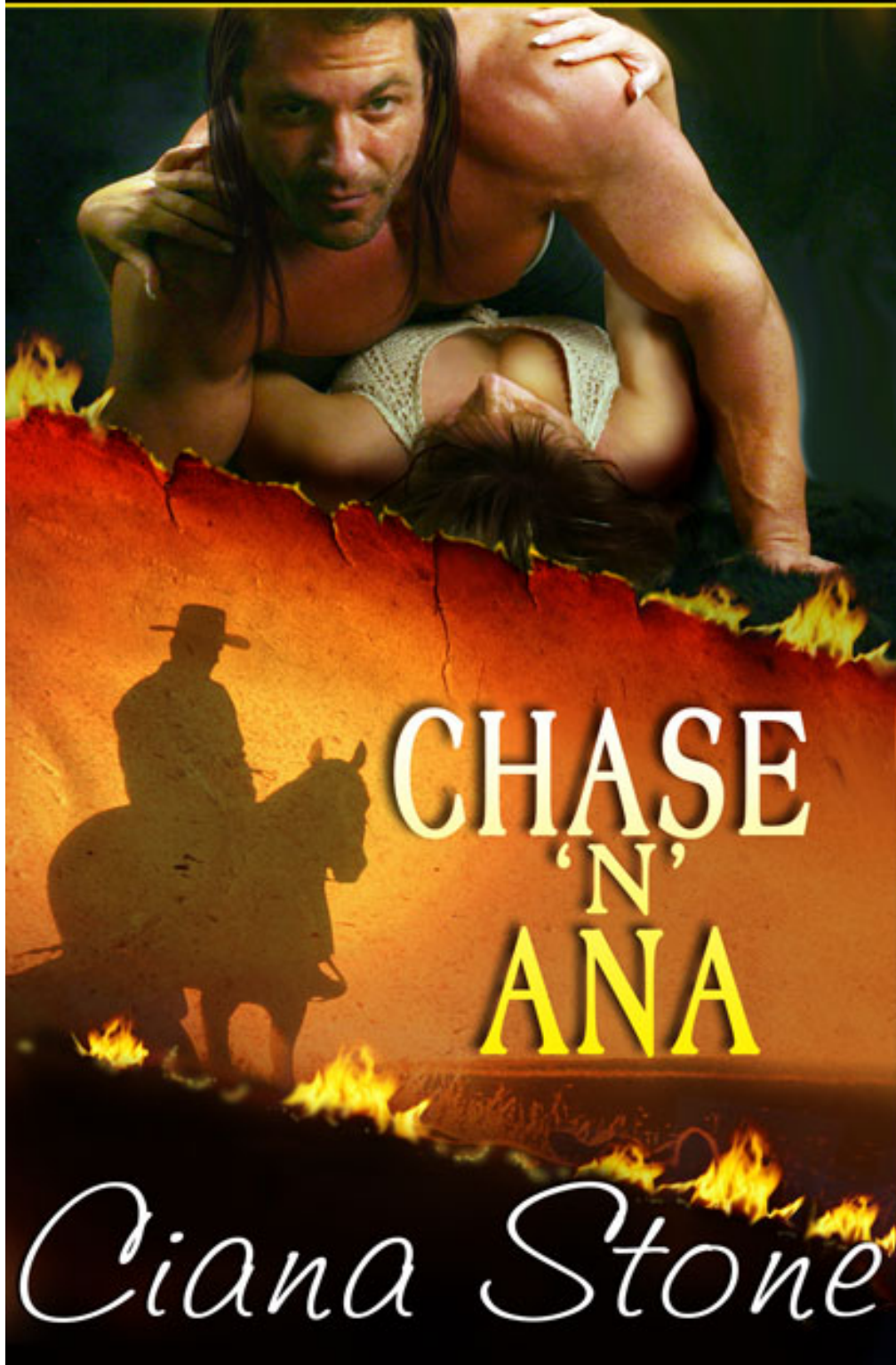


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



CHASE
'N'
ANA

Ciana Stone

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorasave.com

Chase 'n' Ana

ISBN # 9781419908378

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Chase 'n' Ana Copyright© 2007 Ciana Stone

Edited by Sue-Ellen Gower.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication: January 2007

his book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

Content Advisory:

S - ENSUOUS

E - ROTIC

X - TREME

Ellora's Cave Publishing offers three levels of Romantica™ reading entertainment: S (S-ensuous), E (E-rotic), and X (X-treme).

The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. This story has been rated E-rotic.

S-ensuous love scenes are explicit and leave nothing to the imagination.

E-rotic love scenes are explicit, leave nothing to the imagination, and are high in volume per the overall word count. E-rated titles might contain material that some readers find objectionable – in other words, almost anything goes, sexually. E-rated titles are the most graphic titles we carry in terms of both sexual language and descriptiveness in these works of literature.

X-treme titles differ from E-rated titles only in plot premise and storyline execution. Stories designated with the letter X tend to contain difficult or controversial subject matter not for the faint of heart.

CHASE 'N' ANA

Ciana Stone

Dedication

For the “real” Chase – a cowboy whose smoldering sensuality, quick wit, and sexy, slow drawl when he calls me Fancy, makes this little new age witch think of all sorts of things a person can do with a rope.

Acknowledgements

My deepest appreciation to all the people who were so instrumental in the creation of this book:

Ari, who shares my love of cowboys and is always there with a hilarious comment about some of my ideas.

Susan, who is a mental gunslinger that cannot be outdrawn and whose wicked humor makes me laugh even when I’m trying really hard to mope.

Suz, who gives me bellyaches from laughing at her stellar wit, and teaches me every day how to be a better writer.

And Raelene, the publisher who really cares about each and every author, and who I am sure is hiding all sorts of wickedly sexy tales under her hat.

And special appreciation to Patty Marks.

You are the one who makes it all happen, who keeps things going every day, making Ellora’s Cave a welcome place for all of us. Your praise is not sung nearly enough, but make no mistake, we all know that if there was an award for the most dynamic, creative, caring and all-around most kick-ass CEO in the world, you would win it hands down.

Thank you for all you do and how much you care. You are amazing.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Bewley's: Bewley's Cafes Limited

Colt: Colt's Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Co., Inc.

Crabtree & Evelyn: Crabtree & Evelyn, Ltd.

Dodge: Chrysler Corporation

iPod: Apple Computer, Inc.

Patron: St. Maarten Spirits, Ltd.

Wave Runner: Yamaha Hatsudoki Kabushiki Kaisha Corporation

Chapter One

The car coughed. Literally coughed. Then it died. In disbelief, Ana pumped the accelerator. Nothing. Like an elderly animal giving up the ghost, it coasted down the road for a few hundred yards, each passing foot getting slower and slower until it was barely moving.

She steered it off the side of the road and just sat staring through the front windshield. She was screwed. Here she was on—she had to check the map that lay on the passenger seat to determine just where—Highway 70 in Bumfuck, Arizona, with a broken-down car, no water, no phone and very little money. Yep, she was officially screwed.

Ana let her head fall forward onto the steering wheel. Either she was paying off some really horrible karmic debt, or she was having one of the worst runs of luck in the history of man.

Her summer had started off badly. First the Wicca shop she worked for went bust. Literally. The owner got busted for growing hydroponic pot in the basement of the store. That left Ana without a steady job. Teaching yoga and belly dancing three nights a week at the senior citizen center, and the occasional card reading wasn't going to keep her in organic veggies and tofu for long.

Fergi, her ferruginous hawk, attacked her husband Giovanni, who tried to shoot it. Ana used a broom to knock the gun away, and Giovanni shot out the kitchen window and the refrigerator. Fergi got pissed and took off and Ana was not able to get her to come back to the house until the day Ana packed her bags.

Then someone let her rabbit out of the house and it got eaten by a Doberman pinscher, grossing out the guy walking the dog and scaring the crap out of two kids playing on the sidewalk. Not to mention earning her a fine from the department for animal control. She still didn't understand that.

The next blow came in the form of Jimmy Lowe, a sweet thirteen-year-old boy two houses down, who was several bottles shy of a six-pack. Ana was taking a shower trying not to let water go all over the bathroom. The shower curtain was missing, torn off when her best friend Cecilia and her new boyfriend decided to have a nooner in Ana's shower. Apparently Cecilia slipped on the soap, fell into her new honey man who toppled over, grabbed the shower curtain and ripped it off on his way out of the tub.

Lucky for Ana he had decided not to sue her for the four stitches it took to close up the gash in his head caused from whacking the toilet on his way to the floor.

Ana rinsed the soap off her face and turned to rinse the back of her hair. That's when she saw Jimmy, standing at the bathroom window, masturbating. She yelled at

Jimmy. Jimmy fell. And now Jimmy's mother was threatening to sue Ana for contributing to the delinquency of a "mentally challenged" minor.

And all that happened before the end of the first week. But the straw that broke the camel's back was when Ana's husband, Giovanni, slugged her. Actually balled up his fist and punched her in the gut. And all because she disagreed with his narrow-minded stance on same-sex marriages.

She'd heard that love can't die in a day, but knew beyond a shadow of a doubt the moment Giovanni hit her that the saying was wrong. There wasn't a drop of love left in her heart for him. Truth be told, there hadn't been that much for half their married life, which was only three years. She'd put up with him because she felt it was her own fault that she fell for the act he put on when he was chasing her. Once the ink was dry on the marriage contract, he became someone she didn't know, and didn't particularly like.

But she blamed herself as much as him and hoped that in time she'd come to appreciate him for who he was and learn to view his shortcomings with affection. It had not happened, but since Giovanni didn't share his money, car or insurance with her, she had little choice but to stay in the marriage. She couldn't afford the mortgage on the house by herself and wasn't ready to get back into a roommate situation. The last one had ended up getting her tossed in jail because her roommate was running some kind of illegal porn site from a computer setup in the room she shared with her boyfriend, a sleazy guy called Snake. That pretty much made Ana's mind up that she wasn't equipped to deal with roommates.

Then, of course, she got married and figured wedded life had to beat the heck out of the single game. Getting slugged changed everything. It was an awakening, an epiphany, and hurt like hell to boot. Not as bad as the beating he gave her when she announced she was leaving during their argument.

Ana had not imagined Giovanni had it in him to hurt her that badly, but when she woke up in the hospital with two broken ribs, stitches in her scalp and looking like she'd been...well, beaten, she realized how horribly wrong she had been.

Ana was on her own and didn't have a clue what to do. All she knew was that she wanted to get as far away from Giovanni as possible. She remembered hearing her parents talk about a place in Arizona where the people were laid-back and open-minded, and decided that's where she would go. With all her possessions crammed into the back of her car, three hundred dollars in her pocket, a full tank of gas and Fergi with a death grip on the top of the front seat, she hit the road, hoping that the house she left behind would fall in on her worthless husband.

And wound up here. An image flashed in her mind of herself, hanging onto a knotted rope and a little red demon hovering above her with a cigarette lighter, burning the rope fiber by fiber. She knew she was teetering perilously close to losing control of the tight rein she'd been holding to for the last few months and that scared her. Thus far she had not cried, trembled or screamed at the course of events that had turned her life into a gigantic pile of crap. But she was sure close.

Which meant she had to get it together and take action. And the only action available to her at the moment was to get out of the car and start walking.

Which was exactly what she did. Fergi took to the air and Ana walked. Cars and trucks passed her by but not one stopped to ask if she needed help and she was too cautious to stick out her thumb for a ride.

Lucky for Ana, she wasn't as far from civilization as she imagined. In a couple of hours she found herself on the outskirts of the town of Safford. It was not what she'd imagined at all. A mixture of old and new, it was a city of diversity. Before she realized it, she'd spent several hours walking through the city. She spotted a bookstore and went in to inquire if they had job openings. A very nice middle-aged woman informed her that the shop was not currently hiring, but offered to keep an application on file. Ana declined since she had no contact information to put on the form, but thanked the woman and said maybe she would stop back at another time.

She used some of her precious funds to purchase a newspaper, put in her ear buds, turned on her iPod and strolled down the sidewalk, reading the classifieds. She came to a crossroads, glanced around and stepped into the street. She was not halfway across when the sound of a warning scream from Fergi made her look up.

"Oh, shit!" was all she had time to say before the pickup hit her. Then everything went black.

* * * * *

Chase wrestled his cell phone from his dog's mouth and turned his attention back to the road. His heart jumped up in his throat a split second before his foot slammed down on the brake.

He saw an enormous hawk dive down toward the small woman reading the newspaper in the middle of the street. The woman glanced up just as he bore down on her. Try as he might, he couldn't get the truck stopped in time. As if in slow motion, he saw the front of the truck strike the woman and her body become airborne. Her arms went up and out, the paper flew out of her hands and fluttered in the breeze. Her shoulder bag slung off and headed in the direction of the sidewalk.

Chase was out of the truck almost as soon as the woman hit the street. He raced over to her. She was lying partially twisted, her upper back flat on the street with arms spread akimbo, twisted at the waist so that her right hip was against the road, her left leg bent at the knee and crossed over the right. Newspaper pages blew all around them. Her left ear had an ear bud in it. The other side of the headset lay draped across her body. There was no sign of a player that he could see. Even in the midst of the anxiety pressing in on him he still noticed that she was quite lovely.

She was breathing, which was definitely a good sign. As he gently moved long, silky, dark hair aside from her smooth neck to check for a pulse, he dialed 911 on his cell phone and requested an ambulance. The big hawk he'd noticed right before he

plowed into the woman swooped down at them and Chase threw himself across the woman to protect her.

He'd never seen a hawk do anything like that. Was the bird loco? Must be, because it perched on a light pole and watched everything happening on the street. Chase forgot about the bird as he and the unconscious woman became a focal point of attention.

People were gathered, as is wont to happen at any accident. By the time the ambulance and police arrived, there was quite a crowd. Chase sat on the road beside the woman, his fingers on her neck, monitoring her pulse. It seemed to be okay to him, but what did he know? He was a rancher, not a doctor.

The paramedics took over, efficiently checking and then transferring the woman to a stretcher. The police officer responding to the call was an old friend of Chase's, Jason Weeks.

"What happened here, Chase?" Jason asked.

"Shit on a stick, Jas. I hit her." Chase had visions of his rodeo career flying high and far away to be replaced by the sight of a jail cell.

Jason pulled Chase over to the still-running pickup. "Don't speak too quick now," he advised. "What we have to determine is if you were at fault here."

"At fault?" Chase looked at his friend like he'd grown two heads. "Christ almighty, it's clear as the damn nose on your face."

"Just calm down and tell me what happened," Jason said calmly.

Chase blew out his breath, snatched off his hat, slapped it against his leg and with his free hand, smoothed back his dark hair. "I was driving along. Don't know how fast, just regular speed for town. My cell phone rang and Cody grabbed it. I reached over to get it out of his mouth and when I looked back she was...just there...in the middle of the road, reading the paper. I slammed on the brakes but couldn't get stopped in time."

"You say she was reading the paper while she was crossing the street?" Jason asked. "So, even though you didn't have your eyes on the road the whole time, she wasn't paying attention either."

"Yeah, uh, I guess." Chase could not, in good conscience, lay the blame on the beautiful dark-haired woman now on her way to the hospital. "No. No, it doesn't matter, Jas, it was my fault. Question is, am I gonna go to jail over this?"

Jason pursed his lips and squinted his eyes, mulling it over. "Not if she admits to being careless, and refuses to press charges."

"And what are the chances of that?" Chase asked.

Jason smiled. "Well, I guess that depends on you, old buddy. As an officer of the law, I can't advise you to get your ass over to the hospital and make sure yours is the first face she sees when she regains consciousness. Just like I can't advise you to turn on the Hawks charm with that little filly."

"Thanks, Jas." Chase crammed his hat back down on his head and gave Jason a friendly pound on the top of the shoulder. "Okay for me to leave?"

“Yeah, go on. I got what I need for my report.”

Chase got back in his truck and rubbed Cody’s broad head when the dog whined. Like it or not, his plans for the day had changed. Instead of paying a visit to the superficial but nonetheless delectable Mandy Fuller, he headed for the hospital.

Chapter Two

Ana blinked several times, trying to wrap her mind around the sights that met her eyes. A hospital monitor blinked beside the bed she lay on. Through the open door she could see medical personnel behind a long counter and people moving up and down the hallway. She turned to look at the other side of the room and her eyes widened in surprise.

Okay, I'm dreaming, she decided, or dead. Either way, the sight that met her eyes was quite appealing. A man dressed in snug, faded jeans, scarred boots and a tight white tee shirt that stretched enticingly over his broad chest and brawny arms, sat in a chair beside the bed, his elbows on his knees holding a black cowboy hat in his hands between his spread knees. His head was bowed, his dark hair falling over his forehead.

Ana had always been a sucker for the cowboy type. Maybe it was genetic. Her paternal grandfather had been a bull rider. Her father, Joshua Stillwater, was not interested in following in his father's footsteps and left at the age of sixteen to seek his future elsewhere. He found it in the shape of Fia MacGregor, a young woman from the highlands of Scotland whose family had immigrated to America.

Fia, as it turned out, had a soft-spot for cowboy types, so Fiana, shortened to Ana, spent many an evening sitting on rough bleachers watching local rodeo events in whatever place her parents landed for the moment. Even after her parents had been killed in an auto accident, Ana had secretly continued the tradition, watching the rodeo on television and secretly dreaming of real cowboys with piercing dark eyes and long, lean bodies.

Now it looked like she'd come full circle, because unless her eyes deceived her, the man seated beside the bed was not of the drugstore cowboy variety. His jeans were worn but clean, clinging snugly to the well-developed muscles of his thighs. His hands appeared rough, not the hands of a desk worker, and his arms were corded with the kind of muscle that develops from work instead of achieved in a gym. He had the kind of body her mother would have called a "real man".

At the moment Ana could not help but admire that real man physique. But then the man raised his head and looked at her and time stopped. Ana looked into dark eyes that belonged only in her dreams. So dark was the brown that it was barely distinguishable from the black of his pupils. Black thick lashes rimmed the hooded wells of darkness and thick brows drawn elegantly together parted and lifted in surprise.

His face might well have been carved by a master, all masculine angles with a firm, strong chin and slightly long straight nose over a set of lush full lips that begged to be kissed.

Chase was shocked immobile when her eyes met his. He'd been watching her for hours, waiting for her to regain consciousness and planning his strategy to charm her into letting him off the hook for running over her.

She was a small woman, no more than a couple of inches over five feet. Surprisingly, for a woman so small, she had sumptuous full breasts. Her arms were muscled but not heavily, just well toned with enough definition to stand testament that she was in good shape.

Her hair was long, silky and dark, the color so deep a black that even in the artificial light of the hospital, it shone with highlights like the midnight of a raven's wing. High cheekbones gave her a slightly exotic appeal, as did the luscious full lips and bronze tone of her skin.

But the eyes that locked unblinkingly with his were the most arresting feature of her face. Large and almond-shaped, they were the amber-yellow eyes of a jungle cat. Ringed by the thickest, longest lashes he'd ever seen on a woman that were not manufactured or enhanced, her eyes were the stuff of male fantasy. Which would explain why there was action taking place in a part of his anatomy that made him distinctly uncomfortable. The longer they stared at one another, the harder he got.

Chase finally broke eye contact. He looked down at his hat, using the moment to clear his thoughts, and then looked back up at her.

Ana was disappointed when the man broke eye contact. As long as their eyes were locked she did not have to be connected to the real world. She could stay inside the fantasy, imagining that she was looking into the eyes of her destiny.

But the moment ended and she was forced out of fantasy and back to the real world, where she was in a hospital with a man she did not know.

"What's wrong with me?" she asked.

Chase nearly groaned. It wasn't bad enough that she was hot enough to start a fire. She just had to have a slightly husky, low voice that inspired thoughts of hot sweaty nights and passion that burned long after the stars had faded from the sky.

"You were – uh, you were in an accident."

"Yeah, that part I remember," she said. "But what's wrong with me? I'm kind of scared to look for myself. Do I still have all my arms and legs and necessary things? Do I look like I went through a meat grinder? Do I still have both ears and a nose and all that?"

Chase could not help but grin at the questions. "Yeah, Fancy, you still have everything and lucky for you there's not a mark on your pretty face. You have some busted-up ribs but that's the worst of it."

Ana blew out her breath in relief and started to sit. "Ouch!" She grumbled at the pain sitting caused. But at least she could sit. She checked out her arms, and lifted the sheet to peer underneath at her legs as she moved them and wiggled her toes.

"So," she pulled the sheet up and arranged herself with her legs crossed in front of her beneath the sheet. "Who are you and why are you sitting here with me? Are you the sheriff or marshal or whatever you have here? Do you know who hit me? Where's Fergi and where is my purse? How long have I been here? How long was I unconscious? How long do I have to stay —"

"Hold on, there." Chase held up one hand. "One question at a time."

"Okay," she agreed, thinking he was as attractive when he smiled as wearing a somber expression, and what a nice low-pitched voice he had, very soft and low but extremely masculine and sexy. "First question. Who are you and why are you here?"

"My name's Chase Hawks and I'm here because..." He got up and paced to the foot of the bed, clutching his hat nervously in front of him. "Well, I'm here because it was me that hit you."

She turned to face him. "You're the truck that ran over me?" Obviously her bad luck was holding since the guilty party was standing in front of her, looking for all the world like someone she'd rather rape than rip. But sexy or not, he'd still run her down, and now she'd be faced with hospital bills she couldn't pay, which was the last thing she needed.

"Yes, ma'am. I am."

"Yes, ma'am?" she blurted. "No, I didn't mean to — it wasn't my fault — you should have been watching more carefully or I didn't see you?" she shot the questions racing through her mind at him in rapid fire. "Just yes, ma'am?"

He didn't respond and she studied him. "Well, I appreciate you being so honest, Mr. Hawks, and I'm sorry this messed up your day. I'm sure you have better things to do than sit in the hospital with a stranger."

Chase had not expected that from her. "Miss...uh, I don't know your name."

"Fiana Stillwater." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Now, Mr. Chase Hawks, if you'd be so good as to call the doctor, I think I'll be leaving."

"You can't just leave," Chase objected.

"Watch me." Ana threw back the sheet and went to hop off the bed. Only her ribs made her gasp and hang onto the bed for support. "Where are my clothes?" She looked around the room. "And my purse? And you still haven't told me what happened to Fergi."

Chase looked around as well. "I don't know. I guess they put your clothes somewhere. I don't know anything about a purse. And who the hell is Fergi?"

"Well, find out!" Ana was starting to panic. Every cent to her name was in that purse. Without it, she was completely sunk. No way to get her car fixed, get a place to stay or feed herself.

Chase hurried out of the room. Ana searched the room and found a plastic bag in a small closet containing her clothes. She hurriedly dressed and was putting on her shoes when Chase returned with a doctor.

"Miss?" the doctor addressed her.

"What?" She looked up at him.

"I don't think it would be wise for you to leave just yet."

"Nonsense," she argued. "A few broken ribs aren't that serious. So, if you'll just give me my purse and my discharge papers I'll be leaving."

The doctor looked at Chase and Chase shrugged. "Miss...?"

"Stillwater," she snapped, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Yes, Miss Stillwater. There was no purse brought in with you. All of your personal belongings—"

"No, no, no, no, no!" She put her hands up to her face, the heels pressing into her eyes. "This cannot be happening!"

"Miss Stillwater, if you would just—"

Ana cut the doctor off. "Get out! I mean it. Get out of here and leave me alone."

The doctor gave Chase a look and left the room. Ana turned on Chase. "You too. You've screwed up my life enough for one day, so get out."

"Look, Miss Stillwater, I know it's an inconvenience losing your purse but—"

"An inconvenience?" She turned on him with eyes flashing. "An inconvenience is having to detour a block to get where you're going. An inconvenience is having no cream for your coffee. This..." she gestured around the room. "This is not an inconvenience. Losing every last red cent to my name is not an inconvenience. Having my car break down in Bumfuck, Arizona, is not an inconvenience. Having my no-account husband shoot at my familiar is not an inconvenience. Getting beat all to shit and having to hide out for two months, getting sued for contributing to the delinquency of a peeping-tom minor, watching your rabbit get eaten by a Doberman, losing your job because your stupid boss couldn't grow his stupid pot at home—none of that is an *inconvenience*! It's life saying, 'Fuck you, Ana Stillwater—fuck you up the ass and to hell with the jelly.'"

At a loss for more words, yet still filled with rage and anxiety, Ana plunked down on the bed and buried her face in the pillow, screaming her head off. All of the events of the last few months finally burst through the emotional barrier she'd created and she could no more stop the flood of emotion than she could prevent the sun from rising. The monitor beside the bed started beeping madly and the door to the small closet flew open and banged against the wall.

Chase stood there dumbfounded. The damn machine beside the bed was beeping enough to pierce his eardrums, and the woman was screaming at the top of her lungs into the pillow, kicking her legs like she was swimming and bouncing the bed around.

Part of him wanted to laugh at the dramatics and all the crazy things she'd said. Another part was extremely aroused by her energy, anger and fire, and yet another part wondered why, of all the people in the world he could have run over, did it have to be a beautiful lunatic.

"You've got to stop that!" He walked over to the bed and grabbed her shoulder to roll her over. "You're gonna have people thinking you're dying in here."

"Ouch!" she yelled as he rolled her face-up on the bed. "Get off me, you Neanderthal! That's hurts!"

Chase released her and stepped back. "Sorry. But you've got to calm down."

"Do I?" she spat at him. "Why? Because it keeps from upsetting other people? Because it makes you uncomfortable? Well, guess what? I don't care. I'm sick and tired of being everyone's doormat and getting shit on every time I turn around and if I feel like screaming then I'm going to scream."

"Fine." Chase tossed her the pillow and turned to close the door. "So ahead. Scream. Act like a hysterical, irrational woman but it's not going to change anything and it sure as hell isn't going to make things any different."

"Well, what difference does it make to you?" She came off the bed at him. "You're going to leave and go on with your nice life, just a little inconvenienced by the fact that you ran over me. Not so easy for me. I'm stuck in this...place with no money, no job, no car and no one to turn to. So don't preach to me about irrationality, buster."

With that last word she poked him in the chest with her index finger. Chase looked down at her, trying to keep a lid on the anger simmering just beneath the surface. "Don't do that," he warned her in a low voice.

"Or what?" She poked him again. "You'll run over me again?"

She went to poke him again but he grabbed her wrist and jerked her up close to him. Ana froze and turned white as a ghost. All of a sudden she wasn't in a hospital room railing at a cowboy she didn't know. She was back at home, staring into the face of her infuriated husband as he rained blows on her. The pain she felt in her ribs was real but at the moment she didn't see it as due to the truck that hit her but that caused by her husband's fists and feet.

Chase saw the color drain out of her face and fear rise in her golden eyes. He tried to pull her to him, to comfort her, but that was the wrong move. She went wild, hitting and kicking at him, wild-eyed and panting.

It was all Chase could do to keep her from hurting herself as he fended off her blows. It took longer than he anticipated for her to run out of steam. By the time she literally collapsed in his arms, they were both red-faced and sweaty.

He carried her to the bed and propped her against the pillows. Ana stared at him blankly for a long time then jerked and blinked several times. "Oh my god." Color

flooded her face. "I...I'm...forgive me. I..." She covered her face with her hands, horrified at what she had done.

Chase waited for her to lower her hands. "Look, Miss Stillwater, it's obvious that you've had some trouble in your life, and I've just added to it. For my part, I am sorry. And if you'll let me, I'll help you get your car back and a place to stay until you can get on your feet and get home."

Ana laughed hollowly. "That's kind of you, Mr. Hawks, but that's kind of the reason I ended up here—trying to get as far away from home as possible."

Chase considered it for a few moments. The doctor had said that the breaks in her ribs looked to be more of a reopening of unhealed fractures than new breaks. And with what she'd screamed at him, it was a pretty solid bet that she was on the run from an abusive husband. Which made her trouble with a capital T. He could be making a huge mistake, but at this point he didn't see where he had a choice. "Fine, then don't go home. Stay here, find another place, do what you want. But until it's time for you to make that decision, I'm going to help."

Ana was touched that a complete stranger would be so kind, particularly considering her actions the last hour. "Thank you, but that's asking too much. When I said I was broke, I really meant it. I had three hundred dollars in my purse and that's all the money I have in the world. Everything I own is in the back of my car on Highway 70, and I don't have any family. They're all dead and now it's just me. But that's okay. I've been on my own a long time and I'll figure out a way. I always do. I can't take anything from you, Mr. Hawks. It wouldn't be right."

"Actually it would," he argued. "See, the facts are, I ran over you. Now, by rights, you could sue me for that. But I'm hoping you won't because it really was an accident. I was wrestling my cell phone out of my dog's mouth and just didn't see you. But that doesn't change the fact that I hit you. So, as I see it, the least I can do is help you until you're able to help yourself. That way we can call it even."

Ana studied his face and searched his eyes. Was he really as genuine and sincere as he seemed, or was he just another person trying to pull the wool over her eyes and get his butt out of a legal sling into the bargain? She did not want to think so, but she had a habit of thinking the best of people and it often got her into trouble.

But what choice did she really have? "What exactly did you have in mind?"

"Well, I guess you can stay with me 'til you're healed up. After that we'll figure out what to do next."

"Stay with you?" Ugly doubt rose and she tried to push it aside. "I can't do that. I don't even know you."

"Well, I'm not exactly a serial killer," he snapped then immediately apologized. "Sorry. Didn't mean to bite. Look, I'm not suggesting that I take you to bed. Just that I give you a place to stay. I have extra room and I'm gone a lot, so you probably wouldn't see much of me anyway."

"What do you do?" Ana's natural curiosity was piqued.

"I run a ranch, and I rope."

"A ranch? As in cows?"

"A few. Mostly horses."

Ana opened her mouth to say no, but an image flashed in her mind from Fergi, along with a bit of advice. She would not have acted on the advice if it came from another source, but Fergi was the one dependable being in her life.

"Oh, well... Okay, Mr. Hawks, you have a deal. On one condition. I'll work for you in exchange for room and board until I can get a job and get enough money together to get my car fixed."

"You want to work for me?" He couldn't help but smile at the idea. "And just how much experience do you have with ranching?"

Ana returned his smile. "Not much, but I'm a fast learner. So, do we have a deal?" She stuck out her hand.

Chance grinned and took her small hand in his. "We do, Miss Stillwater. We certainly do."

Chapter Three

Ana felt like someone being released from prison when Chase picked her up from the hospital the next morning. As part of their bargain, she'd agreed to spend the night in the hospital. He'd reciprocated by promising to see about getting her car towed to a local mechanic he trusted and getting her things from the car.

It had been a long night. Ana had alternated between second-guessing the deal she made with Chase, and reprimanding herself for turning into a mistrustful person who didn't deserve help. It wasn't until yesterday that she'd realized what a dramatic change had come over her since the day Giovanni turned on her and beat her to a bloody pulp.

She told herself time and again that she could not measure anyone else against him, then immediately questioned whether her judgment had ever been sound. After all, in the initial phases of the relationship she had believed in and trusted Giovanni. And look how that had turned out.

Several mental messages from Fergi convinced her that she needed to fall back on standard operating procedures. Namely, let it go. The past was the past and could not be changed. It was the here and now that needed her attention, and right now her path had led her to Chase Hawks.

Trusting that Fergi was right, she drifted off into a troubled sleep dreaming of a tall, dark-haired cowboy who made her want to remember what it felt like to be in the arms of a passionate lover.

Now here she was, climbing into his truck to be met by one of the biggest dogs she'd ever seen. "Ana, this is Cody." Chase reached over and gave Cody a shove to move him over on the seat. "He's a mixed breed, like me. Harmless."

Ana raised one eyebrow and cut her eyes at him. Somehow she didn't believe that either of them was harmless. "Hi, Cody, I'm Ana." She extended her hand for Cody to sniff. He took one whiff and wiggled all over. By the time she was seated beside him, he was licking her face and doing everything he could to climb into her lap.

Chase climbed in behind the wheel and grabbed Cody by the collar to drag him off Ana. "Don't know what's gotten into him. He's never like this."

"It's chemistry," Ana said as she rubbed Cody's big face with both hands. "Right, Cody?"

Cody barked in reply and lay his head down on her lap. She looked up at Chase and shrugged. "Animals like me."

"Apparently," Chase commented as he started the truck and pulled out. He had to admit that he couldn't blame Cody. He wouldn't mind putting his head in Ana's lap. Of

course, if he did he'd never be content to just having his head rubbed. Nope. He had entirely different ideas about having his head in her lap.

"So..." He looked for a way to divert his attention. "You introduced yourself to Cody here as Ana. Thought that was reserved just for friends."

"It is," she said and turned away to hide a grin. For someone who had agonized over her decision all night, she was feeling remarkably cheerful today. She was by nature an optimistic, take-it-as-it-comes kind of person. But she thought her today's high spirits were connected with the dream she'd had of her grandfather.

Her grandfather had been dead for ten years. He died doing what he loved. Riding a bull. He was working with some young aspiring riders and was thrown and trampled. Ana thought it was a horrible way to die, but something told her that her grandfather wouldn't have had it any other way.

Just before waking, she dreamed about being at his home in the mountains of North Carolina. It was dawn. Light was just beginning to filter down through the canopy of trees as they followed a deer path. He stopped and turned to her. "You don't need me to show you the way anymore, Little Cat. You can follow a trail as well as I, and your heart will tell you when you've lost your way. It's time for you to trust yourself to know the wise course and to stand on your own."

"But I don't want to," she replied. "I make bad choices, Grandfather. I trust the wrong people and end up getting disappointed and hurt."

"True disappointment and hurt comes from mistrust, Ana. When you cut yourself off from your own spirit and give less than what you are capable of giving, you become a person who not only forgets how to trust, but you become unworthy of the trust of others. Better to have given freely and be disappointed than refuse to give and miss what might be the greatest joy in life."

"Maybe." She knew he was right. She couldn't let one bad apple spoil the bunch, as her mother was fond of saying. "But it's hard to get rid of the fear."

"Fear is good, Ana. It keeps our senses sharp. But being a victim to fear is living a coward's life. You must give in to it—urge it to come and when it does, feel it pass through you. And when it has passed, look around and realize that the fear is gone but you are still standing. Then that fear can never again control you, for you have realized that fear itself is not the enemy."

Ana went to him and wrapped her arms around him, pressing the side of her face against his broad chest. "Why can't there be someone like you out there for me? Someone wise and strong. Someone who will love me for me, and not for who they want me to be?"

"Who says there isn't, Little Cat? Now come, it's time for us to part. Give your old grandfather a smile."

Ana drew back to look up at him. He kissed her on the forehead and then she woke.

Now she thought about the dream and wondered if it was nothing more than her own mind conjuring things that she would find comfort in, or if it was more. And how

did a cowboy who seemed conjured from her dreams fit into the picture. Thoughtfully, she looked over at Chase.

Chase was lost in thoughts of his own. Thoughts regarding Ana and the situation he found himself in. He glanced over at her, surprised to find her watching him. For a moment their eyes locked, then Chase looked away. Something about Ana unnerved him and he couldn't for the life of him figure out what. Sure, she could give him a hard-on with a look, but that was just hormones talking. He'd met plenty of women who turned him on and never once had he not failed to lose the thrill once he'd slept with them. He figured it would be the same with Ana. If he had her just once then her ability to give him a rock-hard dick with a bat of her golden eyes would disappear.

No, he decided. It wasn't the sex thing that perplexed him. It was something else. He'd figure it out sooner or later. Right now he had to think about the plans he'd made to house Ana while she recuperated.

He'd shot off his mouth before he'd considered what he was saying when he offered to put her up. One thing he'd learned way back was to never bring a date home. Not that Ana was a date, but the principle still applied.

Chase had been fortunate enough to be born into a family of prestige and wealth. That fortune carried a price, however. There were a lot of females who fell more in love with the idea of money than the man, and Chase had long ago had his fill of that kind of woman. To prevent repeat performances, he'd made a practice of not letting on who his family was, and never, never took a woman to his family home. If he ever found a woman who truly wanted him for who he was and not who his family was then he'd introduce them to the family. Until then, he was just a simple rodeo cowboy with a few horses.

He owned a spread adjacent to the Circle R, his family's sprawling ranch, and that's where he spent a good deal of his time. The Circle R covered more than 30,000 acres of the mountains of Graham County. Bordered to the west by Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness, to the east by national forests, and to the north by the San Carlos Indian reservation, it was a land rich with diverse wildlife. Black bear, deer, desert bighorn sheep, bobcat, mountain lions, javelina and coatimundi were just a sampling of the animals Chase had seen while growing up on the Circle R.

Chase inherited his land from his mother's family. It comprised only five thousand acres, but was unique in that it bordered a historic ghost town.

He figured he must have inherited more from his mother than he realized. From what Clara, the housekeeper who raised him at the Circle R had told him, Charity Hawks had never been comfortable at the Big House, as she called it. Charity would rather have been in a pair of horse-shit-stained jeans and boots, training a new horse than be inside having tea with the society folks.

Chase was the same. He could clean up pretty good when the situation demanded, but if he could get out of being gussied up then all the better.

He cut a look over at Ana. She had adjusted so that Cody could stand across her lap and both of them had their heads hung out the window. Ana's eyes were closed, her face tilted up, the wind whipping her long hair like strands of black silk.

A twinge in his gut made Chase turn away. The last thing he needed was to let himself get worked up over this woman. He didn't know the first thing about her and he made it a policy to measure his passion with a strong dose of caution.

Ana looped her arm around Cody's thick neck and looked out over the unfamiliar landscape. Arizona was about a different as it came from her home in the mountains of North Carolina. Accustomed to a preponderance of lush green and towering trees, it made the scenery seem almost alien. But it was not the vacant desert she had expected. Mountainous and rough, there was a beauty to it that called to her and she longed to get out and touch the earth, feel its energy and explore the area.

She spotted Fergi and grinned. "Look, Cody," she whispered to the dog and pointed at the hawk paralleling their course from several hundred feet above them. "That's Fergi. You'll love her. Only never, never, never try to lick her."

Cody barked in acknowledgement and Ana laughed and hugged him.

When the truck slowed, she pulled her head back inside the cab to look across Chase to the opposite side of the road. A lone road turned to the left, winding through the brush and disappearing into a bend at a thick stand of trees. As they turned onto the road, Cody barked once and started prancing on the seat. Ana laughed at his excitement and hugged him, a little excited herself to get her first look at their destination.

Chase suppressed a grin. Ana looked about as excited as Cody. She was leaning forward in the seat, her neck stretched up as if to give herself a better view of what was around the next turn. He kept an eye on her as they rounded a bend in the road and the house came into view.

Her eyes widened and a big smile took shape on her face. The moment the truck came to a stop she was out the door, Cody one step behind, jumping around her excitedly as she turned 'round and 'round, her eyes raking over everything in sight.

"It's so beautiful!" she exclaimed, continuing to move and look. "You're so lucky. Is that yours? The barn back there, behind the house? Oh my! Are those horses yours?"

Before Chase had a chance to answer, she was headed toward the fence. "Oh, you beautiful boy." She reached the fence and extended her hand to Nightmare, a three-year-old stallion no one had yet been able to break.

"Ana, no!" Chase raced after her. One thing Nightmare was not, was friendly. He'd as soon bite your hand off as breathe.

"What?" She had already climbed up on the bottom rung of the fence and swung her leg over the top rail with her hand on Nightmare's nose.

Chase stopped dead in his tracks. "Uh, just be careful."

"I'm not an invalid, silly." She dismissed the warning and turned her attention back to Nightmare. "You beautiful boy," she crooned, lifting his head up to breathe into his face. "I wish I had something to give you." She stroked him then turned to Chase. "Do you think I could feed him something sometime? What are his favorites? Apples? My grandfather used to have a horse a lot like this that couldn't get enough apples. He'd eat it out of your mouth if you weren't careful. What's this guy's name? Do you ride him? Do you think I could?"

Chase laughed, wondering if Ana ever asked just one question. "First off, his name is Nightmare and –"

"Nightmare?" she blurted indignantly. "What a horrible thing to do to a being as magnificent as this! That's just mean. You could give him a complex or something." She turned back to the horse. "Don't worry. I'm not calling you that. I'll call you...ummmm, let's see...I'll call you Zephyros. That's the West Wind god in Greek mythology. Now I know you're not Greek, but we are sort of in the West and I bet you're fast as the wind. So what do you think? Zephyros?"

Ana waited patiently for the horse to give her a sign. When he did not move she scrunched up her nose and pursed her lips, her brows drawing together. After a moment she smiled. "Okay, then how about West Wind? Does that sound good?"

Chase nearly fainted when Nightmare tossed his head and whinnied. Ana grinned and leaned out from the rail to put her arms around the horse's neck and hug him. Chase was sure she was going to fall off the rail and leapt over to put his hands on her waist to steady her. When he did, Nightmare jerked and pranced. Ana was thrown off balance and would have gone face first into the corral if Chase hadn't wrapped one arm around her slim waist and pulled her to him, cupping his free arm beneath her legs as she swung off the fence to him.

"Youch!" she yelped at the pressure of his arm around her back and his hand gripping her at the ribs.

"Sorry." He went to set her down and she kind of slithered down his body in this fluid, sinuous way that made the blood rush out of his head and straight to his dick. With one arm still up around his neck, her breasts flattened out against his chest and her head tilted back to look up at him, it was enough to tempt a priest. Which he was not.

Ana saw the darkness in Chase's eyes intensify and felt his body go rigid against her, and for a moment it was all she could do not to pull his head down to her so she could taste those full lips. But the look that came on his face spoke of thunderclouds, and wariness joined the desire, battling for control. Unsure whether to jump him or run from him, she compromised and took a step back.

"Why don't we get you settled, then I can show you around," Chase suggested, ending the moment.

"Sure," Ana agreed gratefully.

He got her things from the truck and led her to the house. She was stunned when she walked inside. She had been expecting something very bachelor, not the homey, comfortable surroundings that met her eyes. The only thing that seemed to be missing was family photos. Nowhere she looked did she see a single picture.

Thinking that he just wasn't into that sort of thing, she let him give her a tour of the house. Aside from the living area, or den, as he called it, there was a kitchen with a small dinette area, a laundry room off to one side of the kitchen, two bedrooms and one bathroom.

Chase gestured for her to enter one of the bedrooms and he followed, putting her duffel bag down on the quilt-covered bed and placing the two other bags on the floor. Ana looked around and wondered who had selected the furniture for this room. It had a woman's feel to it. That was the only way she could explain it. It felt like the room was filled with things that had belonged to and been important to a woman.

She dismissed the idea as Chase spoke. "So, do you want to take a nap or lie down and rest? The doctor said you should go easy on those ribs for a few weeks, and the same thing goes for your right leg."

"Nope, I'm fine. But if you have things to do don't let me get in the way. Just tell me what you want me to do and then you can go on about your business."

Chase's mind had filled with all sorts of tantalizing images the moment she said "tell me what you want me to do". The rest of what she said was a mystery. "Do?" he asked, feeling like a clod.

"Yes. Do. Our deal was that I would work for you. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Right. Well..." He looked around. "Uh, I guess the place could stand a cleaning. If you're up to it, that is."

"Absolutely," she replied with a grin. "Now, you just scoot on to whatever you need to do and I'll take care of it. Do you want me to cook?"

"Uh, sure, if you want." Chase was as unaccustomed to having someone in his space as a coyote was to sleeping with a snake.

"Sure. What time?"

"What time what?"

"What time do you want me to have dinner ready?"

"Uh, seven?"

"Then seven it is." She sailed past him and headed for the kitchen. Chase blew out his breath and followed.

"Where's your broom and mop?" she asked.

"In the laundry room. Cleaning supplies, too."

"Thanks." She stood looking at him.

"What?"

"Don't you have things to do?"

"Oh, yeah. Right. I do."

"Then I'll see you at seven."

"Yes. Seven." Chase didn't know what else to do but turn and leave the room. Ana followed him to the front door. "You are leaving Cody here, aren't you?" she asked. "I mean, it would be nice, if you don't mind. This is all new to me and I'd just feel better if he was here."

"No problem." Chase hadn't planned on taking Cody with him to the Circle R anyway.

"And he can come inside?" she asked, looking for all the world like a hopeful little girl, so adorable that he wanted to squeeze her.

"Yes, that's fine."

"Thank you!" She impulsively grabbed him for a quick hug and stood on tiptoes to graze his cheek with her lips before she flew out the door, calling the dog.

Chase shook his head and walked out behind her. The woman was like quicksilver, always in motion and fluid as a stream. He couldn't figure out if she was a little emotionally stunted, or just the most enthusiastic person he'd ever encountered. She bounced back from things as if she forgot them the moment they were finished. He was certain that he'd never met anyone like her. Ever. One moment she had a look that begged a man to take her and the next she was like a child who found joy in the simplest of things.

She wasn't easy to figure. Chase had always prided himself on being able to get a handle on people right away. Ana was an enigma. And that intrigued him. Combine intrigue with sex appeal that was damn near tangible and it equaled a woman to beware of. Which gave him cause for concern. With a curse, he headed for his truck. Right now he was only sure of one thing and that was, it was going take some doing to get used to having Ana Stillwater around.

Chapter Four

Giovanni Sardo smiled at the insurance adjuster and accepted the check the man offered. Three hundred thousand dollars was probably six times more than the small house now lying in a heap of rubble on the yard was worth.

That Giovanni had been able to magically persuade the adjuster to give him that much for the house was testament to the new powers he had attained. And to think he owed it all to that bitch, Ana, for dropping the house on him when she left.

Served her right, he thought. She figured she was getting even with him for the punishment he'd given her for disagreeing with him. As it turns out, she'd handed him what he'd wanted most in life. Power.

Giovanni was a minechicudet, a Sardinian male witch, the seventh son of the seventh son in a long line of witches. How he'd been born with such diluted power was a mystery to all his family and a disappointment to him. He'd dreamed of power his entire life, and how he could use it to get the wealth and status he craved.

He'd never planned on marrying, and sure would not have married Ana if it had not been ordered by his family. His mother had been in the States for a visit with relatives who had immigrated here. She was with Giovanni the day he first saw Ana.

Ana was performing in a festival in one of the local parks with a group of women she'd taught to belly dance. It was her lithe, sexy body that prompted him to stop and watch. It was his mother's elbow in his ribs that prompted him to introduce himself to her after the performance.

His mother had recognized Ana as a witch, and had predicted that her power was strong enough that if Giovanni mated with her and gained control of her, he could take her power as his own. Psychically draining others of power was one of his family's strongest talents.

It hadn't seemed like a bad idea at the time. Ana was sexy as hell, and as he soon discovered, not at all inhibited in the art of sex. He used every ounce of charm he possessed to win her. And once he had, he insisted on marriage, even though she was against it.

For the first time in his life, Giovanni found his mother to be completely wrong. He'd spent three years with Ana, trying to tap into her power, to take it as his own. And all for naught. Ana was what his people called a white-lighter. She operated strictly on the "harm none" principle, and seemed to be protected from forces stronger than he and his combined family.

When he realized he was not going to get her power, and she certainly was not going to voluntarily give it to him, he became dissatisfied. He resented that she had

power she would not use to improve their way of life, and resented that he was stuck with her even more.

Giovanni was trapped. Sex between them had ceased six months into their marriage. Ana would not even sleep in the same bed with him. She slept on the lumpy old couch with her damn hawk perched beside her.

Giovanni wished that hawk a grievous and painful death. He'd tried to shoot it once, but Ana had intervened. Now both of them were on guard for anything he might try.

The night they'd gotten into an argument over homosexuals was the turning point for Giovanni. He hated homosexuals. Gay or lesbian, it didn't matter to him. If he'd had the power he would have wiped them all from the face of the earth. He'd said as much when they saw a piece on the news about same-sex marriage. Ana, of course, had disagreed. Being the bleeding heart she was, she thought people had every right to choose their lifemate regardless of gender, and was strongly opposed to the prejudice that heterosexual people had against the homosexual community.

Giovanni had lost control and punched her. And that blow woke something inside him. A long-suppressed need to inflict pain broke free from the darkness and emerged. With it came a rush of sexual energy stronger than anything he'd felt in years.

And it only grew stronger and more satisfying with every blow, slap, punch or kick he delivered to Ana.

He halfway expected her to fight back magically. But she did not. She tried to physically fight him, but Giovanni was a big man and she was no match for him. And her hawk was not there to help. So, Giovanni had an orgasmic time, beating and raping her, then leaving her broken on the floor. He went out, got himself a hooker and a bottle and celebrated, establishing himself an alibi for when the authorities came to tell him that his wife was dead.

It had not turned out that way. Ana had managed to crawl to the phone and dial 911. She was in the hospital for quite a while, but when she was released she returned to him to announce to him that she was leaving.

Giovanni didn't give a fat shit about Ana, but his pride would not tolerate her walking out on him. No woman walked out on Giovanni Sardo. He tried to stop her, but that damn hawk intervened. Ana packed up her car and as she pulled onto the street she looked back, waved her hand and said a chant.

The next thing Giovanni knew, he was waking up in a hospital to learn that his house had collapsed on him.

He was mad enough to kill, and would have killed Ana if he'd known where she was. But then something marvelous happened. He started to notice that his power was stronger. Much, much stronger. He could control people with a suggestion, manipulate them to do his bidding.

It wasn't until he was released and returned to look at the rubble that had once been his house that he realized what had happened. While standing in the yard, surveying the mess, a vulture landed on the ground beside him.

Giovanni nearly fainted when the bird spoke to him, informing him that there was another inside him. Something that had been long buried beneath the house, imprisoned long ago by white witchcraft. Ana's actions had released it and it now resided in Giovanni.

At first Giovanni was a little panicked. Being possessed and stripped of his will and self-identity was not at all appealing. But soon his familiar and the Entity inside him eased his mind. The Entity did not want to take him over, but merely wished to live through Giovanni. And in return for life, it offered the power he now possessed and much more. The only thing it asked was that they find Ana Stillwater and kill her. She was descended from the witches who imprisoned the Entity and the time for revenge had come.

It was a perfect deal for Giovanni. He had three hundred grand in his pocket, power and a new familiar. Now all he had to do was locate Ana. Killing her would be a pleasure. He'd enjoy taking his time and prolonging it. And when she breathed her last breath, her power would also be his. Then he'd take whatever he wanted from life, and to hell with anyone who stood in his way.

* * * * *

Ana heaved out a long breath when she saw Chase's truck pull away. Fergi swooped down to land on the porch rail. Cody immediately bristled and Ana stooped down beside him. "That's Fergi. Remember me telling you about her? She's my friend, so you have to be nice and get along with her. Okay?"

Cody gave her a look that clearly said "but I'm a hunter by nature" and she rubbed his head. "Yeah, well, so is she and her wingspan is nearly seven feet. Not to mention the fact that her talons are razor-sharp, so in this one case you might want to curb your natural inclinations and make friends. Right, Fergi?" She looked up at the hawk.

Fergi let out a cry and Ana smiled and walked over to her. "Yes, Cody's fine. I've explained things to him. Right, Cody?"

Cody barked and bumped up against the side of her leg. She knelt down to give him a rub. "So, Cody, what's the deal on Chase Hawks?" she asked. "Have I totally screwed up or is he okay?"

Cody's response was to lick her face. "Yeah, I guess he's okay," she said as she stood. "You wouldn't like him otherwise, right? Besides, Fergi agrees and who am I to doubt her wisdom."

He barked twice and she exchanged a look with Fergi. "You sure about this?"

Fergi let out a shrill cry and lifted into the air. Ana watched her rise higher and higher then headed up the front steps of the house, continuing her conversation with

the dog. "So he gets the thumbs-up from you and Fergi, but between you and me, he makes me kind of nervous." She looked down at Cody. "Okay, so nervous isn't exactly right. I mean, let's face it. He is hard for a woman to ignore and yeah, I can't help but notice. I mean, damn! He can make you wet just looking at him. Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to embarrass you. But anyway, something about him still makes me nervous. It's like he's not really being honest or something."

She pulled open the front door and Cody bounded in. Ana stopped just inside the door, closed her eyes and let the energy of the house surround her. What was that she felt? She sank down onto the floor into the lotus position in one graceful move, despite the pull of the damaged ribs.

Focusing on her breath, she counted slowly, inhaling for the count of four and exhaling for the count of eight. When she'd gotten her breath down to three breaths per minute, the sensations of her body disappeared and her mind opened.

For a few moments there was nothing. Then she began to recognize the energy. This place was sanctuary. A place where the rest of the world could not go. Her eyes flew open. Why in the world would he have let her invade something so precious to him?

Chase was asking himself the same question as he drove toward the Circle R Ranch. His place had always been just that. His. A place where nothing connected with the family could touch him. A place where he could go and escape, be alone and hear his own thoughts. So why in the hell had he taken Ana there?

He had not wanted to take her to the Circle R because then his father would get involved and things tended to get more complicated when Charlie Russell got involved. Chase would rather that Charlie not even become aware of the situation, and Jason, Chase's friend with the police department, had assured Chase that unless Ana filed charges against him, Charlie wouldn't have to find out.

Chase pulled around to the back of the house and climbed out of the truck. Just as he reached the wide back porch, his half-brother Caleb barreled out the back door.

"Where the hell you been?" Caleb mumbled around a mouthful of Clara's apple pie, a huge wedge he held in one hand. "Old man's been raising hell 'cause you didn't get that mare over to Smiley's place."

Chase had completely forgotten about the mare. Charlie had been itching to breed her to one of Smiley's stallions and there would be hell to pay if he didn't get what he wanted.

"A hundred bucks if you do it for me," Chase offered.

Caleb thought about it for a second or two then grinned. "Done, but cash in advance, brother."

Chase reached for his billfold. "I'm short twenty. I'll make it up tomorrow."

Caleb grabbed the money and stuffed it in his pocket. "Plus a twelve-pack."

"You know Charlie'll kick your ass if he finds you drinking."

"What Charlie don't know won't hurt him," Caleb replied. "Come on, Chase. I'll come over to your house and bring a porn flick and we'll knock back a few."

Normally Chase would have given in. At least that way he'd know Caleb wasn't drinking and getting behind the wheel of the new pickup Charlie had given him for his high-school graduation present. How to say no without revealing he had a woman in his house was a problem.

"How 'bout we hold off 'til the weekend on that? Then I'll have Harvey drop off a keg and you can drink 'til it runs out your gills."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Caleb agreed.

They slapped hands together, grasped and released and Caleb ran down the steps and headed for his shiny new Dodge pickup. Chase watched him climb in his truck, then turned and entered the house.

The kitchen of the Circle R was the hub of all activity, but today it was quiet. Clara was just taking a big loaf of what smelled like fresh apple spice cake from the oven. The smell made Chase's mouth water. He snuck up behind Clara and grabbed her around the middle, leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "Think you could spare a slice of that cake for a hungry ranch hand, ma'am?"

"Get on with yourself." She turned with a smile that faded the moment she looked at him. "You got trouble all over your face, child."

"No trouble with me." He turned away rather than tell the lie to her face. Clara was as much a mother to him as the one who lay in the ground in the small family plot on the north ridge. He'd never been able to lie to her and get away with it. While he could fool most everyone else, Clara read him like a grammar schoolbook.

"Humph!" She turned back to the counter to turn the cake out onto a cooling rack. "So what brings you here? Charlie isn't home."

"Came by to pick up my trailer. Left it here last week."

"Getting a new horse? Clay says that Nightmare isn't any closer to getting broken than a month ago. You figuring on getting rid of that loco horse and getting you another stud?"

Chase's mind went to Ana and the way Nightmare had taken to her. It was peculiar to say the least. He'd had the horse six months and so far she was the only person who could even get near the animal. Charlie and several others thought he should take a hard stance and break the horse whether he wanted to be broken or not. And that could be done with most animals. But Chase saw spirit in Nightmare that he did not want to break. He wanted the horse to keep his fire. Charlie had laughed at him and so had a couple of his cronies, but Chase had long learned not to care what Charlie thought. If he lived his life to Charlie's dictates, he'd never step a foot inside another rodeo arena, or spend another night outside where he could listen to the whisper of the wind.

Somehow he got the idea that Ana would understand that. Why exactly, he didn't know. Maybe it was the way Nightmare had taken to her, or her complete ease with the animal. She'd had no fear, like she'd known the horse wouldn't hurt her.

Which made the mystery of Ana Stillwater even more tantalizing.

“Earth to Chase,” Clara’s voice broke into his reverie. She shook her head and laughed, handing him a plate with a big slice of warm cake. “Sure as I live and breathe, there’s something afoot with you, Chase Hawks. But I won’t pry. Just you promise me that you’ll be careful.”

“Always.” He smiled and dug into the cake.

* * * * *

Ana backed out of the kitchen door with the mop. The house was clean from top to bottom. Not that it had been dirty to begin with. But a deal was a deal, so she’d scrubbed and dusted and polished and mopped until there was nothing left to clean.

The house had an aura that was distinctly male, except for the room Chase had given her to stay in. Ana was positive that the furniture and quilt on the bed belonged to a woman. She’d stood, eyes closed in the room for a long time, soaking up the vibrations, and she was convinced that whoever the woman was, she had owned the furniture when she was very young, very much in love and also very unhappy, which seemed sad, and also made Ana curious.

She had not gone into Chase’s bedroom at all. Well, she’d started to, but then decided against it. He might be offended if she entered his bedroom without permission and she didn’t want to upset him the first day she was there.

As soon as the kitchen floor dried, she’d start looking to see what the choices were to fix for dinner. But at the moment, she was content to sit down on the back porch step and drink up the energy of the place.

Cody lay down beside her, working his head into her lap as she arranged herself in a meditative position, and Fergi perched on the back of an old wooden rocker, making it sway back and forth. Ana took a good long breath and closed her eyes.

Once again she was enveloped in a sensation that translated in her emotions as “refuge”, a place a safety. She knew beyond all doubt that despite the face Chase Hawks showed to the world, he needed this sanctuary in order to be able to deal with the rest of the world. Here was where he found peace. And she did not think finding serenity was an easy task for him.

But there was an underlying current of something deeply buried. His house contained vestiges of old emotional wounds, energy that had diminished but not disappeared. Whatever emotional baggage he carried, he was dealing with it but was far from free of it.

This made her question again why he had brought her there. This place was obviously very important to him, almost sacred. Why offer to bring a perfect stranger into the one place you protected from the rest of the world?

She didn’t know the answer, but she did suspect that he was afraid that she would seek to retaliate legally against him for running over her. Maybe he was afraid he’d lose

this place if she pressed charges against him or tried to sue him. Maybe the fear of losing what was so dear to him made the risk worth it.

But she did not think that was the sum of it. There was more to Chase Hawks than met the eye. And what met the eye was awfully tempting. Ana had never felt such energy from anyone as she did when his eyes met hers. It was like something physical, it was so strong. And while she knew part of it was purely sexual, she thought perhaps there was something beyond the animal attraction.

Without warning, sadness settled on her like a heavy cloak. Ana tried to decipher the feeling. It was not her own sadness, but from another. She opened herself more to try and touch the center of the sadness, and when she did, an image of Chase appeared in her mind. He stood alone, watching the sun rise, and instead of being awed by the beauty, his heart was filled with sadness and loneliness.

Ana's eyes popped open in surprise. Boy, wasn't she a superficial Sally? Just because he was amazing to look at, had this great house, horses and the greatest dog in the world, she assumed he had it all. There had to be scads of women who would darn near kill to get a taste of him, so why was he so lonely?

Maybe she was wrong, she decided. Maybe her receptors were misaligned or something. But even as she tried to convince herself, she knew what she'd felt was true and that brought out what was either her biggest strength or deadliest weakness. She wanted to ease his sadness.

Which meant that the first thing she had to do was to get dinner started and then she was going to give his house a good cleansing. Once that was done, she was going to recharge the house with positive energy and when he got home, it would be to a house filled with good, happy vibes.

With her mission clear, she rose and went into the house, Cody one step behind.

Chapter Five

Chase parked the truck in front of the house but made no move to get out. He was two hours early for dinner and he was annoyed. All day Ana Stillwater had crept into his thoughts, the way her golden eyes lit up when she smiled, and the way they darkened into pools of liquid fire when she was angry. Her lithe, supple body and the sensual, smooth and fluid way she moved. The way light bounced in little shards of indigo on her long silky hair. And that voice. That low, husky, please-fuck-me voice.

He groaned and leaned his head back. He'd only known the woman a day and already she'd bewitched him, crept into his damn head and taken up residence. There was only one thing he could do to rid himself of the spell she had him under and that was to have her. Sure as the world, if he had her, he'd be able to put her out of his mind and stop fantasizing like a damn schoolboy.

That's what he would do. He'd give her a few days then he'd make his move. Charm the pants off her then fuck her brains out. With his decision made, he felt more himself. In control, just the way he liked it.

He got out of the truck and walked to the house. Music was playing inside, but it wasn't anything he was familiar with. He opened the door, and all the control he thought he had fled like fog in sunshine.

Ana had her back to the door, her legs spread and was bent over at the waist with her head touching the floor, her forearms on the floor, hands clasped lightly. She saw him when he entered and smiled. "Hey! I thought you weren't going to be here until seven?"

But Chase wasn't looking at her face. Her firm rear was completely exposed except for a tiny strip of black material that bisected her ass cheeks. Her breasts were threatening to spill out of the low-cut top of the thong bodysuit.

"Chase?"

He forced his eyes to her face and she laughed. "Yoga," she said.

"Huh?" He hadn't gotten blood to his brain yet, it was still concentrated in his little head which was not so little at the moment.

"Yoga." She straightened gracefully and turned to face him.

"Oh, yeah, right." To keep from staring at her tight little body encased in that sexy getup – cut high on her hips, barely covering her pussy and low at the top, giving him a good view of most of her breasts – he looked around the room.

And that's when he noticed them. Crystals. On the coffee table. On top of the television, on the windowsill, the bookcase, the gun rack and even on the frame above the door to the kitchen. All sizes and colors.

"What's all this?" He gestured around.

"Charging," she said and watched him with amusement. Ana wasn't a fool. She'd seen the way he looked at her. And she'd checked him out in return and noticed the impressive bulge in his pants. It was enough to make her mouth water.

"Charging?"

"Yeah, charging the room." She turned and picked up a large, dull, yellowish crystal from the coffee table, affording him another look at her ass. "This is calcite. Actually golden calcite which is a unique Welsh variety. It was my mother's. Nothing better for energizing the crown chakra, and a wonderful energy amplifier."

Chase didn't quite know what to say. Although it did explain why that oversized duffel bag of hers weighed so much.

"This makes you uncomfortable." Ana wondered why it had taken her so long to pick up on that. Maybe because of the sexual energy that was arcing between them. It had been a long time since she'd felt sexual attraction and she was positive she'd never felt anything even close to the intensity she felt from Chase.

"Sorry." She snatched up a cloth bag from the sofa and hurried around the room, gathering up the crystals and putting them into the bag. She fumbled one as she started past Chase. It fell, but before it hit the floor, he caught it.

"Oh, thank you!" She smiled at him. "I would have been heartbroken if it had been damaged."

"It belonged to your mother, too?" he asked as he handed it to her.

"Yes." She placed the dark crystal in the bag and tied it closed.

"What does it do?"

"It relieves sorrow. Well, not really relieves it. More like it helps us to recognize that everything happens for a reason."

"You think there is a reason, Ana?"

In that moment it came to her. It was all for a reason. All she had been through had been to lead her here, to this moment, and this man.

"Absolutely." She looked up at him with eyes that beckoned like a siren to a doomed sailor.

Her eyes brought him a step closer to her. "Like you breaking down in Arizona and me running over you? You think there's some reason for that?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you fill me in, Fancy?" His voice dropped to a low sexy growl that sent a shiver racing through her.

"You can call me Ana." She slid closer, so close that she could feel the wave of heat coming off his body.

"Does that mean we're friends now?" He moved in, placing one hand on her bare hip to pull her against him.

“No.” She traced one hand up from his chest to his neck then on up to push his hat off his head and rake her fingers through his thick hair. “But we will be.”

With that she pulled his head down. Her eyes remained locked with his and for the space of several heartbeats they remained frozen, eyes searching and breath mingling. Then her lips touched his, soft and gentle, a butterfly’s wings brush of the skin.

“Careful, Fancy. Play with fire and you’re liable to get burned.” Chance’s hand tightened on her hip, feeling the smooth soft skin and firm muscle beneath.

Ana heard the warning as clear as the need in his voice, and she agreed. Chance was not a man to play with. As many women has he’d had in the past, and as sure as he was that he would not be a victim to love, he was as vulnerable as she in many respects. The smart thing to do would be to back down, not push it. But that would go against her nature. She smiled and brushed her lips against his again, this time flicking her tongue out to run it over his bottom lip. “I like it hot,” she whispered.

“Then you’re going to love this,” he murmured just before he seized her lips in a kiss that had her vibrating like a plucked guitar string. Chase was not gentle or shy in his approach. His tongue plundered her mouth, as hot and hard as the hands that gripped her hips and pulled her more firmly against him, sandwiching his stiff cock between them.

Ana gave in to the kiss, matching his passion, their tongues battling for dominance as she undulated against him, her belly pressing against his cock in a sinuous fluid grind that had his hands moving to cup her firm ass and pull her even tighter against him.

When they finally came up for air, her eyes were a dark molten gold, her face flushed. She wanted more, wanted him to press for more, but knew instinctively that this was not their time.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to change.” She backed away from him.

Chase reached out and grabbed her arm as she turned away. “I like what you have on.”

His passion-induced compliment delighted her. She chuckled, a low throaty laugh that had his hormones doing a fast two-step and something completely unfamiliar swell in his chest.

“What was that about playing with fire?” she teased.

“You think you could burn me, Ana?” He drew in close, his maleness overwhelming and compelling.

She smiled up at him coyly. “Believe me, Chase. When the time comes, you’ll need to bring a fire hose.”

And then she turned and walked away, her enticing little ass swaying provocatively down the hall.

Chase groaned and reached down to adjust the bulge in his pants. A witch. That's what she was. A damn sexy, little beautiful seductress. If he didn't have her soon, he just might have to leave home.

With a muttered curse, Chase snatched up his hat off the floor and stomped to the bathroom for a long, cold shower.

* * * * *

Chase looked down at the charred mass of meat on his plate then at Ana who sat across the table from him. "What is it?"

"Meat?" she asked rather than answered.

"You sure?" Chase poked at it with the knife.

"Yes. What's wrong?"

Chase stabbed down hard into the tough slab and raised the knife with the boardlike charred meat skewered on its tip. "How long did you cook this?"

"Half an hour?"

"How hot?"

"Five hundred?"

He plopped the knife back down on his plate. "And you purposely cooked it like that? Surely you don't eat—" That's when he noticed there wasn't any meat on her plate. Just a neatly cut-up potato, some green beans and a few carrot strips. "You don't eat meat?"

"Oh, no." She shook her head with an expression of revulsion on her face.

"Oh, crap. You're not one of those 'But it used to be a living thing' freaks, are you?"

"Well, it did used to be a living thing," she pointed out. "But I don't make a habit of saying that to people who are carnivorous."

"But you disapprove."

"Well..." She really didn't want to get into a discussion on her ideas about eating meat and using animal products and all that. She wasn't stupid. She knew that the majority of people didn't share her views and she was not the sort to challenge people about their lifestyles or eating habits. She believed in the "live and let live" way. But that did also include animals. "Let's just say it isn't right for me and let it go at that."

"Fine," he agreed. "But that being the case, we're going to have to change the rules."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you don't do the cooking."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with the vegetables," she pointed out.

"A man can't live on just vegetables," he argued.

The way he said it struck her as funny and she laughed. "What?" he demanded.

"Sorry. It's just...well, it's funny. I mean, technically, man can live just fine without meat. Probably with a lot less health issues into the bargain."

"Oh, no, here we go." He leaned his chair back on two legs, prepared for the sermon.

"Nope," she disagreed. "Tell you what. Since I messed up your meat, then I'll make it up to you. You eat your veggies and after dinner I'll give you a massage."

Chase jerked so hard he nearly turned over his chair. "You'll what?"

"Give you a massage." She picked up a green bean with her fingers and bit off the end of it. "I used to work in a massage place."

"A massage parlor?" he blurted. Ana was an ex-hooker?

She laughed at his expression. "Not that kind. Get your mind out of your pants, Chase. As a masseuse. You know, rub down, and work the kinks out?"

Chase let his chair settle back on all four legs, intrigued not only at the idea of Ana's hands on him, but that she did that as a living. "So how long have you been in that line of work?"

"Oh, I don't do it anymore," she replied, turning her attention to her meal. "That was way back."

"What do you do now?" He picked up his fork and started eating.

Her hand stilled in motion to her mouth. "Well, I...I...actually, right now I'm in between jobs."

Chase knew sure as he lived and breathed that there was more and since she didn't want to tell it, he wanted to hear it even more. "Yeah, well, that's a given. But what kind of work do you normally do?"

"This and that." She resumed eating. "I teach yoga and belly dancing and tai chi and..." She looked up at him, gauging whether to just go ahead and blurt out the truth.

Chase's eyes were glued to her. She saw curiosity dancing in their dark depths, and something more. She decided she might as well take a chance. "And I read the cards and make potions and cast spells."

Chase choked and she jumped up. He waved her back down to her seat and gulped down some tea. "Cast spells?" he croaked.

"Umm-hmmm," she murmured, carefully slicing her potato into thin slivers.

"As in cauldrons and bat wings and...whatever the hell wicked witches use?"

Ana laughed at the absurdity of it. "No, nothing like that."

"But you're saying that you're...that you're a witch."

"Yes." She smiled. "Is that a problem?"

Chase stared at her in amazement. Either she was crazy as a bedbug, or was trying to jerk his chain. "You can't honestly believe that you're a witch."

"Why not?"

“Because there’s no such thing. I mean there are probably pseudo-wannabe-pretend witches. But there’s no such thing as a real, magical powers, turn-you-into-a-toad witch.”

Ana smiled. “Well, you’re right. I definitely have never turned anyone into a toad.”

“But you still think you’re a witch.”

“Yes.”

“Okay then. Do something.”

She looked up at him curiously. “What do you mean?”

“Do something – witchy.”

She put her fork and knife down and folded her hands in her lap. “The Craft isn’t a game, Chase, or parlor tricks to entertain.”

“Well, excuse me for being ignorant about all that, but I say if you’re really a witch then you should be able to prove it.”

Ana considered it for a long time. Exposing herself was not something that came easy. It was the fact that he was a minechicudet, a Sardinian male witch, that had originally attracted her to her husband, Giovanni. His powers were very weak, having been corrupted over the years by an overindulgence in drugs and alcohol, but at least he didn’t get freaked by the fact that she was a witch.

“Chase, it’s not something you do for entertainment. Powers are sacred and should only be used when necessary, and for the right reason.”

“So what you’re saying is that you’re full of it and no more a witch than I am.” He could not help goading her. “That you’re telling me this load of horseshit because you think I’m some ignorant cowboy who will fall for it and –”

Ana’s eyes flashed and suddenly the door blew open. Chase jumped in his seat and jerked around to look at the door banging against the wall. He looked back at Ana. “You don’t expect me to believe that you did that.”

“I don’t expect anything from you, Chase Hawks.” Ana was annoyed and she knew that was dangerous. Needing to put space between them she jumped up and ran out the door, across the porch and down the steps. She was climbing the fence to the pasture by the time he bounded off the porch after her.

Ana ran to the middle of the pasture and suddenly stopped dead in her tracks. How magnificent it was there. The sun was beginning to set, streaking the sky with strokes of gold and red, mixed with varying hues of blue. The mountains were tinged with red like glowing tongues of fire had licked them into ignition.

She forgot her anger, forgot about Chase and all that had led her there and gave herself up to the moment. Throwing her arms wide, she turned, her head tilted back and her long hair blowing in the breeze, golden eyes taking in the beauty.

Chase stopped as Ana spread her arms as if to embrace the world and began a slow pirouette, turning gracefully, her long skirt swirling out around her and her face wearing an expression that seemed to him as if she were in a trance. He could not recall

ever seeing anything quite so beautiful as her standing there with the mountains reaching up behind her to touch the fire of the sky. He felt enchanted. There was no other word to describe it. As if he was standing in the presence of something that belonged in myth or legend.

Ana felt Chase watching her and stopped, turning to face him. Her golden eyes seemed lit, as if by an inner fire. God how he wanted her at that moment. To slowly peel away her clothes, touch her, taste her, feel himself buried in her wet core.

She felt it, too. Chase was aware he was attractive and wore it well, casual and confident in his sex appeal. What he could not know was the raw sexual energy he broadcast, so strong that it nearly took her breath away. He was a man that a woman would never get enough of, and it made her nervous that she wanted him so badly. How could she ever have one drink of him and be denied quenching the returning thirst it would inspire?

She had to turn her mind from the thoughts or they would overwhelm her, cause her to do something foolish. "It's so beautiful here," she gestured around them. "So much energy. So many whispers from the past. As if there are people here with us...whispering their tales of joy and sorrow, offering wisdom. It's so strong...so vital and primal. It makes me want to..." An impish smile took shape on her face. "Run like the wind." She ran over and poked him in the arm. "Tag, you're it!"

With that she took off running across the pasture. Chase blinked, considered it for half a second and took off after her, his long legs eating up the distance between them.

Ana did not see him closing in on her and when he grabbed her arm, she went white as a ghost and froze. "Hey, you okay?" He tried to pull her toward him but she would not budge.

Ana could not see the concern in his dark eyes, or the gentle way in which he touched her. All she could see was Giovanni, reaching to hold her still so he could hit her again, and again. She couldn't take more of the pain. It was too much. He was going to kill her.

But she could not fight back, couldn't use her ability to harm. She felt herself starting to slide away into a dark, cold place and that scared her more than anything. She couldn't let herself be sucked into that darkness where only pain existed. She screamed and started running blind.

Chase didn't understand what was happening but did recognize fear when he saw it and at that moment Ana was consumed by more terror than he'd ever seen in another human being. Whatever devil she was running from was one that scared the life out of her and he didn't know how to help. But he couldn't let her just run off. Now that night was falling it would be dangerous.

He ran after her and caught her just as she reached the fence. When his hand closed around her arm she whirled around fighting, hitting and kicking as if her very life depended on it. Chase didn't want to hurt her but she made it difficult. In the end, he

had no choice but to take her down and pin her to the ground, straddling her body to hold her still.

"Nooooo!" she screamed. "Not again. Get off me, Gio, or I swear on my mother's grave—"

"Ana, snap out of it!" Chase did the only thing he could think of. He slapped her.

Ana's head whipped to one side and then she went limp, her chest heaving rapidly. Chase eased his hold on her to turn her head. Her eyes were clamped tightly shut, but tears still streamed down her grimy face.

"Ah, Fancy," he murmured, gathering her up against his chest. "What did that bastard do to you?"

Ana stiffened at first, then wrapped her arms around him and sobbed. Chase held her while she cried, smoothing her hair down her back and crooning softly to her. "It's okay, baby. Let it out. It'll all be okay."

Finally the sobs diminished to sniffles and a short time later she loosened her hold on him from the death grip she'd had. "You okay now, Ana?" he whispered against her hair.

She nodded and drew back to look at him. "Had a rough time, haven't you?" Chase asked.

She shrugged. "A little."

"Your husband?" he asked.

She nodded. "Giovanni."

"He's the one who broke your ribs."

Again she nodded, but looked down in embarrassment. Chase put his fingers under her chin to tilt her head up. "Don't you hang your head, Ana. The shame's on him, not you. But you're shed of him now and he'll never hurt you again."

"You promise?" she asked, her eyes locking with his.

"On my life." Chase didn't realize until he had said the words how much he meant them.

"How can I trust you, Chase? Everyone I've ever loved has either left me or hurt me. How do I know you won't be the same?" She wanted to believe him, really believe him deep down in her soul but the memory of what Giovanni had done to her was making it hard. She didn't even know Chase. And despite what Cody and Fergi said, how could she know that one day Chase wouldn't hurt her just as bad?

Chase considered his words carefully. "You can't know that, Fancy. At least not yet. But in time you will. I'll show you how to trust again, if you'll let me."

Ana heard the sincerity in his voice and saw it shining in his eyes, and her heart felt a swell of hope so strong that it made her smile. "Okay," she agreed. "You teach me how to trust and in return I'll teach you..." A frown creased her brow as she thought about it. "How to dance sky clad under the moon."

“Sky clad?” Chase asked, being completely at a loss as to what that meant.

Ana laughed. “Naked.”

Chance couldn’t help but smile. Ana Stillwater was the singularly most unique person he had ever met, as fluid and changeable as quicksilver and as quirky as they came. “Sky clad, huh?”

Ana’s smile brightened. “Trust me, Chase. You’ll love it.”

He had no faith whatsoever that she was right on that score, but there was no sense in voicing it. The smile on her face had ignited something warm inside him, and he’d just as soon keep it that way.

Chapter Six

Chase woke with a start. What was that sound? He climbed out of bed, listening. It came again. From outside. He went to the window and looked out. "What the hell?"

Quickly, he threw on his jeans and boots and ran through the house and out the back door.

The moon was straight overhead, but less than half full as it was on the wane. Still it provided enough light to illuminate the landscape. And there, in the middle of the pasture, wearing what looked to be a big scarf wrapped around her body, was Ana Stillwater. Her arms were above her head, moving in intricate and graceful patterns through the air as her body moved to a rhythm he could not hear, but somehow could feel in his blood. It was a dance of pure femaleness, as old as time and as seductive as original sin.

His dog, Cody, sat on the porch watching. "Why'd you let her run out there on her own?" Chase asked. "You know rattlers come out at night."

Cody looked up at him then returned his gaze ahead. Chase walked down the steps and headed in Ana's direction. Just as he was climbing the fence, she stopped and called something he could not make out.

A shadow passed over his head, making him duck. Air pushed down on him as the sound of powerful wings moved past him. Chase looked up. What had to be the biggest hawk he'd ever seen was flying straight toward Ana.

Chase had never heard of a hawk attacking a person, but he wasn't about to take a chance. He set out at a dead run, shouting to Ana. "Ana, look out!"

She turned at the sound of his voice, and then looked up as the hawk started its descent. Before Chase could reach her, the hawk did. But instead of attacking, it settled on her raised forearm.

Chase skidded to a stop twenty feet from them. Ana smiled at him. "Chase, this is Fergi. Fergi, Chase Hawks."

The hawk twittered at her and Ana laughed. "No, I don't think it means he literally chases hawks." She turned her attention back to Chase. "Does it?"

"Uh, no." He wondered if maybe this wasn't all just a dream.

"Nope, it's real," Ana answered as the hawk chirped at her, then gave the hawk a kiss on its head. "Go on, but don't stuff yourself. You remember what happened the last time."

She raised her arm and the hawk lifted off. Ana watched Fergi rise into the sky then turned to face Chase. "What are you doing out here?"

"That's what I came to ask you."

She shrugged. "Just getting the feel of the place. And spending some time with Fergi. This is all new territory to her."

"That's the Fergi you were worried about? You have a hawk as a pet?"

"Oh, no," she replied and walked over closer. "And don't ever let Fergi hear you say that. She'd be very offended and believe me, a pissed-off hawk isn't a pretty sight."

Chase just gawked at her for a moment, trying to get a handle on the situation. "Your hawk would be offended?"

"Highly." She nodded. "And she's not my hawk. She's my friend and my familiar."

"Familiar? Is that another witch thing?"

"Yes," Ana chuckled.

"So what does it mean? She's some kind of demon or spirit or something?"

"Demon? No. She's more like my, umm, partner."

"Partner? So the hawk's a witch, too?"

"Well, I guess you might look at it like that. She does have certain powers. Mostly Fergi's kind of like my radar, and when needed lends me her ability. But more than anything, she's my friend."

"And she talks to you." Chase was far from convinced that Ana was a witch, even though things were getting stranger by the moment.

"Sure. Just like Cody talks to you, right, Cody?"

Chase hadn't realized that Cody was even there. He followed the direction of Ana's gaze and sure enough there sat Cody, two feet behind him, watching. He barked in response to Ana's question.

Chance looked from Cody to Ana. "He barks, but I'm positive he's never spoken a word to me."

Ana smiled. "Well, sure he has, Chase. He's told you lots of things. Like how he really hates that food with the liver flavor, and how he'd rather not go to Charlie's, because they don't let him come in the house, and how much he likes Clara because when she comes over she always brings him treats."

Chase was dumbfounded. He hadn't mentioned Charlie's or Clara's names, so how did Ana know them? Was this some elaborate ruse, some con game to sucker him for money? Suddenly he was seeing things in an ugly light.

"Look, lady. I don't know who the hell you are or how you come by your information, but there's no way in hell you'll get a dime out of me, so you might as well pack up your little traveling show and look for another sucker 'cause this gig's up."

"What?" Ana stepped back under the force of Chase's anger and his ugly accusations. "You think—"

"No, I know," he barked. Now that he had his anger up, it was taking control. He'd played right into her game, fallen for her wounded deer act and all the while it was just an elaborate ploy to swindle him. "You thought you'd sashay in here with your tight

little body, come-get-me, jungle-cat eyes, and abused-wife sob story and sucker me right in, have me eating out of your hand and forking over every dime—”

“Enough!” Ana was past the shock and full into her own rage. That he could even think her capable of such despicable things was more than she could take. For the first time in many years, her control slipped. She advanced on him with eyes flashing. “How dare you! I’ve been nothing but honest with you and have asked nothing from you. Nothing! And now you want to make me out to be some gold-digging hussy who would spread her legs to get your money? Well, to hell with you, Chase Hawks!”

She started to march past him, intent on gathering her things and walking off his property as soon as possible. But he grabbed her. The fear Giovanni had created rose and almost choked her into insensibility, but her rage was stronger. She whirled on him with one hand lifted, palm out. “Do NOT touch me!”

Chase had no idea how it happened. One moment he was standing toe-to-toe with her, his hand wrapped around her upper arm and the next he was flat on his back in the dirt. And he knew she had not touched him. He shook his head, climbed to his feet and stared at her in shock.

Ana’s reason was shrouded by anger and she couldn’t think straight. She extended her hand in front of her and he saw, literally saw, arcs of golden energy dancing between and off her fingers. “Keep away,” she warned.

“How do you do that?” Chase was so amazed he forgot he was angry. It was true! She was a witch. How else could it be explained? He’d felt it. Seen it with his own eyes. As impossible as it seemed, it was true.

Ana was so taken off guard by the complete change in Chase that her rage dissipated like morning mist. She closed her hand and the energy retreated back inside her body.

“How?” Chase asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered truthfully.

“It’s incredible. Ana, this is... This is unbelievable. You’re a witch. A real, bona fide, knock-my-ass-in-the-dirt witch.”

Ana had to laugh. It was just too funny. “I guess that’s one way of putting it.”

Chase was filled with curiosity. “So what else can you do? Can you fly?”

“No, that’s Superman,” she said, biting back a grin.

“Okay, maybe that was lame, but seriously, can you do anything else?”

A mischievous smile appeared on her face and she stepped up close to him. “Oh yeah. Want to see?”

“Absolutely.”

Ana reached out and placed her hand on his chest. A bolt of pure unadulterated energy, so completely sexual that it nearly made his dick explode, shot through him. Chase literally staggered it was so strong.

“Good god, woman. What was that?”

“Remember that fire we talked about?” she teased suggestively and moved close to run her hands up his body to circle his neck, her lips moving ever so slowly toward his.

“Oh yeah, I do indeed.”

“Well, just consider it a preview,” she whispered and pulled his face down to cover his lips with hers.

Chase thought he was going to come in his jeans. Her lips slanted across his, soft and wet and warm. Her tongue moved inside, tasting and exploring. And all the while her body rubbed against him, creating wave after wave of sensation so strong that his need exploded like a keg of dynamite, stripping away the veneer of civility and reducing him to a primal man with but one thing on his mind.

Ana was as lost as Chase. She had not intended to fall victim to her desire, but one taste of him and nothing else existed but the feel of his hard muscular body pressed against hers, his arms wrapped around her and his mouth, that glorious sexy mouth, feasting on hers.

Suddenly from behind Ana, Cody growled.

Chase immediately looked to see what Cody was upset about. “Ana, don’t move,” he said calmly. “Stay perfectly still.”

“Why?” she asked, but followed his instructions.

“There’s a rattler about six inches from your right foot.”

“Oh, is that all?” She looked down, saw the snake, then bent down and picked it up.

“Holy hell!” Chase took a big step back. “Are you crazy?”

“Don’t think so,” she replied, letting the snake curl around her arm. “You’re a big one, aren’t you? Well, you better be careful ‘cause Fergi’s hunting and I’d hate to see her make a meal out of you, now that we’re friends and all. Maybe it’d be better if you found a safer place to spend the night.”

She stooped down and released the snake. It unwound from her arm and moved away. “And remember, no biting Cody or Chase, okay?”

She and Chase watched it slither away into the darkness. When she turned to face him, he was staring at her like she had two heads. “What?” she asked.

“You just picked up a rattlesnake.”

“And?”

“And you do know they bite, don’t you? And are very poisonous?”

“Did it bite me?” she asked.

“Well...no.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Damn, Fancy. Just what the hell are you?”

“Just your ordinary, run-of-the-mill, garden-variety witch.”

Chapter Seven

"You sure you want to do this?" Chase asked as he and Ana walked to the barn.

"Absolutely."

"But the doctor said that—"

"He's wrong. I'm fine."

"This is nasty work, Fancy."

"Well, I'm a nasty gal," she teased, earning a cocked eyebrow from him.

"Nasty, eh?"

"Hmmm," she murmured with a smile.

Chase shook his head. She had a way of turning his thoughts to sex even when she was burning breakfast. It was clear to him that no matter what he did, said or thought, Ana Stillwater had wormed her way into his blood and wasn't going to be dislodged until he'd had his fill of her.

But right now he had chores to do and since she'd insisted on helping, he figured he'd give her a job that would be sure to have her wrinkling that pretty nose in disgust and calling it quits.

He led her into the barn, stopping to take hold of a large wheelbarrow that had a pitchfork and shovel in it. He pushed it into the barn and parked it in front of the first stall. His mount, Whiskey, neighed in greeting and Chase opened the stall door to let him out.

"Morning, fella." He rubbed the horse's head as Whiskey nosed him in the chest. "This is Ana. Ana, Whiskey."

"As in 'Whiskey River'?" she asked, thinking of the song.

"You know that?" Chase was surprised. He hadn't taken her for the country-western music type.

"You'd be surprised what I know," she replied and stepped over to stroke Whiskey. "Hey, Whiskey. You sure are beautiful."

Whiskey turned his attention from Chase to Ana as she gave him a kiss on the nose and blew softly into his nostrils. Chase watched her with interest. "Where'd you learn that?"

"What?" Her attention was still on Whiskey.

"Blowing your breath like that?"

"Oh!" She hadn't even been consciously aware of what she did. It was second nature to give any new animal your smell. "My grandfather, I guess. He raised horses along with bull riding."

"So you know how to ride?"

"You betcha." She turned to him with a grin. "Can I ride one of your horses?"

"Sure," he agreed. "But not 'til we get these stalls mucked out."

She gave Whiskey a final stroke on the head and turned to grab the pitchfork. "Fine, you get all the fellas out to the pasture and I'll get started."

"Don't you want to know what you're supposed to do?"

"I think I can figure it out," she said and gave him a little push. "Get going, cowboy. You're standing in the way of progress."

"Okay. Damn!"

"What?"

"I need to make a run to the feed store."

"So go."

"I can't leave you here to do this alone."

"Sure you can. Now go!"

Chase considered it for a moment. There was no way she'd be able to get all six stalls mucked out by herself. Chances were by the time he got back, she'd have given up and gone inside to play with her crystals or do more of that body-contorting yoga.

"Okay. You need anything while I'm gone, call me on my cell phone. The number's on a pad beside the phone in the kitchen."

"I'll be fine, Chase."

"Okay, I'll be back soon. Oh, you need anything?"

Ana pursed up her lips, and rolled her eyes up. "Hmmm, no. Yes. Yes. Do you have a blender?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, then I need a bottle of distilled water, some oil. Almond preferably, but if that's not available extra virgin olive oil will do. Let's see... I have jasmine and myrrh... Do you have any lecithin or vitamin E capsules?"

"Uh, no."

"Well then, I need both of those."

Chase was trying to commit the list to memory, all the while wondering what in the world she needed those things for. "Is this for some potion or witch thing?"

Ana laughed. "No, skin lotion. It's really dry here."

"Well, why don't I just stop by the drugstore and get you a bottle of lotion?"

"That's okay. I'm used to making my own. But if it's too much trouble, don't worry about it."

"No, no, it's fine." He repeated the list back to her and she smiled and nodded. "Okay, then see you soon," he said and turned to leave.

"Chase?"

He stopped to look back at her. "Thanks," she said with a smile.

"Sure thing."

"See you later." She gave him a wave and turned to pick up the pitchfork.

Chase let the rest of the horses out to pasture and got in his pickup. "Water, oil, vitamin E and lecithin," he mumbled to himself. "How the blue blazes is she gonna get skin lotion out of that. A greasy mess is more like it."

The idea of greasy inspired lascivious thoughts. With a grin he headed for town.

* * * * *

Ana set to work, removing as much of the soiled straw and manure as she could with the pitchfork and tossing it into the wheelbarrow, then finishing up with the shovel. She pushed the wheelbarrow out, spotted the manure pile and dumped the load onto the pile. It took three such trips to finish the first stall.

"Okay, one down and five to go," she told Cody who lay beside a stack of clean straw bales.

He gave her one short yip. She laughed and returned to her work. The gentleness Chase had displayed last night when she'd broken down had made a dent in her mistrustfulness. She had not needed to tap into Fergi's psychic sense to know that he was genuinely concerned for her, and had a strong sense of dislike going on for her husband for what he'd done.

Ana did not want Chase to hate Giovanni. She didn't want him to think about Giovanni at all, because she didn't want to think about him either. As far as she was concerned Giovanni no longer existed. She'd written him out of her life the day he hit her. He had not been the man for her. It had just taken something drastic to make her admit it.

Now Chase Hawks was another matter entirely. Ana knew to the bottom of her soul that he was the man for her. Whether he would come to that realization was up to him. As easy as it would be to nudge him in that direction magically, she could not ethically do it. And besides, she wanted him to want her all on his own, not because she had bewitched him. That wouldn't be real and she definitely wanted the real thing from Chase.

The man made her warm just thinking about him. Even now the crotch of her cutoff jeans was starting to feel damp from the arousal she was feeling.

She had to laugh. Maybe she wasn't the only witch in these parts. Because sure as the moon rose, Chase Hawks had a spell on her.

* * * * *

Chase picked up the bottle of skin lotion and opened it up to sniff. Smelled good, but not like Ana. This was kind of citrus and that wasn't her smell at all. He put it down and picked up another.

"Well, Chase Hawks. What in the world brings you here?" A female voice had him quickly replacing the bottle on the shelf.

"Hey, Mrs. Crossman." Chase gave the older woman a polite smile. He should have known it would be a mistake to take a chance on shopping at the exclusive shop that specialized in bath and body products.

She picked up the bottle he'd set down. "You looking for something particular, Chase?"

"Uh, no. Just told a friend I'd pick her up some lotion and I'm not quite sure what kind to get."

"Does she have dry or oily skin?"

"Uh...I don't know. It's soft."

"Hmmm." Mildred Crossman regarded him curiously. "Well, you know you can't go wrong with this." She moved over to a counter and picked up a bottle.

Summer Hill, the label read. From something called Crabtree & Evelyn. Chase smelled it. "It's nice, but too flowery."

"Hmmm." Mrs. Crossman tapped her chin with a long-nailed index finger. "Well, what scent does she normally use?"

"I don't know. I mean, she kind of smells like flowers, but not that kind. And there's something else. Something...warm and...jasmine! That's it, jasmine."

"Well then, this is what you want." Mrs. Crossman fetched a small bottle. "Savannah Gardens. It's a blend of Savannah Jasmine, orange blossom, vanilla and hyacinth and has extracts of linden flower, aloe and honey."

Chase liked the way it smelled. "But this isn't lotion."

"Well, honey, we have the entire collection. But if it's just the lotion you want—"

"No. No, I'll take one of each. And a bottle of almond oil if you have it. Oh, and a dozen of those candles over there."

Mrs. Crossman smiled to herself as she gathered his order. Nearly three hundred dollars and ten minutes later, Chase left the store with a big bag advertising where he'd been shopping, loaded with the candles, almond oil, Savannah Gardens bath gel, eau de toilette—whatever that was—hydrating body mist, body lotion, bath soap and room spray.

He had not gone two feet before he came face-to-face with his twin half-brothers, Cole and Clay.

"Yo!" Cole slapped Chase on the shoulder. "What's up, bro?"

"Just running errands. What're you two doing home?"

"Decided to work on the ranch for Pop this summer," Clay answered.

"You volunteered to work for Charlie?" Chase asked in disbelief. One thing their father was not, was easy to work for. All four of the boys had avoided it as much as possible their entire lives.

"He made it hard to refuse," Cole said. "You know Pop when he gets his mind set. Besides, this is the last summer. After I graduate I'm getting as far from Arizona as possible."

"Amen, brother," Clay agreed.

"If either of you reprobates ever graduate," Chase joked. "What's this? The fifth year? You on the six-year bachelor program?"

Cole laughed. "You know that's Clay's fault. If he hadn't talked me into joining that fraternity we would've had enough credits those first two years."

Chase couldn't help but laugh. The twins were a good time waiting to happen. Always had been. They had the best intentions and were both as smart as a whip, but just let someone suggest something that seemed like a good time and they forgot everything else. He guessed they'd grow up one day, but it didn't look like this was the day.

"Well, you boys try to stay out of trouble. I got to get back to the ranch. Catch you later." He turned to walk off.

"Yeah, I can see you're all burdened down with supplies there, Chase. You got a filly back at the ranch?" Clay's comment had Chase stopping cold in his tracks.

"Clay, you know Chase doesn't take his women to the ranch. That's sacred ground. Remember? But that doesn't mean he doesn't have one stashed away around town. Remember two years ago when that filly from Amarillo was holed up in that apartment east of town and Chase decided he was tired of her and she set the place on fire?"

The twins laughed it up over that. Chase didn't. "Grow up," he growled and stomped off.

Clay elbowed Cole in the side. "Bet Caleb knows what's going on. He's wired into everything that goes on in this place. What say we swing by the Circle R and take little brother for a few beers?"

"It's half past nine," Cole pointed out.

"So? We're on vacation. Let's grab a case, pick up Caleb and load up the Wave Runners, and drive up to Canyon Lake."

"Not a bad idea," Clay agreed. "By day's end we'll know what Chase is hiding."

"Yeah, then we'll give him hell."

Laughing, they backtracked to their truck.

* * * * *

Chase stopped dead in his tracks when he entered the barn. He'd expected to find the stalls still in need of cleaning and Ana nowhere to be seen. Instead, he found her spreading new bedding in the final stall.

"Hey!" She turned to him with a smile.

She was dirty, disheveled, sweaty, and without a doubt the sexiest sight he'd ever seen. Her cutoff jeans slunk low on her hips, but were cut high enough to invite a man's eyes toward the intersection of her thighs. The white tank top she wore was sweat-stained, allowing the dusky tint of her hard nipples to be slightly visible.

Ana felt his desire wash over her, mixing with her own and filling the interior of the barn with sexual energy strong enough to set the straw on fire if it grew any hotter. She didn't want to think only of sex when she looked at Chase, but it wasn't easy to do otherwise. His dark eyes were like pools of midnight, beckoning her to dive into the darkness and swim in the passion of their depths.

It took Chase longer than he was comfortable with to rein in the raw need that sang in his veins. "You did all this?" He gestured around the barn.

"Yep."

"By yourself?"

"Well, Cody helped." She gestured toward the dog, stretched out on a clean pile of straw, snoozing. "Poor thing wore himself out."

Chase chuckled. "Yeah, I can tell."

"So we can ride now?" she asked. She was eager to get on West Wind's back, ride off some of the pent-up energy.

"Uh, you might want to clean up a bit first," he suggested. Even from across the barn he could smell the horse shit on her.

"Oh, yeah." She looked down at herself. "I am a mess. Okay, give me ten minutes."

She ran out of the barn and to the well-house. She'd noticed a hose looped on the side of the structure, as well as a bar of soap. By the time Chase rounded the corner of the well-house, she had the hose held over her head with her face turned up to it.

The sight was enough to make him groan. Now that tank top clung to her in near transparency, the water running in rivulets down her body to all the hidden places he wanted his hands, mouth and dick to be.

Ana straightened and shook her head as she lowered the hose. That's when she saw Chase. A split second later a mischievous grin split her face and she turned the hose on him.

"Shit!" He held up his hands to ward off the spray, but it was too late. Squealing and dancing around, she drenched him head to toe.

"All right, you asked for it." He went after her, wrestling for control of the hose while both of them got wetter in the battle.

Ana laughed and squirmed as he wrested control of the hose from her, and held her with her back to him with one arm, drenching her and himself even more. "Uncle!" she gasped between laughs. "I give, I give!"

Chase released her and she turned to face him. The smile on her face transformed into a look that had him reaching for her again, this time to pull her to him for a kiss that was hot enough to boil the water.

Ana gave herself over to the kiss, exulting in the riot of sensations rocketing through her body. When he drew back and looked down at her with eyes smoldering with desire, she tossed caution to the wind, grabbed his shirt and ripped it open, sending buttons flying.

Her hands started on his chest, moving over the wet flesh, squeezing and stroking their way down his rippled abdomen. By the time her hands reached for the buckle of his belt, her mouth was on his skin, licking, sucking and tasting him from chest to navel.

Chase hauled her back up as her tongue worked its way toward the waist of his jeans. With one swift move he grabbed her tank top, yanked it over her head and lifted her with one arm to latch onto a hard nipple. Ana moaned, fisted her hands in his wet hair and arched back, pressing her breast harder against his mouth, wanting more of the sublime sensation that was cascading down from her nipple to her belly and then lower into her sex, making her throb with need.

She climbed on him, securing herself to him by wrapping her legs around his waist, pressing her sex against him. His free hand moved beneath her to hold her up by the ass, squeezing her flesh and pulling her against him tighter. Their lips met, hot and wet, each vying for dominance.

They were so caught up in each other that neither heard the truck stop in front of the house, or the men get out. It was not until a rowdy yell came from the barn that they realized they were not alone. Chase was concentrated on Ana's left nipple and the feel of her pumping her sex against him.

Chase raised his head from Ana's breast and turned, still holding her aloft. There stood his brothers, all three of them, grinning like hyenas and cheering.

"Shit on a stick," he cursed and lowered Ana to the ground. She cupped her breasts with her hands, watching curiously. "What the hell are you no-accounts doing here?" Chase asked as the men approached.

"Just paying a call on our bro," one of them, the youngest, replied, grinning at Chase then giving Ana an appreciative once-over. "Aren't you gonna introduce us?"

Chase blew out his breath. "Ana, these are my brothers, Caleb, Clay and Cole. Fellas, this is Ana Stillwater."

Caleb, the one who'd spoken, stepped forward first with his hand extended. "Caleb Russell, ma'am. Pleased to meet you."

Ana looked from his extended hand, to her own hands cupping her breasts and laughed. "Nice to meet you, Caleb." She looked at the twins. "And who is who here?"

Cole stepped forward. "I'm Cole. The good-looking one."

"You mean the knucklehead." Clay bumped Cole aside. "Clay Russell, at your service, ma'am."

"Nice to meet you...all." She nodded with a smile. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll go finish cleaning up."

She cut Chase a look. His expression was like a thundercloud. Clearly he was not happy to see his brothers. She did not understand why, but wasn't disposed to hang around and find out. The testosterone in the air was thick enough to cut with a knife. Chase nodded at her and she hurried to the house.

"Well, well," Cole addressed Chase. "Big brother's got himself a new filly. Surprised to see her here, though. Thought this place was off-limits to your women?"

Chase did not respond, but bent over to turn off the water that was creating a nice river at his feet. "You got a reason for showing up?"

"Actually we just wanted to see if it was true," Clay answered.

"What was true?"

"Well, the way I hear it, you ran some filly down in town, sat beside her hospital bed all night then brought her home with you," Caleb said. "Rumor has it that you're scared she'll sue you for running over her and are trying to charm her into letting you off the hook."

"And it looks like you were doing a fair to middling job of it, from what I saw," Cole added.

Chase blew out his breath in frustration. He should have known better than to hope word would not get around of what happened. "Blow it out your ass, Cole. Yeah, I did hit her. But it was an accident. And she never threatened to sue. She just fell on some hard times and I'm trying to help her out 'til she gets back on her feet."

"Looks like she ain't the only one on hard times," Caleb jested. "From what I saw."

"Get your mind out of the gutter, boy!" Chase snapped. "What you saw was supposed to be private. And I expect you to keep it to yourself. You get my drift?"

Caleb backed off and backed up a step. "No need to get riled, Chase. Just funning with you. I won't say anything."

"You better hope you don't," Chase warned and looked at the twins. "That goes for you, too. I find out you've shot your mouth off to Charlie, and you and me are gonna go 'round. You get me?"

"Hey, chill!" Cole lifted his hands, palms out. "We aren't going to say anything, Chase. Just chill."

"Fine." Chase backed off a bit. Normally when his brothers gave their word it was solid. "So why are you here?"

"Wanted to find out if you wanted to go up to Canyon Lake for a couple of days of camping?"

"Sorry, got too much to do. But you boys have fun. I got to change."

"Well, maybe it isn't a good idea anyway," Caleb said behind Chase's back. "You know Charlie will be fit to be tied if we all duck outta work. Why don't we just hang out here with Chase, drink some brew and chill."

Chase stopped dead in his tracks and turned. "That's not a good idea."

"Why not? We're already here and we've got plenty of beer. Besides since Miss Ana's just a friend you're helping out, I might like to get to know her better myself."

"Oh shit!" Cole muttered as Chase advanced on Caleb in long, determined strides.

"You listen up." Chase looked down at his brother, who was a half a head shorter. "All of you." His hard eyes raked all three of the brothers. "She's off-limits. You got that?"

"You already staked a claim on that, have you?" Cole, being the farthest away, felt bold enough to ask.

Chase realized his blunder. Now there was no way out. "Yeah." He met Cole's eyes with a look hard enough to drive in nails. "I have."

"Hey, no problem," Cole replied. "Right, boys?"

"Absolutely," Clay agreed while Caleb gave a vigorous nod in the affirmative.

"Good."

"So we can hang out?" Caleb asked and winced when Chase gave him a look annoyed enough to have a non-related man backpedaling.

"Fine, do whatever you want," Chase relented. "I'm going to change."

"Cool," Caleb grinned. "Meet you on the back porch with cold brewskies in ten."

Chase threw up one hand as he walked to the house. The way things were going, he was never going to get to satisfy the itch he had for Ana.

Chapter Eight

Thanks to his brothers ending up spending the entire day and half the night, Chase's chances to get Ana alone were slim to none. The following two days he was busy with ranch chores, and obligations to Charlie to help him purchase several mares and a stallion Charlie had been itching to own.

He was looking forward to time at home, alone with Ana. But when he pulled up in the driveway and saw Caleb's truck he saw that wish go wafting out the window.

Inside he found his brothers and Ana in the den. She was sitting on the floor with funny-looking cards spread on a cloth in front of her.

"You're home!" She beamed up at him. "Your brothers want us to go out with them. Is that okay?"

It was far from okay, but Chase didn't have the heart to say so. "Sure," he agreed. "But right now I need a shower and some food."

"Dinner's almost ready," she said with a grin. "I made you a meatloaf."

Chase nearly groaned. Ana was a whiz when it came to vegetable dishes but made a disaster out of cooking any kind of meat.

"Don't worry, Clay brought me a recipe from Miss Clara and I followed it to the letter."

That didn't inspire Chase with confidence, but he didn't voice the thought. Instead he showered, dressed, and when he emerged from his room, followed his nose to the source of the delicious smell and found everyone in the kitchen.

All of his brothers were helping Ana. Cole was setting the table, Clay was dishing the food into serving bowls, and Caleb was pouring tall glasses of iced tea, while Ana was setting a vase with cut wildflowers in the middle of the table.

Chase stopped in the doorway for a few moments just to watch. Everyone was talking and laughing and working together, just like a family. Or like he'd always dreamed a family would be. He let himself indulge in a small fantasy that maybe one day his family could always be like this. Then Ana spotted him and pulled out his chair at the table.

"Dinner is served, sire," she said with a smile and curtsy.

"Smells good," he said as he took a seat.

"Keep your fingers crossed that it tastes as good as it smells," she replied.

Everyone sat down, served their plates and dug in. Chase sampled the meatloaf with trepidation. Ana watched him nervously. When he looked at her in surprise, she grinned. "Good?"

“You bet. This is great, Fancy.”

That brought a smile to her face that Chase wished he could frame. Her eyes sparkled and face glowed with happiness. He didn't think he'd ever known anyone who got that much pleasure out of something as simple as fixing an edible meatloaf. But then, it had become abundantly clear to him, that there was no one in the world like Ana Stillwater.

The dinner talk was of ranch business, horses, rodeos and the night's entertainment. Ana seemed as excited as a kid who was being taken to the county fair. When they finished eating, they all pitched in to clean up, then Ana disappeared into the bathroom to get ready for the evening.

Chase and his brothers retired to the den to wait. Thirty minutes later, Ana stepped out into the den and did a slow twirl. She stopped, looking at the three men expectantly. “Well?” she asked.

“Good lord and a quarter, let's take this woman to town!” Clay grinned.

“You're wearing that?” Chase asked at the same time, earning raised eyebrows from his brothers and Ana.

“Excuse me?” Her hands went to her hips. “What's wrong with it?”

Chase knew he'd stepped in it, but damn it all, when he let his brothers talk him into them all going to one of their favorite hangouts to introduce Ana to the mechanical bull and country karaoke, he had not imagined that she would dress for the event in something that made his dick jump up and salute.

Her denim skirt was low on the hips and high on the thighs, soft and worn so that it clung smoothly to all the right places. Her top was a buttery-soft suede halter that dipped to a point just above her navel, like an arrow pointing to the small silver belly ring. It scooped low at the neckline with two thin strips of leather that attached to the bodice and circled her neck. Fringe with beads, feathers adorned the neckline and hem, and the back was nothing more than a thin strap. It was cut so that the sides of her full breasts were displayed and it clung to her, emphasizing her breasts and nipples.

She wore knee-high, lace-up moccasins that looked worn and soft, and on her head was one of his old battered brown hats. She was, without a doubt, every cowboy's dream of a fantasy Indian princess come to life.

“Well?” Ana asked.

“You look fucking amazing!” Caleb bounded to his feet.

“Amen to that, brother,” Cole seconded.

Ana gave them a smile, but her attention returned immediately to Chase. “Okay, Hawks, let's have it.”

Chase stood, hoping his brothers didn't notice the bulge in his pants. Ana did and smiled as he walked over to her. “You ashamed to be seen with me in public, cowboy?” she asked softly.

"Good lord, no," he answered. "I just don't cotton to the idea of having to stomp every cowboy in town. And sure as shit, they get a look at you and they'll be drooling like a dog after a bone."

"Well, I guess that's about the...oddest compliment I've ever gotten," she said.

"You look... incredible, Fancy," he said in a soft voice.

"Why, thank you, Mr. Hawks." She executed a quick curtsy. "So, can we go?"

"Might as well," he replied and took her arm.

"Shotgun!" Caleb shouted and took off out the door.

"Damn fool," Clay grouched. "You'd think he was still ten."

Ana laughed as the brothers giped each other all the way to the truck. She climbed in the front between Chase and Caleb, while Cole and Clay rode in the backseat of the double cab.

The ride to the bar was spent listening to the brothers tell stories about times they'd shared in the past. Even Chase was laughing by the time they arrived. It made Ana happy to see him laughing and enjoying the company of his brothers. As an only child, she'd never known the joy or annoyance brought by siblings, and felt a tinge of envy.

The bar was packed when they arrived. Yells and greetings rang out when they entered. It was clear that Chase and his brothers were not only regulars, but quite popular.

A very large, heavysset man was on stage, stumbling through the words to Willy Nelson's "Mama Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Cowboys", earning cheers and a lot of laughs. Chase worked them through the crowd to a table.

Ana was looking around at everything, and jumped at a touch on the shoulder. "You want something to drink?" Chase shouted.

"Tequila?" she asked.

"How?"

"Straight up."

That earned her a round of hoots and cheers from the boys. Chase turned to give the waitress their order and Ana turned her attention back to what was going on around them.

A small dance floor was in front of the stage, but at present there was no one dancing. Over to one side was a big mechanical bull, also unoccupied. Most of the tables were full, and there was a large crowd at the bar.

"Jimmy sure knows how to butcher a song," Clay said.

"You got that right," Chase agreed. "Somebody buy that man another drink and shut him up."

Everyone laughed, even the man on the stage. "You think you can do better, you get your ass on up here," Jimmy challenged good-naturedly.

"Not me, brother."

"Ah, come on, Chase." Caleb poked at him.

"No way." Chase shook his head.

"You don't sing?" Ana asked.

All of the boys laughed. "I wouldn't call it singing," Cole said. "More like...what the hell would you call it, Clay?"

"A wounded elk," Clay said solemnly.

They all laughed and Ana laughed along with them. The waitress returned with a bottle of Patron silver, four shot glasses and a beer. Caleb frowned and complained when a glass was not put in front of him. "Drink your beer and be glad the folks around here pretend not to know you're underage," Clay ordered.

Caleb shrugged and lifted his beer bottle when Chase had poured shots for everyone. "To Ana," Caleb toasted. "The hottest thing to hit this town since..."

Everyone waited for him to finish. He scratched his head and lifted his bottle higher. "Ever."

"To Ana," the rest of the men echoed.

Ana grinned and tossed back the shot. "Whoooo!" She blew out her breath. "Now that hit the spot."

"Then have another." Cole poured before Chase could stop him.

Ana tossed back the second drink. The man at the microphone finished his song and everyone cheered and booed good-naturedly as he vacated the stage.

"Anybody else?" The owner of the bar, Garrett Smith, took the mike.

"You go, Ana!" Clay reached over and raised Ana's arm.

"Here we go!" Garrett spotted her. "Come on up here, little lady."

Ana stuck her tongue out at Clay. "Brat!"

"Chicken," he teased.

"Like hell," she countered and got to her feet.

She went up on stage and conferred with Garrett over the songs available, then nodded and took the mike.

The music started and Ana began to gyrate and sing. Every man in the place stopped to watch. The song was not one Chase would have chosen. A Gretchen Wilson song, "Here for the Party". Ana seemed to know all the words, and wasn't a bit shy in performing. She pranced and postured, belting out the song and playing to the crowd, earning hoots, whistles and cheers.

But when she got to the words "gonna have a little fun, gonna get me some", she pumped her hips and looked straight at Chase. His stomach did a little flip, his groin tightened and his mouth got dry. By all that was holy, she was definitely a witch. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

Apparently neither could anyone else, because when she finished a cheer when up that was deafening. She bowed, blew a kiss and hopped off the stage. "Your turn, hotshot," she challenged Clay.

"No way," he said. "Clay don't sing."

"Then what does Clay do?" she asked.

"Clay will kick your ass on the bull," he said with a cocky smile.

"You got any money to back up those big words?" She arched one eyebrow and poured another shot.

He fumbled around in his pockets. "Forty-three dollars."

Ana looked at the money on the table then at Chase. "How 'bout you front me forty-three bucks, Hawks? I'll double your money."

Chase started to say no, but something in Ana's grin changed his mind. "All right, Fancy, but you lose my money and we're gonna have to talk about payment."

"You got it, stud." The tequila had her feeling loose and free.

His eyes widened at the comment, but closed when she slid off her chair and straddled him to give him a kiss hot enough to set his boots on fire.

"For luck." She grinned and motioned to Clay. "Okay, hotshot, let's see what you got."

Chase, Caleb and Cole switched tables to be closer to the action. Within ten minutes half the bar was crowded around, bets being shouted. Clay finished his third ride and hopped off, sweeping his arm in front of him. "Top that, hot stuff."

Ana grinned, took a shot of tequila and hopped on the bull. Chase couldn't help but grin. She couldn't have cared less that every time she climbed on the bull she gave the crowd a shot of her firm ass and silky thong. And watching her ride was like watching public sex.

She rode the machine like she was riding a lover, flowing with every move, her body as flexible as a willow reed. All Chase could think was how he wished he was the bull. He'd sure like to have her riding him like that.

The contest stretched on much longer than he anticipated and had she not lifted her top and given Clay a bird's-eye view of her breasts it might have gone on all night. Clay's eyes bugged, his face split in a grin and a moment later he hit the floor. Clay got up laughing and dusted himself off. "Now that's just mean, Ana. I mean, damn! Talk about fighting dirty!"

Ana laughed and grabbed him in a hug. "You're a hell of a rider, Clay."

"Thanks. You're pretty damn good, yourself. Where'd you learn to ride?"

"My grandfather was one of the original pro bull riders."

"Really? Who was he?"

"Jonas Stillwater."

"No shit? He's a fucking legend!"

She laughed and looked up. "You hear that, Grandfather?"

Chase walked up and wrapped one arm around her. "Okay, boy," he addressed Clay in a good-natured gruff voice. "Time for you to mosey on."

Ana smiled up at Chase and he hugged her to his side. "What say we take it down a notch and have a dance?"

"Thought you'd never ask." She walked hand in hand with him to the dance floor.

The song was what some called a belly-rubber, slow and seductive and made for two people getting all tightened up in one another's arms and moving in concert.

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you, Fancy?" he asked as she moved into his arms. "Singer, dancer, bull rider."

Ana laughed. "Don't you like surprises, Hawks?"

"Depends on the surprise. How 'bout you?"

"Well, I'd love being surprised that you know how to do more than stand here and sway, cowboy. We're supposed to be dancing."

"Then dancing it is," he said and pulled her closer.

Chase definitely knew how to dance. Within a few seconds he had Ana's blood singing in her veins and her body rubbing on his hungrily. "You're doing this on purpose," she whispered when he leaned down and kissed the top of her bare shoulder.

"Doing what, Fancy?"

"You know what." She nipped at the side of his neck. "Making my blood run hot."

Chase drew back to smile at her. "You're a fine one to talk."

She raised her eyebrows in question and he chuckled. She snuggled up tight, grinding her pelvis against him in such a way that he damn near lost the beat of the music. "You keep that up and we're gonna have to go home and start that fire," his voice rumbled sexily against her hair.

"Promise, promises," she teased.

He broke away from her and looked around for his brothers. "Time to ride, boys."

The brothers were not ready to leave and Ana was feeling mischievous enough to side with them. In the end, they and the rest of the diehards closed the bar. By the time they got back to Chase's ranch, all of his brothers had to be wakened to stumble into the house.

The short walk revived them, and when Ana said her goodnights they were all in the den, drinking beer and talking.

Now the house was quiet. Ana eased her way through the den, where all of Chase's brothers were sprawled out asleep. Caleb on the couch, Cole in the recliner and Clay in the easy chair with his legs stretched out on the ottoman. She did not see Chase anywhere and wondered if he had given up and gone to bed. She stood watching the sleeping men, thinking.

His brothers were an interesting lot. Cole was not as boisterous or rowdy as he put on. Ana had been given a glimpse of his serious side when they were cleaning up after dinner and he volunteered to dry the dishes. Cole's family did not know that he was studying forestry and wanted to work as a ranger for the state park system. As much of a party animal as he pretended to be, he was more like Chase than he let on, feeling a need for solitude and quiet.

Clay was the opposite in almost every respect. He was loud, energetic and filled with a craving for excitement. He'd been secretly a part of the rodeo world for more than a year. Bull riding was his thing. He and Ana had gotten into a long, animated discussion about it at the bar and she encouraged him to pursue his dream, even if his father did not understand it. He had his own path in life and if he let someone else guide it, in the end he would be unhappy and resent that person into the bargain.

Caleb was a mixture of all the others. He was as excited about partying as he was about entering college in the fall and studying to be a large animal vet. His father wasn't keen on his choice of career either, but Caleb figured he'd either come around or learn to live with it. He'd wanted to be a vet since he was five and wasn't going to let anyone stop him. If his father didn't want to pay for his education then he would take it out of the trust fund left to him by his mother.

Ana had gotten the scoop on all the family from the brothers. She knew Chase had not liked them telling her about the family. She could feel his tension.

Chase's mother, Charity, was Charlie's first wife, an Apache girl who had fallen in love with the rough and rowdy Charlie when she was in her teens. Neither family had approved of the union and tried to prevent it. Charity and Charlie settled it for everyone by getting pregnant.

Charity died when Chase was eight, killed in a rodeo accident. Apparently she was a champion barrel racer. Charlie didn't want her to go back to it after Chase was born but Charity was strong-willed. On Chase's eighth birthday, she was in an event. She laid her horse out too far, it fell, pinning her beneath it and crushing her. By the time the ambulance got her to the hospital it was too late.

Charlie blamed Chase because when Charity had asked what he wanted for his birthday he said he wanted her to win the race for him. He loved watching her ride and was so proud every time she won. They were inseparable and had an unspoken language all their own, like souls joined beyond mortal comprehension.

According to the brothers, Chase blamed himself and had never forgiven himself for her death. Upon his sixteenth birthday he petitioned the court to change his name from Chase Hawks Russell to simply Chase Hawks, his mother's maiden name. Charlie did not oppose the change. There was a rift as wide as the desert between he and Chase and neither of them knew how to bridge the gap.

Charlie had remarried a year after Charity's death to a woman from a wealthy family, DeAnna Morgan. She and Charlie had trouble conceiving, and she lost three

babies, a year apart, all before full term. They had been married five years when the twins were born. Five years later, she died giving birth to Caleb.

Charlie had never remarried after that. The boys had all been raised by Clara Mahoney, an Irish-American woman who had gone to school with Charlie and had come to work for him and Charity when Chase was born. It was clear that all the brothers, including Chase, loved her like a mother and referred to her Mama C.

Ana could not help but think how ironic it was. For all their wealth and power, the Russell family had seen more than its share of tragedy and heartbreak. Her own heart went out to all of them, most particularly Chase.

She let herself out of the house and went to the pasture to sit on the fence rail and stare up at the sky. The smell of the new body products Chase had purchased for her wafted around her. It was a sensual dark smell, like night-blooming flowers, humidity and stolen kisses. She loved it.

Chase had seemed embarrassed by the gifts when he gave them to her. She had been touched beyond measure that he would take the time and energy to try and find a scent for her. That he had selected something so blatantly sensual and romantic thrilled her.

But then everything about Chase Hawks thrilled her. She felt like the old country song, that spoke of a woman's soul being invaded by a man and her losing all control, becoming a prisoner to him. And sure enough, she was. Even sitting here alone under the majesty of the night sky, she was a prisoner to him, enveloped in the scent he'd branded her with, victim to the wanting he evoked in her, captive to a love she'd never expected to feel.

Chase walked up behind her as quiet as a breath, put his hands on either side of her waist and lay his cheek against the bare skin of her back where the thin cotton shift drooped low. He inhaled deeply. The scent he'd bought smelled nothing on her like it did in the store. Now it was a heady mixture that spoke to him of sweat-tangled sheets, damp skin and the smell of flowers drifting in through an open window in a lush tropical retreat. Sweet, seductive and just a little dangerous.

"Hmmm." He kissed her skin. "You smell good."

"Thank you again," she said softly. "I can't believe you did that."

"You like it, don't you?" Suddenly that was very important to him.

"I love it." She executed a nimble maneuver so that she was facing him, the vee of her legs at the level of his chest, completely uninhibited of the fact that she wore nothing beneath her shift and the position offered him an intimate view of her sex. "I've never had anything so...decadent."

"Decadent?" He smiled up at her.

"Well, maybe that's the wrong word. It's so...sensual."

"Then it's a perfect match." He put his hands on her legs, his thumbs stroking the soft skin of her inner thighs.

"Thank you." She reached down to caress the side of his face.

Chase's world collapsed in on him at that moment, the past receding into unimportance in the face of the powerful emotions swelling inside him. "I want you, Fancy. More than I've ever wanted a woman. And either you're going to give yourself to me now or I'm going to have to take you. Either way, I intend on having you."

"Then have me, Chase." She leaned down to kiss him, her lips soft and gentle.

Chase's need was too great for gentle. His mouth slanted across hers, his tongue pillaged her mouth, hands moving up to cup and squeeze her breasts, palming the nipples.

"Christ, Ana." He pulled back from the kiss to bury his face in between her legs. "I want to take you slow and easy, feel and taste every inch of you, but I need to be in you too much."

He fumbled at the button of his jeans. In a moment they were puddled around his feet. He gripped her by the waist and lifted her off the fence. Ana felt between them, taking hold of his hard cock and rubbing it against her wet channel.

Chase pushed at her, trying to penetrate the tantalizing warmth of her sex, but she moved his dick so that it slid along the length of her pussy. "You're killing me, Fancy," he rasped, his voice rough with need.

"You feel pretty alive to me," she teased, and when his eyes met hers she rewarded him with a slow sexy smile that had him close to throwing her on the ground and burying himself in her.

Her eyes drew him in, their golden depths urging him to lose himself in their mystery. And so he responded to the call and let himself dive into that golden heat, the connection of their minds nearly as erotic as that of their bodies when she eased his hard length inside her.

It was almost too much. The fire in his body was matched by an inferno in his mind, his entire being enveloped in her.

Chase groaned and started to pump into her, but she stilled him. "Wait. Wait. Be still. Just stand there and hold me."

With her legs wrapped around his waist, and supporting herself by her hands on his shoulders, she began a slow steady pulse inside, her inner muscles squeezing and releasing him in ever-strengthening pulses. Her hips swiveled and rolled.

Chase gripped her ass tighter, overwhelmed by the sensations created by her incredible body. He'd never experienced anything like it. His entire body felt electrified, arcs of sensation dancing through his veins. It was more than the heat of her pussy squeezing his dick and making his balls burn. It was as if every inch of his skin had become supersensitive. Even the whisper of breeze on his back was an aphrodisiac.

It took every ounce of his control not to buck against her, drive deep inside her. It was, he realized, an act of surrender, something he'd never known, and something he was quite certain he'd never have been willing to give. Until now.

Ana leaned in to run her tongue along his neck to his ear. She took his earlobe into her mouth, sucking and biting, the warmth of her mouth and the feeling of her breasts pressed against him making him nearly weak with wanting. His own breath sounded harsh and hurried, the dominant male inside urging him to take. But the torture of wanting was too sublime, making him all too aware of the smell of her, the feel of her skin against him as they both grew hot and wet.

Ana's breath was fuel to an already out-of-control fire when she whispered into his ear. "Are you ready for the fire?"

"Christ, yes!"

She put both hands on his face and whispered, "*Deflagrate muri tempi et intervallia,*" just before she claimed his lips.

Chance spiraled into a realm of pure sensation. Pure sexual, erotic, supreme pleasure spiked through every cell of his body. In pounding wave after wave, the sensations washed over him, another beginning before the previous had finished. It was like fire in his veins, his mind incapable of any thought aside from her wet pussy squeezing him, and the sharp thrills of her hard nipples raking his chest as her body rose and fell and rolled on him.

"Ahh...Ana," he groaned as her lips met his once more.

"That's it," she whispered against his lips, riding him harder. "*May angle ar te merel kadi yag.*"

Chase's body jerked under the force of sexual energy that coursed through him. He felt his control slipping away, felt himself sliding toward that freefall. Tingling tension streamed through his body. His hands tightened on her and his breath hitched.

He was going to come and there wasn't a damn thing he could do to stop it. He was sliding over the edge of a cliff with nothing to prevent the fall. "Fancy...ahhh...can't..." His harsh whisper spoke testament to his struggle to hold back.

And then she stilled. His dick throbbed inside her, the need to come so intense that he groaned in protest, clenching his eyes closed against the wave that threatened to wash him into release.

When his eyes opened, they locked with Ana's. In those golden depths he saw an awareness more powerful than he'd ever known. There was no doubt in his mind that she was completely in tune with his need, that she knew he was about to explode. All he needed was one small movement from her, one more of those delicious pulses from inside her, caressing his dick and he'd be a goner.

Ana leaned close, her breath warm and sweet as her tongue flicked out over his bottom lip, her eyes never breaking contact with his. Chase tried to capture her lips in a kiss. Just one kiss and he'd take the plunge. And he was past the point of wanting. He needed it with an intensity that bordered on desperation.

"Deflagrate muri tempi et intervallia," she whispered against his lips then pulled back.

He saw it in her eyes at the same moment the unfamiliar words emerged in a sexy whisper from her lips. She was going to take him over the edge. And then it happened.

Chase's mind exploded into millions of shining shards of light and he plummeted into a well of pure sensation, pumping deep into her, his body quaking in the onslaught of an orgasm that lasted long after his seed had spilled.

Ana felt his climax as her own and joined him in the spiraling dance into bliss. When at last they were returned to reality, she drew her head back to look at him. Chase released her and she slid down his body, their combined juices running down her leg.

Chase braced one hand on the fence, searching for words to describe what he was feeling. He felt as if he'd just been awakened. What he'd just experienced was more than just an orgasm, far more than physical. It was something that had touched every part of his being. Something profound and almost spiritual. But try as he might he could not find the right words to describe what he felt.

"That was..." He shook his head. "I don't know what that was...but damn...when I get my knees back can we do it again?"

Ana laughed and hugged him. "Absolutely."

Chase returned her embrace. "Ana..."

She pulled back to look up into his eyes and found a tenderness shining in their dark depths that made tears well in her own eyes. "Yes?"

"Fair warning, Fancy. I don't know that I'll ever get my fill of you."

It was the closest to a proclamation of love he'd ever spoken and they both knew it. Ana smiled up at him, reaching up to stroke his face. "I hope not, Chase. More than anything, I hope not."

"Then maybe we could take this inside?"

"With your brothers asleep in the den?" she teased, giving him an exaggerated look of shock.

"You planning on being noisy, Fancy?"

"Hmmm, that depends. You planning on making me noisy, Hawks?"

"Oh yeah." He grabbed her hand and started for the house. "Before the night's over I plan on having you screaming, yelling, moaning, groaning and singing glory halleluiah."

"Promises, promises," she laughed and ran eagerly with him to the house.

Chapter Nine

No one was awake as they crept back into the dark house. Like teenagers avoiding getting caught by their parents, they hurried to Chase's bedroom. Ana entered ahead of him and stopped, closing her eyes to breathe in her surroundings. Intoxicating textures of scent danced with her desire and played in the recesses of her mind. The sensation of maleness enveloped her, passionate, strong, willful and wild.

She heard Chase close and lock the door, shutting the world out and their passion in. He walked up behind her, lifting her long hair to run his tongue along the side of her neck. His smell filled her, speeding her pulse.

He lowered the straps of the thin shift and it slithered down her body to pool around her feet. His hands moved around her, over her flat belly and then up toward her breasts, his lips moving on the skin of her shoulder, leaving trails of fire in their wake.

Her nipples tightened beneath his touch, the palms of his hands warm and calloused. Her own palms grew moist in anticipation. Chase turned her to face him, his eyes raking over her naked form then back to her face.

"By all that's holy, Fancy, no woman has ever moved me the way you do."

His head ducked down to take her breast into his mouth, soft then demanding, flicking her nipple with his tongue. Ana pressed forward, arching her back. Chase raised his head long enough to give her a sexy smile then began a journey down her body with his tongue. A trail of elation ghosted his mouth, making her skin tingle.

When he knelt and licked her navel, hooking his tongue in her belly ring to tug, his hands slid up the back of her smooth legs to massage and squeeze her ass.

Ana's breath hitched when his mouth covered her mound, his tongue raking past the tight curls to search out her clit. Moisture dampened her inner thighs, her need spilling from her.

Chance's tongue moved lower, to lap at the cream, laving her swollen lips, sucking and biting.

"You are so sweet, Fancy. So goddamn sweet. Lie down on my bed, darling, and let me see you."

Ana stepped back as Chase rose. "Fair is fair. Take off those clothes, Hawks."

Chase grinned and reached for the button of his jeans. Ana backed up to the bed and made herself comfortable, reclining on one side and appreciating the scenery. Chase pulled off his jeans and tossed them aside.

Nude, he was as striking a vision as she'd ever seen, hard and muscular but lean and rangy. Spare in body hair as is common among natives, except for hair that started

at his navel and traveled south, growing thicker as it descended to culminate in a thick stand, framing his thick long cock.

Ana shivered in delicious anticipation. Chase's eyes promised her passion that would require surrender and she welcomed the coming domination.

Chase walked to her, pushing her back on the bed. Her hair spread out like a dark halo, her jungle-cat eyes gleaming in the dim light. "Your turn to burn, baby," he promised as he arranged her, feet flat on the bed, knees bent and spread wide.

"Then burn me." Her voice was the sound that prompted Adam to be tossed out of Eden, a seductress whose call could not be ignored.

Chase moved onto the bed, between her legs, sitting back on his heels and allowing his eyes to move slowly over every inch of her body. Slowly he bent forward and licked at her pussy, laving those delicate lips before slowly sliding his tongue between them.

He felt the soft quiver that ran through Ana as he plunged into her wet channel. Using both hands, he spread her sex so that she was completely open and exposed. The soft pink of her naked lips and the cleft hiding her clit drew him.

He stroked and licked, raising the fragile hood to fully expose her clit, and then slowly traced it with his tongue, inhaling the sweetness of her scent that drove his passion higher. He captured her clit between his lips and circled it with his tongue.

Ana moaned and arched, grabbing her inner thighs to spread them wider, her breasts thrust into the air, her body trembling with excitement. Her abandon spurred him, incited him to take her to the very edge of release then withdraw.

"No!" she protested when he paused.

"Easy, Fancy. Don't want to rush."

"Like hell!" she argued.

"You want more, baby?"

"Oh yes. Please."

Chase had never heard anything sexier than her lusty plea. He bent to sink his tongue deep in her pussy, then stroked up in a long lick that ended at her clit. His hands moved to her breasts to squeeze her nipples.

"Aaaahhhh!" she moaned, pressing against his tongue and undulating her hips. "Don't. Stop. Please."

Chase paused again, sliding up her body to feast on her breasts, circling the hard nipple then flicking it with his tongue. Ana moved against him, raising her hips to pump against his engorged cock.

He was sorely tempted to sink into her delicious, hot silky sex, but wanted more to drive her to sensual madness before taking her long and hard. He continued to lick her nipple, running one hand between their bodies to part her lips and sink one finger into her pussy.

Ana bucked as his finger found her secret inner spot. With slow, deliberate strokes, he worked his finger over it, in and out of her hot core.

"Please." She wiggled against his questing finger. "More, more, more!"

Chance's dick jumped in reply but he wasn't ready for the final act. Not until he'd had a taste of all of her. He worked his way back down her damp body, tasting the sweetness of her sweat on his tongue.

Ana groaned in pleasure when he went down on her, his tongue playing over her clit and his finger dipping inside her pussy, stroking her higher. Her pussy started to contract against his finger.

"Not yet." He ceased all activity and slid up her body to capture her lips for a long kiss.

Ana tasted the mixture of the night's alcohol, her own cream and Chase's unique essence in the kiss and sucked his tongue deep into her mouth, wrapping her arms and legs around him to feel the erotic thrill of the length of his hard cock slide against her pussy.

She wanted him with an intensity that bordered on manic. "In me," she breathed against his mouth. "Get in me, Chase."

"In time," he replied and slid back down to imprison her clit in his mouth, his tongue darting over the sensitive nub. His finger probed into her wet sex then out, rubbing the lubrication from her channel to her ass, then easing his finger deep into her ass.

"Ahhh!" was all that came from her aside from her muscles contracting around his finger. Between the actions of his finger and his mouth, she was past the point of holding back.

Chase felt the contractions begin. Her hands moved to tangle in his hair and her body arched up, quivering. As soon as the climax began to abate, he moved into position and slid the length of his cock into her still-contracting pussy.

Ana moaned and moved against him, those amazing inner muscles squeezing him at the end of each push inside her, then releasing, her hips taking over to tilt and pump. Chase had never been with a woman so completely sensual and uninhibited, so able to evoke a level of passion in him he never dreamed possible.

She pulled on him until he rolled over on his back. Straddling him, she sat up straight, lifting her arms above her head and stretching, and then slowly her body bent until the back of her head touched his legs behind her, affording him a bird's-eye view of his cock sunk into her pussy. Her hips moved back and forth, sliding her pussy up and down his length.

Chase gripped her by the thighs, already feeling the threat of an orgasm. She must have felt it because she straightened easily, bending forward until her tantalizing breasts dangled in front of him like the fruit of Eden, tempting him to taste.

"Hmmm," she moaned as he took both her breasts in her hands, moving his mouth from one to the other, teasing her nipples with teeth and tongue. "Time to burn," she whispered, and chanted softly. "*Quicquid didiceris, frequenter repete, menti tuæ infige, multum discas non multa; quia animus humanus non potest omnibus par esse.*"

Chance felt a current pass over his skin. His first thought was to look at the window. It wasn't open. It was then he noticed the faint colors swirling around them, just before she started to lift up and lower down on his cock, her lithe body performing a dance as erotic as Salomé.

Her hands moved to play over this body, little sparks of energy dancing on his skin, creating waves of pleasure that soon had his body completely her victim. Chase surrendered to the sensation, riding the current, feeling as if his entire body was supersensitized to the slightest waft of air or tickle of her long hair brushing against him.

She'd taken control, riding him as surely, seductively and expertly as she had ridden the mechanical bull, and he marveled at her power to transform his reality into nothing but supremely erotic sensation that dissolved all vestiges of civility from him, leaving him stripped to the primal male.

And that primal male was starting to make demands. To ride her, hard and long. To hear her cry his name and quake beneath him. That need exploded and he quickly flipped her over, pulling her legs up over his shoulders so that he could plunge deep inside her.

Ana cried out as his cock hilted inside her, stretching her to accommodate him. Part of Chase's mind urged him to go easy, to take it slow. But the primal male was in control. He stroked hard and fast, his hands on her hips, digging into the flesh, forcing her harder against him.

"Yes!" she screamed suddenly as her body loosened to meet his need. "Harder. Harder. More, Chase, more. Give me more!"

Her pleas were fuel to a fire that was already burning out of control. He watched her reach up and back, her hands tightening around the wooden pickets of the headboard in a position so completely sexual and submissive that he was certain beyond doubt that she was sex personified.

His balls tingled and tightened, his belly quivered and sweat poured down his body as he took her, every cry, gasp and moan driving him deeper into the madness that gripped him. The need to take her, make her his was stronger than rational thought.

"I need you on your knees, Fancy," he breathed roughly. "I want all of you."

Chase did not need to explain. He saw in her eyes the understanding. What he wanted was total domination, to take her in a way that demanded her complete submission.

Ana responded by wiggling free. Cool air whispered against his heavy cock, slick with her juice as she turned over, arranging herself on her hands and knees.

"Head down, baby," he whispered. "Hold on to the bed."

She did as he instructed. Chase nearly came just looking at her supplicant before him, her enticing ass high in the air, her chest and face against the bed with her hands firmly gripping the pickets of the headboard.

"Don't move," he said as he got up and went to the bathroom. A moment later he returned with a tube of lubricant, squeezing a generous amount into his hand. He paused at the foot of the bed to enjoy the sight of her on her knees, her legs spread and ass high in the air as she waited for him.

Chase climbed onto the bed between her legs, his slick fingers moving down the cleft of her ass to the tight opening. He slid one finger inside her ass. She was tight. So tight that he'd not fit until he loosened her.

"You ever been taken up the ass?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Only fingers."

"You want me to stop?"

Again she shook her head. "No. Take all of me."

Knowing that she'd never been taken this way before, and the sight of her so submissive before him, her tight little ass struggling to accept more, was enough to wipe civility from his mind, to erase everything but the primal male from his nature. He had to make every part of her his, to brand her with his touch.

Ana breathed out a moan as he worked two fingers inside her, and arched her back more, causing her ass to raise and spread further.

"That's it baby," he crooned in a voice thick with desire, working to get three fingers inside her, stretching her ass as he stroked deeper. "Take it."

Her response was the groan of a woman surrendering. She pushed back against his fingers and reached down with one hand to stroke her clit.

His balls began to ache as he worked her ass, her lusty moans urging him to drive deeper. "I...I need..." she groaned and supplied the rest of it without words, continuing to stroke her fingers over her clit.

Within moments her pussy flowered, opening and glistening. "More," she breathed. "Take me, Chase. Take me."

Chase needed no further invitation. With his fingers still sunk in her ass, he squeezed lubricant over his dick. He eased his fingers out of her, and rubbed the head of his cock against her ass.

Ana groaned as he pressed inside, the muscle protesting at the invasion. "Loosen up, Fancy. Let me have you."

“Do it,” she whispered. “Now.”

Chase slowly pressed, feeling her stretch to accommodate him, sliding slowly inside her. Ana’s groan when he pushed inside her was one of longing and surrender, one that robbed him of reason and control. He grabbed her by the hips and pulled her ass to him, impaling her on his length.

She cried out but moved against him, offering him all that he wanted. Chase stroked slowly, easing out just an inch or so then pressing deep. He knew she struggled to accommodate him, knew that he was taking what she’d offered to no one else. That alone was enough to start the tremors in his belly as an orgasm started to swell.

He tried to prolong it, to move slow and easy, but the need was too great. She was his and the male inside demanded that he take her.

“You’re mine, Fancy!” he rasped, his breath coming faster and harder as climax threatened to overwhelm him. “Mine.”

“Yes,” she breathed, matching him in passion and need, the seductress giving way to the animal in her nature that longed to be taken, to be dominated. “Now, now, now!”

With a groan Chase exploded, his dick pulsing as he shot deep inside her. Ana screamed his name as her orgasm rocked her. She clung to him, her body rolling and bucking.

They both went limp and Chase tumbled to the bed, wrapping himself around her, the sweat of their bodies making them slick. For a few minutes there was only the sound of their rapid breathing. Then breath slowed and languor set in.

“Chase,” Ana whispered just before she drifted off to sleep. “My love.”

Something he’d never experienced swelled inside him at her words. For a moment it filled him with panic. But the fear vanished in the face of realization. He never expected, never hoped. But amazingly it had happened. He’d fallen in love.

Chapter Ten

Ana found Chase's brothers still asleep when she walked through the den. It was almost dawn and she was on her way to greet the new day with Fergi, something she'd done for as long as she and Fergi had been together.

She eased out the back door and ran into the yard, calling for Fergi as she headed for the barn. She heard Fergi's reply on the wind as she entered the barn. She stopped by each stall to greet and stroke the horses as she made her way to West Wind's stall.

"Hey there, handsome," she said as she opened his stall door. "You wanna go out and run?"

He neighed and tossed his head. "Well, come on then and let's get you saddled up," she said as she crossed the barn to the tack.

He followed and then stood patiently as she saddled and bridled him, using the style taught to her by her grandfather that negated the need for a bit in his mouth. "You sure you're okay with this?" she asked as she led him outside.

He tossed his head and whinnied in response and she climbed into the saddle. At first he was a little uncomfortable and let her know with his neighs and prancing, but it only took a few minutes of soft coaxing before he settled into the feel of her on his back.

"Well, all righty, then." She grinned and turned him toward the pasture. "You think we can clear that fence, big fella?"

He responded by rearing up then taking off toward the fence with Ana bending low over his neck.

* * * * *

Chase had woken to find himself alone in bed. Ana was nowhere to be found in the house, which prompted him to go outside. He stepped out onto the porch just as the stallion cleared the pasture fence. "What the—" he murmured to himself in amazement.

The stallion raced across the pasture, jumped the far fence and kept on going, with Ana on his back, her long hair streaming out behind her like a black silk banner. Chase ran to the barn, quickly saddled Whiskey and took off in pursuit.

Ana let West Wind have his head and they flew across the land, his powerful legs propelling them at breakneck speed, his hooves kicking up clouds of dust to trail in their wake.

She laughed with delight, both her own and his. He was born to run and there was little more thrilling than for her to be on his back, racing the wind with Fergi flying overhead cheering them on.

It was not until she turned him to circle back toward the ranch that she saw the rider in the distance. Even from afar she recognized him, the long dark hair blowing back from the strong planes of his face and the long, lean muscles of his body as he leaned over Whiskey's neck.

It was a sight that filled her with such love and longing that she wished she could freeze them in time, to stretch out the delicious anticipation she felt at his approach. She reined West Wind in to a trot as Chase closed in.

"How the hell did you get him saddled?" he asked as he reined Whiskey into a turn and trotted alongside her.

"Uh, with my hands?" She knew what he was asking but could not help teasing.

"Well, yeah, smartass, I get that part. But how did you get him to put up with it?"

"Oh! That's easy. I asked nicely." She gave the horse a rub on the neck. "Right, big guy?"

West Wind tossed his head and let out a long whinny and Ana laughed.

"What's so funny?" Chase asked.

"He said it isn't so bad without that...fucking bit in his mouth."

That was when Chase noticed that the horse did not have a bit. "Where'd you learn to rope bridle a horse like that?"

She smiled at him and he tilted his head back and then down in realization. "Oh yeah, your grandfather, right?"

"Yep." She directed West Wind over close enough that she could reach out and grab Chase's arm. "Ride with me?"

Chase hesitated only a moment before making the transfer from Whiskey to West Wind without his feet ever touching the ground. He settled behind Ana on the saddle, the tight fit forcing his crotch to snuggle tightly to her backside. His arm wrapped around her to take the reins. Whiskey trotted off a ways and started grazing contentedly.

"You ready?" she asked.

"Born that way, Fancy."

"Well, in that case...go, West Wind!"

The horse shot off like a bullet. Ana hung onto West Wind's mane, stretching forward so that the upper portion of her body was against the horse's long neck. Chase was pressed against her back and she could feel his steady strong heartbeat. They moved as one with the animal, his long legs eating up the landscape in seemingly tireless strides.

The feel of Ana's tight ass pressed against his groin and the motion of their bodies in concert with the powerful stallion soon had Chase thinking of riding of a different nature.

He felt Ana's body jiggle and heard the lilt of her laugh on the wind just before she wiggled that delicious ass against him, making his cock strain at the fabric of his jeans. The horse must have sensed the chemistry. He threw back his head and let out a call that Chase recognized both as a rancher and a male. It was the call of mating. A male sending out his message that he was ready and wanting.

Chase felt a kinship with the horse because at that moment his entire being was focused on the feel of the lithe, strong body of the woman between his legs. He reined West Wind in to a trot, then slowly to a walk. Ana looked over her shoulder at him.

"Had enough?" The mischief was clear in the smile on her face.

"Never."

She executed a maneuver he considered a feat of gymnastics and turned to face him, her legs on top of his, spread wide to straddle him. Chase groaned at the delicious sensation that shot through him. He lifted the handkerchief hem gauze skirt she wore and discovered beneath it nothing but Ana.

"You don't much take to underwear, do you, Fancy?"

She laughed. "Nope. That a problem with you, Hawks?"

"Nope, no problem at all," he grinned and stroked one finger down the crease of her thigh, ever-so lightly brushing the side of her sex. "Well, except for these damn jeans."

"Well, surely a world-class cowboy like yourself ought to be able to rid himself of his pants."

"In case you haven't noticed, we're on a horse."

"Uh-huh, but like I said, a world-class cowboy—"

"I'll show you world-class," he threatened jokingly. "Now scoot your pretty little ass off me."

Ana lifted off him and across the horn on the saddle so she was perched on the base of West Wind's neck. Chase swung one leg over the saddle, keeping his weight on the foot in the stirrup. Hanging on with one hand, he managed to slide his free leg out of his jeans.

"You'd don't take much to underwear, do you, Hawks?" she teased.

Chase left his supporting leg in his jeans, swung back into the saddle and with both hands, lifted her up. His dick stood straight up, like a gun aimed at its target. He lowered Ana onto it and sank into the wet heat of her sex. "Now, what was that about world-class?"

"Ahhhhh," Ana sighed as her body loosened to accommodate him. "Hmmm, so you gonna show me some world-class cowboying, Hawks?"

"No, Fancy. I'm gonna show you some world-class fuckin'."

“Bring it on.” She grinned and moved up and down on him.

Chase held her by the hips, lifting her up until only the head of his dick was inside her, and then impaling her slowly on its length. Once fully seated inside her, he rocked his hips, causing his dick to scrape erotically against her G-spot.

Ana moaned in pleasure and reached behind herself to hold on to the saddle horn, using it as leverage to press and pull against him. Chase felt a heat like the noonday sun in his genitals and belly. The sight of her straddling him, her back arched and arms behind her were like something from a wet dream.

West Wind danced, sensing their arousal. Ana crooned to him a phrase as foreign as all of the other chants Chase had heard her utter and West Wind settled somewhat, falling into a slow walk.

With their bodies falling into the rhythm of the horse’s motion, Chase used one hand to lift the filmy chemise up over her breasts and latched onto a nipple, first nipping at the hardening bud, then soothing it with his tongue, before sucking on it hard.

“Oh,” Ana gasped. “Oh, oh, oh. Now, Chase, now.”

She began to ride him, her body taking in all of him then squeezing and rocking, only to rise again, leaving him quivering with each delicious stroke.

She was like a dream come to life. Completely abandoned in her sexual nature and completely suited to the act of sex with her strong flexible body and uninhibited mind. Chase watched her ride him with sexual pleasure that grew until it was a storm, wiping out all thought aside from the riot of sensation enveloping him.

“Chase!” Ana panted his name, her motions coming faster and harder. “Oh god, Chase!”

“That’s it, baby,” He rocked his hips up to meet her downward strokes. “Fuck me, Fancy. Take it all.”

“Ahhhhh!” she moaned in reply. “Can’t. Hold. Back.”

He felt the quiver in her pussy, watched it move through her body as she threw back her head and screamed his name. That image was what drove him over the edge.

“Ana!” he growled, his body quaking with the force of his orgasm.

West Wind danced and pranced, the smell of sex in the air affecting him in the way of the male of any species. Even the charm Ana had used could not override the nature of the beast.

“Oh, oh!” Ana exclaimed a split second before West Wind reared.

Only through Chase’s strength and skill did she not fall. West Wind landed on all four hooves and took off, headed back toward the pasture. Chase tried to rein him in, but the stallion had a mind of his own and with no bit, he wasn’t inclined to oblige.

“Shit!” Chase barked and pushed Ana backwards, her body bowing back over the saddle horn as Chase pressed his body forward. West Wind sailed over the pasture fence as if he weren’t bearing their weight, and flew across the pasture.

"Another one!" Chase yelled as West Wind drew near the fence.

Ana almost went sideways on the landing, but Chase pulled her up against him. She wrapped her arms and legs around his body as West Wind ran for the enclosure on the east side of the barn where two mares were pastured.

"Whoa!" Chase pulled back on the reins as they neared the barn. "Shit, come on!"

Ana reached back to place one hand on the horse's neck. "'Easy, big guy, we need to get off."

West Wind tossed his head but slowed, coming to a stop in front of the house where a tall man with silver hair and a white hat was climbing out of a truck.

Chase's eyes widened then narrowed as the man turned to look at them, first in surprise, then through eyes that crinkled in laughter.

"So that's what it takes to sit that beast," the man commented. "Well, if that don't beat all."

Ana looked from the man to Chase, whose face wore a look that was decidedly annoyed. The man stepped toward them. "Where's your manners, boy?" he asked Chase then looked at Ana with his hand extended. "Charlie Russell, ma'am. Chase's daddy."

Ana looked from Charlie to Chase, sitting there bare-assed with her straddling his lap and the smell of their sex mingling with the scents of the horse and land. It should have been completely embarrassing but it was just too funny. She chuckled, adjusted her skirt so that it covered both her and Chase's crotch, wiped her hand on the skirt then extended it to Charlie.

"Nice to meet you, sir. Ana Stillwater, Chase's...riding instructor."

Charlie threw back his head and bellowed with laughter as Chase's mouth tightened against the smile that was trying to assert itself.

"Nice to meet you, Miss Stillwater," Charlie said through his laughter. "Chase, you gonna invite your old man for coffee or you just gonna sit there with your pecker hanging out?"

Chase growled and turned the horse. "You know where the pot is. Make some."

Ana grinned and waved at Charlie as Chase directed West Wind into the barn. "Everything okay?" she asked.

He gave her an incredulous look. "You can't be serious."

"What? You're embarrassed that he caught us...with our pants down?" She couldn't stop the giggle that escaped. "Come on, Chase. He's not a virgin schoolboy. For goodness' sakes, he has four sons so he's bound to know what sex is."

"That's not it!" he grouched as he lifted her up and set her off the horse then climbed off himself.

"Then what is it?" she asked a split second before an ugly thought entered her head. "It's me, isn't it? You're embarrassed because of me. You didn't want me to meet your father. You're...you're ashamed of what's happening between us."

"No!" He turned and grabbed her by both arms. "No, Fancy. No. I'm not ashamed of you. I'm ashamed of him."

"Oh, Chase." She wrapped her arms around him, pressing her face against his bare chest. "There's no need. People are who they are. I know that. And it doesn't matter to me who your father is or what he does or has done."

"You don't know him," Chase replied. "He's a hard bastard, Fancy. Wants to control everyone's lives. Make all the decisions."

Ana drew back to look up at him. "Maybe. But he did one thing right, Chase. One thing you have to be grateful for."

"Yeah?"

"He gave you life," she said softly. "And whether or not you appreciate that, it's something I'm more grateful to him for than I know how to say. Because without him there would be no you."

Chase stared at her for a long time, his thoughts turned inward. Finally the veil lifted from his eyes and he leaned down to kiss her softly. "I know this isn't the most romantic time, Fancy, but it's what we have and I have a need to say something to you."

"What?" she whispered, her heart rate increasing and moisture dampening her palms. Was he about to say he wanted her to leave?

"I love you and I don't want to spend one day of the rest of my life without you. I want to make a home with you, have a family with you and grow old with you. Will you marry me, Ana?"

Ana's heart literally skipped a beat. "Oh, Chase." She stroked his face lovingly. "More than anything I want to say yes."

"But?" he asked.

"Well, technically I'm still married to Giovanni."

Chase grinned in relief. "Whew! That's all? Well, hell, that's why God invented lawyers, Fancy. And thanks to Charlie, I happen to know a real dilly of a lawyer."

Ana threw her arms around his neck. "I love you, Chase. Now take me inside to have breakfast with my future father-in-law."

Chase shook his head and hugged her tight. "One day you might cuss me for doing that."

"Well, then we'll have some really good make-up sex once we're finished hollering, won't we?"

Chase laughed and released her to take her hand. "Fancy, you are definitely one of a kind."

* * * * *

Chase's father and his brothers were sitting at the kitchen table, while Chase stood at the stove, flipping pancakes when Ana entered the room.

"Hmmm, pancakes," she said with a grin and went over to give Chase a kiss. "Just what I've always dreamed of. A man who cooks."

Chase grinned and nuzzled her neck, earning hoots from his brothers. "Perverts," he tossed over his shoulder at them then directed his attention to Ana. "Don't guess you want any bacon."

"Most definitely not." She shuddered and extricated herself from his embrace to pour a cup of coffee.

"Good morning." She smiled at the men seated at the table. "You don't look worse for wear," she directed her comment to the brothers.

"Neither do you," Cole replied with a grin. "You should've seen her, Pop. Riding the bull."

"The boys tell me that your granddaddy was Jonas Stillwater," Charlie commented.

"Yes," Ana replied with a smile and sipped at the coffee.

"Hell of a bull rider," Charlie said. "I remember the nationals back in '62. He was riding this mean sumbitch called Jed's Revenge. No one had stayed on that bastard for more than three seconds. Then Jonas came up. What a sight. He stayed on that bull for the full eight seconds and then some. Never saw anything like it."

"He was something," Ana agreed.

"So Jonas passed on?"

"Um-hmm. Ten years ago."

"Shame. How'd he go?"

"Trampled by a bull teaching some young bucks how to ride."

Charlie shook his head. "Damn shame. But probably fittin'."

"Probably," she agreed.

"So you followed in his footsteps, did you?"

"No, not really."

"But the boys said you were tearing up that mechanical bull last night."

"That's hardly the same as the real thing."

"True. So what do you do, Miss Stillwater? And what brings you to these parts and most specifically to my son's house?"

You could have heard a pin drop. Ana didn't think a single one of the boys even breathed and Chase had gone completely still.

"Well, right now I'm in between jobs, Mr. Russell. I've done a lot of things, but haven't really settled on any one thing in particular. And I'm here because I ran away from home and my car broke down on Highway 70. So I walked to town and Chase ran over me with his truck and—"

"What?" Charlie bellowed.

"It isn't like it sounds." Chase turned from the stove.

"Then what the hell is it like?" Charlie's voice took on a demanding tone.

"It was an accident," Ana jumped in, speaking quietly.

Both men glared at one another for a moment then Charlie turned his attention to her. "I wasn't really paying attention," she explained. "I was reading the job ads and crossing the street, and Chase was trying to get his cell phone from Cody and we kind of...collided."

"So Chase runs over you and you just hop up and go play house with him?"

Ana didn't care for the tone of Charlie's voice. The previous good-natured country-boy charm had disappeared to be replaced by a rude, demanding tone and sour face. Chase didn't like the change in his father, either.

"Ana's here at my asking," he said in an angry voice. "And I won't have you insulting her either, you —"

"It's okay, Chase," Ana interrupted, and when he looked like he would argue, added. "Please. I can fight my own battles."

"Fine." He turned back to the stove.

"It wasn't anything like that, Mr. Russell." She kept her voice low and calm, despite the spiking tension in the room that was starting to claw at her composure. "I was taken to the hospital where Chase was kind enough to sit with me until I regained consciousness. Realizing that my purse had not been sent with me and was nowhere to be found, I was without means and he graciously offered to let me work for him until I earned enough to get my car repaired and —"

"That's what you call what I saw?" Charlie barked. "Work?"

His tone and rudeness ate into her resolve to be nice. "Of course not. What you saw was —"

"Was some whore fucking my son on a horse, thinking she'd get her hooks in him and take what I've worked goddamn hard to —"

The dishes on the table started to rattle and jump. Cody barked and ran to Ana's side, lowering his head and growling menacingly at Charlie. Ana stood, her fingertips resting on the table.

"Mr. Russell, I don't know about the world you live in, but where I come from we believe in giving people the benefit of the doubt. It's true that I'm living in your son's house, on his charity and I'm grateful for that. And yes, it's true you happened upon a moment between Chase and me this morning that you weren't supposed to see. But what you saw was not a service being provided. It was a healthy expression of sexuality between two consenting adults and only someone with a very dirty mind and mistrustful nature would think otherwise."

"I saw what I saw and heard from your own lips, missy," Charlie bellowed and started to rise from his chair. "And if you think for one red-hot minute that I'm —"

"Shut up!" Chase stood, challenging his father. "This is my house and my life. I make my own way and don't answer to you for who is or is not welcome in my home. And she is. So, you don't like it, old man? Then get out."

Charlie opened his mouth as if to argue then looked at Chase's brothers. "I 'spect you at work in an hour." With that he stomped out.

"Chase, don't let him leave like this," Ana pleaded. "Please, I can't be the cause of the rift between you getting wider."

"Leave it be, Ana," Chase said in a firm but resolute tone.

She didn't argue, but got up and left the room. It was not over. Not by a long shot. There was trouble to come, and she had to decide whether she needed to stay and fight, or walk and prevent the pain that was headed their way.

Ana went to her room, closed and locked the door, leaning back against it and closing her eyes. "Somebody help," she whispered. "I don't want to cause Chase pain. What do I do?"

A soft, unfamiliar voice whispered in her mind and Ana's eyes flew open. Suddenly she knew who the things in the room belonged to and where she would find help. The question was how to go about it without anyone finding out.

Chapter Eleven

Ana watched Chase's truck until it disappeared from sight then turned to go back inside. The past week had been rough for him and she had tried not to make it rougher. The rift with Charlie gnawed at him more than he wanted her to know, but she'd wakened too often in the middle of the night to find him staring at the ceiling to believe that it didn't matter.

He had been moody, quiet, and now was on his way to a rodeo in Sedona. He'd invited her to go but she had declined, saying that she wasn't feeling all that well. Which was not entirely a lie. She wasn't physically sick, but she was starting to be worried sick about him.

Chase offered to stay home but she encouraged him to go and told him it would do him good. Besides, she'd told him that Clay had entered the bull-riding competition and it would be good for Chase to be there to cheer him on.

In the end he had given in, promising to be back the next day. Ana assured him she would be fine.

Now she ran for the phone, fumbling in the pocket of her jeans for the phone number.

It rang twice before Cole answered. "Yeah?"

"Hey, it's Ana."

"Hey there, sexy. Let me guess, Chase just left and you can't wait for me to skedaddle on over there."

She laughed at his carrying-on. "So now you're psychic, eh?"

"A man can dream," he said and laughed along with her. "So you ready to put Plan A into effect?"

"As ready as I'll get."

"Good deal. We'll be there inside an hour."

"Okay. Thanks."

She hung up and looked around. The place was as neat as a pin. Nothing out of place, so nothing to straighten up. To keep busy she watered the horses, again, played fetch with Cody and Fergi for half an hour then went inside, took a quick shower and dressed in one of her most conservative peasant blouses and skirts with a wide leather belt secured around her slim waist.

She was finishing tea when she heard the vehicle. Ana ran to the door and stepped out onto the porch. True to his word, there was Cole, helping a very attractive middle-aged woman from the truck.

He grabbed a basket from the seat and escorted the woman to the house. Ana saw the woman sizing her up as she approached, and stepped down off the porch to greet her. "Miss Mahoney," she said with a smile. "Thank you for coming."

Clara looked Ana straight in the eye and held her gaze for a long time. She hadn't been sure at all about meeting the Jezebel Charlie had been cussing and stomping about for the past week. If she was half as bad as Charlie claimed, Clara might just have to shoot her. No one preyed on her boys, and while he might be a grown man, Chase was as much her boy as any child could be.

Had it not been for the twins and Caleb, Clara would have found a way to run Ana out of town behind Chase's back. But the other boys swore Ana was a stand-up woman and nothing like Charlie claimed. Clara figured she owed it to Chase to find out for herself.

Clara nodded to Ana and gestured to Cole for the basket. "I brought apple spice cake and a blueberry pie you can put in the freezer for Chase. It's his favorite."

"Thank you," Ana replied and gestured to the house. "Come in. I've made tea."

They all went into the kitchen where the tea service was sitting on the table. Ana saw Clara pause when she saw the service. She'd found it in the pantry, wrapped in cloth in a box. When she asked Chase about it, he'd told her that it had belonged to his mother. Clara had told him that the one civilized thing about Charity Hawks was her appreciation of good tea. Apparently they had made a habit of sharing tea before Charity died.

"Please." Ana gestured to the table and took a seat herself. "That apple spice cake smells like heaven. Do you mind if we have some with tea?"

"Fine," Clara said as she took a seat.

"Cole, would you get a knife from the rack?" Ana asked as she poured the tea. She passed a cup to Clara.

Clara sniffed at it and looked up at Ana in surprise. "Bewley's?" she asked.

"Hmmm." Ana smiled. "I hope that's okay. I find it to be the most satisfying breakfast tea I've ever had. Chase was kind enough to special order it for me.

"Oh, thank you," she said with a smile as Cole put the knife on the table. "Miss Mahoney, would you mind slicing the cake?"

Clara cut them each a big slice. Ana took a bite and closed her eyes. "Oh my!" she exclaimed. "You made this? This is the best thing I've ever tasted."

Ana wasn't acting. The cake was a little slice of paradise. She gobbled up every crumb and reached for the knife to cut another slice. That's when she realized that Cole and Miss Mahoney were both grinning at her.

"Oops, sorry," she said with a grin. "Acting like a little pig, aren't I?"

Clara's heart had melted the moment the girl dug into the cake. For a moment all Clara could see was Charity. Try as she might, Charity could never master the art of baking. But when Clara would bake, Charity would stuff herself like a child, crooning and humming like she was in seventh heaven. Just like Ana did now.

"You go right on. Eat as much as you want. There's more where that came from."

"Thanks!" Ana beamed at her and cut a big wedge of the cake.

Cole laughed at the size of the slice. "Somebody's gonna have to do a whole lot of whatever it is Chase said you do every day to work out."

"Yoga." Ana put her hand over her mouth to answer.

"Yoga?" Clara asked. "I always did want to learn that. I heard it's good for the circulation."

"Oh, yes." Ana nodded enthusiastically. "And keeps the spine loose and flexible which is so important. I could teach you if you like."

"Maybe." Clara smiled and sipped at the tea. "Now, Cole says there's something important you need to talk to me about."

Ana suddenly felt nervous. She wiped her hands on a napkin and bolted down her tea. "Yes. Yes, there is. It's about Chase and his father."

"No sense in discussing that. Those two been butting heads for as long as I can remember. That's not likely to change."

"But I think it can," Ana argued quietly.

Clara's eyebrows rose and Ana quickly explained. "Cole and Clay and Caleb have told me what they know about the situation between Chase and Charlie. Chase is...well, you know him better than I. To say the least, he's close-mouthed about it."

Clara chuckled. "Close-mouthed is a nice way of putting it."

Ana laughed with her. "Yeah, well, he does have a way of clamming up when he doesn't want to talk. But I think it's a real shame the way things are for Chase and his dad. They were both devastated by Charity's death, but the truth of it is that it wasn't Chase's fault. Charlie just had no one else to blame, and Chase accepted the burden of shame and clung to it."

"That's as good a way of putting it as I've ever heard," Clara agreed. "But righting that wrong isn't something that'll be done easy. I've worked at it for years and, if anything, am further away from the goal than when I started."

"Well, now you're not alone in that effort," Ana said with a smile. "Because I want to help."

"No offense, but I don't see how you could possibly help. Charlie would probably call the law on you if you stepped foot on his property, and the chance of Chase asking his daddy back here is a long-shot to say the least."

"Maybe not." Ana grinned. "I'd be willing to bet that they'd band together real quick if, say for example, something happened to you."

"I don't think I like the sound of this." Clara folded her arms over her chest.

"Well, you haven't heard my plan yet."

"Okay, let's have it."

Ana gave Cole a wink. "Just suppose that Chase and his father thought you'd had a heart attack or something, that you just fell out on the floor and had to be transported to the hospital."

Clara barked a laugh. "Well, first of all everyone knows I'm strong as a horse, and second, even if that did happen, they'd likely just send me flowers and wait for me to get back on my feet to cook for them."

"Hmmm..." Ana considered it for a few moments then her eyes brightened. "Okay, so what if you were kidnapped?"

Clara's laugh was full-blown this time. "If I was the queen mother I suppose that would raise a ruckus, but I'm just a housekeeper, girl. No one's going to pay any ransom for my sorry old hide."

"I think you're wrong," Ana argued.

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"Yes. Chase loves you. You're his Mama C. He'd gnaw off his own arm for you. And Charlie would too."

"I doubt that," Clara scoffed at the idea.

"Well, I don't. I think Charlie cares a lot more for you than he lets on. And I bet you ten dollars to a donut that if he knew you loved him, you'd be Mrs. Russell before you could turn around."

Clara's face flared with color. "Hush your mouth, girl. Charlie Russell don't have feelings for me."

"I say he does. And so does Fergi."

"The Duchess of York? Cole, check that tea. I think Ana's been brewing up locoweed."

Ana laughed and so did Cole. Clara cut Cole a sharp look. "You want to clue me in on what's so damn funny?"

"I'm sorry," Ana apologized and rose to go to the door. "I didn't mean Sarah Ferguson. I meant my familiar, Fergi."

She opened the door and let out a strange whistle. "Oh, I forgot," she said over her shoulder. "I didn't tell you. I'm a witch."

"What?" Clara blurted at the exact same moment Fergi landed on Ana's shoulder. Clara jumped in her chair and grabbed Cole's arm.

"Holy shit!" Cole threw himself over Clara protectively.

"It's okay," Ana said as she walked back to the table and took a seat. "This is Fergi. Fergi this is Clara Mahoney and Cole Russell."

Fergi chirped and twittered at the two people cowering on the other side of the table. "She won't hurt you," Ana told them. "Really."

Cole got back in his chair, staring at the hawk in amazement. "Why aren't her talons digging into you?" he asked.

"Oh!" Ana hadn't thought about that in a long time, probably because few people ever saw her and Fergi interacting. "There's a charm on me that protects my skin from her talons. We worked it out when Fergi first came to me because we wanted to be able to touch."

Clara's hand was over her heart and her eyes were as round as quarters. "Good lord, girl. That's the biggest hawk I've ever seen!"

Ana reached up to stroke Fergi. "Yes, she is magnificent, isn't she? And heavy. Fergi, if you get any bigger I'm going to have to start lifting weights. How 'bout hopping over there to that free chair?"

Fergi did just that. One hop and a small flap and she was perched on the back of the chair, balancing as the chair wobbled. "Now." Ana directed her attention to Clara. "You want to hear my idea?"

"Chase have any spirits in the house?" Clara asked in reply. "I think I might need something stronger than tea if I'm going to make a pact with a witch and her...familiar."

Ana chuckled and got up to fetch the bottle of bourbon she'd seen in the kitchen cupboard.

"Okay," she said as she poured a good portion of the liquor into Clara's cup and then Cole's when he raised his teacup. "This is the basic idea..."

* * * * *

Chase mopped his face with his bandana then stuffed it in the back pocket of his jeans. He was going to strangle Cole. Thanks to Cole's timely absence, Chase had gotten roped into helping with the calf castration.

"Hey!"

Chase turned in the direction of the shout. A tall, dark-haired man leaned on the fence. "See what that fella wants," Chase yelled at Caleb, then nodded to Clay that he was ready for the next calf.

Caleb walked over to the fence.

"Can I help you?" he asked as he approached the stranger.

"You Chase Hawks?"

"Nope, Caleb Russell. That's my brother Chase, back there." He jerked his thumb over this shoulder in Chase's direction.

"A guy in town said I should talk to him about work," the man said and extended his hand.

Caleb gave the man a once-over. From his ponytailed hair to his sneaker-clad feet he had city written all over him. "Got any experience?" He took the man's hand.

"I'm a fast learner," the man replied with a smile. "And you'd like to give me a chance."

"Uh...right. Yeah. Okay," Caleb said in a slightly dazed manner. "Sure, you can bunk in with Danny in cabin five. Just go back past the barn and turn left and you'll see the cabins. You got your gear?"

"Actually, I don't have gear. And I don't work with cows. I am good with an engine though. Bet you have some machinery that could use a rehaul or tune-up."

Caleb blinked several times. "Uh, well...yeah, yeah, as a matter of fact we do."

"Excellent," the man said with a smile. "Then why don't I get settled and in the morning you can show me around and get me familiar with your operation."

"Uh, sounds like a plan," Caleb agreed.

"See you in the morning...boss," Giovanni said with a smile and turned away.

Caleb scratched his head and took a step after the man but Clay yelled for him so he turned and went back to work.

Giovanni got in his car and followed the directions Caleb had given. The cabin was actually a small wood-frame house. Not much to speak of, but as he discovered when he entered, it was clean and comfortable.

"Yeah, this will do just fine," he said as he took a seat on the couch and threw his feet up on the coffee table. "Just fine."

It had been much easier than he'd anticipated, locating Fiana. Actually, the insurance company had done the work for him, calling about her car, which had been taken to a garage in Arizona.

Giovanni had left that same day and driven almost nonstop until he reached Safford. It was a next-to-nothing town as far as he was concerned, but did possess something of great value, namely a café where the waitress was as tired of the local yahoos as she could be and wishing for a handsome stranger to roll into town and make all her dreams come true.

Enter Giovanni Sardo. Inside two days he had little Sandy Wingate, waitress and eager fuck partner, eating out of his hands. She'd filled him in on all the gossip which included someone called Chase Hawks, who had run over a woman in town and then taken her home with him. According to Sandy, the local mechanic, Rusty, had towed in the woman's car and it was registered to a Fiana Stillwater. Strange name as far as Sandy was concerned, but made for interesting gossip.

He figured Fiana had told the cowboy some sob story about getting beat up and suckered him in. But had she told him the truth? That when she walked out on him she brought the roof down on his head? Literally. He had thirteen stitches in his scalp to

prove it and no one got away with that. Just like no bitch got away with walking out on him.

Fiana had a lesson coming and it was going to be a hard one. The thought of it gave Giovanni a hard-on. Funny that he hadn't realized earlier how exciting it was to cause pain, the rush that it brought and the power it infused him with.

He laughed. Fiana had teased him more than once about his weak powers. He'd even overheard her once say that the bloodline of the Sardinia witches must be very diluted because his powers were almost nonexistent. Boy, was she in for a surprise. Ever since he'd spilled her blood, his power had increased dramatically.

Soon he'd teach her a lesson. She'd realize that she was nothing compared to him. And then she would die. But not fast. Giovanni was going to take his time and enjoy it.

Chapter Twelve

Ana was waiting on the porch when Chase pulled up in the yard. One look at her and he knew something was wrong. "What's eating at you, Fancy?" he asked as he stepped up on the porch.

"Your father hired Gio— Giovanni."

"Giovanni?" he asked with a frown then almost immediately his eyebrows shot up. "Your husband, Giovanni?"

She nodded, wringing her hands in front of her. That worried Chase. He might not have known her long, but he knew her well enough to know that she was not the hand-wringing, worrying type.

"Are you sure about that? Why would Charlie hire him? From what you've told me he doesn't know anything about ranching."

"Well, it wasn't really your father who hired him. According to Fergi, Caleb hired him. But that was only because Giovanni charmed him."

Chase chuckled. "Honey, I don't think Caleb's his type. That boy's to-the-core a woman's man."

"Not that kind of charmed."

"You mean— Shit! Are you telling me he's a witch?"

She nodded. "His power has never been very strong. At least it wasn't. According to Fergi it is now. He charmed Caleb into hiring him, and he's not really doing ranch work. He's working on some of the machinery or trucks or something."

Chase took her hand and led her to the porch swing. "Are you— I mean, is Fergi sure?"

"Positive."

Chase pulled her close to him as they sat. "Don't fret about it, Fancy. I'll take a ride over there in the morning and make sure he's given the boot good and proper."

"That won't help." She looked up at him. "If he's here, he plans on getting even and you firing him won't change anything except to make him mad, and when he's mad he's irrational, and when he's irrational he's mean and when—"

"He is not going to hurt you, Ana." Chase angled to face her. "You hear me? I give you my word on that."

"And I believe you. I do," she insisted. "But that might not matter. Chase, for him to have charmed Caleb like that means that his powers have significantly increased. A touch charm isn't easy. And if his powers have increased enough for him to do that, then he could use them to hurt you—or any of your family. I think...I think the best

thing for everyone is if I just leave. With me gone, he won't have a reason to stay and no one will get hurt."

"You're not going anywhere." Chase's voice was low, but filled with a resolve as solid as the mountains. "We'll figure this out, Fancy. But you leaving isn't an option."

"You may change your mind." She looked down, trying not to cry.

"Not going to happen." He put his fingers under her chin to tilt her head up. "Fancy, listen to me. I'm thirty-seven years old and I've had more than my share of women. They've come and gone in my life and never once have I regretted seeing them go. I got to thinking that there was just something missing inside me, that the ability to love just wasn't part of me.

"And then you showed up. And everything changed. I'd never let a woman spend a night in my house, much less live here. Sure, I brought you here not knowing what would happen, but still I brought you here. And now the idea of you not being here scares me more than anything I've ever imagined. I need you, Fancy, and I'm asking you to stay with me."

Chase's words were not spoken lightly. Ana knew that. She'd come to know him and had no doubt of his truthfulness. But the idea of bringing trouble, possibly danger, to him and his family tore at her heart.

"Chase, I want to stay. But if I go—"

Chase could not listen to talk of her leaving. And he knew no more words to convince her. "If you go then where will you find this?" he asked and gathered her into his lap and claimed her lips in a kiss that held more than just heat and lust. It was a kiss that spoke of love and emotion that transcended physical need.

Ana had no power to fight it. She wound her arms around his neck and gave in. Chase lifted her up and carried her inside, laying her gently on his bed. She reached for his shirt to undo the buttons, but he stilled her hands.

With infinite slowness he removed her clothes, taking time to caress and kiss every inch of her body, his hands and lips leaving brands behind that filled her with longing. He paused and removed his clothes.

Ana's eyes moved over his body, the long lean lines and defined muscles, seeing and feeling the strength and power that radiated from him. He returned to her on the bed, lying beside her, capturing her eyes and letting her see inside him, clear to his soul.

That look contained more power than anything she'd ever known. She felt it to the core of her soul. Chase might claim to have no power other than physical, but that moment told her differently. His was a magic as primal and strong as the savage land he inhabited. His power stemmed from the beginning of time, when his people roamed the earth, connected to its ebbs and flows, in touch with its spirit.

The love shining in Chase's eyes was one not given lightly. It spoke of trust and respect, a love that would endure beyond time. In his eyes, he showed her all that she would forsake if she walked away, all that it would cost both of them.

Chase was the answer to a wish she'd never dared to hope would come true. His touch could thrill, his taste and feel could satisfy her in a way no other man would ever do. But it was more than the physical way he excited and satisfied her that drew her to him. He completed her. Male to female, spirit to spirit.

No matter how far she ran, she would never be free of him. He'd claimed her and no matter how much distance she put between them, she would be his for all time.

She reached up to place her hand on the side of his face and he moved to kiss her palm. In that moment they both knew that she could not leave.

"I love you, Ana, and nothing and no one is going to take you away from me."

"I love you, too," she whispered. "But I don't want to bring trouble down on you or your family."

"You're not the first woman to run from an abusive husband, or the first to have a restraining warrant issued on one," he said. "I'll stop by and talk to Jas in the morning about that, too. But there's one thing. You said he was here for revenge. That doesn't make sense. He beat you up and now he wants revenge? For what?"

Ana's eyes looked up, then sideways as she gnawed her bottom lip. "Well, when I left, I kind of dropped the house on him."

"You what?"

"I made the house cave in."

Chase burst out laughing. "Now that's what I call bringing down the house."

"He probably didn't think it was too funny."

"No, I don't imagine," he agreed and hugged her. "Don't worry. We'll take care of Giovanni— Uh, what's his last name?"

"Sardo."

Chase drew back from her. "Your name's Ana Sardo?"

"Oh no, I never took his name."

"And you're not gonna take any shit from him either." Chase knew that the danger of her leaving had passed, and he felt as if he had been filled with light. Happiness bubbled inside him, bringing out a playfulness that he'd shared only with Ana.

"Now, what say you and I talk about dessert?" he teased. "I've worked up a powerful hunger."

"There's still some of the cake Clara brought over the other day."

"Honey, I was thinking of something a little spicier."

Ana grinned and rolled over against him. "Well, then, how about honey-covered Chase?"

"I like the sound of honey-covered Ana much better."

"What about dinner?"

"Like you said, a man can live without meat."

"But not honey?" She chuckled.

"You got it, Fancy. Definitely not without honey."

* * * * *

"You promise to call me as soon as you talk to your police friend?" Ana asked as Chase opened his truck door the next morning.

"Promise. Now listen, if you're scared to be here alone I can—"

"I'm not scared," she interrupted, and then continued. "Besides, Clara is coming over this morning, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. You sure it's a good idea for you to teach her that yoga stuff? She isn't all bendy and twisty like you."

"Well, who knows, maybe one day she will be. Besides, it will be nice to have a woman to talk to for a little while. Maybe she can even give me some cooking tips."

Chase laughed. "Honey, the chances of you becoming a great cook are about the same as Clara being able to do some of those body-contorting yoga things you do."

Ana punched him lightly in the arm. "Hey, I'm not that bad a cook."

Chase raised his eyebrows and she laughed. "Okay, so I am."

"That's okay, Fancy. What you lack in culinary skills you more than make up for everywhere else."

"You're such a smooth talker, Hawks. But keep it up. It'll get you lucky."

Chase grinned. "Now that's incentive to get home early. You have a good day."

"You, too." She gave him a soft lingering kiss and grinned when he grabbed her for a scorcher of a kiss that left her wishing they could just go back to bed.

"Okay, I'm outta here." He climbed in the truck and she stepped back, watching as he left.

Cody came up to her and whined. "Yes, I feel kind of guilty too. But it's for a good cause, Cody. All we're going to do is pretend that Clara hurts herself doing yoga. That way Charlie and Chase will rush to her hospital bed and when they do, maybe they'll let the love they have for Clara be the bridge that spans the gap between them."

He barked and she knelt down to rub him. "Let's hope their hard heads don't get in the way. Hey, there's some bacon left from breakfast. You want it?"

Cody took off for the back door, leaving Ana to follow. After giving him the overcooked bacon that Chase had declined, she cleaned the kitchen and put in a load of laundry before heading out to the pasture to visit with the horses.

She was just climbing over the fence to return to the house when she heard the car. She hurried inside to clean up and was just soaping up her hands when she heard the knock on the door. "Come on in. It's open," she called out. She had just started to rinse the soap from her hands when Clara walked into the kitchen.

"Hey!" Ana turned with a smile that immediately faded. Behind Clara stood Giovanni, holding a handgun.

He shoved Clara into the kitchen. She stumbled against the table, but righted herself. Ana left the water running and rushed over to Clara. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Clara replied with a hateful look at Giovanni. "You know this no-account?"

"I'm afraid so," Ana replied and grabbed a towel off the counter to dry her hands.

"You better be afraid, bitch!" Giovanni swaggered into the room.

"Or what, you'll shoot me?" She tossed the towel in the direction of the countertop but missed.

"This is just insurance," he said.

"Against what?"

"Just in case you decide not to cooperate."

"Let Clara go home," Ana said. "Then you and I will leave here and go somewhere to settle this. But she has no part in it so let her go."

"I don't think so. Seeing as how you're so attached to the old biddy, I think I'll keep her. Now, both of you get outside. We're going to take a little ride."

"To where?"

"You'll find out where we get there. Now move!"

Ana took Clara's hand. "It will be fine."

Clara nodded and they walked hand in hand outside. Cody ran up, growling and barking. "Unless you want that mutt dead, you'll tell him to back off!" Giovanni threatened.

"Cody, no," Ana said and knelt down beside the dog. "Don't worry," she whispered. "Fergi's watching from the roof. She'll follow us. All you have to do is get Chase to listen to her when she returns. Can you do that? Please, it will be fine."

Cody growled once more then sat back on his haunches. Giovanni made Ana get behind the wheel and Clara in the front passenger seat. He climbed into the backseat. "You try anything funny and I'll blow the old bat's brains out."

"Where to?" Ana asked, trying to keep the fear and hate from her voice and sending a silent plea to Fergi to follow them.

"Just head for the main road. I'll tell you where to go after that."

Ana did as he said, and before long they arrived at narrow dirt road that seemed to wind off into nowhere.

"Why do you want to take us to the ghost town?" Clara asked.

"Shut up!" Giovanni snapped at her.

Ana cut a look at Clara then into the rearview mirror at Giovanni. Cole had told her about the ghost town bordering Chase's land. He said no one had been out there for years and no one really wanted to because everyone was convinced it really was haunted.

Ana hoped he was right. Maybe if there were spirits present they could be enlisted to help. Because she was pretty sure that Giovanni intended for her and Clara to become part of the town's ghostly inhabitants.

Chapter Thirteen

Chase was eager to get back and tell Ana that Giovanni Sardo would be fired the moment he returned from Tucson with the spare parts he'd been sent to pick up for the flatbed. According to Caleb, he'd been a model employee, not causing any trouble, and was a whiz of a mechanic. He'd left that morning for Tucson and was expected back in a few hours.

Maybe Sardo wasn't there to cause trouble. Maybe they had nothing to worry about. And maybe the gnawing that had started in his belly the moment he'd found out that Sardo was there was due to indigestion and not impending trouble.

Cody leapt on Chase the moment he stepped out of the truck. With his front paws on Chase's chest, he barked and yipped. "Whoa, buddy." Chase had to force Cody to the ground with the dog still barking. "What in the world is it?" Chase asked at almost the same moment a sick feeling took hold in his gut.

"Ana!" He ran for the house with Cody beside him, barking all the way. "Ana?" he yelled as he pounded up the steps to the porch and in through the front door. "Ana!"

The house was silent. More than silent. There was an eerie emptiness to it that he'd never felt. "Cody, please!" The continuous barking was starting to wear on Chase's nerves.

Cody silenced the barks but paced restlessly alongside Chase as he searched the house. "Something's wrong," he said as he got a look at the kitchen door standing open, a dishtowel on the floor and water running in the sink.

Cody started barking to beat the band at that point and ran over to Chase to grab the leg of his jeans between his teeth and tug as he backed toward the kitchen door. Chase didn't know what had gotten into Cody, but now was not the time to try and figure it out.

He turned off the water in the sink, snatched up the phone and called the Circle R. Clay answered, out of breath. "Circle R. Clay Russell speaking."

"Is Mama C there?" Chase asked.

"No, she's at your place with Ana."

"No, she's not."

"Well, call again. Maybe they're tied up with the yoga stuff Ana's going to teach her."

"I'm at home, Clay."

"Oh, well, then I don't know. She's not here."

“Something’s wrong.” Chase’s rising anxiety had him snapping at his brother. “Her car isn’t here and neither is she nor Ana. And Cody’s got a burr up his butt about something.”

“Hold on,” Clay said and yelled for his brother. “Cole! Dial up Mama C’s cell!” He came back to Chase. “Cole’s calling now. Hold on.”

The wait couldn’t have been more than a minute but to Chase it seemed to take forever until his brother came back on the line, and then it was not with what he wanted to hear. “No answer on her cell.”

“Ride out here. Make sure she didn’t break down along the way. Send Cole to town, and have Caleb ride over to Smiley’s and see if maybe she stopped in to visit his wife.”

“What about Dad?” Clay asked.

“What about him?”

“Do I say anything to him?”

“Not yet. Just make sure you all have your cells and keep me updated.”

“You could be overreacting,” Clay pointed out.

“Maybe, but my gut says otherwise.”

“Then I better get moving. Talk to you soon.”

Chase hung up the phone and leaned back against the counter to close his eyes. For the first time in his life he’d felt content. The last month with Ana had been like a wish come true.

He’d taken to rising with her before dawn to go outside and greet the day, watching Fergi circle and swoop, dancing on the air, and Ana circle and whirl, dancing in the dirt with Cody racing around both of them doing his own brand of dancing.

She worked alongside him, never complaining about the backbreaking work, the heat, the long hours, or having to fix dinner and clean up at the end of the day. And when the night came she loved him with passion he never thought possible.

If there was a heaven on earth, this was it and it was all because of Ana. She’d found the key to unlocking his heart, and even though he felt a little silly even thinking it, she brought magic to his life. Literally and sometimes quite exotically.

A yip from Cody had him opening his eyes. The dog barked once, sharply, and then walked to the kitchen door, stopped and looked back at Chase. Suddenly something Ana once said came to mind. That night in the pasture, the first time he saw Ana with Fergi and doubted that the hawk talked to her. She’d laughed and told him that of course Fergi talked to her, just like Cody talked to him.

Chase remembered his reply. “He barks, but I’m positive he’s never spoken a word to me.”

Just as he remembered the knowing smile Ana gave him along with her response. “Well, sure he has, Chase. He’s told you lots of things. Like how he really hates that food with the liver flavor, and how he’d rather not go to Charlie’s, because they don’t

let him come in the house, and how much he likes Clara because when she comes over she always brings him treats.”

Chase walked over to Cody. “You know where Ana and Mama C are, boy?”

Cody barked and nudged the door with his nose. “Okay, then show me,” Chase said and pushed the door open.

Cody shot out into the yard, barking wildly and looking at the sky. Chase looked up, not knowing what he was supposed to see. His eyes widened when a speck in the distance grew steadily larger. It was Fergi.

The hawk swooped down to land on the porch rail. She chattered and twirped, all the while looking at Cody. When she finished, Cody barked twice and looked at Chase.

“Okay, someone want to let me in on the secret?” he asked.

Cody barked again, at the same time the hawk let out a cry. Chase took off his hat and ran his hand up over his forehead then back across his head. He had to be loco. He could have been out looking for Ana and Clara, but instead, here he was, trying to make sense of the goings-on of a wolf-sired dog and a hawk. If Ana were there she’d laugh.

Chase prayed to all the spirits that she would be there again soon. Because now that he’d found her, he couldn’t imagine life without her.

* * * * *

Ana turned off the road onto the trailhead. She wished she’d been making the drive under less stressful conditions. Aravaipa Canyon was breathtaking with its majestic cliffs and rugged terrain.

Chase had told her something about Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness. Over nineteen thousand acres of unspoiled land in Pinal and Graham Counties, the wilderness housed the eleven-mile-long Aravaipa Canyon along with the surrounding tablelands and nine side canyons. There were supposed to be over two hundred species of birds that lived in the shady cottonwood trees, bighorn sheep and a variety of desert fish in the streams.

You had to have a permit to enter Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness and even at that, only fifty people per day were allowed on the land. Ana could see how advantageous that would be for assuring a visitor’s solitude and minimizing the impact to the environment, but at the moment, she would have welcomed driving into a crowd.

Chase’s family land bordered the Wilderness, and was home to the ghost town, Aravaipa, which was once a mining and ranching settlement. Chase’s own land bordered the ghost town, making Aravaipa the barrier that separated his property from the Circle R. According to Chase the town once had a post office, a pool hall, a store and even a school. Initially it was known as Dunlap, after a local rancher, but when it was discovered that there was already a post office with that name, the town was renamed after the Aravaipa Indians.

All that was left now were a few buildings. Ana looked around as Giovanni directed her to pull the car behind one of the decaying structures.

“Okay, now what?” Ana asked as Giovanni climbed out of the back and jerked her door open.

“Now we go inside,” he said as he snatched the keys from her.

“Giovanni, please, just let Clara go home.” Ana didn’t budge. “She has no part in this.”

“Not so,” he said with a wicked smile. “See, I figure the old bat’s worth something to the Russells. And if rumors hold, you’re worth something to the half-breed.”

“No one is going to pay you anything,” Ana argued.

“You better hope you’re wrong.” Giovanni took a step closer to her, running the barrel of the gun from her chin to her breastbone.

Ana wanted to argue, to fight, to do something, but the glint in Giovanni’s eyes convinced her otherwise. She had never seen him like this and it did scare her. There was a bloodlust raging inside him. Had it been from mere anger at her, perhaps he could have been reasoned with, but what she saw went way beyond anger. Giovanni had tasted blood, so to speak, and he liked it. Which made him the most dangerous of all predators.

“Come on, Clara.” Ana held out her hand to the older woman. Together they entered the building.

Light shafted through rents in the roof, their feet kicking up dust that hung in the still air, clouding the light with floating particles. Ana said a quick spell charm to ensure that they weren’t bitten or stung by poisonous insects or snakes.

She saw coils of rope lying against the far wall and turned to face Giovanni as he entered. He sneered at her and motioned her over to the ropes with his handgun. “Tie up the old woman.”

Ana thought about arguing but decided against it. Their best bet was to go along with him and wait for Fergi and Cody to figure out a way to lead Chase to them. She had no doubt that Chase would come.

As she bound Clara’s hands and feet, she couldn’t help but wonder if she had brought this situation down on them with her own deceit. She and Clara had been planning on coming up with something to get Charlie Russell and Chase together. They’d discussed faking falls or illnesses and even kidnapping, and had planned to act out a deceit this very day.

Had the energy of her thoughts acted against her to put her and Clara in real peril? She hoped not. And as Giovanni started to tie her up, tightening the ropes around her wrists so they cut into the skin, she hoped Chase would come soon.

* * * * *

Chase parked behind the main house at the Circle R and entered through the kitchen. It was a somber group that met his sight. His three brothers, his father, the

ranch foreman Ned, Smiley and his wife, and Jason were all sitting at the table. Along with Giovanni Sardo.

"Get the fuck out of this house!" Chase barked at Giovanni.

Giovanni looked from Chase to the people at the table then back at Chase. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Get the fuck out of this house and off this land. In fact, get the fuck out of Arizona."

"Now, Chase," Jason said in a placating tone as he started to stand.

"Shut up," Chase snapped at Jason. "And you." He pointed his finger at Giovanni. "You better be getting out of that chair or I'm going to pick your scrawny ass up and throw you out."

"I fail to see what you have against me," Giovanni said calmly. "In fact, it should be me who is angry. After all, you are fucking my wife."

"You sorry—" Chase launched himself at Giovanni, only to be stopped by all three of his brothers who grabbed hold of him while Charlie got to his feet.

"Time for you to calm down," Charlie boomed at Chase. "I mean it, Chase. Either sit your ass down, or get out."

Chase looked from his father to Giovanni, who wore a satisfied sneer on his face.

He'd charmed them. That explained it. Ana said he was a witch. "He's responsible for Clara and Ana being missing and you're sitting here having fucking coffee with him?" Chase exclaimed.

"He's not responsible for anything," Charlie said in a lower tone. "Chase, listen to me. Sardo came here to present his wife with divorce papers, not try to get her back."

"That's a lie." Chase was not having any part of the story.

"Show him." Charlie tossed the words over his shoulder at Giovanni, who pulled a fat envelope from his shirt pocket and slid it across the table.

Charlie took the document from the envelope and held it up in front of Chase's face. "You see?"

Chase could see what it was, but he still wasn't buying it. Ana had told him that Giovanni was not to be trusted and he believed her.

"What I see is a scumbag who's pulled a fast one on you, Charlie."

"No one pulls anything on me, boy." Charlie got his hackles up immediately and took a step toward Chase. "And you best simmer down."

Chase saw the satisfied gleam in Giovanni Sardo's eyes and knew that at the moment he was outgunned. The only thing he could do was change tactics. "Let go of me." He shook his arms against the hold Clay and Cole had on him. "Now."

"Let him go," Charlie said when the twins looked at him.

They released him and Chase walked over to pour himself a cup of coffee. "Any news?" he asked Jason when he turned back around.

"Nothing," Jason answered. "I've put out an APB on the car, but so far no one's spotted it. None of Clara's friends have a clue where she could be, and there's been no sign of Ana anywhere in the county. And before you ask, we've questioned Sardo, here. He returned with the parts and the man at the shop in Tucson remembered him being there, so there's no way he could have been involved. It's like Charlie said. He's just here to get those divorce papers signed. And personally, buddy, I'd think that would be just fine with you because as soon as Ana signs, she's a free woman."

Chase grunted, took a sip of coffee then set the cup on the table. "I'm going back out."

"Give it a rest," Clay suggested. "Jason said he'll call in the state boys if they don't turn up by morning, and in the meantime every officer in three counties is out looking for them. They'll turn up."

"You willing to bet their lives on that?" he asked and looked around the room. What he saw was that there would be no support for him there. Whatever Sardo had done, his family now was useless to him. "Well?" He directed the last question toward his father. "Is that all Clara means to you?"

For the first time in Chase's life, his father looked away. "Fine," Chase said and turned for the door. "I'll do it alone."

He stomped out of the house and to his truck. Almost his entire life, he'd tried to distance himself from his family, from his father. But always he'd known that he had the strength of the family behind him if push came to shove. For the first time, he was completely alone and that cut him deeper than he'd ever imagined it could.

But family or no, he wasn't going to stop looking until he found Ana and Clara. And god help the man if harm had been done to them, because there was no way Chase would let him live.

* * * * *

"I can't get them to loosen," Clara complained, still struggling against the ropes that bound her wrists behind her back. "Ana? Ana?"

"I'm still here," Ana answered from across the room.

Giovanni had tied them up on opposite sides of the room, lashing their hands behind their backs, their ankles together and looping a noose around each of their necks that was tied off to a ceiling beam. If they tried to get to one another the noose would tighten.

Once that was accomplished, he'd clubbed Ana over the head, knocking her unconscious. When she woke there was a circle drawn around her on the floor, and one around Clara. Between them were thousands of scorpions. She knew what he'd done. He'd imprisoned her with magic. She didn't know what kind of spell he'd used, but she was sure that it wouldn't be pleasant should she try to breach the circle. The scorpions were obviously under his control so reasoning with them would probably be useless.

And she had no strength for that at the moment, anyway. The knock on the head had her still feeling a little disoriented and blood from the wound had streamed down her face, filling her left eye and making it difficult to see.

"I'm starting to get scared," Clara admitted.

"It will be fine," Ana promised even though she was not in the least sure of it. She knew Fergi had followed them, and had half expected Chase to find them before nightfall. That hadn't happened, which meant one of two things. Either Cody and Fergi had been unable to communicate with Chase and get him to follow Fergi, or Giovanni had done something to prevent Chase from coming after them. She called on the power of every good force in the universe to let it be the former rather than the latter.

As if in answer to her prayer, she was seized with a powerful awareness. She felt Chase's frustration, anger and fear, and knew that against all obstacles and despite all odds and opposition, he would not give up until he found them. Even in this dark place, imprisoned by Giovanni's evil, she felt Chase's love and it filled her with the hope she needed.

"Chase will find us," she said softly.

"How can you be so sure?"

"How can you not?" Ana asked.

Clara didn't reply and Ana turned her mind to how to undo Giovanni's spell. It took more effort than she imagined to induce a trance state, and far more time than it ever had. But at last she felt the bonds of reality melt away. And then she was flying.

The land passing by beneath her was beautiful but unfamiliar. She did not know her direction. "Fergi, help me," she pleaded. "Guide me to you."

A ribbon of glowing amber appeared before her, and she followed it, moving faster and faster until the earth below was a blur of motion. Then she saw Fergi. Or at least her astral form, soaring toward her, with majestic wings stretched wide.

Ana's forward momentum slowed to a gradual stop and then she was floating, with Fergi hovering before her. "Giovanni cast a binding spell, preventing me from escaping," she told the hawk. "I'm working to undo it, but time is running out. Clara has been without water for more than a day and I'm afraid that another day in the heat will kill her."

Fergi's voice in her mind let her know that the situation was even more severe than she realized. Not only had Giovanni bound her magically, but he had cast a spell over Chase's family, making sure that none of them thought to search for her and Ana at the ghost town. He had gotten them to believe that he was only there to serve her with divorce papers and now even had them thinking that she was only there to try and swindle Chase out of his inheritance.

"But how?" Ana asked. "Giovanni's powers were virtually nonexistent before. How is he suddenly so powerful?"

The answer was enough to bring self-hatred flooding to the forefront of Ana's mind. When she had collapsed the house on him, the cornerstone of the foundation had cracked, and something old and evil that had been imprisoned long ago beneath the old foundation was released. Incorporeal, it needed a host body, and found a willing one in Giovanni Sardo. Its powers became his, and he became the unwitting vessel for a being that had lost all touch with the Light.

Giovanni and the being were becoming more integrated with each passing day. If the being was not banished, and very soon, the incorporation would become complete and then it would take far more power than she and Fergi combined possessed to stop it.

"But does Giovanni know?" She hoped he didn't. That he was as much a victim as she and Clara. Fergi's answer shattered that hope. Not only was he aware of it, he was enjoying it. The being gave him free rein to do as he wanted. Its only demand was for pain and blood. It thrived on the agony of others, and Giovanni was more than willing to feed that hunger.

"Where did you get all this information?" Ana didn't doubt Fergi, but if there was someone or something else out there that could help, she wanted to know who and how to enlist their aid.

"My grandfather?" Ana asked in complete surprise. "But he crossed over years ago."

"Most roads run two directions, Little Cat."

The soft gentle voice preceded a feeling of warmth and love that enveloped Ana in a cocoon she wanted to burrow deep into and hide. "This is the time for courage," her grandfather's voice spoke in her mind.

"And how do I fight this evil?" she asked.

"By enlisting the help of those who are imprisoned on this plane."

"What?"

"Wake and look around you, Little Cat. This place is inhabited by souls who could not make the crossing until their debts were paid. Allow them the chance to clean their spirits and move to the next life."

"And how do I go about doing that?" she asked.

"Believe." His final word echoed in her mind as she was suddenly back inside her body in the dark shanty with ropes cutting into her flesh and the sound of Clara's soft crying breaking the silence of the night.

Ana sent a call to Fergi, hoping the link was still strong enough for her plea to get through. She would do whatever she could to set the stage for the battle, but unless Fergi was able to get the message through to Chase, they might all end up being trapped in limbo.

* * * * *

Chase felt old, tired and defeated when he climbed out of his truck. Cody ran up to him and leaned against his leg, silent for the first time in two days. Chase leaned back against the truck and stroked the dog's head.

Everyone from the local to state police had been looking for Ana and Clara for nearly forty-eight hours and so far they were no closer to finding them than they'd been in the first few hours. And he knew that was a bad sign.

He'd just returned from another visit to the Circle R, where he'd found his father and Giovanni Sardo in his father's study, drinking bourbon and smoking cigars, as if they were lifelong friends.

Charlie announced that he had offered a reward for the safe return of Clara Mahoney in the amount of one million dollars. When Chase asked about a reward for Ana, Charlie just snorted and said the world would be better off without gold-digging whores like Ana Stillwater.

Giovanni had merely sneered at Chase and agreed. Chase had to make himself turn and walk away. It was clear to him that Ana was right. Giovanni had to be a witch. There was no other way to explain how easily he'd gotten Charlie and the rest of his family to accept his lies.

The problem was, Chase had no idea how to battle a witch. "Come on," he said to Cody. "I need a couple of hours' sleep, and then I'll go back out and search again."

He'd almost reached the steps to the porch when a shrill cry made him stop and look up. Fergi dove from the dark sky to perch on the porch rail. "Please tell me you know where she is," Chase said wearily.

Fergi actually nodded her head. Chase took a step closer and tentatively reached out his hand toward the bird. He didn't know how she would react but he was overwhelmed with the sudden certainty that if he could touch her he could learn Ana's whereabouts.

She was motionless as his hand gently settled on her broad head. Her eyes angled up to lock with his and suddenly Chase felt himself freefalling into nothingness.

Abruptly his vision returned, but that brought little but confusion and a strong measure of fear. Where was he? And how did he get so high above the ground?

"Don't you recognize this place, primate?" a rather sharp, but decidedly feminine voice sounded in his mind.

Chase suddenly did recognize the place. Aravaipa ghost town. He looked around and saw a semi-translucent Fergi flying beside him. "Am I dead?" he asked.

A laugh sounded in his mind. "Silly primate. Of course not."

"Why do you call me primate?"

"Why do you call me bird?"

"Oh, I see your point, Fergi."

She laughed shortly then her voice became serious. "Using our combined energy, Ana and I have made it possible for you to separate from your body. A human term for

it is astral travel. Your body remains safely on your front porch with Cody guarding us. But that is unimportant. Giovanni Sardo has Ana and Clara tied up in that building to your left. They've been without food and water for two days and Ana fears for Clara's life."

"Can't she use her magic to free them?"

"Giovanni has cast a spell. Ana and Clara are protected for the moment, each inside a magic circle. Outside the circle are Giovanni's guards. Scorpions. Should Ana break the circle, she would be overrun by them and dead before she could free herself and save Clara."

"Then I have to go get them."

"Yes, but first we have to make Giovanni think you are close to finding them."

"Why?"

"To force his hand."

"What do you mean? Wouldn't that just put them in more danger? If he thinks I'll find them and expose him then he might —"

"Try to kill them. Yes."

Chase was dead set against it and said as much. "You can't expect me to sit on my hands and do nothing while that bastard goes back there to finish her off."

"We most certainly do not expect that. But once he leaves the Circle R, his power over your family will be weak. We must first undo the spell he has cast, then we can go for Ana and Clara."

"But how do we know he won't kill them before we get there?"

"We do not. But Ana is not alone. There are others there who may offer aid."

"Others?"

"What you humans call ghosts."

Chase wondered if maybe he hadn't just gone off the deep end. There was no way he was doing astral travel with a hawk, having a conversation about ending a spell on his family and fighting an evil witch with the help of ghosts.

"They prefer the term spirit," Fergi said. "And yes, this is real."

"And you think she has a fighting chance?" he asked.

"That depends."

"On what?"

"Your love."

"What?"

"Ana will need the strength of your love if she is to battle the evil that has taken root inside Giovanni Sardo. It is a spirit of hate and thrives on the pain and agony of others. It lives to kill."

"I have to go to her now, Fergi! I can't leave her to face that alone."

"As I have said. She is not alone. The spirits of those left behind due to unpaid karmic debt will be offered a chance to free themselves with their aid. And there is another who will stand beside her."

"You?"

"Yes, but someone other than me. Her grandfather watches over her."

Chase didn't want to agree, but something told him that if he didn't, Ana and Clara didn't stand a chance. "Okay, so what do we have to do to end the spell Sardo has on my family?"

"First we return."

Instantaneously Chase was standing on his porch with his hand on Fergi's head. "What now?" he asked.

"To the Circle R," Fergi's voice was clear in his mind.

Chase ran for his truck. As soon as he opened the door, Cody leapt inside. "You didn't think you were going to leave me behind, did you?"

Chase gaped at the dog, whose deep baritone voice rang clear in his mind. "This is too weird."

"Worry about weird later. Right now put the pedal to the metal."

Chase cut Cody a look. "The pedal to the metal?" Maybe he wasn't insane, and maybe all this was really happening, but one thing was for certain, it wasn't the world he was familiar with.

Chapter Fourteen

Ana smiled, despite the pain in her wrists and ankles from the deep bite of the rope. Fergi and Cody were with Chase, and soon Giovanni would be alerted that Chase suspected her whereabouts. That would send Giovanni scrambling. The way she figured it, he would kill her and claim to have saved Clara, after charming her so that she didn't remember that it was he who had kidnapped her to begin with.

Her smile faded. She had to banish the scorpions before Giovanni arrived and free herself and Clara. Otherwise she had no chance at all.

Closing her eyes, she stilled her breath and concentrated on sending out a call. Every creature on Earth had its own natural enemies. Scorpions had to be the same. What she needed was to make contact with an enemy of the scorpion.

"Grandfather, lend me your strength," she prayed silently and began her chant. *"Viue tibi Musis, multitudinis amicitias vita. Temporis sis auarus: omnibus beneficus: utere donis tuis: vocationi inuigila. Verbum Dei nunquam recedat ab ore tuo."*

Slowly the darkness began to brighten in a swirling eddy of light. She opened her eyes to see the muted tones of brown and beige swimming before her eyes. A form started to take shape.

The first clear feature she saw were two round yellow eyes. The eyes blinked once, then again. Slowly the image became more distinct. Ana lost touch with her surroundings as she beheld the vision in her mind.

At about five and half inches in height, the owl was without ear tufts and its buff-colored feathers bore indistinct dark streaks. It had a very short tail, but sharp little talons.

"Who are you?" Ana asked.

"Humans refer to my kind as an Elf Owl."

"And you are capable of battling a scorpion?"

The owl chirruped a laugh. "Eat 'em for breakfast."

Ana laughed right along with the owl. "Well, I'm surrounded by a veritable feast. You think you could round up some friends and come over for a buffet?"

"Give me five minutes," the owl chattered its reply.

"Bless you," Ana replied and opened her eyes to find Clara staring blankly, her eyes void of hope.

"We're going to get out of this," Ana said. "I promise. You just have to hold on a little longer."

Clara nodded, but Ana could tell that she no longer believed they were going to be saved. Ana could not fall victim to that hopelessness. The owls would come. She had to believe that.

The seconds ticked by, the sounds of the scorpions crawling over one another mixing with Clara's weak breathing and the rustle of trees outside in a wind that had risen.

Then another sound intruded. Ana strained to make it out. The sound intensified until it seemed to be coming from all directions. The chatter and chirp of not one but many owls.

A few seconds later they entered the house, flying through every open window and hole in the roof and walls. Hundreds of owls, all chattering and diving toward the scorpions.

Clara screamed at the sight. "It's okay!" Ana yelled to her. "They're here to help."

Charmed as they were, the scorpions battled their natural inclination to run for cover and so proved to be easy prey for the owls. Within minutes the room was free of scorpions and all but one small owl.

It alit inside the circle with Ana and hopped onto her leg, staring up at her with its big eyes.

"Thank you," Ana said gratefully and inclined her head in respect. "You've saved our lives. I owe you a debt and will gladly pay whatever you ask."

"I think I'd like to stay with you," the owl replied.

"Really?" Ana was thrilled. "Are you sure?"

"If you can get that big bossy hawk to agree."

Ana chuckled. "I think I can manage that. Do you have a name?"

"Ne-as-jah."

"I'm Ana, it's an honor to meet you, Neasjah, and I would love to have you as a companion."

"Then it is done," Neasjah said. "Do you need help with those bindings, Ana?"

"Actually, yes, I do."

Neasjah hopped off her and moved behind her. Ana could feel the ropes around her wrists being tugged and pulled. It took a while, but at last Neasjah succeeded in weakening the rope enough that Ana could break free.

"My hero!" She grinned at Neasjah and quickly untied her feet. Her arms and legs were cramped from being in the same position for so long. It took her a moment to get the feeling back so she could use her hands to undo the noose, then weave the banishing spell and cancel the circle Giovanni had cast around her. Neasjah added her own chirps and chatters to the spell for which Ana thanked her then hurried over to Clara and performed the banishing spell again.

"I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes," Clara whispered, eyeing Neasjah warily. "You really are a witch, aren't you?"

"Yep," Ana replied as she worked at Clara's bonds. "We have to find a place to hide. Unless I got Fergi's message completely wrong, Giovanni will be headed our way."

"Why?"

"To kill me and charm you into forgetting that he kidnapped you."

"Fat chance," Clara snorted, some of her natural spunk returning.

"Actually, a pretty good chance," Ana argued quietly and moved to untie Clara's feet. "Giovanni isn't working alone. Seems like he took on another spirit and it's one mean mother, if you get my drift."

"He what?"

"Come on." Ana stood and held out both hands to help Clara stand. "I'll explain while we decide on the best place to hide."

Neasjah flew up and landed on her shoulder. "Yeoh!" Ana winced at her sharp talons. "Okay, first things first."

She said a quick charm to render Neasjah's talons harmless to her skin. "Okay, that's better. Now, Neasjah. Can you take a look around and keep an eye out for Giovanni?"

"I'm on it." Neasjah took off.

Clara watched the exchange between Ana and the owl in amazement then shook her head. "All right, what's the scoop on this Giovanni character and that whatever it is inside him?"

"Come on." Ana took her hand and headed for the door. "See, it all started when..."

* * * * *

Chase found his father and brothers in the kitchen of the Circle R, along with Giovanni Sardo.

"I think I may have a lead," he announced as soon as he walked in.

Four pairs of hopeful eyes turned toward him in the form of his father and brothers. Giovanni Sardo's eyes narrowed and his mouth tightened.

Chase ignored Giovanni and addressed his family. "I was talking with Mick Rogers. He was flying over the wilderness a couple of days ago and saw a car headed that way. He didn't get a plate, but they were headed toward Aravaipa."

"Call and round up everyone you can for a search party," Charlie directed Clay.

"Perhaps it would be better to wait until morning," Giovanni Sardo suggested.

Charlie opened his mouth as if to argue, then closed it and nodded. "You might be right. No point in stumbling around in the dark. We'll start at first light. Clay, go ahead and make the calls. Tell everyone to meet here before sunup."

Clay nodded and went for the phone. Chase watched his family and how quickly they fell to Giovanni's suggestion. Before Sardo, Charlie would have been out the door before Chase finished talking. Now he was content to wait for morning.

But that was exactly what Fergi and Ana were counting on and as much as it went against the grain for Chase not to rush immediately to Ana's side, he would go along with their plan.

"Well, I guess I'll head on home and meet you back here in the morning," he said.

"Why not bunk out here?" Cole asked.

"Naw, I've got Cody in the truck. I'll see you all at sunrise."

"Good idea," Giovanni said, making Chase want to punch him in the mouth. "You'll need your rest."

"Yeah, right," Chase mumbled and headed out to his truck.

"Well?" Cody's question came immediately in his mind the moment he got into the truck.

"Well, now we get back home, get saddled up and see if Ana and Fergi are right," Chase answered, still feeling for all the world like a lunatic, carrying on a conversation with a dog. But he'd talk to a bear if it meant getting Ana and Clara back. If Fergi was right, it wouldn't be long before Giovanni would hightail it out to Aravaipa to dispose of Ana and make sure Clara thought of him as his rescuer.

That wasn't going to happen. Not only would Chase be waiting for Sardo at Aravaipa, he'd be armed for bear.

* * * * *

"Neasjah, will you find Fergi and let her know where we are?" Ana asked as she and Clara knelt in the shadows of a thicket of cottonwood trees.

Neasjah gave a sharp chirp and took off into the sky. Ana turned to Clara. "We're just going to rest here for a little while until Neasjah gets back, okay?"

"As long as we're out of that cabin and away from those scorpions," Clara said with a shudder. "Ana, how did you get those owls to come?"

"I didn't. Neasjah did. All I did was send out a plea for help from whatever was the natural enemy of the scorpions. Neasjah heard me and answered. She rounded up the owls."

"I've never seen anything like it."

"Me either," Ana agreed, and then added. "We really owe Neasjah. Without her help I don't know what we would have done."

"Seems to me that I owe you," Clara said. "I know I acted pretty snotty at first when you said you were a witch, but as I live and breathe, I'm damned glad you are because if you weren't, that little owl wouldn't have brought her feathered posse."

"You don't owe me, Clara. If it wasn't for me we wouldn't be in this mess and you'd be— Neasjah's back."

A moment later the little owl alit on Ana's shoulder, chattering a mile a minute. "She said that Giovanni is on his way and will be here in a few minutes. Fergi is sticking with Chase who's on horseback and also just a few minutes away. Cody is with him. Chase plans on ambushing Giovanni."

"Thank god," Clara breathed heavily in relief.

"No, that's not good," Ana argued. "Clara, on his own Giovanni wouldn't stand a chance against Chase. But he's carrying around something old and mean and bent on inflicting as much pain and suffering as possible. It won't matter what weapon Chase has on him because the Entity in Giovanni won't fight on the physical plane."

"And you think that...thing in Giovanni is strong enough to hurt Chase?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then what do we do?"

Ana considered it for a few moments. Neasjah chattered at her and she nodded. "Okay." She turned her attention to Clara. "This is what we're going to do. I'm going to attempt to create a charm that will make you less visible and —"

"You can make me invisible?" Clara blurted louder than she intended. "Sorry," she whispered.

"No, I can't make you invisible, but I can, hopefully, make you less noticeable—as long as you stay within the shadows. When Giovanni gets here I'll draw his attention. It's me he wants to hurt, so I'll do what I can to keep him focused on me. While I've got him distracted, Neasjah will lead you to Chase. Once you're with him, convince him to call for help. The more people the better."

"But you said weapons wouldn't work."

"They won't. But it will keep Chase busy and besides, maybe an audience is just what we need. At least that way we'll have witnesses."

"I don't much like the sound of it, but okay."

"Neasjah, I need you to be able to talk to Clara," Ana said. "Which means I need your power to make this work. Will you help me?"

Neasjah chirped once in reply and Ana smiled. "Okay, here we go." She closed her eyes and began to chant softly. After a few minutes she opened her eyes. "Okay, I think that's it. Neasjah?"

"Yep," came the soft almost childish feminine reply in her mind.

"Oh my god!" Clara gasped, letting Ana know that she had heard Neasjah. "I can't believe this!"

"Well, believe it, baby," Neasjah giggled. "And get a move on. We've got some ground to cover."

Clara looked at Ana and Ana nodded. Clara hugged Ana tightly. "You be careful."

"You, too," Ana replied then stiffened. "Go. He's here."

Neasjah hopped onto Clara's shoulder and Clara hurried off, sticking to the shadows of the trees. Ana walked out into the moonlight and waited.

She didn't have to wait long. Giovanni strode into the clearing. He stopped abruptly when he saw her.

"How did you free yourself?"

"Like always, you underestimated me," she replied.

"Where's the old woman?"

"Not here."

He ground his teeth and stomped over to her. "You stupid fucking bitch! She was my goddamn meal ticket and now you've fucked that up just like you fuck up everything else."

"Too bad," Ana replied with as much verve as she could muster. Something was flickering in Giovanni's eyes and whatever it was, it was frightening. She could not show fear to Giovanni or the thing that inhabited him. Clara needed time to reach Chase.

"Tell me where she is!" Giovanni roared and reached for Ana.

For the first time, she did not hesitate. She raised her right hand, palm out. "No!" she said firmly and loudly. "Never again!" A bolt of energy shot from her palm, striking him in the center of the chest and lifting him up off his feet.

Giovanni hit the ground a dozen feet away, but bounded up cursing. "Nice try, bitch, but that's kid's play to what I can do now."

"Can't prove it by me," she challenged him.

Giovanni snarled, raised both hands up on either side of his face, and then flicked them forward much like a gunslinger pointing two handguns.

Ana raised both hands to ward off the attack and Giovanni's energy collided with the shield she raised, sending sparks into the night all around her. Neither of them would relent and soon both were straining with the effort to maintain the energy they emitted.

Ana knew she could not hold out much longer. Even now she could feel the tendrils of his power seeping in through gaps forming in her protection. It was like fire that penetrated her skin and took residence in her blood, searing her from inside.

The pain weakened her and Giovanni grinned, moving closer, pressing harder. Ana struggled to maintain what little defense she had left but it was no use. His power was too strong.

I'm going to die. The realization hit her with enough force to temporarily erase the pain. Without help, she would not be able to withstand the attack and she would die. But if she died then Giovanni would win. He would find Chase and Clara, kill Chase and make everyone, including Clara, believe that he had saved her.

The idea of Chase dying gave her the strength she needed to play her final card. Instead of attacking, she surrendered. Ana sank to the ground, folding her legs into the lotus position. The pain made breathing hard and sweat poured from her body, but she tried to ignore it.

With every ounce of energy she possessed, she projected a plea. "To those who walk in Shadow, and long to reach the Light. I call upon you now, come forth from dark of night. Dispel this ancient evil. Dispel this ancient hate. Rise now to do my bidding, and change your wandering fate."

Giovanni laughed at her. "Now that's just pitiful. You can't do better than that?"

Ana did not respond. She had only enough energy to concentrate on her summoning. Over and over she murmured the chant, enduring the pain even though her heart was beginning to beat erratically and her lungs felt like she was breathing fire.

Giovanni reached down and grabbed her by the hair and dragged her to her feet, pressing his face down close to hers. "You've lost, bitch. You can't beat me. You've lost and you're going to die. But not before I fuck you one last time."

Ana's concentration failed when he threw her on the ground and started ripping her clothes off. She did not have the strength to fight him and the pain racking her body was enough that she struggled just to not scream.

"Don't," she pleaded as he grabbed her knees and spread her legs wide. "Please, Giovanni. If you ever cared for me, don't do this."

His reply was a backhand that sent her head whipping to one side and stars dancing in her eyes. He drew back to hit her again but screamed as sharp talons punctured his skin.

Giovanni rolled off Ana, battling Fergi, whose talons were sunk into his arm. She snapped and pecked at him, successfully biting off the tip of one of his fingers. With his attention diverted, the power he had over Ana faded. She scooted back like a crab from him and climbed to her feet.

"Fergi!" She cried out a warning as Giovanni's free hand began to pulse with fire.

Fergi released him and lifted skyward, barely dodging a blast of fiery energy. Giovanni cursed, cradling his wounded arm against his body as he turned on Ana. "Now, where were we?"

Ana stepped back from him, raising her arms out to her sides and repeating her summons. Before she'd finished the chant, a wind rose, blowing her long hair out around her like a dark halo. Leaves rustled and twigs snapped. Fergi's shrill cry blended in with a low keen that seemed to come from all around them.

Giovanni paused and looked around. His eyes widened.

* * * * *

The sound of horses had Chase stopping and turning Whiskey to face the approaching riders.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded as Charlie reined to a stop in front of him.

"Damnedest thing," Charlie replied. "I was getting ready to turn in and suddenly it hit me. Why the hell are we waiting around for morning? Clara could be dead by then. So I roused the boys and we hightailed it over here."

"Jason's on his way with the rest of the police force," Clay added. "Damn, Chase, I feel like a complete fool. How the hell could we have sat there and done nothing when Mama C's life is at stake?"

"It's Sardo," Chase replied.

"Sardo?" Charlie asked. "What the hell you talking about?"

"He's a witch," Chase said. "He's the one who made you believe that it was okay to wait. As soon as he thought you'd turned in, he headed out here for Ana and Clara."

"Witch, my ass!" Charlie scoffed.

"Believe what you want, but—" Chase wheeled Whiskey around as Cody took off into the darkness. It took Chase a few moments to spot what had Cody so excited. He was off his horse and eating up the distance that separated them the moment he recognized the slim form stumbling toward him with a little owl perched on her shoulder.

"Chase!" Clara latched hold of him and hung on for support. "Thank god! You have to help her!"

"Where is she?" Chase asked.

Before she had a chance to answer, Charlie was pushing Chase aside and scooping Clara up in his arms. The little owl perched on Clara's shoulder fluttered to a nearby limb and watched. "God almighty, Clara." Charlie cradled her against him. "I thought I'd lost you. Are you hurt? If that bastard so much as laid one hand—"

"I'm fine, Charlie," Clara interrupted softly. "But Ana isn't. That no-good husband of hers tied us up in one of the old buildings in the ghost town and left us surrounded by scorpions for two days, and now he's coming back to finish us off. You have to help her."

"The hell I do." He carried her toward his horse.

"The hell you do is right." Clara struggled out of his arms and faced him with her hands on her hips. "If it wasn't for Ana I'd be dead."

A chatter drew Clara's attention and she amended her statement. "Correction. If it wasn't for Ana and Neasjah, I'd be dead."

"Who the hell is Neasjah?"

The owl flew over and alit on Clara's shoulder. "This is Neasjah," Clara said. "Sardo had us tied up and surrounded by scorpions and Ana couldn't break the magic circles around us or the scorpions would have killed us. So she called for help and Neasjah heard her and brought hundreds of owls and they disposed of the scorpions and Ana and Neasjah were able to free us and then—"

"Clara, Clara." Charlie pulled her to him and engulfed her in his arms. "Christ, woman, what did they do to you? Boys, we got to get her to the hospital pronto."

"Like hell!" Clara pushed away from him. "You listen to me, Charlie Russell. I've been taking care of you and these boys most of my life and loving every one of you even though it can be a thankless job. I've put up with your bellyaching, your blustering, your cuss-fired bad temper and all your bullshit because of that, but if you think for one red-hot second that you're not helping Ana then you can just think again. That girl saved my life, and loves your son and he loves her. And whether you like it or believe it, she is a witch and right now she's fighting something that's likely to kill her, and you will help her or so help me God, I'll leave the Circle R and never come back."

"Clara—"

"No!" she cut Charlie off and turned to Chase. "We have to hurry."

"Then let's go." Chase mounted and led the way.

Clara faced Charlie. "Well, what's it going to be?"

"Get on the damn horse," he grouched and mounted.

Clara took his extended hand and swung up behind him. Ten minutes later, they were on the edge of the ghost town.

Silently Chase made his way along. He looked around the corner of a building just in time to see Fergi dive out of the sky and attack Giovanni Sardo, who had Ana pinned to the ground.

Ana scooted away from Giovanni as he battled the hawk. Chase made his way around behind Giovanni. When a strange light started to pulse in Giovanni's hand, Ana screamed a warning to Fergi, who lifted off.

Giovanni turned to face Ana and said something Chase couldn't hear. By that time Ana was on her feet. She raised her arms out wide to her sides and began to speak. Chase couldn't make out more than the first few words before a wind started to whip the cottonwood trees and blow debris across the ground.

A sudden shrill cry from Fergi made him jump. The low keening sound that came from nowhere and seemed to reverberate all around them made the hair on the back of his neck rise.

Whatever it was, it was slowing Giovanni Sardo. He was looking around nervously. "Spread out," Chase whispered to his father and brothers. "Once we have him surrounded we'll move in and take him."

His brothers gave nods and headed into the darkness, careful to move quietly. Charlie started to leave but Clara took his hand. "You be careful," she whispered.

Charlie nodded, gave her hand a squeeze and moved off.

"You stay put, you hear?" Chase said to Clara, and at her nod, slipped around the corner of the building and melted into the darkness.

Ana felt the rise of power in the wind and ended the chant. She could feel the presence of others. Giovanni was looking around fearfully. She wondered if the fear was his, or if the Entity inside him was afraid. At this point it made no difference to her. All that mattered was stopping both of them and helping the Others to make the crossing.

Amorphous shapes began to swirl around them, like fog gathering. The wailing intensified as the spirits circled around them. Ana spotted shapes moving in the darkness and heard Fergi's voice letting her know that Chase and his family were there.

Neasjah's voice sounded, letting Ana know that Clara was also there and that she believed that she could join with Clara to intensify her power if Ana wanted to attack Giovanni on multiple fronts.

At first Ana didn't understand, but Cody's voice joined in and explained. He was with Chase. She, Chase and Clara had unconsciously formed an equidistant triangle around Giovanni. Together with the spirits that swirled in the clearing, they had Giovanni surrounded.

"Okay," Ana sent the message to the animals. "Tell Chase and Clara what to do and on my signal give it all you've got."

Fergi swooped down and settled on Ana's shoulder as Ana began her chant. The spirits wailed louder, and the wind intensified until it had the power of a storm.

Across the clearing, Chase jumped as Cody's voice piped up in his mind, explaining what was about to happen. Chase's first inclination was to argue, but something happened to change his mind.

Charlie stepped out of the darkness with a Colt in his hand. "End of the line, you miserable jackass," he yelled at Sardo.

Giovanni's head whipped around in Charlie's direction. He raised his hand, pointing at Charlie, and snaking energy shot from his fingers. It slapped at his hand and the gun flew from his grip. The energy circled Charlie and lifted him up off the ground. Giovanni flicked his fingers and Charlie was slung a good twenty feet before crashing to the ground.

"Okay," Chase whispered to Cody. "We'll try this your way." Hoping he was not making a huge mistake, he crawled over to get his gun and waited for the signal.

Giovanni screamed at Ana in a voice that was not entirely his own, letting her know that the Entity was assuming more control. "Stupid witch. You think you can stop me with your paltry magic and these pathetic humans? I'll crush you all like bugs beneath my feet."

Ana challenged him, "And yet here I stand."

Giovanni roared and ran toward Ana. "Now," she said and pointed one hand in Chase's direction and the other in Clara's.

Chase saw Clara doing the same thing and followed suit. Suddenly a brilliant stream of light appeared, connecting each of their hands to the other, forming a triangle of light around Giovanni Sardo.

He stopped abruptly, turning to view the spectacle before facing Ana again. "I hope this isn't all you have," he said before he unleashed a fiery tendril of energy at her.

Ana's body arched under the impact, but straightened after but a moment. Her eyes glowed as if lit from within. "To those who walk in Shadow, and long to reach the Light. I call upon you now, come forth from dark of night. Dispel this ancient evil. Dispel this ancient hate. Act now to do my bidding, and change your wandering fate."

The wail of the spirits rose to earsplitting volume. Their shapes swirled in frenzy around Giovanni, buffeting him from all sides. He stumbled, fighting to stay on his feet and maintain the attack on Ana.

"No!" he screamed at Ana. "Die, miserable bitch!"

"Not today," she said a moment before a ball of light shot out of her forehead toward him.

Giovanni's scream was cut short. The ball of light illuminated the spirits to eye-watering brilliance. In turn they crowded in on Giovanni and exploded like a nova, sending a wave of energy out in all directions with light so blindingly white that all sight was obliterated.

Within moments it was over. Giovanni Sardo lay on the ground. There was no sign of the spirits.

Ana dropped her arms and Fergi lifted off her shoulder. Ana walked over to kneel in front of Giovanni. He did not appear to be breathing. Self-loathing filled her. How could she have taken a life? Chase raced to her and she looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "What have I done, Chase?"

"Survived," he said as he pulled her to her feet and into his arms. "And sent some long overdue folks on their way home."

Clara ran to Charlie along with his sons and got him to his feet. With one arm over Clara's shoulders he limped over to Chase and Ana. "God as my witness, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I'd never have believed it."

A groan from Giovanni made Ana jump. He opened his eyes and saw her with Chase. "You think you've won, bitch?" he snarled and lifted his hand. In it was a handgun.

Faster than the strike of a snake, both Chase and Charlie drew their guns. Two shots sounded, almost simultaneously. Twin blossoms of crimson appeared in the center of Giovanni's chest. His body jerked, spasmed and then stilled.

Ana closed her eyes as Chase wrapped his arms around her and pressed her face against his chest.

"It's over, Fancy," he crooned. "You're safe."

"At what price?" she asked.

"The way I see it, you did nothing wrong," Charlie spoke up. "The man tried to kill you and Clara. You saved Clara, and probably the rest of us. You saw what he did to me. If you hadn't...blasted him with whatever the hell that was, then we probably would all be toast."

"Amen," Chase said.

Ana looked up and saw Clara smiling up at Charlie, and Charlie and Chase looking at one another intently. "I was wrong, son," Charlie said. "About a hell of a lot, it seems." He gave Clara a meaningful look. "All I can do is apologize. What say we make a fresh start?"

Chase looked down at the hand his father extended and then at Ana. She smiled and nodded. Chase took his father's hand. "Sounds like a plan...Dad."

Ana realized then that there was no need for remorse. Giovanni had chosen his own path and had allowed the evil to take up residence inside him. In fact, he had welcomed it. That it destroyed him was not her fault. And maybe that was the way his story was supposed to be. If nothing else good came out of his life, at least he was instrumental in bringing Chase's family together again. That had to count for something. The look in Clara's and Charlie's eyes when they looked at one another counted for even more. Ana would be willing to bet that there would be wedding bells ringing in their near future.

And then there was Chase. She looked up to see him watching her with love shining in his dark eyes. Gone were the shadows of the past.

"Woohoo!" Caleb startled them all with his gleeful yell. "Well, hell, ya'll. Life is for the living. I say we meet up with Jason and let him know we rescued the women then get home and have ourselves one hell of a victory celebration."

Chase and Charlie groaned at the same time and Ana laughed. "What's the matter, cowboy? One little old ancient evil and a handful of spirits take the starch out of your shirt?"

Chase gave her a mock scowl and made a grab for her as she darted away from him and took off running in the direction of the horses. Chase hesitated for only a split second before he took off after her.

"Hey!" Caleb yelled after them. "What ya'll doing?"

"Chasing Ana," Chase shouted over his shoulder as he closed in on her.

"Ya'll coming to the house?" Caleb asked.

"Later!" Chase replied as he scooped Ana up into his arm, giggling and squirming.

"Much, much later," she added and looped her arms around Chase's neck. "So, cowboy. What now? We get on our horse and ride off into the sunset to live happily ever after?"

“Indeed, we do, Fancy.” He grinned. “Indeed we do.”

About the Author

Ciana Stone has been reading since the age of three, and wrote her first story at age five. Since then she has enjoyed writing as a solitary form of entertainment, and has just recently come out of the closet to share her stories with others. She holds several post graduate degrees and has often been referred to as a professional student. Her latest fields of interest are quantum mechanics and Taoism. When she is not writing (or studying) she enjoys painting (canvas, not walls), sculpting, running, hiking and yoga. She lives with her long-time lover in several locations in the United States.

Ciana welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Also by Ciana Stone

Mind Games
Riding Ranger
Wyatt's Chance

Also see Ciana's release at Cerridwen Press (www.cerridwenpress.com):

That Which Survives



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com