

Eternally Yours



An evil curse. Two lost souls. Four cousins on a quest for true love...

Many years ago, a scorned man called upon the powers of darkness and condemned two soul mates, Solange and Jonathon, to walk apart for all eternity. The lovers' only hope of being reunited in the afterlife now rests in the hands of their great-granddaughters — four cousins, each possessing her own magical gift.

Can Aurora, Celeste, Skye and Eve realize the power of love — and break the spell before it's too late?

Eternally Yours

The Love of Power
by Maggie Shayne

Chapter One

It was an ordinary day, but she should have known her ordinary days were numbered. There was nothing ordinary about Solange Deveaux, though she'd tried to create the illusion of the mundane. She'd tried. But how did one live a normal life when one's very essence was intrinsically tied to a chunk of granite hidden in the belly of the Earth?

Solange tugged weeds from the rose garden behind the manor house, her long skirts protected from the soil by the swatch of old fabric on which she knelt, just as her soft-skinned hands were protected by the gloves she wore. Nothing, though, could protect her from what she was. Not the happy home she'd made, not the precious little boy running and playing in the backyard, not even Jonathon.

By the gods, how she loved that man.

And she'd never told him. Not in the seven years they'd been living in marital bliss. She'd hoped she would never have to.

But now...

She felt it, all at once, and her hands stilled, gripping a stubborn weed as she lifted her head and looked around. There was something — a chill in the air. A static energy that crackled and sparked. A feeling of — evil. The very ground beneath her began to tremble. In the distance, she heard a voice calling her name.

Solange, come. Come to me.

"No..." she whispered. She didn't know whose voice it was, though it seemed deep and vaguely familiar. She only knew it was something otherworldly, supernatural. She was through with all of that.

The ground shook harder, still harder, and beneath her hands it cracked — the very earth splitting as a fissure opened in its surface. A window exploded above her, raining a shower of shattered glass down on her head.

"Mommy!"

Her little boy raced toward her even as she ran to gather him into her arms. She hugged him against her skirts, leaving soil handprints on his shoulders. An ice-cold wind — like the very breath of evil — unnatural and foul, plunged the temperature downward so fast she could see her breath as she hustled her child up the back steps and into the house. She kept hold of him, running through the back door and the kitchens, into the parlor where she came to a sudden halt as that voice came again.

Come to me, Solange. Do as I say! I have the Stone!

Her heart contracted in her chest. This dark presence had the Stone? What if he destroyed it? What would become of her then? She thought she knew — her fate was bound to that stone. But she didn't want to think about that, not now.

The earth shook harder, and another window shattered.

I have the power to take all you have. Your precious Jonathon. Your little boy.

"Never!" she shouted, hugging Bobby closer.

"Mamma?"

She looked down into the trusting eyes of her son, aware he couldn't hear the voice that she heard. Nor was he likely sensing the evil that chilled the very air. He was a boy. The power of her line passed only to daughters.

Pasting a reassuring smile onto her face, she knelt in front of her child. "It's nothing, Bobby. Only a passing storm. Go now, go on up to your bedroom and work on your lessons."

"But...what's happening, Mamma?"

"It's only a storm, love. Only a storm. Go now. Pappa will be home soon."

The cherub-faced child seemed reassured by her confident tone, her genuine-looking smile, her promise that his beloved father would soon return. How Bobby loved him.

She walked him up the stairs to his room, but as soon as he was safely behind its closed door, she rushed ahead, wrenching open the door at the end of the hall and starting up its dusty, dark stairway.

I'll destroy this entire city unless you obey me, Solange! I'll destroy you!

So frightened her entire body trembled, Solange continued up the stairs. Her hand ran along the wall beside her as she moved, until she felt the candleholder there, a taper at the ready, a match sticking out of its base, for easy access. She tugged the match loose, struck it on the wall, lit the candle and let its light guide her up the stairs. Something was tugging her, pulling her. There was no question in her mind that she needed to open the trunk she'd vowed she would never open again. And even with that she knew it might well be too late.

Her charge was to keep the power alive, to keep the Stone safe. If it were destroyed while under her protection, her link to her ancestral power would end. And maybe...maybe even her life. That was the bargain her ancestors had made. She'd never thought anyone would find the Stone, with or without her magical help.

Crossing the attic toward its darkest corner, she moved aside boxes, tugged off the old sheet that covered the trunk, knelt beside it, and felt for the key tucked into the hidden compartment beneath one of the hinges.

When she had the trunk open, she felt a rush of power, one she hadn't felt in years. Whispers seemed to waft from that box, voices from the past, women's voices. She felt their breath rushing past her face as she reached inside and removed the tools of the woman she had once been. She was the only living female of her line. And she had turned her back on her calling. Her duty.

Now, though...now something threatened her family. She had to reclaim her power.

She removed the items one by one, then spread the altar cloth over the flat top of the trunk. Then she laid out the tools. The cauldron and chalice, the scrying mirror, the double-edged dagger, the censer. One by one she placed them in their proper positions. Then opened the drawstring pouch and cast the cowrie's shells and interpreted the message revealed in the way they fell.

Disaster. A day of reckoning. A curse to come. An evil that must be stopped. A call to action that could not be avoided.

Shaking her head, wishing for a way around the inevitable, she whispered, "And what if I refuse?" She gathered the stones, and cast them again.

The death of a child.

"Please, not that," she whispered. "What must I do? Tell me, please, what must I do?"

Chapter Two

Swallowing her fear, and determined to find answers to her desperate question, [Solange](#) moved the candle aside, swept the shells from the surface of the trunk and focused on the scrying mirror. She gazed into its polished black surface and hoped her skills had not fled with the years of disuse. She let her eyes relax until her vision was an unfocused blur. Her mind went blank, and her muscles limp. The breaths moved in and out of her lungs so slowly and softly that there was no line of demarcation between inhale and exhale. They rolled and receded gently, like waves over the shore.

And the glass clouded. And the faces of her ancestors appeared in the mists.

"Mothers of my mothers, grandmothers of my grandmothers, tell me what I must know," she intoned.

The voices came, whispers, breaths, overlapping one another like a gathering of breezes, but gradually, they melded and became one. One voice, made up of many.

Our powers pass to the women of our line, Solange. They have from time immemorial. Always, there has been one carrying the power in each generation. And protecting its source. You chose to live as an ordinary woman. Tried to turn your back on your calling. You took for granted that the Stone of Power would remain hidden, safe, and you chose love over magic and duty — because of fear! You let fear rule you! But, Solange, you cannot change what you are. You are needed now. It's time to put the fear aside and take back your power.

She shook her head slowly. "I don't understand."

Your lack of attention to your calling allowed the shields of protection to weaken, daughter. And now the Stone of Power has fallen into evil hands.

"I never thought anyone would find it, buried in stone, in the wall of that cave. How could anyone find it?"

The daily rituals and magic the women of our line have always performed so faithfully, the prayers and offerings, the very act of being a witch and being alive to act as the Stone's guardian, all these things added to the mystical shields we placed around the Stone of Power generations ago. But you failed in your duties, turned your back on magic, and so the shields weakened. He sensed it and now he has taken it. And he will use its power only to further his own.

"Who?"

[Darien](#).

Solange knew the name. The black sheep of a magical family, he'd loved her since she was a small child. He'd known of her calling, her legacy, though, and she'd been certain it was her power that drew him. His hunger for it, his desire to make it his own. Darien had never had the best interests of the whole in his heart. In his heart, there was only room for the best interests of Darien himself. He'd been furious when she'd married [Jonathon](#).

"But," she said, speaking her thoughts aloud, "he's only a man."

Not anymore, the voices said. He used his knowledge of magic to grow in power. Even as the protective barriers placed around the Stone were weakening, Darien was getting stronger. And he never stopped searching for the Stone. When the shields grew weak enough, he sensed it and went to the cave to dig it out. And now it is in his hands.

She could hear the unnatural roar of the quaking earth outside, feel the deep chill penetrating her house. She thought she would need to kindle the hearths soon — unheard of in midsummer. Beyond the house, flashes streaked across the sky. Not lightning...no, more like falling stars, or flaming meteors raining down on the Earth.

"What can he do with the Stone?"

Bind his energy to its energy, just as our ancestors did. Who knows of the results in one so evil? Our goal was always the greater good, the well-being of our line and our community and the planet. But in him — immortality and ultimate power are his goals. It may be that he will achieve them with the power of the Stone.

"He's been calling to me. He wants me to come to him."

Possessing you is another of his goals, along with untold wealth and limitless influence. He's a madman, Solange. A madman.

"He threatened my child," she whispered.

Of course he did. It would be in his best interests to see to it that our line ends with you, Solange. For he knows we are the only ones who can defeat him. Your child is in danger; he will attempt to harm Bobby, whether you obey his commands or not.

"If the Stone is destroyed, we'll end anyway."

No, Solange. You are bound to the Stone, as were your ancestors before you. Your essence is tied to its power, and because you've given in to fear for so long, you've let both the Stone's protection and your own grow weak. Because of this, you may well end your mortal lifetime with the Stone's destruction.

Solange felt the truth of those words like blades of ice in her soul.

But your line would not end. Nor would the magical skills passed on naturally through its bloodline. The only thing that would end is our family's link to the power of the Stone — a gift and a charge we have treated with honor and reverence for generations upon generations.

She nodded slowly, closing her eyes. "I'm sorry. I...let you all down." Swallowing hard and lifting her head again, she said, "Tell me what I have to do to save the lives of my son and the generations to come."

Then she listened as the voices spoke to her.

Chapter Three

"I thought I'd find you here."

The sound of her beloved husband's voice was like a balm to [Solange's](#) frayed nerves. She rose quickly, turning in hopes of blocking her altar from [Jonathon's](#) sight with her skirts. "I...I was only..."

He stopped her attempted explanation by pulling her into his arms. "Don't, my love. Don't try to explain. Not now. By God, woman, have you any idea what's happening out there?"

She closed her eyes, relishing the feel of his arms around her. "This unnatural storm, you mean?"

"Storm? It's no storm, Solange. There have been earthquakes. Meteors are pounding the French Quarter. The entire city is ablaze!"

She closed her eyes, wondering at the extent of [Darien's](#) power.

"You have to do something, my love," he whispered.

Slowly, Solange lifted her head, searched her husband's deep brown eyes. She saw what they held: pure love for her. "What do you mean?" she whispered, terrified of his answer.

"Did you think I'd never heard the rumors, the gossip about the women of your line?"

She pulled free of his embrace, her eyes widening. "Gossip? What are you talking about, Jonathon?"

"I know, Solange. I've always known."

"You knew?" she whispered.

"You chose not to share that part of yourself with me, and I've tried to respect that. But now...now everything's changed. Everything. My God, there is destruction raining down on New Orleans from the skies. People are panicking, rioting. Some have already died."

She shielded her eyes. He knew, he knew what she was. But did he realize what it meant? He couldn't or he would be turning away from her already, she thought. "It's only a quirk of nature," she said. "It will surely pass...."

"The air is alive with static. The ground is quaking, [Solange](#), and every witch and priest and voodoo in New Orleans has taken to the streets, all of them asking the same questions — 'What's happened? What can we do?' And when they see me there, they run to me, their faces desperate as they ask me, 'Where is Solange? Why isn't she doing something?'" He held her shoulders firmly, refusing to let her turn away. "The diviners on Rue Royale say that our son is in grave danger, Solange. Is it true?"

"I...I don't know," she said, aware now that there was no use in continuing to deny what she was to him. He knew her face. He wouldn't let her deceive him. Gathering her courage, she admitted, "The black mirror says he could be."

"And is there something you can do?"

She lowered her head. "Perhaps."

"Then for the love of God, do it."

Whirling away from him, Solange paced the attic floor, her skirts swishing about her legs. "You don't understand, [Jonathon](#). This is not a mantle I can take up briefly. Once I make the decision, my life is no longer my own. I will be committed to serve the gods and the greater good, no matter what is asked of me. You — our child — our life together will no longer be my only, sometimes not even my primary focus. That's the calling of my line, Jonathon. It's all or nothing. That's why I gave it up. I knew you could never accept, nor did you deserve, a wife with such split loyalties."

He stared at her for a long moment, holding her eyes, his own so full of love she ached upon seeing it. She could feel its touch.

"How could you have thought I would love you any less?"

Shock rinsed through her body.

"Solange, I thought you didn't want this...this witchery in your life. I had no idea you were living in denial of a sacred calling because of me."

"Not because of you. For you. And our child."

"But you've denied your true self."

"I've been perfectly happy, Jonathon."

"But incomplete, Solange. Living half a life, and thinking we would turn away from you otherwise. So we, Bobby and I, have been denied as well. We've been denied the chance to know the rest of you."

Tears burned in her eyes. She could not believe what she was hearing. But before she could even begin to process what it meant, he was speaking again.

"If you do not take up this mantle? If you continue to deny what you call your calling, what then, Solange?" He looked beyond her, at the mirror and tools on her makeshift altar. "What do your shells and your mirror tell you will happen then?"

She lowered her head. "Disaster. The death of a child. And perhaps...the end of all that is."

Nodding slowly, Jonathon snapped his arms around her and pulled her tight to his chest. He lowered his head, kissed her hair. "Then I don't see that you have much choice. You have to do this, Solange. For the future of our child, for the future of...of everyone."

She closed her eyes, knowing he spoke the truth. "I love you, my Jonathon," she whispered, clinging to him.

"I know. And I love you. And always will, Solange. No matter what."

"I'm so sorry I ever doubted that." She let the hot tears flow, not telling him the things it would do him only harm to know. It was too late. It was too late now. God, she'd been so wrong. "Take Bobby away from here, my love. Take him to your sister in LaFayette. He'll be safe there."

He shook his head. "I won't leave you. No, Solange, I can help you. I want to stay, fight this thing by your side."

"If you were to be destroyed, or our son - I couldn't go on. And if you stay, that's a risk, Jonathon. Too great a risk. Do this for me. Take him. If you love me, take him and go." Licking her lips, she turned toward the trunk that held the symbols of her legacy. "I will stay here, and do what must be done."

He was silent for so long she thought he would refuse. But finally, he capitulated with a sigh. "Come then. We'll pack Bobby's things, and you can say goodbye."

She closed her eyes, the thought of saying good bye to her boy, and to her beloved husband, almost more than she could bear. Especially knowing it might be for the last time.

Chapter Four

[Solange](#) stood in the depths of the cave where the Stone of Power had been hidden so long ago. It had been sealed in a wall of stone at the back of the cave. But now there was only a jagged hole in the smooth face of the rock there. And a large, empty space where the Stone of Power had been.

"So you came," he said from behind her. "I knew you would."

Solange turned slowly and faced the man who had once claimed to love her beyond all others. "You gave me no choice, [Darren](#)."

He surged forward, swept her into his arms, bent her backward and kissed her. Solange did not respond. She remained stiff and cold in his embrace, until, frustrated, he released her. "You will learn to love me in time."

"Never."

"Solange, think of it. I have the power now. I have the Stone. With you at my side, I could rule the world. We could have anything, everything. We could live forever!"

She held his gaze, shaking her head slowly. "You must give it back. Relinquish the Stone, Darien."

"Oh, no. No, you don't understand. You have two choices, Solange. Join me and we rule together. Or oppose me and die. And your son with you."

"You'll never harm my child."

"Won't I? Why, Solange, when I know full well he will sire daughters one day. Or granddaughters or great-granddaughters. The women of your line are the only power that threatens me. They could defeat me in time."

"They won't need to," she said softly. "I will defeat you. Here, today."

He smiled slowly. "For too long you've denied what you are. Your powers are weak, at best. No, Solange. You cannot hope to defeat me. And I think you know it."

She lifted her chin and raised her left arm high above her head.

"I part the mists and sands of time! Grandmothers, meld your power with mine!"

And she felt it, sure and familiar, the surge of power rinsing through her body, streaming into her hand from above. How she had missed it!

She held out her right hand, pointing it toward her enemy. And in a blast of power from her hand, Darien was flung backward. He hit the wall and sank to the floor. And even as he struggled to get upright again, she aimed a second blast his way.

But this time, he was ready. Darien reached for something, pulling it up and holding it in front of him like a shield, just as she attacked. The Stone of Power, she realized too late. The energy she sent forth hit it and rebounded, slamming into her chest so hard she smashed into the rock wall behind her.

And then he was standing over her, staring down at her, shaking his head. "Why would you want an ordinary man like [Jonathon Deveaux](#) when you can have me?" he asked.

Lifting her head weakly, she whispered, "I love him."

"You will never be with him," he promised. "Never again!" And as he said it, he lifted the Stone of Power high and began to chant. "In this life, and that to come, you and he shall walk alone, you by night and he by day. Between the worlds is where you'll stay! When you take this stone from me, the curse shall live, so mote it be!"

The Stone glowed as he spoke, and Solange felt its heat wafting over her. She felt the curse pouring out onto her, and she realized there was little she could do.

No, the voices of her ancestors cried. Fight! You must fight!

She closed her eyes, calling up every ounce of power she had ever possessed. She drew it up into her, from the earth beneath her, from the sky above, from the spirits of her ancestors, from the love of her husband, from the cries of all the magical people in New Orleans and, finally, from the bosom of her goddess — her mother. The one she had abandoned years ago.

As always, the mother responded.

The power coursed through her, stiffening her body. A wind that was not a wind, but rather the very breath of all that was good, surged into the cave, wafting through her hair as she rose to her feet. Her skin glowed with power, and red-hot fire blazed in her eyes. She lifted her hands as Darien backed away, his eyes widening.

"Good always wins out over evil," she said, her voice proud and firm. "The Stone of Power is a force for good. Better it be destroyed than used for the cause of evil!"

So shall it be, then a voice whispered on the wind. But see to it you keep your word this time, despite the consequences!

A blast of white light sprung from her hands. Rather than reflecting it back at her, the Stone seemed to magnify the force this time, sending it squarely into Darien. His face twisted into an unnatural grimace, and in an instant, his hair turned shock white.

He froze that way, standing there, gripping the Stone of Power, and in another moment, Solange realized the texture of the Stone was spreading, into his hands, along his arms.

He was solidifying, turning into stone himself.

Chapter Five

[Solange](#) stood in the cemetery, where the stone statue of a dark wizard had been placed, the Stone of Power still gripped in its frozen hands.

Surrounding her were the crypts of her ancestors. She'd had [Darien](#) placed in their midst, the better to keep him prisoner. But deep down, she knew even then, that it wasn't enough. So long as he held the Stone, he held the Power. He would find a way to use it, to return to life...unless...

"Unless I destroy the stone, as I promised I would," she whispered.

A hand closed on her shoulder. Her beloved [Jonathon](#) — she knew his touch without looking, and turned to fling herself into his arms. He held her hard against him as she sobbed.

"It's all right, my love," he told her, his voice soothing, his hands stroking her jet hair. "Bobby is safe with my sister. And the streets of the French Quarter are calm once more." He cupped her face, staring down into her eyes. "You did it, my love. You made things all right again." He smiled at her. "Moreover, you became who you were meant to be, showed me your truest self. And I still love you, Solange."

Her heart broke more with every word he spoke. "I know. I should have known all along. But I was afraid." She shook her head sadly as she turned to gaze upon the statue. "I stopped him, darling, but only temporarily. He lives still. Look at him.... Can't you see it? Sense it?"

Frowning, Jonathon stared at the statue. He said nothing, but she felt the shiver run through him.

"He holds the Stone of Power. If I take it from him, he'll remain frozen that way indefinitely. But if I don't..."

"He'll return," Jonathon said.

"I can't take the stone from him without breaking it, my love. And if I break it...there will be consequences."

He searched her face, his own etched in concern. "Tell me of these...consequences."

She nodded slightly. "For one thing, I will lose all hope of removing the curse he placed upon us before he became this statue."

"Curse?" Jonathon searched her eyes.

"But unless I destroy the stone, he'll return. And he'll destroy us anyway, and our son as well, to remove any threat to him."

"What is this curse, my love?" he asked, his eyes filling with tears, almost as if he already knew.

*"In this life, and that to come,
You and I shall walk alone,
I by night, and you by day.
Between the worlds is where we'll stay."*

She blinked the tears from her eyes. "When the stone breaks apart, so shall we, Jonathon. And our spirits will be trapped here, earthbound, unable to move on. But worse, unable to be together. Your spirit will walk only by day. Mine only by night."

He gave his head a slow shake. "It can't be real."

"It is."

He held her against him, burying his face in her hair. "We'll have until death," he whispered. "We'll have that long. And in that time we'll find a way —"

"The Stone is the source of power for the women of my line, Jonathon. My own essence is intricately bound to it. When the stone is destroyed — the link to its power will end. But in my case, I believe my life will end as well."

He clutched her tighter. "I won't let you go."

"It's the price of turning my back on my calling, I think. I betrayed my ancestors, my goddess and myself. My own deeds are coming back to me now."

"Then this is...this is some divine punishment for some perceived crime? The crime of loving me? Loving your son?"

"No. It's not a punishment. The Threefold Law, Jonathon, is a law of nature, not a rule to be bent or broken. Everything we do, everything we are, everything we feel in life returns to us. Not as a judgment — no more than rain falling to earth when a cloud becomes too heavy to contain it is a judgment. It is simply the way things work. I was so determined to walk alone — apart from my calling, my forebears, my goddess. I planted the seeds myself, Jonathon, and now they are sprouting. Walking alone is the harvest I will reap."

"I can't bear to be without you."

"It won't be forever," she whispered. "I promise you, it won't be forever." Leaning up, she kissed him gently on the mouth.

Then she turned away, facing the Stone, and one last time, she called up the power.

It blasted from her hands. The Stone shattered, flying outward from the statue. Four pieces, sailing in four different directions. And the last hint of life from the statue blinked out.

As the power left her body, Solange felt the life leave with it. She sank to the ground, limp, every ounce of energy drained from her.

Jonathon knelt beside her, gathered her into his arms. "My love..."

"Four pieces," she whispered. "Four, then, is the number. When there are four women in my line, all alive at the same time, then and only then can this curse be broken, and Darien, defeated once and for all."

"I don't understand."

"You don't need to. Write it down, my love. Write down all that has happened here. See to it our descendants and theirs read our story." She took a breath, but it was difficult. "Until that day, you must take those four pieces to the farthest reaches of the four directions. Promise me you will do this!"

"I promise," he told her.

Nodding, she released her breath with a sigh. "Take care of our son, my love. For his is the key to the future — for all of us. And know that I love you. I'll love you till the end of time."

* * *

Jonathon buried his beloved wife in her family crypt, though it killed him to leave her so near to that hideous statue. He thought about destroying the thing, but feared doing so might somehow release the evil inside.

That very day, he sat down, and wrote about the things his wife had asked him to, copying the tale into a journal for his son.

"The Deveaux Family Legend
To be kept and handed down to the female descendants of Solange Deveaux

"Long ago, your grandmothers' grandmothers, women with deep knowledge of magic, were entrusted by forces as yet unnamed, as yet unknown, to act as guardians of the Stone of Power. The Stone contains great mystical force, and for it to fall into the wrong hands would prove disastrous. Globally, universally disastrous. And so it was decided that the Stone must be protected. Your ancestors were chosen to do this task. And they did so.

"The women of your bloodline hid the Stone deep within the wall of a cave and used magic to cover it with layers of ordinary rock. Daily, these women practiced the art of magic, growing ever stronger, ever more powerful and wise. And because they had formed a bond with the Stone, it grew more powerful as they did, and they grew more powerful as it did, and their very essences became intertwined. The daily rituals and prayers these women performed created a field of protection around the Stone, so that no magical practitioner would ever sense its presence or seek to use it for evil.

"And this continued, with the power and the responsibility going from woman to woman, from generation to generation until the time of Solange Deveaux.

"Solange fell in love, and she believed that meant she had to turn her back on the ways of magic, the ways of her ancestors. She wanted only an ordinary life with her husband and son. She thought they would not love her if she revealed her truest self to them. Solange gave fear more power than love. This was a mistake that would cost her dearly, cost all of us dearly.

"And it was a wasted effort, for her normal life was not to be. Because she turned her back on her calling, the field of protection around the stone weakened, and an evil wizard found it. He blasted it free of its prison and took its powers for his own, and with it, he began to wreak havoc on the world.

"The only way Solange could defeat him and prevent him from ending her bloodline by killing her child was to shatter the Stone of Power, and she did this, even knowing that such an act would lead to her death.

"But before she did, the wizard cursed her — even after death she would find no peace, for she and the man she loved would not move on to the afterlife but would instead remain trapped between the worlds, where she would walk only by night and he by day, alone, for all eternity.

"Only when there are four female descendants of Solange alive at the same time can this curse be broken. Only when those four find, and bring together the broken pieces of the Stone of Power, will their loving forebear find peace and be reunited with her lost love. She gave her life

for her offspring. I can only hope her descendants will be willing, one day, to undertake this quest in an effort to repay her.

"Be aware, however, that there will be consequences, and that only by acknowledging, respecting and controlling your own powers — the powers passed on to you through the blood of your mothers and theirs before them — will you succeed. You'll need those powers, all of you. You'll need to work together. You'll need courage and determination, but most of all — you'll need love. For love is the greatest power of all, and it can conquer anything. Solange didn't trust in love. You must learn from her error.

"Solange's love for you is the reason you are alive today. Let your own love, for her, for each other, ensure that you remain so."

* * *

When he finished penning the tale, Jonathon added a painstakingly drawn likeness of the Stone of Power and a request that additional copies of the tale and the image be made and handed down to each female descendant.

Years and years later, when Bobby was much older, Jonathon saw to it that his son received this journal. He made it clear to Bobby that the journal was to be copied and given to Bobby's daughters, or if there were none, to his granddaughters. All this he did in the faint hope that one day, women would be born into his family — strong, brave women who would be willing and able to break the curse.

He left out the details of what else would happen when the pieces of the Stone of Power were reunited. That it might well bring to life an ancient evil. If he had included that, he feared no one would ever be willing to take the risk.

And take the risk they must!

Jonathon Deveaux died at seventy-two, in the house he had shared with his wife, the manor house in the Garden District of New Orleans; the house he knew she still inhabited by night. He heard her sometimes, walking the halls, trapped between the worlds, a restless, lonely spirit. And after he died, he walked the halls as well, but only by day.

Sometimes, he was afforded the merest glimpse of her, just at the moment when the sun reached the horizon. He would reach for her, tell her he loved her, but they never touched. The closest he got to Solange was the portrait of her that hung in the house — he prayed no one would ever move it.

For more than a century, they existed in this limbo, a hell of unending loneliness, always waiting for a someday that might never come.

Eternally Yours

Silver Lining

by [Ruth Glick writing as Rebecca York](#)

The mysterious murder of a bachelor uncle brings Aurora Deveaux face-to-face with her family heritage — and with the attractive private detective investigating the crime. Can she learn to trust the power within her, and accept the passion that's always been missing in her life?

Chapter One

The sky had been blue that morning. Now it was an ominous gray. Just as [Aurora Deveaux](#) rounded the curve and saw Perry's Cove spread out before her, an enormous fork of lightning split the heavens.

It was like a warning — repeated in the earsplitting roll of thunder that followed.

Go back, if you don't want to die.

Her foot jumped on the accelerator. If she had a choice, she *would* have turned back. Not because she really thought she was in danger, but because the task ahead made her chest tighten.

She was here because Uncle Harold was dead, and she had to clear out his house — the house where she and her cousins Celeste, Skye and Eve had spent so many happy summers as children.

With an effort, she blinked back the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks. She hadn't had a chance to say goodbye. None of them had.

"Not fair," she whispered.

Uncle Harold hadn't even been sick. He'd been murdered, along with two other members of his church congregation, by a man named Calvin Upton who had put poison in the church coffeepot. In a strange twist of fate, Upton was dead, too. He'd left a suicide note saying that he hadn't meant for anyone to die. He'd just been trying to teach the congregation a lesson in humility.

Rory rounded a curve and saw the ocean, the white-capped waves pounding savagely against the beach. Her breath caught, and she couldn't shake the eerie feeling that she'd summoned the scene of natural turbulence to express her frustration and anger.

No. It wasn't her doing. That was nonsense. Still, the conversation she'd had with Celeste that summer, almost 15 years ago, came back — the way it often did when she was stressed.

They'd been outside on the beach at night. It had been overcast and she'd wanted to see the stars. Like magic, the clouds had rolled away and she'd looked up in awe at the points of light above her, spread across a black velvet sky — so many more of them and so much brighter than in Raleigh.

"Thanks for clearing the sky."

Her head had jerked toward Celeste. "I didn't do anything."

Celeste shrugged a shoulder. "Don't be modest. You have special powers. We all do."

"I don't want special powers!"

"You don't have a choice. It's the blessing — or the curse — of the women in our family. Uncle Harold talked to me about it."

"He never told me anything like that!"

"He knew you didn't want to hear about getting a dose of Great-Grandmother's magic."

"That's just a legend."

"You can tell yourself that if you want to. But I know what my power is. I'm a fortune-teller. And you can change the weather. I've watched you do it."

"No!"

"Why do you want to be ordinary?" Celeste had asked softly.

Rory hadn't answered then, but over the years she'd often pondered that question. As an artist, she loved the unique landscapes and seascapes she created. But at the same time, she wanted ordinary relationships, and those had never worked out. There was something different about her — something that made it impossible for her to fall in love, even though plenty of guys were attracted to her.

Well, at least her career was taking off — not just in Raleigh, but up and down the east coast. She'd spent the past few months furiously painting. Now it was July, and she hadn't made it down to Perry's Cove — until that jolting call from a man she didn't know, Samuel Bridgeman, who'd said he was Uncle Harold's lawyer.

She'd been driving on autopilot. Suddenly she realized she had arrived at her uncle's house. As she peered through the gloom toward the porch, her nerves begin to jangle. As if to mock her, the wind picked up, and fat droplets splashed around the car. If she could really affect the weather, she'd make them stop, she thought with a grimace. But they continued to fall. So she reached into the backseat, grabbed a floppy hat and jammed it over her red hair before sprinting for the house.

* * *

The man inside the house kept to the edge of the window as he peered out into the gathering storm.

"Damn," he muttered as he watched the slender young woman sprint toward the front porch. "Who the heck are you?"

He'd planned this break-in carefully, and he'd thought he had the place to himself.

He got only a quick glance at the woman, because she'd ducked her head, hiding her face. But the wisps of red hair sticking out from under her hat tugged at his memory.

He listened as the front door opened. Did she have a key, or had she used burglar's tools on the old lock?

Straining his ears, he listened for her footsteps. They stopped in the front hall. Probably she'd just discovered that the electricity was off. If he was lucky, she'd turn around and leave.

* * *

"Rats," Rory muttered as she pulled out the small flashlight that she always carried in her purse.

The narrow beam did little to dispel the gloom, and she struggled not to shiver as wind seeped around the cracks of the old door frame. She'd like to wait until she could get an electrician in here, but Mr. Bridgeman had been very specific. Her uncle had wanted the house cleaned out as soon as possible.

As soon as she stepped into the office, she knew she'd made a mistake. Someone was here. She could feel his presence.

Before she could turn and run, a man materialized from behind the door. His face was in shadow, but she saw the glint of metal in his hand.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, his tone gritty.

Her voice froze in her throat.

"Answer me!"

As she struggled to make her vocal cords work, a blast of wind surged outside, whipping a tree branch against the window. As it scraped the glass, the man whirled.

Taking the opportunity the storm had given her, she turned and pounded down the hall. But she never reached the front door. Something hard and metallic clunked to the floor behind her. Then a large hand closed around her shoulder, pulling her down — so that she fell to the Oriental runner, the man's hard body coming down on top of her.

Chapter Two

Luke felt a tremor go through the woman who lay under him. He'd tackled her and prevented her escape. Now she was scared. Good.

Then her muscles tensed, and he knew she was going to try something desperate.

"Don't," he growled. "I don't want to hurt you."

She went still, but he didn't trust her to do the sane thing — not when she'd come sneaking in here for Lord knew what.

He should heave himself off of her, but his muscles didn't obey his mind. He couldn't stop himself from reacting in a very unprofessional manner to the nicely rounded cushion of her bottom. When he realized he was in danger of giving his arousal away, he eased to a sitting position.

"Roll over, nice and slowly," he ordered as he stared at her wild red hair. She'd been wearing a hat, which was now lying in the hall, along with her purse.

Head bowed, she pushed away from him, sliding her shoulders protectively up the wall. When she raised her face, he felt as though he'd been punched in the gut by a giant fist.

He hadn't seen her in years. Yet he'd know that face anywhere.

"Rory?" he gasped, feeling his heart start to pound inside his chest.

He saw the moment when she realized who he was, because her expression went from defiant to disoriented. Did she feel as dazed as he was?

"Luke?" she asked in a tentative voice.

The way she said his name made him want to reach for her. Instead he pressed his palms against the hard surface of the floor. Aurora Deveaux was not for a guy from Hickville, North Carolina.

She was speaking again, and her words penetrated the fog in his brain.

"What were you going to do — shoot me?"

"Shoot you? With what?" He glanced behind him at the object lying on the floor. "With a flashlight?"

"Flashlight! I thought it was a gun." She looked endearingly embarrassed. Before he could relax, she straightened her shoulders. "Maybe you'd better explain what you're doing in my

uncle's house."

"Trying to find out who killed him. And why."

"Nice try. It was a creep named Calvin Upton."

"He didn't do it."

"You know more than the cops?"

"I've talked to Calvin's family. I'll stake my P.I.'s license that the suicide note is a forgery. I'm going to clear his name."

Rory tipped her head to one side, struggling to keep her cool as she sat facing Luke Stuart, still trying to come to grips with the reality of the man. He'd been a good-looking kid. Now he was devastating. Well, at least to her. The combination of dark hair, blue eyes, and sensual lips was making her stomach quiver. Over the years she'd made up fantasies about him, if she admitted the truth — to herself, not to him. Then on one trip back to Perry's Cove, she'd learned that he was engaged to a girl he'd met in graduate school at Chapel Hill. That news had twisted inside her. Truthfully, that was one of the reasons she hadn't come back to town recently. She hadn't wanted to run into him with a wife and kids in tow.

Now she couldn't keep from looking at his left hand. No ring, but that didn't prove anything. Floundering around for something to say, she came up with the dumb line, "You're a P.I.? Yeah, that fits."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Again she scrambled to sound coherent. "You never could leave a mystery alone. Like when the candy kept disappearing from Mr. Harper's store — and he banned all the kids. You found Bucky Peterson's stash and made him own up to Mr. Harper."

He laughed. "You remember that?"

"Yes." And a lot more.

"You missed your uncle's funeral," he said suddenly. "You and the rest of your cousins. Didn't you care about coming?"

Her face contorted. "None of us knew until after the funeral. Apparently he wanted it that way."

"Most people in town thought it was pretty strange."

"What? They're all talking about us?"

"Of course. This is a small place. What do you expect?"

She gave a tight nod. In Perry's Cove, everybody knew everybody else's business.

With a grimace, she pushed herself to her feet.

He also stood, and the way he looked her up and down made her nerves jangle. "Are you okay?" he said, his voice rough. "I mean, did I hurt you?"

"No."

As soon as the state of her health was established, he switched back to business. "So why are you here now — if you didn't come to the funeral?"

She kept her voice even as she answered, "Again, his wishes. He wanted one of us — me or Eve or Celeste or Skye — to clear out this house right away."

"You mean get rid of evidence?"

"Evidence of what?"

He shrugged.

"There is no evidence!"

"I think you're wrong. One of us will find something if we start looking."

"I think you'd better leave," she countered.

"Let me tell you about Calvin. Why I want to help his family."

Should she trust him? Maybe she should hear what he had to say.

He must have seen her wavering because he said quickly, "Maybe we should talk over a cup of tea. The gas stove should be working."

"Okay," she answered.

He picked up the flashlight, switched it on, and started down the hall.

"You know your way around the house?" she asked.

"I did a fair amount of handyman work for your uncle over summer vacations from college, after you and your cousins stopped visiting."

While she found the cinnamon-flavored tea that Uncle Harold always drank, Luke got out one of the antique coal oil lamps they'd used when the power was out. The old-fashioned light cast a warm glow over the room. When she filled two mugs with hot water and dropped in tea bags, the fragrance of cinnamon wafted through the air.

Turning from the stove, she found Luke leaning comfortably against the counter, watching her. Suddenly the atmosphere in the kitchen felt much too intimate, too cozy.

"Why do you want to help the Upton family?" she asked.

"Because the insurance company won't pay up on his policy, and they need the money."

"Oh."

"Whoever put that poison in the coffee is screwing his daughter and grandchildren out of their inheritance."

"I'm sorry."

"Then help me."

Unable to deal with the demand in his eyes, she set down the mug she'd just picked up. "I'm going out to get my suitcase."

Before he could answer she headed for the front door.

The minute she stepped off the porch, the wind surged, tearing at her clothing with savage fingers. At the same time, the heavens opened up. Not just with rain. With nasty little hailstones, as well.

With her arms over her head for protection, she ran for the car then remembered that she'd left her keys inside the house.

In seconds she was soaked to the skin, and the blinding rain was coming down so hard and fast that she couldn't even be sure which way to turn to get back to the house.

Chapter Three

It was obvious from where [Luke](#) stood in the shelter of the porch that the sudden torrent of rain had blinded [Rory](#).

It looked almost as if the storm had something against her — the way it had surged as she ran to the car.

Slitting his eyes against the downpour, he charged off the porch, caught up with her and lifted her into his arms.

The rain was like being dunked into ice water. Startlingly cold for a July day. By the time he reached the front door, they were both soaked to the skin, and he had to clamp his teeth together to keep them from chattering.

Looking down, he was fascinated by the way tendrils of her wet hair curled against her pale cheek and neck. But that wasn't the only interesting view. Her shirt and bra had turned transparent, so that he could clearly see her puckered nipples through the soaked fabric. That erotic sight was enough to give him a jolt of heat.

He pictured himself carrying her upstairs so he could bundle her into one of the spare beds. Instead he brought her to the den, where he set her on the couch, grabbed the afghan and wrapped it around her.

"I'll be right back," he said as he charged out of the room again and up the stairs. First he gathered towels and blankets from the linen closet. Then he grabbed a couple of Harold's clean sweatshirts and pants off of hangers in the closet.

Downstairs again, he brought the lamp from the kitchen and set it on the desk, illuminating the shivering woman huddled on the couch.

He sat down beside her "Rory?"

"I feel...so cold."

"We've got to get you warm," he said as he draped one of the towels around her shoulders. Tipping her head against his chest, he worked at her hair, rubbing vigorously, wishing that he could turn on the heat in the icebox of a house.

"I'm going to take off your wet shirt. Okay?" he asked in a voice that wasn't quite steady.

She nodded against his chest. Before he could tell himself this wasn't a good idea, he began working at the buttons on the front of her shirt, the wet fabric making each one take forever to unfasten.

He kept telling himself there was nothing personal about what he was doing as he tossed the shirt onto the worn Oriental carpet. But when he saw her breasts covered only by the lacy cups of her wet bra, he had to fight to drag air into his lungs. The cold had contracted her nipples, making them pout toward him. It was all he could do to keep from reaching up to touch those dainty buds.

Was she watching him? He was too much of a coward to raise his eyes. Quickly, he snatched up the sweatshirt and pulled it over her head, then helped her get her arms through the sleeves.

"Thank you," she whispered.

For covering her up? For getting her out of the wet blouse?

Leaning back, she tipped her head up. "You, too."

"Me too what?"

"You're just as cold and wet as I am."

"Not quite." He didn't exactly feel cold. But he pulled off his wet shirt and tossed it on the floor. When he went to reach for the other sweatshirt, he found only the pants. Maybe he'd dropped the garment in his hurry to get back down here. Or maybe he'd never actually picked it up, but he suddenly felt like a high school kid who'd left his gym clothes at home.

Knowing that he wasn't going to shuck off his wet jeans in front of her because a view of him in his briefs would give away too much, he grabbed the pants and stamped out into the hall. When he came back in dry pants, her jeans were in a heap on the floor, and she had made herself a nest of blankets.

* * *

Rory scrunched under the blankets, thinking that they were a good place to hide, if that's what she wanted to do. From Luke. From herself. Because she was afraid she was on the verge of making a fool of herself.

Apparently he had forgotten to get himself a dry shirt. But she didn't mind. His chest was magnificently bare and covered with thick, crinkly hair — the view leading her thoughts in dangerous directions. Still, as soon as she saw the goose bumps peppering his muscular arms, she knew she had a good reason for lifting the edge of the afghan in invitation.

When he crossed the room and settled next to her, a small sigh eased out of her.

For a long moment, neither of them moved or spoke.

She swallowed hard and asked the question that had been locked inside her, "What would your wife think about this?"

"What do you mean? I don't have a wife."

"Oh." She let some of the tension ease out of her.

"Do you think I'd be under the covers with you if I were married?"

"Some guys would," she murmured. Then, before she could stop herself, she moved her hand, pressing it against the cold skin of his chest. She was just trying to warm him, she told herself as she struggled not to comb her fingers into the crinkly hair under her palm.

"Rory?"

When she answered with a small nod, he leaned closer and brushed his lips lightly against hers.

She could have pulled back. But she didn't have the will to do it. Instead she pressed forward. It was a sweet meeting of his mouth against hers. And deep inside herself, she silently admitted that she had wanted to kiss this man for as long as she could remember. Feeling amazingly brazen, she lightly stroked her tongue against his lower lip.

He made a greedy sound, gathered her close, deepened the kiss.

His reaction made her heart leap and her blood heat, and she gave herself up to the pleasure of his kiss, of his touch.

Warmth flowed through her body when he clasped her against him, devoured her mouth, using his tongue, his lips, his teeth.

She was aware of so many sensations, all of them swimming in her consciousness. The thick hair of his chest flattened against her palm. The insistent pressure of his lips on hers. The masculine taste of him.

"Rory, you're so sweet," he murmured against her mouth as he bent her back onto the sofa.

But when his body came down on hers, she knew she was in trouble. She was alone in her uncle's house, with a man she hardly knew. And she was in danger of doing something that she would likely regret.

"Luke." She pushed against his shoulder. "Luke, don't."

It took several seconds for her to get through to him. When he raised his head, his eyes were dilated.

Then he focused on her face, and his body stiffened. He sat up with a jerk, putting several inches of space between them on the sofa.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I shouldn't have let you think..." The words trailed off.

"It wasn't your fault. It was the rain and the icy wind. I can't believe it got so cold and wet so fast. In July, no less."

In her supercharged state, she couldn't stop herself from snapping, "Are you accusing me of manipulating the weather?" she asked in strained voice.

Chapter Four

From four feet away, [Luke](#) stared at [Rory](#) sitting with her back pressed against the sofa cushions. She had just asked a pretty odd question. Was he accusing her of manipulating the weather? For what? To get them wet and cold so they'd end up huddled together on the sofa?

A nice trick, if anyone could do it.

"Of course not!" But even as he answered, he was silently remembering the stories he'd heard about her family. Harold had always been considered a little strange. And the four cousins were also suspect. Some people had even whispered that they might be witches. He'd heard guys who swore that Skye had read their minds.

"Then what?" Rory demanded.

"I was just trying to explain to myself how we got tangled up on the couch like that. It wasn't something I planned or anything."

She looked away.

He stretched out his hand under the covers and brushed her fingers. "I'm sorry I stepped out of line," he murmured.

"You didn't do anything I didn't want," she said in a strained voice. "Then I got to worrying about where we were headed."

"Yeah. You did the right thing — stopping me."

"Because you'd regret making love to me?" she shot back, then looked shocked at what she'd said.

He brushed back his damp hair with his free hand, wondering how to respond. He settled on the truth. "I've wanted to make love with you for years."

"Oh."

"But acting on one of my all-time favorite fantasies would be taking advantage of you now."

"My fantasy, too," she whispered, and he wondered if he'd heard that right. But the color that rose in her cheeks told him she'd just matched his admission with her own.

He cleared his throat. "Maybe the way to go is to get reacquainted first, you know."

Rory watched Luke rearrange the covers over his legs and feet, thinking that he was as nervous as she was herself.

He cleared his throat. "I guess I should tell you that I've followed your career."

"You have?" she asked in surprise.

"Yeah. There have been articles in newspapers and magazines about you. You've painted some amazing landscapes and seascapes."

"Thank you."

"Uh...I always considered you out of my league."

She blinked. "What does that mean?"

"Well, I've lived most of my life in this one small town. I'm a bush-league P.I. And I do handyman work, too. But you've got a fast-track career."

"I'm just me — Rory Deveaux. I haven't changed."

"You're from the city. You only came here in the summers."

"I didn't pick the city. It's where my parents live." Testing the waters, she added, "I didn't pick my strange family, either." When he didn't climb off the sofa she added, "My great-grandmother was supposed to be an um — witch."

He tipped his head to one side. "My great-grandmother was a...um...*cocktail waitress*. She got pregnant with my grandfather and had to go back home and live with her folks. Lucky for her they took her in."

"Oh."

"You shake anybody's family tree, and skeletons will fall out."

"I never thought about it that way," she murmured, wondering what he'd say if she told him that when she wanted to paint a particular kind of weather, it usually appeared. No, that was going a little far.

"We should see what there is to eat," he said suddenly. "Then get some sleep."

"That sounds like you're planning to stay here."

"If you're camping out in the house, so am I." He gave her a direct look. "It's not safe for you to stay here alone."

She didn't want to believe that. But she wasn't going to argue, not when it gave her an excuse to keep him close.

He stood and picked up the lamp. She followed him down the hall to the kitchen. Thinking that the interior of the refrigerator might be a mess, she bypassed it and stepped into the pantry.

"I'm going to get a shirt," he said, leaving the room.

She busied herself looking for food in the pantry. Everything was just as she remembered it, arranged in neat rows, and she easily found the supplies that her uncle kept around for emergencies — sausage and cheese that didn't need refrigerating. Crackers. Salsa and dip.

When she came back to the kitchen, she saw that Luke had opened Uncle Harold's wine cupboard. "Okay to open a burgundy?" he asked.

"Sure."

They worked together, getting paper plates and plastic cups, then carried the simple meal to the table.

Luke sliced the sausage. She opened packages of cheese.

"Do you remember Johnny Towson's clubhouse?" he asked.

She grinned. "Of course. We'd hole up there reading comic books and eating stuff like this. Plus sour cream potato chips and orange soda."

He grinned back. "Your comic book preference was Archie."

"You liked Superman," she countered.

"You noticed."

"I noticed almost everything about you."

"Me, too."

She ducked her head, trying not to make too much of this cozy meal with Luke and the memories they were sharing. But she couldn't dispel the feeling of intimacy enclosing them.

He shifted in his seat, then shattered her illusions. "You're probably tired from the drive down here."

So he was trying to cut the evening short. Standing, she started putting the food away, working with jerky motions. He came up behind her and cupped his hands over her shoulders.

"I know what you're thinking," he said in a gruff voice.

"What?"

"That I want to put some distance between us. That's sort of true. But what I was really trying to do was keep my hands off you." He turned her in his arms and folded her close.

She melted against him, realizing instantly that he was turned on.

Neither of them spoke as he nuzzled his lips against her hair, her ear. All she had to do was turn her head, and her lips would meet his. Wordlessly, she raised her arms, clasping him to her. She could feel her heart pounding, feel his breath accelerate — and her own.

"Help me do the right thing," he said in a husky whisper.

She didn't want to do the right thing. She longed to do just the opposite. But she forced herself to step away and drop her arms.

She saw his hands clench and unclench. Then he shoved the crackers into a plastic bag. When they finished putting the food away, they lit another lamp and carried both upstairs, along with the flashlights.

Luke took one of the other guest rooms. Rory bedded down in her old room. It was difficult to sleep when all she had to do was walk across the hall and she'd be in Luke's arms. But she stayed where she was, and finally she drifted off.

She woke early in the morning then went looking for Luke. He wasn't in his room.

Had he left after all?

Hurrying down the steps, she heard a stealthy noise in the den. When she looked through the door, she went rigid. Luke had his back to her, and he was rifling through the papers in her uncle's desk.

Chapter Five

As Rory watched Luke going through her uncle's papers, she felt betrayed. In defense, fury rose inside her.

He'd acted so protective. Now she knew he'd simply been using her.

"What the hell are you doing?" she demanded.

He turned to confront her, an abashed expression on his face. But his voice was steady. "I'm doing my job — finding out who wanted to kill your uncle and why."

"Oh, right," she answered, unable to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. "That's why you stayed the night, so you could come down here in the morning."

"That's part of it."

"Get out."

"Okay," he said in a low voice, surprising her by not protesting.

Her vision was blurred, but she held herself together as he walked stiffly out of the house and down the steps. And she was happy to see the wind spring up and hurl a spray of sand and sea grass onto him as he disappeared around a sand dune.

When he was out of sight, she couldn't hold back her tears. They trickled from her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. She had been too wound up with Luke Stuart. Too hopeful that something important was happening between them.

Grimacing, she swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. Then she stared at the desk where Luke had been going through her uncle's file folders.

Maybe there really was something important here, but the desk wasn't the place to look. Probably it was the closet where Uncle Harold had once showed her a secret hiding place behind the back wall.

She was moving clutter out of the way so she could get to the wall when the hair at the back of her neck stirred.

She'd heard something — someone — moving in the house.

Luke?

She stood up, prepared to confront him. But what if it wasn't him? What if he'd been right — that she was in danger?

Frantically she looked around the room and grabbed the only weapon she could find, an old candlestick. Then she hid behind the office door.

Stealthy footsteps came down the hall. Seconds later, a man stepped into the office. A black hood covered his head, making it impossible to identify him. But it wasn't Luke. He was too tall and too heavy.

"Put down the candlestick before you get hurt," he growled, raising one of his gloved hands.

Before she could swing the makeshift weapon, Luke charged through the door and lunged at the intruder.

Wide-eyed, she watched as the big man whirled, lashing out at him with a foot. Luke dodged away then punched at the black-clad face.

The man gasped as the blow connected. Recovering quickly, he snatched a copper vase off the desk, bringing it down on Luke's head.

As Luke dropped to the floor, the intruder ran past him and down the hall.

Her heart in her throat, Rory went down on her knees beside Luke. He was out cold.

"Luke, are you all right?" she gasped.

Finally, his eyes blinked open. When he pushed himself to a sitting position against the desk, she scooted forward, taking him in her arms.

"You're hurt," she whispered.

"It could be a lot worse." Turning his head, he brought his mouth to hers.

In a corner of her mind, she knew that was the wrong thing to do. He'd been unconscious. He needed medical attention. But when his lips moved urgently against hers, she couldn't stop herself from responding. When his tongue swept into her mouth, playing with her teeth and the sensitive tissue of her inner lips, she was helpless to hold back a small sound of need.

He lifted his mouth far enough away from hers to ask, "Does this mean you're not pissed at me anymore?"

"Oh, Luke, I'm sorry. What were you doing out there? Watching the house?"

"Yeah, I couldn't take a chance on someone hurting you; you're too important to me," he answered and brought his mouth back to hers.

Important for what? As a source of information? It certainly didn't feel that way. Not when he was kissing her like a starving man who had just been served a banquet. Not when his hand moved up to cup her breast, his fingers stroking back and forth across her already hardened nipple, making it contract even more.

It seemed like the conk on the head had loosened his tongue, because the next thing he said was, "I've wanted you since the day you strutted out on the beach in that green-and-white bikini."

She was just as reckless in her response. "I bought it for you. I thought you didn't notice."

"I noticed all right."

"Then why didn't you even talk to me that day?" She asked the question that had been locked inside her for years.

"Every time I thought about coming up to you, I got so hard I knew I was going to embarrass myself."

"Oh."

He brought his mouth back to hers as his fingers did clever, erotic things to her nipple.

She wanted to let herself go — to take what he was offering. But inconvenient thoughts kept intruding.

Drawing back, she lifted his hand away from her breast and pressed his fingertips to her mouth, knowing she had to be the sensible one.

"Luke, we can't do this now."

"Why not?" he asked, his voice plaintive.

"Because you got hit on the head. You were unconscious, and I have to take you to the hospital."

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"If we leave the house unguarded, that guy will swoop in."

She wanted to argue the point, but she knew he was right.

He closed his eyes for several moments, then solved the dilemma. "Let me call Mark

further into their personal relationship, she said, "Maybe we'd better make a stop so I can pick up some food.

They drove to Sea Breeze Café, a restaurant where a lot of the locals ate.

When she cut the engine, he put his hand on her arm. "In the emergency room, I told the doctor that someone broke into the house. So the police may be out to interview us."

"What do you mean 'may be'?"

"Perry's Cove only has a small department. And Sheriff Hammer has had his hands full since he lost one of his deputies. It may take a couple of days. Um — do you know who that guy was who brained me?"

"Of course not. Do you?"

"I wish I did. Gloves and a hood made it hard to identify him."

Luke climbed out of the car, and she followed.

She realized as soon as they walked into the restaurant that the stop was a mistake. All eyes turned toward them, and she knew she was either going to have to answer a bunch of questions or come off as a stuck-up city girl.

To give herself time to think, she placed a huge carryout order — for two soups and several salads. Finally, she turned to face Ray Myers, the grizzled old man who had run the dry goods store in town ever since she could remember.

"Sorry to hear about your uncle," he said. Half a dozen other local men and the young blond waitress nodded and murmured in agreement.

"Yes. Thank you."

Before anyone could ask why she and her cousins hadn't attended the funeral, Luke explained the situation to the assembled crowd, then said, "It would help Aurora to know what was going on with Harold in the last few months."

Ray looked uncomfortable, then cleared his throat. "Your uncle was acting kind of strange."

"How do you mean?" she asked.

"He kept saying someone was after him. But we didn't put much stock in that. And when we asked, he wouldn't say who it was. But one thing he kept coming back to was you and your cousins. He kept saying you needed to come down here so he could talk to you."

"Oh," she breathed, feeling worse than she had when she'd first driven into town.

Luckily, the order arrived, and Luke picked up the carryout bags and paid for them.

"Come on. We should get back," he said.

"Thank you all for expressing your sympathy," she told the restaurant patrons, then made a hurried escape.

When she'd slipped behind the wheel, Luke covered her hand with his. "Don't let them make you feel guilty."

"I should have been here for Uncle Harold."

"You might have gone to church with him and gotten poisoned, too," he said, tightening his grip on her.

With a quick nod, she headed back to her uncle's house.

When they got home, they found that Mark Ramsey — a building contractor by profession — had gotten the electricity on. Rory thanked him profusely and asked him to stay and share their meal, but he said he had to get back.

Once they were alone, she busied herself setting out the salads and warming the soup in the microwave.

"How does your head feel?" she asked Luke, when they were sitting across the table again.

"Tolerable."

She ate several forkfuls of salad while he spooned up chicken soup. But she knew he was watching her, knew he wanted to turn the conversation back to Harold and his odd behavior. Only, he wasn't going to press her.

She sat there, torn. Luke had risked his life to rescue her. For that, she owed him information. Yet if she started talking about her family, she wasn't sure where they were going to end up.

She shifted in her seat and knew that he had picked up on the small movement.

"That guy who broke in... I...uh...might have some idea why," she allowed.

He waited silently for her to go on.

"I...um...told you about my great-grandmother who was supposed to be a witch. Well, there's more to the story. Apparently there was some kind of magic stone that got broken apart. I think Uncle Harold might have had a piece of it. At the very least, it would be a unique antique. And what if somebody thought they could use it to work a spell or something? So maybe my uncle wasn't paranoid. Maybe he thought somebody was after the family treasure."

There, she had said it.

Tensely, she waited for Luke to respond.

"Thank you for sharing that with me," he said.

"Do you think Uncle Harold was crazy? And I am, too?"

"No!"

She was on a roll, so she gulped and pressed on. "Okay, I blew up at you when you mentioned the weather. But what if it's really true? What if the magic stuff in my family is real? What if I called up that storm to keep you here?"

To her astonishment, he laughed. "It's just as likely that I was the one who did it. Because I wanted to stay with you. Very much."

"Thank you for telling me," she whispered. Then she gave him a critical look. "Luke, you're worn out."

"I didn't sleep much."

She didn't comment that he'd been up early — snooping. Instead she said, "You should get some rest."

She thought he'd make a macho denial, but he agreed to lie down. Which probably meant he was feeling pretty washed out from the day's events.

"I'm supposed to check your eyes," she reminded him.

His pupils both contracted normally when she tested them with the flashlight. So she sent him up to bed then lay down on the sofa in the den.

For an hour she tried to rest. But she couldn't stop thinking about the hiding place in the closet. Finally she got up and began examining the wall.

It took another half hour to find the panel and figure out how to open it. But she finally accomplished the task.

When she lifted the section of paneling out of the way, she found a niche built into the wall. Inside was an old trunk with a humped top and rusty hardware.

Her heart was pounding as she pulled it out. Did the trunk hold the proof she'd been dreading — the proof that her family was abnormal?

She had just opened the hasp and lifted the lid, smelling the musty contents, when she heard footsteps behind her. Instinctively she slammed the top shut again.

Chapter Seven

[Rory](#) leaned over the antique trunk she had just slammed shut. The trunk she had found hidden behind a secret panel in the wall of the closet.

"So you don't trust me after all," [Luke](#) said, tension crackling in his voice from where he stood behind her.

She slowly turned to face him, hating the uncertainty in his eyes.

Trying to keep her voice even, she said, "You were upstairs lying down, and it could have been that guy coming back."

"Yeah," he answered, giving her that much.

She dragged in a breath and let it out. "And — keeping secrets is a family trait. I guess I need to retrain myself — where you're concerned."

She'd just revealed more than she should, and she waited with the air frozen in her lungs for his reaction.

Swiftly, he crossed the room, rounded the trunk and came down beside her — pulling her into his arms. She laid her head against his shoulder, breathing in his familiar scent.

She wanted to stay where she was, but after a few moments, she eased away. "We should look in the trunk."

"You want me to make myself scarce?" he asked gruffly.

For her answer, she pushed the lid open.

He moved so that he was sitting behind her, giving her unfettered access to the contents, but he pulled her against his chest as though he were protecting her.

To her mixed relief and disappointment, it looked as though there was nothing important inside, just some old clothes, which she set on the floor.

Digging deeper, she found several pieces of yellowed paper. Carefully she unfolded them and saw the words *Deveaux Family Legend*.

Her eyes scanned quickly. Words and phrases leaped out at her. A curse. [An evil wizard](#).

"It's true," she whispered. "[Solange](#) shattered the stone to save her family."

As she spoke, an unseen force seemed to compel her to reach into the trunk again, where she found something heavy, cushioned in a wool shawl. When she unwrapped it, she found a chunk of gray stone. Well, not just ordinary stone. It was flat and engraved with mystical symbols. One edge was smooth, but the other two were jagged, broken from a larger circle.

As she held it in her hand, it seemed to grow warm, and she let it fall back into the trunk.

"A piece of the Stone of Power," she whispered. Her chest had gone tight with tension. "So it's true. I can't keep hiding from it. There's magic in my family. This stone and the notes are the proof."

She turned to look at Luke.

"And what do you think I'm going to do — run away?" he asked.

"Are you?" she pressed, feeling as though she were balanced between heaven and hell.

For answer, he took her in his arms. Then quickly, decisively, he lowered his lips to hers. The hunger and passion of the kiss seared her from the roots of her red hair to the ends of her toes.

All the barriers she had erected between herself and the world were suddenly gone. Deep in her heart, she knew it was impossible now not to give this man everything she could offer. And ask for everything he could give.

He made a low, needy growl as she lifted her arms around his neck. Still, when he raised his head and stared into her eyes, he whispered, "Rory, you can tell me to stop."

"Why would I do that?"

She lay back on the rug, pulling him with her, pulling him on top of her, so that she could feel his arousal wedged against the aching place between her legs.

His gaze burned into hers. Then his lips came down on hers, and she could taste his need, not just in that mouth-to-mouth contact, but in every cell of her body.

The kiss broke, and he rolled to his side so he could unbutton her shirt and the front fastening of her bra.

As he pushed the garments aside, her breath stilled.

"Lord, that is a beautiful sight," he murmured as he reached to lightly stroke one hardened nipple then take it between his thumb and finger. She moaned, then moaned again as he lowered his mouth to the other nipple and sucked.

She arched into the caress, helpless to do anything besides respond to him — physically, emotionally, on every level that a woman could respond to a man.

When he rolled away from her, she made a sound of protest. Then she saw that he was getting rid of his shirt and pants.

She did the same, kicking her pants away and shrugging her arms out of the shirt sleeves.

Rory's chest tightened. Luke had just made wonderful love to her, but now he said there was something he had to tell her. Something she was sure she didn't want to hear.

He gestured toward the trunk. "Whoever killed your uncle was probably looking for the stone. Maybe it's even this [evil wizard](#) coming back somehow to steal the pieces and make sure you and your cousins can't put it back together again."

She stared at him, hardly able to believe he'd bought into the old legend.

"Come on. We'd better get dressed."

When he sat up and reached for his clothing, she did the same.

Luke had started toward the telephone to call and ask Mark Ramsey if he could keep the trunk for them when a man stepped into the room. A mask still covered his head and face and now he was holding a gun.

"Thanks for finding that treasure chest your old fool of an uncle was so proud of."

"It belongs to my family."

"Not anymore." The man turned to Luke. "Don't try anything funny, or your girlfriend ends up with a bullet in the heart."

He had brought rope and other restraints. First he made her tie Luke to the desk chair. Then he secured her hands and feet with plastic handcuffs and tied her into another chair.

When he hoisted the trunk to his shoulder and left, Rory felt like a piece of her flesh had been hacked away. But Luke leaped immediately into action. Moving the chair to the end of the desk, he began to saw at the rope with a sharp edge of the glass top.

"You have to stop him," he growled.

"How?"

Luke gave her a piercing look. "With your powers. Hit him with everything you've got. Rain, lightning, hail. Anything to keep him from driving away."

She stared at him. He was acting as though he really believed that family legend, when she hardly believed it herself.

But she squeezed her eyes shut and tried. When she peeked through her lashes at the window and saw that nothing had changed outside, she moaned in frustration.

Luke was watching her. "Use your anger," he told her as he worked at the rope. "That bastard is stealing your heritage. If you don't get it back you have no hope of breaking the

curse."

It was hard to believe in the curse. But as she looked toward Luke, she realized that he had cut his skin. The sight of his blood was what made her wrath surge.

In her mind, she pictured dark clouds, freezing rain, wind and hail. And when she heard an ominous rumble outside, she knew that she was on the right track. When a torrent began to hit the window, her spirit surged.

While Luke worked to free himself, she added to the storm. She pictured hailstones, and they began to hit the side of the house. She built the wind, hearing it lash at the trees.

Triumph surged through her as she pulled a lightning bolt from the sky, hearing it strike somewhere nearby.

When Luke gave a yell of triumph, she swung toward him. His hands were free, and he quickly untied his legs, then hurried to her and cut her free.

Then they both rushed for the front door.

The intruder was lying in the driveway, his hands protectively over his head. Through the open door of the car, she could see the trunk. But the car wasn't going anywhere. One of the tires looked melted and the windshield was shattered.

The storm stopped abruptly. Luke whipped the man's hands behind his back and bound him with his own rope.

When Luke pulled off the hood, Rory gasped. She knew him. It was Ambrose Fairfax, a local antique dealer.

"Call Sheriff Hammer," Luke told her, as he pulled the trembling man inside. "Then bring me the phone."

She did, and listened while he told the sheriff that he'd apprehended the man who murdered Harold Deveaux. The trunk full of heirlooms he'd stolen was in his car. And his gun was stuffed in his belt.

After Sheriff Hammer arrived, both Luke and Rory went down to his office to make statements. The trunk and its contents were locked up as evidence, but at least she knew it was safe. And Sheriff Hammer thought there was a good chance they'd be able to connect Fairfax to her uncle's murder.

Two hours later, she and Luke were back on Uncle Harold's porch, and she felt her tension mount. Luke had seen what she could do. And it wasn't pretty.

When he put his hand on her shoulder, she jumped.

"Are you worried that I'm going to think you're weird?" he asked, turning her toward him.

She gave a tight nod.

"Rory, your great-grandmother gave up her life for you. Don't let her down."

"What do you mean?"

"You and your cousins have to put the stone back together."

"Use my magic. And give up love?" she breathed, raising her eyes to him.

He shook his head. "No. Not in this day and age — when a woman can have both. If that's what she wants."

She'd been afraid she would never find a man to share her life. But this man had made it possible for her to say "Oh Luke, I love you so much."

"Good. That's good." He tipped her head up and brought his mouth down on hers for a long, deep kiss.

When it ended, he said, "If you'll have me, I want you for my wife. Please say yes."

Stunned, she gave her agreement, and he clasped her to him.

This time she knew what she was doing as she brought a shower of little raindrops down from the sky, each one catching the sparkle of the sun like a small diamond in the sky.

Luke grinned. "A neat trick," he murmured. "Don't ever change, sweetheart. I love you just the way you are. Thunder and lightning and rainbows."

She tightened her arms around him, knowing for the first time in her life that she was loved and cherished for what she was.

And knowing that she had a hard task ahead of her to join her power with her cousins' to find the rest of the Stone of Power and somehow put it back together. But she also knew that Luke Stuart would stand beside her.

The End

Eternally Yours

Dead Easy

by [Evelyn Vaughn](#)

When a tourist drops dead at her table moments after she predicts that he'll live a long and happy life, psychic Celeste Deveaux begins to doubt her magical heritage. That is, until she hears the dead man speaking to her...

Chapter One

[Celeste Deveaux](#) squinted at the wavering sunlight in her crystal ball. "I sense a long and happy life for you, Mr. Goebler. Love, fortune, good health..."

She stopped as her client made a gasping sound. Then he crumpled onto the cobbled surface of Jackson Square, clutching his chest.

Celeste barely hesitated before dropping to her knees beside the German tourist, loosening his tie, checking his airway. Her dark, competent hands glittered with multiple rings and bracelets — silver, brass, wood, shell — which she didn't wear just to tell fortunes. She poured drinking water onto the hem of her mudcloth skirt to use to pat Mr. Goebler's face and slipped a pinch of salt from the bowl on her portable altar onto his lolling tongue. This would not be the first time a visitor to the Big Easy had passed out from heat stroke.

But she quickly realized this wasn't heat stroke. She looked up at the gathering crowd of tourists, street performers, vendors and fellow psychics. "Someone call an ambulance!"

"I did," said another psychic, Madame Cassandra. Celeste called her MC because of the girl's youth. MC, though something of a loner, was so good that she'd probably called for help even while Celeste had been promising Mr. Goebler the world. "They'll be here any minute. But it won't help."

Celeste's client had gone quite still. Deadly still. His eyes stared up at a Louisiana sky he could no longer see.

"Like hell it won't." And Celeste began CPR. But she couldn't ignore her gut, clenching with guilt and horror.

She couldn't ignore the awful thought, her second in recent weeks, that she might be a fake.

* * *

Ambulance duty wasn't all excitement — a majority of the calls ended up providing taxi service for senior citizens, back and forth from retirement homes to the hospital. Too many of the remaining calls were the kind of tragedy no man enjoyed facing.

Like this morning.

When this call came in from Jackson Square about a heart attack, male, mid-50s, [Ben Steadman](#) felt glad for the distraction. He hoped it would be a taxi-service call. He hoped he would see Celeste Deveaux.

He would rather not have found her forcing textbook CPR onto a dead man, her beautiful mocha face and warm, brown eyes stricken. It took all Ben's self-control to focus on the victim, so clearly beyond help.

"Stand back, everyone," he commanded, carrying the trauma kit to where Celeste kneeled over the victim. His partner, TiJohn Craddock, repeated the warning as he wheeled in the stretcher. "Give us some air. *Chère*, you're done. It's time for us to take over."

Maybe it wasn't the most professional way he could've addressed a witness. Certainly not a regal woman in her 30s like Celeste. They'd only dated for two weeks — two magical, unexpected weeks — before she'd used some psychic excuse to call it off. She'd broken...

No, not "broken his heart." Not after just two weeks. But she'd sure bruised it.

Now, as her brown eyes lifted and found his, Ben questioned how honest her own heart had been with the both of them.

Witnesses were talking over each other, describing what had happened. It sounded like a classic heart attack. Ben barely registered their words beyond that.

"Celeste," he tried again, catching her braceleted wrists. He gently pushed her back then began unbuttoning the man's shirt. "I'm going to shock his heart. You have to let go."

She searched his face, then blinked — and, thankfully, her gaze cleared. She nodded and crabbed along the cobblestones to give him and TiJohn the room they needed.

"Charging," said TiJohn.

It wouldn't do any good — this guy's tour of New Orleans was permanently over. But policy was policy. Visitors to the city would rest safer, knowing the EMTs gave their all.

Ben took the paddles. "Clear!"

* * *

Celeste wished someone other than Ben had responded. Watching him work, competent and kind and as handsome as she'd remembered, hurt too badly. She felt too vulnerable, wishing for the familiar harbor of his strong, solid arms.

But it would be a lie. Ben didn't believe in her — not all of her, not the way a Deveaux woman needed. The fact that she'd begun to question herself recently only made his earthly skepticism more dangerous. To her. To her family legacy.

Of all her cousins — four of them, as had been prophesied — Celeste had been the only one

to embraced their destiny. She'd grown up in the manor home that had once belonged to [Jonathon](#) and [Solange Deveaux](#). She had visited their graves, and she'd memorized their story, and she knew only magic could vanquish the evil that had threatened them. So she *had* to believe in her abilities.

Doubts against magic were like Kryptonite against Superman.

Ben was her Kryptonite. Tall, dark, earthy Kryptonite.

"Clear!"

She could not bear to watch them shock poor Mr. Goebler again, so she buried her face in her hands. A long and happy life? What had gone wrong? Nothing about this prediction had felt different from a lifetime of others. But nothing had seemed unusual several days ago, either, until she learned that her favorite uncle had been murdered — and she'd sensed nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

What if she'd always sensed nothing? What if she'd been making it up all along, and her entire adult life had been a fraud? What if Ben was right about magic and she'd lost him from pure, blind foolishness? What if —

"I think I have something for you," said Mr. Goebler in his distinctive German accent.

With a gasp of relief, Celeste looked up. Ben had done it! She *wasn't* a fraud! Mr. Goebler would live a long and happy life after all!

So why were they lifting the tourist into a body bag?

* * *

"Wait!"

Ben felt a jolt unrelated to the defibrillator he'd used on the dead tourist. It was Celeste's hand, catching his forearm. "Didn't you hear him? He's alive!"

Damn. He hated anyone thinking there was something he could have done...or not done. He covered her hand with his. It wasn't like Goebler needed more of his attentions. "No, *chère*. He's not."

She snatched her hand free and squared her shoulders. Now *that* was his Celeste. "Oh yes he is. I heard him clear as day."

Ben noticed TiJohn, clearing the paper and plastic remains of their lifesaving efforts, looking skeptical. Ben shook his head at his partner in silent warning.

Celeste frowned. "You really didn't hear him?"

Rather than argue across the corpse, Ben leaned back from the unzipped body bag to reveal Goebler's lifeless face. "He's not saying much."

Celeste stared. Surely she could see the truth of it as easily as Ben did, even without emergency medical training. She withdrew her hand from his arm and said, "Oh."

"There's nothing you could have done," said Ben.

Celeste said, "Nothing except see it coming."

"You're not a doctor."

"No." She lifted her chin. "I'm a psychic."

Ben knew better than to touch that argument. The last time he'd suggested there might be more pragmatic explanations for what she thought to be magic, she'd dumped him.

That's why it surprised him so much when she whispered, "At least, I thought I was."

Chapter Two

Of course her dead client hadn't spoken.

Celeste had to get out of there. Away from the pitying looks of the other French Quarter psychics. *Definitely* away from Ben the sexy EMT. A few months ago, she'd thought he might be the love of her life. Ben was handsome, competent, tender, upbeat...a man who could root her in reality while allowing her to spread her mystical branches to the sky.

Then she'd learned he didn't believe in mystical branches.

Only her lifelong belief in the Deveaux legacy had allowed her to leave him, all the same. Bad enough for him to question her back when she'd felt sure of herself. But if he expressed skepticism now, while she was suffering her first real doubt...

She wasn't sure she could bear it. Not after Mr. Goebler had died as she was predicting a happy future for him. And not after her uncle Harold...

Still, she would not be hurting anybody by leaving early.

When she hefted her pack and finally glanced toward the ambulance, it was quietly pulling away. Ben was driving, not looking at her. Good. She wasn't sure her heart could take more of his temptingly pragmatic presence. Not this week. Maybe not in this lifetime.

Not that her heart was completely happy with Ben's absence, either.

She sighed and headed home.

Celeste was house-sitting the Garden District manor home where she'd grown up. Usually she loved the French colonial house, with its balcony-wrapped courtyard and sprawling oak trees. Climbing its worn stone steps felt like going back in time.

Today, she hardly noticed.

The first floor, where she shrugged off her backpack and kicked off her sandals, was more modern than the rest of the mansion. Traditionally, first floors had been kept plain because of regular flooding. Other than a quick glance at the answering machine, Celeste barely paused before climbing a spiral staircase to the second floor.

There, in the ornate parlor that had changed little in the past hundred years, she found what she needed — the wall of family portraits. Wedding portraits of her parents, her aunts and uncles, her grandfather Robert and his beloved wife. One happy group portrait of her three female cousins and herself twenty years ago, then ranging in age from four to fifteen. And, most important, the full-length portrait of the quietly beautiful [Solange Deveaux](#).

Their great-grandmother.

As a child, Celeste had been drawn to Solange because of the lady's caramel-colored skin, a hint that she, like Celeste, might have a mixed racial background. Celeste was proud of both her Caucasian father's heritage and her Black mother's, but from an early age she'd been frustrated by portrayals of one group as the power holders of history, the other group as the victims. That was a truth that must be honored, of course; one that must never be forgotten. But she'd sensed even then that it wasn't the *only* truth.

Solange's bravery proved that. And the fact that wealthy white businessman [Jonathon](#) had not only married a woman of suspect background, but proudly displayed her portrait without trying to disguise her dusky complexion, made Celeste proud to be a Deveaux.

After her uncle Harold began to tell her just what being a Deveaux entailed — especially the importance of being one of four female descendents — Celeste began to visit Solange's portrait for a whole new reason. Solange had descended from a long line of powerful magic users, Uncle Harold had told Celeste even before he gave her a copy of the original journals. Because Solange rejected her magic for love, an ancient talisman in her protection was stolen by an [evil wizard](#) bent on destruction. Only Solange's heroic death had prevented disaster beyond imagination. But since the Stone of Power had been broken into four pieces,

scattered across the world, the Deveaux legacy would not be finished until four female descendants lived at the same time, embraced their magic and found the fragments of the stone.

Celeste had loved hearing Uncle Harold tell those stories. But now Uncle Harold was dead.

"Why didn't I know he was in danger?" she asked the portrait now. "He was your *grandson*. If I'm so magic, why wasn't I able to warn him?"

Solange's image gazed sympathetically at Celeste and said nothing. After all, she'd been dead for almost a century.

Uncle Harold, though, had died much more recently. Celeste should have sensed that something was wrong, hopefully in time to warn him, certainly when he died.

Instead, her first indication of trouble had been a telephone call from her cousin [Rory](#). Uncle Harold's lawyer had contacted her because "Aurora" came first alphabetically. So it was Rory who had to call the others with news that not only was Uncle Harold dead but that he'd not allowed them to be informed of it until after his funeral. Since only one of them needed to collect their uncle's effects, and Rory lived the nearest to his North Carolina home, it made sense she do it. Right?

Celeste's attention drifted from Solange to the picture of the four young cousins. Ironically, redheaded Rory — the closest in age to Celeste — was the one cousin in complete denial of her Deveaux powers. Skye, the youngest, had grudgingly accepted her ability to read people's thoughts. Even Eve made a conscious effort to hide that she could move objects with her mind, which, to Celeste's way of thinking, was a backward admission. But *Rory...?*

Shadow crept across the room. With a shiver, Celeste looked up. Through the doors and casement windows that opened to a wraparound gallery overlooking their private courtyard, she saw that the Louisiana sunshine had been usurped by a threat of rain.

Worse, she thought she heard something.

A whisper. A voice.

A *man's* voice.

The unexpected death of Mr. Goebler this afternoon, and the recent murder of her favorite uncle, seemed to echo through the lonely house. Nobody was completely safe, were they? Celeste always thought her sixth sense would warn her to danger, but what if Rory, and Ben Steadman, had been right?

Celeste pivoted to eye the open windows and doors. Seeing nobody, she backed toward the stairway. Just in case.

Then she heard it again — somehow warped, like a voice through water, but definitely male. Definitely impassioned.

Celeste's gaze lifted to that of her painted ancestress. Trying to call on the power of the Deveaux women, she raised her shaking voice. "Who are you? What do you want?"

For a moment, all she heard was the wind in the oak trees, rushing through the Spanish moss, and the sudden patter of rain. Then —

"Hurry," a man said, from the shadowed courtyard. "I have something for you."

Celeste recognized his voice, his German accent. She ran. She ran down the stairs, out the front door, into the rain and down the street until she reached a café. Then, breathlessly asking permission to use the telephone, she dialed a number she should have forgotten months ago.

If anybody would know whether Hans Goebler had been revived on the way to the morgue — and was now capable of stalking her — it would be Ben Steadman.

Chapter Three

Ben deliberately relaxed his hold on his cell phone for fear of crushing it. "No, Celeste. Mr. Goebler's still dead."

"Oh," she said softly.

More than her story that she was being stalked — by a man he knew was dead — the weakness in her voice worried him. He said, "I'm coming over. Stay out of the apartment."

"I'm not at my apartment. I'm staying at my parents' house."

"Give me the address."

To his relief, after a pause, she did. She trusted him *that* much anyway.

Celeste agreed to stay at the café where she'd taken shelter from rain and stalker both. Ben supposed she should have called the police, instead of just waiting for him. But he knew Celeste Deveaux. When she refused something, it was an absolute refusal.

Which made his continued interest in her pretty sad. Hell, he should have been surprised that she would leave the café and slide into his passenger seat when he pulled over to the worn curb.

"Where's the house from here?" he asked, trying to ignore how good she smelled, how great she looked. Bad days like today needed women like Celeste.

Priorities, Steadman. Intruders first.

"Just a couple of blocks."

Following her directions, Ben realized how well-off Celeste's family was. The Garden District was the old family, blue-blooded stretch of New Orleans. Was that the real reason she'd stopped seeing him? *Money*?

Something in his gut, which he would call instinct and she'd probably call a psychic hunch, made him refuse to believe that of her. "Tell me again what this person said?"

Celeste nervously rolled bracelets around her dusky wrist. "He said he had something for me. That's the same thing he said back in Jackson Square."

"Before the heart attack?"

She fixed him with brown-eyed skepticism. "After the body bag."

That again. "The man didn't say anything after I got there with the ambulance, Celeste. He was DOA."

She stared at him for a long moment, then turned away. "Here."

He parked under a feathery mimosa tree. "Stay here while I check it out."

Celeste let herself out. "No."

Damn. The way Celeste Deveaux threw herself headlong at life, courageous and wild and wonderful, had been one of the first things to attract Ben to her. He tried to remember that as he followed her up the worn stone steps to the first floor gallery. "At least let me go first."

She glanced regally over her shoulder, rain or no rain. "You know your way around my house?"

Ben sighed defeat. At least he was here. With her.

Hopefully with no psychotic crazies pretending to be dead men lurking nearby.

Celeste knew they wouldn't find anyone. Ben's honesty was one of the first things to attract her to him. If Ben said he'd left an irrevocably dead Mr. Goebler at the morgue, it was true.

So why was he still here?

Maybe it was because the only other explanation was more than even Celeste wanted to face alone.

"Just because someone had a German accent," said Ben, his looming presence warm and strong right behind her, "doesn't mean he was Goebler."

"It was Goebler," she said.

"I made some calls on my way over. Goebler's emergency contact was his brother." He let her lead him through the first floor, sometimes stopping so he could open a closet door or check behind a curtain.

Celeste liked watching him confront each threat, fearless. "So?"

"So maybe it was his brother you heard." He leaned into the downstairs pantry, then levered himself out, shaking his head. "Maybe *he's* the one stalking you."

That was a more practical explanation than hers. But... "I don't think so."

"It would explain his voice sounding like Goebler's."

"Why would he come after me?" Other than that I promised his brother a long life, right before the man dropped dead. But even if this brother knew that — and how could he? — why would he target *her*? "I didn't cause the heart attack. I even did CPR."

Ben shrugged. "Let's check upstairs."

Celeste even let him lead the way, *up* being an easy enough direction. "Where is this brother anyway?"

"Well, uh..." Ben's step slowed as he topped the stairs. "I think the authorities reached him in Germany."

"*Today*? So he couldn't be here yet. Your it's-his-brother theory doesn't make sense."

"As opposed to the maybe-he-isn't-dead theory?" Ben blew out an exasperated breath. "Or are you going to try to tell me —"

He stopped, eyes widening as he figured it out. "You think a *dead guy's* talking to you?"

"Well, I heard Mr. Goebler." She planted her hands on her hips. "Twice. And you say he's been dead both times. So, Mr. Logic..."

Ben touched her shoulder and guided her to a high-backed Victorian sofa. He even crouched beside her. "It's been a bad day, *chère*. Let me take you out to eat, and it will all make better sense."

"It already makes sense. At least, it does if you're a Deveaux." A simple glance past his broad shoulder, to the portrait of [Solange](#), confirmed that. A woman needed her magic, love or no love. "Thanks for coming, for checking things out, but it doesn't look like we'll ever see eye to eye on this."

In fact, they *were* eye to eye. That's how she saw a glint of frustration in his gaze. Or was it anger? "I'm not done yet. Someone could still be hiding in one of the bedrooms or the courtyard."

Or in the realm of the dead? Celeste felt suddenly weary. "Knock yourself out."

With a sharp exhale, Ben straightened and began looking around. Celeste stayed seated, increasingly sure he would find nothing more than a beautifully kept manor home. She had to accept the truth.

The dead man's ghost was talking to her. But why?

Eyes closed, she listened to Ben's footsteps along the gallery, past the open plantation shutters. He was so solid, so...ordinary. From the moment she'd seen him, clean-cut and broad-shouldered and clear-eyed, she'd wanted him. It didn't make sense. Why would she of all people want ordinary?

Then again, Solange had wanted ordinary. And look what had happened.

Celeste opened her eyes and saw that the rain was stopping, just in time for sunset. She stood and went to the doorway overlooking the tropical courtyard. The kindest thing she could do for both of them was to send Ben away, and yet —

As if a slant of orange light carried special energy, Celeste caught her breath. She felt an unexpected rush of despair, loneliness, longing. Ben. *She had to find Ben!* She couldn't lose him, had to reach for him, touch him, one more time....

Celeste bit back an instinctive cry and stumbled backward, into the parlor. The most intense rays of sunset faded behind the roof and, somehow, her despair eased.

She sagged against the ornately papered wall, confused by the flow and ebb of such rich emotion. "What am I going to do?" she whispered, opening her eyes to the portraits lining the parlor walls.

For a moment, sound seemed to stretch, to stutter, to buckle. Then, as evening's shadows fell in a final curtain across the courtyard, she heard it.

"Listen to the dead, chérie."

It was a woman's voice, not a man's. And it wasn't German.

Of course! Celeste had never had such a strong psychic hunch, so powerful it felt like hearing someone, but she wouldn't question it. She hurried to the verandah rail.

"Ben? I'm going out. Lock up when you're done, okay?"

She felt surprised to see him directly across the courtyard, outside her bedroom. Just to make sure nobody's there, she sternly told herself, angry at her disappointment.

He called, "You're what?"

But there was no time to explain — the dead man's voice had said to hurry.

"I'm going to the cemetery!"

Chapter Four

Once they reached the St. Louis cemetery, [Celeste](#) was glad [Ben](#) had argued himself along. And not just because the NOPD officer watching for vandals and Voudoun wannabes gladly looked the other way for an EMT.

The place was spooky at night!

Row after row of above-ground crypts varied from white to water-stained gray. Intricate black-iron fences surrounded some. Amidst the tombs and funerary lurked moldy stone figures — angels, infants, saints — to guard the dead.

Or to guard *something*.

Celeste had walked the age-worn path to the Deveaux tomb, under an arching palm tree, more often than she could remember. Usually she found the cemetery comforting, even companionable. Tourists came and went to see the grave of "voodoo queen" Marie Laveau. Mourners sometimes danced past after funerals in Big Easy style, celebrating the passing of their loved ones to a better life.

Now, with the cemetery closed to all but a few "ghost tours" for the night, their only company in this city of the dead was the singing of crickets and toads and the peripheral noise of urban sprawl. Occasionally, a ship's horn wailed, mournful, off the Mississippi.

Deveaux or not — if it weren't for Ben, beside her, Celeste would fear this place.

Especially [one statue](#) in particular.

She'd never known what the life-size figure in eroded marble was meant to represent. He wore ceremonial robes of some sort, but did not look like a priest or saint. He sure wasn't an angel — not with the grimace on that worn stone face. His hands extended toward the sky, as if they'd once held something.... Flowers? A crucifix? She couldn't tell. Nor could she decide which of the nearby crypts belonged with him. As they passed the shadowy stone figure, she shivered.

Ben put a hand on her back, strong and comforting. But he said, "I don't like this."

She tried not to arch into his touch. "I didn't invite you."

He took his hand back. She missed it. But if she let him go on touching her, heaven knew what mistakes she would make. Luckily, they reached the looming crypt of [Solange](#) and [Jonathon Deveaux](#), a solid reminder of why she had to go on missing Ben. If Celeste gave up her magic for love, as Solange had, she might suffer similar consequences. The quest demanded more of her. Her *blood* demanded more.

She reached out, spread her hands against the mottled stone. If she was supposed to listen to the dead, she couldn't think of a better dead person to access than her great-grandmother. She took deep breaths. She closed her eyes, arched her head back and focused. And focused harder.

And she heard crickets. Toads. A tugboat.

A big, fat pile of nothing.

Normally she would open her mouth and just say whatever came into her head, assuming it must be a psychic message. Recent events, like the unexpected deaths of the German tourist and her uncle Harold, tightened her throat with uncertainty.

She opened her eyes and saw that Ben was taking a closer look at the empty-handed statue.

"Don't touch that!" Now *that* felt like a psychic impulse.

"Why not?" asked Ben, glancing back over one broad shoulder. He was bigger than the statue. And it was inanimate, right? He could take it.

"I don't know." But she felt relief — again — when he shrugged and left the statue to go look at a sculpted lamb.

Celeste laid her hands on the crypt, closed her eyes, arched her head back, took a deep breath and waited. Waited. Waited for...

A siren wailed by, somewhere toward the west, and car horns honked.

She opened her eyes. "Crap."

"No voices from beyond, huh?" Ben's smile looked smug — and Celeste lost it.

"This is why I didn't want you to come here tonight," she said, despite how comforting his presence had been. "This is why I stopped dating you. Your disbelief in what I can do puts out an energy that keeps me from being able to do it."

Ben took a step back. "All I said was —"

"You didn't have to argue it. You think it, and that's enough! You may be perfect in every other way, Ben Steadman, but you're still a skeptic."

"I'm perfect in every other way?" Damned if he wasn't smiling again. Worse, it was a truly sexy smile. That's all she needed. More distraction.

"You don't understand how *precarious* all this is! It takes the right atmosphere to try to get a clear psychic reading. You and your doubts cloud everything."

He'd stopped smiling, which felt like a mixed blessing. "You really think the reason you aren't chatting with dead tourists is because I don't actively believe you can chat with dead tourists?"

"That's exactly what I think! I've been trying. Hard. And nothing's happening! It's not like I can just say, 'Dead people, talk to me!'"

Which was when her head exploded.

At least, it felt like her head exploded. It was voices. From the cemetery, and the city beyond. From the present, and the past. Louder than a rock concert. More disorienting than a roller coaster. All clamoring for her attention.

"...get to tell my daughter I love her..."

"...it was George who did it...he lied...."

"...stop that shouting and let a fellow sleep...."

Celeste dug her hands into her hair, clutching her skull — or she thought she did. She couldn't be sure. This felt like being pushed in a hundred different directions, a thousand, by unseen hands. No, by the rush of unseen voices. This felt like drowning.

"...wasn't supposed to get the Mercedes..."

"...how dare they? How DARE they..."

"...shut up, you mulatto bitch...."

Someone was shaking her, shouting her name, but Celeste had no attention left to give that. The voices had swelled into a roar, like in a football stadium, one great voice, until she could no longer make out words — only noise and desperation. She was drowning, suffocating, unable to tell which way she had to swim for the surface of her consciousness. Then, as shadows roiled in on every side, one voice cut through with familiarity.

"...you invited them, my darling. Silence them!"

Somehow, Celeste knew it was Solange. She clung to her great-grandmother's voice as she might to a single hand in a current, and she tried. She made her mouth move, though unable to hear herself over the tumult.

"Only... those..."

An edge of the din faded. She could hear Ben asking, "Celeste, what's happening?"

It was just enough of a lull for her to catch a breath and try again, with more conviction. "Only those with messages for *me*," she murmured. "For Celeste Deveaux. I allow only you."

And the voices stopped. Most of them.

Into the dizzying peace, the voice she thought was Solange's said, "*That's my girl.*"

Then the German-accented voice of Mr. Goebler said, "*You must hurry. He is coming.*"

And one more voice, as unexpected as the realization of Ben's arms around her, whispered with childlike sincerity. "*Please tell Mr. Steadman it's okay,*" it said.

"I know he didn't want to kill me."

Chapter Five

And to think, he wasn't real comfortable with [Celeste](#)'s delusions of magic. How small-minded of him.

Right.

[Ben](#) was halfway to the parking lot, carrying an unconscious Celeste — and not in a fireman's hold — when she opened her eyes. "No."

She'd been babbling other things, so he ignored her. Despite her strong pulse and respiration, whatever she'd tried hadn't gone well.

Then her eyes fluttered open, and she nudged his shoulder with the palm of one hand. "No," she repeated, stronger. "Ben...stop."

He'd never been so happy to hear a woman tell him to stop. He'd never been so tempted to ignore one, either. "Let's get you to the emergency room first."

"No! What just happened — I have to think. [Solange](#)...." And she began to fight his grip on her.

seen her, I could love this woman.

Fat lot of good it did him.

"Whatever that was, it wasn't healthy. One minute we're talking; the next you fall like a cut tree. Even if whatever dropped you wasn't dangerous — and I don't know how it wouldn't be — you could have hurt yourself in the fall. Cracked your skull on a tomb, or landed on one of those iron spikes." Or worse. God knew he'd seen it all.

"But I didn't."

"Would you please face reality this once? For me?"

Well, that finished off her smile. "*Reality?*"

Here it came again. "I don't care what you believe, *chère*. I really don't. But when you start endangering your safety —"

"Oh? You never go into a dangerous situation after someone who was hurt?"

Of course he did, whether his captain liked it or not. He'd gone into burning buildings. He'd crawled under unstable wreckage. Once he'd dived into the Mississippi — a river notorious for not giving up those she took — after a drowning woman. But it was his job. "That's different."

Exhausted, Celeste didn't protest while Ben strapped her into the passenger seat or drove her toward the Garden District. Too much had happened.

She couldn't quite face the ringing memory of their voices just yet; her head hurt too badly. But something even worse lurked just under her thoughts, waiting to be faced. What she'd just experienced, in the cemetery, had been overwhelming. Unique. Powerful.

Like nothing she'd ever felt before. *Ever*.

Which said what about her lifelong insistence that she could tell futures?

How often had she argued with [Rory](#) about getting a dose of their great-grandmother's magic? She'd felt so righteous, so in touch with her Deveaux heritage. But what if Rory had been right, and she'd been wrong?

Okay, not wrong about having special powers. But wrong that she'd been using them all her life. Wrong about what they'd been.

Until now, she'd dismissed incidents when her predictions didn't come true as anomalies. She'd rationalized her ignorance of major events as the discretion of the universe. She'd never actually charted her success rate; that seemed too skeptical. Like she'd told Ben, even a hint of disbelief might affect the *precariousness* of what she did.

Now she had to wonder what the success rate was of someone *without* the power to tell the future...and how she would have measured up.

It was embarrassing, is what it was. Not only had she acted magicker-than-thou to her cousins, but she'd dumped Ben because of his own doubts. And now...

She slid a glance toward Ben, where he was steering his truck with the ease of someone used to handling emergency vehicles — fearless, competent and yet cautioned by what he'd witnessed of other people's recklessness. Through her exhaustion, two thoughts reigned supreme. One was the continued refrain of "I'm a medium."

The other was, "Damn, that boy's hands are sexy."

She didn't need magic to predict danger here. Solange and [Jonathon's](#) example still warned her from this kind of romance. And then there was that little girl's voice, talking about Ben killing her....

Now there, *Celeste* was skeptical. But if someone came back from the dead to tell her, then it had to be important, right?

So why did she hold her tongue while Ben stopped the truck and came around to lift her out, back into his arms? Was it because, for the first time in her life, she didn't want to rock the boat? Or was it because she was too happy reaching out, draping her arms over his strong shoulders, giving herself over to his earthy strength?

Oh, heavens, but she wished things could have been different between them.

Ben let them both inside with her keys, then even carried her up the stairs, impressing her even further.

"Where to?" he asked as he carried her onto the gallery, and she realized that he hadn't known which bedroom was hers.

"That way." She pointed her toe in the right direction. "Across and one over."

He carried her to her room, settled her onto the bed, then kneeled beside her to take her hand. For a moment, that felt touchingly romantic. Then he touched her wrist and glanced at his watch. He was just taking her pulse again.

Even she could tell her pulse was strong. Maybe it was a reaction to her proximity to all that death, back in the cemetery. Maybe it was just Ben. But Celeste felt increasingly powerful with every breath. Alive, and anxious to stay that way.

Whatever Ben saw in her gaze, when he glanced up at her, seemed to make him uncomfortable. He looked quickly away and released her wrist. "I wish you'd go to the hospital."

Celeste caught his hand to keep him from standing, from leaving her. Otherwise, he would probably go lie down on the sofa or something similarly heroic.

His gaze shot back to hers as she said, "I wish I knew how to convince you to believe in magic."

Ben took a deep, shaking breath. "Like this, maybe?"

And he kissed her.

Chapter Six

Ben knew this wasn't the kind of magic Celeste had meant. But he couldn't imagine how any human could long for more.

He tightened his hold on her, wanted never to let go. From the way she furrowed her fingers into his hair, using her grip on his neck to lever herself up against him, she didn't mind. At least not for the moment.

"Perfect," she murmured, in a gasping moment before their lips reunited.

God, he'd missed kissing her. He'd missed her spicy scent, the strength of her arms around his neck, the taste of her lips, her mouth. Celeste really was magic, supernatural or not. Her optimism was magic, and so was her courage against convention and graveyards and

everything else. She brought an exotic wonder to everything she did. Too often in his busy life, he forgot to look up, look at the stars. Celeste got him to do that. Hell, she was a universe all on her own.

She curled downward into the cushion of her bed, pulling invitingly on his shirt, hooking a leg around his. Ben slid over her, onto her, testing the curve of her hips, her waist, her heavenly, womanly bosom. He loved the confidence with which she opened her mouth to his, opened her body to his, opened her heart....

But she *hadn't* opened her heart. They'd skipped some serious steps here. Despite how fervently she was returning his kisses, nothing had changed since their breakup. Celeste was just disoriented from her episode in the cemetery. Loss of consciousness did that to a person. And he was taking advantage.

Only that realization gave him the strength to draw back, to lever himself off of her, to stop kissing her. "No...."

"Yes." Celeste curved her fingers around his ear to draw him back down.

It wasn't his ear that ached to obey, but fair was fair. "*Chère*, this isn't right. You're exhausted."

She slid her fingertips from his ear across his jaw, her lower lip protruding in a way that would have looked pouty on a lesser woman. On Celeste, it looked blissfully dangerous. "Ben," she whispered, "I am so *not* exhausted."

His only choice was to roll off of her and the bed entirely, onto his knees on the rug. He did so before either of them could change his mind. "You lost consciousness. That's the only reason I'm here."

Did something flicker in her gaze? "Is it?"

"Have you *never* done the wrong thing?" she teased — and he thought about that morning, the start of his bad day, and quickly stood.

"I'll go find a sofa."

"Please don't."

He hesitated.

"You're here to watch over me, right? How can you do that from a different room?" Celeste extended a hand. "Please, Ben. You're right. I need to rest, to think, to...to *ground*. But it would really help if you stayed, just for now. More than you can know."

He reached for her, took her hand — and was lost. Maybe he could keep from kissing her again, keep from climbing back into her bed. But as he adjusted himself on the floor beside her, watching Celeste close her eyes like a child pretending to nap, Ben knew he was lost all the same.

Maybe she *had* just bruised his heart last time.

If she left him again, it would definitely be broken.

* * *

"No!"

Celeste sat up in bed, certain that she was about to lose something. Something precious beyond money or words or even life. She'd almost been able to reach it, to brush her fingertips to it — *no, to him* — when a flash of light stole it away.

Panting, she reoriented herself and saw that Ben was gone. Damn. She'd slept better than she could remember and not, she thought, because of how much her brush with death had drained her. It had been Ben's hand curled around hers, anchoring her. It had been his protection, his concern.

She shook off the worst of her nightmare, and heard a crackle. A piece of paper lay on the coverlet beside her. In the pale dawn light, she read it. *Had something to do before work. You're beautiful when you sleep. Call me.*

She smiled. Then she realized the full implication of the dawn. No! "[Solange](#)?" she called.

Her voice echoed back at her from the empty house.

Maybe she'd been wrong last night, and she really did need to be in the cemetery for this to work. She didn't think so. Celeste got out of bed and circled the verandah to the parlor entrance, then looked at her great-grandmother's portrait. "Solange? I have so many questions for you about what's happening to me...."

But she got no response. Solange's ghost only wandered by night; that was part of the curse. Her true love, [Jonathon](#), wandered by day — but he was no magic user. Celeste fought back the temptation to call on him just to see if it worked; if last night was any indication, this new skill of hers took energy.

Instead, she tried a safer route. "Does anyone here have a message for me?"

"Hurry."

It happened that quickly. She started to turn in the direction from which she thought she'd heard the voice. Then she remembered it wasn't coming from a standard direction. "Mr. Goebler — I'm so sorry I gave you a bad reading. I don't think I understood my true powers until —"

"Hurry!" repeated the German voice, faint and broken but recognizable.

Which, of course, had been what he was saying all the time. "Of course I'll hurry," said Celeste. "But what is it you want me to do? You say you have something for me, but how could you? We only just met."

"I think I chose you for a reason beyond knowing." Goebler's voice seemed to fade in and out, like losing a radio station. *"I think I have something for you. But..."*

His voice, his signal, wavered.

"But what?" demanded Celeste, raising her own voice as if that would help. "Why do I have to hurry?"

She thought she'd get no response. Then, thinner than a whisper of wind on a July day, she heard a breath of "... He's coming...."

"Who? Who is coming?"

Receiving no response, Celeste hurried back for her bedroom to shower and change into clean clothes. She had no idea what was happening, but she'd been around psychics long enough to know that a woman was a fool to ignore a summons like she'd gotten.

Besides, whoever was coming, it didn't sound good!

When Celeste arrived at the city morgue, the only place she could imagine finding Mr. Goebler, she encountered two surprises.

One was a German man who looked just like her late client, signing paperwork.

The other was Ben Steadman, slumped miserably against a hallway wall, his forehead braced against his clenched fist.

Chapter Seven

Celeste's steps slowed, there in the morgue corridor. She looked toward Mr. Goebler — no, his brother...who would probably also be named Mr. Goebler, wouldn't he?

Then she looked toward the man she might just love.

She'd never seen Ben look so upset, not about anything. It unnerved her. She'd come to think of him as solid, eternal, unbreakable.

Then she felt ashamed of herself. He'd spent most of yesterday taking care of her problems, and she'd never once asked if he was facing any of his own. Not even after that little girl's voice had told her....

Oh, heavens.

She glanced toward the German man — then hurried to Ben's side. "Ben!"

He looked up, surprised. For a moment before he reset his expression, she thought she saw pain in his eyes. "Celeste, what are — How'd you find me?"

"I think..." The words came more easily than any psychic reading. "I think I came here for a reason beyond knowing. What's wrong?"

He drew fingers across her cheek, as if taking some kind of comfort from her presence. "You don't want to hear it."

"Yes." She caught his hand in her own, but only to comfort him. She was no longer confident in her ability to get psychic impressions. Not unless someone dead was giving her inside information. "If it's important to you, of course I want to hear it."

But even after hearing that voice in the cemetery the day before, she wasn't ready for his full admission. "I think I killed a child yesterday morning."

* * *

To Ben's relief, Celeste took his announcement with surprising calm. "How could you possibly think that?"

For the first time, he was glad she could believe in something with little or no proof. He was glad she believed in *him*. But was she right to?

"It was our first call — a five-year-old in long-term hospice, with a high fever. It turned out to be septic shock. She'd been chronically ill for a while. By the time we got there, she was going into multisystem failure...."

From the way she searched his eyes, sympathetic but momentarily blank, he realized he was using shop talk. "Her kidneys, liver, lungs, heart...everything was shutting down. She didn't respond to IV fluids or oxygen, so our only hope was getting her to ICU as fast as possible. TiJohn was driving, and I had to make a call of how much more antibiotics — and what kind — her system could take. And I held back."

She'd been so very little, even for her age, wasted to frailty. And he'd already given her antibiotics, as well as vasopressors to raise her blood pressure. The hospital had been two more minutes away....

"I was afraid more medicine would kill her. Instead..." His throat tightening, he just shrugged.

"It's okay." Celeste's words held a confidence that he didn't understand, one that soothed him even more than the coroner's initial report that they'd found no evidence of liability. He hadn't been worried about being sued. He'd been worried about being incompetent.

To his surprise, she took his jaw in her hands and turned his head toward her. "Look at me, Ben. *It's okay*. You didn't kill her."

Somehow, he did feel better, despite Celeste lacking any training in emergency medicine.

Then she had to go and say, "She told me so."

* * *

"Do you never let it rest?" demanded Ben.

Celeste blinked up at him, startled by the force of his anger. "Let what rest?"

"This game you have, where you talk —" He lowered his voice, either from embarrassment or respect for the people in the corridors around them. "Where you talk to the dead."

"It's not a game."

"No," he said. "No, it's not. Games are fun. This is sick."

"Sick? Do you realize the *gift* this is? Even if you realize, in your soul, that our loved ones are still part of our lives, that's not the same as getting proof. And now I've got better proof than I could have ever imagined —"

"Fine," challenged Ben, folding his arms. "If you can really do this, tell me what else the girl said. Tell me what color hair she had."

"Right here in the morgue?"

He raised his eyebrows, stubborn. Celeste had gotten challenges like this before; what psychic hadn't? They usually annoyed her. Then again, maybe on some level she'd feared her own abilities...or lack of them.

Now she sat on one of the hard plastic chairs, rested her hands on her knees, palms upward, and whispered, "Will you talk to Mr. Steadman again, honey?"

There was no moment of suspense. Immediately the voice said, *"I've got black hair. Like yours. And lots of braids, with dragonflies on them. The nurses gave them to me."*

"Braids," repeated Celeste, though it felt more like translating, with many strobing images overlaying the otherworldly sound. "Dragonfly barrettes. She spent a lot of time in hospitals, and the nurses gave her pretty things. She was tired of being sick. She wanted to go on."

Ben sat down, two chairs away from her. Hard.

"My mommy was sick and went away, but she was waiting for me. Now I don't hurt no more. I didn't mean to make anyone sad, though. Tell Mr. Steadman I'm sorry for making him sad. He was real nice to me."

"You called her *princess*," continued Celeste as she heard more, smiling slightly at the pleasure the child clearly took from the endearment. "You told her you'd make her all better. And she says you did."

"She died."

More than anything, the fact that Ben was responding to her — to what she was receiving — encouraged Celeste. Maybe he could believe in her after all. Maybe.

"The girl is with her mother," she insisted now. "She's not sick anymore. Death isn't an ending, just...a passing."

"My brother," said a familiar, accented voice, "would have enjoyed this."

The little girl's voice and thoughts faded from Celeste's focus — it had been time for her to go play with her mommy anyway. But Celeste felt startled all the same.

From the way Ben's eyes widened, he, too, saw the similarity between yesterday's DOA and today's bereaved brother, who had come closer during her reading.

"Forgive my interruption," the blond man said. He stood with the tight expression and posture of someone still in the early stages of grief, doing his best to function past it. "It's just that Hans enjoyed the mystical arts. He wanted to go on ghost tours while he was here, and visit voodoo shops, and see psychics. But, you see, he died yesterday.... I can only hope he got to do some of that first."

"He did." With one last glance toward Ben, Celeste stood and offered her hand. "I was with your brother when he died, Mr. Goebler. I — I'm afraid I turned out to be a terrible psychic. I told him he would have a long life, and now..."

To her surprise, the German smiled. "Perhaps that was for the best. What finer last words to hear, eh?"

Celeste tried to smile back, but it felt somehow blasphemous. Just because she'd learned to speak to the dead hardly robbed death of its sting. Loss was loss, especially when fresh.

"I am sorry to seem — how do you say? — morbid." continued her client's brother. "But did Hans go quickly? Was there any pain?"

It was Ben who offered "No." To Celeste's relief, he stood behind her and offered his hand. "Ben Steadman. I was with the ambulance that responded to your brother's heart attack. Miss Deveaux here had started CPR almost immediately, and even that wasn't enough. We can all hope to pass that quickly."

Goebler nodded, clearly grateful. "Thank you. Thank you very much for this kindness, to myself and to Hans. I... It is perhaps silly, but I would like to give you a gift."

Her? As he reached into a plastic bag, the kind that held personal effects, Celeste started to say, "I couldn't."

Then Goebler extended to her a piece of smoke-colored stone with at least one smooth edge, at least one jagged. Instinctively, Celeste opened her hand and took it when offered.

The rock felt warm in her hand. That, even more than the mystical symbols engraved on the smooth side, convinced her of just how fortunate her meeting with yesterday's client had been.

"He called it his lucky rock," dismissed Goebler. "It is just something he found in the Alps. I know he would like someone who appreciates such trinkets to have it."

Trinkets? Celeste knew better.

It was a fragment of the Stone of Power.

Chapter Eight

"I have to ask you something," said [Celeste](#), once Mr. Goebler had left them. She hadn't yet put down the "lucky rock" he'd given her. "And it might be the most important thing I've ever asked you, for more reasons than you may understand."

Well, that put the pressure on. "Try me," said [Ben](#).

"I need to know if you believe in magic." Celeste's gaze lowered to the stone in her hand. "Because I have to get this fragment someplace safe, and I need help doing it. And because..."

The longing in her regal face was palpable, and Ben wished he could say he'd been wholly convinced. He'd come close; since her revelations about yesterday's sepsis victim, he could see benefits to believing the way she did. But people didn't shift their grasp of reality in one morning, did they? And if her question was that important — as important as she was — he

had to answer it honorably.

"I believe you believe."

Celeste couldn't mask her dismayed expression.

"And that you were doing *something*," he added quickly. "I'm still not sure what it was, but I'll help you anyway. Isn't that enough?"

Celeste's grip tightened around that rock shard. "Enough for one reason."

But she looked heartbroken all the same.

* * *

Ben was being great. When she asked him to find someone to cover his shift at work, he did, no questions asked. Her need was apparently good enough for him.

At least she had an escort, strong and competent, to drive her and her piece of the Stone of Power home. Celeste wasn't sure what might happen en route. But *something* out there wouldn't want the Stone's fragments brought together. Better to be safe than sorry.

So she had an escort. But she didn't have her lover.

Despite a reading that should have convinced anybody, he still didn't believe in magic.

On the drive home, she told him the story of the Stone of Power — of [Solange Deveaux](#) giving up her magical responsibilities to marry. Of the tragedy that befell the world because of it. Of Solange's sacrifice to hide the powerful artifact in pieces until not one, two or even three Deveaux women could protect it, but a necessary four. Of the prophecy.

When she finished, Ben said, "No wonder you believe this stuff."

But he still didn't say *he* believed it. That was enough for him to help her bury her treasure in the safest place she could think of — Solange Deveaux's rose garden.

But it wasn't enough to risk the Stone's future.

"That should keep it safe," said Ben, shoveling the last of the dirt onto the now-buried fragment. He'd taken off his shirt to dig. His chest gleamed with sweat, and the muscles in his arms stood out from the effort. Dark hair hung damp into his face. He'd never looked so gorgeous — or so unattainable. "Against [dark wizards](#) or mice."

Celeste couldn't smile at his joke. Not when that need of his, to offer rational explanations, was costing them so much.

"So," asked Ben. "What do we do now?"

Celeste stepped forward, framed his damp face with her hands — and kissed him. Deep, long, needy. She might have to lose him, but not without a taste. Not without knowing what she'd sacrificed.

When Ben's arms closed, hard, around her, she tasted more fire than ever in his returned kiss. His body was strong and hard against hers. His need for comfort, for solace, for her was as real as hers for him. She wouldn't deny them this, anyway. Not today.

Ben drew back from her, just far enough to meet her gaze with silent, blue-eyed questions. Celeste nodded, and they went inside — and they made love.

It was more powerful than anything she'd ever known...even the Stone of Power. Maybe because she knew it was the only time. For the sake of her heart, of the Deveaux legacy, even of the world, she could not forsake her duty as Solange once had.

But for the first time in her life, falling asleep in Ben's arms, Celeste wished she were ordinary.

* * *

"You are a fool."

Celeste's eyes opened, startled out of sleep. Late afternoon sunlight slanted through the plantation shutters of her bedroom. This time Ben was there, his arms wrapped around her like a child with a beloved teddy bear. Now she *knew* he held her heart, because she could feel it breaking.

Had someone said something?

"I cannot believe my grandson could sire such a fool."

It was not Solange's voice — not during the day. It seemed to waver from distance and effort. But her very cells recognized it. "[Jonathon](#)?" she whispered to her great-grandfather. "Is that you?"

When he replied, his voice — or thoughts — seemed stronger. Celeste was beginning to realize that the main trigger to this ability of hers was simply to ask.

"You don't understand anything," he said.

That didn't sound good. But with reluctance, she slid carefully from the weight of Ben's arms. How little rest had he gotten, taking care of her yesterday and last night, that he still slept so soundly? He looked solid, dependable and more. He looked vulnerable.

She thought of their lovemaking. How could she leave him again?

She remembered the Deveaux legacy. How could she not?

Hurrying now, because she couldn't bear to leave him otherwise, Celeste wrapped herself in

an embroidered, Persian robe and padded around the gallery to the open parlor doors. Somehow she knew that was where she would best connect with Jonathon.

Surrounded by the images of people they both loved.

"What don't I understand?" she asked, now that she was sure she wouldn't wake Ben. "What have I done wrong? Is the rose garden not a safe place for the fragment? I know I have to unite it with the other pieces, but until we find the rest —" *if they found them* — it should be someplace safe, shouldn't it?"

Instead of instructions about the Stone of Power, though, Jonathon Deveaux said, *"I loved Solange from the moment I saw her, and I have loved her ever since."*

Confused, Celeste turned to look at her great-grandmother's portrait — and at the smaller photograph of the tall, handsome man and his son, taken some years after her death. "How could you not?"

"More surprising, she loved me. She loved me enough to forsake her powers and her ancestral responsibilities for me."

Which was what had started it all. "I know. But she was wrong."

"Yes," agreed the polished Southern drawl. *"She was. But her mistake was not her love, but her fear."*

What? Celeste shook her head, confused.

"Did she think me deaf and blind? I knew the rumors before marrying her. Though I did not understand it all, how could I not love anything that was part of Solange's life? No, she did not forsake her powers for me, but out of fear. And now you threaten to do the same."

"But I'm not afraid!"

"You are afraid that by loving this mundane healer of yours, you will risk the family legacy. Don't you understand, Celeste? Look at the faces on this wall. How can you not see?"

Celeste did as told, looking from one Deveaux face to another. Couples. Families. Babies. Friends. Cousins. All of them happy, powerful. All of them...

"Loved," she whispered. And even without hearing a reply, she sensed an easing of the tension that had vibrated around her as she spoke to Jonathon. Or maybe it was the easing of a tension that she'd held inside for far too long. "Love is the power. It's the ultimate good. Whether or not Ben believes —"

"Believes what?" Ben stood in the doorway, tousled and confused and shirtless and gorgeous. Realizing that perhaps she didn't have to leave him made him all the more wonderful. "Are you talking to dead people again?"

"I thought you don't believe I talk to dead people," she challenged — but with a laugh.

Ben rubbed a hand across his face, clearly still waking up. "I never once said that," he reminded her. "I just question whether they talk back."

But it didn't matter. Celeste ran to him, wrapped her arms around his waist, lifted her mouth for a kiss that he gladly gave — and it was okay.

Better than okay. Perfect.

"Ben," she whispered, curling into him as if born to be held this way. "Do you believe —"

He groaned.

She nudged him with her naked knee. "Listen. Do you believe in eternal love?"

Then she leaned back from him, to better watch his face.

Ben cocked his head at her. Then he said, "Yes. Yes, I do."

"I'm thinking you need to prove it to me," she said.

He grinned. "Gladly, Celeste Deveaux." And he kissed her while the sun set, and she felt no desperation at all. In fact...

"Jonathon..." breathed a familiar woman's voice in Celeste's head.

"Solange! I love you."

"Always... Soon..."

Perhaps this was a longer moment of transition than the cursed couple usually got. Had Celeste and Ben's love won them that? Perhaps, once she called [Rory](#) and Skye and Eve, love could even win Solange and Jonathon their freedom.

Celeste leaned her head on the strength of Ben's shoulder, content. The sun would rise again.

It always did.

The End

Eternally Yours

Mind Games

by [Alison Kent](#)

Fed up with the male obsession with sex, mind reader Skye has taken refuge in an all-female spa. But her paradise is threatened one night by sexy computer consultant Nicolas Kane — the one man whose thoughts remain hidden from her....

Chapter One

"Oh, yes, yes! Right there. That feels wonderful. Don't stop. Harder. Do it harder. Ahh, like that. Just like that. Amazing hands. Heaven. I've died and gone to heaven."

Well, no, [Skye Deveaux](#) mused silently. Spa Paradis wasn't exactly heaven, though it had certainly become her own private refuge. She supposed that was close enough to count in the grand scheme of her personal coming to grips with the sweet hereafter and the [Deveaux family legend](#).

It was the not-so-sweet here and now, however, giving her an insane headache.

She shut her eyes, canted her head to the left and continued to read her client's thoughts, working the pumicelike surface of her favorite massage stone over the soles of the woman's feet. The warm water bubbled around Skye's wrists, infusing her skin and the foamy froth with the scents of citrus, cloves and sage.

Her ability to read minds had never been a secret within her family, though she kept it from most everyone else. That very same gift had made her, at age twenty-four, one of Houston's most requested nail technicians, putting Spa Paradis on the Texas Gulf Coast map.

Her appointment book was filled for the next two months; it could easily have been filled for a year. But Maeve Fields, the resort's owner and Skye's dearest friend, refused to schedule her further than sixty days in advance. Maeve had learned her lesson after attempting to make Spa Paradis coed and now protected her most valuable asset.

At the decision to begin offering services to men, Skye had threatened to walk. Maeve, of course, had thought Skye insane. What woman in her right mind wouldn't want to get her hands on the new wave of hunky gorgeous metrosexual guys who were as into skin care as their female contemporaries?

Uh-uh, Skye had argued. No way. She refused to be a part of any changes to the spa's operation should said changes possibly alienate, cause discomfort or result in embarrassment to any member of their all-female clientele. At least that was the argument she'd offered.

The truth was that Skye wanted nothing to do with the opposite sex. Sad, but true, she mused, moving from Mrs. Waters's left foot to her right.

Skye supposed this meant she would live out the rest of her days as a spinster, tending to the needs of other women instead of lying back on a divan with nubile boy toys at her constant beck and call — a fantasy she was totally down with. Oh, but let her count the ways she loved men. She drooled over tight abs, broad shoulders and really fine butts. Adored huge strong hands and long fingers. Melted at the smiles that reached long-lashed, sparkling eyes to reveal cute little laugh lines.

But their minds freaking sucked!

She reached for a fluffy white towel from the warming tray at her station and flipped the switch to shut off the hydro-jets pulsing into the foot bath. Mrs. Waters sighed, reluctantly allowing her calves, ankles, soles and toes to be patted dry before hygienic paper slippers were placed over her feet. One of the spa's attendants assisted and led the client from the room, allowing Skye to put her space back to rights.

And the one thing she took care of before any of the cleaning and disinfecting so vital to her clients' health was to remove the massage stone from the water and clasp it firmly with both hands. Eyes closed, she allowed the inherent warmth and soothing aura to calm her.

Weird, yes, but when holding the strangely squared-off chunk of stone, its edges worn by time, its surface smoothed by water, her mind was completely clear of all thoughts but her own. That reality had begun for her at a very early age, the truth of her skills growing more obvious with the passage of time.

In fact, her abilities were the reason she had little contact with her family these days — though she'd never had much contact with them at all apart from a few summers spent at Uncle Harold's in Perry's Cove. Try knowing when one cousin was lying to another, or getting any of them to understand the way that family gatherings caused her head to hurt more than at any other time.

She had spent much of her time alone as a child, her family fearing she would read and reveal their most private thoughts. She learned many things she knew she hadn't been meant to know; she'd been too young to understand half of what she'd gleaned. Especially Uncle Harold's nervous concern when he thought about the family legend that would impact the lives of her and her cousins.

It was a responsibility for which she hadn't been ready. She wasn't sure she was ready for it now, though her powers said otherwise. It had to be the conflict of knowing that the four cousins together — the four cousins alone — controlled their great-grandparents' fate causing the overload in her abilities.

That, and the recent phone call from [Celeste](#), who had recently discovered her ability to communicate with the dead, telling of their [great-grandmother's](#) recent warning that the longer the stone remained divided, the more its power waned.... At times, Skye swore she was on the verge of shorting out.

"Hey, Skye, can you do me a monstrously huge favor? I swear I wouldn't ask if I wasn't so desperate."

Maeve was always desperate, Skye mused, with no small amount of humor, wondering what the other woman would say tonight should her corporate hotshot boyfriend, David, actually propose as free-spirited and gypsy-wild Maeve feared. Skye secured her massage stone in its protective case and locked the bottom drawer of her supply cabinet.

Swiveling on her stool, she faced her boss-cum-best girlfriend. "Yes, I will stay and close up after the computer technician upgrades the billing software. But only if you promise me you won't tell David no right away. At least assure him that you'll think about giving marriage a try."

Maeve blinked. Long lashes swept up and down repeatedly over her cognac-gold eyes. "I can't *stand* it when you do that. Could you at least pretend you don't know everything going on in my head? I prefer the illusion that there is more up there than the air that, as strange as it sounds, really keeps me from hyperventilating when I think about David proposing."

This time it was Skye's turn to blink. Causing Maeve to frown. Which in turn gave Skye a headache to rival old-home week with [Rory](#), Celeste and Eve. "I only know what's going on in your head when the thought is active. Like wondering now if you should really wear that black-fringed flapper dress."

"What do you think?"

Skye didn't give a hairy fig about the flapper dress. She was still back on the prior thought that had flitted through Maeve's mind as she'd reminded herself to write out a check for the computer tech before she left. Unfortunately, the name on the check wasn't that of the spa's usual computer tech, Lee Britton.

It was, instead, that of the same independent contractor Lee had sent out six months before to cover one of his calls. "Maeve? What happened to Lee?"

Maeve blushed. "I don't know, really. A scheduling snafu or something. He got tied up at the last minute and called, uh, Nic to cover for him."

Skye glared. "I think you must have forgotten my history with [Nicolas](#) Kane or you would've remembered to mention that he was the computer tech you were sticking me with."

This time when Maeve considered Nicolas, her thoughts came one on top of the next. Skye felt as if she were lying in a fast-food playground pit while colored balls rained down in a painful barrage of hard plastic. Lights of red, blue, green and yellow flashed in starbursts behind her closed eyes. "Stop. Stop. Please. I don't need that vivid a reminder of the man. I can picture him quite well in my own head, thanks much."

"Oh, Skye, please don't tell David," Maeve begged, now trying to hide the fact that she was mentally undressing the very sexy computer tech one stitch of clothing at a time.

"I dunno, Maeve." Struggling not to laugh, Skye tilted her head and regarded her boss as

seriously as she could manage. "David just might be into threesomes."

Maeve gasped. Her face reddened. "I was not thinking about threesomes."

"You are now," Skye replied, then chortled, waving one hand while she worked to recover her breath. "Maeve, c'mon. You'd be less than human — no, less than *woman* — if you didn't enjoy looking at other men. Doesn't mean you have to touch. Unless, like I said, David's got a kinky side he's keeping secret until after the honeymoon."

Maeve looked down, doing a fairly good job of concentrating on nothing but retying the scarf she wore like a belt at her waist. "I don't know why you're so dead set against getting something going with Nic, anyway. It's obvious from last time the two of you have chemistry out the wazoo."

Oh, that one was simple, Skye mentally huffed. Men's thoughts sucked. If they weren't thinking about sex while trying to get into a girl's pants, they were thinking about work while trying to get into a girl's pants. Or thinking about sports while trying to get into a girl's pants. Thing was, they never thought about the girl. It was always her pants.

The only thing worse than knowing what they were thinking was not knowing what they were thinking.

And Nicolas Kane was the only man whose mind Skye had never been able to read.

Chapter Two

The single best part of working as an independent contractor, [Nic Kane](#) decided, pulling his custom-outfitted cargo van to a stop as the light changed from yellow to red, was everything. There wasn't a part of the life he hated.

He couldn't even complain about having to provide his own insurance coverage or set up his own IRA. Working for *the man* toward a retirement package that might not even suit when he reached there, or working for himself and living his life his way from here to there? Hell, it wasn't even a choice.

Hmm. Then again there was one drawback, he admitted, turning to the left at the change of the light. Women. They wanted stability and security and thought it only came somewhere between nine and five and in a corner office. Most women, anyway.

Except, perhaps, for [Skye Deveaux](#).

He hit the drive up into the parking lot behind Spa Paradis harder than he'd intended, punishing the van's new suspension when he'd promised himself this time to take it easy on the old girl.

They didn't make 'em like this anymore, which was a big problem when it came to finding

parts. The '67 Dodge had served him well now for six years but wasn't going to hold out forever. He'd already marked the funds from the Spa Paradis upgrade for the tune-up now due.

That was the other problem with women. Not too many understood the labor of love — read: time and money — he put into the van's upkeep, and he'd yet to meet one who was down with the idea of being picked up for a night out in the old girl.

Again, except for Skye Deveaux.

She'd had no problem with his van. It had been her discovery of the freshly made bed in the *back* that had done him in.

Climbing down from the cab, he slammed the door and headed around to the rear to flip through the van's built-in CD drawers for the Spa Paradis software disks he'd need.

He wondered if Skye was working late. He wondered how she would feel about seeing him again. He wondered why she hadn't even given him a chance to explain that, as appealing as the idea of sleeping with her was, he'd been on his way to trout fish the Guadalupe River and the van was a self-contained camper.

She hadn't given him a chance to say so much as good-night before she'd bailed and bolted. He'd heard the front door of her Rice Village cottage slam before he'd even thought to put the van into Park.

Skye Deveaux was a firecracker, with big brown eyes and bouncy blond curls — a combination that gave him more of a buzz than caffeine. Hell, yeah, he'd like to sleep with her. He was a guy, and she was hot in so many ways.

But he wasn't a creep. And he really thought that if she'd give him a chance, a true, honest-to-God chance, instead of pinning him with other guys' motives, she'd see the truth.

At least that's what he was hoping would happen, the reason he was hoping she'd be here.

* * *

Skye truly needed to come up with a painless and legal method to do away with Maeve.

The other woman was no longer imaginatively casting Nic in a threesome. Oh, no. Now she was choreographing an intimate kick-ball-change step as she stood to the side of the main computer station in her office, where Nic had made himself at home.

Unfortunately, the dance Maeve was thinking about was more of an ooh-ahh-yes, involving body parts other than feet belonging to Nic and to Skye, ahem, who did not have implants, thanks much.

Standing in the office doorway behind the receptionist's station, she cleared her throat when what she really wanted to do was growl. "Sorry to burst your bubble, Maeve, but they're real."

"Oh, Skye." Dark blotches of color rose up Maeve's high cheekbones. "I didn't see you there."

"Obviously." Skye walked into the office, catching only a short glance from Nic as he opened a black portfolio filled with CDs and manuals. She focused, zoomed in, tuned out...nothing. Not a single peep from the man's mind.

Maeve, on the other hand, was throwing a mental blanket over Nic's and Skye's naked bodies.

"How long do you think this will take?" Skye asked of either one of them, adding for Maeve's benefit, "I'm allergic to wool, by the way."

Maeve tossed the pencil she'd been twirling in one hand to the desk and reached for her red velvet hobo bag. "I've suffered enough mental abuse for the day. Now I'm off for an evening of emotional angst. Nic said he'll be done in an hour."

"Two at the most," he added, finally speaking, his voice a deep seductive memory tingling at the base of Skye's skull.

He looked up then, meeting her gaze head-on. Or at least meeting her gaze once his made it to her face, having started where she gripped the back of the office's visitor's chair and sliding slowly up her bare arms to the hollow of her throat and the beating pulse of her telltale heart.

It didn't matter how long it took him to snag her gaze. The impact would've been the same whether it took him five seconds to get there or ten. His eyes were the green of a spring morning bursting beneath the sun, his hair the brown of fertile earth. She dug her fingers even harder into the back of the chair and held on.

Oh, but it was hard to breathe when she saw all the things she knew he must be thinking but hadn't a clue whether or not he was. She wasn't used to anticipation, to heat.

She was used to knowing, to boredom. To turning and walking out the door. Leaving was easy when no surprises were left to be had. And staying...

Staying put her out of her element, gave Nic an advantage she was so very afraid that he'd take. She was only slightly more afraid that he wouldn't.

And that she'd regret that loss for the rest of her life.

Chapter Three

"Don't forget to set the alarm," Maeve called as she left, the front-door chimes finally quieting until the only sounds in the office were those of the computer hard drive as [Nic](#) did a system check.

He'd moved his attention back to the screen, and [Skye](#) had started to pace.

God, was this what other women went through, not knowing what a guy was thinking, having to wonder and guess and act as though not being certain didn't drive them insane?

"You can sit. I swear I'll stay on this side of the desk."

That voice again. Silky and deep, working its way under her skin, like the feel of skilled fingertips hitting that muscle beneath her shoulder blade that ached so at the end of the day.

She circled the chair and sat. "Let me know if there's anything I can do to hurry you along."

He chuckled at that, glanced her way again from beneath the dark sexy slash of an eyebrow. "Hot date tonight?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but no. I don't have a date tonight." Hot or otherwise. Though now she couldn't help but wonder if he did. If he wanted to get done, get out and get on with his fun.

Exactly what he should do. Exactly what she wanted him to do.

Arms crossed, she moved her gaze from his profile as he stared at the screen to his one hand that completely enveloped the mouse, trying not to recall how deftly he'd managed both the steering wheel and stick shift the night he'd taken her to dinner....

"You're right," he said, returning her thoughts to the present. And then he rubbed his free hand over the back of his neck. She almost felt the massaging pressure on her own. "It's not my business, though no harm, no foul for asking, right?"

She blew out an exasperated breath for his benefit when the exhalation was more about regaining her steady footing. She wondered what [Celeste](#) — who worked as a psychic, even if she wasn't — would read should she look into Nic's palm. He had the most incredible hands.

"Hey," he finally said, responding to her huff. "I thought if you did, it would be a good time to help out my fellow man."

"Your fellow man?" He had her attention again, and she intuitively knew she wouldn't like his response.

"Sure." He fought back a laugh. "Don't want some other poor schmuck to show up to get you with his camping gear in tow."

Even after he'd spoken, it took him a long strange moment to move his attention from the monitor to her face, a long strange moment during which she tried to make sense of what he'd just said.

She was so used to relying on her abilities, she wasn't even sure she knew how to figure out what Nic meant with only his words to go by. Unless he'd actually meant what he'd said.

And so she simply lifted a brow and asked, "Camping gear?"

He nodded, a slow lazy lopsided grin that lifted the left corner of his mouth. He swiveled the chair so that he faced her directly, as if the eye-to-eye contact guaranteed her full attention.

He'd had her full attention now for months, since Maeve hired him to install the spa's new billing software and Skye had realized she couldn't hear a thing in his head.

She wanted to know why.

"The back of the van. It's all modular. Outfitted with tracks on the side panels and the floor."

She blinked, certain she wasn't going to be too thrilled with the rest of his explanation. A feeling that intensified into an annoying sort of itchy rashlike sensation as Nic went on.

His grin widened. "When I'm working, I build out the cargo space with the tools of the trade. Come the weekend, I slide out the chests of computer equipment and slide in the camping gear. Grill. Minifridge. Lanterns, tackle. The bed."

"I see."

"That's right." He winked. He actually winked. "You did see the bed, didn't you?"

She wanted to look away from the accusation in his gaze — or what she assumed was an accusation — but he had her, and she deserved to be had.

"I didn't know the bed was for camping. How could I have known that?" Duh, since I couldn't read your mind?

"Oh, I dunno." Nic leaned back, swiveled to the right, swiveled to the left. Stopped. Didn't move a muscle but for the ones it took to speak. "You could've asked. Or waited around for me to explain."

She watched the tic of the pulse in his temple. Watched the flare of desire in his eyes. See? He may not have intended for their first date to end up in that bed, but she knew he wouldn't have minded if it had.

Typical man.

Except he wasn't a typical man. He wasn't blaming her for their date ending badly, though her overreaction — her unwarranted overreaction — had been the fault. No. He was doing no more than stating the obvious. Telling her what she should've taken the time to ask him that night.

She owed him an apology, though giving one wasn't going to be so simple. This time she crossed one leg over the other and set her foot to swinging.

"Here's the thing, Nic," she said as he went back to the computer, loading a software disk though his sideways glance beneath a raised brow told her he was waiting. "Guys come on to me. A lot. It's why I don't date much. I can't trust that it's not going to happen. It always does."

"And that makes your dating experience different from other women how?"

It was that lack of anticipation, that knowing what was going to happen that always ruined the possibility for any sort of good time. But she couldn't tell him that.

What she told him was "I'm not like most women."

This time his smile was even slower in coming. Slower, but worth the wait. It was a smile of dark thoughts, the very thoughts she was unable to read, and it caused a tightening in her body, a sizzling sort of burn that made her wonder what would have happened had she not bolted at the sight of his bed.

"No, Skye. You're not. I don't date most women," he said, his voice a deep caress.

She was in so much trouble here. So very much trouble. "No," she began, her heart pounding as if seeking a rhythm that made sense. "You just take them camping."

He shook his head. His crazy-long lashes drifted down, then up; the sparkling green of his eyes nearly blinded her. "I haven't taken a woman camping in a very long time. Not since I met you."

Chapter Four

It wasn't an admission [Nic](#) would've made sitting at the bar in Haydon's Half Time, or when watching the Astros play baseball with one of his oil-company clients from the firm's club-level seats at Minute Maid Park.

But sitting here in the office at Spa Paradis across the desk from [Skye Deveaux](#), listening to piped-in New Age music and the tinkle of wind chimes, drawing in the scents of herbs and flowers and fruits every time he took a breath...yeah, it didn't hurt too much to say it.

Until she wet her lower lip with the barest tip of her tongue, caught the corner of it between her teeth.

That was when he decided it might not've been such a good idea after all. Right before he groaned.

"I thought men enjoyed camping on a, uh, pretty regular basis," she finally said, sounding as if there was a whole lot more she wanted to say caught in the back of her throat.

"Yeah, well. We do. It's just that camping solo is a hell of a lot less hassle at times." Just the conversation he wanted to be having with the woman he most wanted to bed. She already thought him some sort of campground perv.

"Hmm. That's interesting." Lips pursed thoughtfully, she leaned forward, lacing her fingers around the knee she'd crossed demurely over her other one. "I assumed all men liked help

getting a fire started in their, uh, grill. You know, to cook. Dinner."

He loved her curiosity, adored the way she stumbled over it. He also had to admit the subject wasn't quite so awkward since she hadn't looked at him as if he was a whack job and backed away.

"Fire's good. A lot of women, though, have trouble managing the briquettes. Not to mention the lighter fluid," he added, because not all the color brightening her cheeks was embarrassment. If it had been, her eyes wouldn't have burned so bright, nor the hollow of her throat grown so damp.

If he read her right, Skye Deveaux was getting turned on. Which suddenly gave promise to the rest of the night and their shared lack of plans.

"I suppose camping might be too...primitive for a lot of women to truly enjoy. The ones who come here, for example," she said, pushing to her feet and confusing the hell of out him. Were they or were they not talking about sex? "Most of our clients are more the sort to enjoy being pampered."

He watched her return to walking back and forth across the room's plush olive carpeting, watched her flushed skin pale. Goodbye to good times, he mused wryly, figuring he deserved the letdown for being enough of a sap to get his hopes up in the first place.

"So, Skye," he finally said into the silence left by her pacing. "Since I don't have camping plans this weekend, you want to grab dinner when I'm done here?"

She stopped pacing, stood behind the chair as she had when she'd first come into the office. Her short, bare fingernails whitened as she gripped the chair back again. "Are you sure you want to?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't," he replied, wondering what fueled her uncertainty and if this was her response to all men. "Twenty minutes and I'm done here."

"Okay, then," she said, though she didn't seem all that excited over the prospect. Pushing away bouncy curls that had fallen over her forehead, she fluttered one hand and backed toward the door. "Let me get my things together. I'll wait in the lobby."

"Skye?" He stopped her before she got too far away. "Be thinking of where you'd like to go. And then you take your car, and I'll follow in the van."

* * *

Skye hurried from the office to her station, checking that she'd stored all her supplies before she tucked the personal belongings she'd used during the day down into her clutch. Five seconds later, she got a glimpse of herself in the mirror that hung on the stucco column separating her work area from the next and careered to a halt.

She looked like a banana-haired Raggedy Ann who didn't know the meaning of concealer.

And not only had Nic asked her to dinner, they'd carried on a conversation that she was certain hadn't been about camping at all with her looking like this.

Was the man blind?

If not blind, then definitely insane. She might not be the brightest bulb on the porch when it came to the workings of relationships, but she knew men. Men loved sex. Men were all about sex. Men thought about sex every thirteen seconds, or so reported the last survey she'd read. Not that she'd needed the survey to tell her that.

And she was supposed to believe that Nicolas Kane had not slept with a woman since their disastrous night out six months before?

What was wrong with this picture?

Hearing the shut-down music as he rebooted Maeve's computer, Skye hurriedly rifled through the items she'd just returned to her clutch and made a hasty repair to her appearance. Her short denim skirt staved off eight hours' worth of wrinkles, and the olive-and-grape smock she wore during the day protected the silk of her bubblegum-pink tank.

She had a pair of tan leather slides in her backseat. A decent enough outfit for Taco Milagro or Mission Burrito, as she suddenly had a craving for hot and spicy food to go with her hot and spicy man. Except he wasn't her man. No matter that from what he'd said, he seemed to be saving himself for her.

If his actions made sense, she'd be flattered. But nothing of what she knew of men meshed with what she obviously didn't know of Nic. She'd relied for so long on the safe harbor offered by her mind-reading abilities that being thrust into the unknown was not the adventure she'd often thought it might be.

Then again, perhaps the night ahead might be the first step.

Feeling marginally more herself, encouraged and hopeful to boot, Skye headed to the receptionist's station. Nic walked out of the office behind just as she arrived. She gestured him toward the door as she launched the security system's software program and ran the series of codes that would lock down the spa till morning.

As the computer processed her commands, she glanced toward the door where Nic waited, feeling the sizzle of his gaze go to work on her bones. She was melting, *melting*, and if not for the receptionist's chair at her knees would have fallen in a puddle to the floor.

She could do this, she thought. Step out into the wild unknown, free-fall without her safety net. Enjoy the anticipation of risking her heart. Of taking her first true chance with a man.

And, oh, what a man. Broad shoulders and big hands and thighs that were beautifully, proportionately thick beneath the soft-looking denim he wore. Her fingers itched to test the dark fuzz of his evening beard, to free the waves of his hair caught by the collar of his navy polo.

She offered him the brightest smile allowed by the silly case of nerves swirling through the puddle she'd become.

"Let's go," she said and picked up her clutch.

Nic pushed on the door. Nothing happened. He glanced back at her from beneath a sharply arched brow. "I'm there. Or I'd be there if I could get out."

"Well, crap." Skye headed back around the chest-high receptionist station and rekeyed the security code. A new security system had been installed recently, but it wasn't as though she hadn't entered the codes a dozen or so times since then.

"Try it now."

He tried it. "Nope. Nothing." And then he turned his wicked grin her way. "Looks like we'll be doing our camping out in here tonight."

Chapter Five

"Yes. All right. No, I understand. Thank you." [Skye](#) slammed down the receiver, picked it up and dialed a second time.

"What now?" [Nic](#) asked, leaning his forearms against the cool marble surface topping the receptionist's station. Skye's cheeks were bright red with what he assumed was the same aggravation that had her attacking the phone.

"I've got to find Maeve." Phone to her ear, Skye waited and waited and waited, slamming it back into the cradle, obviously unanswered, with a loudly growled, "Argh!"

Obviously Maeve wasn't wanting to be found. "So? What did the security company say?"

"I hate incompetence." Skye hid her expression by rubbing her forehead with the fingertips of both hands. "And I'm going to kill Maeve."

Now he wasn't sure if she was complaining about the security company or her boss. "I'm in no big hurry here, but it would be great if you'd fill me in on what's going on."

She dropped her hands from her forehead to the desktop, looking down instead of at him — his first clue that she wasn't happy with what she had to say. "When you rebooted the system, it threw the new security program offline. Which wouldn't be a problem, except that the company can only give the coded password to names approved by the administrator."

"Maeve."

"Who was supposed to fill out the paperwork and add two names as backup," Skye said, breathing deeply before dropping down into the receptionist's chair.

"And you can't reach her."

Skye shook her head. "She's out tonight with her boyfriend and obviously felt no need to keep her cell turned on."

Nic tried to muster up sympathy when he couldn't find a drop. Having dinner out with Skye would've been a great way to spend the evening. But being locked inside the spa, the two of them alone, until she was able to get in touch with Maeve? "So, we're stuck?"

"Like Chuck."

"Hmm." Slow and easy, bud. Take it slow and easy. "Okay then. You have a deck of cards? A Monopoly board? Scrabble?" When she gave in to a grin, he added, "Tic-tac-toe?"

"Not a one. All we have are whirlpools, saunas, soaking basins, paraffin, henna, adobe mud-clay and a flat-screen TV." She brought her head up, met his gaze and held it for several long seconds as if taking his measure before taking a chance. "You want a tour?"

He nodded, his voice lost somewhere in the back of his throat. What he wanted could be spelled out with three letters if he were being honest, four if he were being earthy and raw. "You could show me what you do at least."

A soft smile gave her a near ethereal look, putting a sparkle in her eye that he couldn't describe in any way other than *cute*. "You're interested in what I do?"

"Sure." He was interested in how she kissed, how she touched, how hot her skin grew when she was aroused.

"I'll try Maeve again in a few minutes." She moved out from behind the barrier of the receptionist's station and gestured for him to follow her from the lobby into the spa. "But, if you'd like, I could give you a pedi-massage."

He'd like if it involved getting naked. "Pedi-massage? Does that have anything to do with camping?"

She laughed, glancing back and slowing her steps until he walked at her side. Walked close enough, in fact, that he could reach out and snag her fingers with his. So he did. And she let him, squeezing slightly and raising his hopes that she might actually be willing to give him a second chance.

He liked this woman. Liked her a lot. She'd caught his attention months ago — obviously, or he wouldn't have taken her out. Her sense of humor was genuine, her sense of self, strong. She knew what she wanted, knew what turned her off. And knew exactly how to rev his motor to an RPM he'd rarely reached.

When she pulled her hand from his, he wanted to frown, until he realized their stopping meant she'd reached her destination. She obviously wanted him to climb up into what reminded him of a barber's chair. This one, however, was a rich plum leather. And was minus a footrest.

"Have a seat," Skye said in a tone that was as much a dare as anything. He wondered about the challenge. "And take off your shoes."

He was wearing low-top brown leather Doc Martens and wasn't exactly thrilled about the weird vulnerability of baring his feet. But he supposed she was used to rough skin and calluses and, at this point, he was good with giving her anything she wanted.

He unlaced his Doc's, pulled them off; Skye set them on a ledge attached to her station, gesturing with a "gimme" motion for him to hand over his socks.

While he pulled them off, she moved to straddle the low stool in front of him and turned on the jets of water, filling the basin as he rolled up his pants legs.

"Hmm. You don't seem the chocolate and strawberry type. Or the rosehips and basil type." She shuffled through potions and concoctions, placing a small pizza-shaped stone in the basin before choosing a mixture of poisons she liked. "Sandalwood and balsam. Nature's scents."

"The favorites of campers everywhere," he said, and swore she considered splashing him in the face.

And then she did the most amazing thing. Eyes closed, she submerged her hands in the water and took hold of the stone, almost as if she were meditating or communing with an otherworldly power.

How he came up with that bizarre conclusion, he had no idea, except for the expression on her face that sorta scared him. In the next second, however, it was gone, and she was smiling up at him, an imp, mischievous yet sexy as hell.

Oh, yeah, he was in trouble.

He lowered both feet into the perfectly warmed water, a sizzle of bubbles tingling as he rested his soles on the stone. Admitting she was right and the scents were those of a night spent in his tent beneath the stars and towering trees, he closed his eyes and leaned back.

The headrest pillowed him softly; he sank into the plush comfort of the chair and did his best to pretend it wasn't the woman of his fantasies wrapping her hands around his foot. An effort that lasted about ten seconds because he wanted this from her and from no one else.

Her fingers worked in circles on his sole, the heels of her palms pressed the tired top and sides of his foot. Her strength amazed him, her deftness, the way she knew exactly where and how the massage would take him apart.

Coming undone wasn't even the half of it. Slumping further into the chair, he groaned because he couldn't help it.

"You like?" she asked in a voice he barely heard there in la-la land.

"Oh, yeah. I like." He continued to like as she moved from foot to foot, from heel to toes, even kneading the muscles in his calves, his Achilles tendons, the end-of-day aching balls of his feet.

He knew this was her work, not a seduction, but he couldn't get beyond the fact that she was the one administering this tender attention, this relaxing and mindless caress.

Hell, who was he kidding? It was erotic beyond belief because of the fact that it was Skye Deveaux showing him heaven.

Yeah, he could see taking her to bed and returning this incredible favor. Her feet had to be as petite as the rest of her, and finding her pressure points, giving her this same pleasure...oh, yeah. He was there. He was right there, rubbing, searching out the touch that would make her sigh before making her sweat.

He swore he heard her chuckle and then her sharp intake of breath, but he was gone, gone, gone and couldn't open his eyes to see.

Chapter Six

Seconds later, [Skye](#) paced the short length of the employee locker room, rubbing at her temples in a soothing effort that was doing nothing to ease the thunder of voices in her head.

Correction. The voice, period. One voice. [Nic's](#) voice. And more than that. An awareness of his feelings. The sensation of pure pleasure he felt at her touch.

What was going on?

He wanted her, yes. But he wanted to give, not to take. He wanted to share. To offer her the same bliss she had given him, and she didn't know how to respond. Not mentally. Not emotionally.

But physically? Oh, responding was no problem. Except that it was. A bigger problem than the one that had driven her out of his van that night six months before.

Because now she wanted him. And wanted him in ways she hadn't known she could want a man. Ways that were not soft and sweet. Not tender. Or gentle. But ways that were firecracker hot and bad to her every last bone.

She let out a long mournful belly-deep moan.

"Skye?"

She leaned her head back against the wall between the door and the lockers and closed her eyes, listening as Nic drew closer.

Her heart beat so hard in her chest, she knew he'd be able to see the throb of her pulse in her throat. She wanted him to see it; she didn't want him to see it.

"Skye?"

She wasn't supposed to be able to read his thoughts. Maybe she hadn't. Maybe she'd done nothing more than imagine what he'd been thinking. Maybe she'd been projecting her desperate desire to find a man who wanted more from her than her body.

"Skye?"

Right now, she didn't know what was happening or why. She didn't even care. All that mattered was satisfying the ache that seemed to reach all the way to her soul.

"There you are," he said, his concern evident.

She opened her eyes and stared into his, listening, searching, seeing warm spring days and bare skin in sunshine, and hearing...nothing, dammit, not a single blessed thing.

"I don't get it," she whispered, though more to herself than to him.

He braced a hand on the door jamb above her head, looked down at her with the same sort of confusion she felt — and with an even more piercing desire. "What don't you get?"

"It's...nothing." How was she supposed to explain what had just happened in words that would make any sort of sense to him? "I thought I heard...the phone. That it might be Maeve calling back."

He nodded. Obviously she was making some sort of sense. But he didn't move. And he didn't suggest she try the call again.

What he did was reach up with his free hand and place the pad of his thumb in the dip of her throat. "Your pulse is elevated."

"Exertion. Running for the phone." Lame, lame, lame.

He nodded again. "Your pupils are dilated."

She shrugged weakly. "The light in here's not as bright as it is in the main salon."

He didn't even bother to glance over their heads at the fluorescent bulbs shining down like the noonday sun. "Your skin is flushed."

"It's the...steam. From the water." She was not going to survive this. She was not. She was not.

"I don't think so, Skye." His thumb moved to the edge of her tank's scooped neckline. His eyes flashed like sunshine on bright green leaves. The tic of his pulse at his temple told the tale of

his self-control. "I was there. The water wasn't close to being this hot."

"What hot?" Breathe, Skye. Breathe.

"This hot," he repeated and drew the tips of his fingers along the ribbed border of the pink fabric from shoulder seam to shoulder seam.

She steeled her spine against the shiver threatening to rob her of her ability to stand. Her chest heaved, and Nic began to smile. "Oh. My tank."

"Not your tank." He moved a step closer. His beard, dark and heavy, shaded his jaw; she longed to cup her hand to his cheek. "Your skin."

He was so close now that it would take no more than for her to lean forward and her lips would be there, on his neck, where he'd left the top button of his polo shirt undone. She wanted to taste him...to know his heat, his texture, his scent. Her tongue flicked out, bathing her bottom lip.

He shifted, bracing his forearms on the wall on either side of her head. His chest heaved with his ragged breathing; her breasts grew taut in response. Yet he waited, hesitated, kept his distance and gave her the choice — slip away from his body or pull him closer into the kiss she longed for.

It was a simple choice to make.

She leaned forward the barest breath of space it took for contact and kissed him there, right there, beneath the swell of his Adam's apple where his own pulse raced.

His skin was so incredibly warm and salty sweet, and he smelled of the great outdoors as she'd always known that he would. He smelled of more, however. Of all things safe and familiar. As if this was where she belonged. Like home.

He kept his arms where they were, though she sensed the tension that kept him in check. And so she slid her lips higher to the soft skin of his neck, standing on tiptoes to nibble her way to his ear.

The bristle along his jaw was softer than she'd expected to find as she made her way to his cheek, her own breath now coming in short gasps, her nipples hardening, her panties growing damp.

It was when she moved her restless hands to his waist that his control finally slid to the floor. He stepped into her body, pressing her fully to the wall. His lips hovered near hers, then moved over her cheekbone, barely grazing her skin with a contradiction of softness and stubble.

"Skye?"

"Nic?"

"Is this what you really want?"

He was hard. He was heavy. He was wildly breathless. She felt small, at his complete mercy, yet so clearly unafraid. Her nerves had coiled into one big ache that was his, and no other man's, to cure.

She pulled away, looked into his eyes and put everything she was on the line to say, "I want you, Nic. Only you."

Chapter Seven

She tasted like hot-pink sex.

He couldn't think of any other way to describe what went through him at the first seeking touch of her mouth. Her lips opened. Her tongue reached for his. [Nic](#) swore he was going to die.

Either that or he was going to come where he stood.

[Skye](#)'s hands were greedy, tugging his shirt from his pants, roaming beneath the fabric over his skin. Moans and whimpers and sighs spilled from her mouth. He caught every one and groaned back.

A tiny chivalrous cell of gray matter urged him to stop, to test how sure she really was, to be certain she would have no regrets. But his other head was totally into camping.

He cupped both hands to her bottom, baited his hook and reeled her in.

His erection settled firmly in the soft give of her belly. She gasped, grabbed his belt loops and pulled him nearer still, wiggling, shimmying, teasing with tiny nips of her teeth as she trailed kisses down his neck.

He took full advantage of her short skirt, working the denim up and over her bottom a handful at a time. When the room's cool air hit her exposed skin, she laughed without ever moving her mouth.

At least until she made it clear by tugging on the fabric that his shirt was in her way — a problem he was quick to help her resolve, ripping it off and over his head and tossing it to the floor. But then she stopped kissing him, and for half a second he feared he had moved too fast.

In the next half, however, she allayed his fears with a smile that grabbed his gut and twisted it.

"You are an amazingly gorgeous man, Nicolas Kane." She took a huge gulp of breath. "And I'm quite more than a little bit worried that you might be more than I can handle."

"If this is about the size of my briquettes —"

She cut him off with a quick and searing kiss. And then with a chuckle. "No. That I can handle. I'm just afraid you will find me a rather...tame and unchallenging wilderness."

God, but he was crazy about this woman. Crazy because of this woman. He had never looked so forward to getting naked as he did here and now in this moment with Skye.

He caressed the line of her cheekbone with his thumb, lifted her chin and kissed her softly, thoroughly, telling her without words that she had nothing to fear.

Her sigh was one of surrender, and he pressed harder with sweeping strokes of his tongue. And then she reached for the hem of her tank top and shucked the shirt over her head.

He wanted to take his time baring her body, tasting her skin as he removed her clothes. He didn't want to rush; he wanted to savor her for hours. He longed to kindle this fire slowly, but Skye had already reached a fever pitch.

When she reached behind her for the clasp of her bra, he reached as well, trapping both of her wrists in one hand. She frowned, then opened her mouth, no doubt to complain.

He stopped her with his tongue, leaning forward to dip into the valley of her cleavage, to dampen the swell of one breast then the other, wetting the thin lace trim of her bra before boldly sucking her into his mouth.

She cried out sharply, and he plied his attention equally, straight through the fabric until she fairly squirmed to break free from his hold. He released her to make quick work of her bra before returning to feast on the gorgeous cherry-tipped breasts she'd bared.

She grew manic, toeing off her shoes, unzipping her skirt and shoving it to the floor, her eyes wide and glassy with arousal as she stood there in a thong that might as well have been nothing; he could plainly see the swollen knot and plump lips of her desire beneath.

He stopped her fingers on the button fly of his jeans, reading panic in her expression and a return of her fear. "Skye, listen to me. I didn't come here for this. I want you to tell me you know I didn't come here for this."

She frowned. "Of course I know that. You came here to update the billing software."

"It's not that I don't want this." Sweat broke out on his temples. "I want this like you can't believe." She was naked and waiting; she had to feel the same way. "But after that night in the van —"

"Shh." She pressed her fingertips to his lips. "This is perfect, Nic. I can't imagine anything more so. That night in the van I wasn't sure. I didn't know if I could trust what was happening."

"Trust me, you mean," he said, his voice gruff with regret.

"I judged you wrongly. On past experience." She cupped his face gently. "I didn't give you a chance to be you."

A wicked smile played over his mouth. "I can be me now. As long as you're sure."

Her laugh was bad in such a very good way. "Oh, yeah. I'm sure."

This time when she reached for his fly, he helped, getting out of his jeans and boxers in record time. Her wide eyes and her appreciative "Oh, my" had him grinning. Then she had him sucking in a world of breath as she took him in her hand.

When she kneeled and took him in her mouth, he shuddered, and it was less than a minute later that he pulled her to her feet.

"You keep that up, I'm not going to be of much use to you."

"What a silly thing to say." She snuggled up to his chest, kissing his skin with her mouth and her tongue, pressing her palms against his pecs until he groaned. "I like you like this. And I'll get what's mine eventually."

Or better yet, now, he decided when his erection took on a mind of its own, bobbing and searching out the space between her thighs. "I'm not going to take you up against a wall. Think we can take this party to the sofa?"

She peeked around his shoulder toward the plush sectional on the far wall, then scrambled away with a giggled "Race you."

He let her beat him but only by eight inches or so. And then she was flat on her back and watching him fight the condom he'd snagged from his wallet. He almost flubbed the whole process, what with the intensity of her gaze.

Sitting up halfway, she took over, rolling on the thin barrier with quite the practiced hand. "You start one mean campfire. I'll give you that."

"Why, thank you, kind camping guide," she replied before her tongue dipped below his straining erection to tease the seam of his balls.

He backed away and she lowered herself to her elbows, watching as he kissed a line down her sweet belly to her sex, which glistened like the very peach he was starving for. He separated her folds with the tip of his tongue, and she whimpered, opening her legs even wider.

He couldn't get enough of her taste, her scent, the warmth of her body, her response to his touch. Neither could he resist her demands that he climb up her body and settle between her spread thighs.

She reached down to guide him, though he knew his way well, and she held tight to his gaze during his entry, panting, blowing, groaning from the back of her throat as he hit bottom.

He lay there for several long moments, throbbing, enjoying her squirming insistence that he move as she moved, running her palms up and down his spine, digging her heels to his

thighs, driving her hips upward until collapsing in frustration.

"You're making me crazy, you know."

"The very point of this exercise."

"I thought this was about having fun."

"Crazy isn't fun?" he asked, shifting his hips.

She moaned. "Oh, but that's fun."

"Good. I want you to have a good time."

Her eyes dampened at that. "Oh, Nic. How could I have anything but? It's like I've been waiting for you for so long."

"And it's all the better for the wait." Or so it was for him.

He began to move then, and Skye matched his every stroke with a thrust that took him apart. He swore he was being devoured, and responded in kind. Sweat slicked their skin. His fingers roamed between their bodies. Hers played all over his, and the intensity of their joining grew furious.

He wanted to stop, to wait for her, to make sure she was with him all the way. He needn't have worried. Back arched, head back, she cried out her release, and he followed, spilling himself in a draining rush until he lay there, spent.

And then he wondered what he was going to do when she came to her senses, got dressed and told him to go.

Chapter Eight

"It has to be the stone. It makes perfect sense. It's the only thing that makes sense. How incredibly dense have I been?"

Though she hated the idea of moving from where she lay draped halfway on top of [Nic](#)'s body, halfway on the locker room's sofa, [Skye](#) pushed herself up onto her elbows and braced her weight on his chest.

His chest that was oh, so warm and broad, and such a perfect fit for her body. The dark hair that swirled between his pecs was silky soft, as was the line that ran down the center of his torso to his very hard and flat abs. The hair that cushioned his now softened sex was coarser, she'd learned, when she'd explored his, uh, briquettes so thoroughly.

She'd never known there was so much fun to be had between a man's legs.

"What stone?" he asked, thankfully oblivious to her train of thought. He looked as if he needed a week's worth of sleep to recover from the hours past.

"The massage stone. I've had it since...oh, since before I can remember. Which makes perfect sense when you think about it. I used to hide away in our basement when things at home got too, uh, loud. I had a little cubbyhole and I used the rock as a seat for my, uh..."

"Your what?" he mumbled, resting a heavy arm on her back when she made to get up.

"My Piglet, okay? Piglet. Now, hey, c'mon. We can't stay here any longer." She reached down to fondle him. "The fire's died down. It's time for all good campers to pack up."

He opened one eye, arched one brow. "Thought you weren't a big fan of camping."

"Oh, I have definitely changed my mind, big boy." He rolled both eyes at that. "Hey, it's the truth. You outweigh me by more than a few pounds."

"You're a runt."

"A lovable, mind-reading runt. Yes, I know. My cousins have teased me for years."

This time he pushed up onto his elbows, dislodging her to sit between his legs. "Run that one by me again?"

She took a deep breath, wondering if he'd been paying attention. The truth would have to come out sooner or later. "I read minds, Nic. I have all my life. I know. It sounds weird and flaky. But it's not. It's true."

He got a look in his eyes then that was more than a little bit unnerving. "You can read minds."

She nodded. "It's not just me. Well, the mind-reading part is just me. My cousins have other...gifts."

"Such as?"

"[Rory](#) controls the weather with her moods. [Celeste](#) is a medium. And Eve is able to move objects with her mind, even though she pretends she can't. Our great-grandmother, [Solange](#), was gifted as well."

"It's inherited then?" he asked, though he clearly didn't believe a word she was saying.

And why should he? She certainly couldn't prove herself to him...could she? She jumped to her feet, enjoying the thrill that rolled through her as his sleepy gaze and his sleepy erection both came to life at her nudity. "Come on."

She picked up her tank and her thong, figuring it was the least she could do — though the look in his eyes said he would prefer she did a lot less. But he stepped into his boxers and followed her out into the main salon.

"Sit," she said and gestured to the chair at her station. He climbed up wearing his disbelief as clearly as his boxers.

She took her own seat and glanced up into his eyes. "I have to be near the person I'm reading to pick up their thoughts."

"What am I thinking, then?"

"That's just it." She tilted her head. "I've never been able to read you. Until earlier. When you were sitting here. That's why I ran. You were thinking of pleasuring me, not about what you wanted."

"And that surprised you?"

"That unselfishness sorta messed with my head, yeah. Especially coming on the heels of learning of your recent celibacy."

He considered her cautiously, his gaze uncertain. "So, then, that night in the van?"

"I know. It's crazy. It was because I had no idea what you were thinking that I went berserk when I saw the bed." She took a huge breath, blew it out. "I haven't had a lot of luck with men. And I judged you because of that."

"And now?" He was sitting forward, his elbows on his knees, his steepled fingers flexing. "You've obviously changed your mind."

She reached into the basin, lifting out the dark stone she was certain had once broken away from a whole. "Our family has a legacy revolving around a stone that was once shattered into four pieces, which were scattered or hidden so that they didn't fall into the wrong hands. My cousins and I have each been charged with locating the sections and reassembling the circle. But it had to be the right time.... God, but this makes so much sense now."

"And you think that stone's your piece of the whole?"

At his voice, which no longer cynically questioned but queried with a tone of true curiosity, she glanced up. "It has to be. I took the stone with me when I left home. I remember my mother teasing me about it when she saw it packed up in my crazy chest with Piglet and all the other kid stuff I kept. She never really believed in my father's family legend, she probably didn't even know what it was. And anyway, the pieces were supposed to have been scattered across the globe. Who would have thought I had it the whole time?"

Nic arched a brow. "That all sounds pretty vague to me."

"Yes, but I have proof now." She looked up at him then, her hands holding tightly to the stone as she searched his face, his beautiful eyes, silently begging for him to believe. She needed him to believe. She was so tired of being alone. So very tired of the voices in her head meaning nothing. She wanted to hear only his. "I knew everything you were thinking when your feet were in the basin with the water and the stone."

For a long silent moment, he did nothing but study her face. She wanted to ask what it was he was looking for, to tell him to lower his feet once more, enabling her to prove that she wasn't insane. So when he reached for the stone, she hesitated but in the end she relented.

He took it in one hand, grabbed her wrist with his other. He set the stone carefully on the shelf of her station, his gaze daring her to climb up into his lap.

It was when he said, "I know what you're thinking," that she gave in, her knees straddling his thighs in the cushy chair.

He leaned back, taking her with him. She felt his erection stir between her legs, felt the beat of his heart in her palms pressed to his bare chest. "What am I thinking?"

"You want to put the stone back in the water." His lashes drifted down, drifted up. "And you want me to put my feet back in, as well."

"Well, duh." She tried to laugh. It sounded like a croak. "That's hardly rocket science."

"It's not magic either. It's me knowing you and seeing how afraid you are to trust me." He spread his legs so that she settled more intimately against him. "You want proof."

She nodded, unable to speak for the lump of emotion in her throat. "It's been so hard all these years. Hearing the lies in my head while the voices do nothing but sweet-talk. I've never liked men much. Until you."

"Then trust me, Skye. You've learned enough of the truth through your hokey-pokey." He threaded the fingers of one hand into her hair. "Give us a chance to make our own magic."

She closed her eyes, lifted her chin, seeking the very truth he had asked her to find. And when his hand stroked her back lovingly, and he pulled her down for his kiss, she knew she'd found the only magic a woman could want.

That of a true man's love.

The End

Eternally Yours

Mortal Thoughts

by Maggie Price

Eve Deveaux struggles to control the force within her, the power to move objects with her mind. Fear of the harm she could inflict has caused Eve to turn her back on her family legacy — and the man she loves!

Chapter One

Find your piece!

In sleep, Eve Deveaux thrashed in her bed while the words oozed from a grave.

Find your piece!

The voice was her dead uncle's. But the image erupting into Eve's brain was of a robed, white-haired wizard. His fingers reached skyward; a grimace twisted his face.

The air turned as icy as the fear in Eve's blood. Around her, glass shattered. Wood splintered.

Find your piece!

The wizard swooped in, smelling of a musty crypt. Evil gleamed in his eyes.

Surging up, Eve swallowed a shriek when something crashed into the headboard. Moonlight illuminated the shapes of familiar objects careening around her bedroom.

The drinking glass from the nightstand crashed into the mirror.

Her work boots *thunked* against a wall.

The hammer from her tool belt shot upward, embedding in the ceiling.

This, she knew, was no dream.

"Stop!" Eve squeezed her eyes shut and with a conscious effort of will pulled back the power the nightmare had unleashed from inside her. The power to move things with her mind, which she'd locked deep inside her fifteen years ago.

The air lost its chill. A predawn hush settled over the small house.

Although she'd fought her way out of the nightmare, the fear had remained with her. She kicked off the sheet while groping for the lamp. Squinting against the light, Eve inventoried the damage.

Her robe twisted around the blades of the ceiling fan.

A roll of blueprints teetered out a broken window, letting in the sound and scent of the churning Pacific.

Her clock had smashed into the headboard.

Eve scrubbed her palms across her face. For years she'd clung to the belief that the steps she'd taken had given her control over her preternatural power. The nightmare told her different.

It also reminded her of the recent pressure from her cousins.

[Aurora](#), [Celeste](#) and [Skye](#) were full of themselves now that they claimed to have found love by embracing their own unique powers. They had each located a piece of the Stone of Power — the source of the power passed down from their great-grandmother, [Solange](#).

The cousins had each called to remind Eve of the Deveaux family legend: their great-grandparents could join in the afterlife only after four Deveaux women embraced their powers and brought together the individual pieces of the Stone of Power that their great-granny had broken after [some wizard](#) dropped a curse on her and Great-Gramps [Jonathon](#). Eve, the cousins all urged, needed to acknowledge her power and find her piece of the rock.

Eve scowled. Uncle Harold had been so obsessed by the Deveaux legend that he'd probably visited her from the great beyond in the guise of a wizard to scare her into joining her cousins. *Find your piece, Eve. Embrace your power. Fall in love.*

"Forget it."

All the nightmare had done was reinforce her decision to remain alone. If she had a man in her life, right now he would probably be unconscious from a concussion.

It wouldn't be the first time her power had injured.

Age-old guilt washed over Eve...and reminded her she'd be seeing the injured party in the morning.

Locals were buzzing over [Travis Bristow](#)'s return to Mendocino, California, after five years. Considering he'd made a killing in real estate, speculation was rife over why he'd bought the abandoned house on a ridge overlooking the ocean.

Was it an investment to be refurbished then sold?

Did he plan to settle there?

All Eve knew was Travis had called the contracting company she and her dad owned and scheduled an appointment. Her dad was out of town, so it fell on Eve to take the meeting.

She sighed. Seeing Travis again would be a reminder of the long-ago day when the power inside her broke free. A reminder of what she was.

And why she could never be with him.

* * *

Travis Bristow wanted a wife. This time, the *right* wife. And he knew where to find her. So five years after he'd let Eve Deveaux push him away, he was back, determined to have her.

With sun blazing through the cracked windows, Travis watched Eve measure a bedroom of the house he'd always secretly planned would be theirs. She was everything he remembered — tall and willowy, with a fine-boned face tanned gold. Her hair was a short, dark tumble; her eyes chocolate brown. Snug jeans hugged her hips; her breasts pressed against her white T-shirt.

He'd waited years to have those breasts, and the rest of her, pressed against *him*.

Watching her step around an abandoned mattress, Travis wondered if any man had scaled the barrier Eve had erected against him. The barrier he was determined to break through.

"Labor's going to cost a bundle," she commented.

"True."

She jotted a note on her clipboard. "Hope you've got deep pockets."

"Very."

"My price is good for thirty days. You have time to get other estimates. Considering the cost, you'll want to give this lots of thought."

"I've already done that." For five years. "I want Deveaux and Daughter to do the job. When can you start?"

"Shopping around might get you a better price."

Travis raised a brow. "Eve, is our past making you nervous about working here? If so, I'll talk to your dad about doing the job."

"I'm not nervous," she snapped, her chin angling like a sword. "And I don't mix personal with business."

Travis smiled at the temper smoldering in her eyes. He still knew which buttons to push. "Just trying to make things easier for you."

* * *

Travis's comment flung Eve back fifteen years to the day Travis and bully Freddie Poe engaged in another one of their slugfests. The sight of Travis's blood had shot fear and anger into Eve and unleashed a violent power inside her. Even now, she could hear the limb rip off the tree, see it sail uncontrollably through the air, hear Travis's grunt when it hit his cheek.

Knowing she'd unwittingly hurt Travis had made her deathly afraid of what was inside her. When she'd asked him later about the fight, Travis had raised his bandaged face and said, "Freddie called you 'Witchy Woman.' I was trying to make things easier for you."

Now, Eve took in the man who'd always defended her against the school bully. His body looked as hard as granite and his devil's good looks had intensified. Her throat tightened when her gaze shifted to his right cheek where the thin scar slashed then vanished into his jet-black hairline. That scar — more precisely the cause of it — was the reason Eve had vowed to never again use her power. The reason she would always be alone.

The reason she'd refused to marry Travis.

Which hadn't slowed him down, she reminded herself. He'd married soon after he'd left. And later divorced.

Eve didn't want to think about his marital status. Her gaze dropped to the mattress. Nor face reminders of things she and Travis had never — *would never* — share. She frowned, thinking she should just back off this job.

Travis studied her. There was something beneath Eve's veneer, some strong emotion she warred against. He wanted to dig in, put a name on that emotion. If he let her pull back, he'd lose the chance. This time, he didn't intend to lose.

"Do you question your ability to do this job?"

"I can do the damn job." Her pride scratched, Eve crammed her clipboard under one arm. "I'll be here day after tomorrow with my crew."

As Eve walked out, thoughts of Travis hung in her brain, while something menacing tapped at her thoughts.

And with it came a vivid premonition of disaster.

Chapter Two

Two days later, [Eve](#) lugged her toolbox and sketches into [Travis Bristow](#)'s immense house high atop a craggy ocean cliff. The roof leaked and the porches sagged, but for Eve there was something compelling about the way the place had stood for decades against time, weather and neglect.

Inside, the smell of dust and mold mixed with the scent of the sea. The thud of hammers and whirl of drills verified her crew was working upstairs. The sense of well-being Eve usually found in those sounds was marred by aching fatigue. Compliments of three nights of visits from [Mr. Wizard](#).

Hours of nonsleep had afforded her time to ponder the fabled curse a wizard had put on her great-grandparents, [Solange](#) and [Jonathon Deveaux](#). According to late Uncle Harold, the Deveaux cousins could break the curse by reuniting the four pieces of the Stone of Power only after acknowledging, respecting *and controlling* the unique power each cousin had inherited from Solange. They also were meant to find love in the process.

For Eve, there were a few sticking points.

Oh, she acknowledged she was telekinetic. And she certainly respected the strength of her power. Problem was, she couldn't *control* it. Bolting awake three nights running to find that her subconscious had launched a fleet of UFOs proved that.

As for love... How much more fun would this be if she had to explain to some guy why both her bedroom and her life were in shambles?

Eve dragged a hand through her short, dark hair. She could feel the power she'd locked inside her churning as if some outside energy worked to free it. She desperately feared if that happened, as it had the day she'd permanently scared Travis, she wouldn't be able to pull it back.

The prospect had a shiver skittering like a bony finger down her spine.

Her mind hazy with fatigue, she headed into the living room where spiderwebs draped like gray gauze. She set her toolbox on the battered worktable her crew had set up, then rolled out her sketches.

Behind Eve, Travis paused in an arched doorway to admire the way her snug jeans showed off her long legs. He frowned when he noted the rigid set of her shoulders beneath her red T-shirt. She had a tomboy's tough shell. Beneath, he knew there was something soft and hot. This time he was determined to uncover her depths. Eve was, after all, the reason he'd returned to Mendocino. Eve, and the house whose threshold he intended to some day carry her over.

Strolling into the room across a spattered drop cloth he asked, "Now that you've had time to scope out things, what's your take on my house?"

"It hasn't turned to rubble because whoever built it did so with care," she said, sparing him a glance across her shoulder. "The foundation's as solid as the cliff it's sitting on." She shuffled sketches. "You made a good investment, Bristow. Would have been better if you'd have bid out the work."

Because she still had her back to him, he let his expression turn smug. "When you know what you want, Deveaux, there's no point wasting time."

Gazing around the room, Travis realized he'd come full circle. He had left town because he couldn't see a way to get either the house or the woman he wanted. Making money on the real estate wheel and deal had finally gotten him the oceanside house that had called to him since he was a kid.

He would restore it, along with his relationship with the woman he'd wanted for almost as long.

To Travis's way of thinking, Eve was like the house — she needed someone to love her, accept her character for what it was. Someone who appreciated her strengths and understood her weaknesses.

He didn't understand fully, not yet. But he had a good idea what happened that day when he beat the crap out of Freddie Poe and Eve beamed him with a limb without even touching it. She had dropped a barrier between them like a steel plate and deflected every attempt he'd made to discuss what had happened. After that, things between them had never been the same.

Fine, Travis thought, moving to the side of the worktable opposite Eve. He didn't want things the same. He wanted all of her. And he would get what he wanted, no matter how long it took to break through that barrier.

He glanced at the top sketch. "Have you decided the best way to shore up the widow's walk?"

Eve met his gaze. Clad in a denim shirt and worn jeans, and with stubble darkening his jaw, Travis Bristow in no way resembled an executive who'd made a killing in real estate. Instead, he looked lean and hard and dangerous. Heat rose inside her, bringing with it the ache of longing for the man she could never have. "I've...got some ideas," she said, forcing the words past her suddenly dry throat.

His gaze narrowed on her face. "Have you sworn off sleep?"

When he stepped abruptly around the table and crowded close to her, her throat went even drier. "Is that your way of saying I look like a hag?"

"I'm saying you've got shadows under your eyes and you're as pale as chalk."

"Hey —" She jerked her chin as his hand cupped it, but his fingers held firm.

"Why aren't you sleeping?"

"Things on my mind. Let go."

He laid a hand on her arm, stilling her. "You looked tired two days ago when we first met here. Now you're exhausted. What's wrong?"

Eve gritted her teeth. Growing up, she hadn't told him about her power. It would have sliced her in two if he'd turned away when he found out she was different. And because of that power, she'd abandoned hope for a future with this man. How unfair, she thought. How

viciously unfair that Travis Bristow still mattered to her. *Too much.*

"Back off. I've got enough people bothering me."

"Who?"

His fingers felt firm and warm. If she were normal she would have stepped into his arms and explored the need welling inside her.

"Who's bothering you?" he coaxed quietly.

"Why? You going to race to my defense like you did all those times Freddie Poe bullied me?"

Travis gave her a feral smile. "If that's what it takes for you to get some sleep."

She gazed up into his face while his spicy scent hovered around her. The paper-thin scar marring his right cheek was all the reminder she needed of just how *not* normal she was. A mix of anger and frustration had her balling her fists.

"I don't need you to play white knight, Bristow. Back off."

"No." He lowered his head. The same relentless determination glinted in his dark eyes as she heard in his voice. "You're not pushing me away again, Eve. I'm staying. In Mendocino and your life. Get used to it."

All she had to do was lean in and his mouth would be on hers. The feeling of being trapped by both growing desire and the indefinable force ripping inside her had her system pulsating with temper and frayed nerves.

"Dammit, let go!"

"Not twice in one lifetime."

His refusal shot a red haze across Eve's vision. At the same instant she felt something inside her snap, her toolbox began vibrating with earthquake intensity.

Travis shot a look at the table. "What the hell?"

"Let go!" Eve struggled against his hold and the power clawing inside her. Both, she discovered, had equal strength.

A metallic screech filled her head just as the toolbox's lid flew open.

Her breath strangled in her throat when a screwdriver rocketed toward Travis.

Chapter Three

The instant [Travis](#) caught the glint of metal rocketing his way, he toppled [Eve](#) with him to the floor.

Air whooshed out of his lungs as he landed on his back. She sprawled on top of him. A hard *thunk* jerked his gaze to the wall above them. The UFO was a screwdriver, now embedded in Sheetrock up to its thick handle. Considering the trajectory, Travis knew if he hadn't hit the deck the thing would now be impaled in his brain.

"Christ."

"Let me up!" On top of him, Eve thrashed against his hold.

Rolling, Travis reversed positions, pinning her beneath him. When she continued to struggle, he clamped her wrists to the floor on either side of her head. "You trying to kill me, Eve?"

"I'm sorry." Fear hissed through her blood as she fought to close off the violent spike of energy. *"I'm sorry."*

Inside her, the locks she'd secured on her power had splintered open and the pain was huge. Above her, Travis's face was hard as rock, his dark eyes glinting with anger. She wasn't sure which was worse.

"Dammit, what the hell's going on?" His voice was raw, brittle as broken glass.

"I'm tired." The words crimped in her throat. "I'm...not myself."

Upstairs, the sounds of construction bashed against the walls, a sound just violent enough to suit Travis's mood. Setting his jaw, he stared down into her pale-as-ice face and saw raw anguish. Patience, he warned, grinding back his temper. She was scared as hell.

"That's the problem, isn't it?" he asked levelly. "How can you be yourself when you won't face who you are?"

She stared up at him, her lungs heaving, her breasts pressing against his chest. "You don't know what I am."

"Not what, Eve. *Who*. You're a gorgeous, stubborn woman, made intriguing by multiple layers. It's those layers I haven't quite figured out." The vulnerability in her dark eyes touched his heart. "I'm the one you clobbered with a tree limb without ever having touched it, so I've got a good idea of at least one layer. I've researched this. You're telekinetic. We grew up together, Eve. Why didn't you trust me enough to tell me?"

"I was afraid you'd look at me like a freak. And then that day, when Freddie Poe called me one of his endless names and you jumped him, I lost control. My power hurt you, *scared* you...." She shook her head. "I was terrified, knowing what was inside me did that. There was no way I was going to chance hurting you again."

"So you backed off. Put up walls. And years later refused to marry me."

"I didn't want you hurt."

His fingers tightened on her wrists. "I loved you, and you forced me out of your life. You think that didn't hurt?"

A glance at the screwdriver stabbing into the wall had a sob clawing in Eve's throat. "It hurt less than if I'd killed you," she said in a shaky whisper.

"Felt about the same." He gave himself a second to acknowledge how good her long, lean body felt beneath his before levering into a sitting position.

"Tell me about your telekinesis," he said, pulling her up beside him. "Is it why you can't sleep?"

Still trembling, she wrapped her arms around her waist. Considering she'd almost killed him, he had a right to some answers. "There's this nightmare. It's all twisted up with my power."

"I'm listening."

"My cousins and I inherited powers from our great-grandmother. [Aurora](#) can control the weather. [Celeste](#) is a medium. [Skye](#) reads minds. I'm telekinetic." Eve angled her chin. "Do you remember I used to spend every summer in North Carolina with my uncle and cousins?"

"I developed a dislike for summer because you always left. I missed you."

Eve tried to ignore the little twist his words put in her stomach. "Every year Uncle Harold took me aside to tell me about our great-grandmother, [Solange](#). According to him, there's a curse on her and Great-Grandfather [Jonathon](#) that keeps them from joining together in the afterlife."

Travis raised a brow. "Who cursed them?"

"[A wizard](#)." Eve pictured him: shock-white hair, flowing robes, his face set in an unnatural grimace. "He's the star of my nightmares, but when he talks, it's with my uncle's voice."

Travis listened while she told him about the wizard urging her to *find her piece*. Then she explained what she knew about the curse he'd placed on her great-grandparents. While she spoke, Eve kept her gaze trained on Travis's. And felt her heart swell when she saw no doubt in his dark eyes, no revulsion. Just deep, depthless acceptance. *If only*, she thought.

"Let me see if I have this straight," Travis said when she finished. "When you find your piece of the Stone of Power, you put it with the pieces your cousins already have? And that breaks the curse?"

"In theory." Eve scooped back her hair. "But it won't happen. *Can't* happen."

"Why?"

"I have no clue where to start looking for the last piece of the Stone. And I have to be able to control my power. You just got a demo of how little control I have." She didn't mention that finding love was a part of the formula. She'd opened herself up to Travis because she owed him an explanation. To open her life to him would put him in more danger, something she would never do.

"So, your answer to the problem is doing nothing? To just continue having nightmares until you drop from exhaustion?"

"No, there is something I can do." Her gaze swept the room. The walls were patched, the baseboards gnawed by mice and the ceiling sagged. Yet, she pictured rich paint and polished wood, and knew how glorious the house would be refurbished. "I quit, Travis. You'll have to hire another contractor to do this job," she said, and instantly felt the ache that came with the words. "I have to stay away from you. Far away."

"You're not quitting, this house or me." Keeping his eyes on hers, Travis stroked a hand over her hair, let his fingers drift into it. The image of her walking away scraped him raw. "I came back to Mendocino for you and this house. I'm not letting go of either."

"I don't want to hurt you. Ever again."

"Then don't pull away. From this job or me." Over the past five years, he'd learned to wheel and deal to get what he wanted. He saw no reason the situation that now faced him shouldn't be handled the same. "If what I read about telekinesis is accurate, a person has to channel their total concentration on an object in order to move it."

Her mouth thinned. "You think I channeled my concentration on that screwdriver?"

"No. I think you're so exhausted you can't concentrate on anything. The first thing we need to do is figure out how to stop the nightmare so you can get some sleep. How about calling your cousins?" He gestured at the cell phone hooked to her waistband. "Would they know?"

Eve shook her head. "I called them all. No clue."

"Did your uncle put the family history in writing?"

"No, he..." Narrowing her eyes, Eve forced her fatigued brain to work. "Uncle Harold sent me a crate a few years ago. In the letter with it he said he was entrusting the Deveaux magic to me because I have the strongest power."

"What was in the crate?"

"I don't know. The last thing I wanted was to have to deal with more family magic. I hauled the crate into the attic and never opened it."

Travis traced his fingertip along her bottom lip. "How about we go do that now?"

Chapter Four

Travis stopped his Porsche in front of the two-story white Victorian with hunter green shutters. "Didn't the widow Throckmorton live here?" he asked, surveying the structure snuggled into a cove of pines that provided shade against the late morning sun.

"Yes," Eve said, unbuckling her seat belt. "She died a few years ago. I'm renting from her son. Still trying to decide if the place suits me enough to buy it."

Travis didn't comment as they took the steps up to the porch. He already considered the battered house he'd hired her to refurbish as *theirs*. But figuring out how to get Eve Deveaux to call the place home was not his priority. Not while she was still chalk-pale from what happened there a half hour ago.

Replaying the event had him frowning. He had seen more than devastation in her eyes after she lost control over her power of telekinesis and rocketed the screwdriver at his head. He'd spied hard resolve to distance herself from him. She'd gotten away with that five years ago when she'd refused to marry him, and his wounded pride and frustrated fury had propelled him out of town.

When he'd gotten over being mad, he'd hurt like hell. Never again. He now understood she'd turned her back on him to protect him. If his standing at her side put him in danger of getting his head bashed in by flying objects, too bad. That was where he intended to spend the rest of his life.

"We need a crowbar and hammer to open Uncle Harold's crate," Eve said as she unlocked the front door to reveal a hallway scattered with colorful rugs.

Upstairs, she retrieved the tools from a closet. Her face tight with strain, she offered Travis the hammer and crowbar. "You should carry these to the attic. To make sure I don't send them flying at your head."

"I'll carry them but not because I'm in fear for my life." Giving her a grin that was all innocence, he slid the tools from her hands. "A delicate flower like you shouldn't have to lug around heavy equipment when there's a big, strong man around."

The comment earned him an eye-roll before she opened a nearby door. Travis followed her up a flight of creaky wooden stairs.

The attic was empty but for a scarred table and the wooden crate shoved against the wall that boasted the room's lone window. Dust motes hung in the still, quiet air.

Holding up the hammer and crowbar, Travis moved toward the crate. "I'll do the honors."

"Fine." Eve wasn't sure how she felt about opening the crate. Like her power, she had tried to ignore its existence, leaving it sealed to keep whatever was inside contained. Now, despite

her precautions, she felt her own power seeping back. And feared it.

Should she also fear the crate's contents?

Her throat went dry when Travis laid the lid aside. "Ready to take a look?"

Taking a steadying breath, Eve scooped up curled wood shavings. She instantly unearthed a thin bundle of yellowed paper, tied with a blood-red ribbon. Tucked beneath the ribbon was a card with the words Solange Deveaux's tools of magic scrawled in her uncle's handwriting.

Beside Eve, Travis plunged his hands into the wood shavings. "I thought everyone used foam peanuts these days."

"Uncle Harold was old-fashioned."

Minutes later, the crate was empty and the objects they'd unearthed sat on the table.

Travis picked up the double-edged dagger, tested its point with a fingertip. "Razor sharp." He placed it between the chalice and cauldron, then slid Eve a look. "Was your great-granny a witch?"

Eve took in the censer and the shells that had spilled from a drawstring pouch. "I'm not sure," she answered, running a fingertip across the top of a black-faced mirror.

Travis dipped his head toward the folded pages. "Maybe something in there will tell us how to stop your nightmare," he said quietly.

Eve untied the slash of red ribbon and unfolded the pages. Her heart clenched when she read *Deveaux Family Legend*. "Whenever Uncle Harold talked about the curse, he always mentioned Great-Grandfather Jonathon's journal, but this is the first time I've seen it." Eve angled toward Travis so he could read over her shoulder.

"Your uncle had already clued you in to everything about the wizard's curse, right?" Travis asked after reading the final page.

"Except he never mentioned the wizard's name. Darien." Instantly, Eve felt a premonition, like footsteps of the devil creeping across her flesh. Her shoulders stiffened against an involuntary shudder.

"Something wrong?"

"No." She looked back at the journal. "I also didn't know Jonathon had sketched a likeness of the Stone of Power. My cousins won't like hearing that I've never seen a piece of stone that resembles the drawing."

"Hardly your fault."

"True." Eve laid the pages beside Solange's tools of magic. "It *is* my fault that I choose not to

use my power, even if I find my piece of the Stone." She met Travis's gaze. "How can I try to help break the curse when I can't control what's inside me? When it *hurts* people I care about? When it harms *you*?"

"Eve." Travis cupped her face in his hands, felt the creamy softness of her flesh. "Having power — any kind — is a tricky business. If it weren't, it wouldn't mean anything. You're afraid —"

"You should be, too." Her gaze flicked to his right cheek, and he could almost feel it track across the scar. "What's inside me scarred you. Today, it almost killed you. Why aren't you running in the opposite direction?"

He dipped his head. "You think I mind wearing the mark of the woman I've wanted most of my life?" he asked softly, his lips an inch from hers. "Once you understand what's inside of you, you won't be afraid of it."

"Don't you think I've tried to understand?" Beneath his palms, he felt her stiffen. "I've gotten *nowhere*."

"So, we figure out what's going on together." He burrowed his fingers into her short, silky hair. "While we're at it, there's something else we can work on."

Eve couldn't stop her breath from quickening when his mouth settled on hers. Couldn't prevent her heart from doing a long, unsteady cartwheel. Was helpless to halt the tiny explosions inside her when his dark, rabidly male taste streaked straight to her center like an arrow on target.

For a mindless moment the years fell away. Travis Bristow had always done incredible things to her mouth. Still did.

And with that familiar, primal thrill came the reminder that she'd forced him out of her life to protect him. She thought about her great-grandparents, cursed to spend eternity apart, and regret knotted her stomach. Still, they were long dead. The man presently kissing her as if she were the only woman on earth was very much alive. She wouldn't risk hurting him again. She had locked her power inside her for good reason. Had spent over a decade controlling it. Had no desire to understand it. All she wanted was to keep it locked away. *Deny its existence*.

Even as those thoughts formed in her head, the musty air began to churn. An icy vapor rippled against Eve's spine, warring with the heat in her blood. "Lord..."

"Eve?"

She backed from Travis's touch. "Don't you feel it?"

His eyes narrowed. "What?"

Before she could answer the cold slapped her like a fist, staggering her backward against the wall like a drunk on a binge. She yelped when the wall began to vibrate. Then the floor. Next,

the entire house.

Terror washed over Eve when something began clawing its way inside her brain.

Chapter Five

Panic cutting through her, [Eve](#) pressed back against the attic's vibrating wall. Like steam from a hot tub on a cold night, gray clouds oozed from the wooden floor. Fog billowed, taking on the form of a man wearing long robes. A wizard.

[Darlen](#).

"Eve, find your piece!"

The familiar voice had Eve's panic receding. "Uncle Harold?" This was a replay of her nightmare, she realized. Except that she was wide-awake.

Transfixed, she stared at the vision hovering before her. Dressed in full wizard regalia, he had long, shock-white hair. His skin looked hard, almost stonelike. His gnarled hands extended toward the sky as if reaching for something just beyond his grasp. His mouth was set in an unnatural grimace, eternally frozen in a moment of agony. His lips remained unmoving, even when he spoke.

"Find your piece!"

"Eve!"

[Travis](#)'s shout jerked her gaze from the wizard. She saw now she was surrounded by the swirling, frigid fog. And that Travis stood on the other side of the churning eddy, ramming a shoulder against it as if it were as solid as brick and mortar.

"Find your piece, Eve."

She looked at the wizard. Since she was awake, she was going to find out what the hell her dead uncle was up to.

"Why the nightmares, Uncle Harold?"

"For years you've cowered behind fear of what's inside you. Denied who and what you are. I prayed you would get past that, but you haven't. I've come to remind you of your legacy."

"Like I need a reminder," Eve shot back. "What's with the disguise?"

"To show you the enemy your great-grandmother battled. When the end came, she didn't cower. Didn't deny her magic. She stood up to Darlen. Doing so, [Solange](#) sacrificed eternity with her beloved [Jonathon](#). She did that for her child and all her progeny. She did that for you,

Eve."

Eve fisted her hands against an instant flash of guilt. Her uncle had always known what buttons to push to get her squirming about not taking her inherited power as seriously as he thought she should.

"I know what Great-Grandmother Solange did, Uncle Harold. You told me often enough."

"Then you know why you must find your piece of the Stone. Acknowledge your power. Use your gift. Release Solange and Jonathon from Darien's curse. You read Jonathon's journal. What more proof do you need of his great love for Solange, and hers for him? They've waited so long to be together."

As her uncle spoke, tendrils of fog swirled out of the wizard's robes.

"Your cousins have their piece of the Stone of Power. They wait for you to find yours. Solange and Jonathon wait for you. You must fulfill your legacy."

The fog around Eve thickened, trapping her against the attic's vibrating wall in a tight, gray embrace. "I can't fulfill it."

"Won't!" The word blasted out, turning the ice-cold air razor-sharp against Eve's flesh. *"You're just like Solange,"* her uncle taunted. *"At first, she turned her back on her calling. Denied what she was. When she saw her mistake, it was too late to remedy all the damage. Because of that, she walks alone. Do you wish that same fate for yourself?"*

"Eve!" Travis shouted. "Dammit, what's going on? How the hell do I get through this?"

Unable to move, she stared through the swirling fog. Despite the mist, she saw hardened fury in Travis's eyes as he stabbed the blade of Solange's dagger at the dense eddy.

"See how he fights to get to you? He wants you, Eve. He loves you. You only have to find your piece of the Stone. Embrace your power. Break the curse. Love," her uncle's voice crooned. *"You'll have it with the man you've wanted since you were very young. Use your gift and you'll spend eternity together."*

"It's not a gift," Eve shot back, her heart thudding in her throat. "It's my own personal curse." She blinked away tears. "What's inside me hurts the people I love."

She looked at Travis, still swiping the dagger's blade against the impenetrable fog. And, yes, she loved him. Still. Always.

"I'll spend my life alone to keep him safe. I'll spend eternity alone!"

Her words lit the wizard's eyes like fire. A roar sounded, the fog swirled with thundering intensity.

The sudden chime of Eve's cell phone was like a flash of lightning through the storm. A

ghostly white mist boiled up from the floor. The fog bank closed, swallowing the wizard in a vaporous whirl.

The house stopped shaking.

The air turned warm.

"Eve!" Tossing the dagger aside, Travis dragged her into his arms. There'd been nothing inside him but bright terror from the moment the fog engulfed her. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." She burrowed into his arms while a low, flat chime sounded on the air. "Yes."

With unsteady hands, he eased her face back so that he could see for himself. She was pale, her eyes wide. "What happened?"

"Didn't you see the wizard? Couldn't you hear him?"

"All I saw was you, surrounded by a fog bank. Fog that was as strong as steel." He pulled her closer, the helplessness he'd felt slicing through him. "I couldn't get to you."

Suddenly aware that the relentless chime came from Eve's cell phone, Travis jerked it off her belt, checked the display. "[C. Deveaux](#)."

"Celeste," Eve said, reaching for the phone. "My cousin who talks to dead people."

"Sounds like she no longer has a corner on that market," Travis said before pressing a kiss to Eve's forehead.

* * *

"She's sure about that?" Travis asked fifteen minutes later as he and Eve carried the tools of magic downstairs to her small, tidy living room.

"Positive." Eve settled her great-grandmother's cauldron, chalice and pouch of shells on her coffee table. "According to Celeste, Great-Grandfather Jonathon was very specific when he communed with her. He told her my piece of the Stone of Power is somewhere in Mendocino. In the possession of my tormentor."

"Tormentor." Travis sat the black-faced mirror and censer on the table. "Did Jonathon name your tormentor?"

"No."

"Think it's the wizard?"

"Actually, it's Uncle Harold tormenting me in the guise of the wizard." Frowning, Eve sank into the corner of her overstuffed couch. "Like I told Celeste, Great-Gramps is wrong. If my tormentor had my piece of the Stone he wouldn't be haranguing me to find it."

"Makes sense." Travis laid the double-edged dagger beside the mirror then settled beside her. "I don't suppose Jonathon had any pointers on how to exorcise your dead uncle so you can get some sleep?"

"That didn't come up." Eve closed her eyes, opened them. "Celeste sounded ecstatic over the prospect that I might stumble over my piece of the Stone soon. The other cousins will feel the same."

Travis gave her a considering look. "And you're far from elated. Because even if you find the stone, the curse can't be broken unless you embrace your power."

"Which I won't do." Knowing now that her refusal doomed not only her great-grandparents to spend eternity apart, but also herself and Travis, had tears burning in her eyes, her throat. "Can't do."

"Worry about that if and when the time comes." Travis slid an arm around her shoulders. "Did Celeste impart any other words of wisdom from your great-gramps?"

Taking comfort in Travis's touch, Eve curled closer against him. "He said I should expect to hear from my cousin [Aurora](#). Rory."

"What's her specialty again?"

"She controls the weather."

In the next heartbeat, a crash of thunder splintered the air.

Chapter Six

The rain that began shyly spewed into a tempest. Now, twenty-four hours later, the storm held Mendocino in its snapping teeth, snarling traffic and causing intermittent blackouts.

Inside [Travis](#) Bristow's cliff-hugging house, [Eve](#) knelt on the kitchen floor, attacking layers of linoleum with a chisel while shooting furtive glances at the ceiling. When the rain began, her crew scrambled to secure a tarp over the high, pitched roof. But with the windows rattling harder against each blast of wind and rain, she expected the tarp to rip away and torrents of water to pour down on her head.

The freak storm had caught every meteorologist on the West coast by surprise.

Cousin [Aurora's](#) doing, Eve thought.

Restless and edgy, she wielded the chisel harder against the stubborn linoleum. She had no idea what the link was between the storm and her great-grandfather's pronouncement that her piece of the Stone of Power was somewhere in Mendocino. In her tormentor's possession.

Knowing she might soon find the stone lodged a fist of dread in Eve's stomach. When that day came, she would break faith with her cousins by refusing to use her power. A refusal that would prevent her great-grandparents from reuniting in the hereafter.

By those acts, Eve knew she would also condemn herself to spend eternity alone.

So be it, Eve thought, ignoring the hitch in her heart. She would do whatever it took to prevent her power from again harming the man she loved.

* * *

Travis paused in the doorway, shoving his fingers through his rain-damp hair while he watched Eve work. Dressed in jeans and a denim shirt, she wielded the chisel as if the devil himself looked over her shoulder.

Maybe he did, Travis thought.

He knew instinctively she hadn't told him everything that had happened yesterday while she was enshrouded in the fog with [the wizard](#). The encounter had turned her eyes even more guarded and instilled a controlled urgency in the way she moved.

He would find out. If he couldn't scale the barrier she'd erected around herself, he would rip it apart with his bare hands. He would uncover her secrets. And they would deal with them. Together.

The roar of the wind outside nearly masked the chime of Eve's cell phone. While she answered, Travis moved into the kitchen, setting a bag of takeout burgers and fries on the counter.

Eve ended the call a few moments later. "I'll be damned."

Travis raised a brow. "Another one of your cousins calling?"

"No." Rising, she tossed her chisel into a toolbox and stripped off her work gloves. "Freddie Poe."

"Good old Freddie." Travis conjured up an image of the hulking bully who'd considered Eve fair game in the harassment department until Travis stepped into her life. Since Freddie hadn't been bright enough to keep his mouth shut, the bully had given Travis numerous opportunities to pound him.

Stroking a fingertip across the scar on his right cheek, Travis felt a thought shift in his brain, but it wouldn't gel. "Did Freddie call just to say hello?"

"Nope. He owns the Raven, a dive bar out on the highway. Rain's leaking on a couple of his pool tables and he wants a tarp on the roof, ASAP." Eve glanced at the takeout bag. "You'll be eating dinner alone."

"Can't your crew deal with the tarp?"

"Normally." Eve slipped on her rain parka. "Freddie's still as mean as a snake so I want to be there to run interference in case he decides to get more obnoxious than usual."

Eve had barely gotten the words out when the elusive thought clicked in Travis's brain. "I'm going with you."

Her mouth twitched. "Think you still need to defend me against the big, bad school bully?"

"I'll always be available for that." Travis skimmed a finger down her cheek. "Eve, remember how Freddie used to torment you?"

"Yeah, I..." Her eyes widened. "You think Freddie's the tormentor my great-grandfather was talking about? That *Freddie Poe* has my piece of the Stone of Power?"

"Think about it. [Celeste](#) communes with your great-granddad who mentions *your* tormenter has your piece of the rock. Then Aurora delivers rain of biblical proportions. Now, Freddie 'the tormentor' Poe's roof is leaking."

Eve eased out a breath. "Guess we need to show Freddie my great-grandfather [Jonathon's](#) sketch of the Stone of Power."

* * *

Travis pulled his Porsche into the Raven's graveled parking lot. While rain sheeted down he studied the small building with blacked-out windows. A red beer sign provided the only exterior lighting. "A pit bull would think twice before going into this place."

"Freddie *is* a pit bull." Eve jerked up the hood of her parka, then stepped out into the rainy evening gloom. She motioned to the members of her crew who'd hauled the roof tarp in a pickup.

Inside the Raven, beer flowed and the jukebox blared country music. As he and Eve edged through a crush of customers, Travis noted the booths and tables were fashioned out of plywood. *Classy*.

Freddie Poe stood behind the bar, looking just as Travis remembered him: short and stocky with pasty skin and lank brown hair. The vivid red Hawaiian shirt he wore unbuttoned to the waist was the only discernable change from their school days. *Classy*.

Freddie's lips curled into more sneer than smile when he spotted Travis. "Heard you were back in town, Bristow," he said, revealing a crowding of smoke-stained teeth.

"That's right." In case Freddie still entertained the notion he could pick on Eve, Travis placed a protective hand on her shoulder. "Back for good."

Freddie's dark gaze slid to Eve. "You gonna fix my roof?"

"My crew's spreading the tarp now." Eve unzipped her parka. "Travis and I thought we'd wait here until they finish the job."

"Bar stools are for paying customers."

"You haven't changed, Freddie." Travis had to hold back from dragging the moron outside and hammering on him, just for old times' sake. Instead, he tossed a twenty on the bar. "That's for two beers. What's left is yours for looking at a drawing."

Freddie pulled two long-necks out of a cooler, twisted off lids and placed them on the bar. "A drawing of what?"

Travis reached into the pocket of his windbreaker. "I hired Eve to refurbish a house. I want a fireplace built of ornamental stones that look something like this."

Freddie's gaze dropped to the paper Travis laid on the bar. "Are those some kind of mystical symbols carved into that rock?"

"Could be," Travis said. "Any idea where I can find some around here?"

Something flickered in Freddie's eyes. "I don't know nothing about rocks."

Eve craned her head toward the door. "My foreman just signaled that they've got the tarp over the roof." She met Travis's gaze. "Ready to go?"

"Ready." Travis looked back at Freddie. "If you see any stones like that, call me. Price is no object."

Minutes later, Eve slid into the Porsche's passenger seat. "In school, Freddie never could get by with telling lies. His eyes always gave him away."

"They still do."

She stared out into the rainy night. "Think he has the fourth piece of the Stone of Power?"

"I'd bet on it." Travis's fingers slid around hers, warm and sure. "Eve." He lifted her hand, pressed his mouth against her palm. "We'll find your stone. And then we'll deal with whatever comes next. Together."

Arousal flooded into her. Then just as quickly transformed into an ache in her heart.

How could it not when her future lay so clearly before her, barren and alone?

Chapter Seven

After leaving the Raven, [Travis](#) and [Eve](#) picked up another order of burgers and fries. By the

time Travis steered the Porsche into Eve's driveway, the rain had stopped. On their way to the front door, Travis glanced up. Silver images of moon and stars were visible through the rapidly thinning clouds.

Inside, he lit logs in the fireplace while Eve brought plates, glasses and a bottle of wine into the living room.

While they ate on the couch, flames danced over thick logs. The fire cast a golden glow on [Solange Deveaux](#)'s tools of magic, still on the coffee table where they'd placed them the previous day.

Sipping his wine, Travis leaned back on the couch and gave Eve a considering look. "I've seen you swing a hammer, use a drill, cinch pipes."

She settled into the cushions. "That's what I do for a living."

"Think you'd be just as good using tools of magic?"

She paused, her wineglass partway to her mouth. "I don't do magic."

"What do you call telekinesis?"

"A blight."

And that, he thought, was the problem. Until Eve accepted who she was and what she was meant to do, she would never be open to him. *To them.*

He gestured his glass at the black-faced mirror. "What is that thing again? And what does it do?"

"It's a scrying mirror. Sort of a crystal ball."

"Can you use it to find out if we're right about Freddie Poe having your piece of the Stone of Power?"

"No." She set her glass on the table with a snap and rose. "And even if I could, I wouldn't. I'm in no hurry to find the stone."

Travis rose, faced her. "Because when you do, you'll have to use your power."

"I *won't* use it." Standing before the fire, the flames leapt gold behind her. "I'll give my stone to the cousins. But that's as far as I'll go in helping break the curse [Darren](#) placed on my great-grandparents."

"You can live the rest of your life knowing they're forever apart when they maybe don't have to be? Caught between heaven and earth?"

"I'll have to." Her eyes darkened, then went flat and cool as she raised her chin. "The same

way I'll have to live my life without you."

Travis snagged her arm. "Stop right there."

She lifted a hand to shove him away. He simply closed his fingers over her wrist. "You're not pushing me away this time, Eve. I won't back off. I won't go away. And I won't stop loving you."

Her heart was bleeding, she could feel it. "Travis —"

He leaned in, ruthless determination glinting in his eyes. "I'm not giving up on us."

"There isn't an *us*."

"There will be."

And, oh, how she wanted that, she thought as his touch, his nearness, the musky scent of him had the breath backing up in her lungs.

"I can't control what's inside me, you know that." With piercing regret, she reached up, brushed a finger across his scarred cheek. "My power hurt you. The other day it almost killed you. I can't have a life with you."

"I won't have one without you." His fingers tightened on her arm. "You think I'm perfect, Eve? You're going to have to take me as I am, too."

"*You* haven't tried to kill *me*."

"Not yet," he grated.

Frustration had her hands balling into fists. "You think I want to turn away from you again? You think it didn't hurt me to do that?" Swamped with emotion, she stared into the flames. The stirring of her blood, woman for man, had her pulse throbbing. "All my life I've just wanted to be *normal*."

"That's one thing you'll never be." Travis wrapped one arm around her waist and jerked her against him. "Miracles aren't normal, Eve. You're my miracle. There's no magic in my life without you."

Her lips parted. "How is a woman supposed to resist a man who says things like that?"

"When a man says things like that, resistance is the last thing he's got on his mind."

Her heart thundered as she gazed up into his face while love swamped her. She had loved him for so long. Held him at arm's length because she knew they had no future. Still, they had tonight. This one moment in time.

"You're a handsome man with sexy words, Travis Bristow."

"And you're a gorgeous, sexy woman, Eve Deveaux." He pulled her shirt from the waistband of her jeans. Seconds later, they tugged each other down onto the rug in front of the blazing fire.

"In my heart, there's been no one ever but you," Travis murmured.

The feel of his hands on her flesh, stroking, soothing even as they aroused, was a gift. Eve sank into that, into the wanting of that as much as the wanting of him.

She felt the wonder of his touch in every nerve, every pulse. She needed to give, as well as take.

Her hands slicked beneath his sweater, shoved it over his head. She could count his heartbeats, quickening, gaining strength as her lips ravaged his chest.

The wild, ruthless kisses that Travis raced down her throat only made her crave more. On a moan, she fisted her hands in his hair and wrapped around him as he rolled her onto her back.

Around them, time stretched, turned pliant.

And while lovers mated, flames leapt in the hearth, sending out heated fingers to caress life back into the implements of magic.

* * *

Sparks of light roused Travis from sleep. At first he thought they came from the fireplace. But one glance told him the flames had died to embers.

Keeping his arms wrapped tight around Eve, he lifted his head off the rug. His gaze tracked the light to the coffee table.

Eve raised her head off his shoulder, looked around dazedly. "I fell asleep," she murmured.

"Me, too. Eve, look at your great-grandmother's mirror."

She turned her head, then jolted to her knees. "It's...on!"

"On?" Travis sat up. Inside the mirror's black face he saw a shadowy image that looked like a figure moving in hazy moonlight.

"I don't understand." Eve snatched up her shirt, slid it on. "This isn't how the mirror is supposed to work."

"These things come with directions?" Travis asked, glancing back at the mirror. The shadow had become distinct enough he could make out a man's form.

"The ways of scrying are passed down through generations." Eve stared at the mirror. "To

scry, one must create a space and consecrate it."

"How?"

"By performing a banishing ritual. Or casting a circle. Doing so creates a sense of protection. Then the scryer must achieve a state of relaxed awareness."

"Relaxed awareness," Travis repeated, a smile curving his lips. "Sweetheart, I think we performed our own little ritual right here on the rug."

Eve blinked at him. "Are you suggesting we're seeing an image in my great-grandmother's scrying mirror because we had sex?"

"Made love," he corrected. "Consider what Solange did in the name of love. Maybe she's just helping us out here." He raised a shoulder. "You have a better explanation, toss it out and we'll vote on it."

"I..." Eve stabbed a finger at the mirror. "Travis, look!"

"I'll be damned." The mirror's surface now showed a wash of color. Despite the hazy moonlight, there was no missing the vivid red of the Hawaiian shirt. "Freddie Poe."

"What's he doing?" Scrunching her nose, Eve edged closer to the mirror. "It looks like he's walking through a field of..."

"Tombstones. He's at the cemetery." Travis snatched his sweater off the rug, jerking it on. "Let's go find out what Poe's up to."

Chapter Eight

Gripping [Travis's](#) hand, [Eve](#) gave thanks he'd grabbed the small flashlight out of the Porsche's glove box before they scaled the cemetery's locked gate. Overhead, the moon ghosted through the clouds, casting long shadows on the gravestones that thrust up and out of the rain-soaked earth.

Travis's hand tightened on Eve's when a sharp pounding pierced the silence. "Over there."

She followed his gaze. Freddie Poe stood illuminated in a flashlight's beam. His red Hawaiian shirt provided a vivid slash of color against the tall grave marker he pounded with a hammer.

Eve noted that the marker, and a handful of others, were circled by a low wrought-iron fence that swept up into an arched entrance. Atop the arch, POE was fashioned out of the same iron.

"Hel-lo, Freddie," Travis said as he and Eve walked beneath the arch.

The man sprung back as if he'd touch a live wire.

The first thing Travis noted was the piece of the Stone of Power inlaid in the center of the granite monument. The second was the name inscribed in the granite. "So, Freddie, after you closed the Raven did you just decide it's a nice night to hammer the hell out of Grandmother Poe's gravestone?"

Freddie shoved his lank brown hair away from his face. "You're trespassing on my family's private plot."

Eve stepped closer to the towering monument, her hand going to her throat. "My stone." She looked at Freddie. "Where did you get it?"

"It's rightfully ours, so don't get your panties in a wad. Some old guy gave the stone to the sexton who tended the grave of a Poe ancestor buried in Baltimore. You know, that famous writer guy?"

Eve gaped. "*Edgar Allen Poe?*"

"Yeah, him. The sexton later gave the stone to a Poe cousin who visited the grave. The stone got passed down through the family." Freddie shrugged. "Granny set a lot of store by that rock. Wanted it in her headstone."

Eve shot him a burning look. "And now you're hammering it out?"

Freddie rolled his eyes. "Like Granny knows the difference." He looked at Travis. "You said you'd pay for the rock."

"I will, if that's what Eve wants." Travis met her gaze. Already he could see her struggling with what to do. A band tightened his chest. He wished he knew a way to smooth the path that lay before them.

Eve stepped closer to the monument. Instantly, something crept through her senses. Her hands went unsteady. Her heart raced. Sweat slicked her flesh.

And evil dropped over her like a black, smothering shroud.

"Leave it." Sheer, black panic almost overwhelmed her. "Leave the stone where it is."

Freddie cursed. "You gonna pay for the damage to my granny's headstone?"

"Shut up!" Travis snapped. He met Eve's gaze. "What do you feel?"

"Evil." Air heaved in and out of her lungs in ragged breaths. She swung around, saw nothing but dark shadow and silver moonlight. "Like something's waiting in the dark." She backed away from the gravestone. "It wants me to take the stone. I *won't*."

A roar rose from the ground. The air swirled; lightning bolted from the sky. The towering metal

arch exploded into fiery sparks. Then crashed down on Travis.

"No!" Eve lunged, dropping beside him. He lay on his side, still as death, the arch covering his head and chest.

"Travis!" She shoved at the metal, found it too heavy to budge. "Freddie, help me."

"I'm outta here!" he yelled as he leapt the fence.

"Travis!" In wild panic she shoved at the metal. "Travis!"

Frantically, Eve swept the beam of Freddie's flashlight across the ground, searching for the tools he'd used. She found nothing.

She was alone, she realized. Save for her panic, her fear.

Her power.

"Okay. I can do this." She dragged in a breath. While she had lain with Travis she'd surrendered to shuddering need and embraced love. Now, to save him, she would embrace her magic.

She stared fiercely at the arch; felt her mind flex.

The metal lifted minutely, hovered, then lowered back on Travis.

"No!"

The Stone, Eve thought as the Deveaux legend swirled through her head. To fully embrace her power, she must possess her piece of the Stone of Power.

She dashed to the tall gravestone, ignoring the sense of evil that gripped her. Eve focused her gaze on the piece of stone embedded there, its mystical symbols shadows in the flashlight's beam.

The flow of Eve's thoughts shuddered, then bubbled from a wellspring deep inside her.

The stone shifted. The granite monument in which it was embedded suddenly split with a jagged crack. Keeping her concentration on the stone, Eve felt her mind flex.

The stone slid from between the granite pieces.

Eve grabbed it out of the air. She dashed back to where Travis lay, unmoving. Gripping the stone to her heart, she embraced it along with the gift her great-grandmother had passed to her.

A surge of energy rushed inside her, filling her. She shed all shields. Tore open all locks.

And felt her mind bend as the power inside her burst free.

The metal arch rose, trembled on the air. And then rose higher.

Eve felt blood pounding in her temples. Her body burned with energy that seemed to be coming from nowhere and seemed to be going nowhere. Mentally, she shifted the heavy metal away from Travis. Seconds later she lowered it to the ground.

"Travis!" She dropped beside him, weak and panting, physically spent from the effort.

"Eve?" He pushed himself up into a sitting position, vaguely disoriented. He had a headache that was off the scale and his shoulder ached like a fresh wound. When his eyes focused, he saw Eve kneeling beside him, gripping her quarter of the Stone of Power to her heart.

"What happened?"

"You're alive!" She wrapped her arms around his neck, nearly toppling him back over.

"Yeah." He frowned. "I remember a lightning bolt, then nothing after that."

* * *

Later, they lay curled together on Eve's couch, watching flames dance in the fireplace. Eve had placed her piece of the Stone of Power on the coffee table amid her great-grandmother's tools of magic.

Travis slid a fingertip along Eve's bare hip. "Did I thank you for lifting that arch off of me?"

"A couple of times." Having accepted her great-grandmother's legacy, Eve felt serenity stir inside her. For the first time in her life she no longer feared her power. She was at utter peace with herself. And the life that lay ahead of her.

Smiling, she laid a hand on Travis's heart. "I have something to thank you for, too."

"That would be?"

"You came back to Mendocino for me." She pressed a kiss to his scarred cheek. "I love you, Travis. I'm so very glad you came back."

"I had to. When I fell in love with you all those years ago, it was forever." He stroked her thigh. "We're not the only ones getting a second chance to be together."

"[Solange](#) and [Jonathon](#)," Eve murmured, her gaze moving to the table where the stone lay. She had already called her cousins. They would meet soon to reunite the four pieces of the Stone of Power.

[Darren](#)'s curse would then be broken.

Her great-grandparents would reunite for eternity.

For the Deveaux family, the world would be right.

* * *

Hundreds of miles away, all was gray and black in the cemetery where crypts stained with lichen crouched on boggy soil. A sliver of moon wedged between high clouds touched the stone statue of a dark wizard. Around him, the air of expectation thickened like the mist that hovered between the thick trunks of cypress and weeping willows.

And inside the statue, the spark of life burned brighter.

The End

Eternally Yours

The Power of Love
by **Maggie Shayne**

Aurora, Celeste, Skye and Eve have each embraced their special power and found true love. Now, the four cousins gather to mend the Stone of Power and release the souls of Jonathon and Solange from Darien's curse. But are they prepared to fight the evil wizard himself?

Chapter One

"Are you sure this is the right place to be doing this?" [Rory](#) asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

"What better place," [Celeste](#) said softly, "than [Solange's](#) grave?" She shivered a little, though it was far from cold tonight. It was the atmosphere. The tall ornate crypts, a city of the dead, rising all around them. The swirling mists writhing on the ground. The thick black clouds blotting out even the moon and stars.

"I don't like it here," [Eve](#) put in, looking around the cemetery with fear in her brown eyes. "It feels...dark. Evil."

"Don't be ridiculous. The ancestral home is a stone's throw from here. Solange is here," Celeste began, but she let her voice trail off. It felt ridiculous to lecture her cousins when she

was every bit as uncomfortable herself.

"You could at least do something about the atmosphere, couldn't you, Rory?" [Skye](#) asked.

Rory closed her eyes and the others went silent, watching her. In a moment, the ghostly wind that had been moaning and whispering around the crypts and statues faded and died. The dark clouds blotting out the face of the moon broke apart, sailed away like black ghost-ships on a midnight sea. And the full moon gleamed bright and silvery, bathing the crypts in light and shadow.

No doubts for Rory. She cast, and she conjured, and the results were visible, palpable. Rain fell or snow or hail. No questioning her perceptions. No wondering if the voices were only in her head. And no question in her beloved [Luke](#)'s eyes either. No room for doubt. Eve's power was like that, too. When she moved something with her mind, there was no questioning whether it had really happened. It simply did.

"Hell, I'm not sure that's any better," Skye said. She was looking now at the [statue](#) near the Deveaux family crypt. Life-size, lifelike in every way, it was made to look only more real by the moonlight. "God, who put that awful thing here?"

"I'm more concerned as to why," Celeste whispered, eyeing the chiseled, harsh and somehow handsome face, the flowing robes, the hands forever gripping something that had long since crumbled away.

"It's almost as if it's real," Skye said softly. "I keep thinking I can hear its thoughts."

Eve shivered and rubbed her arms. "Yeah? What's it thinking?"

"I don't know. I can only make out whispers."

"Might not be the statue at all," Celeste said. "Might be the whispers of the dead. This place is humming with them. Maybe you're starting to channel them, like I do."

"That's not what it feels like," Skye said. "But then again, how the hell would I be sure?" She met Celeste's eyes.

Celeste understood. Her power and Skye's were the most alike. Skye heard the thoughts of the living. Celeste heard the voices of the dead. Tough to prove either of them. Though she'd never heard Skye speak of her lover doubting her abilities. As far as Celeste knew, [Nic](#) was a true believer.

"Can we just get this over with?" Rory asked. Clouds came creeping back over the face of the moon, and she waved an impatient hand and sent them skittering away. "I can't hold the weather off all night." She looked as if she could, with the moonlight setting her burnished red curls alight like a nimbus of power.

"So what do we do?" Eve asked.

"Hold on, I'll ask." Celeste closed her eyes. "Solange? Great-Grandmother, are you there?"

I'm here, child. But you already know what to do. Trust your instincts. They're the instincts of a witch, and will never steer you wrong. It's important you do this.

Nodding, Celeste looked at the others. "Form a circle," she told them. It was the first thing a witch did in most situations. So it ought to work now.

The four cousins formed a loose circle, right in front of the Deveaux family crypt.

"Solange can see us, she says," Celeste said, passing along the impressions she was receiving from her great-grandmother. "But she can't come to us. She isn't free yet. She's trapped...in the house."

As she said it, all four of them turned to look in the direction of the house. It was beyond Lafayette Cemetery's stone wall, a few blocks away.

"She says it does her heart good to see the wonder of her family, of her bloodline. It made it worthwhile, the sacrifice she made for us."

Beautiful, all of you, and strong. And you have each found love, Solange went on. But it is with you, Celeste, that I feel the strongest bond. I can speak to you, Celeste. It means so much that you can hear me. And beyond that, of all of you, you are the one who looks so like I did in life. It warms me to see you strong and proud in your caramel skin and raven hair.

"You've been so lonely, Grandmother. For so long. I know how you must ache for your [Jonathon](#), but it will be over soon," Celeste promised.

I would make the same choices again, Celeste. I did the right thing.

"Now what?" Eve whispered. She pushed a hand through her short, dark brown hair, a nervous gesture.

Take out the stones.

"Take out your pieces of the stone," Celeste said. She lifted her head, looked around the circle at each of her cousins in turn. Rory reached into a backpack, took out a hunk of stone, dropped the pack onto the ground. Skye had an expensive-looking handbag, large and brown with a gold clasp. She took her piece from that, then set the bag aside, her eyes only on the stone. Sable-haired Eve carried her stone in a leather satchel with a drawstring top. She took it out and tossed the satchel amid the crypts and pottery. Celeste took her own stone from the silk bag she'd taken to carrying belted around her waist. She held it in a two-handed grip, out in front of her, and the others copied her stance.

Put them on the ground, Solange whispered.

Celeste nodded. "Put them on the ground."

As she said it, she knelt down and, reverently, she laid her piece upon the well worn, oft-tread ground. The others did likewise, kneeling, lowering the pieces of stone to the ground, reluctantly letting go of them, and finally straightening again.

And Celeste spoke the words her grandmother gave to her.

"The stone was split, the curse was spoken. The stone is healed, the curse is broken. So mote it be."

"So mote it be," the other three repeated in one voice.

On the ground, the stones began to vibrate, to tremble. As the four women watched in wonder and awe, they moved. Slowly, tentatively at first, then with more vigor. Some of the pieces turned, rotating themselves into the correct position. Then, in one sudden burst of frantic motion, the four pieces slammed together in the very center of the circle the women had formed. Light burst from them, a blinding orange-yellow glow that brightened to pure white at the seams — sparks flew as the pieces melded.

And then the light died and the Stone of Power lay there in the very center of the circle, whole, not even a crack to show where it had once been broken.

Celeste felt something, a rush that made her jerk her gaze in the direction of the house. "Solange is free!" she shouted. She felt the woman waft into the cemetery to join her descendants with a warm, rose-scented breeze.

And then she appeared there. Translucent, wispy, like a veiled, smoky reflection of Celeste's own face, above an old-fashioned dress with a high lace collar.

"Solange," the others whispered.

They could see her, too!

But Celeste's joy was short-lived, for she saw the look on her great-grandmother's ghostly face, saw the fear in her eyes and felt the bolt of panic that shot through the other woman's heart as she looked beyond her descendants.

Celeste followed her gaze and she saw it, too. The statue, looming behind her cousins seemed to be...coming to life

Chapter Two

Something spattered on the ground, like stones being dropped by handfuls, and the three cousins turned, all of them, only to freeze in horror when they saw what [Celeste](#) and [Solange](#) had already seen.

The statue, the frightening, horrible statue, was...moving. The arms, hands, seemed to flex slightly, and stone crumbled and fell away.

"My God, look at the eyes!" [Skye](#) said.

They all did, seeing that those eyes were no longer the eyes of a stone statue, but the eyes of a man. A living, angry man.

"Girls! You must flee!" Solange shouted.

But even then, the statue was shaking off more of the stone, protesting in a deep growl as he struggled to get free. "I don't understand, Solange. We broke the curse. We set you free. What's happening now?"

"Yes, Celeste. You broke the curse. You've freed me. But in so doing, you've also freed him."

"Who is he?" [Rory](#) asked, staring from the ghostly apparition of her great-grandmother to the crumbling statue.

"[Darien](#)," Skye replied. "I can read his thoughts loud and clear now. He's the wizard from the legend. And he intends to kill every one of us and take the stone."

"Over my dead body," [Eve](#) whispered. She waved a hand at the statue, and it went flying off its pedestal, smashing onto the ground in a cloud of dust.

Seconds later, though, the man himself, Darien, rose from that pile of broken rock, an evil smile on his face as he brushed plaster and dust from his robes. "Thank you, Eve. It would have taken me another twenty minutes on my own." He looked at the Stone of Power, lying there on the ground among them. "I'll just take my stone and be on my way."

"The hell you will!" Eve crooked a finger, and the Stone hurled itself toward her. She caught it, staggering backward and grunting at the impact, the weight of it. Her knees buckled, but her cousins surrounded her, helping her support its weight.

"The house," Skye shouted. "Get it into the house!"

They moved as one, Eve hurling tree limbs and rocks at the wizard every time he started to pursue them. Darien's limbs were stiff — probably from years of disuse. Celeste hoped his powers were as weakened.

"He's gaining on us," Skye said without looking back.

"Let's see him get through this," Rory shouted with a look at the skies.

Black clouds blotted out the moon, and a bolt of lightning shot down, blasting the earth in front of the wizard's feet.

"Righteous dead, arise and come to our aid!" Celeste shouted.

And immediately mists rose, swirling and writhing from the ground, from the crypts. They twisted and swirled, and the wizard stopped, stunned by what he saw. His gaze turned first one way and then another as the shapes surrounded him, moaning and shrieking, blocking his escape.

The women ran the rest of the way and managed to get the Stone into the house. They set it on the first table they came to, a coffee table, where Solange's tools were laid out as if awaiting her return. Eve turned and flung a hand toward the door, closing it behind them, turning the locks without touching them. Then she turned to face the others.

"So now what?" she asked.

"I don't know," Skye said. "I only know he was thinking he couldn't let us get the Stone into the house. So I figured it was our best bet."

Solange stood near the table, her hands hovering over her tools, the look on her face full of longing. Celeste felt her thoughts. She was itching to pick them up, to hold them again, to wield their power, but she was afraid to try. Afraid of the disappointment she would feel when her hands moved right through them. She turned, to face the women, her progeny, choosing instead to answer their questions.

"You were right, Skye," Solange said. "I've been imprisoned within this house for many years. And I may be noncorporeal, but I'm not without power. I've cast a circle around this place every night since I left the world of the living. A circle of protection, reinforced, its power magnified, night after endless night. Nothing evil can enter this place. He can't touch the Stone here."

"Then that's it? We've done it? Mission accomplished?" Rory asked. "It can't be. It's too easy."

"I'm afraid you're right, Aurora. Oh, we're safe enough, so long as we stay here."

Celeste nodded her understanding. "Don't you see, Rory? We meant to free Solange from her prison. Instead, we've just joined her here."

Rory blinked, looking outside. "We can't leave?"

"Not without the risk he'll attack us," Eve said.

Skye shook her head slowly. "I don't think he'll wait around or leave it up to us to decide when or whether to leave the protection of this place. He'll try to find a way to force us out. So we'd better figure out how to face him and win, when he does."

Celeste looked at Solange, as she eyed her tools again. "I hope you don't mind us using them. Eve brought them — they'd been in storage at her place in California for a long time."

"Of course I don't mind. I just wish..." She let her voice trail off and, tentatively, reached a hand down to close it around her beloved athame. But her hand passed right through the double-edged dagger.

Celeste bit her lip, feeling the acute sadness that passed through Solange's heart. She moved around the coffee table to sit upon the sofa in front of it. "Use me, Solange."

Solange looked at her. So did the others.

"Are you sure?" Solange asked.

"I am. Come, use your tools. You have the power, more than any of us. Maybe you can tell us what to do next, how to fight him. How to win."

Nodding slowly, Solange moved to where Celeste sat, and turning, she sat as well, as if she were going to sit upon Celeste's lap, only she didn't. She took up residence in the seat of her great-granddaughter's soul — in the core of her body.

She opened Celeste's eyes. Celeste could feel everything, was aware of everything, but not in control. She felt like a puppet, with someone else at the strings. Her hands closed around the athame and caressed it. Then they moved to light the fresh incense in the censer and the candles as well.

Her lips moved, but it wasn't her voice that spoke, and bade the others bring fresh water for the chalice. She mingled water and salt in the cauldron, and lowered the blade of her dagger inside, and a burst of pure energy blasted from the union of force and form, dagger and bowl, male and female. A sphere of electric blue light expanded to encompass the entire house. Never had Celeste felt such power from any magic she had created. And yet she did, now, with Solange at the helm.

Finally, she lowered the blade to the table and bent her head over the scrying mirror.

"Mothers of my mothers," Solange's voice said. "Grandmothers of my grandmothers, tell me what I must know."

The mirror seemed to cloud over, and all the women leaned closer to see what it was their great-grandmother was seeing through Celeste's eyes.

Chapter Three

"It's gone on too long," [Eve](#) whispered.

[Celeste](#) heard it all, but couldn't reply.

"She's right," [Rory](#) said. "She's been leaning over that mirror, whispering for hours, and we have no idea if it's doing any good. Meanwhile, he's still lurking around out there, doing God knows what."

"No, he's not."

Both the other women turned to stare at [Skye](#).

"He's not out there anymore," she said. "I don't feel him. He's gone."

"Where?" Rory asked.

"I don't know. He's...beyond my range, I guess."

Eve sighed, and moved to the sofa where [Solange](#) sat in Celeste's body. She put a hand on her shoulder. "Come on, Celeste, we need you back here now. Solange, let her go, okay? This isn't doing anyone any good."

The eyes that looked up at Eve were not Celeste's. But Celeste felt them smile. "Yes, you're right," Solange said. And then suddenly, Celeste's body went limp as something solid was stripped from it. She sagged on the sofa, stunned, weakened.

"Celeste? Honey, are you all right?"

Her cousins' hands were on her, shaking her, helping her. She sat up straight, blinking her eyes into focus, and noting that Solange sat beside her on the sofa. Was she more transparent than before? Thinner, somehow?

"Celeste?" Eve leaned close, shaking her gently. "You okay?"

Celeste met her cousin's worried eyes, then smiled. "Not really. How about you call me a paramedic?"

Eve returned her smile. "Nice try, but your paramedic isn't here for a reason. We all decided the men would be safer away from all this."

"I know. But if he could have seen what just happened..." A hint of sadness washed through her, but she reminded herself that she had more important things to worry about here than her own validation.

Celeste turned to Solange. "What did you learn?"

Solange looked at her, then at each of them in turn. "My time here will soon be over. At sunrise, I will be reunited with my [Jonathon](#), and together we will have to move on, into the afterlife."

The girls exchanged glances, each more worried than the one before. "But Solange, we need you here. We need you to help us defeat [Darien](#)," Celeste whispered.

"You have me. I live, in each of you. Celeste, my power to speak to the dead lives in you. But don't use it only to speak to the dead, or channel their words. Use it to call on the ancestors of the Deveaux line and to channel their power. The magical force of every witch in our ancestry is yours to wield, if you but ask."

She blinked in shock, stunned that this could be true.

"Eve," Solange went on. "My power to convert energy into physical force exists in you. But don't just use it to move objects. Use it as the force it is. A force field of protection, a blast of invisible might, a beam of light in the darkness. Don't limit yourself to moving objects. A witch who wields magic can change anything in the physical realm — its shape, density, visibility, anything."

"My God, can that be true?" Eve asked softly.

Solange turned then to Skye. "Skye, like me, you can read the minds of your enemies and of strangers, yes. But has it occurred to you that not only can you read the thoughts of your cousins, you can send your thoughts to them, as well? You didn't know this, I know, and it is a skill, but I have every confidence you can do it. Because of your power, the four of you can communicate without making a sound. You can call for help, send out warnings, communicate with anyone at any distance. Do you understand?"

Skye nodded slowly, her eyes expressing awe.

"And you, Rory, your power is not limited to weather alone. That's just the first visible manifestation you've noticed. It is my power, alive in you, and the one I first learned to master. It is the power to command the elements — earth, air, fire and water. You can use it for more than just rain and wind. You can use it to create, to destroy.

You need only realize there is nothing in the universe that is not made up of those four basic elements, and engendered with life by the fifth — that of spirit. You can create at will. Make a mountain by calling on earth, a sword by conjuring ore and fire. You can do anything."

She stood and moved into the center of the room. "Between you, you have all the powers that I had. Like the pieces of the Stone, you four need to come together, to realize you are limited only by your own minds, to work as one, in order to defeat Darien, and to save the love in your lives."

Celeste blinked. "But we've...already done that, Grandmother. We've found love, each of us."

"I know," Solange said, lowering her eyes. "Unfortunately, so does he." She looked toward the window. "And that's what he will use to force you to come out of the protection of this house. The men you love."

"He's gone after the men?"

Solange nodded. "Where did you leave them?"

"At a hotel in the French Quarter," Celeste said. She looked at her cousins, and as one they said, "The Biltmore."

"We have to go! God, if he hurts [Ben](#)..." Celeste's heart froze over at the thought of Ben facing the biggest evil she had ever seen. "If he hurts Ben, he's going to wish he'd stayed

made of stone."

Chapter Four

"You're not ready," [Solange](#) said. "You have no plan."

"We can't wait, Solange." [Celeste](#) reached out as if to take her ancestor's hand, even though the touch was one that could never be. "The men we love are in danger. There's no time for thinking, for planning. Only for action."

"Does [Darien](#) have any weakness, Solange? Any flaw we can make use of?" [Eve](#) asked.

Solange lowered her eyes. "His craving for power. And...his love for me."

The four cousins went silent, and stared at their forebear with their eyes wide. "He...loved you?"

Solange nodded. "As much as he was capable of loving anyone," she said. "But to him, love meant possession. Ownership. Control." She looked at each of them. "That's not what love is. But you know that. That's why you're rushing out of here without preparation. Perhaps — love can be enough. I didn't believe it was. But if I had..."

"Can't you come with us, Solange?" Eve asked.

She shook her head. "Without one of us here to maintain the circle's energy, he might find a way to break through and take the Stone."

Can someone find me a dress?" Celeste asked. "One like the one Solange is wearing?"

The cousins exchanged glances, as Celeste began to wind up her hair.

* * *

The cousins joined hands, met each other's eyes, then looked at Solange. "We won't let you down," [Rory](#) promised.

"See to it you don't."

"Just keep that stone safe until we get back."

She nodded. "Until dawn."

"We'll make it back on time."

Solange moved to the table where the Stone of Power sat surrounded by her tools, and leaned over the scrying mirror. "I'll watch you from here, and stay in contact through Celeste."

She looked up at the four of them, standing hand in hand. "You can do this. I know you can."

With a nod, they headed out.

* * *

The Biltmore was empty. A crowd stood on the street, surrounding the aged building while flames leaped from every window and licked at its outer walls. Fire trucks surrounded the entire place, and the four cousins joined the crowd of onlookers. Celeste had put on a long coat, to cover the long dress she wore. She'd glimpsed herself in the mirror, and had been so startled by her own appearance she'd nearly cried out. She was the image of her great-grandmother's portrait.

Skylar closed her eyes. "The men are inside the hotel. All of them, and him — he's there, too."

"We have to get inside."

Celeste heard Solange whispering to her. "She says to shrink into ourselves, to become one with the things around us. She says we can create an illusion of invisibility."

"Right," Rory said. "We're just going to turn invisible. Even if we could do that, how the hell could we walk through fire unharmed?"

Celeste recited the words Solange spoke into her mind. "We can't burn. We're ice." Then she repeated the phrase, over and over.

One by one the others joined in. Celeste focused on Rory, on tapping into her power, joining her in mastery of the elements, becoming ice, becoming transparent.

As they chanted together, a heaviness settled over them, a state of relaxed, limitless potential. She saw her cousins' eyes change, felt their breathing change, was certain they were all breathing as one, in fact, and that their hearts beat in a single powerful rhythm.

They focused, they drew in, they quieted their minds and tried to become the things they saw. Rory moved her arms and drew a shield of smoke around them, further blocking them from notice as they moved past the firefighters. She waved another hand and the wall of fire parted to allow them through. And they did it — they moved right past the police and firefighters and through the doors into the hotel lobby, and there was no hint there of flames or smoke. Inside the hotel things looked as normal as ever.

"What the hell is this?" Eve asked.

Skylar said, "He's keeping the fire on the outside. It's to keep everyone out. He won't let it inside to destroy anything until he's ready."

"Where are they?" Celeste asked.

Again, Skylar focused. "Third floor — ballroom."

Yes. Do come up. We've all been waiting.

"Hell, he knows we're here," Rory said.

Skye shot her a look. "You heard that?"

Rory's eyes widened. "God, Solange was right. We can tap into each other's powers."

Celeste led the way, and they trooped up the stairs. She could feel the fear shivering along her spine, and more than that, she could feel it in her cousins, as real and clearly as she felt her own. But she felt their determination, too, their love for their men.

And then she felt [Ben](#), heard his thoughts through Skye's mind. He was wishing to God she would stay away, that she wouldn't charge in here, believing herself some kind of witch who could save the day. This guy had real power, and Celeste could get hurt, or killed.

She saw the look Skye sent her, but didn't acknowledge it, didn't indicate whether she had heard the thoughts. She saw Skye's surprise at knowing Ben didn't fully believe in Celeste's capabilities. It didn't matter, she told herself. She loved him, and she knew he loved her.

Then they were there, in front of the ballroom's arching, double doors. With a wave of her fist, Eve flung them open.

The scene that opened out before them was gut-wrenching. Tables were overturned, chairs broken and scattered like matchsticks. Shards of glass lay everywhere, and the crystal chandelier was demolished on the floor. A man lay pinned underneath the weighty mass, struggling to lift it off him. And Rory's cry of "[Luke](#)!" told them all who he was. Skye's focus was on [Nic](#), who lay crumpled in a corner, blood trickling from his nose and mouth, unconscious, and Ben was bending over him, trying to help. [Travis](#) lay still and motionless near a wall. Outside the windows, flames raged and smoke billowed. But none made its way inside.

It was surreal.

Rory said, "Eve, get the chandelier!" Then she waved her own hand even as Rory turned toward the fallen crystal, and it hurled itself across the room, smashing into a wall.

In the center of all the destruction, Darien stood. And it was Celeste who walked up to him. "Let them go. Your business is with me, Darien."

He looked at her, his eyes widening. Across the room, Ben turned to look at her, too, and his face was etched in a frown.

"Solange?"

"Darien, all this is unnecessary. Please, it's between you and me. We can settle it — together."

"You don't love me," Darien whispered, not moving a single step closer. He didn't back up either, though, as Celeste moved closer. "You never did. It was always him."

"I've had a long time to think about that," she said softly.

Darien narrowed his eyes. "You're trying to trick me."

"I —" She reached for him.

"It's too late!" He whirled and sent her sailing across the room with a blast of magic. Her back slammed into the wall and she sank to the floor, hurting everywhere.

"Celeste!" Ben shouted her name and raced toward her, cradling her gently, stroking her hair from her face.

She blinked up at him. "It's all right. I'm...all right."

"Celeste," the wizard mocked. "I should have known. It's amazing how much you look like Solange."

She struggled to her feet, Ben helping her. "I don't just look like Solange. I am Solange. We all are."

Darien frowned.

Then she heard Skye's voice in her mind. *He's going to blast you!*

And even as Darien hurled a bolt of power at her, Eve flung her own arm, and a polished silver tray sailed upright and hovered, weightless, in front of Celeste. The bolt hit it and bounced right back on Darien, who smashed into the wall behind him.

"You're weakened, Darien," Celeste said, striding forward. She waved a hand, testing out Eve's telekinesis, and the tray was flung aside to land on the floor with a clatter. She heard Ben wonder what the hell he was seeing here, through Skye's ESP.

"It doesn't matter. Even weak I'm more powerful than four novice witches."

"But we're not four," she replied.

"We're one." They said it all together, and Celeste thought Solange's voice was with them.

"They say this hotel is haunted," Celeste said.

"They say every hotel in the French Quarter is haunted," Darien replied. "So what?"

"Let's see if they were telling the truth about this one." She lifted her arms. "Spirits of the dead! Rise up and lend your aid to the cause of good! We, the descendants of Solange Deveaux, call on you to rise up!"

The others came closer, raised their hands and pressed their palms to Celeste's and to each other's. Eve looked at the floor. "Open, floor, and floors below, open earth and realms below, open portals to the Underworld!"

A great gaping black hole opened in the floor, one that seemed bottomless.

"Holy mother," Ben whispered.

"You got that right," Celeste said. Then she looked at Rory. "The dead say they need form, substance to help them take shape."

Rory nodded. "Fogs, mists, rise and swirl! Elements of water and air, give shape to the spirits!" she cried.

And then it happened — from the hole, shapes emerged, forms, ghosts, rising and swirling.

Rising to his feet, brushing himself off, Darien shook his head and smiled. "Nice parlor trick, my girls, but what can a few ghosts do to harm me?"

"Depends on the ghosts," Celeste said. Then raised her voice, and it sounded more powerful even to her own ears, than it ever had before. "Ancestors, mothers of my mothers, grandmothers of my grandmothers," she intoned. "Every witch that came before us, I call on you now to come to the aid of your children! Lend us your power!"

Eve flung up a hand, and the roof split and cracked. Rory called up the wind, and it blew completely away and the entire room filled with wraiths, women, ancestors. Witches!

"My God, there are so many of them!" Skye cried. "Do you see them? Do you?"

Chapter Five

Power flooded into the four women. They all felt it and, suddenly, felt each other in a way they never had. [Celeste](#) sensed, saw, heard, smelled, experienced and...*knew*, everything that the others did. It wasn't like losing her individuality but more like gaining a missing part of herself. And each of her cousins' powers, and of her ancestors' powers, became her powers. And hers became theirs. They were one force, one being.

And Celeste saw [Ben](#) looking at her, his face wild with wonder. So she glanced down at herself and saw that she was...glowing.

He started forward, instinctively wanting to defend her. But she spoke to him with her mind. *It's all right. We're all right. Take care of the others, Ben. Don't let them die.*

His eyes widened, but he nodded his acceptance. He quickly moved to the center of the room, grabbed [Luke](#) under the arms and hauled him away from the action, out of the line of fire.

Around the four women were countless others. Shapes in the mist, ancestors, witches all. Celeste felt them, heard them, whispering spells and incantations, lending their own brand of magic and power to that of their descendants.

And then she felt something else. [Darien](#), gathering his strength, knowing that without the Stone, they couldn't hope to defeat him.

"We need the Stone," Celeste whispered as Darien lifted his hands to aim a killing blast at the witches. "[Solange](#)..."

"Solange!" they all said in unison.

Before they could finish the summons, Solange appeared there right in front of them, the Stone in her ghostly hands, above her head, like a trophy. Darien's bolt hit it, and bounded back on him.

"Stop attacking us, Darien," Solange whispered. "You'll only succeed in destroying yourself."

"We're one now," Celeste said, though her voice sounded like a chorus of voices. Stronger than any power could be alone."

"Damn you, Solange," Darien screamed. "If I can't have you, no one will!"

He hurled another bolt at her, and this time, every witch in the room swooped around her, each of them touching the Stone of Power with her essence, if not her actual hand. The Stone glowed with the power they channeled into it, and this time when the wizard's bolt hit, it was absorbed. It glowed from within the Stone for an instant, then reemerged magnified, gleaming white lightning. It hit Darien full in the chest, and he shimmered for only a moment, then disintegrated into a million sparkling bits of light and color.

For a moment there was only silence. Then Solange said, "Go into the light, Darien. Into the arms of the spirit, and heal, and learn, and renew. I forgive you."

The sparkles vanished, rising into a beam of light that shone down through the missing roof of the hotel.

It seemed a weight and a darkness left the room as he did. And suddenly, the roof was intact again, the ballroom restored to order, as if nothing had ever happened, and the fire outside was gone. Ben was helping the other men to their feet. They all looked stunned, shocked, but physically, all right. And they kept their distance, in reverence or respect or maybe fear of all the ghosts surrounding the women.

Solange looked at her four offspring with pride and love shining from her eyes. "Release the spirits you raised, girls. People will be coming soon, and you'll have far too much explaining to do if they find you surrounded by ghosts."

The women joined hands again, closed their eyes. Celeste whispered, "Thank you dear ones for your presence, your magic and your aid. Go in peace and with our love. Hail and farewell."

"Hail and farewell," the others repeated.

With teary smiles and beaming eyes, the spirits fled into the void, whispering their love, their blessings, their goodbyes. Then the four cousins waved their hands over the hole in the floor, the portal to the Underworld, and closed it again. Solange knelt and drew symbols in the air over it to keep it that way.

Then she rose and turned toward the window. "It will be dawn soon." She smiled at them. "I want to be at the house when he comes. Will you come with me? Oh, my [Jonathon](#) simply has to see what our love has done for the world."

"Of course we'll come with you, Solange." Celeste looked at the men, who stood in awe at the far side of the room. "If...you'll come with us," she added.

She knew her cousins were worried, as she was, that tonight's events would send the men screaming to the far ends of the earth. But they didn't. They crossed the room, instead, each gathering his witch into his arms.

As he held her close to him, Ben whispered to Celeste, "Ask me again if I believe in magic."

"But you made me promise to stop asking you."

He shook his head. "I was an idiot. I'm sorry I doubted you, honey. I'll never doubt you again. Not about anything, magic or otherwise."

"It didn't matter to me, you know. All that mattered was that you loved me."

Ben stared down at her in wonder. "That was never a question, Celeste. And never will be."

He kissed her, then closed his hand around hers, and led her from the hotel ballroom.

* * *

They sat in pairs, in the library on the second floor, where the portraits of the Deveaux ancestors lined the walls. And right on schedule, as the sun rose up, Jonathon appeared, seemed to step out of his own portrait and onto the carpeted floor. He looked around at the couples gathered there, then his gaze found Solange, and it never flickered again.

"Oh, my love," he cried. "How I treasure these fleeting glimpses of you. I love you still, Solange. Can you hear me? I love you!"

Solange smiled, tears filling her eyes as she moved forward. "Not fleeting, my love. Not fleeting anymore." She went to him even as he gaped in wonder, and then overwhelming joy.

He opened his arms, and Solange went into them, two ghostly forms embracing as if they would never part.

"Our great-granddaughters broke the curse," Solange told him, though her voice was broken

by tears. "And they set Darien free from the evil that held him for so long."

"I hope he finds the peace he never found in life," he said softly. Turning, he smiled at each of the girls. "Thank you, Granddaughters. You'll never know what this means to us."

Hugging Ben closer, Celeste said, "I think maybe we do."

"Maybe you do, at that." Jonathon eyed the men. "These are special women. Cherish them for what they are. Don't try to change them."

"Never," [Travis](#) said, his eyes locked on [Eve](#).

"They wouldn't be the women we fell in love with if we did," Luke said, caressing [Rory's](#) cheek.

"And we'll never stop cherishing them," [Nic](#) put in, a hand resting protectively on [Skye's](#) shoulder.

Jonathon nodded, seemingly satisfied with their answers. He glanced at Ben. "And you, son?"

"Celeste taught me to believe in magic," he said, turning to gaze into her eyes. "It's a gift I can never repay, but I'll spend my life trying."

Jonathon smiled. "Good, then." Then he faced his bride again. "So long I've been without you, my love," he whispered, shaking his head.

"But now we have eternity together, Jonathon," Solange whispered. "Always together."

Turning, they moved toward the window and vanished in a flash of light.

For a long moment the others were silent, staring at the spot near the window, choking back tears.

Finally, one of the men cleared his throat, and Eve said, "What do we do with the Stone? We never asked her."

Celeste faced her. "We need to put it back in the cave where it was safe for hundreds of years. And we need to perform rituals and magic daily, to ensure it stays protected this time."

"With four of us on the case, the magic will be stronger than ever," Rory said. "Especially now that we know we can make use of all the magic that ever existed in our line."

"And of each other's," Eve added with a smile.

"Still, better safe than sorry," Ben said.

They all turned to look at him. He shrugged. "I'm just saying, maybe we ought to get started on restocking our supply of Deveaux women. You know, we'll need plenty of daughters to keep that rock safe in the future."

"And if we end up with a few sons along the way, it'll be an added bonus," Nic said.

"I'm all for that plan," Travis put in.

"Me, too," Luke said.

Ben leaned down and kissed Celeste gently. "How about you?"

"Oh, I'm in," she told him, and turned into his waiting arms.

The End