and padded into the kitchen. After pitching the condom in the wastebasket beneath the sink and washing up, he set about making coffee. With the rich, earthy smell of chicory filling the air, he scrounged in the cupboards for some of the flavored creamer he knew she preferred. Yeah, it'd probably prove how pathetically hopeful he'd been, keeping her favorite creamer on hand, just in case. Still, he'd take looking like a loser if it scored him some brownie points.

Once the coffee was ready, he carried both of their mugs back into the bedroom. He spied Clarissa standing in front of the steamed-up mirror, trying to run his comb through her hair. Catching her grimace as the comb's teeth caught in a snarl, he plunked the mugs down on the dresser and stepped into the bathroom. He pried her fingers from the comb, earning her startled glance, and gently worked on untangling her wet strands. She remained unusually quiet during the process, her gaze darting away from his whenever he happened to catch her staring at him. Her obvious nervousness over the simple yet intimate act of him brushing her hair only verified his earlier concern. Apparently she was okay with him fucking her, but anything else and she was ready to run for the exit.

Feeling like he was currying a skittish horse, he gathered a long section of her hair in his hand and dragged the comb through to the ends of her damp tresses. “Bet you didn’t know I sideline as a stylist when I’m not tending bar. Or you.”

That last bit managed to return the color to her cheeks, and she nibbled on her bottom lip. “My dad used to brush my hair sometimes. He wasn’t always as gentle as you’re being, but I’d go along with it anyway. I think it gave him something to concentrate on, other than—”

He eyed her profile, waiting for her to finish despite knowing she wouldn’t. When it came to any reference to her past, particularly the years leading up to her mother taking off, Clarissa always automatically shut down communication. He’d learned the hard way not to push her about it after suffering through a week of her silence the last time he’d unwisely brought up the subject of her mother. He released her hair, and she pivoted from him, nearly stumbling in her haste to escape the bathroom.

An old feeling he was all too familiar with sank in his gut while he watched her yank on her bra and panties. Clarissa had retreated into her impenetrable fortress of solitude and pulled up the welcome mat. There would be no admittance for him any time soon.

Chapter Seven

The harsh fumes of antiseptic and industrial-grade disinfectant assailed Clarissa when she entered the lobby of the Lafayette convalescent home. Janet, the day receptionist, glanced up from her magazine and waved Clarissa over to the desk. “They just wheeled your father into the dining room. He’s acting unusually spunky today.”

“Really?” A fraction of the tight heaviness eased behind Clarissa’s sternum. “That’s good.” Hopefully it meant he wouldn’t be on his typical quest to venture down nostalgia lane, dredging up painful memories neither of them needed to obsess over.

“I think it had something to do with his visitor yesterday afternoon.”

Clarissa blinked. “Visitor?” For one terrifying moment her mind veered to Seven.

“Your mother.”

The unexpected reply squeezed the air from her lungs. “What?”

“Your father was so excited,” Janet chattered on, apparently oblivious of the scab she’d just ripped open in Clarissa’s soul. “I take it it’s been a while since they’ve seen each other. Reunions like that always make me teary.” Sniffling, Janet reached for a tissue from the dispenser resting on the corner of the desk.

Not sticking around to hear another word, Clarissa spun and rushed toward the dining room. She spotted her father sitting at a table with three other gentlemen. Her heart cramped. No matter how many times she tried to steel herself, she would never get used to seeing him look so frail.

Sucking in a deep breath, she approached the men. She noticed her father was the only one conversing amongst the group. Judging from the expressions of his breakfast companions, he’d been talking their ears off from the moment he’d joined them. Her suspicions became verified when one of the men turned down the volume on his hearing aid. She tapped her father’s stooped shoulder, and he jerked his gaze upward, causing his bifocals to slip backward on his nose.

“Clarissa!”

A tiny sliver of the panic that’d seized her since learning of her mother’s visit dissolved as she took in her dad’s beaming smile. Today he remembered her. The realization was bittersweet because she knew that tomorrow he’d likely forget. Dropping onto her haunches, she leaned in to peck his wrinkled, papery cheek. She used the opportunity to blink away the moisture collecting in her eyes before shifting her head and returning his grin. “Hi, Pops.”

“She came back. Told you she would.”

The ache resettled in her chest as she surveyed the unrestrained jubilation shining on her father's face. He looked so damn happy. All she could do was pray that he'd forget about her mother's visit come tomorrow. Because she didn't think she could handle having to be the one to break his heart all over again.

Not a second time.

"She asked about you. Wanted to know if you're doing okay."

A mixture of wariness and anger stiffened her spine. After all these years, the woman wanted to know how she was doing? Gee, how fucking maternal of her.

"I would have told her where to find you, but I...I couldn't remember your address."

The distress that flashed across her father's features instantly overruled her silent grievances. She reached for her dad's trembling hands and tucked them within her own. "It's okay. If she really wants to see me, she can look me up in the phone book." *Please, goddess, see to it that she doesn't.* Not that she expected her mother to do any such thing. If she hadn't done so by now, why would she?

Then again, the woman hadn't sought out Clarissa's father in all these years. What had possessed her to do so now? Or more to the point—what did she want?

Whatever her mother was up to couldn't be good. Steely resolve armored Clarissa's doubts. She'd do whatever necessary to protect her father from further heartbreak.

A portion of her panic resurfaced when she realized that come next Sunday, she'd no longer be around to watch over him. She stared at his wrinkle-lined face, hopeless defeat swamping her as he started jabbering away at his tablemates again. The cruel irony of her predicament wasn't lost on her. To protect her father, she was willingly turning over her soul to Seven. But after she was gone, who would safeguard her dad from future threats? She would have to find someone to assume the responsibility. Someone she could trust. Her first instinct was Logan. Goddess knows, he was capable of taking over the job. The only sticky part would be getting him to agree without explaining why she needed him to look after her father.

Her temples began to throb as she contemplated that unpleasant conversation. She had six days to come up with something, no point in giving herself an ulcer over it just yet. Besides, there was one step she could make now that would take care of the biggest of her worries—her mother. She pushed to her feet and returned to the lobby. The reception desk was unmanned. Janet must have stepped away to use the restroom or help a resident or staff member. Drumming her nails on the counter, she eyed the overhead clock.

The heavy scuff of soles treading across the linoleum flooring squeaked farther down the corridor. She turned to see if it might be Janet but spotted one of the orderlies maneuvering a stocked cart from the supply closet. He swung the door shut and continued across the hall. Clarissa's gaze remained riveted to the spot just beyond the closet, where two figures were bent close together, engaged in what looked to be an engrossing conversation. She stared at Seven, a shiver of foreboding heralding a colony of goose bumps along both her arms. This wasn't the same personality who'd sealed their contract with a kiss last night.

Instead, it was the grizzled, potbellied trucker she'd tracked down seven years ago and begged to exchange the contract on her father's soul for her own.

What was it doing here?

A hot wash of anger sizzled through her as the obvious answer materialized. Seven was contracting more souls. And preying on the helpless elderly in the process.

That fucking, heartless son of a bitch.

"Ms. Miles, there you are."

Janet's perky announcement was loud enough to draw every gaze within two hundred feet. Including Seven's. The creature locked stares with Clarissa, the mouth tucked within that overgrowth of beard curving in a sinister grin. Plump fingers tapped against the bill of the green-and-white baseball cap smashed low on Seven's wide brow, giving Clarissa a mocking salute.

Janet stepped forward, momentarily blocking Seven from view. She held out a matchbook. "I found this on the floor in front of my desk. You must have dropped it earlier."

Clarissa gaped at the large red T stamped on the matchbook's glossy cover. Equally repelled and captivated, she reached for the matchbook. She flipped it open, her pulse stuttering at the sight of the name scrawled in blue ink. *Barry Tatum*.

She remembered how shaky her fingers had been while writing that name in this very matchbook seven years ago. Remembered the weeks of agonizing she'd put herself through while she'd struggled over the decision to set her plan in motion—the plan that literally brought her life crashing down around her.

Now the matchbook was back. Another reminder of her guilt.

"Are you okay?"

Janet's concerned tone snapped Clarissa out of her daze. She lifted her head, her gaze skipping past the receptionist to the far corner.

Seven was gone.

Swallowing past the unease tightening her throat, she glanced at Janet. "I'm fine. Or I will be, after you promise to restrict my father's visitor list."

The receptionist frowned. "But—"

"Promise me."

Finally clued in to the severity of the situation, Janet bobbed her head. "Okay, if that's what you want. Who do you wish to restrict?"

Clarissa took a deep breath. There was only one answer that'd keep out a creature that could wear a variety of faces. "Everyone."

Chapter Eight

Logan silently bitched to himself while he mopped a bar rag across the handful of damp condensation rings topping the counter. The one downfall to the lunchtime crunch fizzling to a trickle of customers was now he had way too much time to mull over his situation with Clarissa.

If he'd hoped for one damn minute that sleeping with her would cure him of his constant obsession, his present state of mind more than kicked that fallacy square in the balls. Only now it wasn't ruminations about how sweet she might taste or what kind of sounds she made when she was seconds away from coming that consumed his every waking thought. No, he knew all too well the answers to those burning questions. His current dilemma—and the reason for his unflagging erection for the past four hours—was anticipating all the things he'd do to Clarissa the next time they were in bed together.

Realistically, twenty-four hours wouldn't be adequate time for everything he wanted to do. Hell, a lifetime would be cutting it pretty damn short. And that was another sobering conclusion he'd come to. A night or two would never be long enough to get Clarissa out of his system.

Any lingering illusions he might have tried to fool himself with in regards to his feelings for Clarissa were now dead. This went miles beyond desire and obsession. The awful pain that'd ripped through his rib cage when she'd dashed from his house this morning and sped off like the hounds of hell were snapping at the Miata's tailpipe had hammered the final nail in his coffin.

He was bat-shit crazy in love with Clarissa Miles, the woman who lived by the motto of allowing no one past the closely guarded gate shielding her heart. Hell if that wasn't a big-ass fucking complication that would likely make him drink himself into an early grave. He eyed the empty bottle of Bud that rested on the corner of the bar like a taunting premonition of his fate. Grimacing, he scooped up the offender and chucked it into the recycle bin beneath the counter. The frantic, staccato tap-tap of heels on the wooden floor planks drew his gaze upward just as Willa wobbled to a halt in front of the bar.

She plunked a purse that could easily be mistaken for a piece of luggage onto one of the stools and blew her bangs out of her eyes before straightening her glasses. "Please tell me the kitchen didn't forget Domino's lunch again. Otherwise I might be forced to do something stupid that will earn me a spot on the six o'clock news."

He rubbed his goatee. "Depends. Would this something stupid involve public nudity?"

"No, I'm thinking more along the lines of homicidal rage."

Feigning disappointment, he reached for the phone bolted to the support post located near the taps. “Let me check with Paolo.” After a thirty second conversation where the temperamental cook managed to curse a dozen times, disparage Emeril Lagasse and point out that they were out of the shrimp-gumbo special, Logan secured the phone back in its cradle and gave Willa a sympathetic smile. “That trigger finger isn’t too itchy, is it?”

A menacing noise came from the back of Willa’s throat before she slumped against the stool. “Domino is going to have a fit. More than her typical one, too, since her damn one-meal-a-day diet is making my life hell.”

Logan swept the bar rag into the sink with his palm. “Don’t you mean *her* life?”

“No, definitely mine. And I don’t even get the benefit of losing a few inches around my waist.”

He flicked an appraising look down the length of her tan, plain-Jane suit. “Sugar, the last thing you need to lose is weight. You’re already a dead ringer for that model who’s named after some kind of moss.”

“*Kate Moss*? Are you telling me I look like a skinny chick with no ass?” Before he could answer, Willa’s eyes narrowed. “Obviously the rumor about you being a world-class charmer is a smoking pile of crap.”

Despite her barb, or maybe because of it, his mouth stretched into a grin. “I don’t remember you being this feisty. Damn, maybe I shoulda hit on you when I had the chance.”

Willa pressed the heel of her hand into the center of her forehead, smoothing her scowl lines. “Yeah, that ship’s long sailed out of the harbor, buster.” She dropped her palm and blinked at him, her mouth softening. “I have no idea where any of this is coming from.”

“Where what’s coming from?”

“*This*.” She made an agitated gesture that seemed to encompass her entire body. “The feistiness. It’s so not my thing.” A dark worry cloud shadowing her expression, she tugged the stool away from the counter and plopped onto its seat. “There’s something very wrong with me.”

“Why? Because you’re acting like a normal woman?”

“Yes.” Willa yanked her purse from the other stool and hugged it to her lap. “All I know is that I feel like a damn alien has taken over my head lately. I’m edgy, I can’t sleep, and sometimes I...”

“You what?” he prompted, leaning his elbows on the bar.

She shook her head. “Nothing. It’s not important. All of this is probably just an early life crisis.” She pillowed her chin in her palm, her nose scrunching—presumably in response to his questioning look. “My birthday is next Friday. The big three oh no.”

“Yep, you’re ancient. I can see why you’re wiggin’ out.”

“Bite me.” She jerked her head up and stared at him. “Did you hear that? I just said bite me.”

It took every ounce of control he possessed not to bust out laughing at her shocked whisper.

"I'm not even completely certain why people use that phrase." The worry lines etched into her brow deepened. "I, uh, don't actually want you to bite me, either."

Struggling to keep his expression deadpan, he nodded. "Glad you cleared that up." Behind Willa, he noticed a grizzled dude wearing a leather vest and a green-and-white ball cap mosey from the short hall that led from the restrooms. He frowned, trying to figure out where the guy had come from. Sure, it wasn't like he'd been keeping close intel on everyone in the restaurant, but there was no way anyone could have gone into the johns the past half hour without crossing directly in his line of vision. Course, maybe the guy had holed up in there with a newspaper and a mission. In which case, no force on earth would get him near the men's room any time soon.

The guy passed the far end of the bar, and Logan returned his focus to Willa just as she shuddered violently. Her purse tumbled to the floor, but she didn't seem to register it as a strange look washed over her face. Worried she was about to keel over dead or something, he hiked his boot on the floor rack beneath the bar and prepared to leap over the counter. She snapped to before he even ducked to his knees. Her stare shifted to her purse lying on the ground and the assorted contents that'd spilled as a result of the fall. "How did that happen?"

He gaped at her. "You don't remember?"

Her cheeks still featuring an unhealthy white pallor, she scrambled from the stool and scooped up her belongings, stuffing them methodically into her bag. She stood just as one of the busboys scurried up to the bar with a carryout bag. Tucking her purse strap over her arm, she eyed the packages of food like they were gifts directly bestowed from the gods, rather than scrawny Tommy Finkle.

"Is that for me?" Fumbling for her wallet, she dug out a twenty and passed it to Logan.

Folding the bill between his thumb and forefinger, he strode to the register. Willa clutched the carryout bag to her chest and dashed toward the exit. He skidded to a halt. "Hey, I've still gotta make your change."

"Keep it. I owe you for listening to my lunatic rantings."

Bemused, he watched her rush out the door. Shaking his head, he continued to the register and rang in her order, putting the change aside to later stuff in the tip jar. Almost as if he couldn't stop himself, he glanced in the direction of the ball-cap guy, who was sitting in a booth with Harper Coogan. Given the fact that Harper was a lowlife who saved up his precious time spent away from the bars to use at the racetrack, he couldn't help wondering if Harper's new *friend* might be a bookie.

Even while Logan pondered that question, the stranger shifted his attention from Harper and looked Logan dead square in the eyes. A strange sensation slithered along the nape of his neck, making the fine hairs there stand on end like iron filings attracted to a magnet. The wolf in him growled low in its throat, intuitively not liking the weird vibe coming off the guy.

Just as he was contemplating the risk of getting fired if he gave in to the urge to kick creepy dude out of the restaurant, the stranger broke his stare and smiled at Harper.

The heebie-jeebies holding Logan hostage slowly evaporated. It wasn't until the tightness in his chest eased that he realized he'd been holding his breath. His natural animal instinct telling him to stay on high alert, he kept his wary focus trained on Harper's companion in between stocking the bar for the evening crowd. It wasn't until the two men left Champions together that he finally figured out precisely what had gotten his wolf's hackles up. It'd sensed a mutual predator.

Only that dude hadn't been a wolf. Or anything else that he could readily determine. The fact that he couldn't figure out what the guy was—other than dangerous—left him uneasy.

It wasn't until Clarissa drove completely past Charmed Moon that she knew why she had no desire to go into work just yet. The entire time she'd been sitting with her father at the nursing home, her mind had been consumed with Seven.

The notion that the son of a bitch was culling victims from a pool of senior citizens made her nauseous. And furious.

Somehow, she needed to find a way to stop Seven from contracting those souls. But how exactly did she go about that when she didn't even know how the creature was able to convince its intended victims to agree to the unthinkable? She knew how Seven had gotten to her. Even knew how it'd gotten to her father. But surely not everyone Seven contracted possessed similar desperate circumstances.

For that matter, she still didn't quite understand precisely what had drawn her father into Seven's path, and vice versa. Considering that her father barely remembered what had happened, it seemed likely she would never get the answer to that question. Which meant she was flying blind, with minimal clues to give her the necessary ammunition against Seven.

There was only one option left. In order to bring down the bastard, she needed to discover its weaknesses.

Hitting the button on the GPS, she pulled up the address for Seventy-seven West Seventh Street. This time the coordinates loaded with no problem, and several minutes later, the Miata was bumping down the same dusty back country road she'd traveled the other day. Parking in plain sight of the mansion obviously would be a dumb move, so she found a place to pull off a quarter mile down the street that offered concealment behind a thick hedge of overgrown kudzu. She left the vehicle in its protected cubbyhole and took off across the field, intending to approach from the less visible south end of the property.

Once she reached the dense copse of overgrown cypresses and wax myrtle bordering the fence line, she ducked to a crouch, scanning the mansion for sign of movement. Just because Seven appeared to be

busy in town doing its despicable deeds for the day didn't mean the creature hadn't decided to take a break and pop home for a little R&R. And there was also the butler, Harrison, to consider.

She gritted her teeth, wishing—not for the first time in her life—that her magic came with the ability to cloak herself with invisibility. The red front door suddenly swung open and Harrison stepped out, a broom in hand. Although the porch seemed to be impeccably clean from what she could tell, the butler began vigorously sweeping the whitewashed floorboards. Ignoring the ache growing in her hamstrings due to her awkward position, she watched his brisk movements, silently wondering how long it'd take him to rid the veranda of nonexistent dust.

Just as her numb legs were on the verge of falling asleep, the butler halted, his expression annoyed. He carried on a heated one-sided conversation that she couldn't quite make out before he unexpectedly vanished.

Clarissa blinked. Okay, she'd suspected that Harrison was something other than human when he'd disappeared so quickly on her the other day. Seeing him perform a trick that even David Copperfield would be hard-pressed to replicate only confirmed her suspicions. Did that mean Harrison and Seven were of the same ilk? She stared intently at the empty spot where the butler had been only seconds ago. Well, whatever the hell Harrison was, she needed to take advantage of his absence. Now.

Jerking to her feet, she raced to the front gate. The scrolled latch lifted beneath her fingers, offering no resistance. Praying her luck would hold, she barreled up the wide stairway and tried the door. Fortunately, it appeared that Harrison hadn't thought to lock it before taking off. She hurried inside the house and surveyed her surroundings.

The entry was spacious but held no furniture. There were, however, several large oil paintings in ornate, gold-leafed frames. They all seemed to be from the Renaissance period and depicted the same dreary landscape—a desolate, barren wasteland with a towering mountain in the distance. She eyed the closest of the paintings, a shiver coursing down her spine. There was nothing outwardly evil about the scene but something about it still gave her the creeps. A creak sounded and she froze. It wasn't until a breeze whistled against the shuttered window and the snapping noise repeated that she realized it was only the house settling. Still, who knew when Harrison would be back?

Or Seven, for that matter.

Intent on getting as much snooping in as possible while she could, she systematically began checking the entire main floor. Strangely enough, each room turned out to be as empty as the entry. Moving her focus to the massive mahogany staircase, she worked her way upstairs. The upper level consisted of seven rooms. As always, Seven had taken the freaky symbolism thing to a brand-new level of weird. But unlike those downstairs, these rooms did contain furniture, at least.

With the exception of one room, each interior was tidy and dressed in various décor that stood in direct contrast with each other. She moved from one opulently appointed accommodation decked out with

French antiques and silk tapestries to its neighbor filled with minimalist, modern furniture and disturbing framed wall posters depicting devastating scenes of war. It was clear by looking around each space that its trappings probably offered a glaring clue as to which of Seven's personalities occupied it.

She walked into the last room. Though it was the largest of them all, it held the least accoutrements. Just as she was about to refocus her efforts on the previous spaces she'd rushed through, her attention fell on a book propped upon a tall, marble pedestal situated against the farthest wall. She crossed to the display and inspected the manuscript. It appeared to be ancient—much older than any of the tomes in her office at the coven house. And that was saying a lot, considering the age of some of the books in her collection.

Carefully flipping the delicate parchment to the opening page, she glanced at the single word written there in black ink. *Commedia*.

"Comedy?" She grunted. "Not the first title that springs to my mind." She turned back one page to the intricately detailed engraving of people in medieval garb being consumed by fire and hideous beasts. Yeah, that was always a chuckle buster. Shuddering, she closed the manuscript.

"Hello, sweet Clarissa."

She jumped, a cold wash of dread sluicing through her veins. Slowly she pivoted and locked gazes with the personality that had kissed her last night at Tatum's. The creature leaned against the doorframe, a sly smile tilting one corner of its mouth. "What a most unexpected surprise. I had no idea you missed my company this much."

Tamping down her instinctual fear, she stepped forward. "Hardly. I'm only here to demand why you've gone back on your word to leave my father alone."

"Have I?"

"I saw you at Lafayette today." She sucked in a deep breath when her nemesis's left eyebrow took a cocky upward slant. "Well, *one* of you, anyway. Our bargain was that you would stay away from my father."

"You misunderstand. Your father's soul was not the goal this morning."

"So you *were* contracting souls." Having her suspicions confirmed only stirred the furious brew of rage churning in her stomach.

The personality abandoned the doorway, its eyes flashing with an intensity that made her uneasy. "Never fear, sweet Clarissa. Yours will always be truly beloved above all others."

It took a moment to absorb the meaning behind the declaration. She gaped at the creature. The notion that it thought she'd be the slightest bit jealous of her place within its catalog of collected souls would have been laughable, if it weren't so damn disturbing.

"I see that you doubt my words." He shook his head with a tscking noise. "Have you not figured it out yet?"

She desperately wanted to resist the magnetic draw radiating from Seven, but the force tugged at her, ripping the words from her mouth. “Figured out what?”

“That unlike *her*, I will never choose another to replace you within my affections.” The silken purr of Seven’s voice held a certain mocking quality that complimented the creature’s sly expression.

She staggered backward, a fresh wave of nausea roiling in her stomach. The creature’s chuckle rang in her ears. “Have I struck a tender nerve?”

Her mouth dry and gritty, she swallowed hard. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No? Shall I refresh your memory?” Seven’s cold fingers trailed like ice down her cheek, causing her to flinch. “Forsyth Park. Your mother. The proof that verified everything you’d always suspected.”

The hated recollection rattled at its locked cage, desperate to escape. She couldn’t free it. Couldn’t grant it that power to once again destroy her. Completely. But Seven’s whisper-like kiss upon her cheek offered no comfort, no reprieve from her dirtied past.

“She never wanted you, sweet Clarissa. And she never will.”

Chapter Nine

Leaving Seven's mansion after their *chat* ended up cementing one painful lesson for Clarissa. Going up against the creature might not only be futile, but also more dangerous to her emotionally than she'd ever imagined.

Somehow the bastard knew exactly what to say to get to her. How to hurt her with a casual cruelty that left her reeling. By the time she drove back into the city, she still hadn't shaken off any of the ugly remnants of their encounter. All she could do was hope she could sneak into Charmed Moon without drawing attention.

That possibility shriveled when the loose floorboard in the rear hallway rattled her out. Both Marabella Blanchard and Clarissa's coven sister, Constance, glanced expectantly in Clarissa's direction.

Damn. Clarissa sent the back stockroom a longing glance before sighing and joining the other two witches in the center of the shop.

Constance shoved a shoulder-length lock of her jet-black hair behind her ear and frowned as she swept Clarissa with an assessing look. "There's something different about your aura today."

Clarissa swallowed, her skin going clammy, but before she could stammer through a reasonable lie, Constance's eyes widened.

"Holy shit. You got laid!"

Marabella choked on a cough, and Clarissa debated whether she should be relieved that Con hadn't picked up on her agitation over her conversation with Seven, or if she should conjure a black hole she could hurtle herself into. To make matters worse, she could tell from the flush of excitement riding Con's cheekbones that her coven sister wasn't going to drop the matter of her broken celibacy any time soon.

"Not only that," Constance said with a decisive nod. "It was the most incredible, curl-your-toes-and-light-up-a-cigarette-afterwards sex of all time."

Marabella's eyebrows winged upward. "Wow. You can tell all that just from her aura?"

The wattage of Constance's beaming grin intensified, nearly outsparkling the small diamond stud piercing her nose. "Yep. Clarissa is almost glowing. It's probably due to the fact that she's gone so long without having—"

Clarissa cleared her throat pointedly. "Could we please move on from this? I doubt Marabella wants to hear about my sex life."

“You’re kidding, right?” A snort fell from Marabella. “You’re talking to the girl who can’t *give* her damn virginity away. Please let me live vicariously through you.”

A wicked smile tipped Constance’s lips. “Yes, do tell. You can start with who your wonder stud is.”

“Nobody you know.” Desperately glomming onto the first thing that could pass as a potential distraction, Clarissa plucked a package of lemongrass incense cones from the tabletop next to her. “When did we get these?”

“That was the lamest avoidance tactic ever.”

Ignoring Constance’s droll quip, Clarissa dropped the cones back in place and headed toward the sanctity of the stockroom. There was no mistaking Con and Marabella’s covert whispering behind her. Despite her firm resolve not to let them get under her skin, she still winced. Undoubtedly the entire coven—hell, all of *Savannah*—would know before the end of the day that she’d finally gotten laid, as Constance so charmingly put it. She also wouldn’t be the least bit surprised if her coven sisters started taking bets on who her mystery lover was.

Her head starting to get that familiar ache again, she closed the door to the stockroom and leaned against it, her shoulders slumping. It wasn’t necessarily that she didn’t want anyone knowing about Logan.

So why did it feel like she was hiding their relationship like some dirty secret?

No, scratch that. This wasn’t a relationship, for goddess’s sake. It was sex. Big difference. Regardless, she’d never been one to overshare her personal business with others. As much as Con and Marabella had seemed comfortable teasing her about her sex life, the conversation only made her feel...exposed. Equally vulnerable as her encounter with Seven had left her.

A soft knock rattled against the door, and she almost yelped. Cursing her jumpy nerves, she pressed a hand over her heart, willing its frantic thumping to ease. “Yes?” The single word came out more as a croak than an inquiry.

“Um, it’s Marabella. Do you have a minute?”

The promise of some precious alone time dissolving before her, Clarissa sighed and opened the door. “Come on in.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate this.” Marabella stepped into the cramped interior, her gaze skipping over the countless boxes holding unchecked inventory. Her expression reminded Clarissa of a raccoon’s while staring down the headlights of an oncoming semi. “Wow, talk about a lot of...stuff.”

“Constance went on a buying splurge last month.” Something she needed to talk to her coven sister about. If they didn’t start scaling back, they’d have to rent a larger space.

Suddenly remembering that come next week, Charmed Moon would no longer be hers to worry about, a dull pain bloomed inside her chest.

For the sake of her sanity, she’d never obsessed over what would happen once Seven owned her soul. It’d been easier not to think about it. But with that day roaring down on her, she could no longer turn a

blind eye to her circumstances and how it affected not only her, but the others she'd sworn to serve and protect. Topping the list of harsh realities that she couldn't just sweep under the rug—the coven would be without a mistress. Nearly hyperventilating at the realization, she swayed, her vision going wonky for a moment as she struggled to breathe.

“Hey, are you okay?”

The sharp concern in Marabella's voice snapped Clarissa back to the present. She blinked before returning the younger witch's stare. “Y-yes, I'm fine.” Her fingers shaky, she smoothed her hair off her perspiring forehead. “I'm sorry, what exactly was it that you wanted?” Whatever it was, she prayed it'd be something easier to manage than the potential disaster looming on the horizon if she didn't find a replacement for her position in the coven within the next couple of days.

“If this isn't a good time, I can—”

“Marabella, trust me, if you need my help, ask for it now.”

“Okay, if you're sure.” Gnawing on her lip, Marabella cleared off a corner of the receiving desk so she could sit. “I've been mulling over the idea of opening up a web-based gift store, but now I'm envisioning what my bedroom would look like after *my* first buying trip.”

Clarissa frowned. “I'm sure Domino would be more than willing to free up some space so you wouldn't be forced to work out of your bedroom.”

“Please. My mother can barely stomach the idea of me investing my inheritance this way, much less encouraging my...” Marabella mimicked quote marks with her fingers, “...*harebrained idea* by clearing out the damn basement for my workspace.”

Despite her own considerable troubles, Clarissa couldn't help commiserating with Marabella. It must be hell living with Domino at times. As head leader of the witches guild, Domino was used to dishing out orders and having her will obeyed at all times. Her need for dominance over others didn't stop at the office, either. Marabella had practically been kept on a short tether from the time she was old enough to leave the cradle.

“Have you considered investing your money in a physical storefront? Like what we have here? Space wouldn't be an issue.” Wrinkling her nose, Clarissa scanned her surroundings. “Assuming you possess more self-control than Constance, that is.”

“But...I'm not sure I'd know what I was doing, running a physical store. What if I fell flat on my face?” Marabella caught her bottom lip between her teeth, the nervous habit giving away her self-doubts.

Clarissa wanted to throttle Domino for the part she'd played in aiding Marabella's insecurities. “So what if you did? Would it mean the end of the world as we know it? Probably not.”

Marabella remained pensive and quiet for a few moments, presumably pondering the pros and cons of what Clarissa had said. Finally she broke into a huge grin and hopped to her feet. “I'm going to do it.” Giving a happy little squeal, she flung her arms around Clarissa.

Unused to such profuse displays of affection, particularly from a female, Clarissa stiffened. Her hands cramping at her sides, she battled against the tension and uncertainty that automatically prodded her into panic mode. She knew how to *do* things for people. That was easy and didn't require her fumbling through socially awkward moments. But this? She had no clue how to react. And that realization only sent the tumultuous brew of anxiety already racing through her into hyperdrive.

Obviously unaware of Clarissa's inner turmoil, Marabella tightened her hug. "Thank you for having faith in me. I don't know what I'd do without you."

The heartfelt statement delivered an additional twist to the emotional vise clamping Clarissa's chest. Would every little thing amount to a reminder of her numbered days? The lives she would no longer be a part of?

Giving one last exuberant squeeze, Marabella scooted from the room, leaving Clarissa alone with her glum thoughts.

Shortly after six o'clock, Clarissa gave up the pretense of getting any further work done. Snicking the door shut to the storeroom, she tracked down Constance in the small kitchenette. She waited until her coven sister finished rearranging the tray of whatever freaky health-kick food she was sworn on this week before tapping on the doorframe. "Are you okay locking up tonight?"

"Yep." Constance licked her fingers, her eyes sparkling. "Hot plans tonight with the mystery stud?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Leaving Con to grin like an obnoxious fool all on her own, Clarissa stalked toward the back exit. The Miata waited in the small parking lot behind the cluster of stores. She climbed behind the wheel and, after keying the engine, retracted the roof. It was a perfect night for riding with the top down. The temps were mild, for once, and the sky held not even a hint of rain. If her mind weren't so damn backlogged with worries and frustrations, she might actually have enjoyed the drive ahead of her.

Shifting into gear, she pulled out of her space and approached the lot's exit. She hesitated, the temptation to take a left out of the drive luring her. That way led to Tybee. To Logan, and the promise of blissful forgetfulness in his arms. It'd be at least two hours before he'd leave work though. She couldn't wait for him in his driveway like some pathetic woman desperate for her man to come home. Not that he was her man, anyway. Besides, she didn't want to get into the habit of running to Logan whenever things got tough. If nothing else, she would end this last week of her life with her dignity intact.

She turned right, heading for the coven house. Less than twenty minutes later, she pulled into the long, snaking drive leading to the stately antebellum mansion that she'd called home for a good portion of her life. The coven house held a wealth of memories for her. Some good, some bad. All of them in their own way contributors that ultimately shaped her into the role of mistress. What would she have been

without that title, without this place? An empty shell without a soul? The possibility left a sour taste in her mouth.

Shoving her dismal musings aside, she parked within the garage, which was miraculously unblocked this time, and headed into the house. The sounds of laughter and animated chatter drew her to the parlor. She stepped inside the room, her gaze first landing on Jemma and Fiona, who were sitting on the floor amongst a veritable mountain of bridal magazines. The sheer number of the periodicals made Clarissa's head spin.

"Oh shit." Ms. Peach's loud outburst managed to slice through the audible activity in the room, and everyone's focus veered in Clarissa's direction.

All movement seemed to freeze, automatically stirring Clarissa's suspicions. "Okay, what's going on?"

"Nothing." Peach's expression turned shift. "Who said anything about stuff going on? We're just sitting here, not doing a damn thing."

Oh hell. Had Constance already ratted her out? She scanned the room, on the lookout for anything that resembled a betting sheet. A weird noise that could have been a squeak or an *arf* broke the weighty silence and Clarissa frowned. "What was that?"

"We didn't hear anything. Obviously you're imagining things."

Her suspicions buzzing a three-alarm warning, Clarissa glared at Peach. She opened her mouth, intent on getting to the bottom of things, just as the squeaky *arf* sounded again. This time she spied a flash of movement from the corner of her eye. She whipped her head in Jade's direction and caught the teenager trying to covertly maneuver her backpack behind the couch. Even from ten feet away, it was patently clear that the backpack was wiggling—an interesting feat that an ordinary, inanimate object shouldn't be capable of performing.

Gritting her teeth, Clarissa marched toward the couch and stared Jade down. "That better be an angry leprechaun stuffed in your bag."

Jade gave a nervous giggle. "Oh man, talk about a scarily accurate guess."

Clarissa held out her hand. "Give me the bag."

Nibbling her nail, Jade glanced in Peach's direction. Growling beneath her breath, Clarissa sidestepped the girl and swiped the bag from the floor. The unzipped flap slipped open and a small head with big floppy ears popped through the gap. Clarissa eyed the mini Floyd. "Sweet goddess, please tell me you shrank Floyd, and this isn't really his offspring."

"Um..."

Jade's sheepish tone giving her all the answer she needed, Clarissa reached into the bag and pulled out the puppy. Without getting too personal in her inspection, she quickly determined it was a female. Great,

just what they needed. More estrogen in the house. Apparently oblivious of the drama unfolding around it, the puppy snuffled Clarissa's hand before licking her finger.

"See, Izzy likes you."

Clarissa mentally rolled her eyes at Peach's declaration and the fact that she'd already named the dog. "She's probably just tenderizing my flesh for later. So does someone care to explain how mini Floyd ended up in Jade's backpack?"

Of course Peach was the first to speak up. "We figured you'd throw a hissy about having a new addition to the household."

They figured right. "Damn it, Peach." She held up the little ball of fluff, intending to make her stance clear. "Who's going to take care of it? Feed and bathe it, not to mention train it so it doesn't wet or poop in the house?"

"We'll take turns."

"Right. Because clearly you've done such a fantastic job with Floyd."

Peach's face scrunched in her typical stubborn frown. "You don't have the final say in everything that happens in this house."

The statement was like salt in an open wound, and yet another reminder that her place within the coven was tantamount to a thinly erected illusion vanishing before her eyes.

"We took it to a vote," Peach piped up again, oblivious of Clarissa's glum musings. "Izzy stays."

A smothering blanket of weariness settled on her shoulders. She was too tired, both mentally and physically, to argue anymore. Some battles simply weren't worth it. She set the puppy on the floor and stepped back, spreading her arms wide. "Fine. You want to keep her, go right ahead. But I'm not picking up her damn poop, understood?"

Peach blinked, struck mute for probably the first time ever in her life. Jade filled the silent void instead. "You mean it? We can really keep Izzy?"

Clarissa knuckled her temples and nodded.

"And Floyd," Peach demanded, finally finding her tongue. "Izzy needs a father figure. Someone to show her all the doggie ropes."

Sweet goddess, there was a terrifying picture. Two mutts tearing up the house. The tension in her head intensified, another reminder that giving in would be easier than listening to a minimum of two hours of nonstop complaining from Peach. "He's going to have to be fixed. No more mini Floyds running around here."

Peach pumped her fist in victory just as Griffin strode into the parlor. He raised his eyebrows. "What's the celebration?"

"We're keeping Izzy. And Floyd's getting neutered."

Griffin grimaced. “Somehow I doubt Floyd is going to be thrilled about that part.” He glanced back at Clarissa and did a double take. “Isn’t that the same outfit you were wearing yesterday?” Not surprisingly, his observation managed to draw everyone’s scrutiny to Clarissa’s clothing.

“Sure looks like it to me.” Peach’s gaze turned calculating. “Come to think of it, I don’t remember you coming home last night.”

Son of a bitch. Clarissa chewed the corner of her lip. “I did, but it was late. You were probably already in bed.” Her headache showing signs of getting worse, she scooted past Griffin and continued down the hall to the kitchen. Grabbing an ice-cold soda from the fridge, she escaped to her office and dug in her desk for the bottle of aspirin she always kept close by. She popped two tablets and chased them down with a swig from the soda before plopping onto her chair. Pressing the pop can against her forehead, she shivered, pleasurable goose bumps cropping across her flushed skin as both the aspirin and the can’s cool condensation did their thing.

Something soft and squishy brushed against the top of her foot, and she jumped. Corking her yelp, she glanced down and spied Izzy draped across her shoe. The puppy attempted to wedge its nose between Clarissa’s ankle and the upper strap of her high heels.

“You better not be thinking about peeing on my foot.”

Instead of doing that—thank goddess—the puppy started chewing on the tiny buckle on Clarissa’s ankle strap. She sighed. “Do you have something against Steve Madden? Honestly, those shoes cost me a pretty penny. And I kind of like them.” She was talking to a puppy like it understood what she was saying. Shit, she was more tired than she’d originally thought. Reaching down, she picked up Izzy and placed her a safe distance away. “Go on now. Shoo. Peach has a whole closet of shoes I’m sure she’d just love for you to wreck.”

Rather than obey, the puppy waddled back to Clarissa’s foot and made herself at home again. Clarissa sucked in a deep breath, channeling her inner Zen. Yeah, like that place remotely existed. “Really, I have stuff to do. You’re not helping me here.” She tried moving Izzy again, but the pup had apparently decided to become permanently attached to her foot. “Peach put you up to this, didn’t she?” Muttering beneath her breath, she scooped up the puppy. After giving Izzy a silent look of warning, she placed the dog on her lap, where Izzy immediately curled into a ball and rumbled a contented snore. For such a little thing, it was damn loud. There was no way in hell she’d ever get any work done now.

Left with not much else to occupy herself, Clarissa stroked her fingers through Izzy’s glossy fur. The throbbing in her temples began to lessen, and for the first time in what felt like forever, a tiny piece of calm clicked in place.

Her mouth crooked into a wry half smile. “Don’t think this changes anything. I’m still not picking up your poop.”

Sometime around eleven, Clarissa woke to the sound of a thump and a puppy-like growl.

“What the fuck? There’s a dog in your bed.”

She blinked the sleep from her eyes, barely making out Logan’s shadowy outline looming above her. “That’s Izzy, Floyd’s illegitimate offspring and apparently the newest member of the coven. The little faker wouldn’t stop whimpering until I let her up here with me.”

“That’s all it took to get in your bed? Shit, why didn’t I try that?”

Her vision slowly adjusted to the inky darkness, and she watched as Logan stripped off his T-shirt, jeans and briefs. “What are you doing?”

He bent and grabbed something from his pant’s pocket. A condom? Half a second later, the unmistakable rip of a foil packet verified her suspicion.

“What do you think?” The sexy promise in his low voice made her breath quicken, and her pussy grew damp.

Despite her arousal, a thread of panic shot through her. They couldn’t do this here, with all of the others within earshot. What if someone overheard them? She started to sit up, but her arms pulled tight over her head, preventing her from lifting. Mystified, she tried to move her hands, her bafflement increasing when they wouldn’t budge from the slatted headboard.

“It’s no use, shug. I tied you in good.”

She gaped at Logan’s dim outline. “You *tied* me to the bed?” She wasn’t sure what bemused her more—the fact that he had, or that she’d slept through it.

“Yep. Figured I’d forget about it, didn’t ya?”

“Forget?” She tracked back to the wicked picture he’d deliberately painted in her mind the previous night, when he’d had her pinned against the wall in the back hallway of Tatum’s. Her pulse accelerated. “You mean...”

“Yeah, baby. I’m in the mood for a late-night snack.” His form disengaging from the shadows, Logan stepped closer. He peeled the bedcovers down, and another small growl issued from Izzy, presumably her way of bitching at having her sleep disturbed. Logan patted the wad of bedding where the puppy was snuggled. “Hush, or you’re goin’ on the floor.”

Izzy immediately shut up, and Clarissa grunted. “What is that? Some kind of doggie mind control?”

Logan knelt at the foot of the bed, causing the mattress to dip. “She respects her alpha.” His hands caressed over her ankles before moving higher and smoothing along her calves. “Something you could use a lesson on.”

She wanted to snort at his outrageous arrogance—truly she did—but the heat of his palms on her flesh, along with the hypnotic glow of his amber irises as he leaned over her, played havoc with her brain and body. She attempted to distract herself by craning her neck and trying to see what he’d tied her with. The angle of her head made it impossible though.

“They’re a pair of stockings,” Logan said, obviously taking pity on her plight.

“Mine?”

He chuckled. “Well, they’re sure as hell not mine.”

“Logan, we can’t do this.” She attempted to inject a modicum of calm reason in her voice. Something she failed miserably at, considering the breathless way she’d whispered the words.

“It’s a little late to play hard to get, shug.” As if taunting her, Logan tickled the inside of her calf, making her squirm. “Besides, I like havin’ you at my mercy like this. No way I’m passin’ up the opportunity to do all kinds of wicked things.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to point out that this had nothing to do with playing coy, and everything to do with ensuring they wouldn’t get busted by her coven sisters. But once again, the blistering-hot promise in Logan’s tone had her protests dying in her throat. Instead, she swallowed and licked her lips before voicing the one question most prominently featured in her mind. “Wh-what kind of wicked things?”

Logan’s slow smile revealed his triumph. The bastard knew he had her. “For starters, I’m plannin’ on gorging on you. And I’ll take my sweet time with it.” His fingertips danced upward, flirting with the scalloped hem of her cotton sleep shorts. “You’ll beg me to go faster, beg me to make you come, but that won’t happen until I’m good and ready.”

The firm authority in his tone provoked another of those decadent shivers throughout her body, and her clit throbbed in anticipation of the delicious torture Logan was about to inflict on it. It occurred to her again that she shouldn’t like this, having the control stripped away from her.

So why was her pussy wetter than it had ever been? It must be the situation. Being trussed to her bed with her own damn stockings. Sweet goddess, she was truly warped.

“I can smell how aroused you are.” Logan’s voice was practically the consistency of gravel. Just the sound of it turned her on like crazy. He slid his palms beneath the legs of her shorts and cupped her ass before delving his fingers into the crease between her cheeks. With teasing lightness, he grazed over the sensitive tissue of her perineum. She held her breath as his fingertip dipped against her hidden pucker.

“I’m gonna fuck you here too. Not tonight. But soon.”

“What if I don’t w-want it?”

“Then I’d honor your decision to say no.” The pad of his finger stroked her, its soft, seductive glide coaxing a moan from her throat. “But I’m bankin’ on a different word comin’ from your mouth when I’m feastin’ on your pussy, gettin’ you hot and desperate for my cock. By the time I’m done, you’ll want me sinkin’ balls-deep in every single one of your holes. And I will, baby. I’ll give you everything you crave.”

The fire raging through her body threatened to consume her. She arched against his hand, a needy whimper escaping. “Logan...”

With a growl, he tugged the shorts off her and settled between her legs. She caught another flash of those glinting, predatory eyes before his head descended. Her body tensed, preparing for a thorough

devouring, but all she got was a teasing flicker from his tongue. She bit her lip to keep from wailing at him to lick her faster. Deeper. Remembering his promise to make her beg, she huffed in the back of her throat. Logan chuckled. Goddamn rat bastard.

He hummed against her slit for a millisecond, making her see stars. “Mm, you’re fuckin’ sweet.”

“More than I can say about you.”

“Aw, shug. That any way to talk to a guy while he’s eatin’ you out?”

“Please. You’re barely licking me.”

He lifted away from her, and she almost wept in frustration.

“The first lesson in respectin’ your alpha is to trust that he knows what’s best. For us both, Rissa.” The intensity in Logan’s gaze excited and frightened her. But it wasn’t him that scared her. No, what terrified her was the hidden compartment deep within her soul that read the possessiveness within his stare—and wanted to submit to it.

A tiny seed of panic starting to take root, she struggled against her bonds. Logan’s shadowed features darkened with desire. Something far more dangerous than a self-assured confidence that promised a few hours of mind-numbing pleasure lurked within the depths of his eyes. The responding tug within her heart increased her agitation, and she wrestled harder with the restraints. “Let me out of these.”

“No.”

“I’ll make you, if I have to.”

He shrugged. “Go ahead and whammy me. You’ll still be tied up.”

Panting furiously, she glared at him. He ignored her outrage and lowered his head before blowing a stream of air across her throbbing flesh. Her hips arched, and he caught her around the waist, burying his face in her pussy. He sucked on her clit, the pulsing of his tongue firm and commanding. She cried out at the unexpected intensity of it. Her heart racing, she prayed neither Peach nor Gloria—both occupying the neighboring rooms—had heard her and would decide to come and investigate.

Logan continued his fierce devouring until her thighs were shaking and she was forced to sink her teeth into her bottom lip to keep her loud moans caged. The looming orgasm crept closer, and her toes clenched in the tangled sheet. He backed off, and she gasped in disbelief as the climax slowly dissolved.

“I’m not leavin’ ya hangin’. But there’s a change of plans. I want you comin’ around me.” He stretched over her, his mouth seeking hers as his cock nudged her slit. She could taste herself on him. The notion that her essence somehow marked him as hers flitted through her mind, a concept that thrilled her as much as it alarmed her.

Sex. This was only—

He shifted between her legs, sinking a little deeper inside her. The orgasm she’d thought long gone reemerged with a ferocity that stole her breath. Logan bore down, his hands sliding forward to curl around

hers and press against the headboard slats. He gave a shallow pump, dragging out the ripples of exquisite pleasure. "That's it, baby. Come on my cock."

She shuddered and gasped, her entire body arching into Logan. A husky growl vibrated against her neck, followed by the distinct imprint of his canines pricking her flesh. His intention pierced her consciousness and she froze, her pulse skittering.

He was about to mark her as his mate. Permanently. His jaw locked into position, the soft whiskers of his goatee brushing her skin. Her paralysis of shock broke. "Logan, n-no."

Though his body stilled, his teeth didn't immediately release her. She gathered her magic close, ready to stop him that way, if necessary. Every inch of him was rigid, a tight coil of tension that was seconds away from snapping. His frustration a palpable thing, he reluctantly retracted his incisors and let go of her hands. Pushing up onto his elbows, he stared down at her, his eyes illuminated with a fierce, inner fire. She sensed his wolf close beneath the surface, edgy over having been denied its instinctual urges.

"Wrap your legs around my waist." The strain in Logan's voice hinted at just how desperately he struggled to control his animalistic side. She wanted to refuse, to make it clear that she would not abide him crossing any further boundaries tonight. Good goddess. A mating. What the hell was he thinking?

His facial muscles tightened until they appeared the consistency of stone. Deep inside her, his cock was no less hard. "Do it, Rissa."

Her resolve weakened at his smoky words. There it was again. That twisted desire to submit. No matter how much she tried to resist it, this was one battle of the wills she didn't stand a prayer of winning at the moment. Drawing her legs up, she hooked her ankles on top of his tensed buttocks. A spark of victory glinted in Logan's eyes. He withdrew, the head of his shaft almost slipping free, before he plunged back inside her in an agonizingly slow glide.

"Why do you fight what you damn well know you want?"

Unable to meet his penetrating gaze, she turned her face away. "I'm not fighting. This is me giving in, isn't it?"

"Not completely."

She knew he was referring to the mating attempt, but she refused to rise to the challenge in his voice. "Please, could we just..."

"Just what?"

Though it would sound crude, she had to say it anyway. "Fuck."

To Logan's credit, he didn't even bat an eyelash. Not that she was surprised. After all, she was speaking his language. He rocked his hips, thrusting deeper. "Is that all you think this is? Fucking?"

"Yes."

He nuzzled her neck. She flinched, expecting him to bite her, but instead he pressed a gentle kiss to her rapid pulse. "We both know this is more than sex."

“Please don’t say that.”

“Why?”

Because it’ll ruin everything. Wanting something that was impossible always did.

Leaning on one elbow, Logan cupped the side of her face. “Why, Rissa?”

Damn him for pushing her on this. “Don’t make this complicated.”

“What?”

“Us. It’s just sex. Yes, insanely fantastic sex. But that’s all.”

She expected him to be hurt or offended by her words. Possibly even give his domineering wolf free rein again. Any of those outcomes would have been easier to take than the tenderness in his eyes. His thumb traced the curve of her cheek. “I would never leave you. I’m not like her.”

His softly spoken declaration made her stiffen. She didn’t require any elaboration to know he was referring to her mother. Her ragged mental state couldn’t take any more mention of that damn woman today. “This has nothing to do with—” She swallowed, her throat unbearably thick and tight. With great force of will, she somehow managed to bury the tide of chaotic emotions that threatened to crush her. She met Logan’s gaze and read the sadness there.

“You can’t keep it locked away inside you forever.”

Yes, she could. It was easier than facing the painful memories that seemed bound and determined to haunt her. Although she knew she was taking the coward’s way out, she squeezed her legs around Logan and bowed her back, using her body to distract him.

“Rissa—”

“Please, just fuck me.” Her bindings made it impossible to touch him with her hands, so she resorted to grazing her nipples across his chest instead, earning his groan. He lowered his head and kissed her sweetly.

She didn’t want sweet. She wanted hot and consuming. The kind of headboard-banging sex that guaranteed momentary, blissful forgetfulness of all else. She sucked on his tongue, encouraging him without words to take her over the edge, to that place where the only thing that existed was mind-blanking pleasure.

A shudder wracked his big frame, announcing his defeat, and Logan slid one hand to her thigh. Bracing her, he powered into her, his cock stroking deep. He gave her everything he had and then some. The wet slapping of flesh on flesh and his lusty groans filled the room, filled her head, as he took her with a tender savagery. Each thrust of his hips sent her closer and closer to that decadent peak, until finally she broke, the climax fragmenting her into a million pieces.

Logan held her close, whispering words into her ear that bordered too close to loving endearments. She wanted to tune them out, deny their existence, but her traitorous body melted with each of his murmured breaths. He gave one last pump and came, his muscles quivering and his rugged features an open

canvas of ecstasy and...love. The moment was raw in its intimacy. The most beautiful and uninhibited display of emotions she'd ever witnessed.

It scared the shit out of her.

Only sex. It's only sex. She silently and frantically repeated that mantra over and over while Logan reached for her hands and gently unknotted the stockings. Once she was free, he kissed her wrists and rose from the bed. She watched him disappear into the bathroom, her dazed mind whirling with a million disturbing thoughts. By the time he returned, sans the condom, she still hadn't sorted out the chaos cycling through her mind. She eyed him warily as he approached, fully expecting him to jump back into his clothes and leave her to figure out things in solitude. He didn't. Instead, he ambled to the other side of the mattress and climbed beneath the quilt before wrapping his arms around her waist and spooning her.

"I'll leave before the sun comes up."

Her logical side wanted to balk at the idea of him staying, even while her body and her heart settled with a warm glow. Tomorrow she would remind herself what a terrible idea this was. But for now, the illusion of love and forever was too potent to resist. She stared into the darkness until the steady beat of Logan's heartbeat lulled her to sleep.

Chapter Ten

As promised, Clarissa woke alone in her bed. Even while she felt relief at not having to sneak Logan out beneath her coven sisters' unsuspecting noses, a strange emptiness sat in the middle of her chest. She touched the pillow that still bore the indentation of Logan's head. Without stopping to think about what she was doing, she rolled onto the pillow and rested her cheek in the shallow depression. Logan's scent surrounded her in a sensual, comforting cocoon. She closed her eyes, wishing she could stay there for the rest of the morning.

A cold, wet nose wiggled beneath her elbow, breaking her from the momentary spell. She frowned down at Izzy. "Let me guess. That's your way of saying you need to go out for a potty run." Sighing, she scrambled from the sheets and slipped on her black silk kimono robe before scooping up Izzy and hurrying downstairs. Once outside, she gingerly settled the puppy on the first available patch of lawn and patted its rump encouragingly. "Okay, do your thing."

Izzy did the mandatory sniffing of a few grass blades before squatting. A ridiculous sense of pride washed over Clarissa, and she stuffed her hands in the pockets of her robe to keep from snuggling Izzy when the puppy looked up at her with those droopy eyes and lolling pink tongue. "All right, I admit it. You did good. Keep it up, and you and I just might become best friends for the few days I'll still be around." She shot a quick look over her shoulder to ensure no one had overheard.

After she was reasonably assured Izzy's potty break was finished, she carried the pup back inside the house and headed to the kitchen. Gloria and Peach seemed to be the only ones up and about. While Gloria blended what looked like an incredibly unhealthy amount of butter into the mixing bowl resting on the counter, Peach provided a running commentary courtesy of the morning paper in between slurping down what was probably her fifth cup of coffee. As if they'd perfectly choreographed the move, both women stopped what they were doing and eyed Clarissa while she made tracks toward the coffeepot.

Clarissa set Izzy on the floor so she could remedy her caffeine deficiency, and the puppy immediately occupied itself chewing the toe of Clarissa's slipper. Obviously this shoe fetish Izzy had didn't bode well for the future state of everyone's footwear. Taking a cautious sip from her steaming mug, she turned and noticed that Gloria and Peach were still staring at her. To say they were giving her a complex would be a major understatement. "What?"

Peach's eyebrows scrunched behind the frame of her bifocals as if she were trying to figure out some baffling mystery. "You were smiling just now."

Gloria nodded her exuberant agreement. "It's true. And weird, considering you don't do smiles this early in the morning."

Clarissa opened her mouth, fully intending to point out how ridiculous that statement was, but Peach snapped the newspaper shut, her expression sliding closer to one of deep suspicion. "You're also glowing."

Glowing? Somehow Clarissa resisted the urge to shove up the sleeves of her kimono to check if her skin was indeed radiating after her night with Logan. Wouldn't it be just her luck that her magic would rat her out like that? She quickly racked her brain for a good lie to throw Peach off track. "Hm, must be my new body lotion." Tucking her hair behind her ear, she shuffled closer to the work island, being careful not to step on Izzy. She nodded toward the untended mixing bowl. "Whatever you're working on smells delicious."

The compliment managed to do the trick of changing the subject and distracting Gloria. The cook reached for the nearby bottle of vanilla extract and effortlessly whisked several drops into her creation. "I'm experimenting on different frostings for Jemma's wedding cake. Right now it's a tie between the raspberry vanilla and the white chocolate hazelnut."

Clarissa's stomach growled, apparently putting a vote in for both. Grimacing, she plunked her coffee mug down and went in search of the loaf of bread so she could make some toast. While she dug the mason jar of Gloria's homemade apricot ginger preserves from the fridge, Peach resumed reading the paper out loud to anyone who cared to listen.

"They're predicting rain this weekend. Won't happen though. Those moron meteorologists and their fancy-pancy computers wouldn't know the weather if it bit them in the ass. Plus my arthritic knee isn't acting up. That's all the predictor I need." Giving an assertive cluck of her tongue, Peach flipped to the next page. "Well, hell. Looks like there've been two more spontaneous coma cases. At this rate, it's turning into a damn epidemic."

Clarissa twisted the top off the preserves and frowned. "Spontaneous comas?"

Peach angled the paper in Clarissa's direction. "The latest two casualties are no one I'm familiar with. Whole damn thing is plenty weird."

Her curiosity winning out over her rumbling tummy, Clarissa ignored the toast still waiting for its topping and instead picked up the newspaper, quickly scanning through the lead story. According to sources at St. Joseph's hospital, they were indeed dealing with an odd and completely unexplainable series of comatose cases that'd hit a scattering of Savannah residents within the past few days. Other than their present medical condition, none of the patients appeared to have any common linkage, which only had the doctors further baffled.

"I bet the government's behind it," Gloria offered as she scraped a spatula around the edges of the bowl.

Peach snorted. “You’ve been sniffing too much oven cleaner. Obviously it’s aliens. Those damn ETs have finally figured out mutilating cows is getting them nowhere, and they’ve decided to move up the food chain.”

Gloria stopped blending the frosting ingredients, her eyes growing huge. Clarissa sent Peach a look of warning. “I really doubt it’s aliens. Or anything else you need to worry about. So how about we put aside the conspiracy theories for the time being?”

Peach grumped beneath her breath before returning to her perusal of the newspaper. She spouted off a human-interest piece about a group of high-school band students trying to raise funds for a trip to Germany, but it was obvious that she was hugely let down that there was no possible alien-abduction angle to the story. Rolling her eyes, Clarissa finished slathering her toast with the preserves and carried her skimpy breakfast to her office. Izzy tagged along and used her little whimpering trick to earn a comfy spot in Clarissa’s lap. Once settled in place, the puppy set about weaseling Clarissa out of half a slice of toast before curling into a ball and dozing. Apparently all that begging and shoe chewing was exhausting.

Scooting her chair closer to the desk, she opened her day planner and eyed the massive amounts of entries with an impending sense of weariness. Just because her days were numbered didn’t mean everything else was coming to a standstill. No, the exact opposite. With the upcoming Autumn Equinox festival less than a month away, there were a gazillion things that needed to be done, like yesterday.

The packed schedule staring back at her was a glaring reminder that the coven would have a near-impossible chance of surviving without a mistress. Her top priority was finding a replacement, and soon. She rubbed her temples, the entries in the planner blurring on the page. The most logical choice would be Fiona. Besides being the most responsible of the local coven sisters, Fiona held the distinguished honor of being the great niece of Gertie Howard—Clarissa’s predecessor and former mentor.

Gert’s legendary dogged persistence was the prime reason Clarissa had decided to take over as head mistress when Gert announced she was retiring to a life of leisure.

She resisted the urge to snort. Who was she kidding? It’d pretty much been *Gert’s* decision that she take over. And once Gertie Howard made her mind up about things, life had a funny way of aligning itself to do her bidding.

Maybe that’s what she should do. Channel her inner Gert so she could convince Fiona that taking over as coven mistress would be the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. Yeah, that plan sounded much better than the alternative—begging on bended knee, followed by bribery involving excessive amounts of chocolate-covered macadamia nuts, Fiona’s personal Kryptonite. She tapped her pen against the planner in contemplation. The phone resting on the corner of her desk suddenly released a shrill ring, jerking her from her musings and causing Izzy to twitch and give a sleepy *woof*.

Tossing aside the pen, she gave Izzy a reassuring pat with one hand and snatched the phone from its cradle with her other. “Hello?”

“Clarissa? It’s Marabella. I hope I’m not calling too early, but I was too excited to wait. I think I’ve found the perfect place to set up shop. It’s on River Street, with the most fabulous views and location. And it even comes with its own upstairs apartment. Everything is telling me that I’m meant to sign on the dotted red line so I can get the keys and start living my life.”

The sound of Marabella sucking in a deep breath carried across the line and Clarissa used the opportunity to gently nudge into the younger witch’s tidal wave of exuberant chatter. “Yes, that all seems better than wonderful, but do you think maybe you should sit on it for a day or two? At least let someone you trust look over the lease agreement first.”

“Well, now that you mention it, I was sort of hoping you could help me out with that. Pretty please? With cherries on top?”

Clarissa stared at the opened day planner and the endless other things she should be concentrating on at the moment. Giving a resigned exhale, she picked up her pen so she could jot down the address for the River Street shop. “Do me a favor and make sure those cherries are soaked in plenty of brandy.”

Exactly an hour later, Clarissa left Marabella to finish signing the lease agreement on her newly acquired storefront and walked outside. She dug her keys from her purse and swore beneath her breath when they slipped from her fingers and fell on the sidewalk. Stooping, she reached for the key ring, but her attention snagged on the display in the front window of River Front Books, stalling her in her tracks.

Staring back at her was a framed print of a priest in red robes clutching a book. The astonishing part—and what held her complete attention—was the mountain in the distance. It bore a striking resemblance to the one that’d been depicted in all of the paintings in Seven’s mansion.

Her heart pounding, she blindly dropped her keys back into her purse and pushed open the door of the bookstore. An elderly gentleman with kind eyes and snowy white hair offered her a welcoming smile. “What can I do for you, young lady?”

“Your display in the front window. What is it for?”

“Ah, you’re referring to our Dante collection. He’s our featured author and poet of the month. Are you familiar with his works?”

Unconsciously gripping her purse tighter, she shook her head.

“Then I would be honored to give you a brief tutorial.” Behind his thick spectacles, his eyes twinkled. “Don’t worry. I promise not to make this too dull or boring.”

He offered his arm in a gallant, courtly manner, and Clarissa allowed him to lead her toward a section of the store a few aisles back from where they’d stood. The smell of old leather and parchment wafted to her nose, embracing her in a familiar, soothing hug. Her thoughts immediately turned toward the massive volumes of books in her office back at the coven house and the endless hours of enjoyment she’d found between their pages. There’d been numerous times when she’d considered those books her best friends.

Particularly during those bleak, painful years prior to her leaving home to live permanently at the coven house. The years that refused to budge from the cobwebbed recesses of her memory, despite her best efforts to exorcise them. Unnerving silence snapped her back to the present and she realized her companion was looking at her expectantly. She dropped her gaze to the book in his hands and read the title. *The Divine Comedy*.

It took several heartbeats for her brain to register the connection. Comedy. *Commedia*.

“Dante’s most famous masterpiece.” The man passed the book to her. “It’s heavy reading, but well worth it.”

Her fingers trembling, she brushed the spine with her thumb. Could it be possible? Did this book hold a connection to the one back at Seven’s mansion? And if it did, was there some clue inside it that could shed some light on Seven? Help her defeat it? Almost afraid to believe any of her hopes could be answered, she peered up at the shopkeeper. “I’ll take it.”

Chapter Eleven

A hard rap on the cottage's sliding glass doors bolted Logan from a sound snooze. "Wha?" Shaking the sleep gremlins from his head, he stared blearily at the fuzzy outline of Kegan Justice through the pane of glass. The bear shifter had his fist raised, clearly ready to pound the door again. Logan leapt off the couch with an irritated growl. Fucking heads were gonna roll for waking him from a damned good sex dream about Clarissa.

He stalked to the sliding glass door and after springing the lock, rammed it open. Kegan's gaze immediately veered to the obvious tent pole in Logan's shorts and he grimaced. "Jesus, could you put that thing away?"

"What the hell are you doin' here, Justice?"

"Constance bought a new display cabinet."

Logan scrubbed his forearm across his jaw. "That naturally brought you here why?"

"You own the truck that's going to haul the old unit to the donation center."

What a fucking coincidence. He also owned the balls that were undoubtedly gonna be busted in the process of hefting the damn cabinet. He was half tempted to tell Kegan to find another willing chump, but then he remembered that Clarissa was supposed to be helping Constance mind the store today. "Give me a sec to throw on some clothes."

Sweeping his attention once again to Logan's groin, Kegan grunted. "Yeah, we don't need you taking out low-hanging power lines with that fuckin' thing."

"Blow me." Tuning out Kegan's excessive cursing in reply to that invitation, Logan traipsed to his bedroom and got dressed in record time. Less than five minutes later, he and Kegan were cruising toward Savannah in the pickup.

A companionable silence passed before Kegan cleared his throat. "Do you think it'd be weird if I asked Constance to be my date for Griff and Jemma's wedding this weekend?"

Gripping the steering wheel with one hand, Logan slid the bear shifter a sidelong glance. He'd wondered how long it'd take Kegan to grow some cojones when it came to his unrequited crush on Constance. "Nope. You should do it."

"Yeah? You don't think she'll laugh in my face?"

"Oh, she'll definitely laugh in your face. But you should do it anyway."

“Dickhead.” A chuffing noise came from Kegan as he crooked his arm on the back of the passenger seat. His assessing look made Logan slightly nervous. The one thing he didn’t want was a grizzly bear eyeing him with invisible wolf chops hovering over his head like in those fucking cartoons.

“Have you ever tried hooking up with Clarissa?”

The question was so opposite what he’d been expecting that he nearly choked. “Uh, yeah.” It popped out before he could think twice about it.

“Any luck?”

His mind immediately tracked to last night, when she’d been squirming and gasping and coming beneath him. He instantly got hard again. “I don’t kiss and tell.”

Kegan snorted. “You don’t hafta. We all know the ice mistress wouldn’t let no one in her life, much less her bed.”

Logan slashed his gaze in Kegan’s direction again, an angry growl rolling from his throat. “Fuckin’ call her that again and I’ll rip your tonsils out through your nose.”

Kegan’s sandy blond eyebrows winged upward. “Whoa. Didn’t mean no disrespect.”

“It goddamn *is* disrespectful. And she deserves better than that.”

A hot wash of shame colored Kegan’s cheeks. Hanging his head, he stared at his lap. “You’re right. Clarissa’s good people.” He peeked at Logan before staring out the windshield. “I’m shutting up now.”

“Good.” But the damage was already done. Not only was he pissed at the slight against Clarissa, he couldn’t shake Kegan’s damning words out of his brain. Shit, he knew better than anyone that Clarissa had let someone into her bed. The bruise on his ass where the heel of her foot dug into him while he’d fucked her senseless damn well proved it. But that didn’t mean she was ready to let him into her heart.

She’d stopped him from mating with her. Not only that, she’d panicked over it. True, he’d jumped that gun way too fast. Too soon. But every instinct in him had howled to make the love and devotion that fired his blood a permanent testimony and bond.

Never in his entire life had he come remotely close to giving in to that natural inclination of his species. Hell, before last night he’d half convinced himself the lupine desire to mate for life was only a myth perpetrated by romantics and drunk wolves looking to get laid. But now he knew the awful truth. Worse, he was its newest victim.

He was fuckin’ screwed. And not in a good way.

“Shit, you just missed the exit.”

Logan jerked his focus to the rearview mirror. Sure enough, he’d overshot the cross street that led to the shopping district where the coven’s store was located. He hung a right at the next available intersection and zigzagged back to Broughton Street. Five minutes later, he pulled to a stop in front of Charmed Moon. While Kegan made a call on his cell, Logan climbed from the pickup and took his time rounding the vehicle and striding toward the shop’s entrance in an effort not to appear overly eager. Unfortunately, he

ruined his vibe of macho coolness the instant he walked inside the front entrance and didn't see Clarissa anywhere. "Where is she?"

Constance looked up from the box she was unpacking and frowned. "Where's who?"

"Clarissa."

Constance eyed him with a deep, penetrating stare that also left him a tad uncomfortable and sweating from his brow. For shit's sake, did she and Kegan practice that look together? It was fuckin' freaky. Finally a crafty grin slipped across her face. "She had to run an errand with Marabella, but she should be showing up any minute now."

He feigned a casual shrug. "I was just surprised not to see her."

"Ah, of course." Constance's eyes sparkled like she was the soul recipient of an amazing secret. "By the way, your aura is extra bright and *glowy* today."

His forehead scrunched. "That's, uh, good to know."

Gifting him a beaming grin, she rose to her feet and brushed off the knees of her black leggings. "I've got to grab the dolly and straps from the stockroom. Be right back." Whistling a cheery tune, she skipped toward the rear of the store.

The bells dinged behind Logan, announcing Kegan's arrival. He turned and frowned at the bear shifter. "What the hell does it mean if my aura is bright and glowy?"

Kegan scratched his whisker-shadowed jaw. "Damned if I know. And I don't think glowy is an actual word."

Their conversation plowed to an abrupt halt when Constance reappeared with the dolly. She bent and attached one end of the straps, flashing some generous cleavage in the process. Kegan's tongue damn near dragged on the floor, and Logan shook his head. *Fuckin' pathetic.*

The loose floorboard near the back hallway creaked, and Logan looked up just as Clarissa walked into the room. A raucous chorus of hosannas exploded inside his heart. Shit yeah. He was definitely one screwed pooch.

"Sorry I'm late, Con—" The rest of Clarissa's apology seemed to logjam in her mouth as her gaze finally locked with his. She bit her lip, her cheeks slowly going pink. "You...I didn't know you were stopping by."

"I'm here to help move some stuff." And make a total love-struck ass of himself while he was at it. Hell, clearly Kegan wasn't the only one who deserved a gold star in that department.

Clarissa continued staring at him for a long moment before she broke from whatever trance had held her hostage. "Oh. Well. Thank you for lending a hand. I should probably...uh...do things. Somewhere." She winced and muttered something beneath her breath that could have passed for a cuss.

A snicker floated from Constance. Shooting her a hard glare, Clarissa pivoted and marched toward the stockroom, her head held high.

“The display unit I want moved is over here.” Constance trotted toward the far wall. “I’ve already cleared it off, so half the work is already done, right?”

Both he and Kegan grunted, earning a sheepish grin from Constance. Inching between them, she slung an arm around their waists and squeezed them in a tight group hug. “Have I told you lately how super awesome you guys are?”

Logan recognized a blatant case of ass kissing when he saw it, but Kegan only gave a sappy grin. Given how he’d nearly worn the same expression two minutes ago when Clarissa walked into the room looking like his every fantasy come to life, he decided not to give Kegan too much crap. Of course, that didn’t mean he couldn’t silently call him a schmuck. Which he did.

The old display unit actually proved to not be as much of a ball-buster as he’d feared. But the two-ton behemoth that Constance purchased was a whole other matter. In fact, he and Kegan dropped enough F bombs while positioning it that Clarissa came out from hiding to see what all the fuss was about. Having her mere steps away from him, the heat of her gaze like a constant caress across his charged skin, was pure torture. Particularly since he wanted nothing more than to sweep her into his arms and bury his nose in her fiery hair until he was properly drunk on her.

Kegan said something that he didn’t quite catch. He leaned sideways, trying to see around the edge of the unit. “What?”

“You got a good grip on that side, right?”

Before he could reply that he didn’t, the entire cabinet tilted precariously toward him. “*Son of a bitch.*” Moving fast, he slammed his shoulder into the upper shelf, leveraging all his weight against the solid mass of wood. The unit groaned and creaked in protest before tipping safely into place. He stepped back a pace, his hand automatically reaching for his throbbing left shoulder.

Kegan popped his head around the corner of the cabinet, his face mottled with sweat. “I thought you said you had a damn grip.”

He could think of a million responses to Kegan’s stupid-ass assumption, most of them involving the use of more F bombs, but the sudden and unexpected gentle probing of fingers along his aching deltoid muscle stalled him. Clarissa’s fresh spring scent filled his nostrils, and he shivered in unrestrained pleasure while she continued to knead his flesh. The soft intonation of her chanted spell drifted to his ears, flowing in a melodic pattern that wove within the very fibers of his muscles and blossomed into a soothing buffer of warmth. Almost immediately, the ache vanished.

“Better?” she whispered.

“No,” he lied in hopes of keeping her there, touching him for eternity. A knowing smile curved her mouth, and she dropped her hand.

Just as he was about to curse his rotten luck, Constance tossed a bottle at him. He caught it and gave her a blank stare.

“Charmed massage oil. One of our best sellers.” Constance waggled her brows. A wicked chuckle escaping her, she darted her eyes in Clarissa’s direction. “I’m sure you can find a willing volunteer to give you a rubdown later.”

A lengthy look passed between the two witches, during which Clarissa’s body stiffened and Constance’s grin widened. Finally Clarissa broke the stare and muttered “*Shit*” before stalking off. He waited exactly ten heartbeats before following after her. She was pacing just beyond the threshold of the stockroom, her expression suggesting that she’d just discovered the world was ending tomorrow. Shoving her fingers through to the roots of her hair, she peered at him. “Constance knows you’re my wonder stud.” She returned his stare, her cheeks flushing. “Her words, not mine.”

Well damn. Seems he needed to up his game. “Is it so horrible that she knows about us?”

Her gaze dropped, giving him all the answer he needed. A sharp pain stabbed him in the vicinity of his heart. “Are you fuckin’ ashamed of sleepin’ with me?”

She jerked her head up, her mouth falling open. “Good goddess, of course not. I—I just hate people knowing my personal business and speculating.”

“On what?”

She stared at the ground again and hugged her chest. He didn’t know what twisted his insides more. The shaky vulnerability in her voice, or the fact that she didn’t want anyone to know about their relationship. And goddamn it, it *was* a relationship. Corraling his frustration, he plunked the bottle of massage oil on top of the stack of boxes and crossed to Clarissa, taking her into his arms the way he’d been longing to do since stepping foot into the shop. “Whatever you’re scared of, Rissa, don’t be. I’m not goin’ anywhere.”

Rather than the reassurance he’d hoped for, a shadow of gloom crept into her eyes, and she swallowed. Desperate to detour her from whatever dark path her mind was taking, he lowered his head and kissed her. A breathy sigh parted her lips, granting him the perfect opportunity to glide his tongue over hers. After the briefest hesitation, her hands smoothed upward across his torso before slipping behind his neck. He cradled her waist, holding her close against him. For several long, delicious moments, he explored her mouth, basking in the soft gasps she made. His hands trailed to her breasts and cupped them through the layers of her bra and knit top. “I’ve got to leave for work, but the entire duration of my shift I’m gonna be fantasizin’ about gettin’ these luscious babies slick with that massage oil so you and me can play some naked Twister.”

Her laugh didn’t quite defeat her groan. She tried to push away from him, but he tightened his grip, his mouth sliding toward the underside of her jaw. “I get off early tonight. Come by around eight.”

“Why? So you can get off again?”

“Yep. Don’t worry, you’ll be getting off also. Too many times to count.”

“Hm, in that case, maybe I better bring my calculator.”

He nibbled her earlobe. "Doubt it can add that high."

"Nice to see you've finally gotten that ego under control."

Her dry sarcasm was precisely the response he'd been hoping for. Whatever sadness that'd imprisoned Clarissa earlier had vanished. The world was right again.

"I'll see you later." He kissed her one last time before reluctantly releasing her from his grasp. "Skip wearing underwear, though. Saves time."

One ginger eyebrow lifted. "Maybe I should ditch clothes all together."

A hot lick of lust curled in his groin at the mental image that sprang to mind. "Even better." Willing his hard-on to dissipate, he turned on his heel, swiped the bottle of massage oil and strode from the room.

Once in the main section of the store, he found himself the subject of Constance's amused scrutiny. "Wow, your aura is practically blinding me." While she made a mock show of shielding her eyes, Kegan grimaced in the direction of Logan's fly. "For crying out loud, does that thing have a damn off switch?"

Deciding it was way past time for some payback for the wisecracks and almost getting squashed by a cabinet, Logan shot Kegan a wolfish grin. "Might want to shut up before I decide to tell Constance how you're too chickenshit to ask her out."

His face turning redder than an overcooked lobster, Kegan jerked his gaze to Constance, who was gaping at her familiar like he'd sprouted a foot from the center of his forehead. Snapping his focus back to Logan, Kegan mouthed the word *Motherfucker* and stormed outside. The front windows afforded a more than adequate view as the bear shifter climbed into the pickup and banged the door shut before cracking his knuckles and glaring at Logan.

Giving the dazed Constance a chipper smile, Logan strode toward the exit. And no doubt one hell of an ass beating.

But damn if it wasn't worth it.

Chapter Twelve

Clarissa fully expected Constance to harass her about Logan at some point during the two hours they'd spent cataloging inventory together. The fact that her coven sister hadn't brought him up at all left her a tad worried. And on guard. Knowing Constance, she was waiting for the most inconvenient moment to spring it on her. So she was more than relieved when the front door chimed and Fiona strolled inside, Jade trailing behind her with a sulky pout.

Jade gave an angry jerk to her backpack. "Just so you know, you're the meanest sister on the planet."

"Wrong. I came in second to Tula Jasper. She's got the award sitting on her mantel if you don't believe me."

Her eyes hotter than lasers fueled by the wrath of a million petulant teenagers, Jade glared at Fiona's back before flouncing in the direction of the kitchenette. Soon as Jade was out of earshot, Fiona flung out her arms. "So help me, if I possessed even a fraction of the melodramatic histrionics as Jade when I was her age, I owe Aunt Gert a whopper of an apology."

The mention of Gertie automatically reminded Clarissa of the important discussion she needed to have with Fiona regarding the future of the coven. She felt kind of bad burdening Fiona with more problems when she obviously had enough on her plate with Jade's current drama-queen enactment. Still, it had to be done. She eased her guilty conscience by promising herself to do whatever she could to help Fiona sort out the problem with Jade. Crossing to Fiona, she cocked her head toward the rear hallway. "I need to talk to you."

Fiona nodded and followed Clarissa to the stockroom. Once inside, Clarissa shut the door and latched it. She caught Fiona's bemused expression. "This way we'll have privacy."

Though most coven business wasn't conducted behind closed doors, fortunately Fiona didn't question the atypical shift in procedure. "I apologize for the outburst earlier. Jade's pissed at me because I nixed her idea of partying in New Orleans this Samhain by herself."

Clarissa wrinkled her nose. "Good goddess, what is she thinking? That's the last thing a sixteen-year-old needs to be doing all on her own."

"My words exactly. Only now she thinks that I'm the wickedest witch this side of the Mississippi." Fiona tugged at one of her shoulder-length platinum-blond locks. "Maybe I should dye my hair black and spray paint my skin green to complete the transformation."

Despite Fiona's obvious frustration at dealing with Jade, a pang of envy still splintered through Clarissa. There were many times growing up when she'd wished for a sister. Someone other than an imaginary friend to share her private turmoil with. Someone to love her, and tell her she wasn't merely the byproduct of an alcoholic binge and a busted condom. Tuning out the cruel, taunting voice inside her head, she focused on Fiona. "Do you want me to talk to Jade?"

"I doubt it'll do any good. Best course of action is to let her marinate in her little pity fest for a while until she comes around or digs up another reason to detest the very sight of me. Whichever comes first." Fiona's lips curved up on one corner. "God deliver me from teenagers."

The guilt started to gnaw at Clarissa again, making *her* feel like the wickedest witch of the east for the additional responsibility she was about to heap on Fiona. Tempted to conjure an aspirin—or a bottle of strong liquor—she rubbed her temple.

"Hey, you all right?"

She met Fiona's concerned gaze. *I have no choice.* The coven couldn't survive without a mistress. Still, she was reluctant to just blurt out the request. "Do you ever regret not throwing your hat into the ring when Gert announced her retirement?"

Fiona's forehead scrunched, indicating her bafflement at the question. "No. I wasn't cut out for it back then. Besides, it was more than obvious you were the better choice. Gert understood that, and I happily agreed."

Crap, this was going nothing like she'd rehearsed it in her head. "Hypothetically speaking, you'd be willing to take over as mistress if anything happened to me, right?" She stared Fiona down, praying she hadn't sounded as desperate as she felt.

"Well, yeah, I guess." Fiona's already fair complexion paled significantly. "You're not about to tell me you've been diagnosed with an incurable disease, are you?"

"Uh...no."

The breath Fiona had apparently been holding escaped in a gust, and Clarissa rushed to drive home her point before Fiona became too complacent with the idea of Clarissa's presumed longevity. "But that doesn't mean a freak accident couldn't happen."

"What, like a random piano falling on you from a second-story window?" Fiona made a scoffing noise. "I don't think there's any cause to worry about this."

"Yes, there is." She practically shouted the rebuttal, her heart pounding under the stress of getting Fiona to take the conversation seriously. "We need to devise an emergency plan to safeguard the coven. For goddess's sake, even the President of the United States has a backup in case he's unable to do his job."

Fiona frowned at her. "Is that your way of suggesting you want me to be your acting vice-president?"

It wasn't exactly what she'd been getting at, but it was better than spending the next hour trying to get Fiona to see reason. "Yes."

“Do I get a bigger bedroom?”

“Err...sure.”

Fiona broke into a smile and held out her hand. “Then I accept the position, madam president.”

Okay, clearly she should have considered the bigger-bedroom angle sooner. Relief flooding her, she sealed the agreement with a shake.

“Are we all done here? Because I need to go see if Jade has resorted to fashioning a voodoo doll of me from paper towels and toothpicks yet.”

Nodding, Clarissa stepped back while Fiona sprang the door lock. A second later, she found herself alone in the room. Despite having one less heavy stone of responsibility tied to her, she still felt uneasy, as if she were walking around in a gray haze while her life hurtled toward an inescapable end.

She’d made a lot of stupid choices in the past. The biggest one of all was directly responsible for the current mess she was in. But she couldn’t regret her decision to offer her soul as collateral for her father’s. Not after the part she’d played in contributing to his downfall.

Another weighty stone—this one of shame—fell into place as she recalled the spiral of intoxication and madness he’d been swept into during that horrible period of time. It’d been the worst she’d ever seen him. Far more frightening and devastating than the countless occurrences when he and her mother tumbled into their week-long benders in their constant, toxic quest for self-destruction.

If there was any blessing to the Alzheimer’s that’d become the state of his existence, it was having that particularly dark month wiped clean from the slate of his memory. He was a changed man. A new one, in many ways. She would gladly barter her soul a million times over to keep him safe. Not just from Seven, but from himself.

The reminder of Seven instantly brought her mind around to the book she’d brought in with her earlier. Even though she’d desperately wanted to crack it open and start investigating, she’d left it untouched on the receiving desk, figuring she’d have to wait until later. But now that Fiona and Jade were here, she didn’t feel too guilty abandoning Constance for a few minutes longer.

She retraced her steps to the table set up for logging and packaging shipments and pulled the book from its bag. Planting her rump on the edge of the table, she flipped past the acknowledgments page and the author’s introduction until she came to the first chapter. Scanning the opening paragraph, she immediately deduced that the shopkeeper hadn’t been exaggerating. This book definitely wasn’t a light read. Turning back several pages, she came to the forward, which gave a breakdown to the major components of *The Divine Comedy*. A few paragraphs down, she came to an entry that made her pulse speed up and jolted a spark of shock through her system.

The seven deadly sins.

Seven.

Holy. Shit.

Champions was unusually packed for a Tuesday night. Judging from the sheer number of shifters—most of them retired familiars on a sabbatical from Familia Tacchi 'Loa—Logan figured Champions' bulging-at-the-seams attendance was due to Griffin and Jemma's upcoming nuptials. If there was one thing that brought familiars out of the woodwork, it was a party and the promise of free booze.

His suspicions became confirmed when, twenty minutes later, Griffin and his bride-to-be walked into the restaurant, and raucous cheering erupted from half the patrons. Not surprising. Hell, the loving couple had practically been sainted by the familiar community for the role they'd played in getting the no-sex-with-your-witches ban lifted. Thanks to Catman and Jemma, these sorry motherfuckers were probably getting laid left and right. Himself included. And damn if that didn't make him the happiest wolf on the planet.

With that in mind, he grabbed a wineglass and a bottle of the best Shiraz they had. For whatever freaky-ass reason, Griffin despised beer and preferred the grape instead. After dispensing the wine, he gathered the ingredients to make Jemma a nonalcoholic daiquiri. By the time he'd finished blending the drink, the lovebirds had worked their way through the majority of well-wishers and finally reached the bar.

With a little finagling, he convinced Tully to take over for a few. Ducking out the pass-through, he squeezed Jemma in a hug, his grin prompted as much by Griffin's narrow-eyed stare as it was by Jemma's sweet giggle. Yeah, it was juvenile on his part, but he still got a charge from getting Catman's whiskers in a twist on occasion. Some habits were just too hard to break.

Releasing Jemma, he offered Griffin his hand in a celebratory shake for his upcoming nuptials. He didn't fail to notice his former rival put a little extra crunching power behind his end of the handshake. Neither did Jemma. Rolling her eyes, she stepped between them and pried Griffin's fingers away. "Any possible chance you both can behave tonight?"

"Ah, shug. You know we're just messin' with ya. Right, Catman?"

"Yeah." Griffin's chipper tone stood in direct opposition to the death-ray glare he shot at Logan behind Jemma's back.

Logan smothered his laugh. Shit. Oddly enough, he'd really missed the verbal punches and thinly veiled death threats he and Griffin used to exchange. Man, good times.

Jemma winced suddenly and made a shuffling two-step. "Crap, the ladies' restroom is calling me. I swear, just looking at a glass of water is all it takes to torture my bladder these days." She slid her purse from her shoulder and shoved it at Griffin before dashing off.

Looking perfectly comfortable with Jemma's bright pink purse dangling from his wrist, Griffin snagged the nearby stool with his loafer and parked his butt. "How's business been?"

"Steady. Hopefully all these damn friends and relatives of yours are good tippers. Which reminds me—you ready for that wine I poured you?" After receiving Griffin's nod, Logan returned behind the bar

long enough to fetch the drinks and carry them to the corner where Griffin waited. “So you’re really gonna tie the knot, huh? Can’t believe Jemma’s settlin’ for your ass.”

“Most of the time I can’t believe it either. There’s not a day goes by that I don’t realize I’m the luckiest bastard on earth.” Griffin swirled the wine in his glass before taking a sniff. Apparently deciding it passed muster, he took a swig. “Not bad.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it since that shit gives me heartburn.”

Griffin took another sip and glanced toward the restrooms. Lowering his glass, he shifted his focus back to Logan. “While Jemma’s gone, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

The faint edge in Griffin’s voice gave Logan pause. Shit. He hoped like hell Catman wasn’t about to bring up the threesome thing again. To be on the safe side, it was probably best to diffuse the potential fireworks now. “I already told you fifty million times you don’t hafta worry about me sniffin’ around Jemma. The hug was purely innocent.” Mostly. He’d enjoyed Griffin’s reaction a little too much to rate the gesture one hundred percent innocuous.

“I’m not talking about any of that.” Griffin’s eyes became hooded again. “But while we’re on the subject, let me remind you that I’ll use the bloody stump of your leg for batting practice if you don’t keep your word.”

“Duly noted.” Logan leaned his hip against the bar. “Now that we have that outta the way, what’s got your tail all tweaked?”

“Clarissa. She’s been putting off a strange vibe lately. Has she mentioned anything to you that might shed some light on what’s going on with her?”

There was no way in hell he was coming clean about sleeping with Clarissa. Besides his firm belief in not kissing and telling, Clarissa’s behavior earlier pretty much verified that she’d blow a gasket if he blabbed. Sure, Constance already knew—and would likely spill the beans. In which case, it’d be *her* neck on the chopping block and not his. A much better outcome, in his estimation of things. His and Clarissa’s relationship teetered on too delicate a thread to risk her anger. He’d already pushed his luck to the limit with the attempted mating. Though he didn’t regret initiating what amounted to his most primal, natural instinct, he knew he needed to handle Clarissa with all the cautious patience he’d bestow on a wounded bird that was ready to take flight at the slightest provocation.

“Damn it, have you listened to a single word I’ve said?”

Logan crashed back to the present and noticed that Griffin was glaring at him. “I heard ya. But I don’t think we need to worry about Clarissa.” He tried for a casual shrug. “More than likely, she’s just got a lot on her mind. Particularly with your weddin’ comin’ up. You know how she is about makin’ sure everything runs like clockwork.”

“Yeah, too well.” Griffin scratched the back of his head, the lines bracketing his mouth softening. “You’re probably right. The prospect of one hundred and fifty plus wedding guests descending on the

coven house is bound to test even the most stalwart of us. Hell knows it's got me tempted to slam that entire bottle of wine."

He slapped his palm on Griffin's shoulder. "Just fortify yourself thinking of all the raunchy fun you're gonna have on your honeymoon."

Griffin rumbled a purr, his pupils going glassy as his mind apparently traveled to some naughty place that likely involved Jemma wearing nothing but a smile and strategically placed whipped cream. Jemma chose that moment to reappear. She relieved her bridegroom of her purse before plopping onto the stool next to him. "Okay, what'd I miss?"

"Other than Catman havin' dirty thoughts about you? Not much."

Her lips taking on a wry twist, Jemma rubbed her belly. "Pretty soon I'm going to look like I'm hiding a watermelon in here. Then the dirty thoughts will just be a distant dream."

"Not hardly, baby." His growl suitably territorial, Griffin leaned into Jemma and kissed her with enough emphasis—and tongue, from the looks of it—to steal Jemma's breath and bring a rosy flush to her cheeks. When he was done, he splayed his hand over the one Jemma still had pressed to her stomach. "There's not one damn thing I don't find incredibly sexy about you. And that includes seeing you carrying our child."

Jemma sniffled. "You are so getting nookie tonight."

Logan watched the lovebirds for a moment, his mind superimposing his and Clarissa's images over Griffin and Jemma's. He could easily imagine his Rissa's belly growing bigger and bigger with his babies.

Yeah, babies. He wanted to give her an entire brood of them. They'd be the perfect balance of parenting, the way he saw it. She with her sensibility and discipline. He with his...

Uh...

Okay, clearly Clarissa brought more to the table than he did, unless spoiling their kids rotten counted for something. Most likely though, he'd have to become a real pro at diaper changing and hope it made up for his deficiencies.

He tried not to think about how far away he was from making the fantasy he'd spun into a reality. Better to have faith that he'd break down Clarissa's defenses and win the key to her heart. Because the alternative—losing her—was unfathomable. Fortunately, she seemed more than willing to share her body in every wicked, delicious way he wanted. If the only path to wearing her down was through plenty of hot lovin', so be it.

Hell, not like it'd be a hardship.

His cock started to swell behind his fly as he visualized all the sexy *persuading* he'd lavish on Clarissa, and he rescinded his assessment. Hard definitely described his situation.

Jesus. The end of his shift couldn't get here soon enough.

A grunt came from Griffin. “Something tells me I don’t want to know what you were thinking about just now.”

He followed the cat shifter’s gaze to his crotch. “If you and Kegan keep fixating on my cock, I’m gonna start wonderin’ what’s up.”

“Besides *that*”—Griffin jerked his chin in the direction of Logan’s groin—“not a damn thing.”

A flash of movement on the other side of the bar caught Logan’s attention, and he looked over to see Tully giving him the time’s-up signal. “Shit, that’s my cue to get back in the ring. You guys need anything more before I go?”

“Maybe just the dessert menu.” Jemma gave him and Griffin a sheepish look. “Hey, I’m feeding two now. I’m allowed to have molten hot lava cake before dinner.”

He ducked around the corner of the bar to grab a pair of menus. When he glanced up, he noticed a young dude covered in piercings and tattoos slouched at a table across the way, glaring at him with unmistakable malice. A baggy black T-shirt that proclaimed “Fear the Wrath” in spidery red lettering all but dwarfed the kid’s scrawny frame.

Without question, he knew that he’d never seen the punk before, but that didn’t stop the shiver of déjà vu currently skipping down his spine. The uncomfortable sensation giving him the willies, he turned away for a moment to drop the menus off in front of Griffin and Jemma. Almost as if he were compelled by some mysterious force, he veered his gaze back toward the stranger with the angry staring complex.

The kid was gone.

A fresh crop of the heebie-jeebies prickling his skin, he clenched his fist around the edge of the bar. “What the fuck is going on?”

Griffin stopped cuddling Jemma long enough to frown at him. “Huh?”

“That’s the second time this week I swore I saw someone vanish into thin air.”

“You been hitting the whiskey a little too hard?” Griffin’s eyebrows inched upward.

No, but he was damn well considering it with all these hallucinations plaguing him lately.

“Maybe it was a ghost. Or a leprechaun,” Jemma offered.

He couldn’t recall ever seeing any leprechauns who looked like the roadie for some two-bit metal thrasher band. Still, he liked Jemma’s suggestion a lot better than the possibility that his sanity had taken an early checkout.

Thankfully the remainder of his shift passed in a busy blur. Because if he’d spent one more second mulling the existence of angry leprechauns or fantasizing about Clarissa naked and glistening with massage oil, the state of his sanity would no longer have been in question. Nope. It would have been lifeless on the floor, in need of some serious CPR.

Throwing his bar rag in Tully’s general direction, he jogged toward the exit.

He made record time hopping in his truck and cruising home. Clarissa hadn't shown up yet, which was fortunate, since it allowed him to jump in the shower and scrub off any residual smoke or greasy food smells from the bar that might have decided to attach themselves. Once clean and refreshed, he carefully trimmed his goatee, the task not only ensuring that he didn't overly resemble his inner wolf, but also kept his scratchiness to a minimum so he wouldn't unintentionally exfoliate Clarissa's tender parts.

After slapping on some cologne and tugging on a new pair of jeans, he padded into the living room and sprawled on the couch. His attention drifted to the pillow on the far end, and his brain instantly triggered a memory of Clarissa hugging it for dear life while he drilled into her from behind.

Groaning, he shot to his feet and prowled to the armchair, where he was less likely to fall victim to a series of tantalizing mental images that'd lure him into some solo action. Even if the next several minutes killed him, the only hand that'd be stroking him tonight would be Clarissa's, by God. He popped on the television and distracted his libido with some channel surfing. A documentary about panthers kept him on track for a while, until the damn creatures started humpin' like they were starring in their own personal jungle-cat porno.

The universe was out to derail him. He clicked off the TV and tossed the remote aside in disgust. Tapping his fingers on the side of the armchair, he glanced at the clock resting on the upper shelf of the entertainment center. It was past eight thirty. Where the hell was Clarissa?

Shoving from the seat, he journeyed to the front vestibule and stepped outside. The neighborhood was unusually quiet, allowing him to hear the steady roll and *shoosh* of the Atlantic behind him. He leaned against the doorframe. A breeze rustled past, ruffling across his torso and caressing his nipples. Gritting his teeth at the resultant throb in his groin, he rushed back inside and spent five minutes cursing his luck to hell and back as he frantically searched for his cell phone. He finally located it beneath the bed, where some devilish gremlin had no doubt stashed it to string out his torture.

He tried Clarissa's cell, but it went directly to voicemail. Feeling like a junkie who was one fix shy of a meltdown, he punched in the number for the coven house. Fiona picked up and kindly informed him that Clarissa had decided to stay a little later at the shop.

Well, wasn't that fucking thoughtful of her. While he'd been climbing the walls, desperate to have her in his arms, she'd chosen to pull an all-nighter at work.

Or maybe she'd just used that as an excuse not to see him.

The possibility gnawed at the already frayed, vulnerable edges of his psyche. As if that weren't enough of a kick in the balls, his fucking tattoo started acting up. Damn thing hadn't given him any grief for the past few days, and now it was back with a vengeance. The inked wire and barbs itched to the point he swore they were physically digging into his skin, twisting and tightening in their unrelenting hold on him. It would have been beyond easy to take it as an omen—him forever snared in Clarissa's defensive shields, his hope for their future slowly bleeding from his veins.

Thankfully he was too much of a stubborn jackass to sit here and wallow in misery.

Stalking to the dresser, he yanked out the first flannel shirt he came to and jammed his arms through the sleeves. Not bothering to button the shirt, he wrenched on his boots. Palming his keys, he barreled outside once more and jumped into his pickup.

He broke every land record—and a few traffic laws—reaching the city. By the time he slammed on the brakes outside Charmed Moon, the cab of the truck had been overtaken with the smell of burnt rubber from his tires. He leapt from the vehicle and, after kicking his door shut, stormed to the store's entrance. Catching his reflected image in the shop's window, he slowed his steps. Jesus. The only thing he was missing to complete the picture of a crazed madman was foam coming from his mouth.

Realizing he stood a good chance of Clarissa fleeing in terror at the sight of him, he dragged in a deep breath and finger-combed his hair. Deciding that'd have to do as far as his appearance went, he tried the front door and found it locked. Setting his jaw, he rapped on the glass.

Two minutes passed and still no Clarissa.

The lights were on, so he damn well knew she was in there. His beast threatening to rattle his cage again, he pounded harder on the door. A shadow fell across the floor near the back hallway, and a moment later Clarissa popped into view. She gaped at him, blinking.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and stood there, feeling like a big, lovesick dope.

Clarissa hurried forward, the *click-click-click* of her heels echoing on the wood floor. The tumble of the deadbolt sounded, and she pulled open the door. "Oh, sweet goddess. I totally forgot about—"

The remainder of her words falling victim to his mouth, he tugged her against him, his hands burrowing in her hair. He kissed her with all the pent-up frustration and lust combusting inside him. She gasped, his shirt wadding beneath her fingers as she clutched his waist. Without breaking the kiss, he walked her backwards, clearing the threshold of the entry. Blindly reaching behind him with one arm, he reset the door lock.

His fingers stroking the nape of her neck, he lifted his head. He pulled his focus from her kiss-swollen lips, and their gazes crashed into each other. "Unless you want to give passersby one hell of a window-shopping experience, kill the lights."

Her eyes widened, but he didn't fail to notice the telltale rapid rise and fall of her chest. Seemed his Rissa might be a closet exhibitionist. Tucking that interesting tidbit away for later exploration, he stripped out of the flannel shirt and popped the tab on his fly. Clarissa licked her lips, her scrutiny like a visual caress along his chest and abdomen. His cock surged against the placket of his jeans, impatient.

"The lights," he prompted, his voice rougher than sandpaper. If she hesitated again, he'd take that as an open invitation to rip her clothes off and fuck her against the windows for the entire world to see, making it damn clear to one and all that she was his woman.

Just as the anticipation of doing precisely that crested to a hot peak within him, she spun and trotted to the opposite wall. The track lighting dimmed before extinguishing completely. Enough light still came in from the streetlamps to give the interior of the shop an otherworldly glow. Clarissa halted next to a small table draped in dark blue velvet and plucked an item from the display. She walked toward him, and he recognized the bottle of massage oil. His inner wolf howled in resounding approval.

Tapping a finger against her lip, she surveyed their surroundings. “This would be a lot more comfortable with a bed available, but it’ll take me at least ten minutes to conjure one. All that wood and such.”

“Shug, at this point I’d settle for a damn air mattress and a sleeping bag.”

“Now *that* I can do instantly.” Chanting one of her materialization spells, she held out her hand. A swirling ball of lavender light began forming in the middle of her palm. When the orb was roughly the size of a baseball, she hurtled it toward the ground at her feet. It collided with the floor and bounced before morphing into the aforementioned air mattress. A black satin spread covered its surface.

“What, no sleeping bag?” he teased.

“Please. I do have standards.” She curled a finger in his belt loop and towed him closer. He reached for the bottle in her hand, but she tossed it on the mattress and unzipped his pants, peeling the denim down around his hips. Her fingertips grazed along his happy trail before skating lower and encircling his cock. He jerked in her grip, the air jamming in his lungs. She met his stare, her eyes shining with a purposeful gleam. “Do you know what the best thing about our massage oil is?”

He couldn’t remember how to formulate a coherent word.

Thankfully, she took pity on him. “It’s edible.”

Fuck. With her fingers wrapped around his cock, it didn’t take much effort for his gutter mind to decide exactly where she should drizzle the first drop.

Her nails lightly grazing the rigid length of his shaft, she traced the curve of his breastbone with her free hand. She bit her lip, her expression of vulnerability in sharp contrast to the wicked activity she was engaged in south of his waistline. “Am I...is this right? I don’t have a lot of experience in this particular department. I always worry I’m somehow doing it wrong.”

He brushed his knuckles over her cheek. “Any way you want to touch me is right.”

Both of her hands slid free of his body. At first he worried she hadn’t believed his reassurance, but she hooked her thumbs into the waistband of his jeans and briefs and rucked both down his legs. That’s when he realized she was dead serious about getting him nekkid and slathered in massage oil. He had no idea how he’d survive it. Shit, just the thought of her hands slicking all over him had him on the verge of blowing. But there was no way he’d deny her this. Particularly not after she’d revealed her insecurity over whether or not she was giving him a proper hand job. Hell, as if there were the remotest chance he wouldn’t love every minute of it, whatever she did.

At her urging, he sat on the mattress and wrestled his shoes and clothing the rest of the way off. She dropped onto her knees beside him, and he reached for the hem of her top. "It's better if you're naked too," he assured her, inching the fabric upward.

"Is that in a massage rulebook somewhere?"

"Yep. Mine." He whisked her shirt over her head and tossed it behind them. The rest of her garb quickly followed suit. He stared at her nipples, his mouth watering. Apparently reading the direction of his thoughts, she shoved him flat on the mattress and reached for the massage oil. The click of that cap opening was one of the most erotic sounds he'd ever heard. Groaning, he stretched his arms behind his head, his wrists cradling the back of his skull.

She squeezed out a generous amount of the oil and warmed it between her palms. He began mentally reciting the alphabet. Backwards. When her palms smoothed over his rib cage, he moved on to baseball stats. The second her fingers dipped toward his bellybutton, he knew even envisioning Tully naked wouldn't help him last much longer. "Rissa—"

Her motions jerked to a halt, and he noticed the worry in her eyes. Ah, hell. Biting the inside of his cheek to give himself something to concentrate on other than the throbbing in his cock, he relaxed his shoulders. "You're doin' awesome."

A beautiful smile lit her face, more than making up for the innocent torture she was inflicting on him. Her hands ghosted upward, sweeping in small circles over his pectorals. The tips of her nails raked his nipples, making him suck in a hissing breath and his cock bob against his abdomen. Clarissa noticed both actions. Her irises darkening with that determined glint again, she abandoned one nipple and glided down his torso to stroke his straining cock. He bucked within her grip, his eyes crossing. Aw shit. He was staring down the barrel of the gun here.

"Baby, why don't you come straddle my face while you're doin' that?" he suggested desperately, his voice hoarse.

"No, I have something else in mind."

That "something else" involved her crawling between his legs and engulfing him within the scalding heat of her mouth. Her tongue traced the main vein in his cock before curving around the head. With one smooth, descending stroke, she sucked him down her throat. His eyes rolled back. "*Sweet Jesus.*"

She hummed, the vibrations tripping him over the edge.

"Rissa, I'm gonna come," he warned frantically, giving her a chance to disengage in case she wasn't one who cared to swallow.

But apparently she was. Cheeks hollowing and her suction intensifying, she massaged his balls. His legs shaking from the freight-train force of his oncoming climax, he gripped the sides of the mattress.

And came like there was no tomorrow.

Once the last quake rocking his body dissipated, he slumped into the bedding and held out his arms to Clarissa. She snuggled into him, her lips sliding along his jaw. "I liked that."

He chuckled. "Not half as much as I did."

"Don't be so sure. You're delicious, after all."

"Mm, so are you." He ducked his head and licked the hollow at the base of her neck for emphasis. When she shifted restlessly, he gently tugged her upward until her thighs bracketed him just below his rib cage. Cupping the soft swells of her breasts in either hand, he licked and sucked her nipples, loving the feel of them swelling and pebbling against his tongue. She squirmed and gasped, her wetness leaving damp trails on his abdomen. He loved all of that too. "You gonna allow me a taste of that sweet pussy now, shug?"

Her whimper all the answer he required, he clasped her hips and lifted her in the same motion that he scooted lower on the mattress. His mouth and her pussy met somewhere in the middle. A shuddering cry broke from Clarissa. He savored the sound as much as he did the honey rolling down his tongue and throat. Holding her firm against his face, he ate her with a leisurely thoroughness that offered the side benefit of renewing life to certain parts south of the border. By the time he suckled her swollen, juicy clit between his teeth, he was practically sporting more wood than he had ten minutes ago.

Clarissa panted, undulating on his mouth. The tension in her body hinted how close she hovered near climax, and the liquid heat of anticipation that gripped him at the promise of her breaking apart on his tongue ripped a moan from his chest. She stiffened, her thighs going taut beneath his hands. And finally it came—the pulsing of her clit and the keening cry of her release. He continued devouring her through the storm of it, prolonging her pleasure for as long as he could, but eventually she slid from his face. Rather than slump into a boneless heap as he had moments ago, she wiggled down his length and fisted his cock. Her breaths ragged and wispy, she stared at him. "Condom?"

"Front pocket."

She scrambled for his jeans and dug out the protection. Thank the gods she was quick about sheathing him, because if he'd been deprived one more second of her pussy, he feared he would have bawled worse than an infant. She impaled herself on his shaft, her slick, inner muscles squeezing him tight enough to make him see shooting stars. Arching her back, she began riding him slowly, her hips rolling as she took him deep. He encircled her waist, luxuriating in the sinuous flex of her pale, silken skin. Coasting north, he kneaded her breasts, the pads of his thumbs grazing through the light sheen of oil that coated her nipples, causing her to shiver.

An undeniable truth clanged in his head and heart.

There would never be another woman who made him feel this way. Never be another woman he belonged to like the vibrant goddess astride him. "Do it, baby. Ride that cock like you know you fuckin' own it."

Her breath stuttered in her throat, but she tried to break their linked gazes. He wasn't gonna have that. Scooching into a sitting position, he wrapped one arm around her lower back while his other hand tunneled into her hair, forcing her to meet his eyes. "You know it's true, Rissa. You're the queen of my everything. You have me. *All* of me. Heart, body and soul."

She got that panicky look, and he kissed her, his pelvis rocking upward.

"No," she whispered, even as her pussy fluttered around him.

"Yes." He thrust again, and her nails dug into his shoulders. Her head fell back, exposing the graceful line of her throat. Splaying his fingers on the curve of her tailbone, he buried his face in her neck, her scent drenching him in intoxicating waves. Her pulse beat against his lips and around his cock, a heady siren song to the wolf within him. His vision hazed, his incisors tingling. The mating call was so strong and fierce, it nearly cramped his insides. It would be so easy to claim her in that moment, with beast dominating his senses and her tender flesh unguarded.

He couldn't do it. No matter how much he hungered to. Taking what she didn't freely offer would destroy the fragile balance of their relationship. She would belong to him, but she would hate him for it.

Her pussy vised around his cock, sucking him deeper into her channel and milking the come from him, even that essence of him blocked by the barrier of the condom. He was left with the only thing he had left to share—his heart.

It was hers. Always.

Chapter Thirteen

“Sweet Clarissa.”

The familiar, sibilant voice called to her in the murky recesses between the waking and dream world. She opened her eyes. A vaporous mist swirled around her, thick with a strange, briny scent. It cleared enough to reveal the rocky outcropping she stood upon. She stepped forward, but a heavy weight buckled her legs. She fell on her hands and knees, the impact jarring. Her pained yelp didn’t quite cover the metallic clank that reverberated throughout the rock. Twisting, she spied the chained manacles banded around her ankles.

Seven’s form disengaged from the fog, the ends of the chains wrapped around the creature’s fists. “Four days, and you will be mine. *Ours.*” Movement disturbed the mist, revealing the six remaining personalities that flanked her khaki-and-polo-clad captor.

She stared into each matching set of those cold, reptilian eyes, shuddering in the face of their magnetic draw. “I know what you are. What you’re all about.”

Their mouths fell open, the evil, mocking laughs that rolled free one and the same. “You comprehend only a miniscule piece of the puzzle of what I am. You humans and your simple little brains are incapable of grasping the fullest extent of my glory. Even that moron, Dante, barely scratched the surface of my mystery.” The voice rumbling between the lips of each personified sin that towered in front of her was not familiar. For that reason, along with the obvious sneering contempt in that sibilant tone, she hazarded to guess that she was speaking with the dominant creature that comprised Seven. The head kahuna, for lack of a better title.

“And yet that doesn’t stop you from preying on us, does it, you sick, demented psycho.” The loose grit of silica dug into her feet as she struggled to stand.

The wielder of her chains suddenly yanked her forward, leaving her no time to wonder at the oddness of having sand where there was no beach. “Do not test me. My fondness for you is not in league with Envy’s. *I* would not think twice about condemning your soul to the pit of fire.”

She digested the creature’s words, her mind spinning. Her average-Joe, stalkerish captor was *Envy*? She stared at the figure still clutching her chains, its covetous eyes practically devouring her. A shiver coursed through her limbs. What could this...*thing*...possibly be envious for in regards to her?

Another chilling laugh boomed from the septet of personalities. “Your inept brain betrays you. It’s not only what Envy hungers for in you, it’s that which you seek for in it. We’ve seen the way you gaze upon

those who so selfishly hoard everything that you desperately want but cannot possess. Love and trust. A family that will cause you no pain. It slowly eats away at your very core, this envious desire to be more like them.”

The last three words of that damning condemnation hammered into her with blunt force. She wanted to deny their validity. Proclaim that she was above such pettiness.

But it would be a lie.

Suffocating shame swamped her as she recalled the countless times during her childhood when she would sneak off to Forsyth Park and watch the many parents laughing and playing with their children, while her own mother and father were passed out drunk in their bed.

Those were the years the insidious yearning had begun to spread, its diseased compulsion threatening to consume her. The crushing weight of her bitter longing had grown to the point of almost becoming the entire scope of her existence. Until the moment came, many years later, when her obsessive pilgrimage had blown up in her face, delivering the most devastating and painful of blows. The vicious betrayal that’d ripped her apart that fateful day had nearly decimated her. In the aftermath, she’d caged the ugly beast of her envy, locking it behind the bars of complacency.

She’d stripped the meat of her wanting from the bone, convinced she couldn’t be hurt anymore. But there were days still when she would creep toward that padlocked cage and stare wistfully at its contents. The painful truth of it surged within her, making her nauseous.

“We can make it all go away, sweet Clarissa. This endless cycle of wanting. Here you will have everything you’ve dreamed of. *We* will be the family you’ve always longed for.”

Another blast of that odd, saline-marinated breeze swooshed through, scattering the remaining mist. She blinked as the enormous cavern surrounding her was unveiled.

A massive lake ebbed hundreds of feet below the outcropping where she and Seven’s corporation of personalities stood. The black, oily water seethed with a sick vitality, as if it were alive and ravenously seeking whatever food source fed its evil power. Now and then, thick clusters of fireballs erupted from the waves, their red-hot glare sending off massive amounts of heat. Along the nearby shore, she noticed the condemned souls being herded toward the lake’s edge by six of the sins. She whirled, her gaze colliding with Envy’s.

“There is nothing to fear, sweet Clarissa. We will be together.”

Forever.

She woke with a jerk, her heart galloping out of control and the sheets a sweat-sodden, tangled mess imprisoning her calves. The sensation was too similar to her otherworldly chains, and she panicked, flailing her legs wildly to escape.

“Baby, easy.” Logan’s arms wrapped around her, tugging her against his chest. He brushed aside the snarled straggles of hair that’d fallen in her face, his eyes flashing his concern. “What is it?”

She gaped at him, the uneasiness refusing to release her from its tenacious grasp just yet. A gust of wind fluttered the curtains, bringing with it a salty essence vaguely reminiscent of the one from her dream. Remembrance slowly came floating back. Logan had brought her home with him last night, after their intense coupling in the store. Which meant she was in his bed, not trapped within some cavern of death. Her pulse easing back to normal, she rubbed her forehead. “Sorry, I had a nightmare.”

“Shit. It must have been a doozy.”

You can say that again. She dropped her hand and eyed the damp bedding. “I really made a mess of things.” In more ways than one. She didn’t want to think about the revelations from her dream and the glaring, hideous insights it’d delivered, so she pushed up from the mattress instead and began straightening the sheets.

Logan watched her the entire time, the tenderness in his gaze more than relaying his worry. “Do you want to talk about—?”

“No.”

His chest sank with his frustrated exhale. He seemed to hesitate for a moment, steeling himself, before he stretched his arm toward her. “Then at least come back to bed and let me love you up.”

Old defensive wounds recently ripped open from her nightmare stalled her from immediately diving into his embrace. But the lure of that secured cage of longings glowed like an irresistible beacon too. She took a tentative step forward, and then another. Her trembling hand brushed over Logan’s waiting palm, and he closed his fingers over hers before lifting them to his lips and kissing each tip of her finger with a gentle reverence that filled her with a familiar ache. She wanted to give in to it. Oh goddess, how she did. And that very fact terrified her.

To want something—someone—like this was a weakness that could annihilate her to the core. More so than hocking her soul to Seven.

“C’mere.” His voice husky, Logan flipped up the sheet with his free hand and coaxed her in next to him. Hugging her close, he rained soft butterfly kisses across her brow and her closed eyelids. His warm breath fanned her cheek, her mouth, right before his lips skimmed hers, the tip of his tongue teasing for admittance.

Completely at the mercy of the sensual haze beginning to sweep over her, she parted her lips, giving a shaky moan when Logan’s tongue enticed hers into play. Snuggled within the warm haven of his arms, everything else faded to gray.

Abandoning her mouth, he trailed hot, openmouthed kisses down her neck and collarbone. His tongue dipped into the hollow there before coasting toward her breasts. Her nipples tightened in anticipation. A moment later, a series of wet, decadent swirls prompted her back to arch and her fingers to sift through the silkiness of Logan’s hair. His goatee softly scuffed her skin as he nuzzled her cleavage and groaned. He lifted his head, revealing the fierce blaze in his eyes. “I’m gonna eat your pussy.”

She was more than okay with that plan. Whimpering, she slid her thigh along his. He rolled her onto her back, but rather than trailing his mouth down her tummy, he reached for the knob on the nightstand. At first she assumed he was grabbing a condom to have at the ready. Which might account for her astonishment when he whipped out her trusty blue vibrator instead. She blinked. “How...?”

“I borrowed it from your stash the other night.”

“Borrowed?”

“Okay, maybe stole is more accurate.” He clicked the base to *On* and skimmed the device over her nipples. She sucked in her breath, and he took that as an open invitation to torment the aching nubs until she thought she’d go crazy from the constant humming on her flesh. He traced a lazy line from her breasts to her navel before scooting between her legs, his broad shoulders bracing her thighs. The vibe nudged into her slit, the electric pulses that rippled through her making her squirm and gasp.

A sexy half smile tipped his mouth. “Let’s see if I can give your dolphin buddy a run for the money.” With no further warning, he twisted the vibrator so the aforementioned attachment was nestled between the cheeks of her ass. Before she could adjust to that foreign and incredibly wicked sensation, Logan ducked his head and flicked her clit with his tongue. Her entire body jerked, the air trapping in her throat. She dug her fingers into the sheets, her knuckles cramping.

Logan pumped the vibe deeper, the fingers of his free hand twining with hers as his teasing flicker morphed into an intense devouring that short-circuited her mind and body. With the dolphin doing indecent things to her nether region, Logan’s mouth tugging on her clit and the rubber shaft throbbing inside her, she broke into a thousand pieces, almost passing out from the cataclysmic pleasure of it.

Easing his head back, Logan dialed the vibrator to a lower speed. Rather than granting her a reprieve, the weaker vibrations seemed to tantalize the over-sensitized walls of her vagina, triggering a never-ending tide of small orgasms that left her dazed. Logan stretched beside her, his palm gliding along her quivering torso. He massaged the weight of her breast. “Have you ever been double penetrated, Rissa?”

She stared at him, her mind immediately conjuring a vivid fantasy. Moaning, she shook her head.

“But you’ve thought about it. In fact, I bet you’re thinkin’ about it right now.” He rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, a sensation she felt all the way down to the beating pulse of her clit. “Know what happens to naughty girls with those kinda fantasies?”

The oxygen was trapped in her lungs, making it impossible for her to do anything beyond gaze into his slumberous eyes.

“They get a pair of hard cocks buried deep in their pussy and ass.”

His raunchy words sent a thunderbolt of excitement careening through her, and she cried out, her inner muscles contracting around the vibrator. Rising onto his elbow, Logan fucked her with the device, his cock swelling and dripping precome. “Do you have any idea how fuckin’ beautiful you are when you

come? Makes me wanna stay in this bed all day and give you orgasms just so I can watch your pretty nipples bead and your skin go all soft and pink.”

She managed a laughing groan. “Something tells me I couldn’t survive an entire day of orgasms.” Not that it wouldn’t be enjoyable giving it a go.

He leaned down and gently scraped his teeth across the turgid flesh of her nipple. Soothing the sting with his tongue, he glanced at her. “Can you survive at least one more? Around my cock and your blue buddy here?”

The question sent another flurry of pulses through her clit, and she writhed against the mattress. Yanking the drawer open again, Logan snatched a tube of lubricant. But not a condom. He caught her questioning look and took a deep breath. “You can tell me no and I’ll honor it. But the truth is I want to feel every warm, snug inch of your ass huggin’ my cock.”

She swallowed, the image in her head initiating another series of tiny quakes. Good goddess. At this rate, she *did* stand a good chance of dying from orgasm overload. But talk about one hell of a way to go. She bit her lip and returned Logan’s prodding gaze. “Do it.”

A low growl rumbled from him. Once again settling between her legs, he popped the cap on the lube and squeezed out a good dollop. He removed the vibe, giving him more room to work, and eased one slick finger past her puckered rosebud. She lifted her hips, aiding his motions, and he added another finger, scissoring the digits to work past the resistant band of muscle.

Having him buried to the knuckles inside her, knowing his cock would soon take their place, elicited a wanton thrill within her. She’d tried anal sex once, a long time ago, and hadn’t particularly enjoyed it. But something told her that with Logan it would be oh so delicious. Already, with just his fingers readying her, she was on the verge of climaxing yet again. That was the difference of having someone who knew what they were doing manning the wheel. And the fact that Logan was so incredibly patient, endlessly stoking the fire raging inside her, made it a million times more amazing.

Wanting to return even a fraction of the pleasure he was giving her, she scooted forward and reached for the lube. She dribbled several drops on the head of his cock before glazing her fingers through the slippery gel. She explored each prominent vein and ridge, reveling in the way he grew ever thicker and steely within her grip.

His fingers had stilled in her ass, and she caught him watching her motions, his eyelids heavy and hooded. He looked like he was struggling against the fierce urge to lift her and impale her on his cock.

Now, more than anything, she wanted him to do exactly that. Still grasping his shaft, she coaxed him back on his haunches and straddled his lap. She teased herself with the silky gland of his cock, running it over her clit and labia. His hot flesh felt infinitely titillating and wonderful in comparison to the vibrator’s lifeless rubber. The plum-shaped cap furrowed between the cheeks of her ass, bumping at her entrance. She

angled her hips, and he slid inside the barest fraction. The stinging stretch made her whimper, and Logan's fists balled on her thighs, his knuckles whitening. "Rissa, I don't wanna hurt you."

"You're not." Snagging her bottom lip with her teeth, she bore down, taking him deeper. A lush, decadent heat wave shimmered through her, making her shiver. "It feels so good. *You* feel so good." And he did. Hard and unyielding, his veins a delicious friction on her sensitive tissues.

A fine tremor shuddered through Logan. His hand cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing her jaw. "You're better than perfect." He eased her onto her back, pressing her knees toward her chest. A trickle of sweat sliding down his sternum, he stared at her. "You were made for my cock. Made for me." He kissed her, his tongue thrusting deep, mimicking the slick advance and retreat of his shaft inside her ass.

She gasped, the coil of her approaching orgasm pulling tight.

"Don't come. Not yet." His chest heaving, Logan blindly grabbed for the vibrator. He shifted enough to allow room for the device and sank it home, powering it to maximum velocity—and her to brain-shattering climax. Starbursts of color and light exploded. They could have been real, byproducts of her magic or strictly hallucinations of her mind. She was past any ability to tell as she continued to convulse wildly beneath Logan.

"Fuck, yeah, baby. Come hard on those cocks." He twisted the vibrator, making her buck and the cords in his neck strain. "I'm right there with you. I'm gonna fuckin' flood your ass with my come."

His husky vow hurtled her into a pinpoint of dark, consuming focus. The only thing that existed in that world was the flesh-and-blood cock pounding into her and the incredible pleasure it brought. Desperate to tug him into the abyss with her, she squeezed her inner muscles around him. His features tensing, he surged into her one last time, lodging to the hilt. A sound that fell somewhere between a shout and a primal howl tore from him as he throbbed inside her, his seed jetting free.

She stroked his shaking torso, hugging him tightly to her. Groaning, he extracted the vibrator and tossed it aside before kissing her, their hearts thumping in syncopation. Eventually his cock softened, and he reluctantly pulled from her. He wadded the edge of the sheet and delicately cleaned between her legs and lower. Oddly enough, the intimacy of the act made her feel more connected to him. Cherished in some small way. The notion left her uncomfortable, her vulnerabilities stirred, but she didn't stop him.

Once he was finished performing the task, he snuggled her into his arms again and kissed her brow. "I wanna take you out on a date."

"Why?"

"It's what people do," he said, dry amusement edging his tone.

It's not what we do. They had sex. Safe, uncomplicated sex.

Her mind relived the intense experience they'd just shared seconds ago. Okay, she couldn't deny that even the sex was moving further and further away from being simple exchanges of bodily fluids. Emotions

were becoming involved, and that was dangerous. She couldn't afford to crave him this way, long for a future that would never be.

As if he'd plugged directly into her thoughts, Logan caressed the nape of her neck, lulling her back into drowsy contentment. For a moment, at least. "You still owe me for stiffin' me the other night, you know."

Their anniversary dinner. She should have known he wouldn't let her off so easy. "Fine. When?" It'd have to be soon, or he'd be out of luck. As if to torment her, Seven's taunting words ghosted through her conscious. *Four days, and you will be mine.* A vise clamped inside her throat.

"I have to work tonight." Clueless of her private turmoil, Logan brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "Tomorrow."

Refusing to dwell on her numbered days, she nodded, her fingers following the pattern of his tattoo. "I always wondered why you chose barbed wire of all things to get inked with."

His hand stalled on her shoulder. "Do you wanna hear the official story I tell everyone, or the truth?"

She blinked at him, her curiosity piqued. "That last choice, of course."

He sighed before angling his arm for her closer inspection. "They're hidden in the barbs. You wouldn't even notice if I didn't tell ya."

Confused, she peered at the intricate design. Sure enough, there seemed to be tiny letters secreted within each of the barbed points. She frowned, making out a *C* and then an *L*. With each new letter she uncovered, a terrible truth slowly blossomed inside her.

"It's my name." Afraid to meet whatever lurked within his gaze, she slid her focus to Logan's chin. "I get it. I'm more than prickly—at the best of times." It was no mystery that she tended to alienate others, particularly her familiars. That was part of the reason why it'd taken her three years to replace Griffin after she'd enlisted him to take over as Jemma's guardian.

She'd seen the way she'd repeatedly wounded Griffin with her cold, standoffish ways. The idea of inflicting that pain on anyone else hadn't sat well on her. But when she'd signed the contract with Seven, she couldn't ignore the necessity of taking on another familiar. Because she wouldn't be around to guide and train her replacement, the responsibility would fall upon her familiar. Logan.

When he'd knocked on her door seven years ago and arrogantly informed the other prospective familiars that they might as well hit the pavement, she figured that she'd found the perfect successor to Griffin and the answer to her problems. A familiar who was so ridiculously overconfident in his abilities—and himself—that her emotional distance and lack of ego stroking wouldn't matter.

Obviously she'd been wrong. She swallowed, distant shame cresting to the surface. "I never knew I drove you to brand me into your flesh. I'm sorry if I hurt you that much."

“Shug, you’re only partly right. I *did* brand you into my hide.” His lips pressed into her temple when she flinched. “But it wasn’t for the reason you think. I did it because from the moment I saw you, I realized my heart was entangled.” His breath ruffled her hair. “Even then, I knew.”

The raw honesty of his confession whipped up a storm of conflicting emotions. Fear and panic. Happiness and joy. The warning bells in her head were deafening. She scrambled from his arms, almost falling off the mattress in her haste to put some distance between them. And distance from that golden cage of longings.

“Rissa...”

“I—I really need to shower and get going. I’m supposed to have breakfast with my father again.” And check that Janet had kept her word about the restricted visitor list.

“How about if I come with you? My shift doesn’t start ’til three.”

There was no way she could take having him there, the piercing ache of these disturbing feelings still too new and fresh. “I think it’s better if you don’t. He’s not been at his best lately. I don’t want to trigger one of his episodes.”

Logan gazed at her, his expression clearly displaying that he knew the only one suffering any episode at the moment was her. “Okay. Another time then.” Just as relief started to sweep her, he sat up, the sheet riding low on his lap as his shoulders leaned into the headboard. “But you’re damn well still goin’ on that date tomorrow night. You can’t keep runnin’ from me forever.”

That’s where he was mistaken. It wouldn’t be forever.

Only four days.

Chapter Fourteen

Breakfast with her father went better than she'd anticipated. He seemed to have forgotten all about her mother's previous visit. As for the painful reminiscences that he did recall—the ones that seemed to haunt his fractured memory like overzealous ghosts—fortunately those he kept to a minimum during their chat. By the time she kissed him goodbye and headed out to her car, it was well past noon.

Her cell phone buzzed, and she quickly checked the caller ID, spotting Domino's private line. Damn. Now what?

She clicked the talk button, and after dispensing with the stiff, mutually grudging pleasantries, was informed that her presence was required at HQ. She hung up, cursing her luck. In her typical fashion, Domino hadn't elaborated on what the urgent business was pertaining to, but Clarissa had weathered enough meetings with the head guild leader to know she'd likely have a migraine by the time it was over. After ensuring her bottle of Motrin was adequately stocked, she drove to the Italianate mansion housing the Alliance headquarters.

Willa greeted her at the door. The younger witch wore a frazzled expression, and her sable-brown bob looked like it was the victim of repeated finger pulling or a drive-by tornado. Not exactly a surprise. Considering who poor Willa was forced to deal with on a daily basis, it was a freaking miracle she hadn't gone bald years ago. But what was odd was the harrowed look in Willa's eyes as she stared at her. "She's waiting for you in her office."

"Are you okay?" Clarissa demanded, worried.

"No, probably not. In fact, I'm pretty sure there's a padded cell somewhere with my name stenciled on it." With that cryptic comment hanging in the air, she led the way to Domino's corner suite. After ushering Clarissa inside, Willa exited and shut the door.

Domino eyed Clarissa for a long moment, the sharp angles of her cheekbones adding to the overall hawkish expression she'd perfected. "Thank you for coming. I imagine your schedule must be overloaded, just with the ceaseless hours you've obviously put in turning my daughter against me."

Oh sweet hell. Her temple already giving a dull throb, Clarissa crossed to Domino's desk and squarely met the woman's icy glare. "If you're referring to me helping Marabella follow her dream, then yes, I'm guilty as charged. But I refuse to stand here and let you accuse me of anything more than that."

“She’s moving out.” Domino’s expression hinted that such an offense should be punishable by death. Not Marabella’s, of course, but Clarissa’s—for the part she’d played in Marabella’s newfound freedom. “She wouldn’t have even fathomed such an idea without your involvement.”

Don’t be so certain. Resisting the urge to roll her eyes at Domino’s obtuseness, she waved her arm. “I don’t know why you’re throwing such a conniption. Marabella is twenty-four years old, for goddess’s sake. Plenty of women her age would have moved out long before now. It’s time for her to spread her wings. Respect that, and stop controlling every aspect of her life.”

“Don’t tell me how to raise my daughter.” Domino’s features tightened, her voice going shrill.

She half-expected Domino’s silk pantsuit to tear to shreds like the Incredible Hulk’s as the woman’s fury detonated. “I’m not. But you’re doing Marabella a grave injustice by encouraging her self-doubts at every turn.”

“Well *I* don’t want you encouraging her fool idea of pursuing this business. She’ll only fall flat on her face, making a complete embarrassment of herself.”

Before Clarissa could utter a word, the door suddenly banged open behind her. She pivoted as Willa stormed into the room.

The outrage Domino had displayed seconds ago was nothing compared to the lividness riding Willa’s elfin face. “You know what, she’s right.” Willa jabbed a finger in Clarissa’s direction, but her hard focus never left Domino. “You’ve been smothering Marabella her entire life. Here’s an idea—let her live hers and find your own.”

Clarissa didn’t know who was more stunned, her or Domino. Where was the timid Willa who never lifted her voice to anyone?

Domino’s spell of speechlessness splintered, and her frosty eyes pinned Willa in place. “Were you listening at the door?”

“No. Intercom. Much easier.”

Domino’s tongue momentarily failed her again. Finally she shook her head. “Willa, what has gotten into you?”

“I have no damn idea.”

Huffing, Domino smoothed the lapels of her jacket, the expensive diamond solitaire on her ring finger sparkling. “Well, I don’t like it.”

“Tough. Fire me.”

Domino’s jaw dropped. The guild leader rocked in her seat, her obvious agitation showing. “I advise you not to tempt me.”

“Ha! We both know that’s an empty threat. No one else would put up with your ass.” Snorting, Willa turned and stalked from the office.

Leaving a gaping-mouthed Domino behind, Clarissa trailed after the younger witch. She halted next to Willa's desk and watched as the other woman plopped into her chair. "Wow, that was something to see. I would never have guessed you had it in you."

"Me either." Groaning, Willa buried her face in her hands. "I can't keep going on like this. Sooner or later, I will get fired, then what will I do? I can't live on Ramen noodles forever."

The abrupt change in Willa's demeanor was enough to give Clarissa whiplash. Had the girl merely been putting on a good front earlier? If so, she was one hell of an amazing actress. "I wouldn't worry about it. Like you said, Domino could never replace you. And she knows it."

Willa's bleakness showed no signs of dissolving. After an awkward hesitation, Clarissa tentatively patted the girl on the arm. It was ridiculous how even that small gesture made her break out in a cold sweat. But that didn't stop her from experiencing a small spark of pride for meeting the beast of her insecurities head on. "Do you want to talk about whatever is bothering you? It might help."

Her palms dragging down her face, Willa peered at her. "That's part of the problem. I don't really understand what *is* bothering me. All I know is that I haven't been myself lately. I have no idea who I am anymore."

"Maybe you've just been under too much stress. Domino and the rest of the guild are pros at dishing it out."

"I wish I could say that's what it is, but I don't think so." Willa's fingers listlessly skimmed over her computer keys, her troubled gaze affixed to the cursor blinking on the monitor. "I've been having weird dreams, only they feel more like...visions. Or memories that aren't mine."

Clarissa leaned her hip on the desk's edge, mulling the possibilities. A past-life experience coming back to haunt Willa? Constance had a better grasp on such things. Maybe a regression reading was in order. Just as she was about to suggest it, Willa jerked her hand away from the keyboard as if it'd stung her.

"Levi."

She frowned at Willa. "What?"

"Levi. That word keeps popping into my head. Like everything else, I don't know why. But just the sound of it makes me feel dizzy and claustrophobic. Like I'm drowning. Like we're all drowning."

Ah, now they were getting somewhere. Willa's fear of drowning was nothing new. After losing both her parents and nearly her own life to the watery depths of the Atlantic when she was only eight, Willa had developed a crippling phobia of large bodies of water. Perhaps whatever she was encountering now was just a new manifestation of her repressed terror.

"I see them all drowning," Willa whispered, her tone haunted. "Jenny Cavanaugh. Lois Grimes. Hundreds more."

Clarissa blinked. "Jenny Cavanaugh?"

“Ever since the day she slipped into that coma, I’ve witnessed her drowning a thousand times over. She keeps reaching for me from the center of that oily cesspool of a lake, but I can’t save her.” Willa’s voice broke on a soft sob. “I can’t save any of them.”

A frigid shiver of dread and disbelief arced through Clarissa, and she staggered. It would have been beyond easy to trick herself into believing the nightmare Willa was recounting was a coincidence and nothing to do with her own personal drama. But she’d seen that oil-slicked lake of death. And the countless souls being herded to their doom. Her chest cramping, she knuckled the edge of the desk.

Oh, sweet goddess. No.

Chapter Fifteen

Sneaking into St. Joseph's ICU proved to be an insurmountable obstacle she hadn't counted on. Which only added to her mountainous pile of frustrations. She didn't know precisely what she would have discovered if she had been able to sweet talk her way into Jenny Cavanaugh's room, or any of the others. Probably nothing. Certainly no hard evidence that would link Seven to this string of coma cases. Not that she needed substantiated proof. Her gut feeling more than verified her suspicions.

As she drove to the coven house, she sorted through the little bit of information that she did have. In addition to Willa's revealing visions, the timing of the comas in relation to Seven's return to Savannah was too relevant to be overlooked. Was it possible that the creature hadn't only returned to contract more souls, but to collect the ones it already owned? Who was to say she wasn't the only one who'd had dealings with the son of a bitch seven years ago? The more she thought about it, the more likely it seemed that she wasn't the only one Seven had come for. She was willing to bet that if the backgrounds of the coma victims were known, there'd be a glaring clue pointing in Seven's direction.

Fortunately, she did know a thing or two about one of the victims, Jenny Cavanaugh.

Jenny's gambling problem wasn't a secret. She'd nearly lost everything because of it. Judging from Jenny's current state, it was a safe bet that she *had* lost her soul as a direct result of her addiction.

What had Seven alluded to in her lucid dream? Not only was the sin attracted to you, but you to it? With that in mind, it didn't take any stretch of the imagination to see how Jenny would have been a sitting duck for several of Seven's personalities. Greed and possibly even Lust seemed likely candidates.

But that still didn't explain how Seven talked Jenny into signing the contract. Why would a woman who had just about everything money could buy suddenly—?

The answer slammed into Clarissa with the impetus of an anvil. Jenny had almost lost her entire inheritance. Could it be that Seven reversed her misfortune in return for her soul?

It made sense. She herself had given up rights to her soul in exchange for her father's. People in desperate situations did desperate things. If her father were in any frame of mind to remember the events that led up to his meeting with Seven, no doubt he'd reveal whatever the creature had bartered his soul with.

Her head spinning from the overload of revelations, she pulled into the coven house's driveway and killed the engine. Tossing her keys into her purse, she raced up the porch steps. The interior of the house

was quiet, which meant she could squirrel away in her office uninterrupted for at least a few minutes. Hopefully long enough to figure out what she could do with the information she'd gleaned about Seven.

She was past saving herself at this point, but if there was the slightest chance she could somehow keep one less soul from Seven's twisted cache, then by the goddess, she would.

Dropping into her chair, she yanked a pen and a tablet of paper toward her. She jotted each of Seven's sins on a separate line, leaving room for her notations. The most logical course of action would be an intervention. But in order to do that, she needed to determine the most likely places where Seven would be hunting for victims.

It's not only what Envy hungers for in you...

Yes. The key didn't just lie with Seven, but within the potential victims themselves. What sort of places would draw people so desperate and at the end of their rope that they would sign away their soul?

Her focus returned to the list of sins. Greed. Jenny Cavanaugh had frequented the riverboat casino quite a bit—a spot no doubt teeming with prey. Clarissa noted a few other leads before moving on to the next sin. Lust. Well, that was pretty much a no-brainer. Nightclubs and various places that catered to the pursuit of sexual fulfillment would be right up Lust's alley. There was even a sex club in the city. It wasn't widely advertised, for obvious reasons, but she knew about it through Constance after her coven sister admitted she liked to go there on occasion to watch the entertainment, so to speak.

Clarissa flipped open her laptop and powered it on. Once the system finished booting up, she ran a basic search for local establishments that might prove to be hotspots. By the time she was done, she'd managed to fill the piece of paper with half a dozen prospects. Armed with that, she hurried outside and jumped back into the Miata. She glanced at the time on the dashboard. A little under two hours before she'd be able to catch the first sailing on the casino cruise. She could hit a couple of bars in the meantime. If she was lucky, Seven would be working under the same game plan.

The first couple of bars she tried were on West Bay Street, practically next-door neighbors to each other. It made for convenience, but unfortunately she didn't spot any of the sins. By the time she walked into the fourth joint—a small hole-in-the-wall appropriately named Cubbies—her confidence in tracking Seven had started to take a nosedive, but not her determination. She ordered a soda, and with her bladder bemoaning the addition of yet another beverage, found an empty booth tucked in the corner. For roughly fifteen minutes, the only real action seemed to be centered around the group of frat boys trying to score dates with the cute waitress hanging around their table. But then she felt it. An almost imperceptible shift in the air.

Everyone else appeared clueless of the sensation as they continued drinking and laughing and carrying on like a predator hadn't invaded their idyllic haven. But she'd encountered that magnetic force field enough times to recognize it. Furthermore, she'd been waiting for it.

Inching closer to the end of the banquet seat, she searched the bar's patrons for her quarry. A tingle of shocked awareness jolted down her spine when she spotted the portly trucker who'd contracted her father's soul. She followed the creature's cold, assessing gaze toward the table where a man with thinning salt-and-pepper hair sat, his stooped frame hunched over a pitcher of beer. A long trail of ash fell from the man's forgotten cigarette as he stared bleakly at the lineup of empty glasses in front of him.

A fierce rage slowly filled her as she took in the similarities between the stranger and her father. Was this what had drawn Seven's heartless, calculating personality? An individual who'd given up on life and sought solace in booze and nicotine in hopes of dulling whatever pain haunted him?

The trucker started toward the man's table with a purposeful stride, and she rushed from the booth, her focus glued to the creature's jiggling potbelly. They reached the stranger at the same time, and she had the distinct honor of witnessing the trucker's eyes flicker with surprise as she dropped into the vacant seat next to its intended victim. As if suddenly aware that she'd gained some semblance of an upper hand, the sin's features tightened in annoyance.

"Clarissa. I didn't realize we were due for a meeting today." Although the words were delivered in an amused drawl, a distinct warning glinted in those reptilian eyes as the trucker lowered into the opposite chair. "Whatever this is pertaining to, it'll have to wait. Jack and I have business to attend to."

She squared her chin, refusing to back down. "Don't mind me." She slid her gaze to the stranger, who was gaping at her in bafflement. "Whatever *he's* promised you isn't worth it."

The man blinked, apparently taken aback by either her vehemence or the fact that she knew about his predicament. "How...?"

"Because I'm guilty of the same mistake you're about to commit." She covered the stranger's hand with her own, and was shocked that she didn't feel even the slightest awkwardness over the gesture. Lifting her scrutiny from their linked hands, she met the man's confused stare. "Please don't do this. I've seen what happens once the contract is collected upon. Believe me, whatever hell you're facing now is nothing compared to what that monster sitting across from us has in store for you."

A tsking noise came from the trucker. "Monster? Must we resort to name-calling?"

"Trust me, that's the kindest of the names I have for you."

The sin leaned back in its seat, the creature's posture hinting at a bored tolerance of her presence. "Whatever you're hoping to accomplish here is a waste of time. Jack isn't looking for salvation. The only thing he cares about is wallowing in excess. Alcohol, women, cigarettes. Whatever his drug of choice, I'm here to provide it."

Jack's hand went limp beneath hers. His lips trembled, his shoulders drooping even more. "He's right. Those things are all I need. All I want."

"No, they're not." Desperation clawing at her, she squeezed his knuckles. "They're a weak substitution for something else. Something that's lacking in your life. Or that you're too afraid to face. I

know it's scary, thinking you don't have any other choice. But you do. You can choose to turn your back on everything that's ever pulled you down into this bottomless pit. You can turn your back on *him*."

A fierce tremor suddenly shook through Jack, and he ripped his hand from beneath hers, his features twisting in anger. "You don't know what it's like, so don't fucking judge me, lady."

His sudden outrage wasn't entirely unexpected. She'd dealt with similar outbursts countless times with her parents. "I'm not judging you. And I do understand. All too well. I'm only trying to help you."

"I don't need your goddamn help." Jack glared at the trucker. "Where is that fucking contract?"

"Please don't do this," she pleaded again. Her heart felt like it was shriveling as the sin smiled and produced the document. She tried to take the pen from Jack, but he only shoved her away and quickly scribbled his name on the bottom line.

"That's the thing about humans. They don't truly want to be saved. Might as well accept it." The sin tucked the contract away and stood. "Well, Jack ole boy, it's been a pleasure doing business with you. Just one last thing before I run..." A sneer tilting those fleshy lips, the trucker tipped Jack's chin up and planted a kiss squarely on his mouth. Straightening, the creature sent her a mocking grin. "No need to be jealous. He's not nearly as good a kisser as you are, from what Envy's said." And with that parting shot, the sin vanished.

She stared glumly at Jack, who seemed to be completely uninterested in her presence. When he ordered a fresh pitcher of beer and a round of shots, she stood and headed for the exit, a wave of helpless defeat roiling in her stomach. Once outside, she took a deep breath, her determination returning to the forefront. Yes, she'd lost this battle, but it wasn't over yet. Not by a long shot. Checking the display on her phone, she quickened her pace. She had less than fifteen minutes before the riverboat left its mooring. Given Seven's haste in getting that last contract out of the way, she had little doubt that the creature would likely be on that boat.

And so would she.

She made it on the ship with mere seconds to spare. While she caught her breath, she strolled the gaming decks, on the lookout for whichever of Seven's personalities would be prowling for the next victim. The noisy cacophony of the slot machines provided a frenetic soundtrack as she wove through the crowd. She neared the higher-paying slots and spotted a familiar figure. This personality was female, decked head to toe in a champagne silk sheath and cultured pearls. In other words, the trappings of a wealthy socialite. Greed, perhaps?

Keeping her focus fixed on the sin's austere ash-blond bun, Clarissa elbowed past the congested traffic clustered around the Blackjack tables. She reached Greed just as the personality accepted a cocktail from a passing waiter. The creature's scarlet-painted lips curved in a travesty of a smile. "Persistent little thing, aren't you?"

“You have no idea.”

Greed tipped back its head and laughed, the sound resembling ice cubes clinking in a glass. “I would have thought your *tête-à-tête* with Gluttony would have cured you of this foolish quest. Your time is limited, Clarissa. Why squander it this way?”

“If I can stop you from contracting even one soul, it will be worth every second lost.”

One blood-red nail scratched along the rim of the champagne flute. “You will never be able to stop me. The sooner you accept the reality of that, the better off you’ll be.”

“What, like Jack? Like *them*?” She waved her arm, indicating the sea of gamblers surrounding them. “They have no idea the reality you have planned for them. I can’t just stand by and let you dupe them with a few years of whatever bullshit you’ve promised in return for their endless stint in purgatory.”

“Why?” Greed’s eyes sparkled with an icy malice. “Tell me, *sweet* Clarissa. Do you think that by saving them you’ll find redemption for your sin? For the pain you brought upon your father seven years ago?”

The question was like a knife twisting in her soul. It took every ounce of strength she possessed not to let her stare waver from Greed’s. “No. Nothing will redeem that.”

“Finally you’re speaking some sense.” Carelessly upending the crystal flute on the pull handle of a nearby slot machine, Greed sashayed down the aisle. Lines of irritation bracketed the sin’s mouth when Clarissa fell in step beside the creature. “Your foolishness is really beginning to piss the hell out of me.”

“I can tell.”

Greed visually gave her a disdainful sweep. “It’s beyond my comprehension why Envy is so besotted with you. Your puny magic is hardly any match for our abilities.”

“I don’t need magic to defeat you. Only faith in humankind.”

A snort fell from Greed. “You might as well sprinkle that belief with pixie dust. They’re both made of the same flimsy illusion. As far as I can tell, you humans are nothing more than hairless apes. Only with less intelligence.” Giving her a dismissive glance, Greed stepped around an enormous slot machine and poofed out of sight.

Panic momentarily getting the best of her, Clarissa whipped her head around, trying to see where the sin might have gone. She stumbled sideways, banging into a token machine. Ignoring the burst of pain in her elbow, she hurried out onto the main thoroughfare. She spied a flash of champagne silk ascending the adjacent stairway. Dodging the steady flow of pedestrian traffic, she dashed after Greed. She reached the ship’s upper level just as the sin disappeared into the lounge area. Her heart still banging from her mad chase, Clarissa tailed the creature to a booth where a young male sat. Greed paused for a moment and looked over her shoulder, her jeering smile indicating that she’d been aware of Clarissa’s pursuit all along. More than likely the sin relished the thought of rubbing a fresh conquest in Clarissa’s face.

Clarissa steeled her spine. *Game on, bitch.*

Greed slid onto the bench beside the man. Hell, if you could call him that. He barely looked old enough to vote. The kid sent Clarissa a perplexed glance as she ducked into the booth on the other side of him.

“Tanner, prompt as always.” Greed’s fingertips trailed up along the young man’s bare arm and snuck beneath the sleeve of his T-shirt in a flirtatious way that gave Clarissa the creeps.

The kid shivered, leading Clarissa to believe that he felt a similar sensation. He swallowed, his wide-eyed gaze still pinned on her. “A-are you one of them too?”

“Good goddess, no,” she quickly reassured him while Greed’s chilling laugh floated around them. “I’m here to stop you from making a terrible mistake.”

A frown tweaked between his dark blond eyebrows. “You are? Why?”

“Because sweet Clarissa here envisions herself the savior of mankind. Amusing, isn’t it?”

Tuning out Greed’s sarcastic barb, Clarissa leaned closer to Tanner. “Can I ask why you’re doing this?”

His gaze dropped to the table, and a ruddy flush crept across his cheeks. “I don’t have any choice. My ma and I have been living on the streets for the past ten years. I—I just want her to have a good life with nice things for once. Not whatever we can scrape out of the dumpsters.”

The deep shame thickening his voice filled her with sadness and empathy. But mixed in with those two emotions was an even stronger one—fury at the despicable proof of Seven’s heartlessness for preying on this family’s misery. The creature *was* a monster, in every sense of the word.

She continued staring at the top of Tanner’s bent head, a plan formulating. “There is another choice. I’m the mistress of a coven outside the city limits. You and your mother can come live with us. For as long as you want.”

An angry hiss came from Greed as Tanner lifted his head and gaped at Clarissa. “You would do that for us? Why? You don’t even know me.”

“You’re willing to sell your soul to give your mother a better life. That tells me all I need to know.”

Greed’s face turning a livid red, the creature slammed its palms on the table, shaking it violently. “Don’t listen to her. She can’t offer you the things I can. Untold riches. A life of luxury such as you and your mother have never known.”

“It’s true. The coven isn’t wealthy. But we will gladly take you in and never expect anything from you in return.”

Tanner’s gaze swiveled between her and Greed for a long moment. Finally he gulped and returned his attention to Clarissa and nodded. “I—I accept your offer.”

An almost demonic growl rumbled from Greed as the sin shot to its feet. Eyes blazing with malevolence lasered into Clarissa. “Nobody messes with my contracts. *Nobody*.” A waft of that strange saline-spiked air blew across the booth and the sin disappeared.

“Ar-are you in trouble now?” Tanner stammered.

Probably. “No.” She reached for a nearby beverage napkin. “I’m going to write down the address for the coven house. You and your mother are welcome to come whenever. But I have to ask you a favor.”

A look of weary resignation crossed Tanner’s youthful face, and she tucked the address into his hand. “It’s not what you think. I meant it when I said this invitation comes with no strings attached. But I need you to tell no one about this meeting.”

He watched her quietly for a second, those soulful eyes filled with the weight of the world. “You made a deal too, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“What for?”

She gave him an answer that she knew he would well understand. “I wanted to give my father a better life.”

By the time the ship docked, it was well past five. Still riding a high from her victory over Greed, she drove back into the entertainment district and tried her luck at a couple of the nightclubs. When that didn’t pan out, she dug in her purse for the directions to the sex club. Less than ten minutes later, she pulled into the parking structure for The Velvet Cuff. Praying she didn’t look as out of place as she felt, she beeped the alarm on the Miata and took the rear alley to the club’s hidden entrance.

Inside the cavernous building, exposed industrial pipes overhead and brick walls painted black created a mysterious atmosphere. The throbbing electro-beat of the techno music piped through the veritable maze of rooms only added to the mystique.

“What is your fantasy, my lady?”

She turned and eyed the tall, overly muscular guy who was flicking a crop against his palm and staring at her with a tad too much interest. *Um, not you.* “I’m here to meet a friend.” She gave him her most threatening look, and he shrugged before strolling away.

Shaking off the willies, she walked down the central hallway, peering within the various rooms. Some of the activities she witnessed were quite shocking, and she could feel her face growing hotter and hotter. Public floggings. Public sex and orgies. In one room, a nude man was bent over a chair on a raised dais, his ass getting fucked by one man and his cock sucked by yet another while an appreciative audience watched.

She moved on and came to a room that seemed to be far less popular than the others. In fact, there were only two people inside—a man and a woman. The interior of the space was so dimly lit, she could only make out the couple’s silhouette. But there was something disturbingly familiar about the man. Something about the way his hands roved over the woman’s curves as he slowly stripped her from her dress.

An awful, sickening suspicion crawled inside her. Feeling as if she were about to be an eyewitness to something akin to a horrible car wreck—but unable to look away—she stepped into the room. She could make out the glint of those predatory amber eyes watching her every move, even while those hands, ones that had charted every inch of her body, molded over the other woman’s full breasts. Her brain refused to believe what she was seeing.

He wouldn’t do this. Not after everything—

Hoots of laughter floated from the corner, and she whirled to find the portly trucker—Gluttony—leaning against the wall.

“Bravo, my dear. You almost even had *me* fooled.”

Confused, she turned as Logan walked into her field of vision. But as he came closer, his irises elongated, shimmering to black. She blinked, trying to comprehend what she was seeing. “How...?”

“Lust has an additional perk that the rest of us, alas, do not possess. The ability to become the deepest craving it sees within another. Pretty convenient, no?”

The fake Logan backed her against the wall, its hands curving around her waist. She tensed as the sin nuzzled her, its hot breath steaming her neck. Just as she was about to shove at the creature’s chest, a heavy weight slammed into it, knocking the sin on its ass. Eyes flashing fire, Envy crouched over Lust. The two sins snarled and hissed at each other. The woman—who had stayed in the shadows—strode forward, revealing herself. Greed. The personality shot its two comrades a disdainful sneer. “You both are pathetic. Get up.”

Clarissa stood mute, trying to unravel the twisted tangle of her jumbled thoughts. Other than her dream, she’d never seen Seven’s personalities in the same room together. How was the creature able to fracture itself like this?

An even more troubling realization sprang to life. Seven could be in multiple places at once. She could not. While she was saving one person’s soul, six more could be signing away the rights to theirs.

No wonder Seven was convinced it couldn’t be stopped.

While Lust and Envy stood, Greed stepped in front of Clarissa. “You broke the rules tonight, *sweets*. That’s going to cost you.”

Clarissa’s heart thundered at the unmistakable threat lurking in the sin’s hostile gaze. “I never promised that I wouldn’t try to save anyone else, just myself.”

“And you think that suffices as coming willingly?”

“I *am* coming to you without a fight. That doesn’t mean it applies to the others.”

An evil growl came from Greed before the creature struck Clarissa across the cheek. “I should rip that delicate skin from your face.”

A wicked rasp snaked from Envy. “Touch her again and I’ll boil your innards in oil.”

Greed bared its teeth. “I’d like to see you try it.”

Feeling like she was a spectator trapped in the middle of some psychotic Freudian meltdown, Clarissa gaped at the feuding personalities. It didn't seem to matter—or occur—to Seven that it was basically having one big hissy fit with itself.

After a tense stare down with Envy, Greed returned its focus to Clarissa. Another sin materialized next to Greed, this one male and bristling with arrogance and an overabundance of...pride? “If it were up to me, I’d say to hell with your soul and simply kill you, after forcing you to watch us destroy everyone that means anything to you.”

A youth sporting too many tattoos and piercings skulked from the shadows and cracked its knuckles. At least the personality’s T-shirt proclaimed its sin. Wrath. “I say we do it anyway. It’d be the most fun I’ve had since inciting that riot in Tiananmen Square.”

“Watch your mouth, you stupid punk,” Envy spat. “You don’t call the shots here.”

“You’re just jealous because you’re not as badass as me.” Wrath flexed its nearly nonexistent biceps.

A slovenly dressed figure appeared next to Gluttony. Clarissa presumed it must be Sloth, since that was the only sin left. Apparently finding it too much effort to stand, the creature slouched on the edge of the dais and waved a hand listlessly in Clarissa’s direction. “This is all cutting into my precious nap time, so I’ll get right to the point. If you don’t stop butting into our business, everything Pride promised will come true. By the time we’re done with your loved ones, they’ll beg us to end their pathetic, miserable lives. But that’ll just be the beginning. A soul’s suffering can be eternal.”

A shiver that almost resembled ecstasy shook Lust. Clarissa’s stomach churned at the sin’s obvious pleasure over the prospect of another’s agony.

“So what’s it going to be, *sweet* Clarissa?” Venom practically dripped from Greed’s voice. “Hinder our business transactions and face our wrath?”

The tattooed youth gave a jeering laugh at the inside joke.

Helpless defeat settled on Clarissa like a three-ton elephant. There was nothing she could do. Like Willa said, she couldn’t save any of them. Not without condemning those she held dearest to a terrible existence.

The fact that she even had to make this choice elicited a greasy queasiness in her stomach. Would she spend the remainder of her days in Seven’s hellish lair, picturing the face of every person she might have helped? Even that didn’t seem like fitting enough punishment.

She swallowed against the bitter remorse clogging her esophagus. “Fine. I accept your terms. No more interventions.” As the goddess was her witness, she would find a way to make Seven suffer for the atrocities it’d committed, both past, present and future. Even if doing so earned her a dip in that lake of death.

As if sensing her inner determination, all seven sins chuckled. Envy closed the distance between them and stroked her cheek, that covetous gleam shining from its soulless eyes. “We’re going to have so much fun together, sweet Clarissa. Just you wait.”

Her anger like a raging beast within her, she watched as one by one the sins faded away, until finally she was the only one left in the room. She didn’t know how long she stood there, staring sightlessly at the opposite wall as another layer of her soul slowly withered and died. What was the importance of time anyway, when you faced a lifetime of purgatory for your sins?

Chapter Sixteen

The prospect of locking herself in her bedroom all day was a heady temptation. Particularly since the sun shining through the windows felt like a cruel joke compared to the bleak emptiness that sat heavy in her chest. But that would just be one more victory for Seven—the utter demoralization of her soul, even before the son of a bitch claimed ownership of it.

Leaving Izzy to chew contentedly on one of the throw pillows, she went to her closet and deliberately chose the sunniest outfit she could find. Okay, so maybe the tie-dye purple tank top and jean capris didn't exactly scream cheery smiling unicorns and happy joy joy, but it was pretty much as chipper as her wardrobe selections got.

After running a comb through her hair, she headed downstairs with Izzy. The puppy spotted Floyd scratching himself outside the kitchen and scampered down the hall. Floyd, obviously anticipating a full-on attack from chewing puppy teeth, let out a terrified woof and dashed off, Izzy hot on his heels. A moment later, a loud bang sounded. At first she assumed it was caused by Floyd colliding with something, such as a wall. But then an unmistakable volley of curses streamed through the kitchen's entrance.

"Oh good goddess, now what?" Steeling herself for the worst, she hurried forward. She barreled into the kitchen and gaped at the enormous orange object lodged in the center of the prep island. Whatever the thing was, it weighed enough to have buckled the metal countertop.

Gloria was shaking a wooden spoon at Peach. "I told you not to sprinkle so much growth hormone on it!"

Ms. Peach frowned at the vial in her hand. "How was I supposed to know you loaded this stuff with too much magic?"

"I did *not*—" Gloria growled and thunked the spoon on top of Peach's head. Fortunately the elderly woman's heavily shellacked perm acted as a quasi helmet, easily deflecting the blow. Tossing the utensil aside, the cook glared at the orange object. "What the hell am I gonna do with a persimmon that big?"

"Enter it in the state fair? You'd win hands down."

While Gloria pondered Peach's suggestion, Clarissa bypassed the two women and poured herself a cup of coffee. Gloria cleared her throat. "Uh, in case you're wondering about the persimmon—"

"I'm not. I'm sure there's a perfectly logical reason for a two hundred pound fruit in the middle of the kitchen."

Both witches stared at her, momentarily struck mute. It was the most peaceful three seconds she'd ever known.

Of course it didn't last. Peach spoke up first, spoiling Clarissa's bubble of not-giving-a-damn. "Shit, the ETs already got to her." She shuffled to Clarissa and squinted at her suspiciously. "Okay, I don't know what mother ship you've got the real Clarissa stashed in, but boy is she going to be pissed about you invading her body."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm the only one in here." Clarissa took a sip from her mug.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite positive."

Peach stroked her chin. "Who's the first boy you ever kissed? Wait, scratch that. Those ETs have detailed spreadsheets on stuff like that. Who's the first boy *I* ever kissed?"

"I have no idea."

The elderly witch grunted. "Yep, it's you. An ET would know the answer."

Since it would take the remainder of her shortened lifespan to decipher Peach's off-the-wall logic, she decided to let it go and concentrate instead on more important things. "There's a young man named Tanner who I suspect will be showing up within the next day or so."

"Did you hire him to help with the wedding preparations?" Gloria asked, her expression hopeful.

"No. He and his mother will be living here."

Once again, her words managed to weave a spell of silence over Gloria and Peach. She took another gulp of coffee, basking in the moment.

"Wait a minute." Peach straightened her spectacles. "Four days ago you about blew a gasket over Izzy joining the family. Now you're inviting the whole community to come stay with us?"

"Two people, Peach. Don't make more out of it than it is." Tightening her grip on the mug, she strode for the doorway. She could hear Peach whispering something about constructing tinfoil hats to block their brainwaves in case the new residents were extraterrestrials. Shaking her head, she strode to her office. "Maybe I should have warned Tanner what he was getting himself into *here*."

She scooted into her chair and distracted herself for the next hour, getting her records in order so that when Fiona took over as mistress it hopefully wouldn't be too overwhelming. In the bottom drawer of the desk, she found her personal *Book of Shadows*. Lugging out the large leather tome, she placed it on the desktop and ran her fingertip over the gold-leafed engraving of the pentacle on the cover. She cracked open the book and stared at the first page. *Do what you will, so long as it harms none*. The Wiccan Rede. She'd tried to live by its principles, but all she felt was the crushing weight of failure.

"Uh-oh. Looks like someone is contemplating a hex."

She jerked her head up and met Logan's mock look of fright. Her brain immediately conjured the disturbing image of Lust's twisted impersonation of him last night. A shiver racked her body as she contemplated how easily she'd been duped. How simple it would be for Seven to fool others.

Logan frowned. "What's wrong? Am I letting in a draft?"

"No. What are you doing here?"

If he thought her bluntness rude, he didn't let on. "I thought I'd swing by and see if you need any help around here for tomorrow's festivities. Plus I wanted to make sure you didn't try to weasel out of tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Our date."

Shit. She'd forgotten all about it. "I—"

"Not a chance, shug. You're goin'."

She snapped her mouth shut. Damn. Why did he have to be so bullheaded?

"So what do you need me to do, boss lady?"

Sweet goddess, she hated it when he called her that. Almost as much as she despised the way her tummy fluttered as his dimples deepened with his grin. "There's a two hundred pound persimmon in the kitchen that Gloria could probably use some help with."

Without batting an eyelash at the odd request, he nodded and ducked from the doorway. Rubbing her temples, she stared listlessly at the opened *Book of Shadows*. She slowly flipped the pages, visually cataloging the documentation of her beginning days as a witch. The first dozen entries were various spells she'd invented—some of them halfway decent, but most falling more along the lines of what-the-hell-was-I-thinking. Yeah, the spell for increasing her bust size when she'd been a gawky, flat-chested teenager? Not one of her finer moments. Smiling despite herself, she turned to the next page.

"Err...Clarissa?"

She glanced up to find Constance eyeing her warily. "Yes?"

"There's a woman out on the porch asking for you. I'm not liking her aura. It's mega nasty."

A splinter of fear shafted through her bones. Had Seven reneged on its promise to leave the coven out of this? She jumped to her feet and raced from her office. Outside, she slammed to a skidding halt as she took in who was waiting for her.

"Clarissa, long time no see."

She gaped at her mother, wishing the woman was merely a figment of her imagination. Or even Lust in disguise. But even Seven wasn't that brilliant of a mimic to have so perfectly captured the alcohol-ravaged features of Jolene Miles—features that had once been almost too stunningly beautiful to gaze upon. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Is that any way to speak to your mother?"

"I haven't seen you in nearly seven years. You're lucky I'm speaking to you at all."

Seemingly unconcerned with Clarissa's agitation, Jolene stepped closer. "I went to see your father. Seems like he's doing well enough."

"He can barely remember his own name."

"He remembered me." Her mother's taunt held a sickening amount of pride.

"I want you to stay away from him."

"Fine." Jolene's shoulders lifted in a casual shrug.

Her unexpected capitulation stunned Clarissa. "Y-you mean it?" she stammered, almost afraid to hope. She'd been half worried that Jolene would find a way to weasel into the good graces of the nursing-home staff in order to circumnavigate the restricted list. It was exactly the kind of thing she'd do.

"Sure. But it'll cost you. Why don't we make it an even two thousand?"

And there it was. The reason for her mother's return appearance after all these years. She should have fucking known. "Let me guess. Barry finally discovered your true nature and is done funding your alcohol and drugs." It would explain why she hadn't seen Jolene at Tatum's, strutting around like she owned the place. More than likely, Barry hadn't only kicked her out of his life, but also his family's business.

Jolene's garishly painted lips gave an ugly twist, revealing the smear of crimson gloss on her upper teeth. "Don't talk to me like that, you sanctimonious little bitch. You owe me that money after everything I've done for you."

"And that would be what? Passing out drunk every night? Slipping me roofies when I was a kid so that I'd sleep while you snuck out and met your dealer? Of course, that was before you started completely not giving a damn whether I wandered outside and got hit by a car. But most of all, maybe I should be grateful that you ever showed me a second's attention?" Her limbs shook from the tempest of repressed emotions that strained to escape their bonds.

A dry, rattling laugh broke from her mother. "Oh my God. You've still got a bug up your ass about seeing me with Barry's kids that day in the park. How fucking pathetic are you? I don't give two shits about those whiny brats. I only spent time with them to get in good with Barry. Why can't you fucking realize that?"

She had seen it. But the damning part was she'd still been devastated, still let her mother's betrayal force her down the path that'd ultimately led to her own despicable act of duplicity, even though she hadn't intentionally meant it that way.

Do what you will, so long as it harms none. She'd broken the biggest commandment of them all. The pain in her heart was almost unbearable. "Get off my property and never return."

Jolene's eyes hardened. "You're dead to me."

"Same goes here."

Huffing beneath her breath, Jolene whirled and stalked down the porch steps before jumping in her rust bucket of a car and peeling out of the drive in a spray of gravel. Clarissa waited until the vehicle

completely disappeared from sight before turning. Her gaze collided with the two figures standing on the other side of the screen door. Constance and Logan. Both were looking at her with a mix of horror and sympathy. She could take a lot of things. But not their pity.

Her throat constricting, she pivoted and stumbled down the steps.

Logan watched the beautiful, strong woman he loved breaking down in front of him. His chest seized, aching for her and everything he now knew. *Jesus*. No wonder her heart was a fortress. He brushed past Constance and swung the screen open. It banged shut behind him as he followed after Clarissa. She rushed around the side of the coven house, but he quickly closed the distance between them and pulled her into his arms. She struggled briefly before slumping against him with a muffled sob. “I—I didn’t want anyone to kn-know.”

“It’s okay, baby.” He hugged her tight, his eyes closing as he buried his cheek in her hair. Whispering nonsensical words that nonetheless seemed to soothe her, he stroked her back. They stood there for what might have been an eternity, just holding each other. Finally she lifted her head and he kissed her. There was no heat in it, just an offering of comfort. He squeezed her limp hands. “Let’s get out of here.”

“But there’s a million things—”

“That can be done by someone else,” he interjected. “Why don’t you go wait by my bike while I go have a talk with your sisters?”

At first he thought she was on the verge of balking, but after a long hesitation, she nodded. Giving her knuckles one last caress with his thumbs, he released her and went in search of the others. After explaining that Clarissa would be unavailable for the remainder of the day, he hurried outside, relief flooding him when he saw that she was patiently leaning on the seat of the Harley. He’d been partly convinced that she would take the opportunity to run and hide the second his back was turned. She looked at him in surprise when he fetched the new helmet and sunglasses he’d bought for her from the saddlebag. He handed her the glasses and settled the helmet on her head, securing the strap beneath her chin. “I figured it made sense gettin’ you one, since you’ll be loggin’ plenty of road time with me.”

He’d expected her to rise to the challenge in his pronouncement, not look like she was on the brink of bursting into tears again. He stared at the custom-made pentacle on the helmet, wondering if she didn’t like it. “Hey, don’t sweat it. If you don’t care for the design on this one, we’ll get you another.”

“No, I love it. Thank you.”

In his pitiable, sappy state, her declaration would have no less meaning than if she’d said she loved *him*. His face almost hurting from the wide stretch of his smile, he donned his own helmet and shades before climbing onto the bike. The machine dipped as Clarissa straddled the seat. Rather than gripping the rear sissy bar as she’d always done in the past, she snuggled into him and banded her arms around his waist. In that moment, everything felt right in the world.

Gunning the engine, he cruised down the drive. Once they reached pavement, he gave the bike more throttle and soon the engine was roaring, the countryside whipping by. At first he didn't quite have a destination in mind, his only real aim centered on getting Clarissa's mind off her mother's visit. But then he remembered the carnival he'd spotted on the outskirts of town. Crazy as it was, the idea of giving her a taste of the childhood she'd obviously been deprived of sounded like the best plan he'd ever had. He nosed the bike in the right direction, and twenty-five minutes later rumbled onto the grassy field being used for parking. Once Clarissa dismounted, he followed suit and met her confused gaze as she tugged her sunglasses free.

"This is a carnival."

He chuckled. "Thanks for clearing that up for me."

Her eyebrows scrunched in an adorable way. "What are we doing here?"

"We're gonna do what most folks do at a carnival. Eat too much junk food. Shoot at bobbing ducks so we can possibly win a giant stuffed animal. Ride some coasters that'll make you scream and clutch me." He was particularly looking forward to that part.

"We're going to shoot at ducks?" She looked worried.

"Plastic ones."

"Oh."

"Come on, you're gonna love it." Winking, he twined his fingers through hers and led her to the admission gate. After paying the fee, he slung his arm around her waist, drawing her close. "So what do you want to check out first?"

"I—I don't know."

She looked so lost and mystified, like she'd just landed on a strange, foreign planet, that he couldn't resist kissing her forehead. "Okay, I'll make a suggestion then. I'm starved and those corn dogs are smellin' mighty tasty."

She licked her lips. "That does sound good."

"Then let's go nab 'em. We can munch and stroll."

One corner of her mouth lifted. "Is that a technical term?"

"Yep. You see, I'm a true carnival connoisseur."

They found the corn-dog vendor and bought two of the fattening but mightily delicious treats. After slathering his in a river of mustard, he took Clarissa on a tour, giving her the skinny on all the attractions. She gazed wistfully at the mock shooting gallery, where various prizes were strung up on enticing display.

"You're a crack shot, shug. You should go for it."

She nibbled on her bottom lip. "I do think Izzy would like that big pink gopher."

Tossing their garbage in a nearby bin, he hustled her toward the gallery. He shelled out the necessary cash, despite her protests, and handed her the toy rifle. She clutched the thing like she had no idea what to

do with it. Pretty damn weird, since she'd fired off a real one more than a time or two. Then it dawned on him. She wasn't so much unsure of the toy but of the objective of the game. Giving her tense shoulder an encouraging squeeze, he pointed toward the targets whistling by on the track. "You see the clowns with the bull's-eyes in their mouths? You wanna nail those suckers."

Her cheeks flushed. "I probably should have guessed that."

The carnie running the booth scratched at his mustache. "Well now, not necessarily. In fact, you're at least the ninth person today who had to ask."

The stiffness eased from Clarissa's shoulders, and Logan made a mental note to sneak the carnie an extra five for his kindness. Lifting the rifle, she took careful aim and systematically pegged each of the clowns, putting them down for the count. He bit back a laugh at the hawker's incredulous expression. The old timer shook his head and gaped at Clarissa. "You sure you've never played this game before, little lady?"

"Positive."

Rubbing his chin, the carnie relieved her of the toy weapon. He slid his gaze to Logan. "Best mind your P's and Q's with this one. Otherwise ya might end up with a rump full of buckshot."

"You're tellin' me."

"Okay, Annie Oakley. Which prize shall it be?"

Clarissa's eyes went huge. "I *won*?"

The carnie guffawed. "That's usually what happens when you smoke every dang target."

"Oh wow." Her attention drifted to the pink gopher. "Can I...have that one?" She indicated her choice by pointing her index finger.

"Shore thing."

She accepted the stuffed animal like she almost couldn't fathom how she'd won this holy grail of prizes. There was no way in hell Logan was going to spoil her joy by telling her the toy probably came from China and cost less than what it took to win it. While she clutched the gopher to her chest, he flipped the carnie a Lincoln. Pressing his palm in the small of her back, he steered her toward the next sight. The rich, buttery smell of caramel corn wafted to his nostrils, making his stomach rumble. "Time for dessert."

She blinked at him. "We just ate."

"We're at a carnival, shug. You haven't eaten until your gut feels like it's gonna bust and the Mylanta is callin' your name."

"That doesn't sound very fun."

"It is. Trust me." Before she could hem and haw, he followed his nose to the proper vendor and scored them a bag to share. They walked through the rest of the amusements until they came to the section of the midway where the rides were located. The flashing lights, music and gleeful shrieks from the other carnival goers appeared to have Clarissa dazzled. She stared at everything in wonder. Within the depths of

her eyes, he spotted the little girl who'd never been allowed to just play and do all the things a kid was supposed to enjoy. It made him sad and angry for her, as well as all the more determined to give her everything she'd missed out on.

He squeezed her hand. "Come on, let's go snag a ride on the Ferris wheel."

She gave him a dubious look. "Aren't we supposed to wait half an hour until our food finishes digesting?"

"That's only for swimmin'," he assured her before cupping her elbow and guiding her in the right direction. The wait for the big wheel was relatively short compared to the coasters that seemed to attract the majority of teens gallivanting about. Within a few minutes they'd reached the head of the line, and the attendant ushered them inside their own private little cart. Clarissa figured out the seat belt on her own and buckled herself in, her expression bordering on trepidation. He squeezed her knee. "Relax. These things hardly ever get stuck."

"They get *stuck*?" Her exclamation morphed into a hiccupped yelp as the cart began ascending.

He smothered his grin, but it was damn hard. "I said hardly."

"That's reassuring." Despite her shaky tone, she inched forward on the seat and peered out at the multicolored canvas of lights and people milling beneath them. A gasp caught in her throat. "It's so...beautiful."

"Not half as beautiful as what I'm lookin' at."

She turned and their gazes collided. He leaned into her, one hand framing her cheek and the other curling around the hand she had flattened on her lap. He lifted their linked fingers and splayed them over his rapidly thudding heart. "Feel that? Happens every damn time I simply look at you."

Her fingers rubbed against the cotton of his shirt, and a shuddering sigh snaked past her lips. He brushed his mouth over hers. "I wanna spend the rest of my days making sure each one of yours is full of happiness." He tasted the salt of her tears on his tongue and pulled his head back.

Her eyes waterlogged, she stared at him. "I..."

"What, Rissa?" His heart pounded faster, each beat like an endless, echoing plea for her to say the three words he ached to hear.

"I'm afraid. Afraid of wanting this. Of wanting you."

Her admission wasn't exactly what he'd hoped for, but it was better than what he'd expected. "I know, baby. But you don't have to be. I'm yours always. I'm not goin' anywhere."

The tears collected in her eyes spilled past their dam. As if she were ashamed of even that show of emotion, she buried her face against the crook of his neck. He hugged her tight while the cart softly swayed and his heart silently broke for her.

Chapter Seventeen

It was just a little over an hour until the start of Jemma and Griffin's wedding, and no one had suffered a nervous breakdown yet. Or inadvertently—or not—cast a spell to turn someone into a toad. Considering the number of high-strung witches running around, that last prospect had been slightly dicey.

A grunt came from Ms. Peach. "Whose brilliant idea was it to tie bows on one hundred and fifty chairs?"

Clarissa fluffed the ribbon she was securing before glancing toward the grumbling Ms. Peach. "I believe that would be you."

"I did?" Peach frowned. "You should know better than to listen to me when I'm behind on my meds."

Fiona and Jade appeared to lend a hand, and Clarissa used the opportunity to go check on things in the kitchen. Fortunately the giant persimmon was gone, its bountiful flesh now residing in two of the world's largest fruit salads and a cheesecake. She inspected the five-tier wedding cake Gloria was putting the finishing touches on. A garland of incredibly lifelike fondant roses and butterflies cascaded down the side of the masterful creation. "You've really outdone yourself. Jemma is going to love it."

Gloria beamed under the compliment. "You think so?"

"Absolutely. Speaking of our bride-to-be, I should see if she needs anything." Leaving the cook to take care of things on her end, Clarissa headed upstairs to the bedroom that'd been temporarily turned into the bridal-party headquarters. Jemma was sitting on the four-poster bed, her shoulders slumped. Hannah Finnegan—Jemma's mother—was stroking her daughter's arm reassuringly. A thread of worry snaked through Clarissa. "What's wrong?"

Jemma lifted her head, her expression glum. "I look like a white gumdrop."

Clarissa stared at her, uncertain how to respond. "Um..."

"It's the hormones talking. I told her she looks gorgeous and glowing, but she refuses to believe me."

Jemma sniffled. "You're my mom. You're not above lying to make me feel better."

Clarissa strode toward the dresser and picked up the braided ivy and stephanotis flower garland Jemma had chosen in place of a veil. Returning to Jemma, she carefully situated the headpiece on her blonde curls. "Well, I think you look like a princess. And have you ever known me to lie to you?"

"Well, you didn't tell me right away that Antoinette Delacroix was my grandmother. Technically, that's a lie by omission."

Clarissa slid a glance toward Hannah. "Is she always this stubborn?"

“You have no idea.” Hannah clucked her tongue.

“Hold on a sec. I think I know who might be able to help with this.” She rushed two doors down to where Griffin and Jemma’s father were getting ready. Grabbing Griffin’s arm, she hauled him from the room.

“What is it? Jemma—”

Taking a cue from Hannah, she gave Griffin’s tensed biceps a soothing pat. “She’s fine. But I think she really needs some reassurance that only you can provide right now.” Giving his back a gentle shove, she coaxed him through the entry.

He slammed to a halt just past the threshold of the doorway, and Jemma lurched to her feet. “Griff! You’re not supposed to see me yet.”

“Baby, you look...*damn*.” A loud purr rumbled from Griffin.

Jemma’s face lit up, and she smoothed her knee-length organza skirt, preening a bit. “Are you sure it doesn’t make me look like a gumdrop?”

“Hell no. And I’m going to prove it after the ceremony.”

Hannah cleared her throat. “Hello. Mom unit standing right here. I don’t need to picture your guy’s kinky tiger sex while my precious daughter is reciting her vows.”

Jemma rolled her eyes. Taking that as a cue that her work was done there, Clarissa snuck from the room and headed for the stairway. She planted her foot on the top step just as Logan sauntered into the front entrance. In honor of today’s auspicious occasion, he wore a beige suit and white button-down shirt, the cut of the jacket emphasizing the broad width of his shoulders. A sunbeam snuck through the palladium windows, giving his hair a glossy sheen. Her heartbeat kicked up several notches.

Feel that? Happens every damn time I simply look at you.

He wasn’t the only one. As if he possessed a direct link to the frenetic race of her pulse, he lifted his gaze to her. The heat in his eyes was like a visual caress, and goose bumps danced across her skin. Curling her palm around the railing to steady herself, both in body and mind, she slowly started down the stairs. By the time she reached the bottom, the butterflies in her tummy had settled.

“How’s everything today?”

“Couldn’t be better. Despite some nerves on Jemma’s part, I think we’re good to go,” she assured with a smile, even though she suspected he wasn’t so much referring to the wedding plans, but rather her total meltdown yesterday.

“You look beautiful.”

She glanced down at her strapless emerald green sundress. “People will probably be shocked that I own a dress. And that it’s not black. You look beautiful too, by the way.”

He grinned. “Don’t you mean blindingly handsome?”

“Sorry, but you’ve used up your daily allotment of ego stroking. You’ll have to be happy with beautiful.”

“I am. I’m deliriously happy just standing here with you. Well, almost, anyways.” He leaned closer, the heat of his palm curving on her hip. His lips brushed her earlobe. “I’d be even happier if I were kissin’ you right now.”

“Only kissing?” Her lips twitched. “That’s kind of disappointing.”

“Not when you consider where I wanna kiss you.”

The hot lick of anticipation curling low in her tummy made her shiver. Logan’s groan ruffled through her hair. “Smellin’ your wet panties for the next hour and not bein’ able to do a damn thing about it is gonna kill me.”

“The handfasting ceremony lasts at *least* an hour and a half.”

“Fuck.”

Chuckling at his tortured expression, she encircled his wrist and towed him down the hall. “You can help fasten bows on the chairs. It’ll keep your mind occupied.”

They stepped out into the chaos that was the back rose garden. Many of the guests had already started to show up and were pitching in with the last-minute preparations. Despite the disorganization—or maybe because of it—everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. The laughter and general camaraderie surrounding her soon put her mind at rest that the wedding would go off without a hitch, and Jemma’s special day would be picture-perfect. Even Floyd had ceased trying to gnaw off the bowtie that Peach managed to slip around his neck and was now just moping around, his pathetic look clearly a ruse to gain sympathy that might lead to a snack.

The ceremony officiant arrived, and Clarissa briefly abandoned her station to greet the woman and to make sure the silk cords that would be used for the handfasting were up by the altar. By the time those tasks were completed, the seats were almost filled to capacity with the remainder of guests who’d trickled in. She spied Griffin standing near the rear of the coven house, talking with Logan. She hurried in their direction, sending up a silent prayer that her three-inch heels wouldn’t trip her up and send her sprawling flat on her face in front of one hundred and fifty plus people.

Reaching Logan and Griffin with no embarrassing stumbles, she jerked her chin toward the doorway. “Is Jemma all settled now?”

Griffin nodded. “She’s in the kitchen, eyeing the cakes like she has a hot date planned with them for later. I’m a little jealous.”

Jemma’s father strode out the door and clasped Griffin on his shoulder. “You ready to make an honest woman out of my daughter?”

“I’ve been ready for ten years.”

His eyes suspiciously misty, Neil Finnegan embraced his soon-to-be son-in-law. Once the emotional scene passed, Griffin set off across the lawn while Jemma's father ducked back inside. Logan offered his arm and escorted Clarissa to a pair of seats near the back of the assemblage. They sat, but he kept his hand tucked over hers on her knee. The entire moment felt more than a little surreal. A witch and her familiar tying the knot, something that until a few months ago would have been met with harsh punishment. Holding hands with *her* familiar while her heart skipped with a combination of joy and panic. The knowledge that, come tomorrow, all of this would end, leaving her with nothing but bittersweet memories. If even that.

But she didn't want to think about tomorrow. For now, she would enjoy every second she had left.

Sweet harp music suddenly filled the air and everyone stood and turned as Jemma and her parents stepped onto the path of crushed rose petals. Clarissa didn't need Constance's gift of aura reading to notice how Jemma glowed with vibrant radiance, making it clear to all present that she was overflowing with love for her mate.

An irresistible compulsion drawing her, she glanced over her shoulder and locked gazes with Logan. The snap and sizzle of their connection spiraled around and through her, blocking out all else. It was as if they were the only ones existing in time and space. In her mind, she was transported back to their trip on the Ferris wheel, cocooned within his arms while the world continued to spin around them, unnoticed.

The rustle of clothing broke the spell, and she blinked, belatedly noticing that Jemma had joined Griffin and everyone was taking their seats. She and Logan both sat, and she made a concentrated effort not to look his way for the rest of the ceremony, even though she constantly felt the heat of his consuming focus. While Jemma and Griffin crossed their arms and held hands, forming the infinity symbol as the officiant wound the silk cords over the couple's linked hands, Logan laced his fingers through hers. She easily sensed his desire for her, along with his wolf's edgy hunger to proclaim its own mating rites. The fierce waves rolling off him didn't terrify her, but the responding echo within her soul that screamed *yes, yes, a million times yes* to his mating call was another story.

The instant the ceremony concluded, she jerked to her feet. Logan's grip didn't loosen from her hand, and she met the hot intensity in his eyes as he stood. "No runnin', shug." He glanced toward the small crowd beginning to congregate around the newly married couple. "I'll give you ten minutes to make your rounds before meetin' me in the celestial garden. Don't be late, or I *will* hunt you down."

She gulped at the predatory promise in his voice. His wolf's leash was strained to the max. To test it would probably lead to her dress torn to shreds and his cock buried inside her pussy. Okay, that was likely to happen regardless. The deciding factor would be whether it'd go down behind the privacy of the enclosed garden walls or in front of a crowd of spectators. Seeing how she didn't want to ruin Jemma's day with a public sex show, it'd be best not to balk. "Ten minutes."

He grazed his fingertips along the inside of her wrist before letting her go.

She practically sprinted to Jemma and Griffin's side, bestowing each with hugs and kisses. Fortunately, a continuous swell of well-wishers bombarded the newlyweds, giving her an opportunity to covertly sneak away. Elbowing through the throng, she took one last check of the kitchen to ensure Floyd hadn't somehow gotten into the cakes and other goodies. Satisfied that everything seemed to be under control, she hurried outside and darted in the direction of the celestial garden. She passed through the archway, and the next thing she knew, she was in Logan's arms, getting the daylights kissed out of her. He pressed her against the wooden door, his knuckles bumping her tailbone as he fumbled to secure the key in the lock. A moment later, his hands roved over every inch of her body, hiking her skirt higher and higher.

He broke their wild, ravenous kiss long enough to work her zipper down and the dress floated to the pavers. Her bra and panties soon followed. The scorching warmth of his mouth descended, a feral growl issuing from his throat as he latched onto a nipple. Each gentle tug of his teeth and lash of his tongue ricocheted down to her clit. Gasping, she tugged at his jacket, desperate to feel the hot, velvety sleekness of his skin against hers.

Taking the hint, he ripped impatiently at his clothes, allowing her to strip the jacket and shirt free while he grappled with his trousers and briefs. Finally he was oh-so-gloriously naked, too, and she danced her fingertips over his sculpted chest and the ridges of his abdomen. She sucked on the hardened nubs of his nipples, thrilling at the husky moan that poured from him. His eyes resembling chips of brilliant amber, he upended her into his arms and carried her toward one of the stone benches. He'd padded it with one of the extra blankets from the house, affording it a comfortable cushiness she appreciated as she stretched out. "You put a lot of thought into this."

"An hour and a half's worth." He reached under the bench and held up a bottle of champagne. "Even managed to steal this."

She wrinkled her nose. "I'm not much of a champagne drinker."

"Good. 'Cause I wasn't plannin' on sharin'." His expression dark and wicked, he popped the cork. A shower of the golden liquid foamed over the top, spraying her. He lowered his head and licked the droplets from her breasts before drizzling more champagne along her torso, until the cold liquor pooled in her bellybutton. Lapping her clean of every last drop, he maneuvered them both toward the end of the bench, coaxing her thighs open.

He hoisted the bottle over her mound and let the liquid trickle free.

Her hips bucked as the icy effervescence drenched her clit and labia, the tiny bubbles like a million kisses along her slick, throbbing flesh. Just as she swore she'd die from the pleasure of it, Logan's tongue rasped through the wetness. A flare of magical, violet sparkles no less dazzling than the champagne's bubbles ignited from her as an orgasm slammed her from out of the blue. Logan continued pouring the fountain of liquid, his demanding tongue stringing her climax to the dizzying max.

Eventually the champagne fizzled to nothing, and she uttered a weak, laughing groan as the hot glare of her magic's excess slowly waned. "Thank the goddess. Too much more of that and people would have come running, thinking we were setting off fireworks."

Logan licked his lips, his goatee sparkling from the bubbles. "We were. My favorite type—a Rissa sparkler show."

She chuckled. "Where do you come up with this stuff?"

"Bartendin' gives me ample time for dirty daydreamin'." He slid his palms along her thighs before reaching under the bench again. For one worrisome moment, she thought he might have another champagne bottle stashed under there. Her sanity breathed a sigh of relief when she noticed the condom packet in his hand. After sheathing himself, he stood and swung his leg over the bench. He positioned his cock against her slit, its thick girth stretching and filling her as he leaned forward to kiss her. His tongue teasing hers, he banded his arm around the small of her back, tugging her down in concert with the roll and thrust of his hips. The plump head of his cock bumped into her cervix, provoking decadent ripples throughout her body. His tongue retreated, and he caressed her cheek with his free hand. "I wish I wasn't wearin' the condom. Then I could feel you, all hot and wet around me. I could give you babies."

The last part of his admission left her stunned. She was pretty damn sure her face showed it, but Logan just kept stroking her. Inside and out. The luscious friction of his gliding cock was making it difficult to concentrate on much of anything else. Which no doubt was his evil plan. Dirty bastard.

"I wanna do it right though. No offense to Catman and Jemma, but you're gonna wear my ring before we start makin' babies and fillin' up the nursery."

She stared at him, her head whirling like she was the one who'd guzzled all of the champagne. "Logan, I—" The remainder of her protest morphed into a stuttered moan when he reached between them and circled her clit with his thumb. Her already over-primed body pulled tight in anticipation of the oncoming climax.

"I know you're scared, Rissa. Scared of lettin' me in. But you don't have to be, because I love you." His eyes shone with the testimony of his feelings. "I'm never gonna stop lovin' you."

With that bittersweet declaration suspended between them, she broke, the orgasm both delicious and agonizing because he was offering her everything she'd ever wanted.

And everything she could never have.

Chapter Eighteen

Logan frowned at the lone hovering cloud as the Harley cruised past the congested beach traffic heading the opposite direction. Today was too damn perfect, too ripe with possibilities, to allow even a single cloud to mar the horizon. Too bad Mother Nature hadn't gotten the memo about such things.

No matter. He wasn't about to let it put a damper on his mood. Granted, he hadn't been thrilled sleeping by his lonesome last night. But he'd understood the necessity. He'd laid his cards out on the table for Clarissa when he'd told her he wanted to marry her and begin a family. He'd taken one look at the panic on her face after they'd made love and known she'd needed breathing room to let it all sink in. Hence the reason he hadn't balked when she'd declined going home with him yesterday. But now *he* needed to ensure she hadn't freaked and skipped town. Which was why he'd hopped out of bed the minute the sun crested in the eastern sky.

He knew he'd rushed it yesterday, but there'd been no preventing it. There was no way in hell he could have gone another day without making his intentions crystal clear. She was his world. From this day forward, his status as her familiar and convenient lover was being upped to that of lifetime mate—something that'd been in the making for seven years.

Destiny was about to come full circle.

Gunning it to full throttle, he roared onto the highway. Fifteen minutes later, he coasted into the coven house's driveway and cut the engine. He yanked off the helmet and was bombarded by the buzzing drone of cicadas. Other than the incessant lullaby of the insects, it seemed eerily quiet compared to yesterday's festive hoopla. Relief washed over him when he peeked in the garage and spotted the Miata. Unless Clarissa had decided to hitch it, she hadn't hightailed it out of Dodge. That was a good sign, at least.

He jogged up the porch steps and made his way into the house. Just as he was about to take the stairs to Clarissa's bedroom, he noticed that her office door was closed. Pretty much the only time she shut it was when she was in there, hiding. Mostly from him. Rerouting his path, he ventured down the hall and rapped on the door.

Her muffled "Come in" leaked through the solid oak, and he twisted the doorknob, stepping inside.

He met her unwavering gaze, his heart plummeting a notch as he took in her cool aloofness. He wasn't entirely surprised by her reception, but it didn't ease the sting of his disappointment. "You've pulled up the shields."

She frowned. "Pardon?"

“You can stop pretendin’ you don’t know what I’m talkin’ about. This is you and me, Rissa. We’re done playin’ these games.”

He stalked forward and planted his hands on her desk, looming over her. As expected, she didn’t much like being placed in a position of perceived weakness. After scooping Izzy from her lap and lowering the puppy to the floor, she lurched to her feet. “What the hell were you thinking, bringing up babies?”

“I also brought up us gettin’ married. Get used to it. I’m gonna be talkin’ about those two subjects a lot. So many damn times you’re gonna get sick of it and eventually say yes just to shut me up. Then I can be the happiest fuckin’ bastard on the planet.”

Her eyes welled up and her lips trembled. “Please don’t do this to me.”

“I have to, baby. If I let you be, you’re gonna just keep retreatin’ into that shell. There’s no room in there for me, and I damn well can’t live without you.”

“You have to.” She shoved shaking fingers through her tangled hair. “I’m leaving. And you’re right—there’s no room for you where I’m going.”

He stared at her, confused. When her words finally sank in, he felt like he’d been sucker punched. “What the hell do you mean you’re *leaving*? For how long?”

“Forever.”

He couldn’t even comprehend the word. Not when it didn’t include him. Them. “You’re the goddamn mistress of this coven—”

“Not anymore. I resigned the position last night. Fiona is the new mistress as of this morning,” she explained calmly, as if she weren’t babbling a stream of nonsense that made the blood pound in his eardrums. “She’s going to need a lot of help adjusting to the newness of her responsibilities. I trust you’ll step up to the plate in the interim.”

“I’m not her familiar. I’m *yours*.”

“Not anymore. I’m absolving you from our contract.”

The thunderous whoosh of fury and fear exploding in his head was almost deafening. “Like hell you are.”

Her lips formed the sacred words that would break the contract and sever the threads of their witch-familiar link. An anguished roar ripped from his throat, but it was too late. Already he felt the fibers of their connection unraveling. His inner wolf howled, clawing like a desperate, wounded beast, prodding him into action. He leapt around the edge of the desk, intent on getting her to see reason. To not give up on them. He slammed into an invisible wall and stumbled back, falling against another. Clarissa scooted sideways, and he made to follow, only to discover he was boxed in on that side too.

He glared at her. “You can’t whammy me anymore, so you resort to the next best thing? Turnin’ me into a fuckin’ mime in a glass box, only with sound?” Muffled, as it were.

“I didn’t want it to come to this.”

Tears were spilling down her cheeks. Even in his infuriated state, the sight of them still twisted his insides. “Then let me out of here, baby. We’ll get through this. Whatever it takes.”

She inched forward, her eyes so watery they could have passed for miniature green lakes. “My whole life I’ve known what it’s like to want something I can never have. I never wanted to make anyone else feel this way. You deserve to have those babies. Sweet goddess, I wish I could be the one to give you them. But I can’t.” Her fingers aligned with his, the invisible barrier keeping them from truly touching. It was an ironic reflection of their entire existence together. “Please, don’t waste the rest of your life like I’ve done. You’re wonderful and loving and any woman w-would be lucky to have you.”

“There is no other woman for me, Rissa.” He pressed against the shield, cursing it to hell.

“Yes, there is.” Her hands slid away and she backed up.

“This coven won’t survive without you. *I* won’t survive without you.” He yelled the words, despite knowing they fell on deaf ears. Frustration cramping his chest, he watched as she turned and ran from the office.

Clarissa didn’t know how long it would take her coven sisters to discover Logan or to break the spell for the holding box. Guessing her time was limited at best, she floored the gas pedal until she hit the city limits. She’d given most of her goodbyes, the most painful being the one she’d just fled from. Now she faced the last difficult one.

The Lafayette nursing home came into view and she slowed, waiting for the traffic to clear so she could swing a left into the service drive. Three minutes later, she parked the car and made her way to the entrance. No one was manning the registration counter, so she walked down the corridor to her dad’s room. Rather than snoozing in his bed, he was sitting in the chair in front of the window, staring at the bank of azaleas on the other side. There was something about the stoop of his shoulders and the haggard lines chiseled extra deep in his face today that disturbed her. When he glanced her way, she finally determined what it was.

His eyes weren’t vacant. In fact, she couldn’t recall ever seeing them look so clear. The misery pooled in their depths pinched her heart.

“I remember.”

Oh, sweet goddess. No.

His hands shook like they were palsied, and she waited for him to lash out at her for what she’d done, for what she’d driven him to.

“Rissy...” His voice broke and a cracked sob escaped him. “The hell I’ve sentenced you to. Jesus, it should be me.”

She hurtled forward and dropped to her knees, hugging his frail, trembling frame to her. “Don’t ever say that.”

“It’s true. My stupidity and selfishness brought that monster here. *I* called it. Not you. All because I wanted to remember her differently. *Me* differently. Something better than what we really were.”

She blinked at him, slowly digesting his anguished admission. Like pictures being torn from a photo album, flashes of memories came spinning at her. The countless times her father had rambled on and on about the days before her mother left, not once mentioning their twisted past. She’d always just accepted it as a part of his Alzheimer’s. But now...

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she squeezed his hands. “Dad, are you saying that you asked Seven to make you forget?”

He nodded, and she wanted to weep at the pain and wretchedness that would lead him to barter such an existence in return for his soul.

“It was wrong of me, Rissy. I see that now. But I thought that if I could convince myself I hadn’t been such a horrible person and pathetic excuse for a father, I wouldn’t die hating myself.”

His words tightened the knot in her stomach, and she dropped her head to his chest, her tears soaking his terry robe. A moment later, she felt his fingers in her hair, combing through the strands. “I used to do this for you.” His voice shook with wonder, as if suddenly remembering.

“Yeah, you did.”

“I’ve missed it. I’ve missed a lot of things.”

She lifted her head and gave him a tremulous smile. “Me too.” Hugging him to her again, she rocked them gently. Soon enough, he dozed off, apparently exhausted from the emotional revelations heaped on him after all these years. Kissing his wrinkled forehead, she straightened and headed toward the door, knowing that if she stopped to look back, she’d break down again.

From this moment on, there would be no more looking back.

She returned to her car. This time she didn’t need to rely on the GPS. Funny how the knowledge that your life was crumbling before your eyes made everything so much more crystal clear—even the damn directions lurking in her mind. Exiting the parking lot, she drove toward Seventy-seven West Seventh Street.

And her inevitable future.

Logan figured he hadn’t spent much more than an hour banging on the damn spell box, but his raw throat from his endless shouts and curses made it feel like it’d been an eternity. In the end though, it was Izzy that inadvertently rescued his sorry hide. The puppy’s incessant scratching and whimpering at the office door must have finally attracted some attention, because the dog suddenly stopped its fussing and scooted back as the door swung open. Ms. Peach waddled inside and stooped, reaching for Izzy.

“Would you help me out of this fuckin’ thing?”

Ms. Peach yelped, jerking her hand back. She stared at Izzy. “Holy shit. You can talk.” Her eyebrows knitted together. “But why do you sound just like Logan?”

“Because it *is* me, damn it. Over here. By the desk.”

Her focus swerved to him and her eyes widened. “Sweet ghost of Elvis. Did an ET put you in there?”

“No. Clarissa.”

She looked sort of disappointed with his answer. Scratching her chin, she approached the box. “Hm, I don’t think I’ve got enough spell-breaker juice in me for this job. Why’d she shut you in there anyway?” An interested sparkle lit her eyes. “Is this some kind of kinky sex game between you two?”

Apparently Constance had let the cat out of the bag. “No. I suspect it was ’cause she didn’t want me runnin’ after her,” he said dryly.

“Oh. Told you she was leavin’, did she?”

“Yeah. But you can count on one thing. Soon as I’m outta this damn thing, I’m trackin’ her down and cartin’ her stubborn ass back here.”

Ms. Peach gave a decisive nod. “Sounds like a good plan to me. You wait here while I go gather the troops.” She blinked. “Guess it’s not like you can exactly go anywhere.”

“The troops,” he reminded to get her mind back on track.

“Oh right.” Her head bobbed again, and she scurried from the room. A few minutes later, she returned with Fiona and Constance. After running through his spiel again about what’d led to his current predicament, the three witches set about dismantling the box.

“Damn, is Clarissa’s magic made of Teflon or something?” Fiona wiped the sweat from her brow. “I’ve never seen wards this tough to break through.”

Constance plopped her hands on her hips and gave the box another inspection. “Maybe rather than us working on separate sections, we should concentrate on just cracking one of the side walls.” She glanced at Logan and gnawed her bottom lip. “You’re not wearing a protective cup by any chance, are you?”

He stared at her. “No.”

“Guess we’ll just have to be extra careful with our aim.”

“Uh...”

Constance’s lips twitched into a grin. “Relax. I’m only messing with you. Your groin is perfectly safe. Mostly.”

With that disturbing disclaimer hanging in the air, the trio of witches combined all their whammy power, sending a barrage of green, red and orange thunderbolts pummeling into the shield. The side wall facing them shimmered, putting up a tenacious resistance, just like its pig-headed creator. Finally a visible hairline crack snaked across its surface, rapidly radiating outward like a concentric series of spider webs. Fiona, Constance and Ms. Peach ceased their firepower as the wall dematerialized with an angry crackle. Freed from his invisible prison, he barreled from the office.

Clarissa might have severed their familiar connection, but she hadn't counted on the other thing that still tied her to him. His wolf. If there was one thing a lupine was proficient at, it was tracking its mate, even across thousands of miles.

He sprinted upstairs, ripping off his clothes along the way. Thoroughly stripped by the time he reached her room, he transformed into his wolf form and leapt onto her bed, his claws sinking into the comforter. He buried his muzzle into the bedding. Her scent swirled in his nostrils, heady and intoxicating. A zip-line of energy arced down his spine and he raised his head, a triumphant howl trumpeting from his chest.

With her scent still heavy in his nose, he jumped from the mattress and bound from the room. The stairway a blur, he ran for the front door. Luckily someone had the foresight to leave it open. Unluckily, they hadn't done the same for the screen. He tore through it, shaking himself from the mesh, and galloped down the drive, his muzzle leading the way.

He took the less traveled route, bounding through abandoned cotton fields and the occasional swamp. The going was rougher than if he'd taken the open road, but less perilous for a wolf in broad daylight, particularly since there were plenty of hunters in the area who'd salivate at the idea of stuffing him for their trophy collection. He came to yet another tract of unused farmland and stopped, snuffing the air that whistled through the clumps of snakeweed.

She was close.

Victory singing through his veins, he raced onward, leaping over the rusted carcass of a long-forgotten tiller partially imbedded in the baked earth. A few minutes and several acres later, he wiggled between the spires of a wrought-iron fence. Once on the other side, he trotted forward, cautiously eyeing the exterior of the imposing Greek Revival mansion that stood before him. His hackles lifted, instantly putting him on high alert. He didn't like the vibe of this place.

What the hell was Clarissa doing here?

His senses tuned for any possible threat, he snuck around the side of the mansion. A noise rustled and he instinctively froze, the tufts of his ears cocking flat in warning of danger. A field mouse suddenly jumped from a crevice between a cluster of rocks and scampered out of his path. He released his rigid stance, his ears popping back to normal. Under different circumstances, he would have been mightily ashamed letting a pipsqueak mouse get the better of him. Chuffing through his nose, he crept closer to the front of the building. He spotted Clarissa's Miata, its presence verifying what he already knew. She was here. And likely somewhere in that house.

He stared at the empty, wide expanse of the porch. It was even bigger than the one at the coven house, but it didn't hold a lick of furniture or any other sign that the mansion's occupants ever used it. The big red door was like a beacon calling him. There was no way around it. The only way he'd get to Clarissa was through that door.

And from the looks of it, he'd be doing it nekkid, since he doubted whoever greeted him would be willing to let a wolf stroll into their house. Course, they might feel a little funny about inviting in a naked man, too, but he'd have to take his chances. Transforming from his canine shape, he hoofed it up the steps and rapped on the door. In less time than he'd been expecting it swung open and a silver-haired dude in a butler's uniform peered out at him.

"I'm sorry, but we're not interested in solicitors."

He gaped at the butler, wondering where the hell the fella thought he could possibly be stashing whatever goods he might be selling. "I'm here for Clarissa. Tell her to get her ass out here. Now."

The butler looked like he was on the verge of slamming the door in his face, so Logan quickly wedged his shoulder into the opening.

"Let him in, Harrison."

He stiffened at the unmistakable sound of Clarissa's voice. How long had she been standing there? He pushed his way past the butler and stared at Clarissa. "What the hell are you doing in this place? What's going on?"

"You look angry."

He was pretty damn sure his incredulity had to be written all over his face. "*Angry*? Hell, shug. I can't imagine why. Maybe it has somethin' to do with you lockin' me in a box and then skippin' out. Or perhaps my fifteen-mile chase just now has my tail a little tweaked."

Clarissa licked her lips. "I guess that explains why you're so sweaty." Her eyes turning smoky, she sashayed forward and ran her fingertips along his pecs. "Not that I'm complaining. There's nothing more arousing than a sexy man drenched in perspiration. Gets me all hot and bothered."

Confusion and wariness surged through him. Why was she talking like this and looking at him like she was two seconds away from jumping his bones? Particularly considering everything that'd happened earlier in her office? Trying to make sense of it, he dragged in a deep breath. It hit him then, the total lack of her scent. He growled low in his throat, stumbling away from her.

"What's wrong, hot stuff? Aren't you happy to see me?" Her smile provocative, she leaned in to kiss him.

"Get away from him."

He jumped at the furious demand in Clarissa's voice. Only the words hadn't issued from her mouth. He jerked his focus sideways and noticed Clarissa slumped in the opposite doorway, a wealth of fear and weariness riding her features. Staggering backward, he slashed his attention to the other Clarissa.

Sweet Jesus. *Another* Clarissa. What the fuck...

A peeling laugh erupted from the Clarissa imposter in front of him. "Oh, you should see the look you're wearing right now. In fact—" A distortion flickered over her face and suddenly he was staring at himself, his mouth gaping in perfect duplication of his twin.

He was half convinced he was suffering a psychotic breakdown. That none of this was truly happening and he'd wake any minute and laugh with Clarissa about this incredibly crazy dream.

"Enough." Clarissa—the real one—hurried from the doorway and rushed at the doppelganger, shoving it against the wall. A hiss tore from the creature as it tried to claw at Clarissa's face. He leapt to defend his mate, only to collide with thin air when the thing, whatever it was, vanished.

A raspy chuckle floated behind them and he whirled, his gaze landing on the creepy trucker dude from the bar. His already befuddled brain stalled, unable to cobble together even a passing explanation for what was going on. And why the hell Clarissa seemed to be smack dab in the middle of the insanity.

Another figure materialized next to the trucker. It took him a second to figure out why the dude looked familiar. It was the guy from Tatum's. The one he'd thought was only a figment of his imagination.

The one who'd had his tongue rammed down Clarissa's throat.

A roar ripping from him, he pushed away from his mate and lunged toward the dickwad. Just like the doppelganger had done, the guy vanished and Logan banged into the wall. A hearty chuckle came from the trucker. "Ouch. That's gonna leave a mark."

Logan swung his arm. And punched through nothing but thin air again. What were these motherfuckers? Panting, he swung around. His blood froze in his veins when he saw the dickwad from the bar cooed behind Clarissa, stroking her possessively with his inhuman, talon-like claws. Fearful for her, and enraged at the blatant poaching of his territory, he clenched his fists and stalked forward. "Keep touchin' her and I'll fuckin' kill you."

A laugh snaked from Clarissa's captor. "Something tells me that you'd love to kill me regardless if I touch her or not."

"True. Guess it all comes down to the degree of pain you wanna suffer before I put you out of your fuckin' misery."

A tscking sound came from the creature. "So much rage. So much wrath. You know, I have a sibling that I suspect you'd get along swimmingly with. Still, I more than anyone understand where you're coming from. Sweet Clarissa is certainly a prize worth killing for." A hot flare of covetous lust glinting in those creepy eyes, he bent his head and licked the side of her face.

Clarissa's violent shudder only stoked the fury that'd erupted within Logan the instant that fucker's tongue made contact with her cheek. "By the time I'm done with you, you're gonna beg me to kill you." He took a menacing step forward. "Let go of my woman."

"*Your* woman? I think you're mistaken, wolf." A heaping dose of derision was shoveled on the last word. "I own Clarissa. She belongs to *me*."

The zealous smugness in that hissing voice as it crowed about ownership made him see red. "She's not a possession. Especially not yours, asswipe."

"That's where you're wrong. Tell him, Clarissa. Tell him how your soul belongs to me."

“Her *soul*? Who do you think you are, Satan?” More like a fuckin’ loon.

“I’m a million times more powerful than that horned weakling. My catalog of souls is far superior as well. Though Clarissa’s will always be valued above all others. From the first moment she approached Gluttony with her request, I knew I had to have her.”

What the hell was this fruit loop babbling about? Keeping a wary eye on the psychotic creature, Logan inched closer, not wanting to spook him and inadvertently bring harm to Clarissa. Still, he had to figure out a way to safely get her out of here.

“Did you know, sweet Clarissa, that Gluttony balked about exchanging your father’s contract for yours? Good ole Glut always has been a stickler for the rules. I went to great lengths to convince the others to bend them. You should thank me for that. In essence, I saved your father.”

Tears had started rolling down Clarissa’s cheeks, and Logan stared at their watery tracks. Son of a bitch. Why was she crying like the nonsense spouting from this creature’s mouth should have any affect on her? Unless...

Swallowing hard, he gazed at Clarissa. “Baby, tell me you didn’t—” Christ. He couldn’t even say it because it was so preposterous.

Holding his stare, her luminous eyes filled with more tears.

The oxygen billowed from his lungs. “Sweet Jesus.”

Chapter Nineteen

“Why the *hell* would you give your soul to this lunatic creature?” He knew he was shouting, but he couldn’t do a damn thing about it. Not when his world was fracturing right before his eyes.

“To save my father. He was going to be taken, Logan. I couldn’t let that happen.”

“What are you saying? That his life—his *soul*—is more precious than yours?” He hated the necessity that forced him to sound so callous. It wasn’t that he thought she should have left her father’s future hanging in the wind. Hell, who knew what he would have done in her place. That was the damnable part. Deep down, he couldn’t judge her for the decision she’d made, no matter how much its outcome devastated him.

A patronizing chuckle tumbled from the scumbag. “You assume sweet Clarissa’s motives were entirely pure. That there might not have been something...deeper...compelling her to seek out my sibling that fateful day.”

Logan bared his teeth. “What the hell does it matter why she did it?”

“Oh, it’s vitally important. To her. Not that I’m not grateful for her eternal quest for redemption. It is, after all, the key that’s always kept her shackled to me, one way or another. Isn’t that right, my dearest?”

Clarissa’s watery gaze dropped to the floor. Her fierce battle against whatever private demons plagued her squeezed his heart. “Baby, it doesn’t matter what you did. Whatever you *think* you did.”

“I envied them.” Her soft words were almost inaudible. “Sweet goddess, how I envied them.” She looked up, the pain in her eyes almost unbearable to witness. “Do you know how many times I sat on that park bench wishing one of those families would adopt me so I’d never have to be alone anymore? It ate at me, constantly. But I figured it was my lot in life. You can’t choose the parents you’re given. Or the ones who walk away from you.”

He ached to go to her, to hold her in his arms and take away every ounce of her agony. But when he took a determined step forward, she warding him off with a shake of her head. “Please, I—I need to say this, to get it out of me.” She knuckled her nose, her chest expanding with a fortifying breath. “After my mother left, I thought I’d banished the ugly envy that twisted my insides. But it wasn’t truly gone. Just buried. Waiting for the perfect moment to rear its hideous head and force me to feed it.”

Her voice wobbled for a moment before steadying. “I never expected to see her again. She was supposed to be gone. Nothing more than a painful ghost from my past. At first I was so angry that she was back in town and hadn’t even bothered to contact me or my father that I didn’t pay much attention to

anything else. But then it hit me. She was with two young girls. Two young girls who weren't *me*. Smiling at them in a way that I'd secretly imagined a million times during my little fantasy episodes."

His hands cramped as he made a fist, resisting the urge to reach for her and stop this anguished recounting of history. He noticed her captor's rapturous expression during her confession. It was as if the creature got some vicarious thrill from her suffering. It made him long all the more to rip the bastard to shreds.

"It was one of the lowest moments of my life. Even weeks later, all I could see was that look on her face. I knew I needed to move on, needed to move out and get away from everything that reminded me of her. My father wasn't happy about the decision. He kept insisting that I needed to be there for when she came back." She winced, giving him a terrible suspicion where this was leading.

"She was never coming back. I'd convinced myself of it, but not him. I—I decided that there was only one way he'd ever see the true light about her. I'd have to shine it, bright and glaring. So I began following her, building up my case. When I had enough evidence to nail her, I laid it all out for him. Needless to say it didn't go well."

"And that's where I came in." The scumbag almost sounded proud of his role in the whole tragedy.

"You fucker. You took advantage of them both." His fury returning to the forefront, Logan stormed forward.

"I'm merely a facilitator. Humans are entirely capable of destroying themselves without my assistance."

Logan took a swing, but the bastard vanished. Clarissa tumbled into his arms and he hugged her tight, burying his face in her hair. "Rissa." He choked on the sorrow jackknifing in his throat.

"It's okay. I don't regret the decision I've made. Just like I..." She clutched him, her hands trembling. "I don't regret falling in love with you."

He'd waited a lifetime to hear those words. Her saying them now was bittersweet. He bracketed her face with his palms, his eyes searching hers. "Then stay. I need you, Rissa. I'm fuckin' beggin' you."

"It's too late."

"No. We'll find a way to get you out of this contract. Whatever it takes."

"I love you," she repeated, her lips trembling. One hand left his waist and stroked his cheek before she settled her mouth on his. Her kiss felt precious and fragile, as if it would be the last they'd ever share.

He refused to believe it. Refused to believe he was losing her. A massive shudder shook around them, and he opened his eyes just as the walls of the house began ascending. The sight left him frozen, unable to comprehend what was happening. Clarissa cupped his jaw, and he jerked his gaze to her.

Regret and sorrow clouded her eyes. "Goodbye."

"Rissa."

Her entire body bucked before slumping into his arms. The house suddenly vanished around them, leaving him standing in a vacant field, clutching her lifeless body.

Chapter Twenty

Thanks to the amount of shaking his hands were doing on the steering wheel, he wasn't entirely sure how he managed not to crash the Miata. Probably the only thing that kept him on the road was his determination to get Clarissa to her sisters and her soul back to her body. He roared into the coven house's drive, squealing to a stop in front of the porch. Jumping from the vehicle, he raced to the passenger door and hoisted Clarissa's limp form into his arms. He ran into the house, calling for help at the top of his lungs.

Constance and Fiona came jogging from the parlor. They paid his nudity no mind, instead their eyes going huge at the sight of Clarissa. Both witches rushed forward, but Fiona was the first to speak. "What happened?" she demanded, grabbing Clarissa's deadweight arm.

How did you go about explaining someone's soul had been ripped from their body? Hell if he knew, so he blabbered out every piece of the story, hoping there was some part in there that would offer Fiona and Constance a clue as to what to do next. Both witches took everything he'd heaped on them in stride, but he didn't like the uncertainty lurking in their eyes.

"You're gonna bring her back," he insisted, convinced that the desperation in his voice would make it so.

"Neither of us has any experience with soul retrievals," Constance finally admitted, her face on the verge of crumpling.

"Then find someone who fuckin' does."

Fiona's teeth worried her bottom lip. "That's not something you can just look up in the Yellow Pages. I'm not sure it's even possible in this case."

"Why the hell not?"

Fiona met his steady stare for a moment before averting her gaze. "You said this...thing...almost has some kind of fixation on Clarissa."

"Yeah. What's that got to do with anything? He's a fuckin' monster that I'm gonna annihilate. End of story."

Constance sighed, apparently in response to his tirade. "I think what Fiona is trying to say is that the psycho won't want to give Clarissa up without a fight."

"Fine. Let him bring it."

Fiona's soft exhale matched Constance's. "We don't even know what we're dealing with. It's virtually impossible to fight an invisible enemy."

"That sounds like quitter talk," he bit out. "After everything this woman has ever done for you—for this coven—you're gonna just throw your hands up and admit defeat? Let her die?"

Fiona recoiled from his harsh words like he'd struck her. "She's my coven sister. We're here for each other, no matter what. Hell will freeze over before I let her die."

"Good. Then get on the horn with the guild and every other group you can think of so we can start devisin' a plan to get her back to us." Yeah, he was barking out orders like he was Patton or something, but he had to do something—anything—to keep his rising helplessness at bay.

Leaving Constance and Fiona to get the ball rolling on their end, he carried Clarissa upstairs to her room and settled her on the bed before climbing in beside her. He tenderly smoothed the hair from her face and kissed her lips. They were warm, and he could feel the soft, even flow of her breaths. Looking at her, it was so easy to believe she was merely sleeping and would wake with the merest nudge.

He knew that wasn't the case though. From the moment she'd collapsed, he'd tried endless times to stir her. Stretching onto his side, he bundled her close to him, nestling her cheek against his drumming heart. If there was any light left in his world, she would hear the desperate beat of his pulse calling her home.

"Sweet Clarissa."

She opened her eyes, the seductive singsong voice echoing around her. Twinkling pinpoints of light glimmered overhead. They winked briefly before shooting away. She pushed up from the patch of parched earth she'd been curled upon and glanced about. A foreign landscape stretched as far as she could see, bathed in a strange sort of twilight.

What was this place?

The inky outline of an enormous tree drew her attention. It seemed to be the only living thing on the horizon. She set off to investigate. As she drew closer, it became clear that even the tree had been stripped of life. She traced the deep grooves in the dried husk of its trunk, the utter silence of the oak's spirit creating a deep well of sadness within her.

"Alas, not all things can thrive here," a sibilant voice whispered.

She spun, her gaze meeting Envy's. The creature's eyes were darker than usual, seeming to recede into the twilight. Her focus returned to the barrenness surrounding them. "You brought me here to die."

"No. Back there, you are dying. But here? Here you will be eternal."

The sinister stillness of their vacuum-like void made Envy's voice inordinately loud. She was suddenly acutely aware that they were the only ones standing on this desolate plain. "Where are the others?"

“Keeping the home fires burning, so to speak.”

She was instantly reminded of the oily lake of fire, and shivered. “You’re torturing all those innocent souls. Stripping them to the bone, just like this tree.”

“Sweet Clarissa, the revulsion in your voice wounds me. Those so-called *innocent* souls you speak of are getting no less than what they deserve. What they’ve sought from the very beginning of their useless, pathetic existence.”

“Will that be my fate as well? Burning for my sins?”

“No. You are special. I will keep you at my side for as long as I wish it.”

And once you no longer wish it? The unspoken question elicited an icy sluice of fear. She shook off the sensation, determined not to let it get the best of her. The creature’s twisted logic regarding those condemned souls brought her determination to defeat Seven back to the forefront.

She *would* kill this monster, even if it took the complete destruction of her soul to do it.

The odd assembly of lights she’d noticed earlier returned, glowing with a bright intensity that beckoned. Transfixed, she reached toward the sky. An angry hiss came from Envy, and the creature snatched her hand. “It’s time for us to leave, sweet Clarissa.”

Giving the sky one last glance, she allowed Envy to tug her away from those comforting lights.

Chapter Twenty-One

Fiona knocked on the doorframe before entering Clarissa's bedroom. She plunked a plate of sandwiches on the dresser, her expression stern. "You haven't eaten in twenty-four hours. Starving yourself won't help her."

He eyed the food, his stomach growling. Truthfully, he hadn't given much thought to anything beyond Clarissa. But Fiona was right. Going this long without sustenance was unnatural—and dangerous for a shifter whose metabolism required more protein and energy than most. Reluctantly leaving Clarissa's side, he strode to the dresser and picked up the roast beef sandwich, gobbling it down without really registering its taste. From the moment Clarissa had been taken from him, life had stopped consisting of flavors or anything else that'd once brought him pleasure and happiness.

"A few of the guild members are heading over. They've located a woman who has some background in soul retrieval."

Her announcement managed to cut through the gloomy fog of his inner turmoil. Fiona must have caught the spark of hope in his eyes because she rolled her lips tight before gusting a heavy breath. "She pretty much verified Constance's concerns. If this creature has too great a hold on Clarissa, there might be no bringing her back."

He refused to remotely acknowledge the possibility. "She's tougher than that son of a bitch. And she has us on her side. She's comin' back."

Fiona nodded, her attention drifting to Clarissa's unconscious form again. Dark circles of fatigue ringed the younger witch's eyes. Like him, she probably hadn't slept much in the past twenty-four hours. "I should have hounded her more when she first brought up me taking over as mistress. Maybe then this wouldn't have..." She swallowed, her eyes slowly filling.

He knew how torturous those what-ifs floating around in her head could be. He had no soothing platitudes to ease her doubts, or the awful, queasy guilt that gnawed at his insides. Because the truth was he should have known there was more going on with Clarissa than her fear of being with him, allowing him into her heart. But he'd been so selfishly afraid of losing her, he'd deliberately blinded himself to the possibility of a bigger picture, never realizing that she hadn't just been certain *they* didn't have a future together, but that she believed she didn't possess one at all.

Fiona started to turn toward the doorway, only to stop and sweep him with an assessing look, her pale eyebrows lifting. “Just a suggestion, but you might want to at least put some pants on before the guild gets here. You know what a prude Domino can be.”

She left and he grabbed his bundle of clothing from the floor before crossing to the bathroom. By the time he’d finished showering, Domino and Willa had shown up with a short, stocky woman draped from neck to toe in a DayGlo orange caftan. A matching scarf was wrapped around her head turban-style. Introducing herself as Mama Heloise, the woman strode to the bed and placed one of her plump hands on Clarissa’s torso. Meanwhile, Willa hovered at the bedside, her face whiter than the sheet tucked over Clarissa’s motionless body.

The woman’s collection of bangles clanged musically as she yanked her hand away. “Whatever juju this creature possesses is strong and nasty. Even from here I feel its wickedness.”

Her pronouncement wasn’t news to him. All he cared about was killing the motherfucking thing and getting Clarissa back safe and sound in his arms.

“This thing, it is not going to give up its claim without a battle.” Mama Heloise shook her head sadly. “There is nothing to be done for this child.”

He snarled, backing the woman against the corner bedpost. Dimly, he heard the admonishing shouts from the others but paid them no heed. Clucking her tongue, Mama Heloise dug in her pocket and lifted something to her mouth. A second later shrill screeching filled his ears. He howled in agony, stumbling back. The noise blessedly stopped, and he glared at the woman as she jiggled the dog whistle in his face before re-pocketing the obnoxious device. She hurled a string of Cajun profanities at him, shaking her fist. “Mind your teeth, wolf. My bark can be a million times worse than your bite.”

Her scolding finished, Mama Heloise returned her attention to Clarissa. Removing a rattle from the hemp bag she’d brought along, she chanted something in Cajun again, the rattle’s tasseled cords stirring the air above the mattress. Once she’d completed her ritual, she marked each corner of the bed with some mysterious powder. “This will keep her body tethered to life and repel any evil spirits who might try to steal ownership of this vessel.”

He didn’t know what angered and sickened him more—the idea of Clarissa’s body being homesteaded by an entity with dubious motives or having her referred to as a vessel. It made her sound like nothing more than an empty vase or something, for fuck’s sake.

“Just out of curiosity, Clarissa’s soul won’t be repelled by that stuff, right?” Fiona’s expression turned nervous as Mama Heloise sent her an intimidating stare.

“No spirits will be able to pass through the barrier, including hers. If by any miracle you do find a way to call her soul back, you will have to remove her from this room to allow passage.” Her expression turned properly chastising. “But I wouldn’t risk it, if I were you. Not unless you are absolutely certain she is returning. Otherwise, she *will* be gone from here forever. That is a guarantee.”

Mama Heloise stuffed her things into her bag and waddled toward the door. Domino and Fiona traipsed after her, but Willa remained rooted in place, her unwavering gaze glued to Clarissa. “She hasn’t given up yet.” Apparently feeling the heat of his stare, she lifted her head and looked him square in the eye. “I can feel it. Her determination.”

He didn’t question how Willa could possibly sense what nobody else seemed able to—even the feisty Mama Heloise. She was reaffirming his hope. That was all he needed. All that mattered. Willa crossed to him and took his hands. “We can’t give up on her, either. No matter how dark things look.”

In that, they were in complete accord. Even if he had to search the bowels of Hell itself, he’d bring his mate back.

Sometime around dusk, the sound of loud voices coming from the front entrance managed to tear his focus from Clarissa. Reluctantly uncurling his arm from her waist, he shoved from the mattress, being careful not to disturb Mama Heloise’s mysterious white powder. He went to the top of the stairs and peered down at the commotion below. A petite, dark-haired woman was standing beside a tall, lanky kid. She looked exceedingly uncomfortable as the boy argued over something with Constance.

The kid’s raised voice easily drifted up the stairs. “I’m telling you, she told us to come whenever. If you don’t believe me, just ask her.”

“And I told *you* that’s not possible right now. And seeing how Clarissa never mentioned one word about this, I’m inclined to think you’re full of shit.”

More than curious to see what was going on and what the hell Clarissa had to do with it, he loped down the stairs. The boy and the unknown woman both glanced his way as he drew to a halt next to Constance. “What’s going on?”

Constance waved toward the pair. “He says Clarissa promised him and his mother they could live here.”

He frowned at the kid, gravitating toward the same conclusion as Constance. It wasn’t like Clarissa to make a rash decision like this one, particularly without consulting her coven sisters about it first. But just as he was about to suggest to the pair that they find somewhere else to take whatever con they were working, Ms. Peach walked into the entry. The elderly witch eyed the new arrivals suspiciously. “Who’re you?”

“Tanner Montgomery. This is my ma, Sarah.”

Ms. Peach adjusted her spectacles, inspecting the boy from head to toe. “You’re not an alien, are you?”

While Tanner stood there, looking justifiably confused by the question, Constance ran his story past Ms. Peach.

“Oh yeah. She mentioned you’d be showing up. You look like you’re a loud snorer. You’re sleeping down here.”

Logan figured his expression must have come pretty damn close to mirroring Constance's slack-jawed incredulity. "Wait, he's telling the truth?"

Tanner stacked his arms over his chest defiantly. "Told you so. I'm no liar."

The woman, Sarah, cast her eyes to the floor. "If it's too much trouble, we understand. I figured it was too good to be true anyway. Most folks don't offer their home to total strangers."

Her soft admission managed to make him feel like he was a big bag of shit. Judging from the crimson stain coloring Constance's cheekbones, she felt the same way. She cleared her throat. "Look, I'm sorry if I came across like a bitch. There's just a lot of...stress...going on around here right now. You're more than welcome to stay. Where are your bags? I'll help bring them in."

"No. I'll get 'em." Tanner turned and strode toward the door, his gait stiff.

In the wake of her son's absence, Sarah continued staring at the ground, her awkward shyness more than apparent. Taking pity on the poor woman, Logan glanced at Ms. Peach. "Why don't you take Sarah into the kitchen and see if Gloria can't whip up some dinner." From the looks of it, it'd been a while since Sarah had seen a decent meal. She was even skinnier than her son, her cotton blouse hanging from her shoulders like the threadbare rags of a scarecrow.

"We don't want to put anyone out."

Ms. Peach snorted. "Don't be ridiculous. If there's anything that makes Gloria happier than a fly in a port-a-john, it's getting to cook."

Sarah looked a little queasy at the fly reference, but she shuffled after Ms. Peach anyways. A moment later Tanner returned, struggling under the weight of two black garbage bags. When Logan moved to help the kid, Tanner's face turned beet red and he dragged the bags behind his ratty sneakers. "It's okay. I've got them."

Logan had the distinct impression the boy was ashamed that he carried all his worldly goods in a trash bag. Empathy overtook him. No wonder Clarissa had offered room and board to Tanner and Sarah. Still, he instinctually suspected that the kid wouldn't welcome anything resembling pity. "Yeah, you best carry them yourself. You could stand puttin' some meat on those scrawny muscles."

Constance sent him an incinerating look, but Tanner's scowl slipped and was instantly replaced by a grin.

Logan scratched his jaw. "Guess we better find you and your ma a place to bunk."

"We're not picky. We'll take a floor somewhere if we have to. We've...we've slept in worse places before."

Constance tapped her chin in contemplation. "Get him set up in Gert's old room. It's probably a little musty smelling, but the bedding's fresh. I'll send Sarah your way once she's finished in the kitchen."

Heeding Constance's suggestion, he led Tanner down the hallway to the room across from the parlor. Once upon a time, it'd been Gert's study, but the former mistress had converted it into her private quarters

when her arthritis began acting up too much to take the daily trip up and down the stairs. He held the door open for Tanner, giving the boy plenty of maneuvering room for the bulky bags. The kid finally looked up as he cleared the door, his eyes going wide as he took in the spacious suite. “Th-this is our room?”

“Yep.”

Tanner took a hesitant step forward, almost as if he were afraid the illusion would shatter. “It’s so...*big*.”

“Well, there are two of you. You’ll need the space. ’Fraid there’s only the one bed though. We’ll dig up an air mattress for you.” The mention of air mattresses instantly brought his mind careening back to Clarissa. Pain ripped through his heart.

“Like I said, I don’t mind sleeping on the floor. I’m just grateful...” As if he were too choked up to finish the sentence, Tanner shook his head. “Anyways, I want to thank Clarissa. I owe her everything, and then some.”

He conjured an image of her motionless body, and the misery inside him intensified. “She’s not up for visitors right now.”

“What’s wrong? Is she sick?”

“Somethin’ like that.”

“Oh.” Tanner rubbed the back of his neck, his expression worried. “Hope she gets better soon.”

The hollowness in Logan’s gut expanded. “Me too.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

A cool breeze rustled over his fur, waking him. It took him a moment to realize he wasn't on Clarissa's bed or in his human body. He rose from his crouching position, his claws sinking into cracked loam. Lifting his muzzle, he sniffed. The wind carried a salty brine that reminded him of home, but he wasn't anywhere near his cottage. Another essence mingled with the saline. Something that made him think of death. Just as he was about to cower away from the awful stench of it, he caught the hint of sweetness that'd roused him from slumber.

Rissa.

His blood sang with the sheer joy of it, of *her*. She was close. Very, very close.

He took off at a full gallop, eating up the ground in furious bounds as he followed the sandy path that snaked through the vast vista of dead land. The twilight grew denser, along with the evil bouquet that stung his nostrils. But beneath it all was Clarissa, her perfume like a lone rose within the horrible decay.

A red haze suddenly lit the horizon, filling him with an unexplainable sense of doom. Ignoring the trepidation hammering in his chest, he powered on, closing the distance between him and that fire in the sky.

He reached the base of an enormous mountain, its rocky expanse jutting skyward like an impenetrable fortress. Undaunted, he scanned its inhospitable exterior for an avenue of entrance and finally spied a barely trod footpath. He raced along the narrow precipice, his scrabbling claws disturbing loose gravel and sand. After several close calls, he reached the summit and stared into the strange, frightening valley far below him.

A massive lake sat in the belly of the mountain, occasionally spitting fireballs into the air. More than likely, the flaming cannonballs were to blame for the conflagration in the sky.

What the hell was this place? The direction of his thoughts was no doubt ironic. It wouldn't be surprising if this *was* hell.

Determined more than ever to locate Clarissa, he scurried down the lip of the canyon. Roughly halfway down, her scent became intoxicatingly stronger. Before he could control it, his wolf's instincts took over and he lifted his head, trumpeting a call to his mate. His howl bounced endlessly within the canyon before everything fell deathly quiet. Even the fiery lake below ceased all movement.

He felt angry, watchful eyes cutting the dark in search of him.

And then he heard her. "*Logan.*"

Cursing his absence of human vocal cords, he howled again and chased the sound of Clarissa's voice.

What was he doing here? A mix of panic and joy washing over her, Clarissa surged to her feet, abandoning the uncomfortable rock she'd parked her butt on when the strenuous journey across the mountain had become too much for her.

Beside her, Envy hissed. "Come, we must hurry. The others are waiting."

But...Logan. She couldn't leave him.

"You belong with me now. Have you forgotten your promise so soon?" An unmistakable threat edged the creature's tone. "If you do not obey me, I will make you watch as I throw him down into the lake."

Unmitigated fear exploded within her. "*No*. I'll go with you."

"Smart girl." Those soulless eyes flashing triumph, Envy clutched her arm and dragged her farther down the trail.

They reached the shoreline just as Logan's lupine form shot from the darkness. He lunged for Envy's throat, but the sin easily knocked him away. Rolling to his feet, Logan attempted the maneuver again. This time Envy caught him midair, his claws sinking deep into Logan's fur and flesh. An agonized yelp tore from Logan, and she screamed, throwing herself at the sin. "Stop it! I'll send him away. J-just let him go."

"Maybe I prefer to torture his soul. For eternity."

She ripped her focus from the unbearable pain in Logan's eyes and glanced at Envy. The sin's eyes held a wealth of hatred and jealousy as it glared at the wolf in its grip. Her mind racing, she swallowed hard. "L-let him go, and I will love you. I will love you more than I ever loved him."

Envy turned the full heat of its covetous stare on her. "Sweet Clarissa, you strike a hard bargain."

The creature slowly retracted its talons, and Logan plummeted to the sand. His wolf lay motionless for many moments, stoking a noxious brew of fear within her stomach that caused her to heave. If he was dead...

Just as she was about to drop beside him, he stirred. Giving a weak whimper, he crawled toward her, his eyes beseeching. She choked back a sob. "Please go."

He inched closer and she backed up, the place where her heart used to be cramping. "*Go*."

A plaintive whine broke from him, slicing her to shreds. She could feel the tears drying on her face as the lake's furnace-like heat wafted over her. "You don't belong here. Please...just leave and forget about me."

Envy's fingers curled around her wrists, dragging her with him. She chanced one more look in Logan's direction and noticed he was gone. Even as relief swept her, a crushing sorrow threatened to topple her to her knees. Feeling as if she were slowly dying, she returned her attention to Envy, who was tugging her toward a cavern half hidden in the rocky face of the mountain. "Where are you taking me?"

“To your new home, precious.” The sin hauled her into the cave, and she peered around at her subterranean cell. Water seeped from giant stalactites that covered the majority of the ceiling, dripping into the murky pools carved into the floor.

To say the place was unwelcoming would be an understatement. Shivering, she huddled against the mouth of the rocky cavity, dreading the necessity of spending even an hour within the space. She noticed that Envy was watching her closely, gauging her reaction to her new abode, undoubtedly. Despising the creature to the core, along with this wretched hellhole, she faked a smile. “It’s lovely.”

“I knew you would appreciate its charm.” The sin caressed her cheek. “I wish only to please you. We’re family now, sweet Clarissa. The only one you’ll ever need.”

As if on cue, Envy’s six siblings appeared. Greed eyed her coldly, a mocking laugh slipping past those blood-red lips. “Oh goodie. The homecoming queen has finally arrived.” She shifted her callous gaze to Envy. “It’s feeding time. Care to leave your *precious* long enough to lend a hand?”

Greed’s sarcasm seemed to roll right off Envy, because the sin merely grabbed Clarissa’s arm again and yanked her to a chain shackled to the wall of the cave. After securing the metal cuff to her ankle, the creature departed with the others.

Defeated and miserable, she slumped against the slick limestone, drawing her knees into her chest. Strange, terrifying shadows danced along the surrounding walls. She slammed her eyes shut in an effort to block them out. A scratching noise approached, and she flinched, convinced that the shadows were coming to devour her. Something cold and wet licked her face, and she shrieked.

Soft fur brushed her cheek. She opened her eyes and stared into Logan’s gleaming irises. Unable to stop it, she let a sob escape. He licked her again, her tears falling victim to the gentle persuasion of his tongue.

“You were supposed to go.”

He gave a low *woof* that she swore sounded argumentative, and she sighed. “And you call *me* stubborn.”

Butting against her, he curled into a ball and snuggled his head in the crook of her shoulder. His ear tickled her nose, but she didn’t mind. Just having him close offered a comfort sorely lacking in this place. Tunneling her fingers through his thick, silky fur, she looked up and noticed the soft glow of those odd lights she’d noticed earlier. “You can’t stay. There’s no place for you here,” she repeated.

Logan gave another forlorn whine, and the lights overhead dimmed. Her eyelids heavy, she drifted off to sleep.

He awoke with a jerk, the memory of Clarissa’s softness pressed against his wolf form slowly melting into the reality of her lifeless body resting next to him. His heart pounding erratically, he stroked his thumb

across her lips. They were colder than before. But she was alive. Both here and in that other world that was filled with darkness and death.

He would bring her back. Now that his wolf had tracked its mate, there would be no stopping him. He kissed her before climbing from the bed. He'd fallen asleep in his jeans. Rather than changing into the sweatpants that Fiona had produced for him last night, he walked downstairs as is. Everyone was gathered in the kitchen, including Tanner and Sarah.

"I've found her. That fucking monster is keeping her chained up like a prisoner."

Clarissa's coven sisters gaped at him. Constance was the first to speak. "Wait a minute. You *saw* her? How is that even possible?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," he admitted. "One minute I was asleep, the next I was inside my wolf, racing through freaky land to catch up with Clarissa's scent."

Fiona chewed on her thumbnail, her expression thoughtful. "Your wolf is convinced Clarissa is your mate?"

He nodded, and Fiona and Constance exchanged a look before Fiona finally glanced back at him. "That's got to be the key. Enough of a bond has been established to link you astrally, granting you admittance in this creature's realm." Fiona took a deep breath, her lip quivering. "H-how is she?"

"Scared, obviously. But our Clarissa is one tough nut to crack. She has the strength to fight this thing. And we're gonna help her."

Everyone started talking at once. Amongst all the commotion, Tanner lurched to his feet and strode toward Logan. Anxiety rode every inch of the kid's features. "It took her, didn't it?"

Logan blinked, taken aback. Tanner started pacing, his hands shoving through his cropped-short hair. "She didn't tell me it was taking her so soon. I—I thought...*shit*."

A gasp shot from Sarah. "Tanner Joe Montgomery. You know better than to cuss in front of a roomful of ladies."

At the moment, Logan didn't give two shits if Tanner swore a blue streak. It was the rest of the startling revelation coming from the kid's mouth that had him interested. "What do you mean she *told* you?" Why the hell would Clarissa confide in a total stranger when she hadn't peeped a word to her coven sisters? To *him*?

Tanner slid a cautious glance in his mother's direction. It became clear to Logan that the boy was unlikely to say much more in front of her, for some reason. Clamping onto the kid's shoulder, he prodded him toward the hallway. Once they were safely out of earshot of the women, he backed Tanner against the wall, leveling him with a steely look. "Spill."

"Th-the thing also tried to contract my soul. I would have done it, too, if she hadn't stopped me."

Shit. He dropped his hand from Tanner's shoulder. He eyed the kid's ashen pallor, suddenly realizing that a possible source of insider information had just fallen into his lap. "What do you know about this thing that has Clarissa?"

"Just that its name is Seven, and it has about a bajillion fucking personalities." Tanner slashed a quick look toward the kitchen, his cheeks taking on a guilty flush. "Uh, please don't tell my ma I said the F word. She'd be running for the Palmolive."

"What do you mean by personalities?"

Tanner shrugged. "Exactly how it sounds. The thing can appear one way one second and something else the other."

His mind tracked back to the trucker and the doppelganger. He'd seen the creep walk off with them, along with four others he hadn't been able to really make out in the fog crawling in off the fiery lake. And now that he thought about it, a couple of those *personalities* had been at that weird-ass mansion. If he understood Tanner right, all those creatures were the same *thing*?

He rubbed his jaw, his brain spinning. Hell, he'd never heard anything like it. Still, it didn't necessarily surprise him. There was plenty of odd shit in the world, the majority of it existing outside the boundaries of most folks' comprehension.

So basically, it boiled down to them having to battle not one son of a bitch, but several. *Jesus.* Mimicking Tanner's earlier move, he rifled his fingers through his hair and burned a path in the hallway runner as he let the ramifications sink in. He returned his scrutiny to Tanner. "Is there anything at all you can remember about this Seven creature that might shed some light on what might kill it? Or at least what could be a weakness we could use against it?"

"Not really. It spent most of the time telling me all the things it could do for me. You know, to convince me to sign the contract. It was pretty damn persuasive too. I almost fell for it." Shame tinted Tanner's voice and clouded his eyes.

Remembering the similar expression Clarissa had worn while she'd admitted to her hidden envies, Logan squeezed the boy's arm. "You can't beat yourself up over it. None of us are infallible. It's called being human."

Tanner frowned. "Actually, that reminds me. I don't think Seven holds any warm fuzzies where humans are concerned. In fact, I sorta get the feeling it pretty much thinks we're scum."

Logan scowled. "What a coincidence. 'Cause I feel the same way about it."

He spent the rest of the day strategizing a plan. The way he saw it, there was only one option when it came to discovering the way to destroy Seven.

He'd have to go directly to the source.

A little covert spying in that other twilight world just might dig up the dirt that'd put a permanent end to that motherfucker. He'd have to be careful not to alert the creature to his presence, but that shouldn't be too difficult. The hard part would be staying long enough within the dream state that allowed his wolf free rein over there. He'd only been with Clarissa's soul roughly an hour. That wasn't enough time to learn dick. He didn't trust anything chemical, such as a sleeping pill. Pharmaceuticals tended to have an adverse affect on his shifting. Who knew if they'd produce a similar outcome in the REM state? Best not to risk it.

There was another option—one he'd never personally tried before. Hypnosis.

Kegan had once mentioned that Constance knew how to perform past-life regression, which utilized hypnosis. If she used the same technique on him, she might be able talk his wolf back into that other world and hold him there long enough to find out everything he could to annihilate the monster and bring Clarissa back, safe and sound.

Like anything else, there were risks involved. He'd be under the influence of another, giving him less control of his wolf. But he was racing against time here. Every hour lost took Clarissa deeper and deeper under the command of that fucking thing.

Leaving his mate's bedside, he went downstairs in search of Constance. God willing, his plan would work.

Chapter Twenty-Three

She didn't know how long she slept before Envy came for her again. At first she panicked, thinking Logan was still curled beside her. But as awareness slowly crept within her drowsy brain, so did the chill of the limestone beneath her. Logan's warmth was gone. As was he. Maybe he'd taken to heart her admonishment to stay away.

Envy sprung the shackle from her ankle and jerked her to her feet. "Come. I have a surprise for you."

Her knees, stiff and aching from her uncomfortable bed on the hard stone, protested the rough treatment. She steadied herself before traipsing after Envy. Outside the cave, the sky remained cloaked in twilight. How could that be? She'd dozed for what'd seemed like forever. Surely dawn should have broken by now. Unless...

Perhaps this place was perpetually shrouded in darkness.

A heavy bleakness anchored in her chest at the idea of never seeing the sun again or feeling its comforting rays.

"Look. Isn't it wonderful?"

She lifted her head at Envy's excited shout. An enormous fountain stood in the middle of the beach. It took her a moment to realize it was an exact replica of the one in Forsyth Park. Wispy figures were frolicking beneath its spray. She drew nearer, and the three individuals came into sharper focus—Jolene and the two Tatum girls. She recoiled in shock.

"Quite realistic, aren't they? I spent all day working to get their likenesses perfect."

She gaped at Envy, who seemed oblivious of her reaction. But then the sin turned toward her, its zealous glee intensifying. With sickening clarity, she determined the creature's motive for resurrecting the painful scene. "Why do you crave torturing me this way?" She hated how small her voice sounded, like she'd been transformed back into that child who'd longed for her parents' love and affection.

"Because it gives *me* great joy." The voice did not come from Envy.

She pivoted, horror crashing over her as a massive, hideous beast rose from the depths of the lake. It resembled a giant squid, but with seven heads and huge, demonic red eyes.

Each of which just so happened to be pinned on her. She stumbled backward, nearly tripping on the sand. "Dear goddess, protect us all."

A deep booming laugh thundered from the beast. It was then that she recalled where she'd heard the sound before. In her dream.

This was Seven. The core creature comprising the sins.

“Your goddess does not exist here. *I* am the creator of all. And the destroyer of many. Bow before me, you worthless human.”

If her legs weren’t already too frozen to move, she still would have refused the demand. The creature’s numerous mouths yawned open, revealing a plethora of razor-sharp teeth. “*Bow.*”

Before she could tell Seven what it could do with that request, Envy shoved at her shoulders, forcing her to her hands and knees, until the rough scrape of silica bit into her palms.

“That’s more like it.”

“I didn’t—” She broke off with a gasp, tears stinging her eyes as Envy’s talons dug into her scalp.

“Do not test the master,” Envy rasped warningly. “He is already angry that I allowed the wolf to live.”

Greed suddenly materialized near the fountain, its dark eyes full of disdain. “Yes, that was rather a stupid move on your part. You should have fed him to the master like the others.”

Nausea rolled in the pit of Clarissa’s gut. Her focus swerved from Seven to the lake teeming with oil and fire behind the beast. “You are the evil that lives in those waves. *You’re* consuming the souls.”

Greed rolled her eyes at Envy. “Honestly, what do you see in this one? She’s not even that bright.”

Ignoring the sin’s bitchy sarcasm, Clarissa stared at Seven. “What *are* you?”

Another of those terrible laughs shook from the creature. “Don’t you know? I’m the dark at the end of the tunnel.”

Logan glared at the small crowd of spectators who’d gathered in the bedroom. If it were up to him, he would have kicked most of them out. Particularly the damn guild members, who were no doubt sitting in on the hypnosis session just because they were pains in the asses who enjoyed sticking their noses in a man’s private business.

Constance finished anointing his forehead with her charmed oil concoction before placing her fingers over his eyelids, forcing them shut. “I want you to just concentrate on your breathing for a moment.” She talked him through the process, her voice a relaxing lullaby. “Feel yourself going deeper and deeper within yourself. Your wolf is there, waiting for you. Waiting to take you to Clarissa.”

A strange spiraling sensation overtook him, but rather than panic, he allowed the ebb and flow of the currents to buffet him through the swirling vortex.

Suddenly the spinning stopped and he was inside his wolf, crouched near the cave where he’d slept with Clarissa the previous night. Keeping low to the ground, he belly-crawled to the mouth of the structure, his preternatural eyesight giving him the added boost of being able to see if anyone was hiding in the dense shadows filling the cavern. It appeared to be empty.

He was about to dart toward the opposite end of the cave when a strangely familiar scent bombarded him. Though it possessed an unquestionably female bouquet, it wasn't Clarissa. Whirling, he growled at the trespasser.

"Down, Cujo. It's me. Willa."

If he'd possessed the ability to speak, he was damn certain he would have cursed every word in the book at the young witch, right before demanding she tell him how the hell she'd ended up there.

"Yeah, I can tell from your expression that you're pretty much wondering the same thing I am. Suffice to say, I have no damn clue what I'm doing here, either." Willa hunkered close to the rock wall, her teeth chattering loud enough to rouse the entire mountainside.

Fuck. This wasn't good at all. How was he supposed to gather intel on Seven and keep watch over Willa at the same time? He crowded her closer to the concealment of the cave and gave her a warning look, hoping she'd get the message. He took two careful steps forward. And immediately heard the *swoosh-swoosh* of her feet disturbing the sand behind him. Jerking his head around, he stared her down.

"No way, buster. Wherever your furry ass is going, I'm following. This place is too creepy to hang around by myself."

Damn stubborn women. They were going to be the death of him. Literally.

Returning his focus to the path that snaked toward the shores of the lake in the distance, he snuffled the ground. Sure enough, Clarissa's sweet scent mingled with the grains of sand. She'd been through here recently. After a quick glance to ensure Willa was still trailing close behind, he dashed in the direction of his mate. As they neared the lake, he could make out several figures standing on the beach.

But it was the massive beast rising from the waves that turned his blood to ice. *What. The. Fuck.* He detected Willa's sharp intake of breath and prayed that she wasn't about to scream. Or do anything else that would bring attention to them both and potentially put Clarissa in danger before he could reach her.

Giving Willa an unsubtle nudge, he galloped toward the cluster of boulders that bisected the beach and the sheer curtain of rock comprising the interior of the mountain. The shelter would provide them cover, but it was also close enough to the action that if that thing moved to attack Clarissa, he'd be on top of the bastard in an instant.

The sound of raised voices carried to him, and he cocked his ears forward.

"You humans always amuse me with your constant quests for eternal enlightenment, when clearly it's always been the darkness that consumes you most." The smug diatribe seemed to be coming from the ugly-ass beast. "One only has to watch those news programs your kind adore to see your obsession with tragedy. Killings and muggings. Kidnappings. War and disease. Day after day, you find more ways to destroy the light. And feed *me*."

"No." Clarissa shook her head adamantly. "We're not monsters like you."

“That’s where you’re wrong. My pride corrupts your egos, even while my envy cripples your souls. I’m the gluttonous darkness that desires to smite all else. As you see, there’s a little piece of me in every single one of you. It’s time you fully recognize that.” The beast snapped its tentacles toward its psychotic henchmen, and the four creatures pounced on Clarissa.

Fear and rage exploding within him, Logan released a ferocious growl and leapt from concealment, sprinting to his mate’s aid.

The next several seconds were a terrifying blur as he attacked each of the creatures. He managed to fling two of them off Clarissa, and she struggled to escape the other pair. Willa came running from behind as three more of the creatures jumped into the fray. They dragged Clarissa into the lake, shoving her beneath the waves.

His anguished howl rent the air, he dove in after her. She resurfaced, choking on a mouthful of the oily water. He swam toward her, his legs paddling furiously, but just as he was almost upon her, a fierce wave tossed him skyward.

For one blinding moment, he was suspended.

The next second, he crashed back into his body. Gasping and trembling, he snapped his eyes open. Constance was leaning over him, her face deathly pale as a rush of anxious questions pelted from her mouth. Tuning them out, he pushed her away and vaulted to his feet, his gaze sweeping the crowded room for Willa. She was slumped against the wall, her expression dazed. He raced to her, catching her around the arms as she started to slide toward the floor. “What the hell happened?”

“I—I don’t know. One minute I was in the lake, and now I’m here. But I still feel Clarissa. She’s alive.”

Willa’s admission swamped him with relief and prompted a tidal wave of stunned demands around the room as everyone suddenly became aware that he hadn’t been the only one to take a trip to Freaky Island. Domino asked the question that seemed to be most prominently poised on everyone’s tongue, but with her own unique, domineering twist. “Willa, I demand to know how you ended up over there.”

“I—I have no damn idea. But it’s the place from my dream. Only I guess it’s not really just a dream anymore.” She shuddered.

Desperate to get her back on track, he shook her shoulders. “You’ve dreamt about that thing? What the fuck is it?”

“I th-think it’s a levi—the word that’s kept popping in my head for the past week. As soon as I saw that disgusting...” She broke off for a moment, blinking. “Leviathan.”

A hush fell over the guild members, and Logan swerved his focus to Domino. “What? What is it?”

“They’re the seven-headed gatekeepers to hell. The most powerful of all soul collectors.” Domino’s fingers trembled as she pressed them to her lips. She shook her head, the color slowly returning to her high cheekbones. “Impossible. It’s believed they’ve been extinct for at least a century.”

“Trust me, that fuckin’ thing is alive and kickin’.” But not for long. “How is it killed?”

“I don’t think it can be.”

“Hope,” Willa whispered.

He and Domino glanced at the young witch. Willa’s eyes glazed over, as if she’d traveled to some far-off place. “It can be slain by hope. But first we must relight hers.”

Domino frowned. “Willa, what’s wrong with you?”

Shoving the pain-in-the-ass guild leader aside, Logan clasped Willa’s arm. “Whose hope? Clarissa’s?”

She nodded. “The lake extinguished her hope. Her only chance of surviving, and killing the Levi, is if we relight it.”

Domino made an impatient noise. “*Willa*, what—?”

Slashing his gaze in Domino’s direction, he bared his teeth. “Say one more word, and I swear to Christ I’m jamming a sock in your mouth.”

The guild leader’s eyes blazed, but at least she took his threat to heart. His attention shifted back to Willa. “How do we relight her hope?”

“We call her to us.” She bit her lip and looked around the room before staring up at him. “We call her home.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Sweet Clarissa.”

Envy’s covetous touch roamed her face, brushing over her eyelashes. “You are truly ready to become my bride now. Reborn and baptized.” The sin delicately wiped the last traces of oily ooze from her hair with the cloth it’d wrapped around her as soon as she’d been dragged from the lake. She shivered, a terrible emptiness carved deep within her belly.

“You feel it now, don’t you? The darkness that brings you closer to me. To master. We are one now. Forever.”

The creature’s cold, clammy kiss iced over her lips before the sin helped her into the black lace wedding dress that’d magically appeared beside her. “Come. It’s time to celebrate our union and make it official. The others are waiting.”

As if she were no more functional than a zombie, she followed Envy’s command. There was nothing left of her now. No struggle. No fight. Only a vast, unfillable void.

They stepped into the twilight. The darkness was denser than ever, a perfect twin to the empty abyss within her soul. As promised, the others were gathered at the lake’s edge. She and Envy joined them, and Clarissa stood motionless while the six sins danced around her and Envy. Even the bitchy Greed and the lazy Sloth seemed to be enjoying the festive atmosphere.

“For seven years I’ve patiently waited to make you mine.” Envy’s talons caressed her chin. “Did you know that I came to your coven house the day of that tiger and witch’s wedding? I watched you, sweet Clarissa, my eagerness almost overwhelming as I imagined reciting our own vows. And now here we are. It’s a dream come true.”

It occurred to her that she should feel disturbed that the sin had been anywhere near the coven house. Instead, she felt...nothing.

“I have forgiven you for doing all of those wicked things with that filthy wolf. It’s quite generous of me, no?”

Wolf?

Oh yes, Logan. She waited for the pain of his absence to fill her. But...nothing.

Lust suddenly whirled her into its arms, jerking her around like a rag doll as the sin waltzed her upon the sand. An angry hiss erupted from Envy and it leapt at Lust, knocking the creature onto its ass. The two sins began fighting, clawing at each other, while jeering laughter broke from their siblings.

Amidst the commotion, she heard the faint echo of her name. At first she paid it no mind, but then it grew louder. Enough so it drew the attention of the five sins who were not squabbling. Their features froze for a fraction of a second before twisting with ugly menace. A legion of hisses filled the air, almost drowning out the constant chanting of her name, which had grown to a deafening crescendo.

The two sins wrestling on the sand ceased beating on each other. Its expression awash with panic, Envy hurtled to its feet. The creature spun in circles, making terrible hissing and growling noises into the darkness. When that didn't defeat the rising chorus of her name, Envy crushed her to its chest, clamping its hands over her ears. But even with everything muffled, a strange thing occurred.

The emptiness within her belly began to recede.

She felt a flicker of something. A spark. The edges of her conscience tried to grasp the meaning of it, why the tiny flame offering its meager warmth called to her.

A furious cacophony of noise clanged inside her head, competing with the voices singing her name. The sins were screeching, their shrill, discordant yowls deafening.

Horrific images sprang into her mind. Battlefields soaked in blood, the dead and wounded stacked in massive piles while bombs exploded everywhere. She heard Wrath's rattling laugh and the fragile spark within her sputtered.

Clarissa. The sweet invocation of her name curled around the wick of the weakening flame, stoking it to life. The death-strewn battlefield disintegrated, along with Wrath.

Squeals of rage blasted from the remaining sins. Their crazed flurry like a whirlwind, they swooped on top of her, hurling her into the lake. Their claws dug into her hair, trying to dunk her beneath the waves. The light faltered.

A barrage of disturbing images flashed before her—machines of mass destruction and greed stripping the earth, erecting altars filled with rotting waste.

Clarissa. The beckoning of her coven sisters cracked through the dark.

The machines stalled, crumbling into rusted flakes. Hideous wailing came from Greed and Gluttony as the sins dissolved. Envy's talons sank into her flesh, mad desperation contorting its features as the creature plunged her beneath the oily water. Her lungs filled with the incessant, drowning darkness.

She started to fade.

Rissa. Logan's voice pierced the emptiness, floating toward her like a life preserver. The light of his love filled her chest, making her buoyant. She surged upward, breaking the water's surface with a gasp.

"No," Envy roared, hatred blazing in its eyes. "You're *mine*." The lake seethed and roiled. Funnels of fire torpedoed from its depths as Seven's formidable bulk ascended from the surf and towered behind Envy. The beast's many jaws yawned open, venomous hatred dripping from its fangs.

Envy yanked her head back, its claws aiming for her throat.

Rissa, I love you. The power of Logan's declaration thundered through her, and the light exploded in a fierce illumination.

Envy screamed. A brilliant white glow leached the darkness from its irises and slowly spread throughout the sin. Its remaining siblings writhed beside it, their own bodies radiating the same blinding refulgence. The creatures distorted, bending out of proportion before snapping together as one and rocketing into Seven.

The mighty beast bellowed, its tentacles whipping through the air. It lunged at her, bursting into a white glare of flame. For one dazzling moment, the sky became a canvas of luminosity.

Seven's thrashing carcass toppled into the water, sending up a massive wave that ruptured the darkness. A gurgle discharged from the lake, and the ooze began swirling, siphoning toward the epicenter of its belly. Thousands upon thousands of souls launched from the receding waves, shooting skyward.

She felt herself flying suddenly, soaring toward those luminous, twinkling lights. The coven house stood amongst the tapestry of stars. Her fingers closed around the doorknob, but it wouldn't budge. Heavy pounding shook the other side, and she could hear Logan calling to her.

Clarissa. The voice wasn't his. She floated sideways and noticed a vibrant, golden tree. It reminded her of the one she'd first glimpsed upon waking in this place. Only this oak shimmered with endless life. A woman emerged from the trunk, her face more ancient than the bark. Gaia—mother goddess of all.

"Your family awaits, Clarissa. Both within that house and here." Gaia gestured to the illuminated tree behind her. "It's time for you to make your choice."

Chapter Twenty-Five

The sound of joyous crying and chatter jerked Logan back to his body. He rolled closer to Clarissa on the bed, his palm curving around her cheek. She was still unconscious.

Why hadn't her soul returned? He'd felt her on the other side of the door, trying to—

No spirits will be able to pass through the barrier, including hers.

Mama Heloise's pronouncement ripped through the confused tangle of his thoughts. Sweet Jesus. The bed. They had to get her body out of here.

Frantic, he scooped her into his arms, plowing toward the exit. One of the guild members knocked into him, and he growled as Clarissa's limp limbs jostled within his grip. "Fucking *move*."

Finally everyone seemed to get their heads out of their asses and cleared a path. He gently settled his mate on the carpet and hugged her tight. "Baby, come back to us. We need you."

A hush fell over the room, the silence almost unnerving. Each tick of the bedside clock felt like an eternity. Felt like a torment.

She lay motionless, her body defenseless and vulnerable. Misery howling inside him, he clutched her hand, pressing it to his thudding heart. His throat vising, he buried his cheek in her hair.

Another lifetime passed before he felt it. The almost imperceptible flex of her fingers.

He froze.

Her hand moved again, seconds before a shudder rippled through her body. He jerked his head back, the air jamming in his lungs as her dusky lashes fluttered. She opened her eyes, her unfocused gaze landing on him. Blinking, she lifted her hand to his jaw. "You called me back."

Tuning out the excited clamor surrounding them, he bent his head and kissed his mate. Moisture filled his eyes, but he didn't move to hide his emotions. "Welcome home, baby."

The rest of the day was like a surreal dream to Clarissa. Compared to that nightmare world she'd left behind, the love and friendship encompassing her from every direction felt like a comforting cocoon. Never in her wildest imaginings would she have expected to be the recipient of all these people's thoughts and prayers. Their light still resided within her chest, humbly reminding her of everything she'd almost lost.

Her tummy rumbled suddenly, calling attention to the fact that she was once again in possession of a stomach that required sustenance. Logan's palm smoothed over her arm. He'd looked for any excuse to

touch her for the past two hours. Not that she was complaining. She'd looked for any opportunity to touch him too. "I'll get Gloria to fix you somethin'. Be right back."

Her fingertips brushed his cheek. "I'm not going anywhere."

He rested his forehead against hers before he stood and left the parlor. As soon as he was gone, Tanner and Constance came and sat next to her. While her coven sister clasped her hand, Clarissa offered Tanner a tremulous smile. "I'm glad you and your mom are with us."

The boy swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Me too. And I'm glad you're okay."

Footsteps scrunched on the carpet, and Clarissa looked up as Willa approached. She still didn't understand what the young witch had been doing in Seven's horrific realm or how she'd gotten there. But the weariness and exhaustion in Willa's eyes stalled her from making any mention of it. No doubt the guild had been grilling the girl endlessly for the past several hours. She wasn't about to add to Willa's frustration. Instead, she stood and wrapped her arms around her. The hug felt right. Natural. She would never again be afraid of letting anyone close. Not after everything she'd almost lost. "Thank you. For everything."

"I-I'm just sorry I couldn't help Logan save you before those bastards extinguished your light." She sniffled. "I hope that ugly son of a bitch burns in Hell."

Her mind flashed back to Seven's thrashing form. "I don't think there's any question of that."

Fiona, Marabella, Jade and Peach joined them, adding to the already crowded conditions around the sofa. She was almost glad that Jemma and Griffin were still off on their honeymoon, clueless of the drama that'd unfolded the past few days. Much as she loved having all her coven sisters within arm's reach, she was beginning to feel a little overwhelmed by all the attention.

And truthfully, as selfish as it sounded, the one she most wanted at the moment was currently in the kitchen, trying to round her up a snack when what she really longed for was the comfort of his arms.

As if he'd received a direct transmission of her thoughts, Logan suddenly appeared in the doorway. Their gazes crashed and the world around them faded to the background. She watched him stride forward, his sole focus on her. He swept her up and pivoted toward the doorway. Fortunately no one detained him as he strode for the stairway, otherwise the unlucky offender would have likely received a chunk taken out of their hide.

They reached her bedroom, and he kicked the door shut before locking it. A second later, she was sinking into the fresh bedding, her fingers sifting through Logan's hair as his tongue glided along hers. The kiss was drenched in heat and passion. Love and tenderness.

He cradled her close, his hands touching every inch he could reach. Soon clothing became a hindrance, and they removed that last barrier to each other's bodies, their fingers, lips and tongues relearning the precious plains and valleys of the other. Logan's mouth slid between her legs and suckled softly on her clit, his loving worship driving her to a shattering climax. He left her just long enough to fetch a condom from his wallet.

Remembering his oath not to get her pregnant until she wore his ring, she nibbled along his jaw while he smoothed the latex over his rigid shaft. “We need to get married. Soon. So we can start filling that nursery.”

His motions stilled and he looked at her, the joy on his face almost more blinding than the glow residing in her heart. His lips parted, but rather than responding to her announcement, he kissed her again. Their tongues tangling, he eased over her, his cock rubbing along her labia. She undulated her hips and he took the hint, nudging into her slit. He bore down, filling her in one luscious stroke. She countered his thrusts, the rhythm of their love as ancient as time itself. Their fingers twined, an unbreakable bond.

Almost.

There was one last step to seal their union. One that she longed for with all her soul. But for the first time in many, many years, her longing wasn’t something to be ashamed of. Or to run from.

She turned her head, exposing the vulnerable arch of her neck. A shudder racked Logan, and she could sense his wolf straining at its leash. She whispered the words that would free him. Free her. “You are my mate. Always.”

Groaning, he buried his face against her. He placed a tender kiss on her pulse, and a moment later his canines pricked her flesh. She instinctively tensed, not knowing what to expect. Would there be pain?

His teeth punctured deeper. But there was no agony, only the most exhilarating, intense pleasure she’d ever known. It swept over her, radiating inward and outward until she was submerged in pure sensation. She swam in the currents of his energy, their essences merging into shimmering threads of lavender and gold. There was no beginning and no end to their unity. No weakness in their link. She opened her eyes to the shining light of her and Logan’s love.

One word sang in her soul.

Home.

Epilogue

Twenty-nine was too damn young to be suffering a midlife crisis.

And a mental breakdown.

Shaking her head, Willa Jameson parked her Taurus outside Tybee's Sugar Shack. The only thing that'd talk her down from the ledge she was straddling right now was an Oreo Cookie shake. She stepped inside the building, the smell of vanilla and chocolate like a tranquilizer dart to the jugular. Her sigh of contentment floated free. Now if only this illusion of tranquility and normalcy would last.

Jenson was manning the counter today. He gave her a friendly wave. "Hey, Willa. The usual?"

She wasn't the least bit surprised by the question. God knows, she came here often enough everyone knew her and the fact that Oreo Cookie shakes were her personal crack. "Yep. Extra heavy on the cookie today, please."

Jenson's eyebrows lifted, but he didn't say anything. A few minutes later, her liquid therapy in hand, she left the Shack and returned to her car. She took a sip of her shake and groaned in appreciation before turning the key in the ignition. The radio popped on, and she listened to the DJ rambling about the top story that'd been featured on every news channel for the past two days—the mysterious and completely spontaneous recovery of the coma victims who'd been under close monitoring at St. Joseph's. Everyone was calling it a miracle.

If they only knew the real story. Not that the truth was any less miraculous. And a whole lot weirder.

Plunking her shake in the cup holder, Willa lowered the volume on the radio and pulled onto the street. But rather than turn inland and head to her duplex apartment as she'd intended, she found herself driving in the direction of the north beach as if she didn't possess control over her hands—which were gripping the steering wheel as if the thing might suddenly rip off and go flying out the window.

Oh hell. Now what?

Her foot accelerated on the gas, speeding her past the clusters of rental cottages hugging the shoreline of the Atlantic. The Tybee Island Light Station popped into view and she decelerated. Just as she was about to exhale in relief that her psychosis had apparently decided to give her a break, she careened into the lighthouse's parking lot and braked to a stop. No one was around since it was after normal operating hours. Good thing, because with that *Dukes of Hazard* stunt, she probably would have wiped out an entire line of cars.

She stumbled from the vehicle and staggered across the steaming asphalt. Instead of heading toward the light station, she staggered toward the dunes in the distance. As she stared at the whitecaps cresting on the horizon, she started to get a sinking feeling where she was headed.

Pleasenoplesenoplesen.

The puppeteer controlling her body refused to listen to her desperate pleas. She tumbled through the sand, the waves growing deafening in her ears.

Other than that dip in Seven's fiery lake, she hadn't physically stepped foot in any body of water bigger than a bathtub in almost twenty-two years. As she neared the rolling tide, the horrible memory of her parents sinking beneath the waves crashed into her.

Terror and despair clawed within her all over again. *Oh God, no.*

Warning bells screamed in her head, but her legs continued moving, increasing their pace. Before she knew it, water crashed over her, dragging her under. She tried to kick against the currents, but the tow was too strong.

Something curled around her ankles and gave a vicious tug. Within the murky depths, red demonic eyes appeared. "*I know what you are.*" The sibilant voice snaked into the cortex of her brain.

She screamed, right before the world went dark.

About the Author

At the ripe age of seven, Jodi Redford penned her first epic, complete with stick figure illustrations. Sadly, her drawing skills haven't improved much, but her love of fantasy worlds never went away. These days she writes about fairies, ghosts and other supernatural creatures, only with considerably more heat.

She has won numerous contests, including The Golden Pen and Launching a Star.

When not writing or working the day job, she enjoys gardening and way too many reality television shows.

Currently residing in Michigan with her husband and overgrown lapdog, she is a member of RWA national and Greater Detroit Romance Writers of America.

She loves to hear from readers. You can email her at jodiredford@jodiredford.com and visit her online at www.jodiredford.com.

Look for these titles by Jodi Redford

Now Available:

Taking Liberty
Light My Fire
Vanessa Unveiled

That Old Black Magic
That Voodoo You Do
The Seven Year Witch

Thieves of Aurion
Lover Enslaved

Resisting two magical mischief makers definitely wasn't in the job description.

Vanessa Unveiled

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Vanessa Darby, a bounty hunter and tracker for the Veil Alliance League, figures things can't get any crappier than her car breaking down on a deserted highway. Until the two dimension-hopping renegades she's been assigned to capture lure her to their magical love nest in the woods and entangle her in a web of seduction.

How the hell is she supposed to resist a pair of gorgeous male pookas who possess a wicked talent for bringing the sexy?

Rand and Braeden have searched more than three centuries for their one true bond mate. Now that Vanessa's been dropped into their arms, they have no intention of giving her up. Even if it means agreeing to her terms: If they can't persuade her within forty-eight hours that the three of them belong together, they'll give themselves over to the authorities. But convincing a woman who doesn't believe in love, or the concept of forever, is no easy feat. Particularly with one doozy of a dirty secret from their past waiting to trip them up.

Warning: Two hotter-than-should-be-legal pookas sexin' it up with each other and the stubborn woman they love. One magical hotel in the woods that isn't exactly what it seems. And a unicorn who will forever tarnish the image of the species.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Vanessa Unveiled:

She stepped back into the bedroom just as Rand was shrugging from his shirt. Her breath lodged in her throat. All annoyances aside, he was simply beautiful to behold. His sculpted shoulders were powerful, delineated with sleek muscle tone. A series of intricate symbols inked the right side of his breastbone, drawing attention to his firm pectorals. Like Braeden, his torso was hairless except for the sprinkling of dark hair that traversed his chiseled abs and disappeared beneath the waistband of his charcoal trousers.

He turned toward her, his well-defined stomach muscles flexing. "Is the bath to your liking?"

Despite her best intentions, she couldn't stop ogling his chest. She imagined licking over those delicious curves and hollows. Imagined sucking the hard nubs of his masculine nipples against the roof of her mouth. An intense throb leapt in her clit. She swallowed, corking her whimper. "Y-yes. It's fine."

Disappointment shadowed his expression. For some weird reason, guilt over her less than gushing response settled in the pit of her belly. "No, that's not true."

Rand's face fell another fraction. "You don't like it?"

"Actually, it's amazing." She sighed. "I could easily spend the next forty-eight hours just soaking in that pool."

His eyes darkened. “A delightful way to pass the time. Braeden and I could join you. Soap you from head to foot, paying thorough attention to every inch of you in between.”

She visualized their hands stroking her everywhere, wet, soapy palms gliding over her breasts and pussy. Her nipples beaded. Rand licked his lips and she realized he could easily see her body’s reaction through the thin knit of her turtleneck. He stepped toward her and she backed up, the backs of her knees hitting the ottoman. “I—I think maybe we’d better go join Braeden before he wonders what happened to us.”

Rand continued walking toward her, his gait confident and predatory. “He’s not wondering. He knows exactly what’s going on in here.”

“Nothing is going on in here.” She prayed her declaration didn’t sound as weak as it felt.

“You’re wrong, sweetest. I’m seducing you.”

She gulped. “Well, it’s not working.”

He stopped directly in front of her, so close it was a miracle she didn’t suffer a third-degree burn from the intense heat radiating from his bare chest. The earthy scent of forest and the underlying, potent musk of aroused male drifted from his skin, playing havoc with her hormones. She wanted to bury her nose in all that warm flesh until she was lightheaded and giddy. And then she’d lick and nibble him everywhere.

Rand’s fingers curled around her chin, his thumb brushing the dip beneath her bottom lip. “I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t care what you—” The remainder of her denial fell victim to the lush pressure of Rand’s mouth against hers. Every energy storehouse in her body began lighting up like a bank of slot machines that just hit payload. His lips coaxed hers open with more ease than she cared to analyze and his tongue met hers in a slick glide. Her hands braced against his chest—purely to keep from crumpling in an undignified heap, of course—and Rand’s rumbling groan vibrated beneath her fingertips and inside her mouth. He tugged her closer, one palm moving to the nape of her neck and the other low on her tailbone. Her breasts pillowed against him, and the insistent bulge of his erection nudged just above her pubic bone. The knowledge that all that separated her from his cock were a pair of zippers and some flimsy fabric nearly had her panting.

Rand’s tongue stole another slick caress before he sucked her bottom lip between his teeth. His animalistic growl brought a new gush of wetness between her thighs. “You can’t lie to yourself, Nessie. You belong with us.”

His arrogant assertion acted like a cold dash of water on her desire. She shoved away from Rand and glared up at his passion-flushed features. “I belong to no one. And I told you not to call me by that ridiculous name.”

“You’re the most stubborn twit I’ve ever known.” Tunneling his hands through his dark hair, he granted her a scowl. “You need a good, long fucking, you know that? Maybe it’d manage to dilute some of that vinegar in your attitude.”

She bared her teeth. “My attitude is fine. You’re just pissed because I’m not falling at your feet and begging you to rut away at me. Sucks to realize you’re not so irresistible, doesn’t it?”

And with that big fat lie hanging between them, she stalked from the room.

He was going to make her eat her words. Amongst other things.

Smothering his snarl, Rand dropped onto the cushion beside Braeden.

“Went that good, huh?”

Slashing his gaze sideways, he met Braeden’s sympathetic look. “Humans are exasperating creatures, but that woman takes it to a whole new level.”

“Yet you want her with every breath inside you.” Braeden chuckled in response to Rand’s glower. “I know because I’m suffering the same affliction. She’s like a decadent treat I’ve waited my entire life to unwrap, and the continued wait is damn near killing me.”

Braeden’s choice of words stirred a gloomy brew of worry within Rand. He’d known all along the risk they took pursuing Vanessa. Hell, the delicate nature of their predicament was the only thing that’d kept him from staking a claim on her the first time he’d spotted her five months ago, on that fortuitous and fated day he’d noticed her outside the Veil Alliance’s detainment center. But he didn’t have only himself to consider. Would his heart be able to take the loss of Braeden if Vanessa rejected their bond?

For that matter, would his heart be able to take the loss of Vanessa?

Apparently reading his morose thoughts, Braeden cupped Rand’s cheek. “We promised each other no regrets over doing this.”

“I know. I just—”

Braeden’s mouth stopped any further protest. He licked the seam of Rand’s lips, his groan husky. “I can taste her on you.”

A fierce throbbing coursed through Rand’s cock. Braeden’s innocent pronouncement prodded more wicked fantasies of delving deep inside Vanessa’s dripping slit. He’d pull out slowly and offer his cock to Braeden for a lingering taste before plunging to the hilt in her pussy again and again. Until she was shaking and coming, his name a constant scream upon her lips.

A nip along the underside of his stubbled jaw brought him crashing back to the present. Braeden’s hand trailed low on Rand’s abdomen. “Your skin is on fire. You need sex. Bad.”

Braeden was right. The ferocious demand boiling inside him wouldn’t be appeased by anything less. He clamped a hand on the back of Braeden’s neck, dragging him up for a lush, openmouthed kiss. Their tongues tangled and sparred, amping his insistent desire to full blast. “Take off your pants.”

“Not yet.”

“Yes. Now.” Rand hissed the command through clenched teeth.

Braeden’s mouth curved in mischief before descending over Rand’s stomach. “Patience is a virtue.”

“Fuck that.”

“No, fuck me.”

“My thoughts exactly, you idiot.”

“All in good time.”

Rand growled low in his throat. “Tease.”

Braeden gripped Rand’s zipper, tugging it down. His cock sprang free and Braeden’s laugh caressed over the taut, swollen head before his mouth followed suit. The suction was perfect and sublime. He rocked his hips, his hand riding the back of Braeden’s head. A faint rustling noise slipped past the edges of his awareness. Lifting his focus from his lover’s bobbing motions, he locked stares with Vanessa. Her pupils were huge and dark, her nipples straining against her top. His cock pulsed, swelling inside Braeden’s mouth, earning an appreciative moan from his lover.

“I—I’m sorry. Didn’t realize…” Her hard swallow echoing in the room, Vanessa started to turn tail and run.

“Stay.”

Her foot hovering in mid-spin, she gaped at Rand. “What?”

“Watch. You know you want to.”

Her cheeks grew redder than the anthurium blooms behind her. “That’s ridiculous. I have no interest in—” She broke off when Braeden reached inside Rand’s pants and played with his balls.

She was going nowhere.

Some secrets are dangerous. This Secret is deadly.

Something Secret This Way Comes

© 2011 Sierra Dean

Secret McQueen, Book 1

For Secret McQueen, her life feels like the punch line for a terrible joke. Abandoned at birth by her werewolf mother, hired as a teen by the vampire council of New York City to kill rogues, Secret is a part of both worlds, but belongs to neither. At twenty-two, she has carved out as close to a normal life as a bounty hunter can.

When an enemy from her past returns with her death on his mind, she is forced to call on every ounce of her mixed heritage to save herself—and everyone else in the city she calls home. As if the fate of the world wasn't enough to deal with, there's Lucas Rain, King of the East Coast werewolves, who seems to believe he and Secret are fated to be together. Too bad Secret also feels a connection with Desmond, Lucas's second-in-command...

Warning: This book contains a sarcastic, kick-ass bounty hunter; a metaphysical love triangle with two sexy werewolves; a demanding vampire council; and a spicy seasoning of sex and violence.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Something Secret This Way Comes:

"I really need to shower," I admitted, taking a moment to recognize my clothing wasn't the worst part of me. My cheeks and mouth were smeared with blood, and judging by how heavy my hair felt, it had begun to mat the curls together, which must have looked quite dramatic. My nails had bits of werewolf cheek embedded under them. Gross. I disappeared into my bedroom to fetch my robe, then returned to the living room, where Desmond remained motionless. "Make yourself at home. If you need to change, there are some sweats and T-shirts in the bottom drawer of my dresser that might fit you." I pointed down the dark hallway. "Help yourself."

Stumbling into the bathroom, I didn't bother to close the door. I shucked off my soiled clothing and turned the water on as hot as I could, then climbed into the shower.

I stood under the scalding torrent until the water was no longer pink with blood. It felt like hours and a few layers of flesh later that I finally set foot on dry land again.

I couldn't be bothered to dry my hair other than to towel off as much water as I could. My curls had always been fat and loose, not tight and frizzy, so I wasn't worried about them getting too out of control.

Slipping on the lilac silk robe, I wondered why I had ever bought such a stupid thing. It clung to me everywhere water was still on my body.

After exiting the bathroom, a cool wall of air greeted me in the living room, but there was no sign of Desmond. My loveseat was vacant and the television remained off. I didn't see him in the kitchen, either. I crossed the short distance to my bedroom and stood in the doorway.

He sat on the end of my bed, shirtless, wearing a pair of old, baggy black sweats that had been left by the only man I'd dated long enough for him to leave things behind. Several fresh cuts marred Desmond's chest, all of which were in the process of healing into pink scars. They would be gone by morning. His head was in his hands, and when he looked up I could see the weariness and frustration in his eyes. I assumed he was worried about Lucas until he spoke.

"I don't know what we would have done if something had happened to you tonight."

Again with this *we* business. It was the second time he'd said it tonight.

I got defensive, thinking he was being overbearing. "But you don't even *like* me. You can't stand to *look* at me. You don't think—" My temper was bubbling, but he was shaking his head.

"Lucas knew the minute he met me that when he became king of the pack it would be with me as his second. He knew it when we were only children. Because of his certainty, his family took me and my brother in, treated us like their own sons, and raised us to understand that kind of life in a way our own parents could not."

I could think of only one response. "Dominick's your brother?" It was difficult to reconcile the idea of short, blond Dominick being related to dark, olive-skinned Desmond. Not to mention their different demeanors.

He nodded and continued. "The reason Lucas knew I would be so important to him is that he and I share a variation of the same soul-bond you two share."

Puzzle pieces began to fall into place, forming the answer to my most lingering question. I sat on the bed next to him, suddenly feeling rather queasy.

"So, what you're saying is... I mean the thing Genevieve said at the club...?"

"About the double bond."

"Yes. I take it she wasn't referring to the bonds between me and Lucas and you and Lucas."

He shook his head again. "No. She meant between you and Lucas, and you—"

"With you." I'd suspected as much from what Genevieve had insinuated, but it was different to hear it right from the wolf's mouth.

He looked at me, but I was staring at the empty armchair by the door. "I know how weird this must be for you," he said, his voice sounding weary. "I didn't believe it myself until the elevator earlier tonight. I could taste you so clearly it made my head spin."

I took a deep, shaking breath. "Me too." I was beginning to feel tired, and I knew it wasn't just from the fight. Sunrise couldn't be too far off and I would need to sleep soon, but I still had so many questions. "Is this normal?"

“We always knew it was possible. It’s rare for kings to be soul-bonded to their seconds, but when it does happen it creates a powerful structure for leadership. We can read each other very well. But, with that, we knew the connection could either negate the possibility of Lucas being soul-bonded to a future queen, or it would mean that I might be connected to her as well. There isn’t a science to soul-bonds. We honestly didn’t know what would happen.”

“So what is this, then?” I gestured from myself to him. “We’re some sort of weird soul threesome? I mean, to be honest, I wasn’t totally willing to accept that I was *destined* to be with Lucas, and now you’re telling me I’m destined to be with both of you? Is that how this works?” Anger tainted the words, but I couldn’t help it.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“All I know is since meeting you I can’t stop thinking about you. And my best friend, my king, believes you’re meant to be his queen. Normally you’d be with the one you felt bonded to. But you admitted you can taste us both, which means neither bond is stronger.”

“Why didn’t I taste you before tonight?”

“We wondered about that yesterday. We figured you were only connected to him, so we didn’t question it. My best guess is because he’s king, his influence over you was stronger. You’d never experienced the soul-bond before, so the first taste you got was from the most alpha wolf among us. It wasn’t until you’d been away from him longer than a few minutes you were able to connect with me.”

Sounded like a lot of guessing and not a lot of real answers.

“Did you know?”

“What?”

“Could you sense me yesterday?”

He was silent, his gaze looking at the wall next to my head. “Yes.”

This frustrated me more. They both knew about what was happening, but had chosen to leave me out of the loop, making me feel stupid and unprepared. I stood and turned my irritation on him.

“I haven’t *dated* in two years, and suddenly I’m *meant to be* with not one but two werewolves I’ve only known for a couple of days.” I threw my hands up in the air in frustration. “If I hadn’t tasted you both, if it didn’t feel like electricity went through me when either of you touch me, I’d think this whole thing was *bullshit*.” I put a lot of emphasis on the last word and directed it right at him, then dropped myself into the armchair.

“I didn’t want to believe it either.”

I sighed with a little more drama than necessary. “I fail to see how this is a negative for *you*,” I snapped, then immediately regretted it.

Desmond snatched his bloody shirt off the floor and threw it at me none too gently. “Do you know whose blood is on that shirt?” I wasn’t sure if he wanted a reply or not, so I smelled it. My heart sank.

“Mine.” His was on it as well, but I knew that wasn’t the answer he was looking for. I let the shirt drop back to the floor.

“Yeah, yours.” He stood, picking it up and tossing it back across the room. With him this close to me, his anger rising, all the hairs on my arms prickled and a peculiar tingling danced across my skin.

“Desmond...” I remembered what happened the last time I had this feeling in such close proximity to someone I was soul-bonded to.

“I thought you were going to die. When that wolf got her nails into you and you went limp...”

So it had been a she-wolf who had attacked me.

“I was playing dead.” I had to stifle a nervous laugh when I heard the words out loud. Desmond wasn’t smiling at all, his hands shaking, and in one fast motion he grabbed me by the shoulders and yanked me out of the chair with such force my head spun.

“You asked me what the negative is for me? When you went limp, I saw every chance I had for happiness die with you. I could stand ten feet away from you for the rest of my life and nothing, not sex or money or power, could match how that feels. Do you *get* that?” He gave me a shake for emphasis.

I braced my hands against his chest. Where my fingers touched his bare skin, it felt like the dark hair there was made of electric wire. I jerked my hand back for a second knowing he must have felt the shock, but I couldn’t not touch him. I needed to have my hands on him.

All sorts of very human thoughts were running through my head. *This is Lucas’s best friend. Isn’t Lucas my boyfriend? No. Is it okay to sleep with someone and say my metaphysical connection to him made me do it? Okay, that’s actually a pretty good excuse.*

This close to him, I saw his eyes were not true gray but rather a washed-out violet, which was a pleasant surprise, giving his already striking face a little extra uniqueness. He loosened his grip on me, and I stood flat on the ground again.

“Yes,” I said.

His hands were still on my arms, and I felt like I was on fire and freezing to death at the same time. I shivered. He rubbed my arms with the familiarity of an old habit, warming me with his touch but making the heat move lower as well. My body shuddered.

“Yes?” He had forgotten the question.

I was amazed we even remembered our names with this much static electricity dancing between us. All I kept thinking was, *he wants me*. And right then what I wanted more than anything was to be wanted. Maybe it was weak of me, but it would make me feel safe and protected, if only for one night.

We were staring at each other for so long I thought my entire being would unravel in his hands. In one breath I was wondering if I'd gotten the signals wrong or imagined the chemistry that was setting fire to the air. Was I misreading anger for passion? In the next breath his mouth was on mine.

Love speaks volumes without a single word.

Silent Storm

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Pacific Passion, Book 3

In the months they've traveled together, Laurin Marshall and Matt Jentry's attraction has grown beyond spectacular sexual passion into a deeper emotional connection. Still, Laurin wrestles with one last question: how a water shifter and an air shifter can possibly find permanent common ground.

Matt is content to wait patiently for Laurin to realize he has no desire to change her sky-borne nature. Until a giant golden eagle touches down on the *Stormchild* and tips the delicate balance of more than just the boat.

Laurin's obvious affection for the newcomer comes as a shock. And so does the flash of jealousy that interferes with his shamanic ability to heal the man's malady. While Matt struggles to balance his conflicted responsibilities, Laurin attempts to reconcile her undeniable feelings for one of her kind with her desire for Matt.

Somewhere between the ocean depths and the mountaintops, they need to find a love strong enough to call them both home to the *Stormchild*.

Warning: Familiar lovers (hot) with old rivals (hotter) and a wild curse-melting ménage (hottest yet). Get ready for one exotic paranormal that will make you look to the skies and sea with longing.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Silent Storm:

All around her, towering mountains descended sharply into the sparkling waters of the Pacific. Their ragged surfaces were torn as if a giant hand had grabbed desperate snatches from the earth, leaving behind nothing but thin air and harsh ridges of granite exposed to the brilliant August sun. Along the waterline, where the tide's highest marks had ripped and torn the land, sun-bleached logs lay in tangled heaps, the exposed roots of massive cedars now tormented remains of once majestic trees.

The world kept changing. It was inevitable.

Laurin Marshall guided her kayak along the inlet, letting the crisp morning air fill her lungs, seeking a moment's respite from her internal turmoil. Her mind was filled with images, emotions, and uncertain longings. Two years had passed since she'd deserted her mountain clan to find a place among the water shifters known as the People of the Sea. Only a couple months ago her life had been radically transformed again.

She dipped one side of the double paddle, then the other, moving her arms in a smooth, even rhythm. Trying to let the pace of her heart and the motion of the routine soothe her aching soul.

There were so many things she loved about this life. The water, the proximity to the coastal mountain ranges. The way the water reflected the emotion of the seasons in the colors filling the seemingly endless sky.

She couldn't get enough of the beauty before her. So different, and in some ways raw and stark, compared to the Rockies where she'd grown up. Oh, the mountains of her home reached even higher to the sky, and when she flew, shifted into one of the forms of the People of the Air, it seemed there was nothing between her and the stars. But here, the ocean spoke to her. It had a voice and a song—poles apart from the wind in the pine trees or the flutter of a breeze against a mountain lake.

The sea was vibrant and alive, and she'd fallen totally in love with it.

Laurin paused in her paddling, letting the kayak drift as she rested out of the wind in a small bay. Around her a pod of dolphins surfaced, a couple of the younger ones sliding cheekily alongside her craft, their pectoral fins slapping the water beside the gunwales and splashing her. She laughed aloud and held up a hand to ward off the worst of the attack.

The matriarch of the group surfaced and sang out, and Laurin wished again she could understand what she was saying. The female, with her beautiful smile, dipped her head then submerged, the rest of the pod following. An immature male rose one final time into the air, twisting and landing beside the kayak. Laurin was instantly drenched.

She had to smile. The sea and her people were amazing, even though she'd never been so waterlogged in her life. Part of the downside of being partner to the shaman of the Pacific Inside Passage. Laurin picked up her paddle and headed for the thin strip of sand visible just ahead of her. There were dry clothes in the aft compartment, and if she'd read Matt's note correctly, there should be a relaxing break waiting ahead.

He joined her on the beach. Six feet of brown skin, firm muscles and a grin that was all for her. The neat khaki shorts he wore did nothing but draw her attention to his bare chest and the ridge of his abdominal muscles carving down under the beltline.

"Did you have a good paddle?" Matt pulled the prow of the kayak far up on the sand so she could step out onto solid ground. His thoughtfulness warmed her, even though she scarcely needed to worry about staying dry. He guided her with a steady hand as he helped her from the cockpit. "Laurin, why are you soaked?"

Because your people gave me homage? "Enthusiastic teenager, I think."

Matt Jentry wrapped his arms around her and held her tight, his even heartbeat under her ear now so familiar and so right, she could barely imagine not having him close by. Somewhere near, to touch, to talk to. She glanced up at his beautiful face, firm cheekbones, strong jawline. She couldn't imagine never getting to taste him again.

"Well, that's an intriguing look. You going to share what's on your mind to go with that enticing expression?" His voice was husky and low, and her need for him blossomed into full desire.

She couldn't imagine life without his lovemaking either. She reached up and brought their mouths together.

He kissed her softly, placing a series of light bites along her lower lip, dragging the surface into his mouth and letting it go. She explored with her tongue, teasing his lips, his teeth, his tongue. All the while his hands were busy at her buttons, her waistband. Stripping off her clothes, baring her to the elements. She willingly did the same for him, thrilling at the encounter of her fingers against his torso. The slight breeze brushed her skin, and she wondered again at the remote locations he always managed to find. There were no clans close to this inlet, no human eyes to see them naked and entwined.

Matt lifted her in his arms without taking his lips from hers. She closed her eyes and simply soaked in the experience. The warmth of his touch versus the cool of the blanket he lowered her to. The heat of his kisses, now descending to worship her breasts and tease her nipples to tight peaks. The breeze stroked a cold finger over the wet tip and it tightened even more.

He hummed in admiration. "I did have a picnic lunch arranged, but I'm not sure if I have the strength to wait. Are you hungry?"

Laurin stared up at her lover of two months, the man with whom she had a mystical connection they were still trying to figure out. A mental and emotional connection beyond the ordinary—that only grew stronger the longer they were together. "I'm always hungry for you."

They moved together with an easy rhythm, the first fumbling moments of becoming lovers seemingly far in the past. It was straightforward, but not boring, the passion between them rising fast and staying strong. Whether it was because their magic clicked, or because somehow they truly fit together well, Laurin didn't know. And at this time, didn't care to analyze.

She needed him. As always.

Matt pulled her close, stroking his hands down her naked torso. He cupped her butt and slid her over him so they were centered on the blanket. It took him a second to sit upright before pressing her backward slightly to expose her breasts to his attention. His lips fastened around one tip, drawing a string of desire through her entire being, an echoing pulse beginning in her core. Each suckle triggered a responding internal throb, and she moaned, dragging her fingers through his dark hair to hold him close.

Receiving his full attention was a humbling experience. Laurin had never felt this way about previous lovers, had never had a connection that went deeper than the physical pleasure they shared. With Matt, his steamy touch was wrapped up in the layers of emotion she felt from him. It mixed with traces of thoughts that tangled her mind, and there were moments she didn't know if it was her ideas or his driving her crazy with desire.

Warm skin, wet lips, the hard surface of his shaft between them. Laurin adjusted her legs to kneel on either side of his thighs, her sex covering his rigid erection. She rose and lowered slowly, letting him slip along her core as the moisture from her body coated his cock.

Images of him slipping into her—of the pleasure he felt—rolled back through the strange and powerful link they shared. Combined with the scent of the sea, between the remembrances of the past times they'd made love and this current time, the sensory overload grew almost devastating. It wasn't simply the touch of his hands massaging her breasts, there was the lingering sensation of his mouth, and an echo of a time in the past when he'd pinched and teased her nipples until she could barely think.

It was lovemaking with layers of memories, and each time it grew more powerful. When Matt grasped her hips and adjusted her so his erection slid into her depths, she wasn't sure how much of the pleasure was from this occasion and how much from the past.



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