

# Power of the Bayou

Dana Littlejohn

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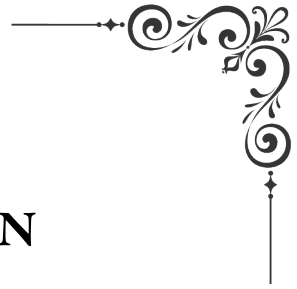
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## DEDICATION

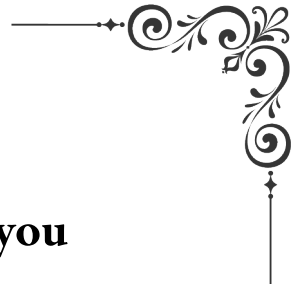
I'd like to thank God for the gift and love of writing.

I dedicate this book to the wonderful city of New Orleans. Its beauty and rich culture were the inspiration for this story. I pray its glory is restored from the devastation of the storm Katrina.



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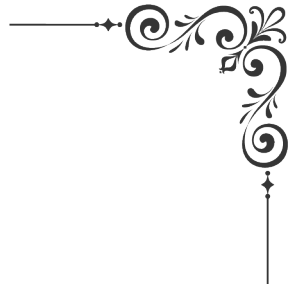
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## Power of the Bayou

**K**ameryn Gamble ran away from an awkward life. A new city offered a fresh start, a new job and a new man. Reynaud added something she never had in a relationship before...friendship, passion and peace. Things were looking up for Kameryn until an ex-lover showed up with the intention of bringing her home.

Reynaud Leduc had everything he ever wanted with Kameryn and yet something nagged at him. He hoped going 'home' would ease his weariness, but it was apparent that things had changed during his absence. Friends had lost their places and enemies had gained power. Will the final confrontation with his past destroy everything Reynaud had in his present preventing him from having a future with Kameryn?



## Prologue

Two security personnel walked a man down a long barely lit corridor. As they neared the unlit torches on the wall flames burst to life on them lighting their way. The prisoner was tall with a large build. His physique indicated he could have overpowered the two smaller men who strolled along behind him, but his demeanor showed otherwise. The lone male's movements were slow and weary. His head hung low and his hands dangled before him as if bound. He gave no struggle at all when the men raised their hands to push him along.

As they entered a large room, he fought the urge to look up and see how many had come to witness his punishment. The room was most likely filled to capacity. The burning stares almost singed his skin. The guards stopped him in an open space in the room in the center of a small circle made of stones. The officers pushed the condemned man to his knees within the circle.

The room was quiet except for the soft shuffle of feet moving. The captive man lifted his eyes to see the long table of elders a few feet away from him. A woman left the center seat to walk toward him. She stopped in front of him, put her hands behind her back and shook her head.

"I am sorry that it has come to this, Reynaud, but I—we," she quickly amended indicating the others at the table with a wave of her hand, "have no choice."

"Madame Cousteau," Reynaud began.



“Silence!” she said sharply, cutting him off. “The time for explanations has passed. I must follow the evidence and the evidence says you were negligent in your task. Your lover- your student- is dead. Her magic was not up to par to protect herself. You were not there to defend her. The fact of the matter is she was yours to train and to look after and you failed to do so,” she added with a hint of sadness.

Reynaud squeezed his eyes shut. Her comment filled him with anguish. His chest ached from his loss. He shook his head in disbelief.

*How could this have happened? How could somebody come into my home without my knowledge and kill my sweet Angele?*

The questions entered his mind again. He had lost count of how many times he had asked them.

“Do you have anything to say about the charges brought against you?”

Reynaud searched his memories, but for the life of him, he could not recall anything new.

“Please, Madam Cousteau, I can find out what happened if I had a little more time.”

His voice cracked with emotion. He didn’t even know how they had gotten back home to their house. His last memories were of them having lunch. They had toasted their love for one another with a glass of white wine and the next thing he knew he was in bed with Angele beside him, her body lifeless and her magic gone. He was grasping at straws but hoped they would give him time.

Madame Cousteau would not have it. She turned away from him to face the two men and two women sitting at the table she had just left. The stern looks on their faces didn’t change. With a quick look over her shoulder, Madam Cousteau shook her head negatively at him then returned to the empty chair among the others. She rested her arms on the desk before she addressed him again.

“Reynaud, we don’t have many Treetars among our people. The gift to heal is very rare,” she told him. “When your magic manifested long

ago it was so strong that your station was easy to ascertain. The question now is how can we allow you to continue to train others to protect and heal when you cannot carry out that task for yourself? We would be negligent to have you continue in that post. You must understand our position in this matter,” she concluded dejectedly.

Reynaud opened his mouth to protest her accusation but quickly closed it with a sigh of defeat. She was right. Had he been alert and on guard, he could have at least healed Angele before her magic was lost. Together they could have defeated any foe.

“Yes, Madam Cousteau. I understand and accept any punishment you and the council feel are needed,” he said in a soft sad voice.



MADAME COUSTEAU CLOSED her eyes to block out the torment Reynaud’s voice brought her. She raised her arms wide with her palms toward the ceiling and reached out to the minds of the council members.

*I find myself hesitant to reprimand Reynaud as the law suggests. That law is in place for the worst of crimes.*

*Yes, Delphine, but this is one of those crimes.*

Anger rose within Madame Cousteau at Isabella’s words. She took a slow, deep breath to keep her emotions out of her thoughts before continuing.

*Since Reynaud has had his position, he has always been nothing short of perfection at his duties. With his lovers, he was openly affectionate, loving and protective. To strip him of his magic seems harsh under those circumstances.*

*I am in agreement as well, but we cannot ignore the fact that Angele Truneaux is dead,”* the man to her left commented. *That fact proves negligence on Reynaud’s part. If he goes unpunished there will be an uproar within the community. Everyone will start to challenge our laws. Only anarchy can follow such a path. We Creolytes have a reputation to uphold,*

*Delphine. Since the very first Creoles were born with magic in their souls our people have been separated from regular humans. We are above such behavior,* he proudly reminded her.

*I know, François. I do believe that Reynaud should be punished, but—*

*This is ridiculous, Delphine. Francois speaks the truth!* Came the abrupt thought of the woman on the other side of François. *We are not common humans. We cannot just disregard the law when it does not suit us. You simply cannot protect Reynaud because he is one of your favorites.*

Madame Cousteau took in a sharp breath. The thought struck her mind so harshly that her eyes almost snapped open.

*If the evidence says he is guilty, then he is guilty,* the woman added with finality.

Madame Cousteau spoke slowly making her words deliberate as she addressed the woman's concerns.

*That is not my intention, Marguerite. I cannot say that the love I have for Reynaud does not affect me at this time of trouble for him, but I assure you that it does not cloud my judgment. I know my duty toward this board and our people. All I am saying is that something does not seem right. I do not think sentencing should be so harsh when it is difficult to believe that Reynaud is capable of such a crime regardless of the evidence that has been presented.*

*I am inclined to agree with Delphine,* Isabella expressed. *This is completely out of character for Reynaud. I, too, am not completely convinced that someone else has not done this terrible deed to discredit him. Sadly, there is great jealousy within our society. So that is not out of the realm of possibility.*

*What are you suggesting, Isabella?* Madame Cousteau questioned.

*I'm just saying that I think it is conceivable that someone else may be involved, that there may be something else to this. Someone like Reynaud does not just snap and become negligent in his duties after years of exemplary behavior and service to his people. It is not impossible to believe that*

*someone of his status could be targeted. It would not be the first time it has happened,* she reminded them.

*Marguerite has been clear on her position. What is your final word, François?* Madame Cousteau asked.

*I find myself agreeing with Marguerite, Delphine,* he answered. *The evidence points to Reynaud and we, as the head council, must adhere to what we know not what we think regardless to whom the perpetrator is.*

Madame Cousteau sensed a hint of regret when his mind touched hers. Nodding, she sent her question out again turning to the man between her and Isabella.

*Tomas, you have been quiet during this hearing. What say you on Reynaud Leduc's position?*

Tomas spoke without hesitation. *I find myself dragging my feet to discipline Reynaud so harshly for something I, too, do not think he could have done.*

*We seem to have a split decision leaving me with the deciding vote. Counting my own vote, I will speak for the council and say Reynaud Leduc shall not be stripped of his magic,* Madame Cousteau said, relief filling her thoughts.

*Reynaud must be punished!* Marguerite insisted.

*She is correct, Delphine. The committee must remain consistent,* François added.

*I agree and I am open to suggestions for an alternative punishment,* Madame Cousteau countered.

*I have a suggestion,* Isabella interjected gently.

Madame Cousteau listened intently to the words directed only to her and nodded. She lowered her hands and opened her eyes.



“COME TO YOUR FEET, Reynaud Leduc,” Madame Cousteau said aloud.

Reynaud did as he was told, but his head remained bowed.

“The council has made its decision. We have decided that you are to be punished for the crime that you have been accused, namely, failure to protect your lover resulting in her death. As you know, this crime is punishable by stripping the accused of his or her magic leaving them to live the rest of their life as a human.”

The audience let out a unified gasp hearing Madame Cousteau's words and Reynaud's knees almost buckled.

“We Creolyte's are proud of our heritage and how we came to be. When our ancestors came to New Orleans from Haiti, St Lucia and the Dominican Republic they relied heavily on the old skills of practical magic and enchantments used in their homelands. It helped them make it through those early hard times.”

“Some of us are old enough to remember those times,” Isabella murmured.

Madame Cousteau nodded. “Indeed, we are. Did you know that among this council there are first born Creolytes?” she asked extending a hand toward Isabella and Tomas.

Reynaud shook his head.

“Because our parents and grandparents' bodies adapted and absorbed the magic, we were the first generation born with the talent embedded within them. Do you understand how important this situation is, Reynaud? A human could have the ability to perform magic taken away from them without any harm to them. For them it's a learned skill, but for a Creolyte, whose magic was a part of their very being, to remove it...” She paused to look down the row at her colleagues. “Well, some consider it a fate worse than death. It is the ultimate punishment.”

The mutterings within the room told him the people agreed, as did he.

“Although you've failed in your job, we are not totally convinced that you were alone in this,” she continued. “Therefore, it is the decision of this council not to carry out the punishment allotted for your crime,

but to alter your present form. In that new form, you will have to find a mate that will trust you with their life and then love you.”

In unison, several huhs, whats and gasps filled the room like a wave. Appropriate sounds matching Reynaud’s confusion.

“The magic you will maintain will be minimal,” Madame Cousteau added. “It will be enough for comprehension in your transformed state, but you will not be able to communicate except for within the confines of the said form. You will be allowed to remember what has transpired here, the passage of time, who you are and the task at hand.”

Reynaud’s knees finally gave way. He fell forward palming the floor as a wave of nausea washed over him.

“Madame, I—how can—”

Madame Cousteau held up her hand stopping his words. “Humans do it all the time, Reynaud,” she mentioned, softly. “I have no doubt you will find a way. If you are successful your powers will be restored to you. The council will confer on the matter and let you know what form we feel is appropriate.”

Reynaud could only stare at her as the guards lifted him from the floor directed by her dismissive wave. Distress rose inside him like a dense fog around his consciousness. His legs felt as heavy as lead as the security personnel all but dragged him down the hall. They returned him to the detention cell shoving him inside. The invisible bonds on his wrists instantly released when the gate slammed shut behind him. Reynaud felt numb as he sat on the bench with his face buried in his hands. When he could no longer hear the footfalls of the departing men, he allowed the tears to fall.

“I must say that I am a little disappointed at the elder’s decision, Reynaud.”

The familiar voice pierced the fog in his head. Reynaud dropped his hands to view his visitor and confirm his suspicions.

“Baptiste.”

“I should have known that your punishment would not be the one that was on the books, but I am satisfied to know that you will be gone all the same.” Baptiste leaned forward gripping the bars. “It wasn’t hard to do you know. You and Angele were *so* predictable,” he said with an impish grin. “Every Monday, lunch at Vincente’s on St. Charles, Wednesday was dinner at Maximo’s Ristorante and, of course, breakfast at Lucia’s on Saturday,” he added with a dramatic flip of his hand.

Reynaud’s brows furrowed. “What— I don’t—”

A soft chuckle escaped Baptiste’s lips as he looked at Reynaud. His voice was soft and sinister when he spoke again.

“It was *so* easy to dispense of you. The great Reynaud Leduc!” he announced with exaggerated theatrics. “You are always so trusting. It just never occurred to you that anyone would be after you, did it? But then why would it? Everyone just *loves* Reynaud Leduc,” he said in a mocking tone rolling his eyes. “All I had to do was arrive early at your little rendezvous spot, intercept your waiter and pour my potion into your drink before he brought it to you.”

Reynaud’s fingers gripped the edge of the bench. “What are you saying, Baptiste?”

“The potion was just a simple aphrodisiac,” Baptiste confided with a shrug. “It was nothing out of the ordinary, really. I just enhanced it a bit and that did the trick. You couldn’t stop pawing each other, touching and kissing,” he added with a disgusted look on his face that matched his tone. “I followed you home and waited patiently for you to finish your less than impressive mating ritual. When you finally fell asleep and your magic was in its restoring stage, I killed Angele,” he admitted in monotone.

Reynaud’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped.

“Oh yes, it hardly took any effort at all on my part,” he said matter-of-factly.”

Baptiste raised his hand and focused his gaze toward Reynaud. His thoughts formed a picture in Reynaud’s mind as he spoke.

*BAPTISTE WALKED A FEW blocks behind them. Reynaud's arm rested lovingly around Angele's shoulder holding her close. Angele's feathery blond hair rested against on Reynaud's chest as they moved leisurely across the streets. Turning onto Decatur Street they went inside their home and Baptiste took up a position outside the bedroom window.*

*Reynaud and Angele entered the room pulling and tearing at each other's clothes until they were naked. Reynaud lifted Angele's petite frame and lowered her onto the bed. His large body completely covered Angele's when he captured her lips again.*

*Angele's hands looked childlike as they glided over the large corded muscles of Reynaud's back and bottom, gripping and kneading them. Suddenly Reynaud flipped them over reversing their position.*

*Baptiste adjusted himself against the window to get a better look inside.*

*Angele laughed and leaned over to put a quick kiss on Reynaud's smiling face. She shifted herself to move forward so that Reynaud's erect cock rested against her ass. Angele gripped stroked it while her other hand moved across the well-built dimensions of Reynaud's chest.*

*Baptiste's face twisted in revulsion as he watched the lovers indulge in each other's caresses.*

*Reynaud lifted Angele's small frame and lowered her onto his waiting erection. When Angele was seated Reynaud gripped Angele's full breasts as his little lover rode him. They continued in such a fashion until Angele threw her head back and squealed. Angele fell forward to lean on Reynaud's shoulder. A few moments later Reynaud lifted Angele once again to cradle her in his arms.*

*Baptiste remained hidden watching them for a time while they slept. Finally, Angele turned away from Reynaud to hug her pillow and a small smirk touched Baptiste's lips. He raised his hand along the window frame and wiggled his fingers. The lock turned slowly and soon the window rose.*



*He entered the room and moved smoothly across the carpet. Standing by the bed, he looked down on the couple with disdain.*

*Baptiste reached down and scooped Angele's sleeping form into his arms, but as he walked to the door Angele's eyes popped open. Baptiste's own eyes widened at her reaction, but he recovered quickly clamping his hand down over Angele's mouth. He closed the door behind him with a small kick and moved further away from the bedroom before dropping Angele onto the floor.*

*Angele looked up, fear evident in her big green eyes. Baptiste almost laughed out loud as he advanced on her. She scurried away tears already falling down her cheeks. Her hand gestures were frantic with no control. Baptiste almost laughed out loud at her feeble attempts to curse him. Baptiste raised a hand easily blocking her attacks. Angele scrambled to her feet retreating until her back was against a wall. Her hands shook terribly as she tried again to defend herself.*

*Baptiste stood in front of Angele looking down into her panicked face. His large physique dwarfed Angele's slight frame. Angele shook her head negatively as she slid down the wall away from him. Baptiste wrapped his hand around Angele's slender throat pushing her up the wall to meet his eye level. Frantically she beat against his arm, but it didn't give way. He held her in place squeezing until her feet stopped kicking.*



“HER EYES WERE BULGING so much it was easy to keep eye contact,” Baptiste continued aloud severing the connection to Reynaud's mind. “The second the light of life left her eyes the magic in her soul transferred over to me. My God! It was such a rush!” he said shaking the bars. “I had no more use of her after that so I returned her to you,” he added with a dismissive wave in calmer tones.

Reynaud's eyes widened as he leaped from the bench. “How could you do such a horrible thing? It's cruel...cold-blooded...downright

evil!” He paced his cell. “It’s forbidden for a reason. I’ve never heard of anyone *intentionally* performing such an act.”

“There is no actual law against such magic,” Baptiste told him with an eye roll.

“No, but it is commonly assumed that no one would ever do such a terrible thing to another Creolyte. It was only discovered by accident many years ago when—”

“Yes, yes, I remember the old sad story about the Creolyte woman that held her lover as he lay dying in her arms,” Baptiste said with an eye roll. “As he held her gaze whispering his undying love for her she felt his magic transfer to her just as he dropped dead,” he added with a dramatic flip of his hand.

“You’re a despicable creature, Baptiste.”

Reynaud returned to the seat and closed his eyes to help block out the dreadful feelings welling up inside him. The scene Baptiste forced into his mind was as clear as if he were actually there. Reynaud’s heart pounded behind his chest and tears welled behind his lids. He took a deep breath and swallowed his pain before opening his eyes. The smug grin on Baptiste’s face inflamed Reynaud’s anger.

“You have shown me the treachery that I am about to pay the price for, Baptiste. Now tell me why. Why would you kill Angele if she was no threat to you?” Reynaud asked through gritted teeth.

Baptiste’s smirk turned into a sinister smile. “Angele’s death was essential to my plan, my good man.”

Reynaud’s brows furrowed as his confusion continued. Baptiste chuckled.

“You have held your station long enough, Reynaud Leduc. It was only because you caught Madame Cousteau’s eye as a child that you became her favorite. It was that favor that elevated you to your post. I think it is time someone else had it...namely me.”

Reynaud scoffed. “Is that what this is about...*jealousy*?”

"I am not jealous!" Baptiste snapped then quickly cleared his throat. "This is not about jealousy, Reynaud," he amended in a calmer tone. "This is about due process. It is simply my time. My magic was strong but never as strong as yours. Now, however, with Angele's magic added to my own, it is just as powerful. They will give me a mate and I will finally have the prestige that I deserve."

"What you did was unspeakably heinous! Why attack an innocent? If you wanted to take my place why not just come after me?" he asked incredulously.

"Oh no, Reynaud. It was not that simple," Baptiste explained shifting his position against the bars. "You are Madame Cousteau's favorite...well you were, anyway. I could not just openly attack you without reprimand. I had to make it so that even *she* could not help you," he paused pressing his face between the thin iron poles. "I had to *destroy* you," he emphasized, his voice dripping with ice.

Abruptly Baptiste's head jerked to look over his shoulder. The sneer on his face was gone when he turned back to Reynaud. In its place was an almost pleasant smile.

"I can hear your welcoming committee coming, Reynaud. Good luck in your next life as a beast."

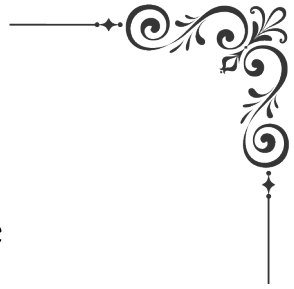
Baptiste left Reynaud sitting on the bench filled with bewilderment and anger. He leaned his head back against the wall and listened. Reynaud's dread grew as the clumping of the guard's shoes got louder as they moved closer and Baptiste's satisfied laughter moved further away.

"The council is ready, Reynaud," a man said appearing before the cell.

Reynaud rose and went to the door with his hands before him. The magical binding took place pressing his wrists together and suppressing his magic. The guards returned him to the room where the elders sat, but no one else remained. Once again, Madame Cousteau stood to address him.

“We wish you luck, Reynaud and hope that you find love with a human so that you may return to your Creolyte body someday.”

Reynaud thought for a moment on telling them what Baptiste had confessed but decided against it. The sentence was about to be carried out and he had no proof to exonerate himself. Accepting his punishment with his head high, he held his tongue. The other elders joined Madame Cousteau forming a circle around him. They muttered the incantation in unison. He closed his eyes as the change came over his body and vowed to be diligent in his mission because his future depended on it.



## Chapter One

The sun barely crested the horizon when Kameryn Gamble unlocked the doors to her café. The morning heat rose in the air as the sky brightened. Removing the count-down sign from the window, she replaced it with a larger more flamboyantly decorated one indicating the grand opening was the next day.

Kameryn stood in the center of the room looking around. The last month had been exhausting, but exciting. It took weeks of dragging chairs and pushing tables around before she was satisfied with the dining room set up. She spent the better part of another week just hanging decorations around the room until everything was just right. The staff arrived three weeks ago to help stock, put away supplies, make the kitchen workable and do other tedious jobs necessary for opening a business. She smiled at their completed work.

“This is really going to happen...finally,” she murmured softly.

A large brown dog stood beside her panting and wagging its tail. Startled Kameryn yelped and stumbled backward against a table. Looking around she realized the door was still open. She blew out a frustrated breath and shook her head.

“Even after three years, I’m still jumpy? Unbelievable.”

After a few calming breaths she looked down at the dog. “Umm, okay, you can go home now. Shoo.”

The animal stopped panting and moved closer to her then sat down.

Kameryn took a step back. “Uh, that’s the opposite of shoo. Don’t you have a home to get back to? Go home, doggie.”

The dog lay down and scooted forward on its belly.

Kameryn stared at the canine with a raised brow. “Okay, so what does this mean? You don’t want to go home?”

The dog rolled over onto its back and kicked at her playfully.

Kameryn tilted her head. “Hmm, is this *dog speak* for you’re not going to eat me despite how big and burly you are.”

The dog rolled back to his belly and looked up at her with pulled back ears.

“Well, you don’t act like you want to hurt me.”

The dog kicked again and panted.

“I’ve never had a dog before. My family was more goldfish type of people. It can’t be hard to learn to take care of one, right?” Cautiously, she knelt and offered her hand. “C-come here, boy. I won’t hurt you.”

The dog rose to his feet and padded closer with his muzzle extended. He sniffed Kameryn’s hand, licked it and then pushed her over climbing up her body to lick her face.

“Whoa! Hey, you *are* a big boy!” Kameryn said through her laughter. “Okay, okay, calm down, boy.” She sat on the floor with her legs crossed then patted her lap. The dog answered her call laying his large body beside her putting his head on Kameryn’s lap. “You’re the biggest dog I have ever seen,” she murmured. Her hand glided over the soft brown fur that covered the dog’s muscular limbs. “So, where *is* your home, big guy? Do you have a family?”

The dog whined softly.

“Big pretty dog like you has got to have people around that love you and take care of you,” she mentioned stroking his neck and chest affectionately. Suddenly her hand stopped. She looked around the room with a gasp. “Aww, this was your home, wasn’t it boy? The realtor did say this place used to be one of those big houses that the bank bought and renovated,” she recalled.

The animal whined again and nuzzled her side. Kameryn looked down at him and smiled.

“Your people probably lost their home and had to move away. Now you’re all alone, aren’t you, boy?” Kameryn asked rubbing behind his ear. “Well, I think this place is big enough for the two of us. I’ll tell you what, if you promise not to eat me, you can stay,” Kameryn told the dog in a humorous tone. “Would you like that, boy? Would you like to be my dog?” she asked happily.

The dog stood up and barked twice before licking Kameryn’s face several times.

“Okay, okay, I’ll take that as a yes. You’ll find that there are many perks to having a master that owns a bistro,” Kameryn mentioned getting to her feet. “I guess I need to come up with a name for you.” Her brows knitted in thought. “Your fur is the same color as this caramel glaze I make so how about I just call you Caramel?”

The dog sat down and froze. No barking, wagging or any other movements.

“Oh, sorry. You’re a boy. That probably sounds a little too feminine, huh?” Kameryn laughed. “How about we shorten it to just Mel?”

The dog barked and his tail started to move again.

“Well, I’m glad we got that settled. Let’s go, Mel. The outdoor market should be opened now.”

Kameryn and her new friend took the short walk down Decatur Street to the Moonwalk. The warm breeze from the Mississippi landed on her face pushing the loose braids from her forehead. She smiled and breathed it in. Finally, after years of looking over her shoulder, it felt good to exhale.

Kameryn whistled happily, swinging her wicker basket, as she moved along the Moonwalk from vendor to vendor looking over their goods carefully.

“Hey, Kameryn, how are you today?” someone yelled.

Kameryn smiled and turned toward the voice. “Hi, Mr. Dubois. I’m great, how are you?” she greeted the man walking to his table.

“I’m just fine, sweetheart. I see you’re up with the sun.”

“Oh yes. You get the best everyone has if you’re here first to choose it.”

Mr. Dubois chuckled. “I knew you would be by today so I put some basil, oregano and parsley aside for you.” He reached behind him and pulled out a small paper bag.

Kameryn let out a happy squeal. “Thanks, Mr. Dubois. I will make something extra special with these and bring you some,” she promised adding the bags to her basket.

Mr. Dubois laughed cheerfully. “That would be wonderful, Kameryn. When do you open?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Excellent. I will bring the wife by for dinner one night. So, who is your friend?” he asked motioning to her side.

Kameryn looked down. Mel sat quietly beside her. “Well, I think he’s a stray. I’m guessing I took over his home when I brought the place on Decatur for my bistro. I’ve seen him hanging around before. We’ve decided to be roommates.”

Mr. Dubois inspected the animal closely. “Well, he doesn’t look like he’s missed too many meals. He’s very healthy looking for a stray, isn’t he? Have you named him?”

“I’ve decided to call him Mel. I just hope he answers when I do,” Kameryn said on a chuckle.

Mr. Dubois nodded in agreement. “He seems well trained. Does he do any tricks?”

Kameryn shrugged. “I have no idea.”

Mr. Dubois reached behind his table again and pulled out a half-eaten sandwich. “Here boy, can you sit up or beg?” Mr. Dubois asked dangling the sandwich before him.



Mel rose onto his hind legs and hopped back and forth before returning to his seated position.

Mr. Dubois laughed then tossed the food to him. Mel gobbled it up quickly.

“Good boy!”

“Wow. That was impressive, Mel,” Kameryn said rubbing the dog’s head.

“You’ve got yourself a good dog there, Kameryn. Dogs are very loyal creatures, you know. If you take care of him, he will take care of you,” Mr. Dubois told her pointing at the dog. “Now, go,” he added with a dismissive wave. “Mrs. Anthony has something for you, too.”

Kameryn handed the man some money and turned from him with a wave. “Thanks, Mr. Dubois. Come on, Mel.”

Mel followed her dutifully over to Mrs. Anthony’s cart, where she picked up fresh mint leaves, strawberries and peaches. Kameryn collected other items from a few more vendors as the market started to fill with people. By late morning she had returned to her bistro twice to drop off her goods.

“All my fresh food will be delivered later today for our grand opening tomorrow, Mel,” she said putting away the contents of the first bag. “I don’t mind freezing them or using frozen vegetables, but if you can get your veggies and herbs from the gardeners you need to get them. They make the food taste much better,” she told the dog unloading another bag. She stopped abruptly then blew out a breath.

“Oh, my God.” She shook her head. “Am I seriously giving cooking tips to a *dog*?” She raked her fingers through her locks and sighed. “Girl, you have officially crossed over into pitifulness.” She looked down at Mel. “Well, come on boy, it’s time for me to take a nap. It’s going to be a long day.”

Kameryn walked to the back of the kitchen with Mel trotting behind her. She unlocked a white wooden door that stood out among all of the stainless-steel appliances and entered a long dark hallway. The

hallway opened up into a small atrium in the backyard. Sunlight flooded the area. Kameryn grabbed the knob of the door that led out to the yard and shook it hard. Satisfied, she continued down the narrow pathway.

The passage led to another door, beyond that was like a small one-bedroom duplex attached to the building. Kameryn passed through the tiny living room and kitchen to a staircase leading to her bedroom. Sitting on the bed she changed the alarm setting on the clock then returned it to the nightstand. With an exaggerated stretch, she pulled the blanket up to cover the sheets and pillow.

“Come on up here, boy,” Kameryn said patting the bed. “No point in sleeping on the floor. This bed is big enough for both of us but stay on top of the covers. We’ll give you a bath later.”



KAMERYN STOOD AT THE window looking out into the rain. Her forehead and palm lay against the cold glass as the water ran down the other side in long streaks mimicking her tears.

“Hey baby, there you are.”

Kameryn’s eyes squeezed tight at the sound of the masculine voice behind her. Once upon a time, the rich deep tones were silky and reassuring to her ears. Now the sound sent a chill slithering up her spine that made her skin crawl when she heard it. Strong arms slipped around her waist as a large body aligned itself behind her. The distinctive feel of a hard cock pressed into Kameryn’s ass, but it didn’t excite her at all.

“Why didn’t you say something when you left the room?”

The smell of alcohol wafted across into her face and dread welled up inside her.

*I needed to get away from you for a while, that’s why.*

Kameryn knew not to say the comment aloud. It surely would have gotten her pushed against the pane with Joe’s hand around her throat or at the very least shaken so hard she would be dizzy afterward. She

would rather not experience either, but they were Joe's go-to moves. Kameryn was at the window for just over an hour before Joe came into the room. When she left the room, Joe had just poured his first after-dinner drink. Kameryn hoped he hadn't been drinking that whole time she was gone, but history dictated otherwise.

"I— I just wanted to look out the window for a while. I like watching the rain."

"Mmm, well you been doing that long enough. It's time for bed. Let's go," Joe said leaving her ass with a sharp slap.

The creaking springs of the mattress made Kameryn cringe. Discreetly, she wiped her eyes and turned.

"Joe, I'm not really ready for bed. I was going to do a little work on the computer, maybe look up a few recipes to try."

"Uh-huh, but I said it's time for bed," he countered flipping the covers back.

Kameryn heard the finality in his tone and walked toward the bed. She was not looking for a fight. Removing her pajamas with a sigh she took her place beside him and turned on her side.

"Uh-uh, what are you doing? Turn back this way. I want some ass tonight," Joe said jerking Kameryn to her back.

"I'm tired, Joe."

"Tired? Five seconds ago, you were trying to sit up on the computer checking out some damn recipes."

"Yes, well—"

"I don't want to hear that shit, Kammy. Open your damn legs and let me in."

Joe pushed Kameryn's knees wider than natural without waiting for her help then shoved his face between Kameryn's legs. The rough pressure against the sensitive area made Kameryn cry out. Joe gave the delicate folds a few sloppy wet licks.

"Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. I want that pussy wet when I'm fucking you," Joe grunted as he climbed on top of her.

He brought himself up onto his knees, spat loudly in his hand and rubbed his saliva on the swollen head of his erection. Kameryn turned her face away in an effort to hide the disgusted look she knew would be there.

Abruptly, Joe shoved his staff into her body. Kameryn gasped. Joe groaned lustfully assumingly mistaking the sound for pleasure. He continued to push his shrinking member against her privates a few more times but was unable to maintain his erection.

Kameryn pressed her lips together to stop the mocking laugh that threatened to escape.

Gripping her breast and stroking his member roughly, Joe tried to keep his erection, but to no avail. His knuckles pressed roughly against her as he tried pushing his flaccid member at the opening to her core. His prowess was as lacking as his sensitivity and the unpleasantness didn't last long.

Kameryn exhaled when Joe rolled off her with a frustrated grunt.

"Fuck it. I'll get some in the morning."

A short time later Joe's snores filled the room. Kameryn lay in bed staring at the ceiling. Flipping the sheet away, she gave in to the overwhelming urge to get away from him. Silently she threw her legs over the side of the bed, but before she could stand Joe reached out and gripped her wrist.

"Where are you going?"

"To the bathroom," she answered readily.

"It doesn't take more than five minutes to piss, Kammy," Joe told her in a warning.

Kameryn nodded and walked from the room. She closed the door to the bathroom and stood against the door. Looking around frantically she spotted the small grandfather clock on the shelf and snatched it down. She took a few calming breaths and then walked back to the bedroom. Kameryn stood over the bed looking down at Joe. After a few moments, Joe turned with a quizzical look on his face.

“What the hell—”

Kameryn lifted the clock over her head and slammed it down onto Joe’s face ending his sentence.

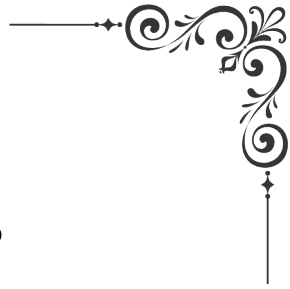


KAMERYN’S EYES POPPED open. She wiped the sweat from her brow as she looked around the room and exhaled. Beside her, Mel lay quietly looking up at her. She forced a smile and petted the animal.

“You should be glad dogs don’t dream, boy. The nightmares I have about Joe would drive anyone insane. The only good thing about them is sometimes the ending turns out better than it did in real life.”

The dog continued to look at her blankly. Kameryn chuckled and sat up.

“Never mind, boy. You don’t have to worry about ever meeting Joe. He’s long gone out of my life.” She looked at her watch and smiled. “Come on, Mel. It’s time to go meet the last delivery guys.”



## Chapter Two

To Kameryn's surprise, there was a line waiting to get in again. It had been that way since the grand opening two weeks ago. Opening day jitters had worn off quickly as she and her staff had fallen into an easy routine. Even Mel had learned not to go into the kitchen or the dining room during open hours. Kameryn usually found him at the back door leading to the yard with a pile of scraps someone had tossed into his bowl.

Kameryn was pleased with her staff and considered herself lucky to have found experienced hardworking people to work for her. Not having to micro-manage them, her days were spent walking through the dining room greeting patrons, introducing herself and passing out discount cards to first-time visitors. At the end of her day, Kameryn sat at a table in the corner tallying totals and preparing the funds for a bank drop.

"Mel! Where are you, boy?"

The dog trotted into view almost immediately. Kameryn closed the laptop and slid it into the chair she vacated.

"There you are. Ready for our walk, boy?"

The dog barked loudly in response and she chuckled.

"I know you are. Come on."

Mel followed her as she went to the kitchen safe and removed the money. After stuffing the funds into the deposit pouches, Kameryn put them into her shoulder bag. She slung the bag over her head so it would hang on her opposite hip as she walked. Kameryn locked the doors be-

hind her and stepped into the night. The thick air felt muggy against her recently air-conditioned skin making her t-shirt stick to her torso.

The bright moon lit the way along with the streetlights toward the bank. She and Mel walked leisurely taking the same path they had taken each night for the last two weeks. They crossed the street and turned the corner to the block the bank was on. Kameryn made a face when two men appeared around the corner in front of her.

*Hmm, no one is ever out here at this time.*

The men passed by acknowledging her with a nod. Kameryn smiled and nodded back.

“Excuse me.”

Kameryn turned. “Yes.”

“Are you coming from the restaurant down the street? The new one that just opened?” one of the men asked.

“Yes, I am. We’ve only been open for two weeks. I’m the owner, Kameryn Gamble.”

The two men smiled and moved closer to shake Kameryn’s out-reached hand.

“Nice to meet you,” the first man said pleasantly.

“Oh, you’re the Kameryn in *Karl and Kameryn’s Bistro!*” the second man chimed in pointing at her.

Kameryn nodded. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“So where is Karl?”

“Oh, Karl is my father. He’s deceased.”

“You named the place after your late father. That’s so cool.”

“Yes, a touching tribute. So, can we like, go get something to eat there now?” the first man inquired.

“No, we’re closed now. We close at nine Monday through Thursday, but on Friday, Saturday and Sunday we close up at ten.”

The men looked at each other then back to Kameryn.

“So, you’re just leaving for the night then, eh?” the first man asked.

“Yes, why don’t you guys come by tomorrow and grab something to eat.” Kameryn dug into her purse. “Here’s a discount card,” she added handing them each a one.

“Thanks, but this isn’t what we really want,” the first guy said handing the card to his friend.

Kameryn’s head tilted. “It’s not? Well, what do you—”

Before she could finish her sentence, the second guy swung punching her hard on the left side of her jaw. Kameryn landed on the ground with a painful thud. Mel’s loud yelp filled the air as he landed beside her.

“We figure since you’re the boss you must be going to that bank at the corner if you’re coming this way,” her assailant said close to her ear.

“Stop talking to her, Virgil and get the damn bag.”

Virgil yanked on the strap around Kameryn’s arm, but Kameryn pulled back.

“Hey! Let go of the bag, bitch. Let go!” Virgil said through gritted teeth.

“Hurry up, Virgil. The guard could come around the corner at any time,” his friend warned.

Mel growled and made a sudden leap away from her.

“Oh shit!” Virgil said jumping out the way.

Kameryn heard the distinctive sound of a body hitting the ground but Virgil’s large body blocked her line of sight.

Mel snapped and snarled loudly in succession with the man’s painful cries. Virgil looked frantically between Kameryn and his friend.

“Shit!”

“Call off your dog!” Virgil turned away from to kick at Mel.

Kameryn took advantage of her attacker’s distraction to jerk forward on the strap. Virgil turned back to her his eyes wide with surprise. Kameryn kicked him hard between the legs. Virgil’s eyes managed to open even more. He let out a high pitch squeal then collapsed to the ground in front of her. Kameryn scooted away from him. Virgil’s part-



ner continued to scream as Mel held him down tearing at his arm. Kameryn stood unsteadily then kicked Virgil hard as she could in the gut.

“Hey! What’s going on over there!” someone yelled from a distance.

As the clumping sound of hard-soled shoes striking the ground grew near, Kameryn called Mel to her. Moments later the bank guard closed in on them.

“Hey Kameryn, are you alright? What happened?”

He wrapped his arms around her shoulders to steady her. She leaned against him and pointed to the men in turn.

“Those two tried to rob me. That one hit me and that one kicked my dog. Mel attacked him to keep him off me.”

The two men roll on the ground moaning in pain. Not bothering to check Virgil’s condition or his partner’s bleeding arm, the guard pulled his radio from his side and called the police.

“Are you sure you’re okay? Should I call an ambulance for you?”

Kameryn touched her jaw and winced. “I’m okay. Sadly, it’s not the first time I’ve been hit.”

“Don’t worry. The police will take care of them. Soon as they get here, I’ll take you to the bank and then walk you back to the restaurant.”

A short time later she was back in her apartment. Going to the mirror, Kameryn inspected her face.

“Damn, it’s going to take a lot of foundation to cover this bruise.”

With a frustrated grunt, she walked away from the mirror to the small kitchen to remove a bottle from the fridge. Her hands shook as she poured a drink. She emptied the glass in one gulp groaning instantly. Tasting blood, she used her tongue to search her mouth. Finding a tear in her cheek, she frowned.

“Bastard.”

With a sigh, she poured another. The second shot she took to her bed and sat down. Staring into the glass, she swirled its contents. Just as she brought the glass to her mouth, Mel bumped her leg. Lowering her drink, she chuckled.

“Come up here boy,” she invited, patting the bed.

Obediently Mel hopped onto the bed beside her and lay down. Kameryn slid the drink onto the nightstand and lay back rubbing the fur behind the dog’s ear.

“What would I have done without you, boy? My big, brave boy. You may have saved my life. At the very least you saved my business. It is *way* too soon for us to take a loss like that.” She turned to face the animal. “How did you become my best friend so quickly, Mel?”

The dog licked her face and she smiled.

“Yeah, I know. You have no clue what I’m saying. It’s all right, Mel. Let’s just go to bed. My jaw hurts like hell and I’m ready to end this day.



KAMERYN STIRRED THE sauce in the small pan. She dipped a small piece of bread into it then popped it into her mouth. With a satisfied grin, she turned the pot off and removed it from the fire.

“Are you done yet? What the hell is taking so long?”

“I just turned the sauce off, Joe. I’m going to start bringing the food out now.”

“Well hurry up, *shit*.”

Kameryn pulled four plates from the cabinet. “All right. Here, could you—”

She turned with the dishes outstretched only to see Joe’s back as he left the kitchen.

“Okay. I guess not,” she muttered.

Kameryn put the plates, stemware and another bottle of red wine onto a tray and left the kitchen.

“Hi guys, sorry dinner took so long.”

“It’s fine, Kameryn. Sean and I were going to go out to dinner when Joe said to just come home with him and you would make something. I didn’t realize he hadn’t even bothered to give you a heads up before showing up with extra mouths.”

“Brenda’s right, Kameryn. I mean, if you think about it you put dinner together kind of fast,” Sean agreed.

“It’s all right. This impromptu dinner party gives me an opportunity to test the new sauce I’m perfecting on someone other than Joe. I’m using it on the roast pork loin tonight,” Kameryn explained setting the table before them.

“Mmm, sounds good. My stomach is intrigued,” Sean expressed rubbing his belly.

Kameryn chuckled. “Okay, Sean. I will be right back with the food. Honey, can you pour the wine,” she asked Joe sliding her hand across his shoulder.

Kameryn disappeared into the kitchen returning quickly. Holding the tray against the table, she laid platters filled with sliced pork loin, steamed asparagus and cut red potatoes into the center of the table.

“Wow, everything looks great,” Sean said.

“You ain’t lying, baby. Smells good, too. Kameryn you whipped this up in an hour and a half? That’s amazing,” Brenda added.

Kameryn smiled at their praise. She took her seat near Joe. The other couple lifted their glasses.

“To Kameryn for the fastest most delicious looking food ever prepared,” Brenda toasted.

“I second that,” Sean said.”

The four glasses met in the air and Kameryn quickly took a drink to cool the heat rising in her cheeks.

“They’re gone,” Joe said coming into the kitchen sometime later.

“I liked your friends. They seem like really nice people. I think they liked my food, too. I’m going to add the sauce to my recipe book

for when I open my restaurant now that I have it the way I want it," Kameryn chatted excitedly.

"Yeah, I guess since Sean liked it that makes it a keeper, huh?"

Kameryn looked over her shoulder with furrowed brows. "Huh?"

"You think because they liked your food that gave you the right to disrespect me?"

She frowned. "Disrespect you? What in the world are you talking about?"

Joe stepped closer. "You don't think I saw how you were smiling and coming on to Sean?"

Kameryn closed the dishwasher then turned to face him. "I wasn't coming on to anyone. We were talking about food, something I actually know a thing or two about. When you guys were talking about cars, business and football I was left out of the conversation. I didn't know anything about that stuff. Even Brenda could contribute. When Sean asked me about the food, I was finally able to join the conversation."

"Oh. So now you're saying I don't know flirting when I see it?"

She stared at him with wide eyes. It was like he hadn't heard a word she just said. The angry edge to his query was not lost on her. She took a deep breath and spoke calmly.

"I didn't say that, Joe. All I'm saying is we were talking about something I have knowledge of. It wasn't just me and Sean talking. Brenda was engaged in the conversation, too. She asked all kinds of questions about my desserts so she can make some for Sean," Kameryn reminded him.

Joe moved closer. "So now you think I care about that shit."

The anger still flashed in Joe's eyes. Kameryn knew there was nothing she could do to turn it off now. Joe wanted this fight. He drank most of the wine at dinner and had even opened another drinking half of that one. Kameryn knew it was best to just walk away she just hoped Joe would let her.

"Joe, it's late. Let's just go to bed and talk about it in the morning."

Kameryn flipped the switch on the washer and tried to walk past him, but unfortunately, it was not to be. Joe grabbed her arm yanking her back against the nearby stove. With his other hand, he turned the knob swiftly and the fire came to life. Before Kameryn could turn Joe gripped her throat and forced her head down.

“Maybe I just need to show you that it’s a bad thing to flirt with my friends,” Joe told her through gritted teeth.

“Joe, stop! I wasn’t flirting!”

Kameryn struggled with him, but Joe’s strength was superior to hers.

“Joe stop!”

Kameryn’s head moved closer and closer to the dancing flame. The heat singed her hair as it fell over the side of her head.

“Please! No! Noooo!”



“NO!”

Kameryn bolted to a sitting position breathing hard. Sweat ran between her braids and down her temple. Her lungs burned as she heaved air in and out of them. Looking around frantically she tried to calm himself. She fell back against his pillow and pushed the wet bangs from her forehead. Tears filled his eyes.

“Damn it! It’s been three years. Why am I still having these dreams?” she cried out in frustration.

Kameryn wiped the sweat and tears from her face. Mel whined and crept closer to her laying his head against Kameryn’s chest. Kameryn sniffed loudly and cupped the animal’s face.

“Why can’t I get rid of these dreams, these *nightmares*, boy? Joe is out of my life. He can’t come for me. I’m safe now.”

The dog tilted his head. Kameryn chuckled.

"I keep asking you these complicated questions, don't I, boy? If I had you back then you would have protected me, wouldn't you have, Mel?"

The dog whimpered again brushing his nose to Kameryn's. Kameryn fell back against the pillow with a groan.

"I miss talking to Simone about these things, but she's back home. We talk on the phone and text a lot, but it's not the same, you know?" She turned to look at the dog. "You're the only friend I have out here. We're going to take care of each other just like Mr. Dubois said." She sighed rubbing Mel's head. "That's how it's supposed to be, Mel. I just wish it was like that with people, too," she added with an edge of melancholy. "If you were human it would be perfect."

Having Mel by her side comforted her. Kameryn's fingers slowed in the soft fur behind the dog's ears until they stopped. The fear that jolted her awake eased away allowing sleep to conquer her once again.



## Chapter Three

The soft press of gentle kisses on her neck and cheek roused her. The caress of fingers in exploration tickled the skin on his chest as they brushed over her nipples. Her eyes finally fluttered open, as she tried to roll over, the hand attempted to stop her. Her eyes widened at extra pressure on her breast. With a gasp, Kameryn bolted to a sitting position snatching the sheet with her.

“What the hell!” She scooted to the edge of the bed. “Who the hell are you? How’d you get into my room?” She looked around frantically. “Where is Mel? What have you done with him?”

The mystery man reached out and for her hand. Kameryn pulled in a sharp breath easing her hand back.

“Relax, Kameryn. Nothing has happened to your faithful companion.”

Kameryn swallowed loudly. “H- How do you know my name?”

The man smiled. “I know a lot about you. I’m your best friend.”

Kameryn lifted a brow and shook her head.

“I am Mel.”

Kameryn’s jaw dropped at the man’s confession. It was not only the man’s words but his appearance that shocked her. His arms rose above his head and he leaned back against the pillow giving Kameryn an unobstructed view of him. He seemed content with Kameryn openly ogling him.

She had never seen a more beautiful man. Almond-shaped eyes the color of glistening amber stones and full inviting lips. The moonlight

illuminated his nakedness. His body was like a perfect sculpture, intricately defined with fine muscle tone and symmetric lines. His wonderfully erect cock stood proud exuding power and the assumed ability to give pleasure.

Stunned to silence, Kameryn's curiosity overrode her fear. Hesitantly she reached out but quickly snatched her back.

She scooted back on the bed. "Uh-uh, no way. What have you done to my dog? If you've hurt him—"

"I promise, I've done no such thing. I was the dog you named Mel. You've freed me and I am a man again."

The man offered her a reassuring smile. His large hand moved slowly to caress her cheek before she could touch him. Kameryn gasped jumping slightly at the connection.

"You do not have to fear me, Kameryn. I would never hurt you, nor will I allow anyone else to hurt you."

The man's voice had a native sound with a soothing sensual tone. Hearing it sent exciting shivers over her skin. She looked into his eyes and saw something familiar and knew he told the truth. So many questions swirled in her head, all fighting to be asked first. After a while, one managed to float to the surface.

"Am—am I dreaming?"

"No, you're not."

Slowly he lifted his large hand to caress her cheek. Kameryn gasped jumping slightly at the connection. He took Kameryn's hand and brought it to his mouth leaving the tips of her fingers with a kiss. Moving her palm slowly across his clean-shaven face, down his hairless torso across the taut stomach muscles, the man finally brought it to rest on his blatant erection. A tantalizing shudder traveled up Kameryn's arm to the junction between her legs. She gripped his hard-on without any further coaxing.

"As you can see, I'm very real," he assured her.



The warm, silky skin moved easily over the steely muscle beneath. It felt real enough to her and extremely inviting.

“Yes, I see that. But— but how can this be? If you were just a dog, how can you—”

“It is a long story, Kameryn and I will tell it to you, I promise, but not now. Let’s talk in the morning. Tonight, I just want to love you and thank you.”

Kameryn released his staff and shifted her gaze to his face. “Thank me?”

“Yes, your love has freed me from the body I was banished into for a crime I did not commit.”

Kameryn’s brows furrowed. She opened his mouth to ask another question, but he silenced her with a finger to her lips.

“There will be time to speak tomorrow. Please, let me make love to you tonight. I promise to explain everything and answer all your questions later.”

He slid from the bed to pull Kameryn to her feet. Kameryn tilted her head back to keep eye contact. As she looked up into the man’s handsome face, her lips twisted.

“Uh-uh, you have to tell me *something*. How are you, Mel? I mean, how were you a dog and now a man? How?” she asked with an exaggerated shrug.

Mel nodded. “Very well. Many years ago, someone set me up and I was punished for his crime. The counsel over my people used their magic to curse me.”

“So, you’re a magic-user?”

“Yes. Does that bother you?”

She shrugged again. “I didn’t think there were any more magic users around. I read that this area used to thrive with magic, but it has been years since anyone’s heard anything about the magic users at all. There are just stories left that old people tell their grandchildren.”

“Hmm, so my kind has been reduced to legend and old folk tales. I don’t believe that.”

“Do you think you have people still around?”

“I’m still around. Why wouldn’t someone else be? My people are discreet. Perhaps they are just in hiding.”

Kameryn thought for a moment. “Okay, that’s good enough for now. So, what do I call you since your name isn’t really Mel?”

“My name is Reynaud Leduc.” Reynaud put a gentle kiss on the top of Kameryn’s hand “I cannot wait to hear it whispered from your sweet lips.”

Reynaud pulled her close to take her mouth. Kameryn exhaled and willingly leaned forward to kiss him back. His hands moved over Kameryn’s torso without hesitancy. Slipping his fingers along the band of her panties, Reynaud pushed them over her hips until they fell to the floor. Kameryn stepped out of them and kicked them away. Reynaud kneeled before her. His large hands kneaded her buttocks then moved on to caress her thighs.

Exciting tingles spread throughout Kameryn’s limbs as Reynaud explored her body. Reynaud pulled her forward until her crotch touched his face. He inhaled deeply pressing his nose against her pelvis. A shattered groan left her lips as beat filled her cheeks. She pressed her lips together to silence any future outbursts.

“Mmm,” Reynaud said before dragging his face up Kameryn’s body as he stood again. “Even without my former heightened senses, you smell incredible to me.”

Reynaud guided Kameryn back to bed with a firm hand on her shoulders and then lay beside her.

“Kameryn, you are a beautiful woman. I love your hair’s intricate detail...” he murmured pushing aside one of the long locks. “Your delicate features, the innocence in these golden-brown eyes of yours...” he added sliding his hand down Kameryn’s temple. “And this mouth...” he

said on a gasp before kissing her abruptly. "All of you is pleasing to my sight."

"Reynaud, I don't—"

"Let me stay with you," Reynaud said cutting her off "You have shared your secrets with me. I know of your pain. All these years with no one to touch you lovingly or show you love is a travesty. If you will allow me, I will make you feel like no one has ever made you feel. When you wake up with fear gripping your heart from another nightmare, I want to be there holding you until you fall asleep again. I want to bombard you with the love and affection you deserve."

Kameryn looked at him wide-eyed. Reynaud spoke so much passion, caring and need in his voice. His big hands glided over her heated skin exciting her and taking away all coherent thought.

"Let me stay with you, Kameryn," he urged.

What had just happened was amazing and beyond anything she had ever seen or thought could happen. She wanted what Reynaud offered very much. Her instincts told her Reynaud spoke the truth and would not harm her, but she could not reply. Her mouth was dry and she had lost the ability to speak. Searching her brain for what to do, she nodded frantically.

Reynaud smiled. Miraculously Kameryn had enough conscious thought to roll to her side and rummage through the nightstand to retrieve a condom. Reynaud took it and wasted no time moving toward the foot of the bed and returned to the junction between Kameryn's legs.

"Oh God! Reynaud," she breathed.

It had been so long since someone had their mouth on her. Reynaud was extraordinary. His tongue swirled around the sensitive folds of her vagina as his full lips gripped and sucked on her clit. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Kameryn acknowledged Reynaud fumbling with the wrapper when his actions slowed for a moment. Her excitement increased.

Reynaud's talented mouth continued licking and sucking her most sensitive area. The combination of Reynaud's superior tongue lashing brought Kameryn closer to ecstasy. The feelings increased until incredible sensations burst into Kameryn's consciousness like firecrackers in the sky rocking her body and pulling a scream from her very core. Reynaud continued his administrations until her breathing returned to normal.

Kameryn lifted her head to look down at him. Reynaud looked up. For a while she couldn't move then she abruptly threw her legs wide in offering. A sigh of pleasure matched hers the moment he entered her.

"You're so tight, so hot...so sexy."

Reynaud's movements were gentle and deliberate. Each one drove Kameryn half crazy. The insistent strokes into her tight tunnel woke sensations in her that had been dormant for years. Reynaud rode her with expert precision moving his hand over her nipples taking her pleasure to new heights. His words and technique seduced her quickly bringing her to a mind-shattering orgasm. She yelled out shameless cries of joy.

Reynaud pumped into her for a few moments longer than moaned his release as well. He pushed his erupting cock deep inside her clenching walls. Kameryn enjoyed each emptying pulse as she looked up to Reynaud's handsome features twisting in obvious pleasure. With a slow cleansing breath, Reynaud rolled off Kameryn to his side then pulled her into his arms. Kissing her neck and shoulders tenderly, he sighed.

"Kameryn, I have waited so long for this moment. I can't begin to tell you how wonderful it was. Thank you again."

The harshness of Reynaud's breathing disappeared as it regulated to an even pattern. The arm he had draped over Kameryn's waist finally loosened its grip as sleep claimed him. Kameryn relaxed into her pillow watching him sleep. She felt incredible and more content than she had been in years. Reynaud's lovemaking was like nothing she had ever experienced before. She moved a little closer to him and closed her eyes.



THE CHILL ON HER SKIN woke Kameryn slowly. She opened her eyes to find the sheet bunched around her back. The warm feel of body heat was gone. She turned over. The empty bed confirmed her fears. She was alone. No Mel. No Reynaud. With a sigh, she rolled back to her side, gripped her pillow and squeezed her eyes shut to stop the tears.

“Are you awake?”

Kameryn flipped over with a loud gasp. Reynaud stood naked at the doorway to the bathroom. The sunlight streaming through the windows highlighted his masculine beauty. Broad shoulders, long muscular legs and even his sleeping member looked invitingly delicious in the light of day.

Reynaud smiled at her as he approached. Sitting beside her on the bed, he used his thumb to wipe away the tear on Kameryn’s cheek.

“You didn’t think I left, did you?”

“I still haven’t processed if you are even real.”

Reynaud chuckled. “And yet you were distressed when you thought that I had gone.” He leaned forward kissing her softly. “I am real, Kameryn. Didn’t I feel real last night?” he asked with a teasing grin sliding beneath the covers.

*Oh my God! Did he ever!*

“You certainly did.”

Reynaud took her hand and put her palm on his cheek. “Do I feel real now?”

Kameryn smiled. “Yes, you do.”

“In my dog form I had many people willing to feed me, but none wanted to take home a stray. Not one person in all that time took me in as one of their own. No one took care of me and no one needed me.” He paused to cover her hand with his own. “Fate has brought us together. I will not leave you...unless you want me too, that is.” He turned away to stack the pillows against the headboard. “Do you want me to leave?” he added over his shoulder.

“No!” Kameryn shouted.

The happy smile that spread across Reynaud’s face made heat infused her face again.

“I mean, no. I’d like you to stay.”

“Excellent because I’d like that as well.”

Reynaud opened his arm in invitation. Kameryn rested her head in the crook of his neck melting into the sense of security his embrace gave her.

“You shared a lot with me while I was in my dog form. Tell me more. I want to know all about you.”

She shrugged. “There’s nothing really to tell. My dad died when I was a teenager in a car crash. I got my love for cooking from him. He did most of the cooking when I was growing up. He was a cook in the Navy before he met my mother.”

“So, your father is the *Karl* in Karl and Kameryn’s Bistro.”

“Yes, we used to talk about it when I was a kid. It was his retirement plan to work with me in the restaurant. After high school, I worked nights to put myself through culinary school.”

Reynaud nodded and kissed the top of her head. “Thank you for sharing that, Love. Now I’d like to know more about the guy that causes you nightmares. Tell me about this Joe.”

Kameryn blew out a breath. “Joe, huh?” She adjusted the sheet over them. “Well, when I met Joe, he was this amazing older guy. He blatantly flirted with me and basically swept me off my feet with affection, time and money.”

“I see. How old were you then?”

“A few months shy of twenty-five. He was my first real relationship. It was right after culinary school. I just got a job as a sous-chef at a really nice restaurant in New York City. After about six months Joe asked me to move into his apartment to save money.” She paused to take a deep breath. “The first year was like a dream, almost perfect, but the last three...more like a nightmare.”

Reynaud tightened his grip around her shoulders. "Where is he now?"

Kameryn blinked away tears. "He's in jail. We were having an argument over something stupid and he slapped me."

Reynaud's body stiffened beneath her. "He hit you?"

Kameryn nodded. "Yes. We were in the kitchen. He slapped me and I grabbed a pot out of the sink and hit him on the head. The lady next door heard us and called the police."

"Oh good. You pressed charges."

She shook her head. "I didn't have to. The state takes over domestic violence cases."

"That's good. It takes the decision out of the hands of the victims."

"Can we get off Joe now?"

"Of course, Love. What do you want to know of me?"

"Well, I've never heard the name Reynaud before. It's very unique."

"It is a very old Creole name. It means courageous, bold and strong. I was named after my grandfather."

Kameryn chuckled. "That name fitted you perfectly when you were Mel."

Reynaud laughed with her.

"Reynaud, how— How did you get banished?"

"I was betrayed," he answered on a sigh.

Kameryn listened intently as Reynaud told his story nodding and gasping along the way. When it was complete, she still had questions.

"How long were you a dog?"

Reynaud was quiet for a moment seemingly in thought. "One hundred and fifteen years," he said finally.

Kameryn sat up to look at him. "*A hundred and fifteen years?*" she asked on an astonished breath.

Reynaud nodded.

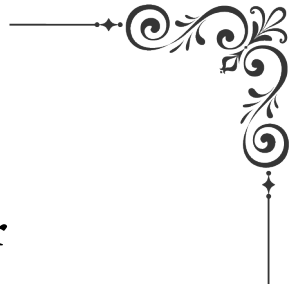
The melancholy in his eyes broke her heart. He gasped when she caressed his cheek.

“I can’t even imagine the loneliness you must have felt. People coming and going in your life. Some liked you, most didn’t, while you remained locked in a dog’s body counting the days waiting for someone to...”

Reynaud covered her hand with his own. “To love me,” he finished for her.

She stared at him for a moment then moved to close the distance between them. As their lips fused together Kameryn believed what he said about destiny bringing them together.





## Chapter Four

A mid-afternoon breeze eased the unexpected sizzle on Joe's skin from the sun's bright October rays. He slouched on a bench in the park gnawing on a piece of gum as he continued to eye the woman across the street. Though he could not see the details of her face, her mannerisms were all too familiar.

He almost ran across the street when she first came out, he was a little unsure. Three years was a long time not to see someone. Her body looked fuller but still shaped as he remembered. The woman moved from person to person greeting people as they approached the door of the restaurant. Her cheerful manner and the nonchalant way she raked her fingers through her locks made Joe narrow his eyes. He leaned forward to rest on his knees straining his vision. Popping his gum faster, he concentrated on her every move.

Abruptly the woman burst into laughter. She hugged a woman and then let her into the restaurant. It was barely audible, but when its light, almost musical sound reached his ears, a slow smile rested on his face.

"Hello, Kammy."

Joe crossed his arms over his chest. "Huh, so after all that jawing on about opening a restaurant, she finally did it." He snorted. "Well if nothing she did know how to cook," he admitted with disdain.

The heat that rose around his collar that had nothing to do with New Orleans's sultry Autumn weather. He pushed himself from the bench and walked back and forth between two trees.

“Okay, yeah, she had a right to be mad. I wasn’t the best boyfriend. I admit that. I needed some smoothing around the edges, but jail did that.” He stopped and palmed his chest. “I’m a changed man now. I’m humble.” He leaned against the tree to stroke his beard. “She had no right to leave me though. That’s just doing too much. She belongs to me. She knows I love her. I was getting myself together just for her.”

He turned back toward the restaurant. Kameryn walked into the building behind the last person in line.

“Three years is more than enough time to calm down, maybe even *forget* all the things I’ve done to upset you. It’s time to come home to Daddy now.” Joe spit the gum out the side of his mouth into a bush and took off down the pathway. “I’ll be back later, Kammy. We’ll talk then.”



“THE KITCHEN IS DONE, Kameryn,” the sous chef announced coming into the room. “Here is tomorrow’s menu for you to review,” he added sliding a few sheets of paper on the table before her.

“Thanks, Pierre. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yup. Good night,” Pierre said pulling the door closed behind him.

“All right, Love, everything is shut down, cleaned up and put away. I don’t think we missed anything.”

A smile touched her lips at the voice behind her. Reynaud’s sultry, Cajun accent still sent shivers of delight down her spine when she heard it. Kameryn looked up from the paper to watch him approach. She loved watching him walk. He moved with the fluidity of a tiger on the prowl. Power encased in grace.

“What are you reading?”

“Oh, nothing, just an article in the Times-Picayune about Karl and Kameryn’s Bistro!”

Reynaud’s eyes widened. “You’re kidding?”

“Nope. They wrote an article saying we are the best new restaurant of the month!”

“That’s great, Love!”

“You would think so, but the article in Louisiana Food Today gave us five stars for food and atmosphere,” she added waving paper around.

Reynaud scooped her from the chair into his embrace and spun her around.

“I’m so proud of you. You have done so well in these last six months since you’ve opened.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you. You have been a constant source of joy and enlightenment. You’re my right-hand man,” she confessed kissing his cheek.

“I want to be both hands and everything you need,” he told her bringing her hand to his lips.

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

“Did Pierre drop off the menu for you to review before he left?”

“Yes, Reynaud and the specialty menu for tomorrow, too?”

“Do we have everything we need?” he asked looking over her shoulder at the menu. “What’s the dessert of the day?”

Kameryn chuckled. “Yes, Pierre is very diligent, you know. He always checks the supplies before he makes menu suggestions.”

Reynaud nodded as he released her to walk to the table. “Mmm, we’re doing caramel glazed apple dumplings. One of my favorites.”

“I’m exhausted. I’m going to turn in. You coming?”

“Yes, but I’d like to switch out the tablecloths for the more fall-like ones we got last week. Go ahead and go to bed. I’ll be up there in a few.”

Kameryn nodded. “All right. Will you put this on the bulletin board, too? I think it looks fine.”

“Of course.”

Reynaud took the papers from her and then they went their separate ways. Kameryn took the hallway separating the house and the restaurant. She stopped in the bathroom on her way to the bedroom. On autopilot, she left the bathroom and walked across the room drying her face.

*That was quick*, she thought when she heard the bedroom door shut.

Kameryn spun with an excited smile, but a gasp changed it to an open gape. The towel fell from her hand as dread rose within her robbing her of her voice and freezing her feet in place. Before Kameryn could even formulate the next move, the large hand was back on her throat for the first time in three years.

“You seem surprised to see me, Kammy.”

“Joe,” she managed to squeak out. “I thought you were in jail.”

“I was and now I’m out.”

“H— How did you find me?”

“I had a little chat with your friend Simone. Everyone else I asked about you had a sudden case of amnesia, but I figured if anyone would know where you were it would be her. You guys go too far back for you to just disappear and not tell even *her*.”

“Simone wouldn’t tell—”

Joe applied pressure to her throat stopping her words.

“I had to use some of my more persuasive techniques, but she eventually told me where she *thought* you might be. I didn’t believe a word of that bullshit, so I checked her phone and found your texts.”

Kameryn frowned.

“Oh, you don’t believe me? One text you sent had a picture of you standing in front of the grand opening sign of Karl and Kameryn’s Bistro.”

Kameryn tried to swallow but the action was painful as her saliva struggled to pass against Joe’s palm.

“All I had to do was google Karl and Kameryn’s Bistro and voila! Here I am. Oh, by the way, you should give her a call in a few days at Mercy Hospital in Manhattan to ask her how her stay was. She can’t call you since I smashed her phone.”

Kameryn gasped.

“Well, I couldn’t have her call and give you a heads up. Seeing how I wanted it to be a surprise and all.”

Tears stung her eyes and her heart ached for her friend. Although she and Simone communicated often by text or call, they haven’t heard from her all week. She simply assumed her friend was busy and they would catch up on the weekend.

“I have an order of protection against you, Joe. You’re not supposed to be within fifty feet of me,” Kameryn reminded him on a gasp. “You’re breaking the law.”

“A piece of paper doesn’t change nothing. You think some court has the right to tell me when I can see my woman or not? There’s no court in the world that can keep me away from you. Now, where’s all your shit? We’re going home.”

She shook her head. “I’m not going with you, Joe. I have a good life here. My restaurant is doing well and I have a new man. One that loves me.”

Joe’s breath was hot on her face as he pulled her close to plant an almost tender kiss to her cheek. The sensation was the equivalent of bugs running just beneath her clothes over her skin. Kameryn tried to shake the feeling off, but Joe’s voice only intensified it more.

“Baby, what are you talking about? *I* love you,” he said calmly flexing his fingers around Kameryn’s neck. “I’m your man. No other man can love you like I can. There will be no other man in your life.”

Kameryn shook her head and pulled away from the wide digits trying to relieve some of the pressure on her windpipe. She gripped his forearm trying to pull it away.

Kameryn shook her head. “No. I know what love feels like now. What we had before was *not* love. It took me being away from you to really learn that.”

Something strange flashed in Joe’s eyes. The sight sent fear rushing to her core.

“You’re mine, Kammy. We belong together,” he said with a shake of his arm. “You belong to me and if I can’t have you... no one will,” Joe added through gritted teeth.

Kameryn beat against the steel grip gasping for air as Joe’s hold tightened. Tears filled her eyes as unconsciousness welled up threatening to claim her.

“Relax, baby. When I get you home everything will be better than before. Our lives will be back to normal.”

“Get your hands off her you despicable bastard!”

Joe jumped startled by the voice behind him. Looking over his shoulder, he released his hold on Kameryn shoving her backward. Kameryn stumbled to the wall leaning on it for support as she massaged her sore throat.

“Reynaud,” she said in a hoarse whisper.



REYNAUD WALKED INTO the room and stopped. A man had hold of his sweet Kameryn. The fear he saw in Kameryn’s eyes was enough to give away the man’s identity. Rage rose within him. It rushed through his veins like a rampant river after a storm. His breathing quickened and his nostrils flared as he sized the man up.

Joe stood his full height eyeing Reynaud as well.

“I said get the fuck away from her, Joe.”

Joe’s eyes widened. “Who the hell are you? How do you know me?”

Before Reynaud could respond, Joe put his hand up and continued.

“Oh wait. Are you the *boyfriend*?” Joe sneered doing air quotes.

“You need to leave.”

Reynaud saw the glare Joe had in his eye before. Joe would have hurt Kameryn, *his* Kameryn, had he not shown up. He would not lose another lover to hatred.

Joe scoffed. “I’m not going anywhere without my woman.”

“Men like you are filled with hatred and anger. Even if you had all the control and power and everything else you think you want it would never be enough.”

“You’re the one that needs to leave. This is between me and Kammy.”

“If you have an issue with Kameryn I suggest you bring your fight to me,” Reynaud offered, contempt dripping from his words. “She’s under my protection.”

Joe laughed, but there was no humor in it. He walked slowly trying to circle Reynaud, but Reynaud strolled in pace with him.

“So, *you* are Kammy’s new man?” he asked with a snort.

“That’s *exactly* who I am.”

Joe turned to Kameryn. “He’s a bit of a stuffed shirt isn’t he, Kammy? A downgrade from me, wouldn’t you say?”

Kameryn shook her head slowly as she rubbed her throat.

Joe faced him again. “Well, in case you didn’t know, Kameryn doesn’t need a *new* man. She has one already, me. I’m the only man she’ll ever have.”

Reynaud scoffed. “I beg to differ. For you to claim Kameryn as your own she has to *want* to be your woman and she doesn’t.”

“You *beg to differ*?” Joe repeated mockingly. “What the fuck does that mean? Oh, I see. You’re one of those *educated* men. You use big words and shit like that. That’s cool. I can work with that. Just so you know, Kameryn is too stupid to be happy with an intelligent man like yourself. But I’m not like that. No, I know how to deal with educated folk. You just gotta know how to talk to people.”

Joe smoothed his t-shirt and dusted invisible lint from his shoulders. He clasped his hands together and smiled.

“Now look, uh—” His sentence hung open questioningly.

“Reynaud,” he supplied.

Joe’s face screwed up. “Ray-*what*? All right, whatever.” He shrugged. “Look, dude, this ain’t your problem,” he continued in a

soothing tone. “You look like the type of guy that has his shit together and you ain’t bad looking either. I’m sure you can get any woman you want. You don’t need this kind of drama in your life, Ray,” Joe said waving his hand toward Kameryn.

“Reynaud,” he corrected.

“Whatever,” Joe said dismissively. “Look, all I’m saying is why don’t you just step off the scene and let me take what’s mine and we’ll be on our way. Cool?”

Kameryn slid to the floor catching his eye. Reynaud could see the confusion on her face and he could tell the apprehension had not eased either. Reynaud continued walking with Joe in the challenge circle but stopped when his body blocked Joe’s line of sight to Kameryn.

“There are two things wrong with that scenario, Joe. First, Kameryn doesn’t belong to you. She doesn’t belong to anyone. She chooses to be with me. Secondly, I don’t want another woman. I want Kameryn.”

“Kameryn is a weak woman, Raymond. She needs a strong man like me to keep her in line. I can show her where her boundaries are and remind her when she crosses them,” Joe told him through gritted teeth.

Reynaud laughed and shook his head.

“Clearly we are discussing two different Kameryns or you are truly as dumb as you look.”

Joe’s stunned expression made Reynaud laugh again.

“Allow me to enlighten you on the difference between the two. *This* Kameryn,” he paused to point at her. “Had enough strength to run from a man that was no good. Enough courage to move out of state alone to start her life over *and* live out her dream. That not only demonstrates a high degree of intelligence but perseverance and self-reliance.”

Reynaud wrapped his arms around his chest. “The combination of that along with Kameryn’s exceptional good looks and her gift as a chef puts her *way* out of your league in the first place,” he concluded with



a disbelieving scoff. “The only way you, being the bottom dweller that you are, were even able to talk your way into this top-shelf woman’s life in the first place was because of her lack of experience with men when she was young. And again, its *Reynaud*.”

Joe’s narrowed eyes flashed furiously. “So, you think you’re better than me, huh?”

“It doesn’t matter what you or I think. The only opinion that matters in this situation is Kameryn’s,” Reynaud explained with a nod in Kameryn’s direction. “She has made her choice clear...and in case you missed the memo, it wasn’t you,” he added with a small grin.

“Kameryn doesn’t get a choice. I say she’s coming back with me,” Joe snarled.

Reynaud dropped his arms and his smile widened. “Try and take her then.”

The moment was upon him. The one he had waited for so many years to happen. This man was trying to take his second chance away and he wouldn’t let it happen. *Couldn’t* let it happen.

Reynaud bought his right foot back bracing himself for Joe’s imminent assault. He didn’t have to wait long. Joe launched himself with an announcing growl. Reynaud easily sidestepped the wild lunge. As Joe stumbled by him, Reynaud grasped Joe’s shoulders and shoved his knee up into Joe’s chin. With a grunt, Joe fell backward to the floor.

“Fuck!” he shouted holding his jaw. Scrambling to his feet he wiped away the dripping blood. “All right, that’s cool. You got that one.”

Breathing hard, Joe lowered his head with his arms wide rushing him again. Once more Reynaud moved to allow Joe to run into the wall.

“Motherfucker.” He gave the wall a smack. “Alright then.” He spit a mouthful of blood to the floor as he stood up. “Okay, come on pretty boy. Toe to toe. No more of these fancy fucking moves. Let’s just fight dammit. Morrow E Morrow,” Joe shouted, raising his fists.

Reynaud laughed to himself and shook his head at Joe's rendition of the popular saying. He mimicked Joe's moves when Joe abruptly stepped forward landing a perfectly executed punch to the left side of his jaw. Reynaud staggered back from the blow. Before he could react, Joe advanced connecting another hit to the right side of his face.

"Yeah! Mother fucker, what!" Joe shouted. "How about some more of that shit!"

Joe danced around bouncing on his toes. Reynaud licked his lips. He nodded when he tasted the blood. He raised his fists again watching Joe attentively. Joe continued with his trash talk, but Reynaud blocked it out. Joe continued to jump around and wave his arms wildly before Reynaud's face taunting him.

Reynaud patiently waited for his opening. Keeping his hands up, he dodged faux swings as they came. As soon as Joe dropped his arms to say something ridiculous, Reynaud threw his punch catching him square on the nose.

Joe stumbled backward. Reynaud threw another four jabs hitting both sides of his face in turn. Joe fell against the wall to balance himself, but Reynaud didn't let up. The next punch landed hard on Joe's jaw. Joe finally collapsed to the floor grunting painfully. He rolled to his stomach palming the linoleum and breathing hard. Blood flowed from his mouth and nose pooling in front of him. Reynaud advanced on him, but Joe held his hand up.

"Hold up," Joe pleaded. "Wait a minute, man. We don't gotta do this," he panted.

"You're right, we don't. All you have to do is leave and never come back," he told him.

Reynaud turned to Kameryn. Concern, fear and relief all played across her beautiful features. Reynaud offered her what he hoped was a comforting smile.

"Go call the police, Love. My phone is in the kitchen."

Kameryn stood but hesitated before taking a step. Reynaud gestured toward the door.

“I’m fine, baby. Go ahead.”

Finally, Kameryn nodded, but before she could move her eyes went wild.

“Reynaud!” she shouted.

Reynaud spun on reflex catching Joe’s wrist in motion. He slammed his elbow into Joe’s chest with all his might. The blow made Joe drop the knife from his hand. Gripping his upper arm, Reynaud drew Joe’s whole body over his shoulder. Joe landed hard on his back with a loud yelp.

“Go!” Reynaud screamed at Kameryn.

When Kameryn ran from the room, Reynaud twisted Joe’s arm until he heard a loud snap. Joe howled in pain. He leaned down to whisper near Joe’s ear continuing to add pressure to the injured arm.

“I’m going to give you over to the authorities at this time because it is the right thing to do but be warned. Kameryn is with *me* now. You will never hurt her again. I will protect her with my life and I will love her for as long as she will allow me to. If they happen to release you and you have the gall to return, I *will* kill you. Make no mistake about it. Is that clear?”

Joe’s agonizing cries garbled his words. Reynaud pushed his injured limb into his back causing him to shout again.

“I didn’t catch that, Joe.”

“Yes, dammit! I said yes! I understand!”

“Good now let’s go.”

Reynaud yanked Joe to his feet and shoved him toward the door. The sirens of the police were loud as they went down the stairs. When they appeared in the main room of the restaurant Kameryn let in two officers. One walked over taking custody of Joe while the other remained with Kameryn. Reynaud sat in a nearby chair to wait.



“I’M SO SORRY THIS HAPPENED,” Kameryn said averting her eyes.

Reynaud turned her chin so he could see her face. “I’m not. This confrontation was destiny. I am truly free now.”

“You saved my life. How can I ever repay that?”

Reynaud pulled Kameryn into his embrace. “You don’t have to.”

Kameryn’s arms slipped around his waist. Reynaud rested his head on top of Kameryn’s tiny locks. Kameryn held him tighter and sighed against his shoulder.

“I love you, Reynaud.”

A sudden rush of heat filled Reynaud’s body like a wave. Kameryn gasped and stepped out of his embrace.

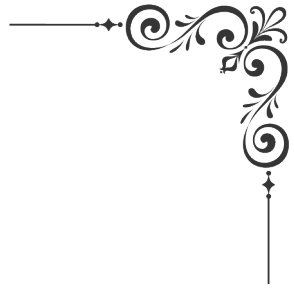
“Reynaud, what’s—”

He couldn’t explain to her what was happening being just as confused as she looked. A tingly sensation infused him from the inside out.

Kameryn gasped and took another step backward.

The feeling soared through his body electrifying his senses, heightening his awareness, awakening his soul. He took in a breath and then exhaled. Elation saturated his being. Reynaud smiled and pulled Kameryn back into his embrace. Tears filled his eyes as he held her close.

“You have already given me much more than you’ll ever know.”



## Chapter Five

Reynaud reached inside the trunk of the SUV to retrieve another box. He and Kameryn had been unloading material for the last half hour. They had been crisscrossing each other, moving quickly and hardly speaking. He was glad they were almost done.

“I can’t believe it’s been a year already,” he said on a chuckle.

Kameryn appeared beside him as he entered the kitchen.

“Do you mean for us or the restaurant?”

Reynaud thought he heard an uncharacteristic edge on Kameryn’s voice. He turned a raised brow to his girlfriend.

“What is that supposed to mean?” he asked dropping the box harder than he wanted.

Kameryn lowered her own package to a nearby prep table.

“Nothing really. I was just wondering how long we were going to pretend that nothing is bothering you.”

“Baby, we’ve had this conversation. There’s nothing—”

“Please don’t patronize me, Rey. I may be one hundred plus years younger than you, but I am not stupid.”

Reynaud noticed the change in his woman’s voice when she cut him off. Her frustration was almost palpable.

“Okay, I can see you’re angry so let’s talk about it.”

“Alright. It’s been more than six months since you got your magic back and since then you’ve been...different.”

“Well, yes. I am different. I have my magic back.”

“I know that. You’ve got your magic and you use it in the garden. All that is cool, but I mean, *you’re* different.”

Reynaud frowned. “I don’t know what you mean, Love.”

Kameryn leaned against the table. “Don’t get me wrong, Rey. I’m not saying you’ve treated me badly or anything, but it’s you that’s not the same. I *know* you and I know when something is bothering you. It’s like you’re with me, but you’re not.”

Kameryn’s words pierced his heart. “That is not my intention, Love, you know that. The last thing I want to do is push you away.”

“Okay, well then just talk to me. I’m sure if we— “

“Can we talk about it later? We’ve had a long day and there is still much to put away before we get to bed.”

Kameryn’s lips pressed into a thin line. The muscles in her jaw twitched as she seemed to struggle with whether or not to release a retort.

“Fine,” she said after a few moments through clenched teeth

Reynaud groaned. His little lover was not happy with him. The tight, one-word agreement was proof of that. Kameryn continued to unload the vehicle with him, but she didn’t say another word or send a glance his way.

Reynaud slipped into bed hours later, but when he reached over to hug Kameryn, she turned away from him. His hand slid off her body to the bed. He sighed.

“All right, Love. Let’s talk.”

Kameryn looked over her shoulder. “I don’t have anything to say, Reynaud. There’s nothing bothering me,” she stated then rolled over again.

Reynaud sighed. *There’s that tone again.*

Fortunately, he had not caused too much friction in their relationship to merit the ‘tone’ often. On the rare occasions when it had come out, however, Reynaud knew that whatever the issue was that created it needed to be resolved if there was to be peace between them again.

“You’re right, Love. It’s me, but... Well, I don’t know where to start.”

Kameryn turned onto his back and folded her arms over her chest. “That’s easy. You start at the beginning.”

Reynaud nodded. Sitting up, he propped his pillow behind him and opened his arms in invitation. Kameryn hesitated, but with a surrendering sigh, she scooted beside him and Reynaud held her close.

“I don’t really know how to explain it, Love. You’re right though. Ever since my magic returned something has been nagging at me.”

“*Nagging at you?* What do you mean?”

Reynaud nodded. “It almost feels like someone is calling out to me, but the call is just outside my conscious reach.”

Kameryn looked up with a raised brow. “You think someone is looking for you?”

“Yes, it feels like it, but I can’t tell who.”

“But wouldn’t all your people be dead after all these years?”

“Not necessarily. Creolytes coexist with humans, but because we were born with magic we live longer. Our magic makes us stronger from the inside out. It enhances cellular regeneration allowing us to age slower and that helps us live almost twice as long as a human could. Most Creolytes move from one ward to another so regular people wouldn’t notice that they have not grown old after some time has passed.”

“So, it could be possible for someone to be reaching out to you?”

“Yes, very possible.”

“Do— Do you think it may be Angele?”

Reynaud heard the apprehension in Kameryn’s voice as she pushed the question out. He put a gentle kiss on her lips and then hugged her reassuringly.

“No, my love. Angele has been dead for a very long time. Though our magic makes us more resilient, we share the same frailties as regular humans. We are very mortal and die in the same way as people with no magic abilities. Baptiste killed Angele. She is dead and will remain dead.”

“Then who else could it be?”

Reynaud pondered a moment. “I think it may be Madam Cousteau.”

“The council leader? The one who raised you?”

Reynaud nodded.

Kameryn’s head tilted. “Could she still be alive after all this time, too? I mean, she was old even then, wasn’t she?”

Reynaud shrugged. “I don’t see why not. Barring any unforeseen disaster that may have ended her life prematurely, Madam Cousteau and the other leaders could be alive, albeit elderly. Though she and the others were my seniors of at least fifty years at the time my punishment, their magic was extremely strong. It would have preserved them.”

Kameryn gasped. Sadness filled her gaze when she looked up at him.

“What is it?”

“Reynaud, New Orleans *did* have a disaster. It happened fourteen years ago. A storm came through and destroyed the levies. Water devastated everything. Some parts of the city are still recovering even now.”

As the ramifications of Kameryn’s words sunk in, horror swelled within him and unanswered questions became clear.

“While you were Mel didn’t you travel to that part of the city?”

“I’m sure I have, but when I was a dog even though I had been all over the state, I couldn’t remember where I was most of the time. In my dog form, I knew time was passing, but changes in landscapes and finding my way around was no different than a regular dog. That’s why no matter how far I traveled I always ended up back home.”

Kameryn nodded. “Is that’s why you go to different parts of the city to try to familiarize yourself with your surroundings as a man?”

“Yes and no. I’ve noticed that much had changed when I touched the soil, but I had no idea anything like that had happened. Now that I am a man again, I expected my body to buzz as the magic inside me reacts to my surroundings, but that has not been the case. This territo-



ry was once abundant in the herbs needed for their healing power and to perform many enchantments, but I have only seen very few when I looked around. The plant life was one of the main reasons why the first Creoles chose New Orleans to settle in.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. They left places in the Caribbean like Haiti and the Dominican Republic to be free of France’s rule. The weather and the plant life played a part in the first settlers staying.”

Kameryn relaxed back into her position on his chest.

“Kameryn, you say there are places that have not yet recovered? Even after almost fifteen years have passed?” he asked after a while.

Kameryn nodded. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“I must see if my old home is one of those places. Will you take me there tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

Reynaud let out a breath and eased down the headboard to lay his pillow drawing Kameryn with him. Fear of what he would find filled his thoughts. He made a conscious effort to quiet his mind but already knew the troubled feelings would prevent him from sleeping.



AFTER THE MORNING, apprehensive, but determined, Reynaud followed her quietly to the car. He looked out the window reminiscing and marveling at how things had indeed changed. A sense of melancholy settled upon him when Kameryn turned down a familiar street leading to counsel’s old dwelling. When its dilapidated form came into view, Reynaud’s magic sparked within him, but it was quickly doused. A pit formed in Reynaud’s gut at the full sight of the area. The car pulled to a stop and they got out. Devastation spread as far as the eye could see. Despair clutched his heart and tears stung his eyes.

“What is this place called today?” he asked after a while.

“The locals call it the Ninth Ward. It took the greatest hit when the flood came,” Kameryn told him.

Reynaud nodded, looking out over where the site of the Creolyte council hall, Lieu de Rencontre, once stood. He spent every day of his adult life there as a magical trainer. With so many magic users performing tasks of all kinds for countless years the very walls of the dwelling hummed with power.

Their sect wasn't as large as a few others in Louisiana. Many of their people were content to build their homes near the structure to remain near the energy that flowed from it. It allowed them to be a close-knit group.

Reynaud walked down the hill with a heavy heart. Everything around him lay in ruin. The tiny twinges poking at his magic were minuscule compared to the full body throbbing the neighborhood's former glory used to instill. Suddenly his head snapped to look over his shoulder.

“What? What is it?” Kameryn asked coming to his side.

Reynaud hesitated, wondering himself. He walked along the overturned soil stepping over tossed debris not knowing exactly where he was going. Kameryn followed in his footsteps almost bumping into him when he stopped abruptly to look around again.

“There's something...familiar... Something,” he paused, shaking his head. “Something pulls at me, Kameryn. Its touch is very faint, like someone trying to tap you, but you're just out of the reach of their fingertips. It tugs at the magic that sits in my soul.”

“Maybe you can follow it.”

Reynaud turned. “Follow it?”

“Yes. You could focus on it and use it. You know, like ships use a lighthouse at night. I don't know how your magic stuff works, but...” she suggested with a shrug leaving her sentence incomplete.

Reynaud thought for a moment. There were so many things he could not yet do. He had been doing small tasks to strengthen his long

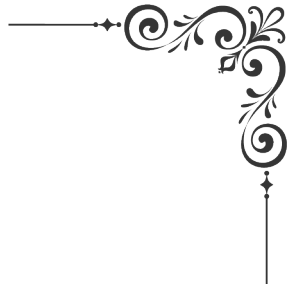
inactive earth magic since it had returned to him. In the beginning, he practiced by healing trees and grounds in the general area, multiplying the growth of healing herbs he found in the places Kameryn had taken him and enhancing Kameryn's own vegetable gardens in their atrium. Those things were much easier for him now than they were six months ago.

Although uneasy, Reynaud closed his eyes and concentrated on the sensation. Heat vibrated inside him consuming his senses, intensifying as he focused. Something pulsed just outside his consciousness, just as Kameryn suggested. Fatigue brought him back. He wavered on his feet, but Kameryn appeared at his side.

“Rey, are you all right?”

Reynaud leaned forward supporting most of his weight on his knees to catch his breath. He turned a smile up to Kameryn.

“Yes, I can follow it.”



## Chapter Six

**B**aptiste St. John sat at his desk glowering at the man before him. The pencil in his hand tapped the cherry wood in a slow methodical rhythm. As he stared at the man, Baptiste played with the idea of striking him or not, if he couldn't give him all the information he needed. When he leaned the chair forward to speak, his visitor jumped.

"Are you telling me that you caused me to miss out on a once in a lifetime opportunity, Andrew?" Disdain filled his deep baritone voice.

Andrew's Adam's apple bobbed over his shirt and tie. He fidgeted in his chair under Baptiste's glare as he nodded.

"Y-y-yes, I guess I am, Mr. St. John," Andrew stammered. "But it wasn't our fault," he added quickly. "How were we to know—"

Baptiste held a hand up and Andrew's words stopped instantly.

"I do not want your excuses. I want you to tell me, once again, what happened. This time goes slow. The punishment you receive depends on my full understanding of this mishap occurred."

Baptiste spoke softly in a calm tone, but Andrew's eyes widened as the meaning of the words was not lost to him. He nodded vigorously shifting in his seat again.

"Yes, sir. Well, we were all there, the same four that took Tomas to the house back in twenty-ten. We did just like you said, made him comfortable and watched his status keeping you abreast of how he was doing."

Baptiste rolled his eyes then slammed the desk with an open palm. Andrew's bottom left the chair and he gasped at the sound.

“My patience is thin with you, Andrew. I suggest you fast forward to yesterday.”

“Oh. Yes, sir. Well, we take turns keeping watch over him, you see. I guess when Louis left the room to switch with one of us, he missed the beginning. When I walked in to take his place, I saw Tomas glowing like a light bulb, just like you say he would. It was amazing. I ran for the boys. We were all kind of frozen, you know, just staring at him. None of us had ever seen an elder die before, you know?”

Baptiste pressed his lips into a thin line and pushed against the back of his chair. He heaved a breath clenching his hand into a fist.

“The magic seemed to just burst from his body shooting toward the ceiling, you know. No, into the very atmosphere was more like it and then he died,” Andrew continued excitedly gesturing with his hands to the ceiling. “You couldn’t really see it, but you can sure feel it. It was like standing near a reverse waterfall or something, you know. The whole room filled with heat and then this wall of pressure pushed against us like a big whoosh, you know?”

Baptiste glanced at him out the corner of his eye as Andrew’s hands moved around in an animated fashion.

*If this fool says you know one more time...*

“The sensation was so strong it made us stumble backward and then it was over,” Andrew concluded. “We pulled Louis from the floor and Laurent went to check to see if Tomas was really dead.”

Baptiste stopped rocking the chair and regarded Andrew with a raised brow. “You say Louis fell?”

“Well, Louis only weighs about one hundred pounds soaking wet, you know. Just about anything can knock him over.”

Baptiste’s eyes narrowed.

Andrew cowered. “But, but it could have been the force coming off Tomas that did it,” he added in haste. “It kind of knocked us all back.”

“Are you saying you felt some kind of power exchange when the magic escaped Tomas’ body? That’s what pushed you back?”

Andrew blinked several times staring at him then shrugged. “Uh, I don’t know if all that happened, but we did feel *something* that’s for sure. I was all warm and tingly for a moment afterward too, you know?”

Baptiste swallowed his groan. “I see, and what of François? Is his health fading as fast as Tomas’ did?”

“I believe so, sir. I sent Laurent, Moreau and Martin to take over watching him before I came over here.”

“And what of Louis? Where is he now?”

“Louis is in the waiting room, sir. He came with me. He wanted to talk to you. He’s been sick or something ever since.”

Baptiste remained silent for long moments. He rocked back in his seat nodding then he snapped the chair upright and smiled.

“Excellent. So, to be clear, only you, Moreau, Laurent, Martin and Louis were in the room and you *all* were pushed back? Yes?”

Andrew thought for a minute then counted on his fingers before nodded.

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well then. That’s all I needed, Andrew. You are dismissed,” Baptiste told him with a dismissive wave.

Andrew’s eyes widened. He gripped the arms of the chair and leaned forward but hesitated before standing.

“Are you sure that’s all, sir?” he questioned.

“Yes, you may go.”

Andrew wavered for a moment longer then left his seat.

“Oh, wait,” Baptiste called out with his finger up. “There is just one more thing, Andrew.”

Andrew released the knob and turned around. “Yes, sir?”

Baptiste’s stride was steady as he closed the distance between them. Without hesitation, he walked directly to his subordinate, reached his hand out and gripped Andrew’s throat. Andrew’s gasp was cut short as his back slammed against the door. His stunned expression locked onto his face as he muttered incoherently in protest. Baptiste kept his

arm erect as he lifted the shorter man to his line of sight tightening his grasp.

Andrew's feet dangled as he beat the muscled forearm in an effort to relieve the pressure but to no avail. Baptiste's strength proved superior. Andrew's eyes began to bulge and his resistance waned as his windpipe collapsed. Bending his elbow, but was careful not to loosen his hold, Baptiste stepped closer to Andrew's face.

"I've been waiting a long time for these elders to die off. No matter how insignificant you think that power is, it belongs to *me*," Baptiste told him through gritted teeth.

Baptiste clenched his fingers cutting off Andrew's air supply completely. His gaze locked onto the protruding blue orbs before him making the transfer of magic swift. Baptiste welcomed the sensation reminiscent of hot wax touching the skin and then quickly cooling, but the accompanying electric current that shot through his body was unexpected. It raced along his nerve endings, hardening his cock and making his nipples erect. A shiver ran up his spine leaving goosebumps in its wake. Baptiste couldn't suppress the moan that shot from his mouth as a result. He gasped and dropped Andrew's lifeless body to the floor as the abrupt feeling jerked his body backward.

"Shit!" he said on a breath.

On weak knees, Baptiste stumbled back to his desk falling heavily into his chair letting his head drop to the wood with a thud. His heart pounded, his breathing increased, and sweat peppered across his brow. Just as he feared he would pass out, a sudden rush of exhilaration soared through him pushing him upright and taking his breath away. His magic crackled inside making his skin tingle, the hairs on his arms stand up and his erection throb. He felt invigorated and stronger than he ever had.

"Wow," he managed pulling air back into his lungs in long drags. After a few more deep breaths his heart rhythm slowed to normal and he burst into hysterical laughter. "If that's what comes from just the

spillover of an elder's power mixed with a low-level magic-user like Andrew, I can only imagine what the feeling of a full transfer of power will be like."

When his amusement eased his gaze fell on Andrew's dead body across the room. He stared at him for a moment then picked up the phone.

"Maxwell, come remove this body from my office and tell Reggie to pull the car around."

"Yes, Mr. St. John. Anything else, sir?"

He paused a moment. "Yes, send Louis to the conference room," Baptiste added with a slow smile. "He has something I need."

Baptiste hung up and left his office. He perched on the corner of the long mahogany table in the adjacent room's waited. Moments later, Louis burst through the doors. He paced back and forth rambling incoherently clutching at the damp shirt he wore.

"Fascinating," he muttered as he watched the young man.

Abruptly, Louis stopped and turned frantic eyes to him.

"Mr. St. John, you have to help me. I— I don't know what's wrong with me." Louis pushed wet hairs back from his forehead before he took up pacing again. "I think, I don't know, I'm sick or something. That guy, that guy we were watching..." he paused as if the name eluded him.

"Tomas," Baptiste supplied.

"Yeah, yeah, Tomas. Whatever he had I think I may have caught it."

Baptiste almost smiled as Louis' anxiety continued.

"Please, sir, I'm going to the doctor when I leave here. Do you know he had? Do you know what's wrong with me so I can tell them?"

"Of course, I do, Louis. The good news is you haven't caught anything."

Louis stopped again still pulling on his clothes. "I haven't? But...but I feel—"

"Not at all. The problem is that you're human."



Louis frowned. "Huh?" he asked scratching his arms.

"Let me explain. I employ as many humans as I do magic users to do menial jobs. A flunky is a flunky to me except my humans are on a need to know basis when it came to assignments that handle enchantments."

Louis picked up pacing again and continued pulling on his shirt.

"I don't understand any of that, Mr. St. John. Please, just tell me what's happening to me."

"My apologies, Louis. In a nutshell, humans have no magic. They can learn to wield it, but it is not a part of them. Since you were there when Tomas died some of his magic was transferred to you," he said extending a hand his way.

Louis stopped again turning wide eyes to him.

"Tomas's Earth magic has nothing to anchor itself to. I imagine the magic is running around frantic within your body, shocking your system, sending you into a frenzy," he explained with a shrug.

Louis raked his fingers through his drenched hair. "Can't you do something to help me?"

"Of course, Louis," Baptiste answered with a smile. "What kind of boss would I be to let you suffer?"

Baptiste stood, crossed the room and extracted the wayward magic from the young man in the same manner as he did Andrew. When he recovered, Baptiste left the room pulling his cell phone from his pocket.

"Maxwell, there is more to dispose of in the conference room. See to it."

"Yes, Mr. St. John," came the reply in his ear.

Baptiste exited the building. Reggie swung the door to his limousine open.

"Where to, Mr. St. John?"

"Take me to see François."

Baptiste sat back with his eyes closed during the ride. He stroked his pulsing cock through his pants enjoying the exhilarating surge of new magic coursing through his system. The Earth-bound magic in his soul danced joyfully welcoming the immense power of Tomas' corresponding magic. It merged beautifully, enhancing and stimulating his own. The feel was orgasmic and addictive. He had to have the rest of it...had to have *more*.

The cobblestone streets and brick buildings of downtown New Orleans were left behind him. Just over an hour later emerald green grass and blossoming trees of the lands just off the Mississippi River loomed ahead, unaffected by the overheated days they suffered in the 6 last month. Great white columns decorated the long porch that wrapped around the front and sides of the great house that came into view. Large windows stretched from floor to ceiling on the first and second floors.

The car jerked to a stop in front of the residence. Baptiste had just enough time to straighten his tie and put his clothes back in order before Reggie opened his door. With a confident stride, he took the few steps leading to the porch, but before he could reach the large French doors, they swung open.

"Good afternoon, Mr. St. John," an older gentleman in a white suit jacket and white gloves said with a slight bow.

"Good afternoon, Luke."

With long strides Baptiste glided past him, covering the floor of the immaculate foyer in a few quick movements. Luke picked up the pace behind him but stopped when he reached the elegant staircase.

"Are you here to collect the monthly reports?"

Baptiste stopped to look over his shoulder at the man. "It's a bit early to pick them up."

"Indeed sir, but they are completed. I can have them ready for you shortly."

Baptiste smiled and continued across the floor. "Efficient as always, Luke. You have taken excellent care of this plantation for the last five

decades. Not to worry. I am not here for an impromptu inspection. I am here to visit Francois. The messenger will come for them in a few days as expected.”

Baptiste trotted up the winding stairs. His hand glided over the smooth polish brass of the banister as he walked along the corridor toward the bedrooms. Two men sat at the end of the hall at a small card table. He saw no magic in their auras and dismissed them as expendable.

“Mr. St. John, we weren’t expecting you,” the first man said knocking over the chair as he leaped to his feet.

“It would seem so. Where is Moreau, Laurent and Martin? They are supposed to be guarding François.”

“They— they, uhh, they went, umm —” the first man stammered.

“Martin is inside, but other guys went to chat up the women working outside,” the other rushed out shaking the table as he rose.

“Bring them to me, at once.”

He walked into the room as the two men fell over one another to do his bidding. The room was less like a bedroom resembling more of a small living room. The space easily held a table with four chairs against one wall with a sofa, coffee table and television set arranged by another. Martin lay on the couch with his head back and eyes closed. Rude noises came from him as he snorted and licked his lips. Baptiste groaned and went over to him.

“Get up, Martin,” he growled kicking his leg.

Martin sprang from the couch with a loud snort. Now that the man stood before him Baptiste could feel Tomas’ power inside him.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Martin, but you have not developed x-ray vision since you’ve come to this plantation to work, have you?”

Martin’s confusion showed on his face. He scratched his head and thought before answering. “Uhh, no,” he said sounding somewhat unsure.

“Then how do you expect to see the signs of François’s departure from this world from out here?”

“Oh! Well, sir, I was just—”

“When the others return, I want you to go to my house and wait for me. There is much we need to discuss,” he told him, turning to enter the adjacent room.

*Getting rid of that buffoon will be a credit to the population.*

Baptiste pushed the door closed and leaned against it. François lay on a king size bed on the far side of the room. The long satin curtains on the grand windows were shut blocking out the midday sun. At the foot of the bed, a sheet lay crumpled at François’s feet. His hands lay across his belly clasped together with his fingers interlocked. The thin, white pajamas he wore stuck to his skin and sweat dripped from his brow. Baptiste almost thought him dead from his positioning, but the tell-tale signs of the slow rise and fall of chest assured him otherwise. He smiled and stepped closer.

“Someone has passed on,” François stated not turning to look at Baptiste. “Who was it?”

“Tomas is dead, François. I am sorry.”

François turned to look at him. His eyes shifted over Baptiste’s form in a searching fashion. His fingers parted and his arm extended to hold his palm out. He scoffed low in his throat as he relaxed into his pillow again returning his hand beneath the sheet.

“You carry Tomas’ magic within you yet claim to be sorry that he is dead. A contradiction, no?”

Baptiste’s fists clenched at his sides and he narrowed his eyes at the old man.

“Is that to be my fate, too, mon ami? I have long known your plans, young Baptiste,” he continued with a heavy, French accent. “You have always had a heart for power. Many years ago, I wondered why Madame Cousteau chose Reynaud over you. In time, I knew why.”

“And why is that, François?” Baptiste asked through gritted teeth.

François looked up at him and smiled. "One who feeds off power is never full. You are made stronger with magic that was not given to you at birth. I do not know how you acquired Tomas's power, but I can tell from its diminished state he did offer it to you. I am not so weak as to give up my life force just yet."

Anger flowed through him as the old man turned away from him closing his eyes shutting him out, essentially dismissing him. Baptiste growled low in his throat and stormed out of the room. Martin jumped to his feet seemingly ready for Baptiste's next orders. In smooth succession, Baptiste turned to walk Martin's way and slapped his face. The blow sounded like a crack of a whip. Its intensity knocked Martin back to the sofa. Baptiste continued to pass him without a word and out of the room.



## Chapter Seven

Baptiste grunted as he rifled through a stack of papers in an open folder on his desk. He slammed the top of the pile and snatched the phone from its cradle.

“Maxwell, get in here!” he commanded and slammed the receiver back in place.

He rocked his chair back and waited. A tall, thin man, with no hair, rich brown skin, dark eyes and a thick goatee, entered almost immediately. With his notebook opened and pen out, he took the chair before the desk and crossed his legs.

“Yes, sir.”

Baptiste stared at him for a while then sat his chair upright. “Maxwell, how long have you been with me?”

“The better part of twenty years, sir.”

“Uh-huh, and in that time surely you have learned that I do not like to be kept waiting. What took you so long?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll work on my punctuality.”

“See that you do. I have looked through this stack of papers ten times and I cannot find the monthly reports for Maison Douce,” he told him pointing at the paperwork. “Who was supposed to collect them?”

“That would be Andrew, sir.”

“Well then where the hell is he? Why isn’t he doing his job?”

“Andrew was the young man I had to, umm, *dispose of* last week, Mr. St. John,” Maxwell reminded him.

Baptiste thought for a moment then recognition widened his eyes.

“Oh yes, him. Well then get someone else from his little group to retrieve the reports.”

“Andrew and the men that followed him were in charge of watching Tomas and several small tasks at Maison Douce, sir. All five of them were terminated in the same manner.”

Baptiste threw his hands up and jumped from his chair. “Good grief. Am I running this business by myself? Who is in charge of that house?”

“Luke is in charge of the day to day business over there.”

“Well, why hasn’t Luke found a replacement for Andrew and his men yet?”

“No one actually knows they are missing but us, sir.”

Baptiste turned narrowed eyes to Maxwell. “I need those papers, Maxwell. Fix this.”

Maxwell left his chair. “Of course, sir. I will inform Luke that others will be coming to Maison Douce at once.”

“And Maxwell,” he called out causing the man to turn. “Make sure Luke is punished for my inconvenience. He should have noticed this mishap and fixed it by now.”

“Yes sir,” Maxwell said but hesitated at the door. “Mr. St. John, might I suggest a visit from Desiree?” he added as a second thought. “You seem to be in need of some stress relief.”

He smiled as a vision of Desiree entered his mind’s eye. “Yes, her beautiful body covered in the black corset and fishnet stockings has brought me to completion on many occasions,” he muttered scratching his chin. “But no. I am in no mood for that today,” he added with a dismissive wave. “Send Cindy to my house this evening instead.”

“Cindy, sir? Are you sure?”

“Yes, Maxwell. Cindy will do.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get right on it.”

Baptiste opened the folder again then retrieved a small laptop from his top drawer. He flipped from page to page entering its information into the database on the computer. When he was done, Baptiste gathered the papers and put them into an envelope in a file cabinet behind his desk. Returning his gaze to his laptop, Baptiste frowned and shook his head before picking up the phone.

“Maxwell! I need those— “His words were cut short when the door flew open.

“I have the monthly reports from Maison Douce, Mr. St. John,” Maxwell said extending the pages toward him.

Baptiste sent a look to the receiver then returned it to its cradle.

“Thank you, Maxwell. You are efficient as always.”

Maxwell left the room with a nod. Baptiste added the information from the sheets and hit save. He stared at the completed graph on the screen and smiled.

“Now that’s more like it.” The pleasure in seeing the final numbers started to fade and his brows scrunched in thought. “When was I last at Maison Douce?” he muttered. When comprehension dawned, his lip curled.

“Oh yes, Francois. Dismissing me from his presence like a common servant,” he grumbled. Rocking his chair, he wrapped his arms around his chest. “Yes, perhaps it is time I went back over there. Someone has to put that old man in his place,” Baptiste muttered and picked up the phone. “Reggie, bring the car around.”



BAPTISTE REACHED THE top of the front steps at Maison Douce and the door swung open as he crossed the porch.

“Good afternoon, Mr. St. John.”

Baptiste lifted a brow as he passed the man greeting him. “Who are you?”



“I am Jean Pierre. I was sent over from your other establishment, the houses at Cynthiana Winery. I am to run le Maison Douce until Luke’s return,” he explained with a crisp bow.

Baptiste nodded and continued across the floor. “Have you been updated on the happenings of this house?”

“Yes, sir. Maxwell has informed me of my duties.”

“Very well,” Baptiste said and continued to the staircase. He took the steps quickly. New flunkies were at their stations. When they spotted him, they quickly stood to greet him. Baptiste acknowledged them with a curt nod, but nothing else as he entered the room. No one sat in the outer room of François’s bedroom. He crossed the room and entered the bedroom. Michael, a young, mediocre magic-user, sat in the corner wearing headphones. Baptiste caught his attention and jerked his head gesturing him to follow.

“Good afternoon, sir,” Michael said, pulling the door shut behind them.

“Status, Michael,” Baptiste said ignoring the pleasantries.

“François’s magic continues to fade, sir, but the fire still burns inside him.”

Baptiste rolled his eyes, not bothering to hide his annoyance. “How much longer before he expires?”

Michael’s hands lifted in an unsure gesture when he shrugged. “It’s hard to say, Mr. St. John.”

“You’re a fire user, aren’t you? Can’t you tell?”

Michael shook his head. “He is an elder. Yes, his body continues to weaken, but his magic remains strong. It could happen at any time. Today, next week, maybe even next month. There’s no way to really tell.”

Baptiste took a long deep breath and then exhaled. “Fine. I’m going to talk to him. Stay out here until I return.”

Michael nodded and Baptiste went back into the room. Everything was exactly the same inside including François’s appearance. He moved closer to see if the older man was asleep.

“Have you come back to inform me of another death, young Baptiste?”

Baptiste’s eyes squeezed tight at the sound of Francois’s pet name for him. His shoulder rose slightly as his head tensed to the right whenever he heard it. It was the equivalent of someone’s nails scratching on a chalkboard.

“No, Francois, I came to talk to you,” he answered as calmly as he could.

Francois chuckled low. “I see. In that case we really have nothing to discuss, mon ami. Your pretense to chit-chat does not cover the real reason you have come and I have a notion of what that is.”

*Smug, patronizing, old fool.*

“Do you, now?” Baptiste said pulling the chair closer to the bed. “What, pray tell, is the reason then, *old* Francois?”

Francois turned in his direction. Though his face showed deep wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, they were minor with respect to what a human would look like if they lived for two hundred and fifteen years.

“You tire of waiting for me to die, young Baptiste,” he answered matter-of-factly. “Perhaps you have even come to put a pillow over my face to hurry me along,” he added with a soft laugh.

“Don’t tempt me, old man,” Baptiste warned through gritted teeth.

Francois’s mirth did not cease. “You could do that and relieve yourself of the burden to care for me, but you won’t. You will whine, grunt and release your fury on whoever gets in your way, but you will wait because you want what I have.” Francois turned away from him and settled back onto the pillow. “I’m afraid you must continue to wait. I am not so inclined to depart just yet. Be on your way, young Baptiste. I am not dead yet.”

Baptiste’s anger was instant. With a growl, he leaned forward and grabbed Francois by his shirt collar yanking him from the bed to meet his gaze.

“Yes, I do tire of waiting for you to die, Francois, but I will wait no more,” he said emphasizing his last words with a shake.

“I implore you, Baptiste, do not do this. I will not give up my magic and if you take from me what I do not give it will not sit well within you,” Francois warned.

Baptiste released Francois’s pajama top only to slip his hands around the old man’s throat. He brought his face up again, but Francois shut his eyes tight.

“Open your eyes to me, old man,” Baptiste growled giving him another shake.

Francois tossed his head back and forth pulling at Baptiste’s fingers. With an impatient noise, Baptiste dropped Francois to the bed. Breathing hard, the older man coughed and rubbed his neck.

“You are insane and have no respect for your elders. That is why Reynaud was chosen over you. You don’t deserve to lead and you will not,” Francois croaked.

Baptiste glared harshly at Francois. Abruptly his hand flew through the air striking him hard across both sides of his face. Shock and pain widened Francois’s eyes as he cried out. Baptiste gripped his neck again, but this time, though he fought, Francois could not shut his eyes.

“You may have your opinions, old man, but you will take them to the grave with you. Reynaud is dead. I will have your power and I will be the next leader of the council. Make no mistake about it.”

Francois continued to struggle against him. As life faded from his eyes the sensation indicating the power exchange began...but it was different. Unlike the smooth flow he felt from others, Francois’s magic came in quick shots of heat, like fireballs slamming against his inner being.

When the light in Francois’s eyes had finally gone out, Baptiste flung him back to the bed and fell back against his seat. The chair reared backward from his weight crashing to the floor. Baptiste gripped his upper body and screamed. Sweat burst from his body coating his skin.

Overwhelming heat burned behind his eyes making them water. He swallowed several times in an attempt to cool his scorched throat.

*What the fuck!*

As fast as the attack came it started to alleviate. Panting profusely, he tore at his clothing until his chest was bare. Raising his head, he inspected himself. A moment ago, he felt as though he was burning from the inside out, but his skin was not burned or even reddened. Relieved, Baptiste let his head drop back as he continued to breathe in long harsh breaths. Before he could rise, the door flew open and Michael was by his side in seconds helping him to his feet.

“Sir! Are you all right?”

He leaned heavily on the boy for a moment. His voice was as shaky as his knees when he was upright again.

“Yes, Michael, I’m fine.”

“What happened, Mr. St. John? I heard you scream,” Michael said, picking up the chair.

“I don’t know,” Baptiste said honestly.

Michael walked over to the bed and looked down at Francois. “He’s dead,” he said sadly. “It’s been said that when an elder dies it can be felt by those nearby. Maybe you felt that, sir.”

“Yeah, maybe. I have to go, Michael. I’m leaving you in charge of the arrangements for Francois.”

“Are you sure you’re alright, sir? You look— “

“Just do it!” he shouted and left the room.

Baptiste all but ran from the room, down the steps and back to the car. Reggie had to rush to get the door open to let him in.

“Where to, Mr. St. John?”

“Take me home, Reg.”

Baptiste sat in the back of the car taking more deep breaths.

*Get a hold of yourself, Baptiste. Francois’s fire magic is just trying to find its niche with your earth magic. It will merge and blend just like the others did soon.*

Baptiste felt himself calming down and he smiled.

*Yes, that's it. Relax. Let the magic settle down.* He blew out a long, slow breath. *That's it. It just has to get used to being around other magic.*

Baptiste took a bottle of water from the car door, downed it in three gulps then continued his breathing exercises until Reggie pulled the car into his garage. After a shower and dinner, he felt like his old self. He was more than ready to receive Cindy when she appeared.

"Hello, Mr. St. John," she greeted sweetly when he opened the door to his room.

Cindy's five foot two, slender physique looked childlike in comparison to his six-foot-four height. He considered that and her large doe-like eyes her best features. Baptiste opened the door wider and stepped to the side. Cindy lifted onto her toes to kiss his cheek before accepting his invitation. Baptiste closed the door and inspected her. Though he preferred her in white, the pale-yellow dress she wore complimented her blonde hair. She stood with downcast eyes waiting. Her demure manner pleased him. His cock throbbed with need and he realized it had been almost a week since he had a woman in his bed. Baptiste pushed himself away from the door and removed his robe.

"Come to the bed, Cindy, and take your clothes off," he demanded moving toward the bed.

"Yes, sir."

He stood beside the bed already naked and stroking his full cock as he watched her undress. The dress fell to the floor at Cindy's feet with a simple tug of the string tied into a bow at the base of her neck. The fabric pooled at her feet leaving her wearing nothing but her shoes.

Baptiste groaned low in his throat gripping his balls. He loved that the women Maxwell sent to him didn't bother with panties or bras. They were useless things, anyway, covering what he wanted to see and getting in his way when he was ready for sex. Cindy stepped out her shoes and away from the garment to crawl across the bed. She stopped

at the top, removed the rubber band holding her hair up and rested her head on the pillow with her arms and legs opened wide.

Baptiste wasted no time getting on the bed to cover her with his large body. One swift push and he buried himself into her core balls deep. Her loud, shocked gasp mingled with his pleasurable moan, but her body fought him, preventing easy movement.

“This is the first of many times that I will have you tonight, Cindy. Open for me,” he told her.

His slow, deliberate strokes continued to loosen her tight tunnel. Soon her body gave way and a sudden flash of heat rolled over his senses. As his pleasure increased, so did the flicks of foreign fire at the edge of his consciousness. Baptiste tried to push the feeling away thinking it would interfere with his orgasm, but as it engrossed him, he found it enhanced his impending climax. He groaned aloud and pounded Cindy’s pussy faster.

“Mr. St. John, wait. Your body feels hot.”

She was right. He did feel hot and felt *good*. Francois’s magic rose within him, taking over, guiding him. It gripped his senses intensifying the bliss he felt building in his balls. Electric strikes of excitement shot through his bloodstream each time he drove into her. Cindy struggled beneath him, playing their game well. She beat his arms and wiggled her tiny body beneath him just how she did before.

“Mr. St. John, please. You’re getting hotter. Something is burning me,” Cindy pleaded.

“Shhh!”

Normally he liked that part of their routine, but now it was just distracting. Baptiste covered her mouth and strained his awareness. Focused on his impending release, he slipped his other hand beneath Cindy’s ass to lift her into his wild thrusts. Consumed by his desire and the unfamiliar enchantment inside him, he attacked her pussy wildly grunting incoherently until he roared his release. Liquid fire burst from his cock. He screamed at each exiting squirt unable to distinguish if the

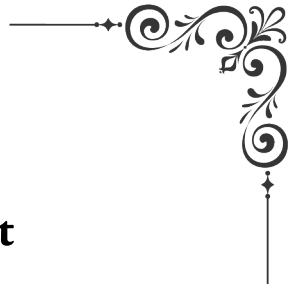
feeling was pain or extreme pleasure. Once his body started to calm, Baptiste rolled away from Cindy dizzy with euphoria. After a few moments, he let out an exhausted laugh.

“That was superb. I will rest for a while and then I will have you again,” he announced.

When the customary *yes sir* didn't come, Baptiste turned. Cindy lay beside him completely still. His brow lifted and he rose on his elbows to scrutinize her better. Her eyes were wide and her mouth gaped a bit. Baptiste jumped up and went around the bed to stand over her. His eyes widened at the sight of a very visible pinky impression scorched into the delicate skin across the nose. Bright red fingerprints also adorned Cindy's pale left cheek from where he held her face. Almost reluctantly Baptiste angled his head a bit. To his dismay the same type of mark lay on her hip where he gripped her.

“Fuck!”

He donned his robe once more than retrieved his phone from the nightstand. Leaving Cindy where she was, Baptiste dialed Maxwell's number and left the room.



## Chapter Eight

Reynaud sat at a table in the back of the dining room staring at a menu no longer seeing the words. Many days had gone by since they visited the site where Recture de Lecture used to stand. Making things grow in their garden, healing trees that were damaged in thunderstorms had proved positive and made him stronger; but wasn't enough to fill the void he felt growing within him. He could sense much more around him needed to be done. The more he thought about it he knew that it was Madame Cousteau trying to reach him. A proper search needed to be done, but it was the last thing he wanted to do.

Gentle hands slid over his shoulders. The slow massage over the tense muscles brought his attention back to the present thoughts. He welcomed the arms that wrapped around his neck and hugged him around the back of his head.

"How long are you going to stare at that menu, Reynaud? Do you think Pierre should change something on it?"

"Huh?" Reynaud looked at the papers and shook his head, dropping the pages to the table. "No Love, it looks good."

"Is something else wrong?"

Reynaud hesitated for a moment but shook his head again deciding against verbalizing his thoughts. Instead, he turned his head and kissed Kameryn's cheek.

"No, I think I'm just tired. Let's go to bed."



Kameryn stepped back as he pushed his chair away from the table. Reynaud took her hand and led her to their bedroom. Inside he wasted no time disrobing his lover. Kameryn's body had not lost its appeal. They had made love countless times over the last year and each day Reynaud wanted her more than the last. He was so grateful that Kameryn seemed to feel the same way.

Reynaud let his gaze fall over his young love's dimensions. He had long since memorized each and every curve of her five-foot-three frame. The few bleached strand locks, the amber color of her eyes and even the scar along the side of his foot were all locked in the recesses of his mind. Giving in to his need to touch her, Reynaud gripped Kameryn's shoulders bringing her to his chest in a fierce hug.

Kameryn's breath caught. She reached around him returning the embrace.

"Sweetheart, please. I know something—"

"Love, please. Let me just love you. You're right. Something has been on my mind, and I promise I will tell you everything. Just give me tonight."

Reynaud held her gaze until she nodded. He lowered his head and fused their mouths. Kameryn groaned parting her lips to accept Reynaud's tongue. Her warm, wet mouth tasted of the sweet dessert they had concocted only a few hours ago. Greedily, Kameryn returned his passion with no signs of hesitation her earlier protest may have offered. Reynaud slid his fingers down her body to find their way between her legs. His insistent rubbing and probing brought Kameryn to a quick frenzy.

Kameryn pulled away from him to lean her head against his chest. He grunted and groaned enjoying Reynaud's administrations to his cock. The sounds were music to Reynaud's ears.

"Reynaud..." Kameryn moaned, rocking her hips up into Reynaud's hand.

"Ah, yes... I know. Tell me you love me, Kameryn. I need to hear it."

“Yesss,” Kameryn hissed. “I love you!”

The words floated from her mouth on a breathy wave touching Reynaud’s heart. He scooped Kameryn up and all but threw her across the bed. Kameryn let out a startled yelp and a small giggle that made him smile. Reynaud discarded his clothing with quick yanking movements. He threw his leg over Kameryn’s rounded hips then quickly took up stroking his erection. The insatiable look in her eyes as she watched him excited him more.

Moments later she pulled him down into a passionate kiss. Their groans of pleasure were intertwined. His hard-on pressed against her sensitive flesh. A shudder moved over him like a heated wave. He could feel her body shaking as he slid his erection back and forth between her moistened lips.

“Mmm,” she moaned near his ear.

Her pleasurable moans gave him goosebumps. When Reynaud could take no more, he thrust forward and sank to the hilt into her. Kameryn gasped aloud. Lowering his head, he devoured Kameryn’s mouth swallowing her blissful groans. The connection between them went far deeper than his cock ever could. From the first moment, it sparked something within his core. Each time with Kameryn was better than the last. Pushing himself upright, Reynaud withdrew and returned moaning his pleasure aloud. Over and over he repeated the move, building a slow rhythm then going faster.

Kameryn’s delicate fingers caressed her full breasts lovingly. Reynaud’s blood burned at the sight. He quickened his pace. Her body tightened around him.

“Shit!”

She released her breast and gripped his ass. Sweet pressure filled his balls and a burst of bliss suffused his entire body. He bit his lip fearing he would come before she climaxed. Moments later, Kameryn added her screams of ecstasy to the atmosphere. Free to finally let go, Rey-

naud's orgasm raced through him snatching a cry from his very soul when it reached a crescendo.

Reynaud held himself aloft on shaky arms, resting his head in the crook of Kameryn's neck for a few moments. When he lifted his head, Kameryn looked up at him and smiled. Love and contentment shined back at him. The sight warmed Reynaud's heart. He rolled to the bed and pulled Kameryn into his embrace.

"I love you, Kameryn."

She snuggled closer to him. "And I love you."

"I will always protect you."

She yawned and nodded. "Uh-huh."

Her body relaxed beside him and her breathing evened. Soon the room filled with her soft snores, but sleep eluded him. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Madame Cousteau.

Kameryn rolled over and gripped her pillow. He moved behind her.

"How can I fulfill my duty to protect you without knowing what Madam Cousteau wants? What if something had changed? What if something is going on within the council that would threaten our relationship? There's a reason she's calling out to me," he mumbled against the back of her head.

Reynaud let out a frustrated breath. Madam Cousteau needed his help and he could not ignore that. He pulled Kameryn into a hug.

"I promise, Love, I will return as soon as possible," he muttered then slipped out of the bed.



REYNAUD WALKED THROUGH the debris in the dark waiting for something to direct him. A feeling, a spark, a vision, he longed for something supernatural to guide him and let him know he was doing the right thing, but nothing happened. The tingling he felt the first time he visited remained, but the day moved onward with no further

changes. As the sun rose, he could see better and the wreckage seemed to go on for miles. Reynaud wandered aimlessly all day not knowing where he was or where he was going. By dusk he was tired, thirsty and lost.

A crumbled structure loomed before him. The inside offered nothing for comfort and no roof for protection should it rained, but he was at least out of any wind. He leaned against a piece of wall on a balding patch of hard ground. Resting his head against the dilapidated brick, Reynaud thought of Kameryn and shook his head.

“She’s going to be pissed when I get back.”

He chuckled to himself as a vision of her face appeared in his mind’s eye.

“She looks so cute when she bites her lip like that.” He sighed as his smile faded. “Damn, I miss her already.”

The area around him darkened quickly. The minuscule light left in the sky barely made it through the thick foliage of the nearby trees.

Reynaud looked at his watch. “It would be the of the dinner rush right now. Kameryn would be in the kitchen making sure dishes were made and delivered to the dining room in a swift manner.”

Reynaud tapped his head against the wall. He had come to love the restaurant business and he really loved working by Kameryn’s side doing the mundane things in life. His woman was nothing short of a fountain of encouragement and love. They had only been together for a year, but Reynaud could not picture his life without her. With a sigh, he realized that he was truly alone for the first time since he returned to his human self.

The little light around him faded and total darkness consumed the area. Reynaud closed his eyes.

“I need to get this resolved so I can get back to the life I’ve made with Kameryn.”



REYNAUD LOOKED AROUND bewildered. He was home, in the house he shared with Angele. It was unchanged.

"But how can this be?"

He walked around only to discover that it was true. Reynaud touched his temple and shook his head, but before he could question further, Baptiste walked by him. He carried his beloved Angele in his arms like a new bride. Anger immediately flooded his senses.

"How dare you put your hands on her," he snapped.

Baptiste disappeared down a hall not answering. Reynaud's heart pounded behind his chest.

"No!"

He rushed after them arriving at the doorway just as Baptiste laid Angele's limp body beside his own sleeping form.

"No. No! This already happened."

Reynaud took a deep breath and shut his eyes to the tears he felt coming. He felt dizzy. The room spun around him. A soft, sinister chuckle reached his ears. He clasped his hands to both sides of his head in an effort to block the sound.

"You have held your station long enough, Reynaud Leduc. I think it is time someone else had it... namely me."

Reynaud opened his eyes turning to the voice. He focused on the man before him. They stared at one another, eye to eye, neither blinking nor backing down.

"Your treachery has no bounds, Baptiste. Why not direct your venom at me directly? What did Angele have to do with your hate?" he asked.

"Your Angele was merely a casualty of war," Baptiste explained. "As Madame Cousteau's favorite, I could not just openly attack you. I had to discredit you in the eyes of the council so when you finally fell, not even *she* could help you."

Reynaud felt the bile rising from his stomach leaving a bad taste in his mouth as he looked at his rival. Baptiste laughter rang in his ears again as he looked him over openly.

“The great Reynaud Leduc has finally been beaten by the *even better* Baptiste St. John!” he roared resuming his gaiety.

Reynaud squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his palms to his ears again. The hysterical laughter swarmed around him. He fell to his knees. Baptiste’s face multiplied in his mind’s eye locked with his sinister smile circling him menacingly, closing in on him.

*Reynaud.*

A whisper broke through the madness.

*Reynaud.*

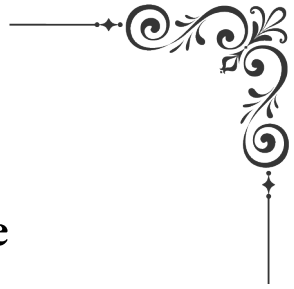
Reynaud concentrated on it. It was like a tiny light guiding him from a dark tunnel.

*Come to me, Reynaud, before it’s too late. I will help you.*

His form floated from the ground drawn to the sound, leaving Baptiste’s voice behind.



REYNAUD GASPED AND sprang to an upright position sweating and breathing hard. Confused at first to where he was, he took in his surroundings with a raised brow. The area around him brightened with the rising sun. He held his head and concentrated on his dream and knew exactly where to go. It would take some time to get there on foot, but his search would be over soon. As he stood, he noticed fresh grass growing beneath him and smiled.



## Chapter Nine

Baptiste paced the floor of his office. He tugged at his jacket and adjusted the shirt clinging to his damp skin. As he passed his desk, he picked up the cloth and wiped the sweat from his brow again. With a deep breath, he turned his head side to side then rolled his shoulders before returning to the window. Staring through the glass with narrowed eyes, he raised his hand concentrating on the blooms just beyond. Responding to his will the rosebuds shook then turned in his direction. The petals opened beautifully and their redness deepened in color. A small smile touched his lips, but before he could let out a sigh of relief the entire bush burst into flames igniting two others nearby.

“Damn it!” he yelled slamming his fist against the pane.

Acknowledging the click of the door with a mere shift of his gaze, Baptiste kept his attention forward staring at the small inferno. Some of his workers appeared with buckets frantically throwing water onto it as they looked about seemingly searching for the source of the blaze.

“Sir?”

The concerned edge in the voice of his right-hand man served only to irritate him.

“What is it, Maxwell?” he demanded turning to face him.

Maxwell’s eyes went wide and his voice faltered a bit. “I—I think it would be best if you took the rest of the day off, Mr. St. John. I will have Reggie bring the car around,” he said and left the room without waiting for a reply.

Though still frustrated, Maxwell's odd behavior gave him pause. Baptiste had done many things in Maxwell's presence over the years. He had seen a wide range of emotions from the man, but that was the first time he had ever seen fear at the sight of him.

Baptiste walked into the adjoining room. He looked into the mirror and gasped. The image staring back at him was indeed his reflection, but unlike he had ever seen it before. He turned his face to and fro touching his cheek. Where his eyes were supposed to be brown, they glowed bright red making the whites around them appear pink instead. His skin remained unchanged except it was wet with continuous perspiration. He gripped the sink and growled low in his throat.

"Perhaps Maxwell is right. I have to get a hold of this power," he muttered.

Nodding his head, resolving the thought to himself, Baptiste splashed cold water on his face until he felt better. His eyes still appeared more red than brown when he inspected them again, but they no longer glowed.

Baptiste left the restroom and went to his desk. Pulling a pair of dark sunglasses for the top drawer he left his office. Reggie held the door open for him when he exited the building. He slipped into the back seat and realized someone else was in the car.

"Maxwell, what are you doing here?" he said with slight annoyance.

"I'm just making sure you get home."

"I don't need a nanny, Maxwell."

"That is not my function, sir. My primary purpose is to ensure all your needs are met. That is what I'm going to," he explained as the car jerked forward.

Baptiste had struggled all morning trying to wield his magic. The more he concentrated on his earth magic the more he felt the fire move to block his call to it. He was drained with his efforts and leaned back against the seat.

"Very well, Maxwell."



Baptiste closed his eyes and though he lived a good fifteen-minute drive away from his job, it seemed like mere moments had passed when Maxwell tapped his shoulder. He followed Maxwell into his home and let the man direct him into his chair in the den. Maxwell left him for a moment but returned quickly with a tall glass.

“What’s this?” he asked, accepting the drink.

“Something to help you relax.”

“Now stay here. I will be back to check on you.”

Baptiste looked into the chilled cup. It smelled like the lemonade-iced tea mixture he liked. He drank it down without further question welcoming the coolness it gave his throat when he swallowed. Maxwell took the empty glass from him and he sank into his chair further feeling more relaxed already.



“YOU SENT FOR ME MADAME Cousteau?”

“Yes, Baptiste. Please, close the door and have a seat.”

Baptiste took the chair in front of her desk and crossed his legs.

Madame Cousteau pushed away the paper she wrote on. “I understand that you have petitioned for Reynaud Leduc’s prior position.”

“Yes, Madame, I have.”

“Why?”

“I am an Earth magic healer with just as much training as Reynaud. My skill is equal to his. I am ready for the position,” he told her with a small smile.

“I see. Well, your application for such a position will not be honored. I wanted you to hear it from me.”

Baptiste’s body tensed, but he was conscious to keep his face from changing.

“Madame, I don’t under— “

“I will not hear any of your lies, Baptiste. You may go now.”

Baptiste's mouth snapped shut and his eyes widened. After a moment he tried to speak again, but Madame Cousteau cut him off.

"I will come right to the point. I know how you conspired to discredit Reynaud Leduc. I will not have a dishonorable Creolyte in my midst training others. So, the answer is no."

"You would dismiss family so easily? Without just cause? On a guess?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"A *guess*?" she shot back with a raised brow. "Oh no, Baptiste St. John. It is true that I have no way to condemn you for your crime, but I know you are guilty none the less. And yes, we share the same bloodline and for that fact I am ashamed."

Baptiste stared at her with narrow eyes. His breathing labored as she continued her explanation.

"However, I must keep the knowledge of your treachery to myself but rest assured that it is not that we share the same bloodline that keeps me quiet it is the lack of material evidence to do anything about it."

Baptiste swallowed his retort. Now was the time to cultivate his patience. Retribution would ensue in due time.

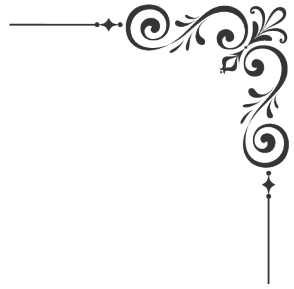
"Very well, Madame Cousteau," he told her with a forced grin. "Thank you for your time and consideration."

It took all his restraint not to slam the door behind him. Baptiste stomped down the hall putting his plan in action to get back at Madame Cousteau and the other elders who obviously supported her decision.



BAPTISTE'S EYES POPPED open and fury raced through his system. He looked around to find himself still in his den. The room had darkened suggesting the passage of time. He pulled his phone from his pocket.

"Reggie, bring the car around. We go to see Madame Cousteau.



## Chapter Ten

Reynaud grinned when he saw the stately manor rising in distance just off the Mississippi River. Quickening his step, he continued toward it. Though tired and hungry, excitement raced through his senses as well. He would see Madam Cousteau after so long very soon.

“Good evening sir, how may I help you?” a man wearing a black suit asked when the door opened.

“Ah, good evening. I’ve come to visit with Madam Cousteau, please,” Reynaud said with a smile.

“I’m sorry, sir, there is no one here by that name. Have a good day,”

A forced smile appeared across the doorman’s face before he promptly shut the door. Reynaud’s jaw dropped as he stared at the door blinking wildly. The confusion he felt was short-lived, taken over by anger. He knew Madam Cousteau was there. Her call brought him directly to the door. Why would this man tell him otherwise?

Reynaud pounded on the door. He paused waiting for the butler to return, but another man opened the door instead.

“How can I help you, sir?” he asked.

Reynaud scrutinized the man. This was no butler. His dark pinstriped suit, crisp white shirt and expensive-looking hat seemed best suited for a day at the office. The man’s physique and mannerisms were that of a person one would most likely see *guarding* a door rather than *answering* one.

“I’ve come to see Madam Cousteau. The other gentleman said she was not here, but I— “

“Of course, sir. The last guy was just mistaken. He’s new around here. Come right in,” the man offered, taking a step back making room for Reynaud to pass.

The hairs on his arms of Reynaud’s neck stood on end making him hesitate. He quickly noted two other men who were similarly dressed coming into the foyer. When the door closed behind him, he turned to face the first man.

“Where is Madam Cousteau?”

“We are just waiting for our boss to get here,” the man explained ignoring Reynaud’s question. He wrapped his arm around Reynaud’s shoulder guiding him further into the home. “Would you like something to drink while we wait?”

“No but thank you. I have no desire to see your boss, whoever that is. I came to see Madam Cousteau,” Reynaud reiterated.

“Yes, and how is it that you know the madam?”

A tingly feeling snaked up Reynaud’s spine tickling the hairs at the base of his neck. He stopped walking.

“The madam and I go way back.” He turned to face the man looking him eye to eye. “Where is she?”

“I think it’s best that we wait on the boss.”

Reynaud’s gaze shifted to the staircase to the left. The pull that brought him to the house mentally directed him up the stairs. He turned his body that way. The other men closed in on him as he moved.

“I don’t want to see your boss. I’m going to see Madam Cousteau.”

He took three steps, but the two men apprehended him before he could move anymore. The man who opened the door punched him in the gut without hesitation. Reynaud doubled over from the pain.

“I’m afraid I must insist.”

Reynaud took a few deep breaths than snatched his arms away from his captives. He threw a quick elbow back into the face of the man on his right. As Reynaud adjusted himself to swing on the other man he was met with another punch to the stomach and a well-connected up-

percut from the man on his left. Dazed by the blows, Reynaud landed hard on the polished marble-like floor beside the man he had incapacitated. His assailant stood over him smirking smugly.

“The boss has been the only one to see the madam in years. I think he will be very interested to know how you even know that she’s here.”

The two men pulled Reynaud to his feet again to drag him away from the staircase. A vase of flowers on a pedestal caught his eye as they turned him down a hallway. Reynaud yanked his arms from his captors, grabbed the vase and swung it at the guy on his right. The man ducked and Reynaud’s momentum took him full circle hitting the other man across the head. The container shattered falling in pieces to the floor along with the man. Quickly Reynaud thrust his knee up into the other man’s groin.

Reynaud took off in a run leaving the fallen men behind. He passed the first man just before reaching the staircase. Kicking him in the head, he continued on taking the steps two at a time. Following his instincts, Reynaud burst into a bedroom at the end of the hall locking the door behind him. A swift scan showed the suite was empty. He paused to catch his breath then opened the door to the inner-room and slipped inside.

Madam Cousteau lay in the bed at the far side of the room. The light of day shined through the windows. She looked as lovely as he remembered seemingly unaged. As he stared at Madam in awe, she turned his way and smiled.

“I knew you’d come,” she said, her voice soft, but not frail or strained.

She extended her hand in invitation. He rushed across the room to a chair, pulled it to her bedside and accepted it.

“I have missed you so much, Reynaud. I am so sorry that you had to suffer banishment when you were innocent. As we were conjuring you into the dog my heart cried even as I held my tears back. I was so fixed on you at the time that I could see what really happened in your mind’s

eye as you thought about it. Please forgive me for my part even when I knew the truth.”

He kissed her hand and held it to his face. “I never blamed you, Madam. There is nothing to forgive.”

The elder let out a relieved sigh. “There is much for us to discuss, Reynaud. Please listen, a lot has happened since you have been away. The land has suffered greatly in the last fifteen years. There was a great flood that destroyed our home base.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve seen it,” he told her.

“Yes, it was a heartbreaking and stressful time. Isabelle tried to use her gift over the wind to help Marguerite hold back the water, but it was too much. Marguerite was overwhelmed despite the help and perished along with so many people, humans and Creolytes. Isabelle was devastated over her sister’s death. When it was finally over, she left us for another sect further North to put the tragedy behind her.”

Reynaud wiped the flowing tears from her cheek. His heart broke to see her distress.

“So, Isabella is no longer in Louisiana?”

She shook her head. “She settled in Chicago where she could wield her gift unnoticed.”

“Are you still in touch with her?”

“No, my sweet. She died many years ago.”

“Where are the others that sat on the council with you?”

Madam Cousteau choked on her next words. Her free hand moved to her chest as she tried to compose herself.

“They are dead, Reynaud. Isabella was the first to fall after Marguerite. Her magic was stolen years ago because she had never really recovered from the storm, losing her sister and being alone with the people she grew up with for many years beside her. Tomas died of natural causes but Francois...” She sobbed gripping the charm around her neck. “He was murdered and his magic stolen. I’ve felt each one as their

spirits left this realm. We were all connected as first-borns through the magic.”

He did not know the others like he knew Madam Cousteau, but his heart ached for her loss.

“I’m so sorry, Madam.”

She caressed his face. “Please, my darling, you were more than just a pupil to me. My time grows short. I would love for you to call me by my given name.”

Reynaud nodded offering her a smile. “As you wish, Delphine.”

“Let’s not rehash the past any further. Tell me about the one who freed you.”

He couldn’t help but smile. “Her name is Kameryn. She’s beautiful, kind, smart, courageous and a fantastic cook. She’s wonderful.”

Delphine giggled. “Oh my, she does sound wonderful, indeed. I’m so glad that you’re happy.”

“Well, we were happy until recently when all this happened. She knows of my past, of course, but I didn’t tell her anything when I left to seek answers from you. She will be angry when I return and rightfully so.”

“What’s done is done, sweetheart. You will have to fix that with your love when you return. Your mind must be focused on what needs to be done now. What you need to know is that Baptiste is here.”

Reynaud’s blood instantly boiled. “Baptiste?”

“Yes, and I believe it was he that stole the other’s magic.”

Reynaud gasped. *Did the man’s treachery have no bounds?*

“Baptiste was the one that put us into these houses years ago when we started to age out of our positions. He placed those who were loyal to him in the elder seats, but he seeks my position for himself. I have known that since before you were condemned.”

“I won’t let him. I *will* kill this time for all that he has done. What he has done to you, the other elders and justice for Angele,” he said through gritted teeth.

“I have summoned you to me for a purpose, Reynaud. If Baptiste has indeed stolen the power of elders, he will be considerably stronger than you remember. You will need my help to ensure your victory.”

Reynaud swallowed and forced himself to calm down.

“I will do as you ask, Delphine. What do you need from me?”

“Not all of our people perished in the flood. You must rebuild the council home. When you do our people will come out of hiding and find you. Bring them together again so that our kind can thrive once more. Promise me you’ll do that.”

“I promise, but how can I do such a daunting task? I haven’t got the—”

“I want you to take my magic as your own.”

Reynaud gasped dropping her hand as he rose to his feet. “What? No. How can you ask—”

Delphine reached for his hand. She pulled him closer bringing his palm to her chest.

“Listen to me. I outlived my position long ago. The others grew weak and frail with time making them easier prey for Baptiste. My control over all the elements has kept me stronger. Only Baptiste’s greed for power has stopped him from taking what he wants from me. That’s how I know it had to be him that took the lives of Isabella and François. He needs their strength in order to have a chance to take me on.”

“But Delphine how can I take—”

“You’re not taking anything. I’m *giving* it to you. The amulet lets me wield and control the other elements. You must have my power and amulet to defeat him. The people will follow you once you have the strength to lead them.”

Delphine tossed back the sheet covering her and sat up at the edge of the bed.

Reynaud shook his head. “I don’t know if I can—”

“Reynaud, Baptiste *will* come for me. I would rather give you my power than have him strip it from me.”



He heard the finality in her tone and nodded. "You're right, of course, but what will happen to you once your magic is gone?"

Delphine smiled and caressed his cheek. "Reynaud, you will wear my amulet. I will always be with you."

Reynaud sighed and his shoulders slumped. "Very well, Delphine. What must I do?"

Delphine removed her necklace and Reynaud lowered his head so she could place it around his neck.

"Take this with you as well." She retrieved an envelope from under her pillow.

He flipped it over to inspect it. "What is it?"

"Papers for you to look over when you get home. Now take a seat. Give me your hands and no matter what, do not break the line of sight. It will happen quickly," she warned.

He did as he was told. Delphine mumbled an incantation he could barely hear. Suddenly the expressive brown eyes he had known most of his life began to change. The chocolate color faded and shifted into a soft sky-blue hue. The transition was fascinating. He couldn't turn away if he wanted to. The surrounding air cooled around them. Goosebumps rose on his skin and his nipples hardened when a shiver raced down his spine. He blew out a breath and it condensed before him in a tiny cloud. Reynaud's eyes widened. He blinked fast as the blue in her eyes lost even more color. They were almost colorless, like ice.

Delphine's frosty hands tightened around his preventing him from pulling away. His breathing heaved as the icy blast gripped his lungs. He started to cough and his eyes watered. Holding her gaze had become difficult. Delphine's mutterings were louder.

Reynaud tried to pull away as her eyes turned a bright searing red. The sudden heat on his hands made him gasp aloud. He almost jumped from his seat, but Delphine's grip prevailed keeping their connection intact. A rush of heat infused his body making him howl. Perspiration burst from his pores. He was on fire from head to toe and yet there

were no flames about him anywhere. His lids lowered on instinct as he screamed.

Delphine gripped his chin giving his head a shake forcing him to look at her again.

“You must not break contact,” she told him frantically. “Hold on. It’s almost over.”

He nodded and stared at her again. “Yes, yes, okay.”

Delphine continued to mumble as she took his hands again. The heat continued to rise within him. He bit his lip to stop any other from escaping. Sweat ran down his temples and saturated his back. Just as he started to yell again his body cooled. Delphine’s eyes went back to their original color. Reynaud felt renewed, stronger than he ever had before and refreshed.

Delphine’s grip eased and she fell back against the pillow with a loud sigh. He let out a long breath and slumped back against his chair. When he returned his attention to her only dust remained where Delphine once lay.



“MAKE SURE HE DOESN’T leave. I’m almost there,” Baptiste said then shoved his phone back into his pocket. “Hurry up, Reg. It would seem I have an uninvited guest to deal with.”

The car pulled in front of the house moments later. Baptiste exited the car slamming the door. Taking the steps quickly he hurried inside. His men rushed toward him talking at the same time. He held a hand up to stop their chatter and moved toward the staircase. Baptiste went straight to the bedroom. He needed to know who had the audacity to violate his home. The closer he got to the door the angrier he became, but when he turned the knob and found it locked his fury rose to new heights.

He pressed his palm to the center of the door. The wood splintered and cracked beneath the paint until the door flew apart. He pushed

past the debris to move toward the inner bedroom. Inside there was a man kneeling at Madam Cousteau's bedside. Baptiste's brows furrowed at the sight of her empty bed. The man stood and stretched. Baptiste gasped as recognition dawned.

"Reynaud," he said on a breath.

Reynaud turned with wide eyes. Baptiste raised his hand and a quick blast of fire shot out knocking Reynaud head over heels. Reynaud's shocked cry of pain filled the room as his body slammed to the floor.

Baptiste's jaw dropped as he looked at his hands. His stunned gaze quickly morphed into a grin. He moved across the room with both palms extended toward Reynaud.

Reynaud tried to roll onto his hands and knees, but before he could the second blast sent him sliding across the carpet into the wall.

"I should have known that she would have found a loophole to keep you alive."

Baptiste passed the bed with a quick glance and kicked the chair out of the way. Reynaud grunted as he tried to rise again, but Baptiste had already reached him. The two kicks he delivered to Reynaud's gut lifted him from the floor. He rolled onto his back wrapping his arms around his midsection grunting in pain.

"I cannot begin to express the pleasure I feel as my shoe connects to your chest, Reynaud," he said Baptiste stomping his foot into Reynaud's torso. "Your painful grunts are like music to my ears. This new power finally gives me the strength I need to punish you like I really want."

Baptiste easily lifted Reynaud from the floor and threw him across the room. The angry trajectory sent Reynaud flying out the nearby window instead of into a wall. Reynaud's high-pitched scream ended with a loud thud. Baptiste walked over to the window to see Reynaud lay on his back holding his chest sucking in harsh breaths.

Baptiste rolled his eyes. "Damn it. Now I have to go outside."



## Chapter Eleven

Reynaud barely had a chance to catch his breath let alone assimilate what Delphine had done to him. He had just noticed Baptiste was even there before he attacked. His body ached all over from the fall. Concentrating on mending his injuries, Reynaud became astutely aware of the new magic that flowed within him. It enhanced his healing abilities expediting the process.

His eyes popped open on a gasp. Springing to his feet, Reynaud's hand went to his head and then to his torso. Suddenly he snapped his head around to peer over his shoulder.

"On your feet already? That's surprising, but it doesn't matter," Baptiste said coming around the corner.

"Baptiste, Delphine has—"

"Oh. It's Delphine, now, is it?"

Reynaud refused to acknowledge his faux surprise. "Delphine has told me of your continued depravities since you set me up."

"Did she, now?"

"I always knew you were a despicable being, but this recent assault shows a new low in your honor."

"Well, I hope you've learned enough to put you on guard."

The blast that hit Reynaud did not have the same force as it did earlier. He shook off the pain as if it were a pinch. Baptiste's widened eyes made him smile.

"So, you've found a way to protect yourself."

"Your initial attack caught me off guard. I am ready for you now."

Baptiste threw his hands up to seemingly attack, but nothing happened. He shook his hands vigorously then looked at his palms with wide eyes. Baring his teeth, he looked around frantically. Suddenly he swung his arms in a swooping motion and the ground on both sides of him flew forward hurling toward him.

Reynaud held his hand up and the dirt and grass stopped and dropped in piles before him. He scoffed and rolled his eyes.

“You have magic inside you that you cannot control and your own magic was never a match for mine. You’re pathetic.”

“Fine! I don’t need magic to deal with you.”

Baptiste surged forward ramming his head into Reynaud’s gut. They stumbled backward with Baptiste holding onto his waist but didn’t fall. Reynaud beat his back with both fists. Baptiste grunted in pain with each blow and finally released him falling to the ground.

When he reached down to turn him over and Baptiste yanked him to the ground. They rolled across the grass punching each other until Reynaud gained the upper hand. Straddling his hips, Reynaud grabbed Baptiste by his collar and landed two punches to Baptiste’s face. He dropped his dazed opponent back to the ground pressed down on his shoulders to hold him in place. Baptiste shifted back and forth trying to dislodge him, but Reynaud’s superior strength prevailed.

“Tell me, Reynaud, how did she do it? How did she bring you back?”

“She gave me another chance at the love you took from me.”

“Ahh, so you have another woman in your life? Well, I will have to do what I can to meet her. Tell me, is she as beautiful as Angele was? Is this one tall and slender or petite and shapely like Angele? Do you have a type?” he added on a chuckle.

Reynaud ignored his questions and spoke slowly in a deliberate tone.

“No one has more reason to hate you than I, Baptiste. I fully agree that you should be punished for the crimes you have committed to me

and countless others, but I am not the one to administer it. That sentencing still belongs to the council elders.”

Baptiste’s cynical laugh was harsh to Reynaud’s ears. “Are you serious? You have been gone too long. There are no more elders, you fool! They’re all dead including Madam Cousteau.”

Reynaud eyed him.

“Don’t bother to deny it. I saw the dust on the bed. Madam Cousteau led the council because she held the power to control all the elements. The men that could possibly sit on the council now are under my control. Who is left to punish me?” Baptiste asked.

“I will find a way.”

“*You?* What will you do? *Kill me?*” he added with a mocking laugh. “That is the difference between me and you, Reynaud. Given the chance, I would kill you in a heartbeat. You and whomever else decides to get in my way. You, however, don’t have the balls to do what needs to be done. I will have what I want and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

Reynaud thought for a moment as Delphine’s words rose in his mind. The challenging look Baptiste sent his way helped make up his mind. He leaned forward to accentuate his words. The amulet fell free from his shirt to dangle in front of Baptiste’s face. Baptiste’s eyes went wide as he stared at it.

“You’re right, Baptiste. The power to reprimand you would have gone to Delphine, but since she has passed her magic to me it would appear that her duties are now mine.”

“She did what?” He shook his head wildly. “No, no! That can’t be!”

“You must be punished for your crimes and I know of only one way to deal with a power-hungry maniac like you.”

Reynaud pressed his palm to Baptiste’s chest. Knowing no spells to invoke he concentrated on what he wanted to do and trusted the magic inside him to carry it out.

Baptiste's face contorted and his mouth moved as if he were screaming, but no sound escaped. Reynaud searched his body focusing on each element inside him. Baptiste's body suddenly felt hot. A cold breeze rushed over them cooling him off and then his body shook violently beneath him. After several long moments, Baptiste's body finally stopped moving and sank several inches into the soil.

Reynaud snatched his hand away from Baptiste's body abruptly then rose to his feet. Baptiste lay on the ground for a few moments longer than turned over to rise onto his hands and knees.

"What— what have you done to me?" he asked in a panicked whisper.

Reynaud sighed and turned away from him. "I did what was necessary."

Baptiste breathing quickened. He grasped his chest shaking his head. "My magic...is gone. No! *No!* What have you done? *What have you done?*" he shouted.

"I have taken what was not yours to begin with *and* what you were born with. You are no longer a danger to anyone."

Reynaud continued to walk away leaving Baptiste's anguish filled screams behind him. He picked up his pace eager to return to Kameryn's arms and follow through with his promise to Delphine. The journey back home didn't take long. Fatigue never conquered him. He walked all day and arrived home late that night.

The streets were deserted and the restaurant had been closed for hours. Reynaud went around the back to enter through their private entrance. The thought of Kameryn made him sprint up the stairs. After a quick shower, he slipped beneath the sheets beside his lover. Pulling her closer, Reynaud sighed. He hadn't realized how much he missed her until he held her arms again. Kameryn snapped to a sitting position with a loud gasp. Reynaud raised his hands.

"It's me, Love. It's me."

"Reynaud!"

Reynaud pulled Kameryn into a hug. "I missed you so much."

Kameryn's posture was rigid in his arms. He released her and looked into her stern gaze.

"You *missed* me? I find that hard to believe, Reynaud. You left without a word, a note or anything," she repeated with a raised brow. "You've been gone for three days! You didn't call or even drop me a text to say you were alive. How is that missing me, Rey?"

Reynaud could hear the hurt behind Kameryn's angry words. He knew when he left, he would have to deal with hurt feelings and anger when he returned, but hearing her pain was a knife in his heart.

"You're absolutely right. I was one hundred percent wrong and I'm sorry."

"I didn't hear from you at all, Rey. I didn't even know if you were dead or alive or even coming back."

"Wouldn't come back? How could you even think that? I love you. Only death could stop me from coming back to you."

"You could have taken me with you, but you chose to leave me here...alone," Kameryn said turning away from him.

"Kameryn, Love, I couldn't take you with me." He turned Kameryn's face back toward him. "I had no idea what I was getting myself into or where I was going. I couldn't take the chance of you getting hurt."

Sadness and pain shone behind the unshed tears in Kameryn's eyes, but Reynaud saw understanding dawning as well. Reynaud leaned against the headboard and opened his arms.

"Please, Love, please let me explain. I swear I didn't mean to hurt you. That was the last thing I wanted when I set out on my journey."

Kameryn stared at him for a while longer then positioned herself to lie on Reynaud's chest. Reynaud sighed with relief holding Kameryn closer before telling her what transpired during the days, they were a part. When his tale was done, Kameryn looked up at him.



“So, where does that leave you? Are you really head of the council now?”

Reynaud nodded. “It would seem so. Delphine gave me all the power she had and all she asked was that I restore the council and bring our people together.”

“You’ll have to rebuild the council building to do that. Does that mean you’re going to have to leave again?”

“Yes, but not yet and not alone. I plan to spend the next few days right here with you. Afterward I want you to come with me to find out what must be done to clean up that area and start the rebuilding of le Recture de Conture. I don’t want to leave your side again.” He put a gentle kiss on her head.

Kameryn shifted back to the pillows bringing him down to lay behind her. Reynaud wrapped his arms around her midsection and pulled her to him.

“Yes, well, I’m all for us spending as much time as we can in this bed. I missed you too.”

Kameryn snuggled against him rubbing her bottom into his groin. A shiver traveled through his body and his cock pulsed with need.

“You have some makeup time to put in, Mr. Leduc. Oh. What was in the envelope Delphine gave you?” she asked over her shoulder.

“I don’t know. I forgot about it.” He left the bed to retrieve the envelope from his pants pocket. “Open it and see,” he said handing it to her.

Kameryn tore the envelope open as he slipped beneath the sheet. Glancing over the papers she turned wide eyes to him.

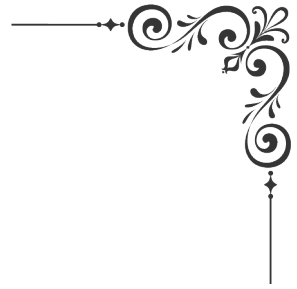
“What?”

“These are bank papers and deeds,” Kameryn explained separating the pages into two piles. “These are the deeds to some of the most successful businesses in Louisiana and these are passwords and account information at three different banks. See. This is how much each has in the savings and checking”

Reynaud looked where she pointed and gasped.

“I think your task just took a turn for the better,” Kameryn told him.

Reynaud’s happy laugh shook his whole body as he held her near. “I think *our* lives just took a turn for the better.”



**THE END**

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