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Lost Bird

Sachi Wolowitz overcame horrific tragedy as a teen and has rebuilt her life, alone. She’s happy working at Many Blessings and teaching her first love, skeet shooting. She’s not looking for love. Especially not with the handsome plumber or the nameless cutie she bumps into at the grocery store, who both have unusual auras that speak to her soul.

John Evans and Oscar Weinstein have been friends since childhood. Each survived having their heart shredded and they are now roommates simply existing. John feels an attraction to Sachi when he replaces her water heater. Oscar recognizes her from the news, but is too nervous to make the first move.

When John’s elderly aunt thinks she’s seeing ghosts, Sachi and her team must investigate to discover if there’s really paranormal activity, or if his beloved aunt is going senile. Will Sachi find the proof she seeks, or get more than she bargained for and take a risk on love with the two hunks?

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Length: 68,003 words

LOST BIRD

Coffeeshop Coven 2

Tymber Dalton

MENAGE EVERLASTING



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DEDICATION

To Hubby, for giving me the freedom to go do what I love even though he has no interest in skeet. To Sir, Uncle Ron, and Uncle Dean for all the great times at skeet and dinner. I wish Uncle Jamie was still here to enjoy them with us. Somewhere, I hope he's shooting twenty-five every day.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book picks up a few days after the events of *Many Blessings* (Coffeeshop Coven 1) and overlaps a little with some of the events of *It's a Sweet Life* (Coffeeshop Coven prequel). While all the books in this series are standalone and can be read independently of each other and in any order, here is the suggested reading order to avoid spoilers.

All of the titles are available from Siren-BookStrand.

1. *Out of the Darkness* (Coffeeshop Coven Prequel)
2. *It's a Sweet Life* (Coffeeshop Coven Prequel)
3. *Many Blessings* (Coffeeshop Coven 1)
4. *Lost Bird* (Coffeeshop Coven 2)

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LOST BIRD

Coffeeshop Coven 2

TYMBER DALTON

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Chapter One

Despite the sweat trickling down her back from the muggy Florida late June heat, Sachi Wolowitz tried to keep her expression neutral as she lifted her Browning 12-gauge over-under shotgun, mounted it against her right shoulder, and locked her right elbow into the correct position. She pressed her cheek against the stock and sighted down the barrel before swinging to her hold point.

“Ha.”

Her father hit the button on the remote control that sent a high house clay sailing out through the window and across the field. She pulled the trigger, clamping down on the groan that wanted to claw its way out of her throat from the feel of the shotgun’s recoil hitting the still-healing wound in her shoulder.

Unscathed, the clay landed on the far side of the field, where it shattered as it hit the ground.

“Lost bird,” he said.

She broke the gun open, removed the spent shell, and put a fresh shell in the lower barrel. “Option,” she muttered, her mood dark. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d missed high house one.

He nodded, waiting.

She took her stance again, trying to calm her mind. “Ha.”

The high house machine cycled above them, launching the bird across the field.

She clenched her teeth and fired, squarely nailing the clay, pieces of it falling to earth and some of them landing on the center bunker.

“You’re still in pain,” he said.

She lowered the gun. “Low house,” she said.

When she broke the Browning open to reload for the low house shot, her father reached out and wrapped his fingers around the forestock. “No. You’re done.”

“I only broke one bird.”

“We had a deal. *My* call,” he said, his jaw firmly set in a look she knew all too well. “You’re done for today, Miki.”

Only her father still called her Miki, even this many years later after she’d legally stopped being Miki.

She suspected she’d always be Miki to him.

“Dad, I *need* to shoot.”

“You need to heal. You *got* shot.”

“I’m fine. Fucker only hit me with a goddamned .22.” She tried to pull the gun free from his hand, wincing as she did, but his fingers only clamped more firmly around it.

“No. Doctor told you it was probably too soon. Give it a rest. Let it heal a little longer.”

She stared across the field toward the low house, at the window where the clay would fly from if he would just.

Push.

The fucking.

Button.

“Dad, I haven’t shot in weeks. I’m going crazy.”

“You’re already crazy,” he playfully said. “You got that from my side of the family.” He finally won the gentle tug-of-war and tucked the shotgun under his arm. “You’re done for today. That was our deal. I let you take a test shot, and you’re obviously still in pain. I gave you the second one because I knew if I didn’t so you could break that bird, you’d be impossible to live with.”

He turned, dragging the controller and its cord with him as he walked back to the table under the shelter near station four at the top of the field.

Discussion over.

I’m twenty-seven, and he can still use that tone on me.

And I still give in.

She stood there watching him walk away with her shotgun.

Goddammit.

“We had a deal,” he called out without looking back. “Home. Now.”

He pointed as he walked. She looked to where he was pointing and spotted a bright red male cardinal swooping across the field, stilling any argument she might have tried against her father.

Muttering under her breath, Sachi followed her dad back to the shelter.

Sachi didn't protest when her dad simply pointed to the car without letting her get her gun or shooting bag. Since his arrival from Idaho a couple of weeks earlier, she'd secretly thrived on his doting attention, his stern care, his protectiveness.

For once in her life, even though she'd have to get shot again first before she'd ever admit it out loud, she wasn't too proud or stubborn to let him take care of her.

After what she'd been through, she'd gladly accept it.

He finished loading everything in the trunk. After he slid behind the wheel and cranked the engine so the air conditioner could cool the car, he looked at her.

"I called a real estate agent today. While you were at work at the shop."

Her jaw tensed. "Yeah?"

"He said he thinks he could sell the house pretty quickly. Lots of hunters and winter sportsmen are looking for places in the area. Said I could easily get what I want for it. Maybe more." He shrugged. "Maybe even a lot more."

She didn't dare nod. "Yeah?"

"I also called around to a few airports in this area. I could probably have my pick of jobs. Several places are hiring. Three asked if I could come in for interviews today."

"Yeah?"

"How would you feel about that?"

"About what?"

He let out *that* sigh. "Miiikiii..."

Her gaze dropped to her lap, where her fingers aimlessly picked at each other. She hadn't worn the sling the past three days, ever since officiating Mandaline, Ellis, and Brad's handfasting ceremony on Saturday, even though it hurt more when she didn't wear it.

Finally, she nodded, struggling and praying the tears wouldn't come this time, the way they had so many times since her dad had flown to Florida from Idaho after the attack on her and Mandaline two weeks ago.

She was sick of crying. She'd cried for Julie when she'd died, because she'd loved her as more than a friend and employer, but as a mentor and, in a way, a sister.

She hadn't cried that hard since the attack that had killed her mom and nearly killed her, too, when she was a teenager.

She'd cried her fair share in her life already. More than, it felt like. She was sick and tired of it.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She nodded, a little harder and faster that time.

He reached over and gently patted her thigh. Before he could pull his hand away, she slipped her fingers around his and briefly squeezed before letting go.

"Thanks, Daddy," she whispered.

Predictably, Sachi's dad ordered her inside when they returned to the house. He wouldn't let her help unload at all. Knowing it was useless to argue with him, Sachi went and unlocked the front door and got the alarm turned off.

The place smelled delicious, the brisket her father had put in the slow cooker earlier that day spreading its delicious aroma throughout the house.

Yeah, definitely could get used to having Dad around all the time.

She rarely cooked for herself. If she ate good cooking, it was from eating with Libbie, or with Mandaline and her guys, or going out to eat.

Or, in the past, with Julie.

Upon his arrival, Sachi's dad had been shocked to find out her practically empty fridge, except for bagels, yogurt, fruit, and cheese sticks, was the norm, not the exception.

Over the years, she'd kind of gotten used to being the fifth wheel. She tried not to impose on her friends, but when they insisted she join them, it was easier to accept than to keep fending off invites.

Not like she wasn't used to being alone. It wasn't like she had any kind of a social life other than working and doing readings and teaching classes at Many Blessings, or teaching skeet.

And she certainly wasn't looking to change that status quo, either. She didn't envy Mandaline's luck in finding not one, but *two* men to help heal and uplift her, but a relationship wasn't in her cards or her desires. She felt nothing but gratitude to the Universe and the Goddess that her friend had love and light in her personal life. Brad and Ellis were both good men with good

hearts.

The fact that she herself owed them her life notwithstanding, she considered them adopted family, the way she considered Mandoline adopted family as well.

But that kind of blessing, of a relationship, wasn't what she asked the Goddess for. All she wanted now was peace, freedom from the renewed nightmares the recent attack had dredged up...and for her dad to really move to Florida and live with her. Or at least live close enough she could spend time with him.

With the last remnant of her past ordeals now dead and in his grave, she could focus on finally healing for good and rebuilding a relationship with her father without worrying about putting him in danger.

I guess I'm not too old to admit I want my daddy.

* * * *

John Evans stood at the kitchen sink Wednesday morning and stared out the window at the courtyard. The sun had risen high enough that the two security lights had already shut off despite it not being seven o'clock yet. Six duplexes shared the small swath of raggedy grass struggling to win a losing battle against patches of Spanish needles and fire ant hills.

This sucks.

It was a far cry from the house his ex-wife now lived in with her boyfriend, the house he'd built with and for her before she turned out to be the bane of his existence.

I should have listened to Aunt Tammy.

His grandaunt had hated Sabrina on first sight, and had made sure to tell him exactly that when he'd introduced her a few years earlier. It had actually shocked him that his normally gentle and genteel aunt had so vocally and forcefully expressed a negative opinion about anyone. At the time, he'd attributed it to her grief over losing her husband a few weeks before that.

He'd also wondered if it wasn't a little bit of Alzheimer's or dementia starting. Yet, in every other way, Tammy Evans had seemed all right. Now seventy-eight, her opinion had been vindicated, although she'd never once said *see, I told you so* to him.

Although he wouldn't have blamed her if she had.

He heard Oscar's bedroom door open and his friend head to the bathroom they shared. The two-one duplex had been all John could afford at the time when Sabrina had filed for divorce and kicked him out of their house. Now with Oscar as his roommate, and the divorce settled, he finally had some breathing space financially and could start rebuilding his savings.

Sabrina had been willing to nuke her own credit rating to take his down with her by not making payments on any of their joint credit cards, or on the house. So he'd had to maintain all of that, in addition to his own living expenses, until he finally got the judge to rule in his favor. She'd had to pony up some money of her own to pay John back for his chunk of the house.

Still, it left a bad taste in his mouth.

Oscar hadn't fared much better with his ex, but at least his friend hadn't been married to the woman. She'd simply drained their joint bank account and changed the locks on their rental house while he was at work one day.

And there hadn't been a damn thing he could do about it since it was her name on the lease.

So here they were, two emotionally scorched bachelors rebuilding their lives from the ground up.

There'd been plenty of nights they sat in front of the TV and toasted with beers to never getting involved with a woman ever again.

Oscar made his way into the kitchen and headed for the coffeemaker. "Morning," he mumbled as he reached for his mug.

"Morning." John took a sip of his own coffee. He'd already showered and dressed and would be leaving for work in a few minutes. Fortunately, he only had a five-minute drive to the warehouse complex housing his plumbing business.

At least Sabrina couldn't take that away from me. He'd been running the corporation before he met her, taking over after his father, who'd founded it, had a heart attack and retired early.

"Want me to make dinner tonight?" Oscar asked.

John considered it, as he did every time Oscar asked him that. And yet, his answer was still the same. "Sure, if you feel like it."

Oscar shrugged. "Might as well save the money."

They looked at each other and chuckled. "We're like an old married couple," John joked.

Oscar batted his blue eyes at John. "Not tonight, daaahling. I haz a headache."

John had been taking another sip of his coffee and had to spit it back into the mug to avoid choking on it as he laughed. "Yeah. Exactly."

Oscar turned and leaned against the counter, staring down into his mug. "Ed at work? He told me he spotted Karen out at dinner with some guy the other night."

“Don’t go there,” John warned. “We’ve both been through this. Remember what you kept telling me in the beginning.”

“I know, I know.” He let out a sigh of frustration. “You know, I felt so damn bad for you when you were going through all that shit with Sabrina, and then I turn around and basically get my balls handed to me, too.” He met John’s gaze again. “How pathetic are we?”

John finished his coffee and rinsed the mug in the sink. “We’re not pathetic. We were just too blind to see, that’s all.” Except he did think they were pathetic, both of them.

He dried his hands. “Hey, look at it this way. If we ever take a chance again, we’ll be more careful.”

“Yeah, fuck *that* noise,” Oscar muttered. “Next woman is going to have to be spectacular and sweep me off my goddamned feet. I’m done sticking my heart out there and getting it stomped. I obviously have a seriously defective relationship circuit in my brain. I look back and see the same shit you went through with Sabrina, but at the time I didn’t realize it.”

John headed for the front door. “We could always get a cat,” he said, a playful grin on his face.

“Fuck you,” Oscar good-naturedly called out. “No Ikea crazy-cat-lady starter kits for me, thank you very much. I’m only thirty. I’m not that desperate. Yet.”

John was still laughing as he pulled the front door shut behind him and headed for his work van. Yet another familiar joke between them. That one day in the distant future, someone would find them ancient and dead in their apartment, with fifty-seven cats feasting on their bodies.

Yet as he started the van and pulled out of the complex, he wondered if that might very well be uncomfortably closer to the truth than he’d like to admit.

* * * *

Oscar poured himself a second cup of coffee and headed for the shower. Despite him being two years younger than John, they’d been friends growing up in Brooksville. They’d drifted apart for a little while when Oscar attended USF in Tampa and majored in graphic design, and John ended up taking over his father’s plumbing business.

And now, here they were, inseparable again.

He started the shower and waited for the water to warm up before stepping in. He’d honestly felt a little superior to John while his friend was going through his divorce, although he’d never admitted it to anyone.

Ah, how the mighty have fallen.

No one had liked Sabrina except John, but they’d all kept their mouths shut.

Except for Aunt Tammy, that was.

She’d vocally stated she flat-out hated Sabrina.

Yet here he was, now sharing an apartment with his friend after basically having the same thing happen to him.

At least I wasn’t married to Karen.

All he’d lost in his breakup was money, a few material things like a TV and some furniture...and his pride and self-esteem, not to mention his self-confidence.

And his balls. Metaphorically, but it felt like physically, sometimes, considering the emotional hit he’d taken.

Actually, a cat doesn’t sound like such a bad idea after all.

Chapter Two

When Sachi walked into Mandaline's office at Many Blessings a little before eight Wednesday morning, her friend and boss glanced up from where she sat at her desk.

And did a double-take. "Let me guess," Mandaline said.

"Please, don't." Sachi stepped in and shoved her purse into the cabinet where all the employees stashed their personal items.

"Ouch. Sorry, sweetie."

"Dad saw me flinch when I took my first shot."

"It's only been—"

"Can it, boss. Dad already read me the riot act." Sachi leaned against the doorway with her left shoulder and crossed her arms over her chest. "He wouldn't let me take more than two shots at high house one. I missed the first, so he gave me a pity shot and let me take my option."

"I sense a disturbance in the Force," Brad teased from behind Sachi.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Don't start with me, Tarzan. Just because I like you doesn't mean I won't sock you in the snoot."

He slipped an arm around her waist and gave her a quick hug. "I know."

Mandaline picked up a check and handed it to Brad. "Ask Libbie to put us down for an extra flat of pastries for the Fourth of July, please."

"You decide to stay open?" Sachi asked.

"Still not going to book readings for any of you, and you all can still have the day off, paid, if you want. But Brad and Ellis volunteered to help man the store. Ellis made the valid point that with a lot of people off work for the day, it might not be a bad idea to stay open."

Sachi grinned. "Aaand...?"

Mandaline rolled her eyes but her smile betrayed her. "And you were right, Snarky Queen. Happy?"

Sachi nodded. "Completely." She reached out and poked Brad in the arm. "Good work, Tarzan."

He turned his thousand megawatt smile on her. Sachi wouldn't deny that, despite knowing he was her best friend's partner, the man was handsome and could dampen even her frosty panties with that smile. "You ever going to quit calling me Tarzan?"

"I saw your handsome ass in the buff. What do you think?"

He grinned. "You just wait. We'll manifest a couple of guys for you and—"

Sachi stuck her fingers in her ears. "Lalalalalala! I can't hear you!" She spun on her heel and hurried out of the office, escaping behind the counter.

Goddess, that's the last thing I need in my life right now!

She fished out a neon-green-and-pink apron with the Many Blessings store name embroidered on it in a curlicue font that matched the sign out front. As she tied it on over her clothes, Brad followed her out of the office, a serious expression on his face.

When he stepped over to her he softly said, "You know I'm just teasing you, right?"

His aura looked a little cloudy. Normally, it was bright, clear. He worried he'd hurt her feelings.

She gave him a one-armed hug with her left arm to reassure him. "Yeah, Tarzan, I know."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to—"

She waved it away. "It's okay, sweetie. I'm still emotional is all."

He studied her for a moment before nodding. Brad, the survivor of not one, but two traumatic brain injuries, had two distinct sides. The more there guy, and the one who seemed like he might be off in la-la land. This Brad was the more *there* one, and he had his entire intuitive focus beaming sharply at her.

"Say hi to Libbie and the gang for me," Sachi said as she waved him toward the front door.

"Will do."

Since Brad, a very talented artist, worked from upstairs, he frequently volunteered to do the morning run across the square to Libbie's bakery to pick up their daily inventory.

As he walked out the front door and across the square, Mandaline stepped out of the office. They were alone in the store except for Pers, Mandaline's dog, and Damiago, her cat, both sharing a spot in a sunbeam on one of the couches in the front area under the large display windows.

"You know, if you want to talk..." Mandaline let her words drift off. Her aura wasn't as cloudy as Brad's. Mandaline

was used to Sachi's crankiness, but she still felt concerned for her, which touched Sachi.

Sachi nodded, her gaze dipping to the floor. "Yeah, boss. I got it. I know."

She heard Mandaline's sigh before her friend returned to her desk in the office.

Sachi breathed in a sigh of relief as she started the usual morning preparations for the coffeeshop part of their operation. The people who knew her best knew she wasn't a warm, cuddly kind of person when dealing with her own emotional stuff. She'd built a secure wall around herself in that way. She'd become an expert in disguising it over the years.

Her customers and students, both at Many Blessings and at the shooting club, saw what she deliberately portrayed to them—a funny, snarky, laughing woman who loved what she did.

That wasn't a lie, really.

What she didn't want was their sympathy, or their looks of pity. It was bad enough that reporters had dredged up her mom's murder and the attack on her when everything happened a couple of weeks ago, just weeks on the heels of Julie's murder by local famous author, Steven Corey.

Sachi could ignore that look on the faces of practical strangers, even though it was a look that bit right through her core.

She didn't need or want it from her friends, however.

Not in the slightest.

* * * *

Sachi borrowed Ellis' car and ran home for lunch. Her dad had, at Sachi's insistence, gone on a couple of job interviews that day. He'd be there to pick her up after work, but she needed a little time alone, in the personal fortress of solitude that was her home.

Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on how she looked at it—a puddle of water was slowly creeping across the kitchen's tile floor when she walked in. Had she not come home for lunch, she wouldn't have found it until that night.

And it likely would have been a lot worse.

"Dammit!" She tracked its source back to the hot water heater, which was situated in the utility room between the kitchen and garage. It appeared to be leaking out of the bottom of the appliance.

She knew enough to go flip the breaker for that circuit, and to shut off the water valve going to the water heater.

Beyond that, she was clueless.

After grabbing a handful of bath towels to mop up the water, she picked up the phone and called Ellis on his cell.

"Hey, chief. Didn't you say you guys have a great plumber working on your house?"

"What's wrong?"

She gave him the short and snark-free version.

"I can have Mandaline bring Brad over to work on it for you."

"No, Tarzan's busy. Besides, this might require getting a permit or something, and I don't want him to have to go through all that trouble. My next door neighbors had to have a permit for theirs, I think. I appreciate the offer, but I'll pay a pro for this one." She already felt badly enough that they'd gotten pulled into her personal mess and Mandaline had almost gotten hurt because of her attacker.

"Okay. His name's John Evans. If I don't have his number, Brad will. Hold on, let me look for it."

She walked over to the counter and grabbed the notepad her dad had started making a shopping list on. It warmed her heart to see his handwriting there.

Brisket, lox, cream cheese, dish soap, broccoli, potatoes—

"Here it is." Ellis rattled off a number. "Evans Plumbing. Call him, tell him you're our friend. He'll take good care of you."

"Thanks." She ended the call and dialed the number. Five minutes later, after explaining what happened, a woman on the other end assured her they'd have someone at her house within an hour. Her next call was to Mandaline to update her.

Fortunately, Sachi didn't have any readings or classes at the store that afternoon, or any skeet students. By the time her doorbell rang forty minutes later, she had the worst of the mess cleaned up and had figured out how to drain the rest of the water from the tank by hooking a garden hose to the valve at the bottom and running it out the back door and into the yard.

Barefoot, she went to answer the door. She glanced out her front window and saw the Evans Plumbing van parked in her driveway, so she didn't bother looking through the viewfinder before opening the door.

She nearly slammed the door shut again. In fact, she'd reflexively started to pull it shut with her left hand and whacked herself in the hip with the doorknob.

The man who stood there in her entryway wore the most gorgeous royal blue aura she'd ever seen. Thick, like sweet syrup she wanted to dive into and swim around in. He had curly brown hair and delicious brown eyes and, gauging from her

bare feet, he had to be around six one.

She blinked.

In the years since she'd been able to see and read auras, she'd only had such a strong, visceral reaction to someone once before.

Even then, her panties had never instantly dampened quite like that.

He looked up from a clipboard in his hand and met her gaze. "Ms. Wolowitz? I'm John Evans. I'm here about the hot water heater."

Of course you are. She stared at him for a moment before finally finding her voice. "Um, yeah. Thanks for coming on such short notice."

"No problem. Can you show me where it is?"

She couldn't peel herself off the door. *I'm fucking going to kill Tarzan and Mandoline. They done gone and manifested me a hunk.*

"Um, sure." She forced her fingers to uncurl from the edge of the door and ordered her feet to take a step back. "This way." She turned and headed down the hall, resisting the urge to break into a run.

She knew if she did that, she'd hit the back door, cross the yard, and keep running.

He's here for my water heater. He doesn't know anything except that I'm a royal schmuck at this point.

Keep your calm, girl. Steady breaths.

She stepped as far away from him as she could in the utility room and pointed. "There's the fuc—arting thing." Around her friends she didn't bother censoring her swearing. But around people she didn't know, and clients and customers, she tried to tone it back to at least a PG-13 level.

He knelt next to it and nodded. "Breaker already turned off?"

"Yeah. And the water valves."

He glanced at the hose. "Good thinking on draining it. Do you want the same size, or one bigger?"

She somehow managed to stifle the giggle and snarky comment of *I'm a size queen* that threatened to slip through her lips.

"Um, whatever you think."

He stood and took a few measurements of the space. "Let me have a look at the breaker real fast to confirm the circuit amps, and I'll get you a couple of prices."

She showed him to the garage, where the breaker box was, and popped the large garage door for him so he didn't have to keep going back and forth through the house. Once she walked into the kitchen, she leaned over the sink and splashed cold water on her face.

Holy. Fucking. Goddess.

She'd managed to compose herself by the time he returned from his van a few minutes later with several options written down. She could go with a larger size water heater for only a hundred dollars more in price.

"Does that include the permit?"

"Everything, including hauling the old one away."

"So how many days will I be without hot water?"

"I can have the new one installed in a couple of hours. I had a job cancel on me today which is why I was able to come myself."

She successfully smothered *that* nervous giggle, too. He wouldn't understand the lascivious thoughts running through her brain.

He continued. "We'll pull the permits and notify the inspector, but for something like this, they let us go ahead and do the repair immediately. Your house is new enough we don't need to make any modifications to the electrical circuit or existing pipes or anything."

"Okay. Let's go with the larger one then." A little snort escaped her, but she thought by turning and heading for her purse she might have been far enough away from him he didn't hear her.

"Great. I'll go get the unit and be back here in less than an hour."

She looked up from where she was rooting through her purse for her wallet. "You don't want me to pay you now?"

"Once it's finished and working."

When he left, she leaned against the counter again and took long, slow, deep breaths.

The ability to see auras had started within a day after the attack when she was a teenager. She hadn't said anything to anyone about it then, afraid they might institutionalize her. She'd seen them faintly during her overnight stay in the hospital, but attributed it to having been choked and beaten, and the mental and physical trauma of her rape, and emotional trauma over her mom's death.

It was at her mother's funeral two days later, however, while sitting by her father's side and wearing a floppy hat and large, dark sunglasses to hide her black eyes—and her tears—from the rest of the attendees, that the ability jumped out and really said *huzzah*.

Everyone there bore an aura. Later, as Sachi researched her new ability and learned more, she understood that the most likely reason she'd seen them so clearly the day of the funeral was due to the highly charged emotional situation. As her ability grew and strengthened, she learned how to tune out and focus on not seeing auras, except when she wanted or needed to for a client.

It had been years since one had jumped out unbidden at her like this.

The last one had been the one and only attempt she'd had at a serious relationship several years earlier, after settling in Florida.

She went to go take a cold shower. No, she wasn't a freaking nun and was as liable to lust after a hunky man as much as the next hot-blooded hetero woman or homosexual guy.

The difference was she never acted on it.

Ever.

She didn't date, she didn't flirt. She kept her thoughts and feelings to herself and, sometimes, her handheld shower massager.

Even that was fairly rare, though.

Maybe a little cold water will jolt my senses into proper alignment.

* * * *

John tried to focus on the task at hand as he drove to the shop to pick up the new water heater. He'd never met Sachi Wolowitz before, although he was familiar with who she was.

Hell, someone would have to be living under a rock to *not* know who she was. It had made the news when she'd been shot by a guy, who was then shot and killed by Ellis Fargo, a local attorney and a customer of his. John had personally overseen the work in that very house after a previous contractor had screwed some of it up.

The haunted look in Sachi's eyes when they'd shown her on TV had drawn him in an unusual way even then, having never met her before.

When the dispatcher had given him her info he'd suspected it would be the same woman, yet he still felt the unusual lurch his heart made when she opened the door.

Those gorgeous blue eyes of hers, almond-shaped and full of wariness, looked even more beautiful and powerful in person. She wore her long, straight black hair loose today, although in some of the news coverage he'd seen of her, pictures of her on a skeet field, she'd worn it pulled back in a ponytail or braid.

Part of him wanted to turn to her and ask her out, but he couldn't make himself do it. For starters, he didn't want to get involved with a client. In a small town like Brooksville, it didn't take much for the rumor mill to run overtime. He suspected she'd already had more than her fill of *that* to last a lifetime. Also, if it went badly between them, word of that could get around, too. He had a good reputation in town. He didn't want to do anything stupid to mess that up.

Hell, his ex-wife had done more than her fair share of trying to ruin him.

No, better not to touch the topic with a twenty-foot pole. Besides, he was way too busy to have any kind of a private life. He still felt raw from his divorce over a year earlier. And Oscar's breakup late last year with his longtime girlfriend was another reminder of why people needed to protect themselves financially as well as emotionally.

Nope, leave it alone. Stay professional. And he'd bring a guy back with him to help him with the water heater...and as a little extra insurance for him to set a good example as the employer.

* * * *

Sachi had just gotten dressed when John returned, knocking on the front door to announce his arrival. She felt a little sigh of relief when she realized he had a guy with him, one of his employees now parked in yet another Evans Plumbing truck along the street in front of her driveway.

From him, she saw nothing more than the slightly hazy muted colors she usually saw when she looked at someone and tried to read their aura.

John, however, still bore a vivid blue aura around him.

Fuck.

That delicious blue aura remained there, in fact, when the men finished less than an hour later and waited until they were

sure the new water heater was working properly.

That the aura stubbornly refused to go away despite her best efforts to *not* see it made her dig her heels even more deeply into denial.

She handed over her credit card to him to write the info down, being careful not to touch his hand when she did. She didn't want to know what *that* might feel like. Although she imagined it would feel as yummy as his aura looked.

When she went to see the men out, in the front yard a brilliant red male cardinal landed on the small concrete statue of Buddha that sat near the front entryway. By the time she closed the front door her heart raced, out of control.

Cardinals.

Her mom's favorite bird. It never seemed to fail when she was at a crossroads, a cardinal always appeared to give her a hint as to the right way to proceed.

The only time she'd ever ignored one, she'd walked away from a good man who'd deserved better than her.

Why did this guy have to live in this town?

Fortunately, before now, she'd never had contact with him. And as long as she didn't have any other plumbing issues of that magnitude, she likely wouldn't need to have any future contact with him. She could fix a leaky faucet or replace a toilet flapper valve herself. Hell, she'd done it before.

As long as the damn water heater holds up, I'll be good.

On that thought she went to go freshen up, change into yet another clean pair of panties, and head back to Many Blessings with Ellis' car.

Chapter Three

When Sachi's dad arrived at the store to pick her up later that evening, she told him about the water heater.

"I feel bad I wasn't here to help you out, sweetheart. I could have replaced it for you."

She suppressed her groan. *I should have known he'd feel guilty.* "Daddy, it's fine. I'm a home-owning adult. This stuff sometimes happens."

"I wish you'd called me."

She walked over to him and hugged him. "Daddy," she softly said, "I called you when I *really* needed you, and you came. That's what matters most to me." She straightened his cap. "How'd the interviews go?"

"I have three job offers, and two other people called to ask me to come in for interviews tomorrow."

She smiled. "You fast worker, you."

"You're sure you're okay with this?"

She hugged him with both arms, ignoring the twinge in her right shoulder as she did. "Daddy, it's going to be good to have you here all the time. And you've said your arthritis is really starting to bother you in the winter. This makes sense."

Mandaline appeared in the office doorway. "Whenever you're ready to move, Ellis and Brad have already said you'd better let them come help." Not only Mandaline, but both her guys had also readily taken to Michael Bloomfeld as an adopted dad, something Sachi was secretly happy about. Other people from the store had also quickly taken to him and welcomed him with open arms.

Sachi knew if her dad had a strong structure of friends in Florida, it would only help bolster her argument of getting him to make the move without her having to resort to guilt to fully convince him.

Fortunately, it looked like he'd need little convincing, although she kept her joy over that to herself.

Once in the car and on their way home, he said, "I really think I'll end up taking the job down in Pasco County at Garson Aviation. It wouldn't be a bad drive, and they seemed very nice."

There was more, she could tell from his tone of voice. She also knew enough to let it play out in his way.

"But I need to talk to the others first before I make my final decision."

She nodded. "That sounds like a good plan."

Quiet settled over them. "A cardinal landed on the roof of the car as I was walking out to it after I got done talking to the people in Pasco."

Aaaand there it is.

Her father didn't know about all her talents. When he'd asked her before about how she got into doing readings for people and teaching at Many Blessings, she'd never given him a full and accurate answer. But there was one thing they shared in common.

The cardinals.

He'd never come right out and said anything about it, but had hinted all around the subject enough over the years that she knew his feelings about them.

Starting from the cardinal that had landed on her mom's casket at the funeral. A bright red male that had no business being there that time of year.

Her mom's favorite bird. And, from that moment on, their private signal of Sachi Bloomfeld speaking to them in her own way, the only way she now could.

She reached over and patted his leg. "Dad, you make whatever choice you need to make. I'm behind you one thousand percent."

He smiled. "There you go sucking at math again, sweetheart."

She laughed, glad to see him smiling.

Hell, it just felt good to actually laugh for a change.

When they got home, he carefully went over the water heater, checking every bit of the men's work until he was fully satisfied. "Looks like they did a good job. How much did they charge you?"

She handed him the detailed bill, already anticipating the request.

He slowly nodded as he read through it. "Looks reasonable. You said Ellis recommended him?"

"Yes, Daddy. He does work for him and Brad on their house. He's good."

"Good." He returned the receipt to her. "Then I guess I'll get dinner ready if you want to do another load of those towels." He pointed to the pile of them she'd left on the floor by the washer.

"Deal."

As she loaded the washer and got it started, her mind drifted back to John Evans' aura. Not like she could or would do

anything about it.

Figures that the Universe would throw a curveball at me.

She put it out of her mind as the delicious aroma of her dad microwaving the leftover brisket began filling the kitchen. Nope, she'd focus on her dad. She'd spent too many years away from him.

For now, he'd be the only man in her life.

* * * *

Friday morning, Sachi was covering the store for Mandaline, who had driven Brad down to Tampa to the VA for one of his regular doctor appointments. Both Mina and Paige were in the back giving readings to clients, and Makenzie was scheduled to arrive for her shift any minute.

Fortunately, the store was quiet, with only two people browsing the showroom, and two more sipping their lattes while working on their laptops.

When the elderly woman hesitated on the sidewalk in front of the door and stared, as if reading the signage, Sachi successfully stifled her groan. She knew that look well, someone who wanted to talk to them about doing a paranormal investigation on their home.

Finally, the woman pushed the door open and stepped inside, blinking as her eyes adjusted from the bright Florida sunshine to the store's dimmer interior.

Sachi pasted a practiced smile on her face and throttled back on her snarkometer. "Good afternoon, and welcome to Many Blessings. How may I help you?"

The woman's expression brightened as she toddled over to the counter. "Are you the people who do the ghost hunting?"

Somehow, Sachi held the groan back while keeping her smile firmly planted. "That's us."

"I'd like to hire you. I think my husband is trying to talk to me."

Sachi let her focus sharpen on the woman's aura. A light, crisp, fresh spring green color, looking completely untouched by any of the signs she usually spotted when someone was mentally succumbing to the natural progression of age.

"How so?" Sachi asked.

"I'm seeing a lot of things moved around outside. Sometimes I hear things and see things outside at night. He used to love working in our garden. I really think he's trying to get a message to me. Maybe him, or even possibly our son, Charlie."

Sachi reached for the notepad and pen they kept by the cash register. Mandaline continued Julie's tradition of checking out every local case, even if they didn't think it would come to anything. A vast majority of their investigations involved debunking things that people thought were supernatural in origin. It was rare they actually found supernatural or unexplainable phenomenon.

"Well, let's start with your name," Sachi said. "And your address."

"I'm Tammy Evans." She listed an address to the east of town, almost all the way to Ridge Manor but west of the interstate. A little buzzer went off in Sachi's mind as she noted the information, yet she couldn't identify why. "I have twenty acres of land. My nephew and his friend help me out when they can around the property, but I really don't want to bug them with this." She leaned in. "I don't want them thinking I'm dotty."

Sachi didn't let her smile slip. "What exactly are you experiencing?"

The woman, who insisted Sachi call her Tammy, listed a very cogent and reasoned-sounding list of events, phenomenon that had occurred off and on for over a month. By the time she finished talking with Tammy ten minutes later, Sachi was no longer sure if she doubted the woman's mental soundness.

Then again, Julie's murder was proof that people weren't always what they appeared to be at first blush.

Tammy was a widow, her only child deceased, and no other close relatives such as siblings or grandkids. Just the nephew she'd mentioned earlier. Sachi preferred talking with other family members when dealing with elderly clients, just to get an objective gauge of their mental state. In one case they'd dealt with a couple of years earlier, it turned out the woman had a benign brain tumor her family was able to get successfully treated.

After consulting their master schedule, Sachi set up a preliminary investigation appointment with Tammy for six o'clock Sunday evening. Instead of having to drag everyone and all their equipment out for a massive investigation, it was easier to scout the location first and then see if it was possible to debunk anything on the spot, saving them time and effort.

"You mentioned a nephew," Sachi said, hoping to get him brought into this. "Any chance we could have him there, too? Sometimes it helps to have other family members involved in things."

"Oh, of course. His name's John Evans. He runs a plumbing company here in town."

Sachi blinked, forcing herself to remain standing and not repeatedly pound her forehead on the counter.

Of course.

It didn't help Sachi's growly mood later when Mandaline returned and Sachi updated her, telling her about the new investigation.

Mandaline cocked her head and pointed at the office door, indicating Sachi was to close it, giving them some privacy.

Sachi blew out a long breath before reaching out and pushing the door shut.

"Spill it," Mandaline said, her brows arched. "What aren't you telling me, and none of that bull that there isn't anything."

Sachi hadn't related anything to Mandaline about her encounter with John Evans except that the guy had done great work at a reasonable cost in a very short amount of time.

Heat filled her face. "Spill what, boss?"

Mandaline crossed her arms over her chest and waited her out.

Sachi lost the glaring contest. "You know, it's all *your* fault, you damn witch. You and Tarzan, both. You fucking manifested me a goddamned guy despite me specifically asking you *not* to!"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"I heard you, but I'm beginning to think you got shot in the head, not the shoulder. What the heck are you talking about?"

Sachi didn't want to admit it. Not even to Mandaline, who she considered to be her closest friend.

Mandaline waited her out.

"Okay, *fine*," Sachi grumbled. She told Mandaline about John's aura, and waited for the grinning to commence.

Mandaline surprised her by not responding how she'd anticipated.

She simply nodded. "Now I understand why you're acting like this. Would you prefer I have someone else help us with the prelim on Sunday? And do you want me to call him for you?"

"What?"

"I'm not going to make you explain yourself beyond that, sweetie."

Sachi stared at her. This was why she loved this woman so much, like a sister, maybe even more. She had a connection with Mandaline the way she'd had with Julie...before.

She felt the prickle of tears in her eyes and quickly blinked them away. "No, I'm good," she quietly said. "I'll call him and talk to him."

Mandaline didn't reply.

"Seriously, I'm okay," Sachi insisted. She took a deep breath. "Julie once told me I'm not the sum of my scars. Maybe it's time I start listening to her and stop putting up walls."

Mandaline reached out and gently took Sachi's hand. "You're not agreeing to marry the guy. Maybe this is the Universe telling you it's time to start facing other fears now that you have the biggest one banished from your life for good."

Sachi stared at her friend's hand as she laced fingers with her. "I'm not sure I know how," she whispered.

Mandaline squeezed. "Yes, you do. One step at a time, the way you do everything else."

"Maybe he'll hate skeet, or guns in general. That's a hard limit for me, you know."

"Maybe he'll love them."

"Maybe he's gay."

Mandaline smiled. "Maybe he's not."

Sachi wouldn't lift her gaze. "Maybe he's not interested in me."

"Maybe he is. Or will be."

"What if he's not? Or he doesn't even like me?"

"Would it be so bad if he did?"

Sachi didn't move to pull her hand free from Mandaline's. "Did Julie ever tell you about Tom?" Julie had been the only one she'd ever told about Tom. Her relationship with him had happened before she'd started working at the store.

"No."

"He had the same aura," she said. "And damn, did I love that man."

"What happened?"

Sachi shrugged. "I happened. I got scared. I loved him too much, and I was afraid he might get hurt because of what happened to me. So after I realized how much he loved me, I told him it wasn't him, it was me, and let him go."

"Where is he now?"

Sachi sadly smiled. "Last time I saw, he was posting pics of their new baby daughter on Facebook."

“Ouch. I’m sorry.”

“No need to be. My choice.” She finally met Mandaline’s brown gaze. “I never told him all the deets about what happened to me. Just enough that he didn’t think I was a total weirdo without cause. But just before I broke up with him, I had a weird hang-up call on my house phone that left me with a serious case of the heebie-jeebies, and I freaked out.” She shrugged. “I was still looking over my shoulder all the time. I couldn’t have lived with myself if he’d gotten hurt because of me.” She smiled. “That’s why I took a bullet for ya.”

Mandaline arched an eyebrow at her, a corner of her mouth curling in a smile. “You know that’s over, right? That you don’t need to look over your shoulder anymore?”

Sachi’s smile faded. “Yeah.”

“So how about this—just leave yourself open. You don’t need to go chasing him, but don’t put up a wall against something that might or might not happen.”

“But what if something does happen and I get hurt?”

“But what if it doesn’t?”

“But what if it does?”

Mandaline squeezed her hand again, this time covering Sachi’s with her other hand, the warmth from her touch washing through Sachi’s flesh.

“If it does, you’ve got a safety net here to catch you. Me, Brad, Ellis, your dad, everyone. You won’t hit the ground, I promise. But you have to start somewhere. If you live the rest of your life like this, then you let Jacob and Jackson Clary win. You’re too tough and too good a person to let that happen. I know you are.”

“You and your damn logic,” she muttered.

Mandaline smirked. “Maybe we should resurrect Dildous at the next coven.”

That made Sachi burst out laughing at the thought of the dildo and its corresponding and made-up deity Sachi had used for comedic effect to invoke some healing at the first coven gathering at the store following Julie’s murder. “Okay, you have to admit, that was damn funny.”

“I know. That’s why I brought it up. Hey, who was telling *me* to take a chance on Brad and Ellis, hmm?”

“Do as I say, not as I do, witchypoo.”

“If you spent this much time and energy *not* fighting the Universe, you might actually find happiness, sister.”

Sachi drew in a shaky sigh. “I’m not sure I know what happiness is. Much less how to find it.”

“Just let it find you.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It *is* easy, if you let it be.”

Chapter Four

Sachi nipped up and finally made the call to John Evans before her dad arrived to take her to the skeet field. She had two students that afternoon, and she knew she wouldn't even be able to sneak in a round herself. Her father would plant himself under the shelter and watch her give lessons, making sure she didn't pick up a gun other than to demonstrate proper technique.

She'd never felt such a war of love and frustration before, but she wouldn't deny it was a nice problem to have for a change.

Tammy had given Sachi John's cell phone number, in addition to his work number. Sachi closed herself in one of the private reading rooms to make the call with the shop phone. Her pulse raced, fingers trembling as she dialed his cell and waited for him to pick up.

Almost hoping his voice mail would grab it, she had to swallow to form spit when he answered. "John Evans."

Nut up. "Um, hi. This is Sachi Wolowitz. You worked on my water heater the other day?"

"Sure, how are you? Is everything okay?"

She closed her eyes, but then she imagined his face and that delicious blue aura surrounding him.

Not helping.

She opened her eyes again. "Yeah, that's fine. I'm actually calling about your aunt."

"My aunt?"

"Yeah." Sachi found it easier to get into the conversation as she turned her focus to the business at hand. She told him what happened and waited while he processed it.

She liked that he sounded concerned and wasn't trying to blow her off. "Did she act like she was feeling okay? I know a couple of times she mentioned things being moved, but I thought maybe it was just normal memory stuff. She still drives and takes care of her own bills and banking. I helped her put all her stuff together for her CPA for taxes this year, and she's got her act together better than I do."

"Well, that's why I wanted to bring you into the conversation. We're going to have a preliminary walk-through at her place on Sunday evening, if you'd like to be there. In fact, we'd prefer it if you could be there." *In more ways than one...*

Stop that!

She chewed on the inside of her lip and forced her focus back onto his voice.

"We'll be there."

Her heart sank. "We?"

"My roommate, Oscar. She's known us both all our lives and sort of adopted us. He spends as much time with her as I do."

Her heart soared again, Sachi cursing it the whole dang way. "We'll see you at her place at six on Sunday night, then."

"Thank you, Sachi. I appreciate you calling me."

She hung up the phone, her fingers tightly curled around the receiver. He hadn't mentioned a girlfriend. And from the way he talked about Oscar, she didn't think John was gay, either. At least, not with Oscar.

Sachi closed her eyes. *Goddess, please give me strength and hope and faith and wisdom to do what I need to do and get through this. If there's anything to get through. So mote it be.*

* * * *

Sachi's dad gave her a strange look as he walked around the counter when he arrived to pick her up. "Are you feeling okay, Miki?"

"Yeah, sure. Why?"

He studied her. "You look...different."

"I changed clothes for my lessons."

He frowned at her. "That's not what I meant and you know it."

"I'm fine, Daddy. Let me get my purse."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Then what happened?"

That was the only drawback to having her dad there all the time. He had a keen eye for her moods. "We have a new investigation on Sunday."

His frown darkened. "Is it safe?"

“Yes, very. A lovely woman in her late seventies. In fact, coincidentally, the aunt of the guy who fixed the water heater.” She headed for the office to grab her purse from the cabinet.

“Oh.” The clouds cleared in his expression. “Okay then.”

Whew. The last thing she wanted to do was have *that* conversation with her dad. He’d been really good about not asking her those kinds of personal questions. *Let’s not ruin a great run.*

Fortunately, she was able to completely put all thoughts of John Evans out of her mind during her skeet lessons. The first was a fifteen-year-old girl who’d been shooting for several months and showed a lot of promise. Sachi had to teach her international style for her competitions, and it was fun to watch her student make progress.

Even more fun was how her supportive parents sat under the shelter with her own dad, chatting and cheering their daughter on.

Her other student was an older man who’d shot trap for a number of years and now wanted to switch to skeet. Fortunately, he was an easy student and had the basic mechanics down.

By the time she finished a little after seven, she was ready for dinner. They had to stop by the grocery store on the way home. When they reached Publix, her dad took a cart and went one way while Sachi went another. She wanted to hit their bakery to satisfy a massive donut craving.

Her dad silently *tsked* but didn’t chastise her for it. As she homed in on the donuts, the rest of the world disappeared.

Dooonuuuts...

That’s why she wasn’t paying attention when she accidentally bumped into a guy who was carrying a hand basket. She turned to apologize, her throat locking up, the words seizing before they could pass her vocal cords.

Dark brown hair and devastatingly blue eyes, the hunk looked like he clocked in around five eleven.

And he also had a gorgeous blue aura surrounding him.

Fucking Goddess, what the hell are you doing to me?

He offered her an apologetic smile. “Sorry.” He reached for a box of donuts on the display table.

She rapidly nodded as she tried to pry words from her throat, finally managing an, “Uh-huh.”

He put the box of donuts in his basket. “They’re pretty good, huh?”

She nodded again. “Yeah.” *Smile, idiot!* She managed one and hoped it didn’t make her look like a manic female, half-Japanese version of Sheldon Cooper.

What were the damn odds? She glanced around. No one else within sight bore the same deep, beautiful blue aura he did, nearly identical to the one John Evans sported.

“Well, have a nice evening,” he said with a friendly smile.

She nodded harder, eventually coaxing, “Thanks. You, too,” out of her throat.

She stood there, watching him walk away and head for a checkout line when she finally mentally kicked herself.

You dumb bitch! There was a perfect opportunity to turn on the snarky charm and maybe take the chance Mandoline was completely right that she should take.

And she’d blown it.

Grabbing a box of glazed donuts, she started to step away from the table when she grabbed a second one as well and stormed off to find her dad.

* * * *

Oscar tried to slow his racing pulse. He knew who the woman was. He and John had both seen the news reports a few weeks ago about Sachi Wolowitz.

He just hadn’t expected her to be so pretty in person. Or look so vulnerable, in a way that made him want to step up and beg her to point him in whatever direction she wanted him to go to slay bad guys for her.

I don’t need any complications in my life right now, and I’m sure she doesn’t want a loser like me, either.

There wasn’t any way to deny how he’d felt when he’d locked eyes with her. Like there’d been a connection.

Yeah, you felt like that with Karen, too, and look where the hell that got you.

It was tempting, too tempting, to step out of line and go find her. Then again, she didn’t have a hand basket or a cart, so maybe she was there with someone.

And how pitiful is that anyway, to pick up someone in a grocery store? She’d probably think I was a creep.

As he paid for his groceries, he tried to focus on that thought. The poor woman had been through enough. She didn’t need some random stranger coming up to her in Publix and hitting on her.

When he got home, John wasn’t there. It wasn’t unusual for John to work late on Fridays, helping his guys finish up jobs so they didn’t have to work on a Saturday, except for emergency calls. He browned a pound of ground beef and cobbled

together a pot of half-store-bought, half-homemade spaghetti sauce to simmer on the stove.

It would only take a couple of minutes to boil the pasta, and the two of them would easily make a meal of just that.

He walked over to where he kept his laptop on a TV table next to the couch and got it powered up. Sachi Wolowitz stubbornly kept filtering into his thoughts.

I wish I'd tried to talk to her more.

On the heels of that, the thought that he didn't have his own shit together enough to hold up his end of a relationship. And probably the last thing the poor woman needed after what she'd been through was someone like him.

When John called and told him he was on the way, Oscar got the pasta boiling and gave the sauce a stir. The two of them had settled into a fairly boring routine. Tonight, they'd end up watching a couple of shows on TV before they parted ways for the night and went to bed. Tomorrow, unless John was roused out of bed by an emergency call, they would both end up sleeping late, putter around the apartment and do some housework, and then debate going out. Maybe to play darts, maybe shoot some pool, maybe bowling. Or a movie.

Or...whatever.

They had other friends they sometimes hung out with, single and not. Both men had long since waved off their friends' many attempts to fix them up on dates. Oscar knew he'd been asked two or three times if he and John were an item, and wondered if John had received the same question.

If so, they never discussed it between them. It seemed more than pathetic to discuss their love lives, or lack thereof.

It wasn't like they needed to ram it into the other's face, that was for sure.

It just...was.

John arrived home and grabbed a quick shower. Within a few minutes, they were both sitting in front of the TV, plates of spaghetti and bottles of beer in front of them, and watching the evening news.

To make conversation more than anything, Oscar said, "You won't believe who I saw in Publix tonight."

"Who?"

"You know that woman who got shot a couple of weeks ago? Sachi Wolowitz?"

John froze.

"What?" Oscar asked. He didn't understand the sudden shift in his friend's demeanor.

"Yeah?" John sounded wary.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. What about her?"

"I saw her in the bakery department at Publix. What's wrong?"

John put down his fork. "I replaced her water heater on Wednesday. And...she called me today."

Oscar didn't understand why he suddenly felt a little surge of jealousy roll through him. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Aunt Tammy went into the shop Sachi works at. The New Age place on the square downtown? Sachi called me to tell me they were going to do an investigation Sunday night at Aunt Tammy's and they asked if we could be there."

"Huh? What kind of investigation?" Oscar listened as John related his brief conversation with Sachi.

"Of course I'll go with you," Oscar said. "I love Aunt Tammy. You know that."

No, she wasn't related by blood, but his grandparents were dead and she was the closest thing he had to a grandmother. His own parents had moved out to Arizona a few years earlier. Being an only child, and with no other close family, he welcomed the connection.

Another thought hit him. "You don't really think she's got Alzheimer's or anything, do you?"

John shrugged and took another bite of his pasta. "I hope not. You see her as much as I do. Her house is always tidy, her banking stuff seems okay. I don't know."

Oscar knew his friend didn't believe in the supernatural. He didn't exactly, either, but he was more open-minded to the possibility. "What if it is her husband?"

John arched an eyebrow at him but didn't reply.

"Seriously," Oscar said.

"*Seriously?* Maybe I should get *you* checked out."

"Keep an open mind."

"I am. That's why I agreed to be there with them. Any debate about what's really behind stuff is kind of a moot point at this time. Whatever happens on Sunday, happens."

Oscar didn't know what would happen, but selfishly hoped it meant he could have some time to talk with Sachi again and redeem himself.

“You all right, sweetheart?” Sachi’s dad asked as they drove home from the grocery store.

“Yeah.”

“You seem lost in thought.”

No shit. But she couldn’t admit that to her dad. She also couldn’t believe that twice in the space of a few days she’d seen not one, but two men with those auras.

The Goddess has a really funky sense of humor.

No one else in the store had borne the same vivid aura.

Why now?

She didn’t want to call Mandaline and talk to her about it. There wasn’t any way to do it without her dad possibly overhearing.

It would have to wait until she got into the store tomorrow afternoon. She had three skeet students in the morning, in addition to the juniors squad meeting for their first organized practice since she’d been shot. She couldn’t miss that.

Later that evening, alone in her bedroom, she grabbed her favorite deck of Tarot cards and sat cross-legged in the middle of her bed.

She closed her eyes as she shuffled, trying to clear her mind.

Goddess, please quit screwing around with me. I need a sign, and more than just random hunks with really sexy auras.

She cut the deck, eyes still closed, and laid out three cards, waiting to open her eyes until they were all down.

The Sun. Ace of Cups. Three of Cups.

She puzzled over that. Seeing the Sun card didn’t really surprise her. New beginnings, a brighter future, sure. Okay. Ace of Cups with this deck tended to signify the start of a new romance, or new fortunes.

Again, fine.

But the Three of Cups...

She cocked her head and stared at it. It felt a little odd in the context of the other two cards and the question she’d asked.

Deciding she was too tired to think about it anymore, she quickly gathered the cards, shuffled them, and put them away before crawling under the sheets. As she drifted to sleep, her mind recalled John Evans and the mystery donut hunk.

They are cute...

* * * *

The next morning, no matter how hard Sachi tried to focus, her mind kept trying to return to the two men.

Damn, I wish I’d asked donut guy’s name.

She managed to hold it together, somehow, despite almost flubbing pulls several times because her thoughts had started to drift and she nearly missed the shooter’s call.

It hadn’t gone unnoticed by her father. “What’s going on?” he asked her when they were back in the car.

“It’s hot and I need a shower,” she said. She’d grab one at Mandaline’s apartment over the store.

“No,” he said, watching her. “Something’s going on in your mind. What is it? Your focus was not out there today.”

She struggled against the blush threatening to sweep up into her cheeks. “I’m fine, Daddy. I’m just...tired.” Okay, that was the truth. Especially since it felt like she’d tossed and turned all night long, between dreams of John Evans and Donut Hunk.

It would be a loooong day today, and tomorrow, until she saw John Evans again.

When she got to Many Blessings, she’d hoped to dash upstairs to Mandaline’s apartment and pull herself together before her friend spotted her.

No such luck.

Mandaline stuck her head out the office doorway as soon as Sachi stepped through the back door. Then Mandaline’s gaze narrowed and she quickly walked to the back to block Sachi’s progress.

Mandaline planted her hands on her hips. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Sachi held her tote bag in front of her, a totally ineffective barrier against her friend’s senses.

The witchy standoff lasted nearly a minute before Sachi felt her face heat. She pointed upstairs and stepped around her friend, who followed her up to the apartment over the store.

“Spill it,” Mandaline said.

Sachi set her tote bag in the bathroom and turned. “It happened again.”

“What happened again?”

“The aura.”

Mandaline’s brow went from furrowed to raised. “Oooh. Where? And who?”

She felt even more stupid explaining it. But when she finished with her story, Mandaline hugged her. “Maybe this is a good thing, right? You acknowledging you need to open yourself was what the Universe wanted to see before planting more opportunities in your path.”

“I don’t *need* opportunities,” Sachi grumbled. “I don’t want them, either. I just want some peace.”

“Maybe this is the peace you seek.”

“The peace I seek isn’t seeing hunks in Publix. The peace I seek is...” She let out a groan. “I don’t know what the hell peace I seek, but it’s not a piece of ass I’m seeking, that’s for damn sure.”

Mandaline grinned. “So says you. Maybe that’s not what the Universe says.”

“I’m taking a shower.” She returned to the bathroom and locked herself in. With the water as hot as she could stand it, she stood there, letting it soak through her.

Unfortunately, she knew it wouldn’t be hot enough to soak the memories of those gorgeous blue auras out of her mind.

Chapter Five

Sachi, Mandaline, Brad, and Anna headed over to Tammy Evans' house Sunday evening, arriving a little before six. It was a rural area, nearby properties sporting pastures with horses, cattle, and even the odd burro.

Her rambling, one-story ranch-style house sat about a hundred yards off a crumbling, pothole-ridden asphalt road, the clay dirt driveway curving through a gate and up to a gravel parking area next to the house. The front yard looked well-tended, the grass freshly mowed, beds of azaleas surrounding the bases of several large, drooping oak trees that shaded the yard. Behind the house, it looked like a narrow swath of mowed yard led into overgrown and partially wooded land.

"Looks like she needs a few pet goats to take care of that pasture," Sachi muttered.

Two cars sat parked there already, so Mandaline pulled her Honda Element behind one of them and parked. As they got out, Brad handed Mandaline her hobo bag with the stuff she'd need for the initial walk-through. Tammy Evans emerged from the front door, smiling as they headed up the walkway leading to the entryway.

Sachi came to a sudden stop, Brad bumping into her, as she saw who emerged from the house behind Tammy.

John Evans and Donut Hunk.

Both of them still sporting delicious blue auras.

She must have let out a terrified *meep*, because Mandaline stopped and turned. "You all right?" she softly asked. They were still far enough away that Tammy and the men couldn't hear her.

Sachi nodded, unable to take her eyes off the two men.

Mandaline frowned, glanced at the men, then back at Sachi before a beaming smile broke across her face.

Before Sachi could protest or run for the hills, Mandaline hooked an arm through Sachi's and practically dragged her up the walk to where the three now stood waiting.

Sachi knew damn well Mandaline had figured out why she'd reacted the way she had.

Goddamned witch!

"What's going on?" Brad muttered to Mandaline.

"I'll fill you in later," she whispered back. "Hi, Tammy?" she asked, still keeping her left arm hooked through Sachi's as she reached out with her right. "I'm Mandaline Royce."

The women shook. "It's so good to meet you, dear. This is my nephew, John, and his friend, Oscar."

Holy crap on a crap cracker, Donut Hunk is the roomie.

Mandaline introduced the rest of their group, Sachi nodding.

John smiled. "How's your hot water heater doing?"

She nodded, forcing a smile she hoped looked real, or at least not totally dumbassish. "Great, thanks."

"This is my friend, Oscar Weinstein," John said.

Fanfreakingtastic, Donut Hunk has a name.

"We sort of bumped into each other at the grocery store Friday night," Oscar said, his smile turning Sachi's insides into something that might have oozed from Vesuvius when it wiped Pompeii off the farking map.

She nodded again, trying to step behind Brad and use him as a human shield, but Mandaline wouldn't let her.

In fact, the dang witch tightened her grip on Sachi's arm, keeping her right there by her side. "Very nice to meet you both," Mandaline said, taking over. "Let's start by going inside and talking before we do a walk-around."

Hunk One and Hunk Two parted and let Tammy go first, followed by the four of them, the two men bringing up the rear.

Sachi wasn't sure if she liked it better when she could see them, or knew they could see her ass.

Once inside, Sachi tried to pull her mind into working mode. Despite her loss of focus, she noted the house appeared neat and tidy. Tammy showed them to the living room and invited them to take seats.

"Can I get anyone anything to drink?" Tammy asked.

"Not right now, thanks," Mandaline said. "Let's take care of the preliminary investigation first."

Sachi didn't miss how Mandaline pulled her down onto the couch with her, Brad flanking Sachi on her other side.

Once seated, Mandaline finally released Sachi's arm and dug a notebook and pen out of her bag. With Tammy seated in a recliner across from them, and everyone else seated on another easy chair, as well as dining room chairs that the men brought in to fill out the seating, Mandaline started her usual round of questions.

Thirty minutes later, Sachi was convinced the older woman wasn't suffering from dementia. Sachi wasn't sure the woman was really experiencing anything supernatural in origin, but Tammy definitely believed what she said.

She even had a few pictures on her iPhone, which she showed to Mandaline. "Now, I know," Tammy said, glancing at her nephew, "that as people get older their memories go. I'm not a fool. But I kept seeing the hose in different positions. So every morning for the past week, I took pictures. I didn't move it. As you can clearly see, it's in different locations. Close, but

still moved.”

Sachi, Brad, and Anna all gathered around. Yes, the hose was close to where it had been, as if someone had tried to make it look the same, but it had definitely been moved.

“It’s not just that. I’ve found stuff moved in the garden shed, too, and I’m the only one who goes out there. And,” she said when her nephew tried to speak, “yes, before you ask, it’s locked. That’s not all,” Tammy said. “At night I’ve heard voices and seen lights out in the woods.”

“Are you sure it’s not someone on your property, Aunt Tammy?” Oscar asked.

“They were little green lights. Like giant fireflies. They weren’t people. I’m telling you, I think it’s Herbert or Charlie. Or maybe both. They loved gardening.” For the first time, she looked sad. “We spent a lot of time when Charlie was growing up outside in the garden.”

“Does there seem to be a pattern to when or how they appear?” Mandaline asked.

The woman thought for a moment before shaking her head. “I don’t think so.”

“I need you to start keeping a detailed journal of what and when you see it, all right?”

“I can do that.”

“And nothing happening inside the house?” Mandaline asked.

“No. Just outside in the garden.”

Mandaline looked through her notes. “Why don’t we head on out there then, and you can show us around.”

“Of course.” Tammy stood. “I realize you might find other explanations for what I’m seeing, but I can’t help but think something wonderful will come of all this.”

Sachi had started to rise when Mandaline met her gaze, grinning ear-to-ear with a smile that would have put the Cheshire cat to shame. “I’m sure you’re right about that,” Mandaline said.

Sachi reached up to scratch the side of her face with her left hand, where Tammy and the two men couldn’t see, flipping Mandaline a bird as she did.

Mandaline clamped her lips together to stifle her laughter as she winked at Sachi.

Damn witch.

* * * *

John tried to hang back behind everyone else. He was sure once he saw Sachi again that he wouldn’t feel the same way about her.

Wrong.

He couldn’t seem to keep his eyes off her. Even if he wasn’t looking at her, it was like something visceral inside him felt attuned to wherever she was, following her.

And he definitely didn’t believe in love at first sight. He sure as hell didn’t believe in ghosts.

He appreciated that everyone seemed determined to not make his aunt look crazy, but he also felt badly that they were wasting their time on all this nonsense.

Then again, he didn’t mind spending the time in Sachi’s presence.

She’s not only a customer, now she’s working to help out Aunt Tammy. I damn sure don’t want to do anything to screw that up.

No, better to watch from afar. Then he wouldn’t have anything at risk other than his time.

He damn sure wouldn’t risk his heart.

It never hurt to look, however.

I’m pathetic, not dead.

* * * *

It turned out most of the property’s twenty acres were wooded, and butted up against a portion of the Croom Tract of the Withlacoochee State Forest. At one time, the Evans’ property had been partially cleared pastureland, but had grown up in the more than three decades since they’d last owned horses. Tammy and her husband had owned the property for over forty years. Only the front three acres, containing the house and her garden area, were kept up.

Long shadows, punctuated by dark pockets of underbrush, were visible in the quickly waning light. Sachi and the others stood at the fence and looked out onto the back acreage.

“We’re not hiking through that tonight,” Brad said. “It’s almost dark. I don’t want to be hunting through that when we have no idea what’s out there. Last thing we need is someone stepping on a snake or something.”

“Agreed,” Mandaline said. “We’ll have to come back earlier in the day to go through it when we can see better.”

“But I’ve only seen the lights at night,” Tammy said. “And I can see them from here.” She pointed off into the deepening gloom. “They’re out there. Greenish lights. Not like flashlights. I’ve tried taking pictures and video of them with my cell phone, but nothing shows up. It’s not made for night pictures.”

“Any noises?”

“Nothing other than voices sometimes, but I can’t understand what they say, and they sound like men’s voices.”

“We can try observing from here first,” Mandaline said. “Also, we can set up some trail cameras. If there’s something out there not supernatural, those will catch it. But if we can observe the phenomenon, we need to get out there to find the cause of it.”

Sachi stared at the woods. Personally, she thought there was as much paranormal activity going on out there as at an Apple Store Genius Bar in the middle of a mall, but maybe that was just her.

It was damned hard to focus on anything other than the two gorgeous, blue auras calling to her from John and Oscar.

For all she knew there could have been a freaking herd of screaming banshees tooling around out there at full tilt and she might miss them, as distracted as she felt.

Mandaline glanced at Sachi. “We’ll put together a plan and come back on Tuesday night to get started.”

“How much do I owe you?” Tammy asked.

“Not a thing. We never charge for what we do. Our friend, Julie, who started all this, she refused to charge. You’re welcomed to make a donation to the charity of your choice in her name, if you’d like, but we won’t take your money for this.”

Tammy smiled. “Thank you so much.”

They walked around to the cars and said their good-byes. Sachi forced herself to shake hands with both John and Oscar so as not to look like a totally antisocial freak.

She didn’t know what she expected. When Mandaline first met Brad and Ellis, she’d had a series of wacky and realistic visions when they touched.

All Sachi felt was idiocy for flinching at the contact. Back in Mandaline’s SUV and on their way down the driveway, Sachi forced herself not to turn to look back to where the men stood with Tammy in front of the house.

In the backseat, Anna and Brad were talking.

“You all right?” Mandaline quietly asked Sachi.

“Yeah, boss. I’m fine.” She stared out the window at the deepening night and tried not to think about blue auras or gorgeous guys or anything else that disturbed the calm eddies she wanted to swim through in the river that was her life. She didn’t want any rapids or white water. She’d had more than her fair share of those as it was. Enough to last her a lifetime.

All she wanted was peace, and her dad.

* * * *

Anna didn’t hang around when they returned to the shop, and Brad went upstairs, leaving Sachi and Mandaline alone by the back door. Sachi had managed to pry her car keys from her father’s hands after promising to not try to sneak in a round of skeet.

She wouldn’t have put it past him to call the field just to make sure they were closed and that she couldn’t get in to shoot.

“If it counts for anything,” Mandaline said, “I like them both.”

Sachi leaned against the side of her car. “Yeah, whatever,” she grumbled.

“I also watched them. They were both watching you.”

Sachi cursed the little surge that raced through her. “So?”

“Oh. My. Goddess. Knock it off, Sachi.” Mandaline grabbed her by the shoulders and gently shook her. “Call either of them. Hell, call both of them. Ask them out.”

“I do *not* need a guy in my life right now.”

“Would it hurt to ask them out for pizza or coffee? Tell them you want to talk about Tammy Evans.” Mandaline grinned. “After all, you are in charge of this investigation.”

“*What?* Oh, *fuck* no. No no no. What the fuck? You *cannot* do that to me, girlfriend.”

“Watch me.” Mandaline grinned and dropped her hands. “I just did.”

“I took a fucking *bullet* for you! See if I ever do *that* again.”

Mandaline crossed her arms over her chest. “And that’s why I’m forcing you to confront this. If not them, someone, sometime. The Universe is going to keep dropping guys in front of you until you finally give in and take a chance.”

“*Them?* Did you just say them?”

Mandaline grinned. “I most certainly did.” She turned and headed for the back door. “And if you don’t get off your ass, I really will toss a love spell your way.” With that she closed the door behind her. Sachi heard the deadbolt snap into place. Still grumbling, she unlocked her car and got in. “Goddamned witch probably would, too.”

* * * *

When Sachi returned home, her dad seemed to radiate nervous energy.

“How was today?” he asked.

“I didn’t sneak in any shooting, Daddy. I swear.” She dumped her purse on the counter and headed to the fridge for a bottle of hard cider. She wasn’t much of a drinker, but she really wanted one tonight.

“So? How did the investigation go?”

She pulled a bottle from the fridge, grabbed the magnetic bottle opener from where it hung on the front of the fridge, and popped the cap off. Then she took a long swallow, enjoying the slight bite from the cider. “It was just the preliminary talk and walk-through, not the actual investigation. We’re going back over on Tuesday to start.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“No, actually, I want you to plan your move from Idaho.” She walked over to him and gave him a one-armed hug. “Did you finally make your decision?”

He’d seen another cardinal at one of the other interviews and was waffling, unsure which job to take. After slowly nodding, he said, “I still think the one in Pasco.”

“Because of the cardinal?” She knew she shouldn’t ask, but couldn’t help it. She could only rein in her snark for so long before it busted out in other, more hurtful ways.

He smiled. “They offered the best salary and had the best benefits.”

“Ah, logic.”

“Yes, as hard to believe as it sounds, Miki, I do use logic on occasion.”

She took another sip. “So when do you start?”

“Monday, if they have their way. But I told them I need to take care of moving first.”

She tried to slow her racing pulse as her excitement built. “So when are we moving you?”

“I guess that depends on how soon Ellis and Brad can come help. I’ll pay to fly them out, and their expenses,” he said.

She tried to keep her calm. She really did. She set the bottle down on the counter and took a deep breath, but then the little girl still hidden somewhere deep inside her threw her arms around him and started crying tears of gratitude. “Thank you, Daddy.”

It felt so good to bury her face against his shoulder and feel safe again. To know, finally, they could be a family again. Or, rather, what remained of their family.

He chuckled as he hugged her. “You act like that now. Wait’ll I’m hounding you about not eating right all the time, and how many hours you’re working.”

“I don’t care,” she mumbled against his shirt, relieved that, for the first time in her adult life, she could finally reconnect with her father. “I’ll be glad to have you here.”

Despite how he’d talked, she’d still secretly feared, up until that moment, that he might change his mind and return to Idaho. “I’ll make our plane reservations tonight,” she said. “We’ll fly out and get the house packed and be ready when Brad and Ellis get there.”

“Don’t you need to coordinate with them first?”

“Ellis said the drive would take about three days, give or take. You and Brad can fly back. We’ll use a car hauler for your truck. You can get back here and start work sooner that way.”

“All my tools are still there, Miki.”

She looked up at him and saw he wore a smile. “The job will still be here for me,” he assured her. “I’ll fly out first. You have your investigation on Tuesday night. Let me get things packed and arranged before you make the flight reservations. You can fly out later in the week. Besides, you have juniors on Thursday afternoon.”

He touched her chin. “They were so glad to have you back. Don’t worry, it won’t take long to pack the house. You arrange things with Brad and Ellis and you three come out together. I don’t want you missing any more of your lessons than you have to.”

She felt a smile creeping in. “You realize I might try to sneak skeet in while you’re gone, right?”

He nodded. “I’m counting on it. Which is why I already talked to Mandaline about giving Ellis your guns to hold on to until the doctor clears you or I get back, whichever comes first.”

“Dad!”

He grinned. “Logic, sweetheart.”

* * * *

Oscar held back and watched the group head down the driveway in the kiwi green Honda Element. Aunt Tammy and John had already stepped inside when she called to him.

“Oscar?”

“Coming.”

He couldn’t get his mind off Sachi. Several times, it felt like he’d caught her gaze darting away from him, as if she hadn’t wanted him to see her watching him.

Then again, maybe that’s just wishful thinking on my part.

In fact, he suspected that was the more likely explanation.

Why would she have any interest in me?

Aunt Tammy plied them with homemade red velvet cake before allowing them to head home. Oscar had driven them in his car, and as he pulled into his parking space in front of their duplex, he realized how utterly miserable he felt.

“Remind me again why we keep refusing her offers for us to move in with her?” Oscar muttered. “She’s got a big house.”

John let out a sad sigh that surprised Oscar. “Well, at first, I didn’t want to be a mooch. Then I thought I didn’t want to worry about it interfering with my love life.”

“*What* love life?”

“Exactly. Now I’m wondering if we shouldn’t take her up on it.” He turned to look at Oscar. “Whether she’s seeing things that aren’t there, or it turns out to be someone illegally hunting on her land at night or something, maybe she’s at an age she shouldn’t be living alone. I worry about her.”

She’d asked them about it again that evening, before the group from Many Blessings had arrived.

“I wouldn’t mind living there with her,” Oscar agreed. “I mean, I want to sign a real lease with her and everything. I know she keeps asking us, but I want it all aboveboard.”

“Agreed.”

John looked out the windshield again. The complex wasn’t exactly in the middle of a crack neighborhood, but it was at least two decades past having seen better days. Many of the residents were receiving subsidized housing assistance, a mix of young families, elderly, and some disabled residents. Fortunately, crime was low in the otherwise mostly rural area, but so was the morale. The landlord kept up with basic repairs and little else. Two of the buildings were slightly different shades of grey than the others due to more recent paint jobs, and three of the units had roofing shingles with large mismatched patches because of repairs. The parking area was cracked and crumbling blacktop that hadn’t been repaved since at least two presidents ago.

It was utterly depressing.

“We’re pretty pitiful, aren’t we?” Oscar asked.

John nodded. “Yep.”

It was on the tip of Oscar’s tongue to ask John what he thought about Sachi when he squelched the thought. He didn’t want to do anything to screw up the investigation or taint her impression of Aunt Tammy based on him looking like a jerk to the woman.

Nope, better to keep it to himself and admire her from afar.

He and John got out and headed toward their apartment. Anyway, they’d be seeing Sachi again on Tuesday. Both men had agreed to be present for the investigation.

But it didn’t stop Oscar from thinking about Sachi’s beautiful blue eyes as he lay in bed and waited for sleep to take him.

Chapter Six

“So you’re in cahoots with Dad to keep me from shooting skeet yet, huh? Some friend you are.”

Sachi leaned against the doorway of Mandaline’s office and shot her friend a glare. Early on a Monday morning before Many Blessings opened, they were the only ones downstairs. Brad had already headed over to Libbie’s bakery to pick up their morning order.

Mandaline grinned from where she sat at her desk. “Sorry, sweetie. He bribed us with brisket. Blame Ellis more, because he offered to stash them in the new gun safe at the house.”

She let out a snort. “Bastard.”

“Like you’re really upset.”

Try as she might, Sachi couldn’t press her lips into a tight enough line to hide the way they curled at the outside edges.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Mandaline said, her grin even coloring her voice with good cheer.

“Ugh.” Sachi threw her hands up and headed for the counter. “I can’t win.”

“No, you can’t,” Mandaline called out from behind her. “So you might as well give in.”

Sachi spun on her heel and returned to the office. “Oh, I’m going to be in late tomorrow. I’m taking Dad to the airport.”

“He finally picked one of the jobs?”

“Yep.” She laced her hands together in front of her. “Look, if Brad and Ellis are too busy, I’m sure I can pay a moving company—”

“Don’t even,” Mandaline said as she pointed a finger at Sachi. “The guys were asking me this morning if we had a date yet. Looks like I can tell them now.” She smiled. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still irritated at you for shoving me into the bear pit. Two guys with great auras. I don’t even need one guy, much less two of them.”

Mandaline leaned back in her chair, that playful smile still on her face. “Either something will come of it, or it won’t. I’m not asking you to go throwing yourself at them. I’m simply asking you to stay open to the Universe.”

“I’m trying. It’s easy for you to say that.”

Mandaline’s smile finally faded. “Not so much, no. You were the one on *my* ass not too long ago, remember?”

Sachi crossed her arms in front of her. “Yeah, well, again, the whole *do as I say* shit, witchypoo.”

* * * *

Sachi jumped on the shop’s computer and pulled up Google Earth to get a better look at Tammy Evans’ property. No, they wouldn’t be hiking around it tomorrow night, but she wanted an idea of what they were dealing with.

The problem came when she tried to distinguish the property from the state forest it bordered. On the satellite view, the front three acres were clearly visible, but a sea of tree coverage blended the rest of the property in with the main forest and more heavily wooded properties on either side. Other than the faintest hint of a trail that might be a fire road if the overhead coverage wasn’t so thick, there wasn’t anything.

After a quick thought, she pulled up a page on the official Florida Fish and Wildlife website that listed hunting season dates for the Withlacoochee State Forest and found the ones for the Croom Tract.

Nope, there should be no legal hunters in the area. It would make sense during hunting season if people accidentally—or purposefully—wandered onto private property if it wasn’t adequately fenced and marked. Tammy had told them the pasture fencing had only been barbed wire, meaning it was probably down in many places now.

But maybe if they were jacklighting?

She might have been born a city girl in New Jersey, but having gone to school in Montana and Idaho, she heard enough hunting talk from kids in her classes, and from hanging around at the shooting clubs, to know what it was, and that it was usually highly illegal. Another quick search on the same state website confirmed that nighttime hunting wasn’t allowed, except for brief periods before sunrise, in some cases.

Hmm.

But Tammy insisted she wasn’t seeing flashlights or spotlights.

It would take a special kind of stupid to hunt with a glow stick.

And Tammy had said she hadn’t heard any gunshots.

But bow hunting was allowed in some areas of the forest during certain seasons and for certain game.

Sachi looked up a couple of phone numbers and made some calls. Ten minutes later, she was still stumped. Rangers didn’t have any cases of poaching arrests, or reported poaching activity, in that area for the past couple of months.

Of course not. That would have been way too easy.

The Croom Motorcycle Area was the more heavily used park area and lay just to the east. It was the tract where Sam Corey lived.

Where Julie had died trying to get rid of the evil spirit possessing Sami's now-deceased husband, Steve.

Sachi yanked her thoughts right the hell off that train before they could get settled into seats and make themselves comfy. She had a job to do and didn't want to get bogged down again in her relatively fresh grief over losing Julie.

Sitting back in the chair, she studied the satellite view once more. She'd gone on many investigations with Julie and had helped her debunk plenty of cases.

What would Julie do?

Sachi stared at the screen, willing the answer to come to her.

Believe...

The word quietly drifted through her mind with the force of a hurricane.

But what did it mean? Believe Tammy? Believe Mandaline's insistence on taking a risk? Believe that there was hope for her lonely, pathetic life?

Temporarily stumped, she started to put together the investigation plan.

* * * *

Sachi both dreaded and eagerly anticipated the upcoming investigation. So much so that, by Tuesday afternoon, her body had decided to reenact the Normandy invasion in her stomach and lower intestines.

Mandaline knocked on the apartment's bathroom door, where Sachi had retreated yet again for a little privacy and so as to not tie up the downstairs bathroom that both staff and customers shared.

"You all right? I have Imodium."

"I'll be fine," Sachi grumbled. "This is all your fault, you know!" she added.

On the other side of the door, Mandaline laughed. "Sure, I'll take the blame if it means you get past this and take a chance."

"Right now I have to get past needing to stay within a ten-second sprint of a toilet."

Mandaline was waiting for Sachi in the kitchen when she emerged a few minutes later.

She handed Sachi a glass of water and a tablet. "Here. It'll help."

"So will Valium. Or maybe Xanax," Sachi muttered as she took the offered medicine and downed it with a few swallows of water. She'd always had this problem, from when she was a kid. Even before the attack that had changed her life. If she got nervous, her stomach took the brunt of it.

"You know what you're going to say when you look back on all this, don't you?" Mandaline asked.

"That I *really* wish I was into hexing and threw one on you?"

Her friend grinned. "Nooo. You're going to be glad you took this step regardless of how it turns out."

"You sound annoyingly cocky right now. You realize that, right?"

"Yep." She hugged Sachi. "That's because I see only good things happening for you."

* * * *

Unfortunately, the Goddess apparently had an even more twisted sense of humor than Sachi originally suspected. A blob of showers moved in off the Gulf of Mexico and hovered over their area, with more rain behind it.

They wouldn't be able to run their investigation that evening. Although, to be fair, that was a typical summer day in Florida, with a very strong chance of late-afternoon thunderstorms every day.

She called Tammy first, both relieved at not having to face the men, and irritated at the fact that her intestinal uprising had been in vain.

"I wondered if you'd have to reschedule," Tammy said after Sachi broke the news to her. "It's all right. I'm keeping track of things like you all asked me to."

"Anything new happen since we left?"

"No, I didn't see any lights yesterday, and I haven't seen any tonight, either, but I suspect with the rain I might not be able to." She had a thought. "Come to think of it, I usually don't see the lights for a couple of days after a good hard rain. But then again, maybe I simply missed seeing them."

"Okay. Would you mind calling your nephew and letting him know?"

"I'll do that. Let me know when you want to reschedule."

“Thanks, I appreciate it. I’m going to have to juggle a few things on my schedule, as well as my dad’s move here from Idaho. It might be a couple of weeks before we can reschedule, but please call us immediately if the activity increases.”

“I will, thanks.”

With more than a little relief, Sachi said good-bye and ended the call.

“*Bok-bok*,” Mandaline clucked from the doorway.

Sachi stuck her tongue out at her. “Hey, don’t blame me, witchypoo. Blame the Goddess.”

“Did you do a rain dance?”

She grinned. “No, but thanks for the idea.”

“You want to stay for dinner tonight?”

Sachi was about to say no and remembered that she’d be going home to an empty house for the first time in a couple of weeks. Her dad had arrived the day after she got shot, and had been there ever since.

It would be weird going home and not having him there, not smelling him cooking their dinner, and not having his comforting presence around.

“Okay,” Sachi said. “Sounds good.” She stood to leave the room and stopped in front of Mandaline. “You sort of owe me anyway for putting me through this.”

“I am but a tool of the Universe,” she said, an evil grin on her face.

“You’re a tool all right, witchypoo.” She pushed past Mandaline to take the phone receiver back to its cradle at the front counter, her friend’s bright laughter following her down the hallway.

* * * *

Brad’s cooking experiment that evening was homemade fried chicken. The aroma drifted from the apartment and filled the downstairs where Sachi and Mandaline were going through the candle display in the closed store and putting together a replenishment order.

“I have to admit,” Sachi said, “you lucked out with those two.” Ellis would return home shortly from his law office just a couple of blocks down the street. For now, they were still living in the apartment over the store until the renovations were complete enough on the old house Brad and Ellis had purchased and started rehabbing for them to move there.

The same house that had brought Brad and Ellis together with Mandaline, and where Sachi nearly lost her life.

“You, too, could know the joys of a poly triad,” Mandaline teased. “Or, at the very least, a relationship with one guy.”

“Can we make a deal to can it tonight? My stomach’s finally declared a truce with itself. I haven’t needed the bathroom for a whole twenty minutes. I’d rather keep it that way.”

“Sorry.”

Her father had also called her upon his safe return to Idaho. While they didn’t have a firm date set yet, it looked like Sachi, Ellis, and Brad would be flying out sometime the following week.

“This messes up your July 4th plans, you know,” Sachi said. “Are you sure you don’t want them here with you? I can drive the truck. Might take me longer by myself, but I can do it.”

Mandaline jammed her hands on her hips. “You know damn well your dad won’t let you do that, and he shouldn’t be riding in a vehicle that long with his arthritis. Makenzie and Anna already volunteered to help out here in exchange for paid days off elsewhere. So did Mina and Paige. I’ll have more than enough help around here.”

“All right.” She swallowed hard, touched that her friends had jumped in like that to help cover the day. “Thank you.”

“Second thoughts about having him here?”

“No. Not that. Just...it feels weird in a *good* way, this big change.”

“Not all changes are bad, sweetie. I know you’ve had more than your fair share of bad changes, but take it from me, good things are coming your way.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I am right.”

Ellis let himself in the front door with his key, carrying his suit jacket and his laptop bag slung over his shoulder. “Ooh, what smells yummy?”

“Tarzan’s stirring up a batch of fried chicken,” Sachi said.

He walked over. “I take it you’re joining us tonight?”

“For dinner. Nothing else, lucky you.”

She liked Ellis. He and Mandaline had a little bit of a rocky start at first due to his inability to believe in the supernatural, but he was the first person outside of Sachi’s immediate Many Blessings family she’d ever confided in about what had happened to her years ago. She’d taken him skeet shooting that first time more as a way to better evaluate him for

Mandaline's sake, and had ended up becoming friends with him in the process.
He smiled. "Your dad get to Idaho all right?"
"Yep."
"I'm actually looking forward to taking the time off for this. I haven't been through that part of the country before."
"You haven't missed much," she grouched, then gentled her tone. "Sorry. Old habit. It is pretty. My memories are... tainted."
He gave her a one-armed hug. "Understandable. I'll see you guys upstairs."
Sachi watched him disappear through the doorway leading to the stairs after he kissed Mandaline. "You're one lucky witch, lady," she muttered.
"Don't I know it." Mandaline poked her in the back, between the shoulder blades. "And so, too, shall you be."
"Don't count my lovers before they're laid."
Mandaline grinned. "There's the Queen of Snark I know and love so much."

* * * *

John tried to hide his disappointment after getting off the phone with his aunt. Yes, with the weather he'd suspected a cancellation, but had hoped he still might get a chance to spend time with Sachi anyway.
I could call her and ask her out to dinner.
Once again his mind rattled off all the reasons why that was a bad idea, including the fact that he didn't want to exclude Oscar.
He called Oscar. "Bad news."
"What?"
"The rain cancelled tonight."
Oscar was silent for a moment. "Oh."
He felt his friend's disappointment mirroring his own. "Yeah. Aunt Tammy just got off the phone with Sachi."
"Oh?"
He didn't understand the new tone in his friend's voice and decided to let it go. Oscar was probably still at work and couldn't freely talk. They hadn't been openly discussing Aunt Tammy's claims around others for fear of her becoming the victim of a scammer. "We can still go over there for dinner tonight, if you want. She offered."
He let out a sigh. "Sure. Why not? No reason for us not to."
"Okay."

* * * *

Oscar bit back the bitter disappointment welling up inside him.
Maybe I need to call Sachi and tell her she can call me to talk about stuff with the case, if she wants to.
"I'll see you at the apartment then," he said before ending the call with John. He set his cell phone on his desk and stared at the project on his monitor.
He didn't understand what was wrong with him. He'd spent the entire day thinking about Sachi and not focused on his damn work. Which was why he was still working on this stupid project right now. He didn't have to have it finished until Friday, but he wanted it done and off his plate.
Unfortunately, thoughts of Sachi had sapped his usually unflappable focus.
He sat back and closed his eyes. *A man can fantasize, right?* As long as he didn't make the trip from Fantasyland into Uber-Creepyville, all was cool.
He didn't have to tell anyone else about the dreams he'd been having about Sachi, right?
Or that she'd been on his mind that morning when he rubbed one out in the shower before work.
Or that there was something about her that had gotten its hooks into him and wouldn't let go. Something he couldn't explain or define.
Feeling a way he hadn't felt in...ever. About anyone.

* * * *

On his way home, John stopped by his parents' house. After his divorce they'd offered to let him move in with them. While he'd appreciated the offer, it felt even more wrong than the option of moving in with Aunt Tammy had felt at the time.

Although, in Aunt Tammy's case, she probably genuinely needed someone else under her roof, if current developments were any indication.

His dad was in the kitchen, cooking. "Hey, son. You staying for dinner? Your mom stopped at the grocery store on her way home from work."

"We're going over to Aunt Tammy's. I'm on my way home to get Oscar, but thanks for the offer."

His face clouded. "How is she?"

Aunt Tammy was a touchy subject around his mom, which was why John was glad she'd gotten delayed on her way home from work. She still taught English at a high school in Spring Hill. "She's okay. Lonely, I think. She has me and Oscar over at least once a week."

His dad nodded as he stirred a pot full of what looked like a cheesy sauce of some sort. "That's nice."

"Don't worry, I haven't told Mom."

His mom felt his father's aunt should sell her property and move into an assisted living facility. She'd dealt with being a caretaker to her own mother, who'd had Alzheimer's, and refused to do it again for another elderly relative, considering the stress she'd been under after her husband's heart attack. She had limited herself to taking care of her husband, and that was it.

"You know she loves Aunt Tammy," his dad said, "but you can see her point of view."

"I can see it, but I don't agree with it. Aunt Tammy is still capable of living alone. Her tax prep was better than mine."

"I know that, and you know that. But I can't blame her, either. It was hard enough on her getting me through my cardiac rehab. She still panics if I so much as cough. I don't want her stressed out any more than need be."

Every time John mentioned his aunt around his mom, his mom went off on a more than energetic tirade of how the woman belonged somewhere that could take care of her, and how she didn't want to be responsible for having to deal with the fallout should the elderly woman fall or otherwise become incapacitated before that time.

It did no good to tell his mom that his aunt had already revealed her will and her wishes, and that he himself had volunteered to help her out if and when that day arrived.

It would only make his mom rail even harder against it, not wanting him saddled with caring for his elderly grandaunt.

John leaned against the counter. "No one's going to stress her out except herself," John said. "She does a dang good job of that."

"She was talking about wanting to look at condos again."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I did put my foot down, believe it or not." He smiled. "I'm not a complete wuss when it comes to your mother. I'm not nearly ready to give up my home or my privacy just yet. I can still afford a lawn guy to come in and take care of the yard. She's just a worrywart."

True, but he saw his mom's side of that argument. His father had coded twice on the ambulance ride to the hospital after his heart attack. Fortunately, it'd happened at the shop, in the office, with plenty of people to see it happen and jump into action to get him help.

Had it happened five minutes later, when he would have been behind the wheel of a work truck and on his way to a job, it could have been fatal. Not only for him, but for anyone he might have accidentally injured.

"So nothing interesting happening, huh?" his dad asked.

John thought about the postponed investigation, and the way his thoughts kept turning to Sachi Wolowitz. "Nope. Not really."

"I heard Karen was seen out and about."

John groaned. "I know. Oscar already heard."

"How's he doing?"

"Better than he was." He glanced out the window, where he saw his mom's car pull into the driveway. "Hanging in there. Just like me."

"You boys are young. You'll find the right women and be fine. It just takes time."

"Yeah, I know."

He managed to get out of there after helping his mom unload her groceries. As he headed back to their dinky duplex apartment, John once again thought about accepting Aunt Tammy's offer of living at her house. It would mean catching a ration of shit from his mom about it.

Then again, he was thirty-two.

Maybe it's time to make a few decisions on my own instead of simply reacting to the punches life throws at me.

Oscar had just returned home when John arrived. John grabbed a quick shower before they made the turnaround to go to his aunt's house. When he emerged from the bathroom, he walked out to the living room.

"We only have a couple of months left on the lease before we're due for renewal," John said.

“Yeah?”

“What we were talking about the other night. You mean it?”

“Moving in with her?”

John nodded.

“Well, sure. I love Aunt Tammy.”

“You wouldn’t have a problem living there with her if we have to start caring for her more?” John asked.

“No. Why would I? I told you, I’m in. If she wants me there, I’m happy to be there. You thinking about it again?”

“Yeah. I stopped by my mom and dad’s on the way home.”

“Ah. Well, *there’s* the problem. Your mom will be up our asses about it nonstop if we do.”

“I know.” He leaned against the wall. “We’ll see if Aunt Tammy brings it up again tonight. If she does, I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page.”

“Sure. And we are.”

When they let themselves in the front door at Tammy’s house, the delicious aroma of beef stew hit them.

“Oh, man,” Oscar said as he lead the way to the kitchen, where they found her at the stove. “That smells great!” He kissed her on the cheek before stepping out of the way so John could kiss her other cheek.

“Glad you think so. Haven’t made stew in a while.” She turned from the stove and stared at them. “You’re going to think I’m nuts, but Herbert told me you two are thinking about finally taking me up on my offer.”

The men shared a guilty look. “What?” John asked when he found his voice first.

She wore a smile. “No, I’m not crazy. Let me prove it. You boys discussed signing a lease with me and everything.”

Oscar fumbled the plastic cup he’d been pulling down from the cabinet next to the sink. Despite his best efforts, it tumbled out of his hands and into the stainless steel sink, where it bounced around until he finally got his fingers wrapped around it.

The look of shock on Oscar’s face had to mirror the one John knew he now wore. “How did you—”

“I told you. Herbert told me.” She smiled. “I dreamed it last night. He comes to me in my dreams and we sit and talk. So yes, if that’s the only way I can convince you two boys to give up that horrible little apartment you’re living in and move in with me, fine, we’ll do a lease and you can pay me rent.” She turned back to the stove.

Wide-eyed, Oscar shrugged and shook his head, his meaning clear. *I didn’t say anything to her.*

“Will you boys please set the table?” she called over her shoulder, effectively ending the conversation.

“Yes, ma’am,” they parroted back with a final glance at each other.

* * * *

The rest of dinner went relatively normally. Oscar thought they were going to get out of there without any additional weirdness.

Until just after dessert.

That was when Aunt Tammy lobbed another oddball at them.

“Sachi seems like a very nice woman. Very sweet.”

Oscar glanced to John for guidance. Seeing none, he stumbled forward. “She seems like it.”

She stood and picked up her now empty dessert plate. “That nice young man, Brad? He said she’s single. I think you boys should consider asking her out.” With that, she turned and walked into the kitchen.

John sat there, his fork frozen midbite, and stared at Oscar.

Oscar stared back. After a long, uncomfortable moment, Oscar gave up trying to figure out a response to her comment and shoved another bite of red velvet cake into his piehole.

John did the same.

On the ride home that night, they didn’t talk about it. It wasn’t until Oscar pulled in and parked that John finally spoke.

“That was weird, right?”

“Um, yeah, kind of.”

“You know, if it turns out she really is losing it…”

Oscar couldn’t blame him for not wanting to finish that statement. “Dude, I’m there with you, regardless. I’m not walking away from her just because she’s not a blood relative.”

“Okay. Thanks. I appreciate it.”

But as they said good night and closed themselves behind their respective bedroom doors, Oscar couldn’t help how his thoughts returned to Sachi. He’d researched her story and knew far more about her than she’d probably be comfortable with. The tabloids had done a fine job scouring her past and putting it all out there in a scandalously condensed version for the world

to one-click on, but he'd wanted to know the full truth.

He knew it was crazy to label what he thought he might be feeling for her as love, since, technically, he barely knew her. But he also knew he hadn't felt this way about Karen, even in the best of times.

Troubled and knowing no answers would be forthcoming, he climbed into bed and tried to go to sleep.

Chapter Seven

Early Thursday afternoon, Sachi felt she owed Ellis an apology as he walked around to the trunk of his car and opened it.

Inside lay two of her 12-gauge over-under shotguns, her favorite Browning and a Stoeger she let him use for his lessons.

"I could kiss you, chief. Seriously. I mean flat-out on the lips and everything. Maybe even slip in a little tongue. Even if you are Mandaline's guy."

He opened the zippered cases, removed the guns from the trunk, and broke them both open before he carried them over to the shelter where he set them in the gun rack. "A deal's a deal, though. Right?"

She nodded. "Yeah. If it hurts too bad, I'll stop. I promise."

Sachi didn't know if Ellis had told Mandaline what he was up to. When he'd called Sachi earlier in the day and confirmed that she would be at the skeet field that afternoon, she'd hoped and prayed he'd had an idea up his sleeve.

She dumped a box of shells into the pouch she used for shooting while Ellis pulled on his new skeet vest. After they both put in their earplugs and donned their shooting glasses, Ellis grabbed the controller and followed Sachi over to station one, where she removed a shell from her pouch.

"You remember what to do?" she asked.

"High, low, doubles," he said, smiling. He carried the Stoeger broke open and balanced on his shoulder.

He was turning into one of her better adult students, although he had yet to hit twenty in a round.

After taking a deep breath, she slid the shell into the lower barrel and snapped the gun closed. Then she mounted it to her shoulder, wincing a little as she locked her right elbow into position.

"You want to see one first?" he asked.

"Nope." She let her mind settle. "Ha."

Above them, the machine cycled in the high house and launched a clay. She nailed it over the center bunker, where it exploded into a cloud of dust.

"You winced a little."

She lowered the gun and broke it open, her hand cupped over the shell so the ejectors didn't send it flying out of the barrel. "A little." She looked up at him with all seriousness. "It's not as bad as it was last week, but I'll admit I don't know if I'm good for a whole round or not."

He nodded and didn't question her further. She deposited the spent hull in the front section of her shooting pouch and grabbed a live one, sliding it into the lower barrel.

This time, she lined up her shot and her hold point for the low house. "Ha."

That one she nailed a little closer to her than she liked to hit them, but still got it.

She broke the shotgun open and put two fresh shells in. "This will be the test," she said, snapping the action closed again and mounting the gun.

She felt the low, dull ache in her healing shoulder, but it still wasn't as bad as it had felt last week. "Ha."

From each house, an orange clay arced out of the windows and across the field toward each other. She picked off the high house first, nailing low house late, but she got it.

"Well?" he asked.

"It hurts, but I want to try another station." She looked at him after she'd unloaded the spent hulls. "You're all right, chief. I take back anything nasty I might have said or ever will say about you."

He laughed. "Sweetie, it was pitiful. Like watching a wounded animal trying to gnaw off its leg in a trap."

She batted her eyes at him. "Aw, you lawyers have such a sweet way with the wordage crap. Seduce me some more."

"So says the mistress of bitchcraft."

She grinned. "That's *princess* of bitchcraft, thank you very much."

They switched places, Ellis handing over the controller to her. By the time they reached station four, Sachi had missed two shots and knew she was finished. She set her gun in the rack under the shelter and spent the rest of the round pulling for Ellis.

When they finished and walked back to the shelter, she sat on the bench, feeling so frustrated she worried she might break down and cry in front of him. "I just...It wasn't bad enough the fucker tried to kill me, he had to take away my only joy in life, too?"

"Sachi, he didn't take it away from you. You just need a little more time to heal, that's all. Give it time and be thankful it wasn't worse."

She returned her unused shells to the box in her shooting bag before she and Ellis dumped the spent hulls into a cloth

grocery bag. She'd take them home and reload. "The only good thing that came out of all of this is that the fucker's dead," she said.

"And your dad is moving here."

She snorted. "You and your freaking logic."

He smiled. "Just remember our deal. I won't tell your dad we did this, but you have to take it easy."

Ellis was one of the only people she'd let talk to her like that. Partially because he'd saved her and Mandaline's lives, and mostly because she really liked and trusted him.

And he was one of the few people whose counsel she'd actually listen and give weight to. "I promise, chief."

"You have students today?"

"Yeah." She glanced at the time on her phone. "They should start arriving here shortly."

"Would you mind if I hang around?"

"No, but why?"

He shrugged. "I like watching you teach. I learn from you."

She grinned. "Most of them shoot far better than you."

"So I learn humility from them."

It felt damn good to be able to laugh. "Sure, you're welcome to stay and hang out." She wasn't an idiot. He was hanging around to make sure she got out of there and got home safely. No doubt Mandaline would be calling or texting her if Sachi didn't call or text her first later.

And she wasn't about to complain about it, either.

Admitting it, however, would take her getting shot again first.

* * * *

When Sachi's dad gave her the firm moving dates and the okay to buy plane tickets the next morning, she felt a thrill run through her.

Yes, it was a minor aggravation to reschedule some of her skeet students after having had to reschedule them when she got shot, but when she called them and explained why, they all understood.

But it also meant having to reschedule, again, Tammy Evans' investigation.

I want it done and off my plate.

Until they could get feet on the ground, so to speak, and get that investigation underway, she wouldn't be able to focus on much else. After consulting with a calendar and padding a little for safety for the road trip, she called the woman with a tentative date.

"Oh, I completely understand," she told Sachi. "I'm not in any hurry. I haven't seen anything the past couple of days."

"That's good. I mean good that it's quiet."

"You know, I would love to have you out here for dinner when you return. I'll invite John and Oscar, too."

Greeeeat. Just what I need. Someone else throwing them at me. "That sounds wonderful, but I can't give you a firm date on that. We'll have to do that on a different night. I'll be playing catch-up after we get my dad moved, and I really want to get your investigation started."

"No worries. I understand. Good luck, and have a safe trip."

"Thanks." Sachi hung up, wondering if the woman had been trying to hook her up with the guys, too.

No. That'd just be...silly. She could see one of her friends, someone close to her own age and who was more open-minded about alternative lifestyles doing that.

But Tammy Evans?

I'm just paranoid, that's all. I spent too many years looking over my shoulder. Sometimes, coincidences are just that.

* * * *

Nearly ten years earlier, Sachi had hugged her father good-bye, climbed into her pickup truck, pointed it east, and never looked back.

It hadn't mattered that her rapist—the man who'd also murdered her mother—was dead, and his father, who'd attacked and tried to strangle her, was in jail.

All that had mattered was the fact that she couldn't sleep more than an hour at a time, or through even the slightest noise. That she slept with her loaded shotgun propped next to her bed, and her bedroom door locked, the window locked and clamped shut with extra antiburglary devices.

That she still couldn't recognize the blonde girl with short hair and her own blue eyes in the mirror every morning, even though she was the one who'd decided to change her appearance.

That her mom was dead, and her own life forever altered.

That she saw auras now, something that freaked her out at first until she started researching them on the Internet.

That she still had nightmares every night.

Her destination of Florida had simply been a logistical issue. Had she been able to drive to Cuba and spoken Spanish she would have settled there.

Luckily, trap and skeet were pretty big in Florida. Despite having grown up in New Jersey, the thought of living in Tampa or St. Petersburg freaked Sachi out a little, the sheer size of the cities. Brooksville was smaller, quieter, and there was a community college there she could attend.

Property had been inexpensive, and the staff at the trap and skeet club there were in desperate need of a juniors coach. Within six months, she had built an outwardly good life for herself. She'd invested some of the money her dad gave her from her mom's life insurance settlement, as well as a wrongful death lawsuit they'd filed and settled out of court. Bought herself a house. Enough money still to pay for school and bills, as long as she was careful.

And she was very, *very* careful. She might have sucked at math and science, but at least she'd managed to snag one stereotypical trait of her mixed heritage and was extremely good at managing her money. She also held down a series of part-time jobs until she was able to prove herself and become a skeet instructor at the field.

Sachi had called Florida home for over eighteen months when she stepped into Many Blessings one afternoon after her school classes, because rain had cancelled her skeet lessons for the day.

That day was another one forever etched in her memory. Thankfully, for a far more positive reason.

Julie had been alone in the store that day. Sachi remembered walking through the door, the bell jingling, and her pausing as the cool AC briefly chilled her and her eyes adjusted to the dimmer light.

The petite, red-haired ball of fire had looked up from where she was writing something down at the counter. Then her eyes had widened before she swooped across the showroom with a happy squeal, as if Sachi were a long-lost friend.

Julie had grabbed Sachi's hands, a beaming smile on her face. "Yes!"

"Uh, sorry? Yes what?"

Julie squeezed her hands. "You're hired."

"I wasn't coming in here for a job."

"I know. Doesn't matter. Auras, right?"

Stunned, Sachi had nodded.

"Then it's settled. Can you start today, or tomorrow?"

And that was all there was to it. Julie had brooked no disagreement, and Sachi had quit her other part-time job working as a cashier at a hardware store.

Julie, Mandaline, and the others had welcomed her into the fold, worked with her, taught her so much about what she could do, as well as other things. She discovered she had a talent for reading Tarot cards. Combined with her ability to see auras, she was able to start giving readings to customers, then teaching.

Between working at the store, teaching skeet, and going to school, Sachi was almost too busy to look over her shoulder all the time.

She even quit dying her hair and let it grow out again.

About a year after going to work at Many Blessings, she'd spent a quiet evening upstairs in the apartment with Julie, having dinner, and tearfully admitting everything she'd gone through.

The only person, besides her father and the cops, to whom she'd told the complete and unabridged story of what had happened since it happened.

On Julie's couch, her friend had held her as she'd sobbed the story out in a way she'd never been able to before. Julie was also, at that time, the only other person who knew her real name. She'd wanted Julie to know in case something happened to her, so she could contact her dad for her and tell him.

Julie had held her, gently rocking her. "You are not the sum of your scars, Miki Bloomfeld. You are a beautiful woman, a powerful creature, a steadfast pillar of strength for those who love you. Now and in the future." She'd cupped Sachi's face in her hands and made Sachi look her in the eyes.

"The cardinal isn't your totem just because of your mom's love for it. *It is* you. You don't realize how much you brighten a room by walking into it, do you? The people around you love you for your intelligence, your insight, even your snark. You will have to learn to let go of your pain, stop using it as a shield against the world. Once you do, you will open yourself to joy the likes of which you don't believe is possible."

Sachi was yanked out of her memories by the pilot's announcement that they were beginning their final descent into

Spokane. Her stomach reflexively clenched as the plane gracefully sank through the clouds.

As she tightly gripped the armrests on either side of her, Brad and Ellis both reached over and covered her hands with theirs.

“Don’t worry,” Ellis said. “We’re here with you.”

“Yeah,” Brad added, “and Mandaline will kick our asses if we don’t take care of you.”

She glanced over at him and spotted his playful smile.

Taking a deep breath, she let it out again. “I *really* appreciate this, guys. I can’t tell you how much.”

“That’s what friends are for,” Ellis said. “Because you’re even more than a friend. You’re family.”

She closed her eyes and took another deep breath. *Family.*

Julie, I’m trying to open myself, like you said. I really am. Please help me, if you can hear me. Give me a sign.

Her dad was waiting for them in the terminal, and she let him pull her into his arms for a huge hug.

“I apologize in advance for the disaster at the house,” her dad said as he led them out to his SUV, “but moving is messier than I thought it’d be. It didn’t seem like I had a lot of stuff when I started out to do this.”

Sachi spent most of the ride with her face turned to the window while her dad and the men talked. Some of the passing landscape looked desolate and ruggedly familiar. Other areas no longer resembled her memories in any way due to development.

When he turned off onto the road curving up to the house, she forced herself to breathe. In summer’s dry heat, the area had lost its bright spring green colors in lieu of fading green and even brown. Trees had grown up in the years since she’d left, creating more shade than she remembered in some areas.

And when he pulled into the driveway, she thought about the first time they’d pulled up to the house, that time in a moving truck, her dad driving, herself in the passenger seat.

The past and the present merged, melding, until Brad’s voice pulled her out of her thoughts. “Sachi? You all right?”

“Yeah.” She unfastened her seat belt and opened the door, climbing out. The warm piney air felt dry, unlike Florida’s ironically cooler, albeit muggier breezes.

A moving truck sat backed up near the front door. “I’ve already got my tools loaded,” her dad said. “I figured we’d be dumping a lot of stuff into the storage unit when we get to Florida, so I’d leave everything in there and then could move them into my truck once we’ve got the moving truck emptied.” He walked up to the house and unlocked the door, leading the way inside.

Sachi hung back for a moment, her thoughts a jumbled swirl. She’d been swathed in a painful and emotionally numb kind of haze when they’d first moved here. If it hadn’t been for her father’s gentle prodding, she might never had gotten out of bed again. But he hadn’t given up on her, refused to let her give up on herself despite his own grief.

They’d become a team of sorts, despite everything they’d lost.

When she stepped inside, the past and present did a funky little dance again. It even smelled the same inside, the faint cedar aroma of the paneling in the small house’s living room lingering in the air.

In one corner still stood the glass-fronted curio cabinet. When they’d moved there, Sachi personally had placed every object as close to its original position as she could based on pictures and detailed notes she’d taken before packing it. It had been her mom’s, and the majority of the items were cardinals. Ceramic, glass, even carved wood, they took up the bulk of the six shelves.

It looked like her dad had kept it as close to the same and meticulously dusted everything the way she had.

She opened the door and adjusted the front bird on the third shelf from the top, pointing it a little more out to the front.

The way her mom had kept it.

Her dad walked up behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders. “I hope you don’t mind I left it for you to pack. I thought maybe you’d want to do it since you did it before.”

She reached up and squeezed his hands. “Thanks, Daddy,” she whispered, her throat threatening to squeeze closed on the words. “I appreciate it.”

Chapter Eight

One of John's guys finished a job sooner than expected and was able to take on another job he'd planned to handle personally. That left him with extremely rare free time.

He opted to swing by Many Blessings. He wanted to invite Sachi to dinner with him and Oscar tomorrow night, on the fourth. They didn't have a lot to offer in terms of ambiance, but Oscar was a fan-damn-tastic cook. It felt more right doing things that way than trying to arrange a formal three-way date.

Not date. Quit calling it that. You're not asking her out on a date.

No, he didn't want that. Well, he did, but knew he couldn't. Dinner didn't mean a date, right?

What his aunt had said to them at dinner the previous week kept rolling through his head.

He found a parking space on the square. A bell on the door jingled, announcing his arrival as he pushed it open. He walked inside the cool store and enjoyed the way the AC chased the early July heat away. Upon initial glance, it looked like he was the only customer in the store.

A guy wearing an apron stood behind the counter. He recognized him as Brad, from the investigation. Apparently, from Brad's beaming smile, he recognized John, too.

"Hey, John. How are you?"

"Brad, right?"

"Yeah." They shook hands over the counter. "Did something else happen at your aunt's?"

"No." John suppressed the nervous cough that wanted to break through. "I just wanted to stop by and see Sachi for a moment and ask her a quick question."

"Oh, sorry. She's not here."

His heart sank. "Oh. Well, I can just call her. She left me her cell phone number."

"No, I mean she's not in town right now. She and Ellis are driving her dad's moving truck back to Florida."

"Oh." His heart sank even more. His aunt had told them Sachi had postponed things because of a move, but not any of the details. "I didn't realize she was married." *Idiot. Why did I say that?* In fact, he could have sworn Aunt Tammy said Sachi was single.

Brad laughed. "Uh, *nooo*. Sachi's single. Ellis and I are Mandaline's guys. Ellis is just helping out as a friend. I would have helped drive, too, except I'm not supposed to drive."

Brad tapped his temple. "Old brain injury. Once in a while, I have seizures. I flew out, helped with the packing part of the operation, and flew back to Florida with her dad. He just started his new job yesterday."

John was still stuck on trying to process the *Ellis and I* comment. "Huh?"

Brad's grin widened. "You heard me right. I'm guessing that's what's causing your confusion? Don't worry, it throws everyone who hears it for the first time."

He stared at Brad. This had gone from a painfully awkward attempt on his part to ask Sachi out to dinner into a very strange and possibly even more awkward discussion.

"Feel free to ask questions, if you want," Brad said. "We're used to it."

John's brain tried to form words and couldn't. His mind felt too clogged up to dump vocalizations down into his larynx.

Brad, ever helpful, added, "And we're not gay, either. It's called a *poly-V triad*."

John stared.

"It gets easier to process after the initial shock," Brad assured him.

The glimmer of something tried to take hold in his mind and he shoved it away. Sure, he and Oscar had had juvenile, frat boy discussions about sharing a woman. Usually after having downed their third or fourth beer each, while in the privacy of their own living room, and usually while watching a bad B-movie on SyFy staring a buxom C-list celebrity.

It wasn't something that had ever crossed his mind as being in the realm of possibilities, no matter what his aunt had said. He suspected Oscar was also attracted to Sachi, from the way his friend had looked at her at Aunt Tammy's house the other night, and from how Oscar had tried to hide his disappointment over the postponed investigation.

Not to mention Oscar's reaction over what Aunt Tammy had said to them.

He'd also wondered if it would be a source of contention between them. In every other way, throughout their lives, they'd gotten along quite well with very few issues.

John wouldn't sacrifice his friendship with Oscar over a relationship with a woman. Oscar had been there for him when love had left him high and dry and shriveled on the rocks in the sun. And he'd been there for Oscar.

"Sachi's single?" Horror enveloped him as he realized he'd spoken that out loud.

Brad glanced around and leaned in, lowering his voice. "Don't tell Mandaline or Sachi I told you this, but Sachi sees

auras. She said when you came to fix her water heater, and then when she ran into your friend in the grocery store, that she saw auras around you two that she'd only seen once before in her life. And she saw them again the other night at your aunt's house." He smiled and nodded as if that should make things crystal clear to John.

No, not so much. "What? What are you saying?"

"She's into you guys, okay? If you haven't been living under a rock without a TV lately, you'll know she hasn't always had an easy life." Brad leaned in closer, prompting John to do the same, Brad's voice dropping even lower. "And she's very scared of being hurt right now."

The man's friendly expression transformed into a harsh, stern warning. "So don't be afraid to take a chance. But if you two guys play her and hurt her, keep in mind you'll have a whole freaking store full of people after you who consider witchcraft and magick as far more than just a harmless hobby, and who will be out for your blood. Literally."

As Brad leaned back, his serene smile reappeared, as if it'd never left his face. His voice returned to normal levels. "Just sayin', man. But seriously, take the first step. Ask her out. Both of you."

The bell on the door jingled as an older couple entered and headed for the counter. John stepped to the side, letting Brad greet them while he processed what just happened.

It almost hadn't felt real, like maybe he'd imagined the whole thing.

Maybe I did. Maybe he was the one, not his aunt, who needed a mental health evaluation.

Taking the opportunity while Brad was occupied, John hurriedly left the store and returned to his work van. He sat there for a moment, the AC blasting and radio up, while he tried to process the conversation he'd just had.

The very weird conversation, very...well, *weird* was the only word he kept pulling out of his vocabulary.

Spooky weird.

He stared at the storefront. It felt like he'd been dropped into an alternate dimension for a few minutes and had emerged from the other side.

Kind of like when he and Oscar had dinner at his aunt's house and she dropped the double bomb on them about dream conversations with her deceased husband, and that Sachi was someone they should look at as a romantic interest.

It couldn't be that easy. Nothing is that easy. Ever.

After a few minutes, he finally pulled out of the parking space and drove back to work.

* * * *

It was a bittersweet two days in Idaho for Sachi. By the time Ellis and Sachi were ready to leave with the moving truck Sachi was eager to get back to Florida.

To having her dad there for good.

Even better, the real estate agent was going to be showing the house tomorrow to three people, and had received several other inquiries about it already.

Life was looking up, and Sachi couldn't be happier.

They had crossed into Montana, Sachi at the wheel as they headed east on I-90.

"You all right?" Ellis asked.

One at a time, she unclenched her fingers from around the steering wheel and flexed her right hand before putting it back on the wheel. "Fine."

She'd gone through this the last time she'd been this way, too, terrified that she might not make it out of Montana alive.

Paranoid that every state trooper she saw might be a friend of Jackson Clary's and on the lookout for her. Fortunately, the county she'd lived in before was two south of the Interstate, giving her a modicum of comfort.

This time the stress wasn't nearly as severe, but the old memories remained.

In fact, this time she needed to chase a ghost of her own. As they approached the turnoff to head toward where they'd lived, she signaled.

"We need gas?" he asked.

"Yes, but I need to do something."

"Want me to take a turn at the wheel?"

"Not yet."

They fueled up. She didn't need a map to find her way south. The drive was seared in her mind.

"Um, wrong way, Sachi."

"Side trip, chief."

Apparently he was quick on the uptake, because he didn't ask any other questions.

It took them nearly an hour, and she stopped at a grocery store on the outskirts of town and bought some flowers from the

sparse display in their produce department. When they reached the cemetery, she sat there for a moment behind the wheel.

“Do you want to be alone?”

She shook her head.

He got out and walked around the cab, opening the door for her. She shut off the engine and let him help her down. With him following, she walked a path she knew from memory, even though she hadn’t been there in over a decade.

“I always felt ashamed I didn’t stop when I left home,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because I should have come by.”

“No, I meant why didn’t you stop?”

“Fear.” She glanced back at him. “I didn’t know what to expect. I was terrified enough driving alone through Montana.”

“I don’t claim to understand what you went through, but I know the woman you are now. I want you to know I consider you a friend, even adopted family.”

She stopped and turned, looking up at him. “You’re just saying that for the free skeet lessons.” She smiled.

He smiled back. “Don’t forget the reloading.”

The tears surprised her. She didn’t fight him when he gathered her close for a comforting, brotherly hug.

After a moment, with his arm still draped around her shoulders, they continued through the cemetery until they reached her grave.

She unwrapped the flowers and knelt down, tucking them into a small vase built into the gravestone. As she sat back on her heels she rested her hands on her knees and took a deep breath. She knew her mother’s spirit wasn’t buried in the ground beneath her. The marker simply indicated the final resting place of her bones.

Countless nights, she’d lain awake and thought about what she’d say if she ever got a chance to come back here. Now, she had it, and every idea had flown from her mind.

Across the cemetery, a flutter of movement caught her attention. A flock of doves took flight, landing in a nearby tree, a sea of brown and tan and black.

Save one.

One red male cardinal.

She clapped a hand to her mouth to stifle the sob. “Thanks, Mom,” she whispered when she trusted her voice again. “I love you, too.”

* * * *

They were somewhere west of St. Louis when she finally found the guts to broach the subject. “You and Tarzan,” she said without preamble.

Ellis was driving, so he couldn’t take his eyes off the road. “Yeah?”

“I mean...how is that working? Are you guys jealous?”

“Not that I mind discussing this with you, but can I get a little context as to why we’re discussing it now?”

“You won’t understand.”

“Uh, I saw a lot of weird shit happen that helped keep you and Mandaline from getting killed. Needless to say, I’m far more open-minded on the topic than I was before I met you and Mandaline, so try me.”

She admitted about seeing the auras, about John and Oscar. And what Mandaline had done by putting her in charge of the investigation, forcing her into more close contact with the two men.

He slowly nodded. “Okay.”

“Not going to bust my balls about this?”

He smiled. “No more than usual. But she’s right that you should take a chance.”

“So back to my question.”

“Well, I can’t answer for anyone but myself and Brad. We’ve been friends a lot of years. Since we were kids. Like brothers. I was always more worried about finding a woman who would accept my relationship with Brad. It was a good kind of shock to find a woman who fell for both of us, and we fell for her.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“I’m getting there. Give me a minute. I think if your senses are right, and it leads to something between all three of you, it will depend on how close the men are. If they’ve been friends for years, they might be okay with it. If not, maybe not so much.”

“You’re not jealous of Brad?”

“No. He’s the happiest he’s been in years, and he’s been through a shit-ton of crap. He’s lucky to be alive. I’m the happiest I’ve been in my whole life. I’m not saying life’s perfect, but we sit down and talk and we each get our private time

when we need it, and it just keeps working. I wanted it to work more than I wanted it to fail. Isn't that what you guys kept telling me, that I needed to manifest it or whatever? So I do that. I focus on it succeeding."

"Ah, that's the lawyer I know and adore. Using my own words against me."

"Okay, so think about this. What's the best-case scenario? They both like you, you like both of them, and they both say yes they're okay with a triad. Bonus for you. What's the worst-case scenario? That either they don't like you, or you don't like them, and you walk away from it. Anything in the middle of those two extremes isn't bad, either, you know. Like maybe clicking with one and not the other."

"Settling?"

"Maybe you're seeing available guys, not just those two."

"I haven't seen any other guys, anywhere, even in the airports in Tampa and Spokane, with auras like that. Only one other time." She stared out the window.

"Aaand?"

Should have known he'd ask. Damn lawyers are almost as bad as witches. "I walked away from him," she quietly admitted. "And I shouldn't have."

"Okay. So blue aura is really good, right?"

"Not just blue. I can't explain it. It's different, but in a good way." She looked at him again.

"I have to side with Mandaline on this one. Call them. Can't hurt to at least meet with them for dinner or something. See what shakes out."

"That's not helpful," she grumbled.

"No, it's not the pat, neatly tied answer you wanted. We're proof that it can work, however. And it should give you hope that it might work, but you have to meet the opportunity head-on, or at least halfway."

"There you go using logic on me again."

He smiled. "That's us damn lawyers for you."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

* * * *

With both of them sharing the driving duties, it took them right around three days, with only one overnight stop, to make it back to Florida. Her dad and Brad were waiting for them at her house when they pulled up.

As she crawled down from the passenger side of the cab, her dad took one look at her and pointed at the house. "Bed. Now. You're exhausted."

"We've got to unload."

"I've got that handled," Brad assured her. "Grover's sons and sons-in-law will be here in less than an hour to help us. She was too tired to argue with him, even if his logic hadn't been sound. Fortunately, she couldn't and wouldn't argue. "Deal. Thanks again, Tarzan."

As she grabbed her backpack and headed up the sidewalk, she heard her dad ask, "Why does she call you 'Tarzan,' anyway?"

She smiled as she closed the front door on whatever Brad's reply might be. But a shower first, then she collapsed onto her bed.

As she closed her eyes, she tried to recall what day it was.

That was when she remembered the day after tomorrow was the scheduled do-over date for the next part of Tammy Evans' investigation.

She groaned. Now that her dad was, for the most part, moved, she'd have to face *that* business head-on.

Face the two men head-on.

Face her fears head-on.

Chapter Nine

The next morning, Sachi knew she wouldn't get a moment of peace from Mandaline unless she asked the guys out.

Not that Mandaline would actively bug her about it. It would be more of a case of what her friend didn't say than what she did that would get Sachi's goat.

Damn witch, anyway.

With her heart in her throat, she called John's cell phone, figuring it would make more sense to call him than Oscar.

She almost hung up after the second ring when his voice came on the line. "John Evans."

"Hey. Um, it's Sachi."

"Oh, hi. What's up?"

She closed her eyes. *Nut up, kiddo.* "I was wondering if you and Oscar and I could get together for dinner, maybe tonight? Nothing fancy, maybe just meet up over at the Golden Corral or...something." She mentally groaned. *Wow. That... sucked. Even I wouldn't go out with me.*

"Is everything okay?"

No, I'm an idiot. "Um, yeah, just wanted to go over some stuff before we get started tomorrow night." She hoped the Goddess would forgive her that since, technically, it wasn't a lie.

Technically.

"Okay, sure."

She felt like she needed to add something, anything, to not sound like a dumbass. "I mean, I wanted the three of us to be able to talk. Alone. I mean, together, but alone. I mean—"

"Without Aunt Tammy there."

"Yes, that." She wanted to jump through the phone and rip the last fifteen seconds of conversation out of his memory and start over.

Hopefully not sounding like an idiot in the process the second time around.

But since that's not an option... "I'd just like to get your impressions. Both of you. About her. Uh, I mean about the situation."

"I'll call Oscar, but how about seven at Golden Corral?"

Oh, thank the Goddess! "Seven sounds perfect, thanks."

After hanging up she sat there, pinching the bridge of her nose between her fingers.

"So?"

Sachi jumped, startled, and turned to see Mandaline had stuck her head through the doorway of the smaller reading room where Sachi had gone to make the call.

"Tonight, seven. Want to come with?"

Mandaline grinned. "You're on your own, sweetie. Knock 'em dead."

She laid the phone on the table before dropping her head onto her arms. "I'm afraid I'll be the one dying. I can barely talk to a guy."

Mandaline stepped in and closed the door behind her. She walked over and gently kneaded Sachi's shoulders. "Just keep saying to yourself, 'It's only dinner and talking.' That's it. That's all it is. It's you facing your fear."

She didn't lift her head. "That's not my only fear."

Mandaline didn't ask, knowing Sachi would eventually volunteer it.

"I was only with one other guy before," she softly said. "Just Tom. I mean... You know what I mean. This whole thing is crazy, and relationships don't come with training wheels. And I think the only reason Tom put up with me as long as he did was because he had a sister who was a rape crisis counselor, so he picked her brain about how to deal with me. He wanted to be with me, but I was so scared of something happening to him, of Jackson Clary or someone coming after me, that I pushed him away. And...and in some ways, it was easier to live in fear instead of fighting for happiness."

Sachi finally lifted her head and tipped it back so she could look up at Mandaline. "How the fuck is someone like me ever going to have a chance at a normal relationship with *one* guy, much less two guys? I feel fifty shades of cart before the horse at this point."

Mandaline's expression turned somber. "You simply put one foot in front of the other and have faith. *Believe.* Maybe you need two guys in your life. I know looking back that I'm glad I have two. And not for the sex. As much as I was hurting when Julie died, I don't think one of them alone could have coped with what I was going through. I think the Universe put them both there for them to help me heal as much as I helped them heal."

Sachi rested her head back against Mandaline's stomach. "Why do you have to go using that damn logic on me, girlie?"

Mandaline draped her arms around Sachi and kissed her cheek. “Because I lubs you, sister. I want to see you happy. You’ve not only earned it, you deserve it. Quite frankly, I got a really good feeling when we were over there. I can’t see auras the way you can, but there was something there between you and those two guys that I can’t deny. A spark. A definite interest on their part.”

“You really think so?”

“Yeah.”

Sachi drew in a long, deep breath before blowing it out again. “I’m scared,” she whispered.

Mandaline squeezed her even more tightly. “I know, sweetie. It’s okay to be scared. This is the good kind of fear, now, not the bad kind.”

Sachi closed her eyes. “I hope you’re right. I *really* want you to be right.”

“You won’t know unless you try.”

* * * *

Sachi preemptively blockaded any forthcoming intestinal battles by downing an Imodium tablet after making the call. She also busied herself that day with readings for clients, a small chakras class that afternoon, and helping Mandaline with bookkeeping. Her dad had already called to tell her he’d be home late because he’d been invited out to dinner by his new employer, so no guilt there.

Before she knew it, it was six thirty and she needed to head out to dinner.

She stood before the store’s back door for a few moments, unable to make herself walk through it.

“It won’t open itself,” Mandaline playfully called from down the hallway.

“Don’t rush me, boss. I’m thinking.”

“You’re *overthinking*,” Mandaline walked down the hall with Pers, her little dog, following her. “Just tell yourself you’re going to discuss the investigation and let it lead where it leads.”

“Dammit.” She dodged around Mandaline and down the hall.

Mandaline turned. “Now what?”

“Forgot my notebook.”

When Sachi returned to the back door, Mandaline had scooped Pers up with one hand, and opened the back door for her.

She suspected her friend would bodily shove her through and out the door if she didn’t go of her own volition. “Tell me again this is going to be okay,” Sachi whispered. “Please?”

Mandaline’s expression softened and she hugged her. “It’ll be okay,” she whispered in Sachi’s ear. “It’s *just* dinner.”

“It’s just dinner,” Sachi repeated, stepping back and nodding.

Mandaline smiled. “Exactly. It’s just dinner. You eat dinner every day. That’s all it is.”

“Just dinner.” She faced the doorway again. “Just dinner.” She took a deep breath and forced her feet forward.

Mandaline followed her, standing in the doorway but not closing it. “Call me when you get home, okay?” she told her. “Or stop by, if you want. No matter how late.”

Sachi nodded as she got into her car. “Just dinner,” she kept muttering. “Just dinner.”

In fact, she kept repeating it to herself the entire drive to the restaurant. And even as she stood in the restaurant’s lobby and awaited the men’s arrival.

When she spotted them, she realized with a dawning horror of sorts that Oscar wore an Arizona Cardinals football T-shirt. John had driven them, apparently, because he held his keys in his hands.

Attached to an Arizona Cardinals key ring.

It took every ounce of will she had not to burst into manic giggles right there in the lobby of the Golden Corral. The mer wouldn’t have understood why.

Combined with the fact that their blue auras looked even more brilliant and vivid, which she hadn’t thought possible, she was close to becoming a babbling wreck.

Forcing herself to shake hands with them, she opted for an obvious comment. Obvious to her, at least. “Nice shirt.” It seemed like the eyes of the cardinal on the front were staring right at her, boring into her soul.

Yeah, got the hint. Thanks.

Oscar looked down at his shirt. “Oh, thanks. My mom and dad sent it to me.”

“They live out there, now,” John added, holding up his keys and clearly displaying the key ring. “We love football. I think they’re subtly rubbing it in our faces that the Cards were better than the Bucs last year.”

“Nearly every year,” Oscar added with more than a hint of snark in his tone.

Holy Goddess, her panties were already soaked, and she’d only spoken two words to them. She didn’t know whether to

focus on Oscar's killer blue eyes, or John's sweet brown gaze, either one already deadly to her powers of speech and concentration, but even more devastating when combined.

She swallowed. "Um, let's get a table."

Fortunately, it worked out that they were seated at a booth and the men, without asking, both slid into the same side, leaving her free and alone in the other.

Great. Won't need to keep making them move for my bathroom trips.

Which she took the first one almost immediately, cleaning herself up and splashing water on her face after she washed her hands.

When she returned to the booth, they were both thankfully up and getting their first round of food. She went and got hers, mindful of how much she piled on her plate. She'd barely eaten all day despite her hunger, her nervous stomach still firing threats across her lower intestines' bow every time she even so much as nibbled on anything.

After she'd sat down again, she dug out her notebook. "Right. Let's start with have you guys actually seen anything happen at the house?"

It was hard for her to focus and be all business when all she wanted to do was curl up between the men and their plush, blue-velvet auras.

How can I literally go years with only a handful of lascivious thoughts, and here I am practically drooling over these two?

"Us? No. Aunt Tammy has been keeping her log like you told her to," John said. "She's reported things moved twice, and seeing the lights three times."

"Have either of you gone back into the woods to see if anything's there?"

"No. We haven't been there when it's happened, either," John said.

"My people hiked out of the wilderness," Oscar quipped. "I'm not hiking back into it."

"Your *people*?" John asked, staring at him. "You made yourself *bacon* for breakfast. And is that not ham on your plate now?"

She wanted to bust out laughing at the two of them and their banter.

"Yeah, well, you know I don't like the woods," Oscar said, now a little red in the face.

"He had an unfortunate encounter with a squirrel when he was a kid," John explained to her. "Bounced off his head while we were in the woods. Freaked him right the hell out."

"It fucking attacked me."

"It didn't attack you," John said. "It didn't even scratch you."

"Quit picking on the woodland-challenged," Oscar muttered.

Okay, that did it. If she wasn't in love with the two guys before, she was close to it now. She could feel the brotherly energy between the men even through their good-natured exchange.

"I have to admit, other than being outside to shoot skeet, I'm not much of a sportsman, either," she said.

* * * *

Oscar didn't resent being the focus of John's friendly teasing because he suspected he knew exactly what his friend was up to. John wanted to try to put Sachi at ease, try to make her laugh. Oscar knew if he could see how nervous Sachi appeared to be, it had to be painfully evident to John. John was, admittedly, the more emotionally in-tune of the two of them.

Sabrina his ex-wife notwithstanding.

And they'd made her smile. They'd coaxed at least a little of a sparkle into those beautiful blue eyes of hers.

"I've never shot skeet," Oscar said. "Is it hard?"

She shrugged and pulled back her long, black hair. "It's not hard to me, but I've been shooting for over thirteen years. Have you ever shot before?"

"Paintball."

John laughed next to him.

But even more importantly, Sachi smiled again. "Not exactly the same thing."

And that's why, twenty minutes later, both men were sitting, enraptured, as she talked about the fine art and sport of shooting skeet.

Her notebook lay unused next to her except for her initial notes.

She seemed to realize she'd gone off-topic. "Sorry," she said, an adorable pink blush filling her cheeks. "I'm kind of a skeet geek."

"No, it's fine," Oscar assured her. "It's interesting. Do you think you could teach us?"

In all honesty he had no clue if John wanted to shoot skeet or not. Frankly, at that moment, he didn't care. He knew he wanted to shoot skeet. With Sachi, at least. Her love for the sport telegraphed through her every word, the way her face lit up while she talked about it, everything.

Maybe she enjoyed what she did for a living at Many Blessings, but they were witnesses to her true passion being laid out before them.

He desperately wanted to be a part of that.

Wanted her to look at *him* like that.

* * * *

John hadn't told Oscar about what Brad revealed to him that day in Many Blessings. In fact, he hadn't said a word about it to anyone, chalking it up to a poor guy who obviously had some...issues going on.

But now...now he wasn't so sure.

Sachi was a beautiful field of gravity drawing them in, her own self-contained force of nature.

He was happy to fall to her pull.

Shoot skeet? Hell, why not. If she'd said her hobby was identifying mushrooms or counting paint chips, and described it with the same level of joy and enthusiasm, he'd gladly try those, too.

Maybe there was more to life than he could see with his eyes. The way Oscar seemed drawn to her, the fact that she'd possibly be open to a poly relationship—maybe it wasn't too crazy a series of circumstances to lead the three of them to a happily ever after they could call their own.

He hoped it wasn't.

Because the more time he spent in Sachi's gravity field, the more he realized he didn't want to break free. He wanted to be there with her, watching her, listening to her. Hell yes, he was attracted to her, but it was more than that.

Much more.

It was *her*.

All of her, every bit of her.

Chapter Ten

Sachi spent a restless night torn between fantastically sexy dreams about Oscar and John...and horrific nightmares about Jacob and Jackson Clary. One dream had her sandwiched in between John and Oscar and enjoying sexy time, but then the mer morphed into father and son and she awoke with a scream locked in her throat, her body covered in a cold sweat.

When she finally sat up in bed a little before six that morning, she felt too bleary for coffee to cure. After using the bathroom, she pulled on her robe and headed out to the kitchen, where she'd heard her dad getting ready to go to work.

"I don't understand how you can do early mornings every morning," she muttered as she leaned against the counter.

He frowned, head cocked as he stared at her. "Are you all right, sweetie?"

"Just...bad night."

"Dreams?"

She gratefully took the full coffee mug he handed her and nodded as she sipped.

She didn't want to fill him in on the yin of that freaking yang, the sexiness that accompanied the nightmares.

That would be too...weird.

Not to mention she was still trying to sort it all out herself. There was a long, winding road between going out to dinner with two guys and calling what she had with either of them a relationship.

Mostly because only a psycho, creepy stalker, Facebook meme-worthy lady would call what she had with the guys at this stage a "relationship."

And what the hell was up with the cardinals? It was getting a little ridiculous, although in a way it put her mind at rest somewhat.

All she'd have to do was overcome her fear and speak her damn mind to them and hope they didn't shoot her down with too much laughter or scorn.

It's going to be a loooong day. Especially considering the investigation, weather allowing, would last well into the early morning hours.

Once her dad left for work, Sachi refilled her coffee and headed for the shower. She suspected this would be one of those days she wished she had a caffeine IV plugged into her arm.

Even that might not be enough to keep her on her feet, much less on her toes.

She stood in the shower, head resting against the wall and the water drumming against her scalp, and thought about her dinner with the men.

It embarrassed her to realize she'd spent most of the evening monopolizing the conversation with skeet talk when she'd been there to talk to them about Tammy.

Oh, who the hell am I kidding? I wanted to spend time with them. Even if it'd just been sitting on a couch with them and watching TV, I would have been happy.

Well, tonight would be the first test. To see if they could find any trace of activity that they couldn't debunk. Then again, if it was a natural phenomenon, at least it would show Tammy wasn't imagining it.

She really didn't want to be the reason that sweet woman was sent to a nursing home. She *really* wanted to find something, anything, that they could show pointed to what Tammy was experiencing, supernatural or not. Plenty of able-minded people mistook natural causes for supernatural phenomenon. Happened all the time.

Julie, please. Send me a sign if you can hear me. Tell me I'm not making a huge mistake.

By the time Sachi reached the store a little after seven, she'd already downed four mugs of coffee at home and carried her huge sixty-four-ounce travel mug that Mandaline had dubbed "The Barrel."

Sachi only broke out "The Barrel" when she was seriously low on the energy scale. It was actually a convenience store refillable mug meant for cold drinks, but it worked equally well for coffee.

In fact, Mandaline's eyes widened when she saw it. "Uh-oh. What happened?"

Sachi dumped her purse into the cabinet in the office and slammed it shut with her foot as she took another sip. "I went and ate dinner with them and had a nice time. That's what happened."

Mandaline followed her out of the office. "Then why do you look like a zombie?"

"Because I didn't get much sleep."

Mandaline's eyes widened even more at that statement, but the sound of Ellis coming down the stairs halted more questions.

"Hey, Ellis," Sachi said.

He came to a sudden stop and turned, concern on his face. "What's wrong? What happened? Are you all right?"

"I was just about to find out," Mandaline said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Sachi stared at them. “What?”

“You didn’t call me *chief*,” he said, putting down his suit jacket and laptop on one of the comfy chairs in the showroom. “Tell us.”

Her face growing red, she gave the briefest of summations of dinner, the cardinals, and her dreams.

Ellis nodded, while Mandaline looked relieved. “So, you’re all right?” Ellis asked.

“You don’t need to go all Perry Mason on anyone, no,” Sachi assured him, her snark firmly reined in. “But thank you for the thought. I appreciate it. Chief.”

He stepped over and hugged her. “Okay. Just making sure.” After giving Mandaline a quick kiss, he gathered his things and let himself out the front door, locking it behind him since it wasn’t opening time yet.

Mandaline grabbed Sachi’s hands. “Dreams?”

“Yes, dreams. Seriously, I might need your help tonight. I don’t know if I can do this.” In the light of day, she was once again wondering if she wasn’t making a horrible decision by allowing her heart to soften for the men.

“You’ll have Brad, Anna, and Mina. You’ll be okay.”

“I might not be conscious by then.” A yawn punctuated her comment.

“You can take a nap upstairs this afternoon.” She gave Sachi another hug and returned to the office.

“You just have an answer for everything, doncha, witchypoo?” Sachi groused at her.

Mandaline simply waved in reply.

Mandaline drove Brad to their house that morning so he could do a little work there as well as grab a quick nap of his own. They were getting close to being able to live in the house full time, now that the mold problem had been corrected and completely cleaned up. He wanted to put another coat of paint on their bedroom walls during daylight hours, to make sure he didn’t miss anything before they started moving furniture in there that weekend. The rest of the renovations could continue while they lived there.

Sachi spent the day trying to throw herself into her work. She managed a brief nap at lunchtime, but it did nothing to resolve the mental cloudiness she felt.

Sachi knew her friends were looking forward to having their house done, but for her part she’d miss knowing they were right there all the time. The house was only a few minutes away, but even when Mandaline took a rare day “off,” she was still usually right upstairs.

Just like Julie had always been.

A lot of things had changed around Many Blessings for all of them in a very short amount of time. Julie’s murder, her own almost-murder, Mandaline and the guys coming together—it was almost too much to process.

They were supposed to have one of their unofficial coven meetings at the store that Saturday night, more a potluck gathering of friends than a mystical circle of magick despite its name.

Maybe I should invite John and Oscar. It wouldn’t do any good investing more of her heart in them if they had a problem with what she did and believed.

Although, if they were putting up with the investigation in the first place and supporting Tammy, they couldn’t have too much of a problem with it.

She hoped.

After lunch, when she’d come downstairs after her brief nap to get back to work, she stood alone behind the counter. She’d raked out the little tabletop Zen garden that sat on the counter before restocking one of the coffee machines.

She heard a noise behind her and turned to see the little wooden rake setting on the counter, tines up.

With chills racing through her, she stepped closer. In the sand was a smiley face.

Sachi choked back a sob. “Is that my sign, Julie?”

Ever since her death, Julie had left them little messages in the sand from time to time, usually for Sachi and Mandaline, although others had been recipients of them, too. In life, Julie had frequently drawn smiley faces or left brief, positive messages written in the sand for others to find.

With trembling fingers, Sachi used her cell phone to snap a picture of the sand. Then she carefully raked it out again, leaving the rake tines-down at the edge like they usually did.

She stared at the picture on her phone. “Thanks, Julie,” she whispered.

Her stomach wasn’t necessarily completely on board with things yet, but her soul felt a little more settled. She’d asked Julie for a sign, for direction, and she’d received it.

She had no doubts that if Julie wanted to warn her, she would have.

It was still nearly two hours before dark when Sachi goaded herself into action. With her stomach in her throat, she took Mandaline's keys and, with Anna and Mina's help, loaded the Honda Element with their equipment. She'd have to go pick up Brad on the way.

"Are you all right?" Anna asked her as the three women buckled their seat belts.

"Yeah, just didn't sleep well last night." Sachi considered the women not just coworkers, but friends. Still, she wasn't as close to them as she was to Mandaline, Brad, and Ellis, who were more adopted family.

There were things she did not discuss with people who were only friends, even close friends.

What she'd seen about John and Oscar, their auras and her dreams about them, fell firmly into the "do not discuss" category.

Brad was sitting on the steps to the kitchen doorway when they arrived. He climbed into the SUV's backseat with Mina.

"We ready for fun?" he asked.

Sachi glanced in the rearview mirror at him before she backed the SUV up and turned around in their spacious yard. "I don't think that word means what you think it means, Tarzan."

He grinned. "Oh, come on. You can't be quoting *The Princess Bride* at me and be in a bad mood."

"Try me."

"She brought 'The Barrel' to work this morning," Anna told him.

He winced. "Yikes. Guess I missed that."

She met his gaze in the mirror. He arched his eyebrows and mouthed *sorry* at her before she put the vehicle in gear and headed down their driveway toward the road.

They stopped for takeout in town and ate it on the way to Tammy Evans' house. When she took the turnoff onto the driveway, her stomach once again lodged in her throat at the sight of the men walking out to greet them when they parked.

I can do this...I can do this.

She hoped her stomach could do it.

Before dark had settled, they had their equipment set up in the yard and had run initial checks of EMF readings. Since it was an outdoor setting they couldn't rely on drastic temperature fluctuations as evidence. They would be running infrared cameras, trail cameras, and motion detectors, as well as using a handheld FLIR thermal camera, in conjunction with several digital voice recorders to pick up any EVPs.

Sachi wasn't sure they'd find anything. Then again, it hadn't rained in two days, a miracle considering the time of year, and Tammy had said it seemed like the activity picked up when it was dry.

Sachi didn't have any other correlation for that kind of activity, unless it did turn out to be supernatural and was related to Tammy's deceased husband and son engaging in a little otherworldly gardening. It wasn't uncommon for phenomenon to pick up during thunderstorms, the theory being that spirits drew energy from the charged atmosphere.

Tammy had a screened back porch off her kitchen in the rear of the house that she volunteered as their base of operations. Sachi hoped that by being there with their equipment, instead of inside the house, it would make it easier for them to observe and respond to any phenomenon they might pick up.

Once full dark settled, they turned off all the external lights they could and waited. There was a security light down along the driveway, but since it was one set up by the power company, they couldn't do anything about it. Fortunately, its light didn't reach into the backyard, and Brad unscrewed the bulbs on the motion-detector lights on the back side of Tammy's house.

Brad and Mina went out first with voice recorders and the FLIR, walking along the fence line and even a few feet inside it where the barbed wire was down, but not venturing deep into the underbrush. They picked up an animal they suspected was a raccoon on the thermal, but nothing else.

When they returned, one of the motion detectors positioned on the far side of the yard went off, immediately followed by one of the trail cameras tripping. When they checked it, they found a picture of a small deer.

"You know," Sachi said, "a deer's eyes catch and reflect the light. If one was looking at the house and was hit by the security lights, that might have been what you saw."

Tammy patiently smiled. "I know what a deer's eyes look like. It wasn't that. I told you, they looked like really large fireflies in the distance. Deer come into the yard all the time."

"Are you sure deer didn't maybe move the hose? Or even wild boar?"

"I haven't seen any signs of wild boar around here in over a year. No digging or anything. And a deer wouldn't uncoil and recoil a hose differently."

True. Sachi had seen the pictures. Although those weren't proof. It was possible, although Sachi highly doubted it, that the woman had moved the hose herself and simply forgotten.

Or maybe on purpose.

She allowed her focus to shift so she could study the woman's aura. Nope, no sign of deception. When someone lied,

Sachi could almost always sense it, because dark flashes would appear in the colors.

Tammy's aura still looked strong, that fresh, spring green color unclouded.

Then again, if she's got dementia, she might not think she's lying.

And yet Sachi still saw no sign of that, either.

The only successful thing she'd accomplished so far that evening was figuring out how to mute the two men's auras so they weren't quite so distracting to her.

By two in the morning, they hadn't picked up any signs of anything supernatural. No EVPs recorded, either. Sachi left everyone on the back porch and took her red flashlight into the house with her to go use the bathroom. Even though the powder room just off the living room wasn't visible from the back porch, she didn't want to turn on any lights and screw up her night vision.

She set the flashlight on the counter before pulling down her shorts and sitting on the toilet.

The flashlight went sailing off the counter as if someone had slapped it, hitting the floor and going out, leaving her in complete darkness.

Her body locked up as she sat there and listened, now unable to complete the business she'd sat down to start.

Closing her eyes, she silently counted to ten, holding her breath as she did. When she opened her eyes again, a pale, light blue aura hovered in the corner of the bathroom.

What sounded like an older man's voice spoke very faintly, as if from a distance. "Please believe her. Help her."

Sachi leaned forward, stretching, her hand frantically swatting at the wall where she knew the light switch had to be.

Squinting as the light came on, she found herself completely alone in the bathroom.

Fuuuuuck!

Chapter Eleven

“You know *damn* well it takes a lot to freak me the fuck out, but I am *officially* freaked right the fuck out,” Sachi said to Brad from where she stood behind him in the bathroom doorway.

Frowning, he nodded as he carefully scanned the darkened bathroom with the FLIR camera. In the corner where she’d seen the faint aura, and where the voice had seemingly spoken from, there was a cooler spot than the rest of the bathroom. Unfortunately, it was also the same direction the AC vent pointed and could be attributed to that as well.

“I believe you,” he said as stepped out of the bathroom and turned to her in the light of her red flashlight.

“I mean, it slapped the damn light off the counter!” Fortunately, the light had only switched off, not broken.

“Show me where you were.”

She scowled at him.

“I mean, put the toilet lid down and sit exactly the way you were sitting. And where the flashlight was.”

She stepped around him, with everyone watching, and did just that.

He stepped in again and seemed to be gauging the distance. “Flap your elbows out.”

She did. There was still plenty of clearance in the powder room between her elbow and the flashlight. “I didn’t hit it. Don’t you think I wouldn’t have freaked out had I hit it?”

“It’s okay. You know the drill.”

Yes, she knew the drill damn well, but usually she was on the other end of the drill, the one staying calm and asking the questions and trying to find the alternate—and usually more likely—nonsupernatural solution.

Tammy looked serenely triumphant in the light of the red flashlights. “It was Herbert. It had to be.”

John and Oscar both wore understandably dubious expressions.

Great. Now they’ll think I’m a damn nutjob.

Since Sachi had been the focus of the activity, Brad had her try to speak to it again, both alone and with someone else in the bathroom with her. Then they repeated it with him, Anna, Mina, even having Tammy step in with one of the investigators.

Nothing.

All they captured outside were two more trail camera pictures of a raccoon and an opossum.

Nothing supernatural.

“Well, I still say this was a successful night,” Tammy declared as they started breaking down equipment a little after five in the morning. “At least now you know I’m not making this up.”

“Ma’am, we never said you were,” Sachi said. “But you have to understand, we go into every investigation with the mindset of debunking things until we can’t debunk them. It’s nothing personal.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean it that way. I meant now John and Oscar know someone else heard and saw something, not just me. They will be less inclined to believe I’m senile.” She looked at the men. “If you two would just move in with me, you’d be here all the time and when I see something, I could show it to you right then.”

The men exchanged another glance. Sachi was too tired and her nerves too frazzled to try to interpret it.

By six o’clock, Sachi and the others had returned to the store with a promise to call tomorrow to schedule another investigation. Their policy was not to have back-to-back nights of investigation, if they could possibly help it, to give everyone a chance to recover. Not to mention some of the staff had family and day jobs that had they had to schedule investigations around.

Anna and Mina headed home in their cars. Sachi locked up the Element and left the keys with Brad. They’d unload it later after they got some sleep.

When she got home, her father was up and in the kitchen getting ready for work.

“Everything go all right, sweetheart?”

“All right” wasn’t exactly how she’d describe the investigation. “I just need a lot of sleep,” she said, giving him a brief hug before heading to her bedroom. She stripped and fell into bed, too exhausted to even think about a shower.

* * * *

When Sachi awoke a little after eleven, she texted Mandaline that she was alive and would come in later. Fortunately, her dreams had been filled only with sexy-time fun thoughts of John and Oscar, not the bad dreams of the night before.

Two nights before?

She was so tired she didn’t even know.

After checking her schedule and realizing, thankfully, that she didn’t have any skeet students that afternoon, she reheated

a mug of coffee in the microwave and headed to the shower.

She knew what she saw and what she heard. She knew without a doubt that she didn't whack the flashlight herself. Something else had smacked it off the counter.

It didn't escape her that, had someone else told her the story, she'd approach it skeptically, regardless of their apparent level of sincerity.

At first she'd planned to go to the store, but then she pulled on shorts, a T-shirt, and sneakers, and headed to Tammy Evans' house.

She was there, alone, and pleased to see Sachi. "Did you get some sleep, dear?"

"Yes, thanks. Can I see the powder room again?"

"Of course."

Tammy stood in the doorway while Sachi sat on the toilet lid again, flapping her arms several different ways. The only way she could have accidentally knocked the flashlight off the counter would be if she'd leaned forward and reached up and over the counter.

Which she hadn't.

The toilet paper roll hung on the wall to her left, while the counter was to her right. So she couldn't have accidentally bumped it while doing that, either.

Sachi stared at the corner where she'd seen the aura appear. "Between you and me, I want to tell you that I do believe you about some of the phenomenon you've reported. I know what I saw and heard. That doesn't mean we won't be able to debunk the lights or other stuff."

Tammy's smile broadened as she nodded. "I understand, but it's nice to hear you say that."

Sachi stood and switched off the light as she stepped out into the hall. "Would you mind if I poked around in the backyard for a little bit?"

"Not at all. Go right ahead."

"Thanks."

Sachi walked across the mowed backyard to the fence line. Looking out there, in the slightly cloudy afternoon, she couldn't see more than twenty or thirty yards into the underbrush before it grew too thick.

It definitely wasn't something she wanted to go hiking through on her own.

In the distance, she heard a rumble of thunder off to the west and realized it wouldn't be an option that day anyway. The afternoon rains were back and moving in quickly.

She said good-bye before leaving, but when she reached the end of the driveway she shifted her car out of gear and held her foot on the brake so the car wouldn't roll.

Pulling out her phone, she called up the map feature and studied it. Once she was sure of the way, she shifted back into gear and headed the opposite way she'd come in. Less than a mile down the already rough asphalt road it turned into a graded clay road. Trees and bushes and fences along the sides of the road were dusted with orange kicked up from passing cars. Once the afternoon rains hit, it would likely rinse much of that away, leaving a muddy, mucky road in its wake.

The road hadn't been graded recently, either, Sachi having to slow down because of the washboard bumps.

But when she passed a wooden forestry sign to her left, she knew she was heading the right way.

Twenty minutes later, she pulled to a stop and shifted the car out of gear again to consult with her phone. The very faint trail led south off the road and was likely the one she'd seen on the satellite photos. It wasn't very wide, and wasn't rutted, like vehicles had used it. It looked more like a foot or bridle path, except the thick coating of pine needles on it indicated it hadn't been traveled lately. Or, if it had, the travelers hadn't disturbed the ground cover.

But yes, the dot on her phone indicating her current position according to GPS corresponded with the satellite pics, too.

She was considering whether or not to park and walk down it until she found the back side of Tammy's property when another clap of thunder, this one nearly overhead, startled her. Her foot slipped off the brake and the car nearly rolled off the road into the ditch next to it before she got her foot on the brake again.

Fat, heavy drops of rain began spattering her windshield and bouncing off the roof of her car.

"Okay, so not today, then."

She got her car backed up and turned around without, fortunately, getting stuck, and headed back toward town.

* * * *

"You went out there by *yourself*? Sachi, what the *hell* is wrong with you?"

She'd gone home to change before returning to the store. Now Mandaline looked at her like she'd just sprouted a unicorn's horn in the middle of her forehead and had started ramming people up the ass with it.

“Hey, I was on public property, and I didn’t go hiking down there alone.”

“But you would have if it hadn’t started raining.”

Sachi’s protest died before she could speak it. “Okay, you got me there, but I didn’t see any signs of anyone having been there for awhile. It would have been fine.”

“You don’t know that!” Mandaline’s normally complacent demeanor had been replaced by her fearful, protective momma bear mode. “You need to promise me you won’t go traipsing around there without someone with you.”

Sachi crossed her arms over her chest. “Do I need to sign that in blood, or is my word good enough?”

“Dammit, this isn’t funny!”

“Yeah, it is, kind of. You’re telling me you wouldn’t have done exactly the same thing?”

Mandaline’s jaw clenched. “That is *totally* beside the point!”

“No, it’s exactly the point. You put me in charge of this investigation, witchypoo. You can’t do that and then tell me not to investigate.”

“I’m not telling you not to investigate. I’m telling you not to go running off into the woods, alone, without telling anyone where you’re going first!”

Sachi would have burst out laughing at her friend’s overreaction had both their griefs not been so fresh from Julie’s death. Julie had gone on an investigation, alone. Refused to take Mandaline with her.

And Julie had been raped and murdered.

And it had been Sachi who’d refused to go with Mandaline to investigate Ellis and Brad’s house in the beginning without a shotgun coming along for the ride.

She pulled Mandaline in for a hug. “I promise I won’t go do that again. All right? But I do want to go take a look at it a some point.”

“Thank you.” Mandaline’s reply sounded muffled against Sachi’s shoulder. “Sorry I’m going off on you, but you know why.”

Sachi tightened her embrace. “Yeah, I know, sister. I get it. I’m sorry I triggered you.”

Mandaline sniffled before finally stepping back. She wiped at her eyes. “I can’t help it. I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

“Neither do I.”

* * * *

John grabbed a short nap that morning before heading into work. He handled paperwork and permitting issues and was almost through everything when he realized Sachi’s inspection was due. After making a call to the county, he found out the inspector had an opening for that afternoon and would be in her area.

“Let me call the customer and get back to you.” He still hadn’t had time to process the previous evening. The irresistible draw he felt toward Sachi wasn’t damped at all by what she claimed she heard and saw in the bathroom.

She didn’t strike him as someone who’d make up something just to stir things up. In fact, she struck him as exactly the opposite, someone who hated to be the center of attention, especially when it came to one of their investigations.

That might be naïve thinking on his part, but for once in his life, he didn’t care.

He believed her.

He dialed her cell phone and fortunately she picked up after the first ring.

“Hey, it’s John. The county inspector can come by your house this afternoon for your permit inspection, if you’re available.”

“Um, oh. Okay. I’d forgotten about that.”

“So had I. I was catching up on paperwork today and realized it hadn’t been done. Sorry about that.”

“What time?”

“Four, if that’s okay.”

“Will you be there, too?”

He started to say no when his brain processed her tone.

Hopeful. Like she wanted to see him.

“I can be.”

There was a slight pause. “I’d like that.”

“Then I’ll be there.” He wouldn’t give himself a reason to not go.

Hell, he wanted to go.

More importantly, he wanted to ask her over to their place for dinner.

"I'll see you then," she said.

He called the inspector back and got it lined up. When he walked out of his office, his office manager looked up at him and frowned.

"What are you so happy about?" she asked him.

"What?"

She laughed. "You're grinning like an idiot."

"Oh." He shrugged. "Just in a good mood."

"Do that more often. You've been a real sourpuss lately."

"Duly noted."

Now the question was did he ask Oscar if he wanted to go. Although that would sound really fishy. How did he explain *that* to Sachi?

He couldn't.

But he could at least clue his friend in. He called him. "I have to go by Sachi's for the inspector."

"Since when?"

"Since she asked me."

Oscar paused. "Are you rubbing it in my face?"

"No! I wanted to ask her to come over to our place tonight for dinner with us. I wanted to run it by you to make sure you'd be home and were up for it."

"Oh." There was a pause John couldn't label. "Sure. Okay. Thanks."

"You didn't seriously think I'd cut you out, did you?"

* * * *

No, Oscar hadn't consciously thought that, at the time, but the little bit of jealousy that rolled through him when he thought maybe John was hinting he wanted him to make himself scarce left him feeling sick at heart.

The fact that John actively wanted to include him in the dinner gave him hope.

"What were you thinking about for dinner?" Oscar asked.

"Burgers. Something easy."

"I'll hit the store on the way home."

"Sounds good."

Oscar hung up, feeling a thousand times better than he had before the call. He'd only snagged a couple of hours of sleep before going into work. He could have taken the whole day off, but his body didn't want to remain asleep. Neither did his brain, which insisted on focusing on Sachi and the night before.

And what Aunt Tammy had suggested to them at dinner that night, that maybe the two of them should date Sachi.

From talking to Brad the night before, he found out Mandaline was partners with both Brad and with Ellis Fargo, an attorney in town.

Hell, if they can do it, why couldn't we?

He could see how much John liked Sachi. He wouldn't lose his friendship with John over a relationship, but maybe since Sachi was best friends with Mandaline she might be open to something a little nontraditional.

He just hoped John would be open to it.

* * * *

Sachi made it back to her house about a quarter 'til four and was relieved to find no one there yet. She'd just unlocked her front door when John pulled up in his work van. After turning off the alarm, she stood in the doorway and waited for him to walk up.

That blue aura of his still held her, like a velvety grip around the back of her neck, irresistible.

He offered what appeared to be a nervous smile. "Once he gets here, it shouldn't take him more than a couple of minutes to sign off on it. They're pretty routine."

"No problem. I appreciate you coming out. I hope this wasn't an inconvenience."

"No, not at all." He rubbed at the back of his neck. "Listen, I'd like to ask you something, and no pressure or anything. But if you're not busy tonight, we, Oscar and I, would like to have you over to our place for dinner. With us."

Her heart jumped. "Dinner?"

"Yeah. Nothing fancy, just burgers on the grill. Casual. It's just, we enjoyed dinner with you the other night, and last

night wasn't exactly a good one for socializing, and—"

"Yes." She gave him a smile she hoped would put his mind at ease. Did she want to have dinner with the two hotties?

Uh, fuck yeah.

"Oh." He seemed almost surprised she'd said yes. "Okay. Great." He flashed another smile, this one backed by more confidence. "Um, you're not a vegetarian or anything, are you? Because if you are, we can—"

"I'm a first-class carnivore," she assured him.

His smile broadened. "Great." He nodded. "Good. Um, is seven okay?"

"Seven sounds great. Can I bring anything?"

"Desert, if you'd like."

"Cool." She reached out and touched his arm. "Looking forward to it. Text my cell with your address."

He was starting to do just that when a pickup truck with the county's logo on the doors pulled up in front of the house.

"There's the inspector, I take it?" she asked.

"Yeah." He hit *send*. A brief moment later, her phone buzzed.

She checked it. "Got it."

They were staring at each other when the inspector headed up the walk.

"Thanks for coming over today," she said. "And I'm looking forward to tonight."

She loved the way his aura pulsed, flowing with relief now that she'd said yes to their invitation.

John and the inspector quickly took care of doing what they needed to do, and the inspector signed off on the job. Fifteen minutes later, they were alone again.

It looked like John was about to say something when his phone went off. "That's work. Sorry, I need to run."

"Okay. See you at seven."

His grin not only started her pulse racing again, but started her clit throbbing, too. "Seven. Thanks!"

She closed the front door and rested against it.

"Julie," she said out loud, "is this the sign I keep asking for?"

Her gaze fell upon the curio cabinet they'd set up in the corner of the living room. Maybe she'd spent too much time looking for signs instead of taking action.

Time to take action.

Chapter Twelve

Sachi had headed back to the store, returning home a little before six. Beyond nervous, she changed her mind several different times about what to wear. Yes, John had specifically stated casual, but that could mean anything.

Shorts? Jeans? She didn't have a lot of casual choices other than that. Sure she had dresses and skirts she wore for work, but they weren't exactly backyard barbecue outfits.

She finally settled on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. She almost forgot to call her dad to let him know she wouldn't be there for dinner, and was relieved to find out he already had plans to eat dinner with coworkers. Any guilt she might have had about her last-minute plans disappeared.

Glad to see he's settled in so quickly.

She didn't mind it, especially since he'd spent so much time focused on her when he first arrived in Florida.

It's time he gets out and makes new friends.

She pulled up the men's address on the maps feature on her phone and drove out there. The apartment complex just east of Brooksville looked like it had seen far better days. But when she walked up and knocked, carrying the Key lime pie she'd picked up at Publix on her way over, she was relieved to see a smiling Oscar open the front door on a sparse, yet clean and tidy apartment.

Just in time, too, because the rumbles of thunder that had chased her all the way to their apartment heralded the arrival of a real frog-strangler of a rainstorm.

"Guess I'm here for the duration, at least," she said with a smile. "Hope this doesn't mess up your plans for grilling."

He smiled as he took the pie from her and headed over to the small kitchen with it. "We have a backup plan. Aunt Tammy gave us one of those little electric grills for Christmas last year."

"Where's John?"

"Shower. He had an emergency job to handle. He just got home a few minutes before you arrived."

"Ah." As she looked around the small combined living and dining room area, she was pleased to see two full discount store bookcases along one wall. She walked over. "Who's the reader?"

"Both of us. He likes mysteries, and I'm more into sci-fi and fantasy."

It looked like they had a yard sale coffee table paired with their low-end IKEA sofa and a mismatched thrift store chair.

She loved it and them. Loved that they weren't all about fake appearances. It said a lot about them.

There were a few prints on the wall that looked like they'd been framed with discount store frames, but the digitally created art was gorgeous. Several different themes, from a futuristic spaceship, to a woodland scene, to a beach scene.

"These are neat."

"Thanks. They're mine."

She looked at him. "You did these?"

"They were projects in college. I don't get to stretch my chops like that much now. I do ad copy and signs, mostly." He shrugged. "It's a living."

She stared at the pieces again. "You and Brad should talk. He's an artist. You probably have a lot in common."

"I wouldn't call myself an artist."

She pointed at the prints. "Uh, I would. Doesn't matter the medium."

John emerged from the bathroom, wearing a T-shirt and shorts, hair damp but brushed. "*Thank* you, Sachi," he said as he entered the living room. "I keep telling him he's an artist, but he doesn't believe me."

Oscar shrugged. "It's a living," he simply repeated, although he wore a pleased expression.

She looked from one man to the other. Their auras both bore nervous tension. So much so that she knew she had to get it out in the open and deal with it sooner rather than later.

"Look, I'm going to say something, and if I'm way out of line, feel free to let me know," she started. "I like you guys. *Both* of you. I'm not saying that I want to hop right into bed with both of you right this minute. But from the minute I met you guys, I felt something."

She took a deep breath. They both stared at her, their full attention on her. "I know my beliefs aren't exactly what you guys believe. But can you respect me enough to know that I'm letting my instincts guide me here?"

Both men nodded, but didn't interrupt.

She plowed forward, knowing this would make or break what happened next. "If you guys are interested in seeing if something can happen between the three of us, I'm open to that. But I can't split you two up. It wouldn't be fair to either of you. To be honest, I'm attracted to both of you. Is that even something you two would be open to, if things...you know, pan out? The three of us together?"

With smiles growing on their faces, they looked at each other, nodding, before returning their focus to her and nodding even harder.

They looked so cute.

“Okay.” She let out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. “And if things don’t work out between us, I’m good with just being friends. It also won’t affect the investigation. Got it?”

They nodded harder, both of them grinning now.

“Good. Now that we got that out of the way, we can enjoy our dinner and talk about our options without dancing around the issue all night and wasting time.”

* * * *

Oscar had never fainted in his life. But hearing Sachi admit she wanted to explore their relationship options sucked all the oxygen out of his lungs.

Both of us?

It was perfect.

That she was the one to speak it out loud to them only cemented in his mind that it could work.

And from the look of relief on John’s face, he suspected his friend felt the same way.

They wouldn’t have to worry that she might choose one over the other.

He wouldn’t have to worry about losing his friend over it.

He could have his cake and eat it, too.

Hell, yeah, I’m good with that.

He remembered he was supposed to be getting dinner ready. Outside, lightning flashed and more thunder ominously rolled through as ferocious rain beat down on the roof. He left John to talk with Sachi while he got the ground beef mixed together with spices the way he liked to make his burgers before forming the patties.

John had led her over to the kitchen and was about to offer her a drink when she let out what sounded like a shocked gasp.

Oscar turned to see her, wide-eyed in horror, staring at the counter.

Following her gaze, he didn’t see anything there except things he’d picked up to go with dinner, including a jar of cheese dip and a large can of baked beans.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

She’d gone white, one hand up and backing away from them until she bumped against the back of the couch.

He washed his hands and tried to follow her, but now she was warding them off with both hands.

“Just…give me a minute.” She sounded horrible, like she might be sick.

John looked at him, then back at the counter.

* * * *

Fuck.

Sachi’s relationship with Tom, as well as lots of therapy, self-work, and hours spent blasting clay birds on the skeet field had helped her overcome a lot of her trauma. It was rare now that something triggered her PTSD this strongly.

She couldn’t take her eyes off the can of baked beans on the counter, the large can, the same brand, the same size…

She swallowed hard, trying to hold back the nausea threatening to overtake her.

The guys didn’t know. They didn’t understand. They had no clue.

“Put it away, please,” she whispered. “Now.”

“What?” John asked.

“The beans. The can of beans.” She tried not to scream it, so it came out a whisper instead.

The men exchanged a puzzled glance before turning. Oscar spotted it first and stepped over, grabbing it and shoving it into a cabinet.

Once it was out of sight, she sat against the couch, her fingers curled around the top of it, her body trembling as she closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing.

The men slowly approached. She felt them rather than saw them.

“Are you all right?” John said.

She wanted to scream that no, she was not fucking all right.

But they hadn’t known.

They didn't have the memory of the dented can, slick with Jacob Clary's blood, falling from her hand and rolling across the floor after she'd bashed his skull in with it trying to get him to quit killing her mother.

After a few more deep breaths, she forced her eyes open. Both men looked worried, their auras dark with it now. Worry for her.

For her.

It was times like this she thanked the Goddess for her ability to see auras.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Sometimes...I trigger. That's a massive trigger."

"I'm sorry," they parroted, not taking their focus off her.

That made her smile and broke the spell completely. She took a deep breath and slowly let it out again. "I guess we *really* need to talk. There's a lot you need to know about me before you guys can decide if you even *want* to have someone like me in your lives."

* * * *

John didn't know what had just happened, but he felt both guilty as hell over inadvertently causing Sachi's reaction, and pissed off beyond belief at the events in her past that had triggered it.

Pissed off that he couldn't reach into the past and wipe those events away for her, make it better for her.

Protect her from that kind of emotional trauma.

He suspected it was related to what had happened to her years ago, and something she was about to detail to them. He knew it would be best to let her reveal to them what she wanted, in her way.

After getting her a glass of iced tea, he and Oscar settled on the couch while she took the chair. Dinner was forgotten, their focus on her.

For a moment her blue eyes stared at the floor before she met their gazes and softly started.

"I guess you both know I kind of got famous around here a few weeks back."

They both nodded, but neither of them interrupted.

"The guy who shot me was Jackson Clary. His son, Jacob Clary, raped me and killed my mom when I was fifteen." Her focus dropped to the floor again as she held the glass with both hands, her shoulders rounded, elbows resting on her thighs as if trying to make herself small so the past couldn't see her sitting there and telling the story.

"It was out in Montana. My dad moved us out there from New Jersey when I was thirteen. I went to school with Jacob. He was older than me and on the junior skeet team I joined. I was younger than him and half-Japanese and half-Jewish in a hick town where people were either nice or assholes. I also outshot him at a state juniors competition only six months after joining the team. My dad made better money as an airplane mechanic than Jacob's dad did as a deputy who had aspirations on running for sheriff. My dad bought me the best gun and reloader he could afford, and my popularity went up with kids who no longer wanted to give Jacob, who was usually a jerk on the best of days anyway, the time of day.

"I was home alone when he showed up. When I tried to run, he caught me in the dining room and was..." She took a swallow of tea. "Mom came in, bags of groceries in her arms, at the end of it."

She sniffled. "Mom was a little shorter than me. Tiny woman. Jacob was on the football team, healthy Montana farmstock kind of dude. She dropped the groceries and started screaming and beating on him, trying to get him off me. He shoved her against the wall and started hitting her, choking her."

Sachi drew in a long, ragged breath. "I was in shock. Everything happened so fast, I didn't think about going for my gun. I grabbed the first thing I could put my hands on." She stared at them again and John spotted the tears in her eyes. "A can of baked beans. It had rolled out of a bag of groceries. That size can, that brand. I hit him until he finally let go of Mom and fell over. Then I called 911." She let go of the glass with her right hand, staring at it as she flexed her fingers. "I only dropped it because it was so slick with his blood that I couldn't hold on to it."

Her cynical laugh sounded more like a sob. "Lucky me, Jackson Clary was the responding officer. Jacob wasn't dead, but apparently he snapped my mom's neck when he attacked her. The ambulance crew was the one who pulled Jackson off me. He'd almost strangled me to death. Fifteen more seconds and I would have been dead, too."

"Shit," Oscar muttered. "I'm so sorry."

"Jackson was convicted of attempted murder and other stuff. Jacob spent four weeks on life support before his mom finally had the plug pulled. Then she went home later that afternoon and committed suicide with vodka, Valium, and a razor blade in the bathtub."

"Jesus," John said.

"Dad got my name changed to protect me and we moved over to Idaho. He was afraid some of Jackson Clary's friends might try to hurt me. I left home the day I turned eighteen. Dad gave me Mom's insurance money, and I had money from a

lawsuit we filed and settled against the county there for what Jackson did to me. I drove until I hit Florida and settled here. Made a new life. I never went back, and I spent my life looking over my shoulder, afraid one of Jackson Clary's friends might come after me."

She let out a snort. "They let Jackson Clary out of jail on a 'compassionate release' for inoperable cancer nearly eight months ago. Apparently he blamed me for his woes. When the media went batshit over Julie's murder, I guess coverage made it out to Montana, and he must have seen me on TV. We had paparazzi falling out our assholes, it felt like. Steven Corey was hugely famous. The fact that he'd snapped and raped and murdered Julie, and attacked his wife and best friend, was front page news."

The men nodded. John knew all about that. Brooksville had been crawling with international media for days after the events.

"Mandaline and I went to Ellis and Brad's house, and Jackson followed us there from the store. Well, I should add that the reason I have an alarm at my house now is because we think he tried to break into it before that happened, but I wasn't home and my neighbor saw it and called it in. Then Mandaline and her guys had me stay there at the store with them, in the apartment upstairs. So Jackson's next attempt was when he followed us that night."

She took another swallow of tea. "If it wasn't for Brad and Ellis, Jackson would have probably killed us both. Brad saved us, but Ellis is the one who finished Jackson off. They showed up just in time."

"I'm sorry," John said.

He didn't know what else to say.

She shrugged. "Not your fault. The attack sort of dredged up a few things, I guess. I'm not as over as much of it as I thought I was." She laughed again, but it sounded less pained. "Sorry about the beans."

"No, it's okay," Oscar said. "We get it."

John nodded.

"I can do any other kind of beans," she said, John spotting her forced humor in an attempt to put them at ease. "Dried or canned. But..." She shrugged. "Sorry."

"Green beans?" Oscar asked.

She smiled even as she brushed at her eyes with the back of her hand. "I fucking *love* green beans."

"I'm sorry about your friend Julie," John said. "I wish I'd met her. She sounds like she was a remarkable woman."

"She was. She was like a sister to me. I didn't know her as long as Mandaline did, and I wasn't as close to her as Mandaline was, but she was the only family I really had here. I spent a lot of years looking over my shoulder and being careful not to let anyone know who I was or what had happened to me. The only other guy I was in a relationship with, I walked away from him because I was terrified someone might have figured out who and where I was and he would get hurt."

"So what's your real name?" Oscar asked.

She smiled. "Sachi is my real name." She waved her hand at them, indicating she was joking. "Miki. Miki Bloomfield. My dad still calls me Miki. He never could call me Sachi when we were together."

"How did you pick the name Sachi?"

"It was my mom's name. I knew at the time it might be stupid, because it's not like there's a lot of Japanese Jews in Idaho, either. Duh. But I wanted to honor her. Wolowitz was Dad's mom's maiden name." She let out a sad sigh that echoed to the bottom of his soul. "So there you have the rest of the story."

Never before had John so badly wanted to pull someone into his arms and soothe their heartache away the way he wanted to with her.

"Sachi's a beautiful name," Oscar said.

A sad smile crossed her face. "My mom was a beautiful woman."

* * * *

Oscar felt guilty as hell that he'd triggered Sachi, but fortunately, now that she'd gotten the story out of her system, she seemed to look a little better.

She even offered to form the hamburger patties for them.

He wanted to hug her, wanted to hold her, wanted to heal her.

No, he and John weren't broken when compared to her, but she was a thousand times stronger than even the two of them put together, to come through what she had and rebuilt her life so completely.

Made him feel like an ass for whining about being single and losing custody of his new HDTV to Karen when she locked him out two weeks after he'd bought it.

As she made the burgers, she glanced at them occasionally. "So. Now that you've heard all that, does it freak you the

hell out? Honestly.”

Oscar didn’t know what John felt, but he knew what he felt. “I can’t say I know what you’ve been through or how you feel. That would be total bullshit on my part. But I know that I really like you a lot, and I’m willing to go slow, as slow as you want, to see what might happen.”

“Me, too,” John said. “Slow is fine with me.”

Chapter Thirteen

Once Sachi got through her initial fear that she might throw up, telling them the story wasn't as bad as she thought it might be. Sort of like ripping a foot-long strip of duct tape off her arm, taking the hair with it. The faster it was done, the faster the pain would be over.

Or like ripping an adhesive bandage off a wound that still needed a little debridement.

A wound that needed the healing kiss of air to allow it to fully finish mending itself.

"I can go so slow it feels like we're going in reverse," Oscar said.

Sachi and John stared at him.

"What?" Oscar asked.

John shook his head. "Seriously? Dude, it's a good thing she's already into us, or you'd run her off."

Sachi laughed, glad to have that after the emotional gutting of telling her story. "It's okay. I'm glad you guys are as nervous as I am. It's a relief, actually."

"I'm so nervous," Oscar started, "that I could totally pis—"

"Stop." John leveled his finger at him. "Just, *please* stop talking and let the lady do the talking before she changes her mind."

He sulked. "Fine." He shot her a wink.

She wanted to burst out laughing with joy. They were so much alike, and yet so different in some ways. The good ways across the board, apparently.

She reached out and palmed Oscar's cheek. "Don't try so hard," she gently assured him. "I promise I'm not going anywhere as long as you guys are willing to put up with me."

His expression softened and he turned his face to kiss her palm. "Thanks for trusting us."

Yes, she was surprised to realize that, despite her nerves, she did trust them.

Outside the storm raged, surprising even Sachi, who'd long ago grown used to the temperamental summer weather of her adopted home state. They got the burgers grilled and the green beans heated up. Settling on the couch with Oscar, with John in the chair, they had finished eating and were watching *The Big Bang Theory* on TV when the power went out.

"Crap," John muttered. His cell phone lit up as he activated the flashlight function. Setting his paper plate on the coffee table, he went over to the kitchen, where he dug a battery-operated lantern from under the sink.

He turned his phone off when the larger light illuminated the room. He carried it over and set it on the coffee table. "There."

The power came back on.

The consternated look on John's face made Sachi bust out laughing again. "If you put the lantern away, you know the power will go out again, right?" Outside, the wind howled. At this rate, Sachi knew she might be stuck there for a few hours. Fortunately these kinds of storms usually passed through very quickly.

Not like she objected to the company.

His consternation turned into a smile. "You're right." He switched it off and sat down again while they waited for the cable box to reboot itself.

"Actually, while we're enduring our forced TV break, I'm going to hit the little girl's room, if you don't mind." She carried her plate over to the counter and left it there.

"Sure, we just have the one." Oscar pointed at the bathroom door, which formed the center of the tiny hallway between the bedroom and bathroom doors, right off the living room.

"Thanks."

As she closed the door behind her and flipped on the light, she was pleased to see it, too, looked clean. No worse than her own bathroom.

Thank the Goddess they aren't pigs.

The bathroom didn't have a window. Based on the layout, she suspected the other apartment butted against this one. As she sat there, the lights went out again.

She was just finishing up and about to fumble in the dark for the sink when the wind's howl turned into a scream. From somewhere outside, an enormous groaning *crack* split through the other noises. The lights blinked on just long enough for her to look up and see part of the ceiling and roof beginning to collapse when the lights went off again, leaving her in total darkness with debris raining down on her head and the sound of the wind picking up even more.

She screamed.

Oscar was on his way to the counter himself when he and John heard the noise.

The lights went off and Oscar missed the counter by inches, accidentally dropping his plate on the floor.

“Dammit.”

Working by feel, he knelt to pick it up, glad he hadn’t let go of his glass, too.

The lights flashed back on, then off again as the freight-train roar filled the apartment.

“Shit!” John yelled.

As they heard what sounded like the roof ripping off, Sachi let out a scream from the bathroom.

The small sliding glass door next to the dining room blew in, or rather out, being sucked from its frame by the gust of wind.

John got his hand on the lantern and switched it on as the howl began receding. “Sachi!” he screamed as he grabbed it and ran for the hall.

Oscar was right on his heels. “You all right?”

She was still screaming, so she couldn’t be hurt too badly, he hoped. She started pounding on the bathroom door. When the men tried to open it, the knob turned, but the door wouldn’t budge.

“Pull on the knob!” John yelled to her.

“Oh, like I hadn’t thought of *that*!” she screamed in reply.

“Stand back,” Oscar yelled, taking a couple of steps back as he pushed John out of the way. He tried for a running start and slammed his shoulder into the door, where it didn’t budge an inch.

John shoved the lantern at him. “I have a sledge in my work van.” Before Oscar could argue with him, John ran out the opening where the slider used to be.

“It’s okay,” Oscar said. “We’re going to get you out. What happened?”

“It looks like part of the roof’s gone. I can see a tree limb. Oh, my Goddess, you’d better check on your neighbor!”

“We need to get you out first.”

“I’m okay, I’m not hurt. Seriously, go check on them. It looks like a tree fell. A big oak. And I think I hear someone yelling over there. Go help them first. I’ve got my phone. I’ll call 911.”

His heart chilling, he realized there was a huge oak tree on the back side of the duplex, on their neighbor’s side.

“Stay there. I’ll be right back.”

It sounded like she laughed. “Not like I’m not going anywhere.”

He headed for the doorway and saw John running back in the rain from his van. “We need to check next door,” Oscar told him. “Sachi said she’ll wait. She’s not hurt.”

John had started to argue when they turned and looked. Sure enough, the huge oak had tipped over.

Racing through their apartment and out their front door, they ran to the neighbor’s apartment and banged on the door. It looked like part of the roof was missing on the unit next door.

They heard someone yelling from inside. Fortunately, the door was unlocked and they rushed inside to find most of the enormous tree filling the apartment.

The brief thought that their own bedrooms were probably damaged flitted through Oscar’s mind before he dove through the branches to find their neighbor. He knew the elderly man’s name was Keith, but beyond that, he didn’t know much else about him.

“Are you all right?” John yelled.

“I’m trapped in my bedroom. One on the right.”

They pushed their way through, the sledge hammer coming in handy as John used it to bash a hole in the hollow-core door. The man was pinned on his bed by a dresser, which had been toppled by a section of the ceiling caving in.

“Are you hurt?” Oscar asked as he set the lantern down and with John tried to help get the dresser off him.

“I’m not tickled, boys. I think my leg’s broke, but I can’t get out.”

They heard sirens arriving as they managed to get the dresser lifted enough they could shove the bed farther against the opposite wall, giving them enough room to free the man’s leg. John grabbed the sledge and busted out the bedroom window, which was only a little higher than the bed.

John jumped out and disappeared while Oscar stayed with the injured man. A few minutes later, he returned with firemen, who helped Oscar climb out so they could get into the window with a stretcher.

Oscar grabbed the lantern and headed back into their apartment with John on his heels. “Sachi?” he called out.

“I’m *still* here,” she said.

He wanted to laugh that her snark sounded intact.

“Get back as far as you can,” John said as he hefted the sledge hammer.

“Roger roger. Go for it.”

He busted out the bottom of the door, making a large enough hole she could crawl out of. As they helped her, she hugged John, then Oscar, kissing them both on the lips.

She froze, staring at them. “Um, thanks.”

The nodded.

“Your neighbor okay?”

“Leg’s hurt, but he said that was it.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “Um, you’d better look at your rooms.”

They did. Sure enough, the roof was damaged in both rooms, more so on John’s side, which was closer to the tree.

“Wow. You guys can’t stay here tonight.”

A deputy stepped into the open doorway and flashed his light around. “Are you all okay?”

“We’re fine,” John said. “We helped our neighbor. Is he going to be okay?”

“Yeah, they said he will be. We’ve got Red Cross on the way, too. Nearly every building’s damaged.”

“Dammit.” John scrubbed his face with his hands. “This sucks.”

“Call Aunt Tammy,” Oscar suggested.

“Good idea.”

Sachi pulled her phone out of her pocket. “Y’all will need help getting your stuff out. Let me make a few calls.”

Fortunately, no one sustained any more serious injuries than their neighbor. It was either a tornado or a straight-line wind that took the tree out and damaged the roofs, as best the authorities could tell. And less than an hour later, Sachi’s calls had produced Brad and Ellis, as well as their friend, Grover, and his sons and sons-in-law, everyone with vehicles, large garbage bags, storage bins, and anything else they could grab, to help the men salvage and move their stuff.

Aunt Tammy was waiting with the front lights on and her garage door open and waiting when they brought the first load there a little after ten that night. By midnight, the men’s apartment had been emptied of everything they could salvage, and the contents either transferred over to Tammy Evans’ house, or to Grover’s storage shed, where at least it’d be safe and dry until the men could retrieve it.

As everyone left, Sachi hung back to speak to the men. “Looks like y’all know how to show a girl a helluva first date.” She smiled.

They both hugged her, Oscar still trying to process the wild ride they’d gone through. “I’m so glad you’re not hurt,” he whispered in her hair.

“Me, too,” John echoed.

“Yeah, well, I’m tough. Hard to kill.” She smiled at them as they released her. “Wiry.” She adopted a fake accent. “I yam from New Joisey, after awl.”

* * * *

This wasn’t exactly how Sachi had envisioned their dinner together. But she was glad she’d been there, able to call friends into action to help the men.

“I’m sorry this night was a disaster,” John said. “Literally.”

“No harm, no foul. Hey, no one was shooting at me, so I call that a good night.” She grinned, enjoying the way they smiled.

The truth was, she’d probably go home and take a hot shower and have a beer or five to chill out. Her adrenaline spike had left her shaky and weak now that the initial emergency was over with.

“There’s supposed to be more storms tomorrow night,” she said. “So I suspect we’ll end up canceling.”

The men nodded. “Yeah,” John said. “It’s okay.”

“But we’ll reschedule.” She stepped in, staring up at John. “Look. Saturday morning, I have a skeet lesson at eight. But we’ll be done by nine. Come over to the club and let me take you shooting. I’m sure after all of this you both will need a little chill-out time. So even if we can’t get together tomorrow night, we’ll have that. And Saturday night, we have one of our coven get-togethers at the store. It’s just a potluck dinner and we shoot the shit. Would you two like to go with me? Meet everyone?”

Oscar smiled. “We’d love to.”

“Absolutely,” John said.

“To skeet, or coven?”

“Both,” the men parroted.

She laughed. “Okay. Good.”

Standing on tiptoe, she kissed them both on the cheek, squeezing their hands. “We’ll take our time. Hopefully a hurricane won’t hit on Saturday.”

They nodded, still smiling.

Their auras looked relaxed despite what they’d gone through. She didn’t think it was too self-aggrandizing to acknowledge that their auras had looked shaken, unsettled all evening, until she solidified plans with them.

“Maybe Sunday I can help you go through your stuff at Grover’s. Get it sorted or repacked or whatever. And you can come over to my house for dinner with me and my dad.”

“We’d like that,” John said.

“Good. Okay. Settled.” She squeezed their hands again, wishing she didn’t have to let go.

“Hey, text us when you get home, okay?” Oscar asked. “Let us know you’re all right.”

“Both of us,” John added.

They were the good kind of overprotective. She liked that. “Will do.”

It also put her at ease to know that they were on the same page. That the men were willing to give her the time she’d need, and were willing to try this, together, the three of them. Those had been her biggest hurdles.

The rest should be easy, right?

When she finally pried herself away from them and got in her car, she drove home full of second thoughts.

“No, don’t do that to yourself,” she said out loud in the car, her fingers tightening around the steering wheel. “You see their auras. You know they’re being honest. Don’t sabotage this.”

Her dad’s SUV was parked in the driveway when she pulled in.

Wow. Okay, there was another facet of this. How did she explain to him that she wanted to date not one, but two guys?

Well, he didn’t wig out over Ellis and Brad.

Maybe that was her answer. He’d accepted their dynamic without batting an eye about it.

But would he be as accepting of an alternative lifestyle when it was his little girl in the middle of the man sandwich?

Chapter Fourteen

The Friday evening investigation was a bust. More thunderstorms that wouldn't let up until after dark.

Sachi called it around five that evening, phoning Tammy to break it to her, and to reschedule it for Sunday evening.

"Oh, that's all right. This worked out for the best. Herbert told me it would, and it did. Although I feel badly the boys lost some of their things."

The men's beds were ruined by the rain, as were some of their books and things in their bedrooms. Fortunately, most of the living room furniture had been saved and moved to Grover's. All in all, the men had gotten off lucky. And with the extra furniture Mandoline still had in storage in the upstairs section they called the warehouse, stuff that Julie had left to her, other than the actual mattresses, they'd be able to easily help refurnish anywhere the men moved.

And the men were using the beds in Tammy's two guest rooms, so they were okay for the time being.

Sachi had still wanted to see the men that evening, maybe have some private time with them, but as her energy crash hit she realized that probably wouldn't be a good idea.

She called John first. "I'm not playing favorites by calling you before Oscar," she said, "it's just your number was right above your aunt's in my contacts."

"It's okay."

She broke the news to him. "But we're still on for tomorrow," she said. "For skeet and the coven, right?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. Would it hurt your feelings if I said I needed to go home and crash tonight?"

"Of course not. Sachi, I'm just glad you're alive and for all the help you got for us. We'll keep ourselves busy tonight. We need to get stuff organized in our rooms here anyway. It's okay."

From his tone of voice, she knew he wasn't just pissing on her leg about it.

"Okay, thanks. I'll call Oscar myself."

"Okay."

That call went equally well, and he laughed when she apologized for calling John first.

"Okay," Oscar started, "can I ask for something?"

"Sure."

"Quit apologizing. If this is going to work, unless we master the art of the three-way phone call, I promise I won't take it personally."

She let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks. I just wanted to be fair."

"I know, and I lov—I'm glad of it."

She couldn't be sure, but thought he'd caught himself maybe staring to say he loved her for it.

She let it go. "Okay. Thanks for being so understanding."

"It figures we all get to this point just to have us move in with Aunt Tammy." He chuckled. "I guess we have no choice but to take things slowly now, huh?"

With her dad living under her own roof, until she knew he'd be okay with it, and until they took things farther, Sachi knew he was right. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Then we'll see you in the morning."

Her dad called her while she was on the way home and begged off dinner, making her laugh.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. You have a more active social life than I do, and you've only officially lived here less than two weeks."

Doubt crept into his voice. "Do you want me to cancel my plans? I will if you want me to."

"No, Daddy. That's not what I meant." She hadn't had time to give him the full story about what happened Thursday night at the men's apartment. He'd arrived home after she'd gone to bed, and was already gone that morning when she got up. "Go and have fun. Seriously. I'm going to order myself a pizza and have me a beer and relax."

"If you're sure."

"I'm sure." In fact, he wasn't home when she went to bed a little after eleven that night. As she fell asleep, exhaustion and stress catching up with her, she offered a prayer of thanks to the Goddess for the positive things that had happened in all their lives despite the whacky delivery of same-said blessings.

* * * *

The next morning, Oscar drove them over to the shooting club to meet Sachi. Neither of them had been there before ever

though they knew where it was.

They hadn't really discussed what had happened Thursday night, still processing everything as well as trying to sort through their belongings and bring some semblance of order back to their lives after work the evening before.

John spoke up before they reached the shooting club. "We still good?"

"Absolutely." Oscar glanced at his friend. "I want this, and I'm willing to do whatever we need, no matter how long it takes, to make it work with her."

"Our parents will probably shit bricks."

Oscar smirked. "Yeah, well, your mom's already going to shit bricks that we've moved in with Aunt Tammy. Did you tell her yet?"

He snorted. "*Hell*, no. You crazy?"

"You don't think she'll find out?"

"Oh, I think she'll find out, but I'm hoping someone else tells her."

"Chicken."

"Damn straight. You know my mom. At least your parents are out in Arizona and can't do anything but give us the silent treatment from long distance."

"That's true."

They spotted Sachi's car by one of the skeet fields and pulled in next to it. She was standing under the shelter there and talking with an older man, who seemed to be focusing intently on her every word.

Oscar held out his fist to John. "We're in this together, right?"

John returned the fist bump. "Together. Absolutely."

She smiled and waved at them before shaking the man's hand.

"Here we go," John said. "Either she loves us after today, or we make total idiots out of ourselves out there."

"Or we make total idiots out of ourselves, and she still loves us anyway."

* * * *

Sachi was glad the men hadn't backed out of shooting. This would be another test. How they handled themselves, if they were good sports or not, if they seemed threatened by her skills.

She'd seen that before, especially with older men watching some of the girls on the juniors team. It wasn't uncommon to hear comments like, "Oh, she shoots good...for a girl."

More than once Sachi had ordered people off the field, with the full backing of the board of directors, over bullshit like that. She wouldn't have her girls bullied or made to feel like tomboys for their skills.

And she also drilled it into the boys' heads that she wouldn't tolerate any kind of behavior like that from them, either.

It'd only taken bouncing one spoiled brat rich kid from the squad, and banning his parents from the club, to drive that point home.

Only after the boy delivered a personal apology to the girl, in front of his teammates, did Sachi give the girl the final decision of letting him come back. The girl had, and then proceeded to clean his clock in the next round, shooting twenty-four to his seventeen.

His parents, who'd railed against the original banning, were still banned as members.

She walked Oscar and John down to the office, got them signed in and got their skeet rounds and shells paid for, and set them up with rental guns and vests. They'd come prepared with their own safety glasses and earplugs.

Unlike her very first round with Ellis, where she'd been making a point with him, she took it easy on her guys. She didn't shoot the first round, coaching them and pulling for them. By the time they finished, John had hit ten, and Oscar eleven. She didn't run them through an official round, mostly worked stations one and seven with them to get them used to it.

Both agreed it wasn't as easy as it looked.

"Are you going to shoot?" Oscar asked. They'd each paid for two rounds and bought two boxes of shells.

"I will this time." She smiled. "I didn't want to intimidate you right off the bat."

"I've got a hot news flash for you," John said. "You already intimidate us."

"In the good ways," Oscar quickly added.

So far, their auras hadn't shifted much, except to seem even warmer, deeper, thicker. They were obviously enjoying this time with her.

She knew she was enjoying it.

They were getting ready for the second round when one of the customers, Ed Geary, showed up and asked if he could join them. She'd coached him before and knew he could pull for her.

Pretty soon, Sachi was lined up at station one for her first shot.

Don't screw this up, girl. "Ha."

Ed hit the button. The machine cycled and launched the clay. It turned into a satisfying cloud of dust as she hit it dead on. John's and Oscar's eyes widened. "Whoa." It had taken them both three tries to hit the high house one clay.

She smiled as she broke the gun open. "And that, boys, is how you shoot like a girl."

John grinned. "I can only hope to one day shoot as good as you do."

Ed, a retired firefighter in his late seventies, cackled. "You'll need a hell of a lot of practice then, let me tell you what."

By the time they finished that round, Sachi's shoulder was protesting, and she'd shot a satisfying twenty-three.

John had hit ten, Oscar nine.

"Don't feel bad," Ed consoled them. "She worked you boys easy the first time. Those two stations are the ones she starts people on. You're lucky you hit as many as you did this go-round."

She carefully waited to see how they'd react.

Luckily, neither man seemed to take a hit to his ego. John looked at her, a playful smile on his face. "Then I guess I'm lucky this isn't strip skeet, huh?"

Ed roared with laughter. "If you were dressed like a damn Eskimo she'd still have you nekkid by station four!"

Oscar, who was standing next to her, winked. "Maybe that's not such a bad thing," he whispered, too low for Ed to hear.

Take things slow? Hell, at the rate they were going, she might not be able to control herself.

One thing was for certain, by the time she walked them back to the clubhouse to return their equipment, she was definitely one step closer to head-over-heels in love with them.

* * * *

John hoped his nerves didn't get the better of him. Sachi had playfully texted back and forth with both of them throughout the afternoon.

"I hope this isn't a mistake," John said as they headed for Oscar's car. He carried the macaroni and cheese casserole that Aunt Tammy insisted on making for them to take.

"Why would it be a mistake?" Oscar asked.

"You're into this kind of stuff more than I am. I don't want to end up looking like an ass in front of her friends."

"You won't. Just don't laugh at them or anything. Unless it's something supposed to be funny. You heard her, she doesn't expect us to share her beliefs. She only cares that we respect them."

"I'll do my best."

"Hey, I've never seen you piss in a punchbowl or anything, buddy. I'm sure you'll do just fine." Oscar grinned as he started the engine.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, college boy."

"You know what I mean. Give yourself more credit than you are."

Before Oscar should shift the car into reverse, John reached out and grabbed his arm. "You're really okay with all this?"

"All what?"

"This. Us. Her."

Oscar's expression turned serious. "Yeah. I'm serious. I thought I made that clear already."

"It won't cost us our friendship?" John asked.

"I won't let it," Oscar said. "Whether *you* let it or not, I can't answer. I don't think this would work with anyone but you, but it just..." Oscar stared out the windshield for a moment, his jaw working as he searched for the words. "It just feels right with you, okay?"

Oscar looked at John again. "This just *feels* right. That night we had dinner with her at Golden Corral, my mind kept drifting and I kept thinking how right it felt then, the three of us. Like it's supposed to be that way. That might sound goofy, but it's how I feel. Like it wouldn't feel right if it was only one of us with her."

John let go of his arm, slowly nodding. "Yeah. Me, too. I'm glad you said it."

"Anything else you want to say while we're having a deep moment?"

John smiled. "Try not to feel me up when it gets to that point."

Oscar stared at him. "You're a schmuck." He backed out and pointed the car down the driveway.

But Oscar wore a smile that belied his tone. The smile that told John they were on the same page.

And that gave him a lot of hope.

Sachi helped Mandaline fold her laundry and get the sheets put back on the bed. Her friend had decided suddenly that afternoon that she wanted to wash the sheets and towels from the apartment. “You picked a hell a crappy time to do this, boss. You realize that, right? We’ve got two dozen people who will be here soon.”

“Which is exactly why I want it done *now*.” She smiled at Sachi. “I don’t have to think about it later.”

“You said you guys aren’t even sleeping here tonight. Why not wait until tomorrow or whenever to do it?” She wrestled a pillow into a pillowcase.

“Because I want it done.”

Sachi quit arguing. It wasn’t doing any good anyway. Until Mandaline had the load of towels and sheets folded and put away, Sachi knew she wouldn’t get anything else done.

It was easier to help Mandaline than argue with her.

Stubborn witch.

Fortunately, Sachi was already downstairs when John and Oscar arrived. John set their covered dish down on the folding table they’d broken out for the potluck dishes. Nervously, Sachi walked over to them and did the hug-handshake dance with them until they all settled on hugs.

“I’m glad you guys decided to come,” she said.

They offered her smiles in return. “Us, too,” they said, glancing at each other before laughing.

It felt good to laugh with them. “Well, grab a seat. It’s very informal. Feel free to join in when we do circle if you want, or not. Totally optional. Most of what we do is just getting together to eat and talk.”

“Why is it called a coven then?” Oscar asked. “I thought that was more formal.”

Sachi shoved back the sadness threatening to creep in. “Julie named it that. Since this is a coffeehouse, she liked the alliteration, I think. *Coffeeshop coven* has a better ring to it than *coffeeshop potluck group*. And we’ve got people from all faiths. Christians, Pagans, Wiccans, Jews—”

“So non-Kosher, nonpracticing Jews are welcomed?” Oscar teased.

She smiled. “Even non-Kosher half-Jew, half-Shinto, Pagan non-Wiccan witches are welcome.” She tapped her chest with her thumb. “And you think *you’re* a mutt?”

He laughed. “I bow to the lady’s superior muttness.”

John smacked him on the shoulder.

“It’s all right,” Sachi assured John. “I refuse to take myself seriously when it comes to my faith. If it’s not fun and doesn’t bring me joy, I don’t want it in my life.”

John’s expression softened. “Sorry. I’m sort of a nonpracticing anything. I think my parents used to be Episcopalian, if that counts.”

“And that’s fine, too,” she assured him. “Whatever floats your spiritual boat, as long as you aren’t harming anyone else, go for it.”

“Is your dad okay with what you do?” John asked.

She shrugged. “He’d sort of fallen away from his faith before he met my Mom. It wasn’t a point of contention for them because they fell in love. She was more interested in love than she was religion. Which, from what my dad says, sort of frosted her family right the frak off, but that’s okay, too.”

“What about her parents?” Oscar asked.

“She was a very late baby. Her parents died when I was just an infant. I’m not close to my aunt and uncle on that side, either.” She rubbed her hands together. “But enough about *that*. Let’s find you guys seats before this place fills up.”

If the laundry hadn’t been a hint Mandaline had something up her sleeve, then her behavior when they finished eating and got ready to start the inside circle part of the evening would have been a massive clue.

Mandaline wore a grin that put Sachi on edge. Brad and Ellis, who’d also attended, looked equally Cheshire-like.

“Whaaat’s up, boss?” Sachi warily asked her.

Mandaline’s grin widened. “Noneyo.”

“Noneyo?”

“None yo’ business,” Brad teased.

Sachi glared at them and leaned in close, her tone low and threatening. “I have the Browning in my trunk. And I have my road witch kit. Do *not* make me resort to da shoosting or da hexing of you three troublemakers tonight.”

Mandaline was the picture of innocence. “Who? *Us*? Up to something?” She flashed a wide, nearly manic grin at Sachi.

“Shit,” she grumbled as she headed back to the group.

Mandaline called the group together for the inside circle. This was the fourth coven they’d had since Julie’s death, not

counting the reception party after Mandaline, Ellis, and Brad's handfasting ceremony. They were all still somewhat emotionally raw and trying to find their new way through it without Julie's loving touch and guidance.

Approximately thirty people had gathered, fewer than the last one, but a little larger than their average attendance in the summer.

Mandaline, flanked by Ellis and Brad, stood across the circle from where Sachi stood between John and Oscar. Sachi couldn't see what her friend held behind her back, but it soon became apparent.

Mandaline stepped into the center of the circle and raised one hand to call for quiet, the other still behind her back.

"We've all gone through a lot of changes the past several weeks," Mandaline said. "Some, unfortunately, tragic. Some positive. And some simply were. Unfortunately, there are those in our midst who are resistant to change." Mandaline focused the force of her brown gaze squarely on Sachi, who felt supernova heat bubble up into her cheeks.

"It is time, therefore," Mandaline continued, "to once again call out to that great deity we've previously invoked."

She produced the large, pink jelly dildo with the suction cup base, licked the base, and stuck it on one of the tables with a *plop* where, much as it had when Sachi first produced it several covens ago, it slowly wiggled and waved back and forth at everyone with slightly obscene undulations.

"Hail, Dildous!" Mandaline chanted as she raised her hands to the ceiling.

The room exploded in laughter as Sachi crossed her arms over her chest, one hand covering her eyes. She let out a low groan.

I. Am going. To fucking. Kill her.

Everyone else chanted, "Hail, Dildous!"

I should have known that thing would come back to haunt me.

Mandaline was on a roll and building up steam. "Once again, tonight we offer up chants to the great god Dildous, for guidance in love and lust, and for hopefully getting those who desire it laid as often and well as they wish it. Hail, Dildous!"

The group, still laughing, attempted to respond with, "Hail, Dildous!" A few people had laughed so hard they were now coughing.

Sachi peeked through her fingers. Both Oscar and John were grinning and laughing with everyone else.

Greeeat.

"Oh great and mighty Dildous," Mandaline continued, slowly walking her way around the circle, "we ask for help. We ask for love. We ask for healing. We ask for orgasms! Please, rain your celestial vibrations down upon us. OmmmMMMMM!"

The group, the ones who weren't laughing or choking over laughing, picked up the humming. "OmmMMMM!"

Sachi dropped her hands and forced a smile, glaring at Mandaline until her friend stopped right in front of her.

"Nice," Sachi whispered. "Thanks."

Mandaline simply shrugged, the smile still on her face and hands in the air, as she turned to the rest of the group. She sliced her hands down, indicating silence.

"Oh great and mighty Dildous, god of the mighty O, we beseech you this night to grace us with your generous presence. So mote it be!"

A chorus of, "So mote it be!" resounded through the room, the participants erupting into applause and hoots of approval.

Mandaline stepped into the center of the group and curtsied to them, her peasant skirt sweeping the floor as she did. Then she motioned for silence again. "And now, I pass along the primordial scepter to its next caretaker."

She went to yank the dildo off the table, but the suction cup base wouldn't let go and she nearly pulled the table over. More laughter ensued as she wrestled with it, finally using her fingers to peel the suction cup base off the smooth surface. Before Sachi could turn and run, Mandaline had grabbed her arm and slapped the pink jelly dildo into her palm, closing her fingers around it.

"Enjoy it in good health," Mandaline softly teased as more people laughed and cheered.

"It's still unused, I hope," she snarked.

"Yep. I had to wash the dust off it this afternoon."

"Well thanks for that. I guess."

Mandaline made the rounds of the room, visiting with people, while John and Oscar stared at the dildo.

"Is that a hint?" Oscar asked.

Sachi started to shake it at them, realized how plain wrong that seemed, and transferred it to her other hand, which she hid behind her back. "She's just giving me payback from a few weeks ago when I pulled this stunt on her."

"Ah," John said. "I thought maybe she was giving her seal of approval."

"Same thing. I'll be right back." She quickly wove her way through the crowd and dumped the dildo onto the shelf under the cash register, where Anna was taking her turn manning the till tonight.

Anna bumped hips with her. "Payback's a witch."

“Yeah,” Sachi grumbled. “I’m gonna get that witch, all right.”

Chapter Fifteen

Sachi had a duh moment a few minutes before they were to call for the closing circle outside that would end the evening.

“You know, we don’t have to go home when this is done,” she told John and Oscar. “The apartment upstairs is vacant tonight. We can go up and, you know, hang out. Watch TV. Whatever.”

Both men eagerly nodded. “We’d like that,” John said.

“We can spend time together without keeping Aunt Tammy awake,” Oscar said.

“Or my dad,” Sachi added. Although, he’d had plans that night with coworkers and said he wasn’t sure what time he’d get home.

Not that she would have minded having her own house all to themselves, but it might have been a little awkward if he’d walked in on them in the living room—or overheard them in the bedroom. And she didn’t want to spend the entire night nervous that he might do just that.

Once they conducted their final circle and ended the evening, everyone hugged and the cleanup began. Twenty minutes later, it was just Mandaline, Brad, Ellis, Sachi, John, and Oscar.

They’d moved Damiago and Pers to the house earlier that afternoon. As Brad and Ellis bid them good night and headed to the car, Mandaline leaned in and hugged Sachi.

“Have fun,” she whispered in Sachi’s ear before stepping out the back door and offering a last wave good night.

Sachi locked the back door behind Mandaline and waged a nuclear-class war within herself between leery and longing, desire and dread, anxiety and anticipation.

Then she turned and stared down the hallway. John and Oscar stood there, looking as anxious as she felt. Even their auras flickered as a reflection of their nervous state.

They didn’t want to do anything to hurt her, mentally, physically, or emotionally, of that she was certain.

Her clit kicked fear in the nuts and sent it packing as she walked toward them, determined, for once in her life, to take charge of her destiny without letting fear make the final call.

She took their hands and held them pressed against her chest, so they could feel her racing heartbeat. “I’m nervous, too,” she managed.

Immediately, their expressions softened, their auras calming. John and Oscar both gently squeezed her hands.

“If you’re not comfortable with this,” John said, “it’s okay. We don’t have to do anything tonight. If all you want to do is sit on the couch and watch TV, we’re good with that. Really.”

Oscar nodded. “We just want to spend time with you, alone.”

The thing was, she didn’t want to just sit on the couch and watch TV. She wasn’t exactly the most experienced in terms of sex, considering Tom had been her only lover, but he had been gentle, kind, and pretty damn good as far as she knew.

She also knew sex was supposed to be fun, happy.

She wanted that in her life. Fun and happiness.

Needed it.

And here it stood, well within her easy grasp.

“I want to go upstairs,” she said, forcing herself to speak up so they could hear her, “but I don’t want to watch TV.”

The men nodded.

She turned off the lights downstairs and then led the way to the stairwell.

Only once they were up in the bedroom did Sachi mentally connect the dots as to why Mandaline had been so insistent on doing laundry that afternoon and changing the sheets on the king-size bed.

Damn tricky witch.

How she loved that woman.

She turned on the TV and set the cable box to a light jazz music channel to provide background noise and light after she turned off the overhead one.

“Um,” Oscar said, “I don’t have...um...” He looked uncomfortable and stared at John.

“Oh. Um, neither do I. Sorry.”

Sachi didn’t need to read minds to follow their thoughts. “Damn. Wait.” She went to the bedside table closest to the door and opened the drawer.

There, under a sticky note with a smiley face and the words *You’re Welcome!* in Mandaline’s handwriting, was a large box of condoms. Next to it, a brand new bottle of lube, still in its box.

I’ll thank her tomorrow. She turned and held them up. “Score!”

She set them on the table and kicked off her shoes, her bravado fading as reality set in. “I promise I’ll try not to devolve

into a crying hot mess,” she softly said.

Both men reached out to her, cradling her between them. Behind her, John wrapped his arms around her waist while Oscar clutched her hands in his and kissed her fingers.

“We don’t have to do this tonight if you aren’t ready,” John assured her again.

“But if I give myself that out, I might never *be* ready. I don’t want to live my life in fear anymore.”

Oscar kissed her on the forehead, so sweet and tenderly that nearly drove her to tears. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

She stared up into his blue eyes, feeling like she was falling, praying they caught her.

Praying they didn’t drop her or fumble the ball or whatever that football term was.

Please don’t let this be a mistake.

They didn’t paw at her, didn’t feel her up. They simply stood there with her, holding her, their blue auras enveloping her, mixing and merging and flowing around and through her.

She tipped her head back and reached up with one hand to tangle her fingers in Oscar’s hair. She coaxed his head down, her lips meeting with his in an explosive kiss that stole her breath from its sweetness.

It wasn’t until she parted her lips, her tongue flicking out and tracing the seam of his, that he finally deepened their kiss, a soft moan escaping him as she felt his cock harden against her through their clothes.

Thisss.

Oh, yes, *absolutely* this was what she wanted. Her fingers curled, tightening her grip on him, digging into his scalp and holding him there, waiting until he finally grew confident and took over from her.

His other hand slipped around her hip, below John’s arms and pressing against the small of her back, holding her body tightly against his.

Behind her, John’s lips feathered against the side of her neck, his breath hot and quick and sending pleasant shivers down her spine that seemed to coalesce in the neighborhood of her clit.

And still, they took their time, waiting on her, happy to go at her pace.

She cradled Oscar’s cheek with her hand and looked him in the eye. “Please, do this,” she whispered. “I’ll say stop if I’m not okay. I…” She tried to figure out how to make it sound even reasonably cogent. “I trust you guys. But I need you to…” She realized she didn’t have a good way of saying it that wouldn’t make it sound like slams against their manhood.

And considering John now had a decent-size bulge jamming against her ass through his clothes, she wasn’t about to slam either of their manhoods, literally or metaphorically.

“Take over,” she whispered. “Please?”

“We don’t want to hurt you,” John said.

She tipped her head back enough she could look him in the eyes. “I know, and that’s why I’m asking you to take over. Because I know if I need you to stop, you will. This is me trusting you guys. If I can’t trust you here, I don’t know where I’d be able to trust you.”

Oscar let go of her other hand. This time, he slipped his fingers of that hand up the nape of her neck, pulling her in for a kiss.

She wanted them to take over? Apparently, she was going to get it. The explosive kiss made her clit throb even more, his tongue gently sliding between her lips, flicking along hers as he rocked his hips against her.

John’s kisses along her neck turned into gentle nips that made her moan.

Suddenly, the thought came to her that Tom might have been a sweet, gentle lover, but these two guys were going to rock her socks right the hell off her body and into the next life.

Oh, boy.

John’s hands traveled up, cupping her breasts and rubbing the pads of his thumbs over her nipples through her shirt and bra. That only added fuel to her pulse, which now raced out of control.

“Like this?” John asked, his voice sounding deep and throaty. He, too, now rocked his hips against her ass, the feel of his stiff cock rubbing against her. Neither was, thankfully, as huge as Dildous, but both appeared more than adequately endowed.

She couldn’t speak with Oscar’s tongue in her mouth, but she wiggled her hips a little, drawing moans from both men.

Oscar broke their kiss, his forehead pressed against hers as he caught his breath. “Sweetheart, we’re going to take our time and love the pain away. We promise we’ll never give you a reason to not trust us.”

A prickle of tears threatened and she willed them away. She didn’t want to start crying now, happy tears or not, and have the men stop.

Goddess, she did *not* want them to stop! Not when it felt like her panties were thoroughly soaked through already, and they hadn’t really done anything yet.

And throughout all of this, their blue auras swirled and flowed around and through her, only adding to the energy coursing through her veins. This felt right, more right than anything she'd ever felt before.

All signs point to yesss...

She tried to stifle the snicker that wanted to bubble up.

They turned her in their arms and then it was John kissing her, his technique different in a good way, and equally as sexy and exciting. Oscar slid his hands under the hem of her shirt. Up, up, finding and sliding her bra out of the way, his warm hands cupping her breasts and making her moan again.

"Yes, just like that," Oscar whispered. "That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Mm hmm!" She could only mumble, this time John's tongue taking away her ability to talk.

Not that she was complaining.

Not in the slightest.

Somewhere along the line, Oscar got both her shirt and bra off her, leaving her there in her skirt and panties. The feel of their shirts against her bare flesh excited her, thrilled her.

Still, they kissed her, taking their time and their turns pressing their lips against hers, the other feathering their lips over her flesh, her shoulders and back and breasts, lips nipping and teasing her nipples into hard, aching peaks.

John finally lost his shirt at some point, followed by Oscar. The feel of their warm flesh against hers was even better, warm and right and everything she'd hoped it might be.

She reached down with both hands, pressing her palms flat against the fronts of their pants. Both men groaned as her fingers molded around the shapes of their erections.

Oscar gently cupped her chin in his hand. "You keep that up, you know where those are going, right?"

She smiled. "I sure hope so."

He smiled back, the effect totally devastating. She wanted to keep making him smile like *that*, both of them, different and sexier and happier than she'd seen either of them look in the short time she'd known them.

Reaching to her waist, she shoved her skirt and panties down to the floor and stepped out of them. "Gentlemen." She walked over to the bed and started pulling the covers down while she heard them frantically trying to get out of their shoes and pants and underwear behind her.

She sat on the bed, facing them, smiling as she watched them undressing. They looked as frantic as she felt.

She found them insanely adorable.

Once they got naked without hitting the floor in the process, they flanked her on the edge of the bed. Even in the dim light from the TV she could see they sported rigid erections.

Another wave of nerves wanted to sweep through, to tell her this was a bad idea to get involved with not one but two guys after barely knowing them a few weeks.

She gave the thought a boot in the ass and kicked it out of her brain. She wanted this, dammit. Wanted to stop being afraid. Wanted to stop being alone.

Together, they lay back on the bed. John stroked her cheek. "You're so beautiful. I knew I felt something for you that day when I came to fix your water heater."

"Sorry I botched our bakery meeting," Oscar said.

She turned to look at him. "No apologies. We're where we need to be right now. Doesn't matter how we got here."

John gently turned her head again and kissed her while Oscar began working his way down her body with his mouth. Over her breasts, taking his time as he flicked first one nipple, then the other with his tongue, lower, lower.

She started to curse the fact that she'd only trimmed the carpet instead of shaving, then realized if they really loved her, it wouldn't matter to them.

I can shave the wookie later.

It apparently didn't matter to Oscar, at least. His hand preceded his lips, drifting to rest between her legs, pausing apparently to judge her reaction before his fingers gently slipped between her labia and found her clit.

OMGOMGOMG! Fear and desire struck up a tornado of discord inside her until she took matters into her own hand. She reached down, grabbed a handful of his fine, straight brown hair, and shoved his head lower.

He chuckled. "Someone's pushy." But it was just the push he needed, apparently. He drew a long, low moan from her as he slipped one finger inside her soaked pussy and used his other hand to spread her folds open so he could nuzzle at her clit with his lips.

And once he started, he didn't stop.

Any remaining reservations that might have even considered breaking through her brain shattered into a thousand tiny pieces as it felt like lava flowed through her veins.

Oh, yes, this!

Had she really forgotten how great oral sex felt? Apparently so, or Oscar was even better at it than Tom had been, because *damn*, this felt *good*.

Not just good—*gooooood*.

Her other hand hooked around the back of John's head. She grabbed a fistful of his curly brown hair and held on tight, her cries muffled by his mouth over hers.

John started playing with her nipples, first brushing his fingers across them, then as he gained confidence lightly rolling them between his thumbs and fingers. It amplified her pleasure to an eleven on the one-to-ten scale, making her cry out again as the bubble building inside her finally swelled and burst.

Her back arched as the orgasm bounced around inside her, short-circuiting her brain. She was vaguely aware of screaming something at them, pleasure so intense she wasn't sure she could handle that much of it, when everything suddenly stopped.

Everything.

Her eyes flew open as she looked up at the men, who'd both stopped what they were doing, the licking and sucking and kissing and teasing, and were now staring down at her with fear on their faces.

"What?" she gasped. "Why the *hell* did you stop?"

"You said stop. We both heard you," Oscar said.

"No! Damnit, I said *don't* stop!"

"Oh, sorry," John said. "We thought you said stop."

"No!" She let out a groan. "It was muffled because your tongue was down my throat."

"We thought it best to err on the side of caution."

Bless their hearts, their erections had even wilted a little.

Well, I have my answer. She now didn't doubt if she said stop, they'd stop.

"Okay, new rule," she said. "Colors. I'm not likely to randomly yell out colors, 'kay? Green, yellow, red, just like a stoplight. Red means stop. Unless I yell that, do *not* freaking stop."

Relief filled them. "Got it," they said.

"Good. Now someone owes me for an interrupted orgasm."

They dove into action, immediately resuming their previous positions and actions and quickly turning her frustration into renewed pleasure.

At least her stomach had remained settled, although that was likely due to the proactive Imodium she'd taken earlier in the evening.

Insurance.

It didn't take long for Oscar to quickly get her worked up again. This time when she cried out *don't stop*, they didn't.

And it felt sooooo damn good.

She lay there gasping for air and trying to recover from that while Oscar kissed the insides of her thighs, his finger still deep inside her, but now not moving.

When she opened her eyes, John was smiling down at her. "Better?"

She nodded, eyes falling closed again.

"Not falling asleep on us, are you?" Oscar teased.

"Nope. Just catching my breath."

"Good." Oscar slowly withdrew his finger from her. She opened her eyes and watched as he licked her juices off it, a sexy smile playing across his lips.

Oh, daammnnn that's hawwwt!

Tom had helped heal her soul in many ways, ways she wasn't sure she'd ever feel whole again after what had happened to her. Sweet, loving, kind, patient, and sexy.

And...totally vanilla. She didn't realize it then, but in retrospect, while she likely would have been happy with him, the older her knew she needed something...more.

A guy who'd look her in the eyes while licking his fingers clean was a good start.

And the sexy grin Oscar wore didn't hurt, either.

She crooked a finger at him and he scrambled up the bed, his cock once again fully erect, she was happy to see.

Not wanting to leave John in the dust, she reached down and wrapped her fingers around his hard cock.

Yum.

First things first.

She grabbed Oscar's cock with her free hand and coaxed him closer. He braced himself on the headboard and stared down into her eyes as she looked up and met his gaze. She slowly pumped her hand up and down on his cock as his rumbling

moan vibrated through his body into hers, and straight to her clit again.

Oh, goodie. Libido in good working order. Check.

“I’m guessing you got yourselves checked out after your exes?” she asked.

Oscar nodded. “But if you don’t want to, I under—”

His words cut off in a loud moan that nearly made her come again as she engulfed his cock with her lips.

She enjoyed this, she wouldn’t deny it. She had with Tom, too. As he’d helped rebuild her trust, she’d loved the effect it had on him, going down on him, especially watching him watch her do it.

Apparently, it’d been a while for Oscar. His cock exploded, catching her by surprise as hot jets of cum spurted into her mouth.

His passionate groan turned into one of frustration. “Oh, dammit! I’m sorry, Sachi. It’s just..*damn* it felt so good! I swear I don’t usually do that. Come that fast, I mean.”

She giggled, refusing to relinquish his cock until she was satisfied she’d drained him. “No worries, sweetheart. We’ve got all night.”

She sat up and before he could react, she engulfed John’s cock in her mouth. Oscar was a little shorter in length, but larger in girth than John. It didn’t matter, because they were both sporting cocks that neither had any reason to be ashamed of.

And, she was thankful to see, they were reasonably proportioned. It was nice to joke about being a size queen, but the reality wasn’t as fun.

John’s fingers clutched at the back of her head as his entire body went rigid beneath her, sending her heart soaring.

When she reached down and cupped his balls with her free hand, he, too, exploded.

Good. Now that all three of them had at least one under their belts, they could all relax and take their time.

She wanted to take a *lot* of time.

She sat up, a grin on her face.

“You did that on purpose,” he said, his voice sounding breathless.

“Yep. You catch on quick.”

Sachi got out of bed and dashed into the kitchen to grab a plastic cup. She did a quick rinse and spit in the bathroom, and brought the full cup of water back into the bedroom with her, where she set it on the bedside table. Then she perched between them on the bed, sitting on her knees.

“I’m not fragile china, guys. Feel free to step up your game.”

John grinned as he sat up and grabbed her, pulling her down and on top of him. This time, he fisted a goodly handful of her hair and held on tight as he kissed her.

She let out a pleased whine as she melted against him.

This!

Oh, sooo this.

She was aware of Oscar sitting up next to them. Then his hand caressed her ass, his fingers slipping down between her legs until his fingers found her clit again. Still swollen and sensitive from the first go-round, she rocked her hips in time with his movements.

His voice whispered in her ear. “Oh, you want us to step it up, hmm?”

She couldn’t think about responding because John was fucking her mouth with his tongue. Although, to be fair, she was giving back as good as she was getting.

Oscar slid one finger into her pussy and began finger-fucking her with it, his other fingers hitting her clit at the bottom of every stroke.

She moaned, falling still, her back arched to give him the best angle.

“You like that?”

She whined.

John had one arm tightly wrapped around her waist, the other still firmly holding her head in place and kissing her.

Oscar’s hand sped up. “Show us you like it, baby. Come for me like this.”

John spread his legs, forcing hers apart, and that was all it took. She fell headfirst down the pleasure slide again.

“That’s it,” Oscar said, more force in his voice. “Make all the noise you want. Show us how good it feels, and we’ll keep doing it. We’ll give you all you want as long as you keep showing us you like it.”

She cried out, the muscles of her cunt grabbing at his finger as he continued fucking her with it and her orgasm rocked through her. Even with her eyes closed, she felt the blue energy of their auras swirling through her, adding to the pleasure in a way she never thought possible.

Okay, no offense to him, this was *definitely* better than with Tom.

Way better.

Oscar's hand slowed, giving her a moment of respite. Only a moment, because he carefully worked a second finger into her, apparently trying to gauge her reaction before slowly picking up speed, until he was soon driving her back up the ramp again toward another climax.

She'd had multiple orgasms before, a few times with Tom.

But this...*never* anything like *this* before.

Mandaline's a lucky witch was the last coherent thought she had as her climax tipped her over again and she gave in to the pleasure.

Oscar's hand disappeared. John flipped her over onto her back, grinning down at her. She heard Oscar ripping the box open and the sound of plastic tearing and realized John was rolling a condom onto his hard shaft.

He braced himself with his left arm while lining up the head of his cock with his right, swiping it up and down her wet slit until he nudged himself between her thighs and got himself aligned with her cunt.

Sachi arched her back, thrusting up, but he wouldn't be rushed. "You said we had all night," he teased, his right hand lacing his fingers with hers and raising it above her head.

She started to shoot a sexy, snarky comeback at him when a flashback hit her. "Yellow," she gasped.

He froze. "What's wrong?"

"I...Please don't hold my hands down right now."

He immediately let go, instead cupping it with his and bringing it up to his lips, where he kissed her palm. "Are you all right?" Gone was the seductive, sexy tone. His voice sounded full of concern.

She also felt him starting to lose his erection again. "Dandy." She grabbed his head and yanked him down on top of her, kissing him while she arched her hips against him and hoped she'd salvaged it for him.

For her part, she was okay, had gone through this and worse before and knew how to work her way out of it again as long as the men just followed her lead.

And without even knowing it, John had just cemented her undying trust in him.

Atta boy. His cock swelled again, much to her relief, and he slowly pressed forward until he was fully buried inside her. She wrapped her legs around his hips and hoped he'd take the hint.

A quick study, he did. Slowly at first, still worried about her, it didn't take him long to get into the rhythm, a sweet, seductive grind that even managed to rub against her clit in a way she hoped they could refine in the future.

For now, she wanted him to come. She nipped at his tongue, drawing another low moan from him. He planted his hands on the bed on either side of her head and goaded by her heels nudging his ass, started fucking her harder, faster.

She wanted this for him. The way his aura grew brighter, stronger, clearer. Maybe the answer was these two men needed her for their healing as much as she needed them for hers.

As good a reason as any.

Ending their kiss, she whispered in his ear, "Come for me, baby. Come hard for me."

He let out a cry, his face buried against the side of her neck as he took a few more thrusts inside her before falling still. As he caught his breath, she stroked his back, holding him, not wanting to let him go.

Note to self, get back on the pill. She hadn't been on it in years.

Hadn't needed it.

But she suspected they'd be spending a fortune in condoms at this rate.

After a moment, he raised his head and kissed her. "Will you hate me if I tell you I love you?"

She tousled his hair. "I love you, too."

Oscar cleared his throat. When she looked, he wore a smile. "Love you, too, mister."

He leaned in for a kiss. "Love you, baby. So much."

John left the bed to clean up and dispose of the condom. When he did, she rolled on top of Oscar and sat up, straddling his torso.

She laced her fingers through his. "Ready for number two?"

"Tell me."

She didn't want to talk. She wanted to fuck. Specifically, fuck him.

But she also recognized a stubborn streak in his aura. "I didn't expect that to trigger me," she quietly said. She squeezed his hands. "We're good now. I'm okay."

"I don't want to trigger you."

"Sometimes you won't be able to help it. It doesn't happen like it used to, believe me. Maybe if I'd had more than just Tom in my history, it might be something I'd already be over now." She shrugged. "It's okay."

"No, it's not okay, because I don't ever want to cause you to trigger."

John returned. "What?"

“He wants to make with the talky instead of the fucky,” she tried to joke.

“Sachi,” Oscar said. “I want to talk about this now.”

She let go of one of his hands and reached behind her, finding his cock and gently squeezing it. “Okay, so talk.”

He let out a low growl. “That’s cheating.”

She grinned. “So sue me.” He arched an eyebrow at her. “Oscar, it’s okay. See? Colors worked, just like in all those kinky romance books. I refuse to live my life worried about what might trigger me. It’s enough to know that when I feel like that, if I tell you, you guys will instantly respond.”

“That’s not good enough for me,” he said. “I don’t want to trigger you at all.”

“And that’s something you’ll have to get over. You had no idea about the baked beans. To be honest, it’s something I hadn’t really even thought about in years. It was just one of those weird confluences of events. We’re good.” She gently squeezed, feeling his cock respond. “Now, would you rather continue the buzzkill discussion, or would you like me to roll a condom over this nice cock of yours and fuck you silly?”

“Go with the condom and fucking, dude,” John teased. “Much better option. The lady has spoken.”

Oscar reached out his free hand to John, who obliged by slapping a plastic wrapper into it. He held it up to Sachi, who leaned forward and took it from him with her teeth.

He laughed and her heart soared at the sound.

Yes, they’d have some bumpy roads ahead, but she knew, she *trusted*, that the three of them would make it through this all right in the end.

She scooched farther down the bed so his cock was in front of her. Then she ripped the wrapper open, tossing it over her shoulder as she kept eye contact with Oscar. In the dim light, his blue eyes took on a sexy midnight hue even more stunning than the color of their auras.

Slowly, seductively, she rolled the condom down his cock before she rose up and lined him up with the entrance of her pussy. “Enjoy this,” she said. “I know I will.” She slowly impaled herself, relishing his moan of pleasure, his hands gripping her hips, fingers digging in.

When he was fully buried inside her, she leaned forward and kissed him. “FYI? Fucky was *definitely* the right choice,” she teased. Her hips began a sexy grind against his, her nipples brushing against the light dusting of brown hair across his chest and sending tingles of need straight to her clit again.

It seemed every touch went straight to her clit tonight, every gentle stroke of their hands, every caress of their lips, every kiss, even every sound.

Them. Everything about them.

This is perfection.

Well, in her mind, anyway. If it couldn’t be called perfection, she didn’t know what could.

She sat up again and John kneeled next to her, capturing her lips in a kiss that almost made her forget what she was in the process of doing. Then with one hand resting along the small of her back, his other slipped between her legs, his fingers finding her clit.

“Why don’t you give us another one,” John said. When she looked, he wore a sexy smile she knew would completely be her undoing for the foreseeable future.

Daammnn...

He kissed her again, his fingers stroking, speeding up as she started rocking back and forth faster, harder, until she was bouncing up and down on Oscar’s cock with his hands on her hips guiding her, and John’s fingers on her clit pulling her closer and closer to the edge.

The dam burst. She cried out, loving the way John’s lips crushed hers in a bruising kiss that swallowed her moans.

“Yeah!” Oscar said, meeting her thrust for thrust until he buried himself deep inside her, holding her still, his own climax answering hers.

Sachi braced her arms against Oscar’s chest as she tried to catch her breath. John kept an arm around her, supporting her, eventually drawing her off Oscar and against him as they sank down to the mattress together with her draped across his chest.

Oscar stole a quick kiss before leaving the bed. He returned a moment later, snuggling close and draping his arm over her back.

She didn’t want to move, didn’t want anyone to talk. Didn’t want to disturb this perfection.

Except...she had to pee.

Once she was sure she’d be steady on her legs again, she gave them both quick kisses. “Be right back,” she assured them. Dashing into the bathroom, she didn’t bother turning on the light as she took care of business, washed her hands, and returned to bed.

Snuggled comfortably between them, the men lying on their sides and facing her, she caught one each of their hands with hers and laced fingers with them.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

John looked confused. “You don’t need to thank us, sweetheart. We’re the ones who should be thanking you.”

She looked at Oscar, who nodded. “What he said.” A playful smile quirked his lips. “I can’t believe someone like you would want losers like us.”

She drew their hands up under her chin and kissed them in turn. “Please don’t talk like that about yourselves. We all took massive hits in our pasts. We need to let them go.”

“But you, understandably, have a lot more to deal with,” Oscar said. “We just don’t want to screw this up with you.”

“What he said,” John joked with a smile.

“I can forgive a lot. All I need is for you both to promise never to betray my trust. And that covers a huge, honking swath of real estate, from lying to me to cheating on me, to things like tonight. If you can promise me that, we’re good.”

They both nodded. Oscar leaned in first and kissed her. “I promise.”

John kissed her next. “Me, too. I promise.”

She offered them a smile. “Then let’s grab a quick nap before round two, because I suspect you boys won’t have any trouble revving my engine again.”

John spoke up. “Can I ask for a promise?”

She nodded.

“You don’t give us Snarky Sachi to hide when you’re in pain or afraid or triggered. We need to know you trust us, too. You don’t joke it away when you’re alone with us. If you can’t talk about it right then, you say so. And when you can talk about it, you do.”

She glanced at Oscar, who nodded. “Please?”

This felt like running toward the cliff’s edge at full bore without attempting to slow down.

“I promise to try,” she said. “I don’t have a lot of experience with it though. It’s kind of my survival mechanism.”

“I’m good with trying,” Oscar said.

John kissed her again. “So am I.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Chapter Sixteen

The next morning, Sachi awoke feeling disoriented. At first she'd be damned if she could remember where she was or how the hell she even got there.

Or why she felt pleasant aches and pains in places she wasn't used to having them.

Then she realized John and Oscar lay on either side of her, and the entire night—and their second round of early morning boinkage—came rushing back to her.

Closing her eyes, she mentally counted to three before opening them again.

They weren't a mirage. They were real, peacefully sleeping, their blue auras flowing over and through her.

She closed her eyes again and breathed a sigh relief. *Thank you, Goddess. Thank you, Julie. And thank you Mandaline, you sneaky, thoughtful little witchypoo. I really owe you. Big-time.*

On that thought she had to clamp a hand over her mouth to smother the happy sob that wanted to break through. She lay there silently crying, trying really hard not to sniffle too loudly and awaken them.

She'd had absolutely no dreams that she could recall, good or bad. And this morning, despite all the unfamiliar and not entirely unpleasant aches and pains in her body, she still didn't regret the decision to step forward and move things along with the men.

They were men of their word. A year from now if she hadn't taken this step, they would still be doing the same dance with her, never looking at anyone else, never pressing her for more than she was ready to give.

After a few minutes she got her emotions under control and carefully climbed down and out the end of the bed and headed to the bathroom.

When she closed the door and flipped on the light, she had to clap a hand over her mouth again. This time, to smother her cry of surprise.

In the mirror, she saw the same brilliant blue aura that surrounded the men.

Never before had she seen her own aura.

Ever.

Even after trying countless times to do so.

Julie's best advice had been that maybe it was a fluke, since many others could see their own auras.

In fact, her own aura was the only aura, before now, that she'd never been able to see. No one that she knew who could read auras could ever see it, either.

She reached out, touching the mirror, her mirror-image arm and hand swathed in the brilliant blue glow.

This is new.

Then the giggles hit her. She grabbed a bath towel from the bar on the wall and held it pressed over her mouth as she laughed into it, unable to take her eyes off the mirror, the blue halo surrounding her.

When she looked down at her arms and legs, she couldn't see it. Only in the mirror.

But it was enough.

It was proof.

She'd made the right decision, of that she was now absolutely certain.

After she used the bathroom and cleaned up a little, she returned to the bedroom. According to the time on the cable box, it was a little after nine.

The men stirred as she nestled herself between them again. Oscar, then John, let out yawns before both appearing to be startled to see her there.

She grinned up at them. "Good morning, gents."

Equally handsome grins spread across their faces.

Wake up to this every morning?

Yeah, I could get used to that.

* * * *

John stared at Sachi. Part of him had been convinced he'd dreamed the whole thing, so to see her lying there between them was a relief at a molecular level.

He was about to lean in and kiss her when somewhere on the floor his phone rang, the special ringtone he used for his mom's cell.

"Hold that thought," he told Sachi. His mom rarely called him from her cell, and then it was usually important. Hoping it

wasn't something to do with his dad, he got out of bed and dug through the pile of clothes until he found his pants. He managed to locate his phone in his pocket and answer it before it went to voice mail.

"Mom?"

"Don't you *dare* 'mom' me! When were you planning on telling me, huh?"

What few vestiges of sleep remained in his system vanished at her biting tone. "Huh?"

How the hell could she have found out about Sachi already?

He walked out into the living room as she continued her rant. "I had to hear at Sunday school this morning from Emma Davis that your apartment was destroyed by a tornado the other night!"

Oh. "Since when do *you* go to Sunday school?"

"Really, John? *That's* what you ask me? Are you two all right? And where are you staying?"

Relief flowed. Not only was this call not about Sachi, his mom hadn't figured out they were staying with Aunt Tammy.

Yet.

"Um, we've got it covered for right now, thanks. Friends came and helped us save our stuff. We've got a temporary place to stay."

"Well why don't you both come here? We have the room. And why didn't we get a call about this?"

To be honest, the last person he'd wanted to call when it happened was his mom or dad. He didn't want his dad feeling the stress, and he didn't want his mom trying to logic him into moving home with them. "It was late and I didn't want to worry you and it sort of happened really fast. It's not like we had a lot of stuff to move."

"So where, exactly, are you staying?"

Shit. He didn't want to outright lie to his mom. "Well, right now we're at a friend's apartment." Technically not a lie.

"Jonathan Roger Evans, you answer my question."

Oh...crap. She'd used both first and middle names.

He winced in preparation. "We moved in with Aunt Tammy."

Silence met his answer. He checked the phone and the call hadn't dropped.

"Then why," his mom finally said, her voice sounding way too calm and steady for his liking, "did you just say you're at a friend's apartment?"

This was getting deeper by the second. He turned and spotted Sachi and Oscar, both naked, standing in the bedroom doorway and staring at him with concern on their faces. "Because last night, we did." Before he even realized what he was doing, he plunged into the icy waters of his mother's foul mood. "Oscar and I have a girlfriend and we spent the night with her last night."

Both Sachi's and Oscar's mouths dropped open into nearly identical *Os* of shock.

"What?"

Well, she was already pissed off at him. Wasn't like it could get much worse at that moment.

Might as well bite the bullet. "Oscar and I have a girlfriend."

"You mean you and Oscar have girlfriends? Since when?"

"No. *A* girlfriend, Mom. She's *our* girlfriend. Together."

Another moment of silence. Then, "I do *not* want to have this conversation with you."

"Good. Are we done?"

"How *dare* you talk to me like that!"

He wasn't going to fall for her guilt-trip trap this time. "Like *what*? I'm sorry we didn't call you about the tornado, but it happened really fast. The reason I didn't tell you we went to Aunt Tammy's should be self-evident." *Well, at least we're off the girlfriend topic.*

"How can you be so irresponsible! You can't take care of an elderly person. You have a business to run!"

"Yeah, and it's been a bitch of a week, to be honest, and it's Sunday, and it's my freaking day off. Aunt Tammy is not an invalid, and I don't know why you keep insisting she is. I'm not you, Mom. I am thirty-two and can make decisions on my own. Aunt Tammy generously invited me and Oscar to move in with her and we accepted. It's temporary, but frankly, she's got her shit together better than I do at this point, and I enjoy her company."

"This conversation is *not* over."

"Um, yeah, actually, it is. I love you, Mom, but this is a case of where you need to butt out." He hit end, then immediately silenced his phone in case she called back.

As he stood there staring at his phone, she didn't.

He walked over and set it on the kitchen counter.

Oscar stared at him. "Dude. That was...*Duuude*. I've *never* seen you stand up to your mom like that before."

He pulled Sachi into his arms. "Yeah, well, I've had it with her bullshit."

“What did she say about me?” Sachi softly asked.

“I don’t think she really processed that part. She was too outraged about us moving in with Aunt Tammy.” He kissed her. “I’m sure once that filters through and she’s had some time to think about it that she’ll be just as outraged.”

Oscar laughed. “You think she’ll call my mom and dad?”

“Who knows? And who cares.” He tucked Sachi’s hair behind her ears. “All I want to do right now is go back to bed and snuggle before we get up and go in search of breakfast.”

* * * *

Sachi stepped into the kitchen and opened the fridge. There were still condiments and stuff in there, but it looked like Mandaline and her guys had moved the bulk of the food to their house. “Yeah, I would have offered to make eggs or something, but the cupboard is bare. Sorry.”

John scooped her up into his arms. “Then how about we work up more of an appetite before we go in search of food?”

Sachi laughed as he carried her into the bedroom and playfully dumped her onto the bed, Oscar and John climbing in on either side to join her. “What did you have in mind?” Sachi asked. “You guys will have to go easy on me this morning. Let me build up my tolerance.”

That was the wrong thing to say. Both of them immediately sported worried looks as their auras reflected their concerns.

“We didn’t hurt you last night, did we?” John asked.

“A lot of words come to mind about what we did, but *hurt* is definitely *not* one of those words.” She smiled. “Think of it more as I need some sports conditioning. I think we burned off more calories in a couple of hours than I do in a whole month’s worth of shooting.”

“Then how about we take it easy this morning?” Oscar asked with a sexy grin. Before she could respond to that, he dove between her legs, his talented fingers and tongue quickly robbing her of the ability to speak.

John stroked her cheek as he smiled down at her. “When he’s done, I want my turn, too,” he said. “I love seeing that helpless look on your face.”

Her hand brushed against his cock, which had grown stiff and was rubbing against her. He let out a soft moan as she tugged on it, urging him to change positions. “Oh, I see what you’re up to.” He grinned as he sat up and moved to kneel next to her.

She eagerly swallowed him, her eyes blissfully sinking closed as his moan spoke to her soul. He caressed the back of her head, stroking her hair before gently gathering it up in one hand, holding her there.

Something else her soul craved, letting go with full trust in them.

Oscar soon coaxed the first orgasm out of her, but she hadn’t gotten John off yet. “Oh, baby,” he gasped. “That feels so good when you moan around my cock!”

Apparently Oscar was going to help her do it again, because he didn’t relent until he pulled a second orgasm out of her moments later.

That triggered John’s explosion. His balls tightened in her hand, his cock going even harder before she tasted the first spurts of cum flowing from him.

She let out another moan, a pleased one, matching John’s groan of pleasure. Sucking, licking, she didn’t want to release him until he finally started laughing and used her hair to actually pull her off his cock.

“I’m done, baby. No more, please. Uncle.”

Oscar had also stopped, his playful grin lighting more fires inside her. “Switch places,” Oscar said.

Before she could react, they had, Oscar’s stiff cock now down her throat while John busied himself between her legs.

She didn’t think it’d be possible for John to get her off again...and she soon found out how wrong she was. She was moaning her way through her third orgasm of the morning a few minutes later when Oscar couldn’t hold back any longer. After she swallowed his cum, he braced himself against the headboard to catch his breath.

“Dammit, it’s like you’re humming all over my cock when you do that,” he gasped. “I can’t hold back when you do that.”

She giggled, nuzzling her face against his thigh. “It’s not a bad thing.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want you thinking I can’t last more than a few minutes.”

“I don’t think that. You lasted pretty long when you were fucking me for the second time last night. Didn’t hear me complaining, did you?”

In fact, he’d fucked her so long and well that he’d managed to find and hit the sweet spot and trigger an orgasm in her without any assist from fingers. “Okay. Just saying.”

The shower wasn’t big enough for the three of them, but even though she didn’t have clean clothes she didn’t want to go home smelling like sex, much less go out to breakfast that way. The men opted to take individual showers after she did, and

forty-five minutes later, they were heading out to eat with Oscar driving and Sachi riding shotgun.

“Your dad won’t be upset you didn’t come home last night, will he?” John asked.

“No, I don’t think so. I told him I’d be at the store late. Really late. He’ll probably think I just stayed over since I told him Mandaline and her guys were going to be at the house.”

“How do you think your dad’s going to take this?” Oscar asked.

“I don’t know. Hopefully better than John’s mother.” She smiled at him over the seat.

John laughed. “He couldn’t take it much worse.”

“Maybe I should let Ellis hold my skeet guns for me again until after we tell my dad,” she joked.

But apparently the men thought she was serious. “You really think so?” Oscar asked.

“No. I’m joking. Guys, if this is going to work, you need to remember my snarkage filter is frequently nonexistent.”

“One of your many charms?” John teased.

“Yeah, sure. Let’s go with that.” She turned back to the front again. “More a survival mechanism, but charm sounds better.” She had a thought. “Maybe we could have dinner with Dad tonight.”

“Isn’t tonight the do-over for the investigation?” Oscar asked.

She winced. “D’oh. Sorry, yeah, it is. I guess we’ll have to figure something out.”

“I don’t want you stressing out over your dad,” John said. “If you need to wait to tell him, we understand.”

“Again, don’t give me the out.” She tempered her comment with a smile. “I’m a big girl. I can do this. I’ll be twenty-eight here soon. I’m better off right now in life, more stable than a lot of people older than me. I have a house that’s paid off, a car that’s paid off, and two jobs that pay my bills. I have money in the bank.” She grinned. “Saaaay, you dudes aren’t gold-diggers after me for my money, are you?”

Both their auras flashed with worry just long enough she thought she might have to apologize for the joke when they started laughing.

“I guess being with you means I need to loosen up some, huh?” John asked.

“Uh, yeah.” She squirmed in her seat, those same pleasant aches reminding her how they’d spent the night. “You wouldn’t be the only one loosened up,” she snarked. “Just not in the same way I am.”

Chapter Seventeen

Sachi knew it'd be even harder to focus on the investigation now that she'd slept with Oscar and John. But she also knew how important it was to try to get to the bottom of things. To come up with a definitive answer that would either put John's mind at ease that his aunt wasn't senile, or answer the questions once and for all.

She wished she'd had equipment in the bathroom with her that night when she'd seen the aura and heard the voice, but oh well.

No use whining about that now.

Maybe they'd get lucky again. Just in case, she would have Brad hook up an IR camera in the bathroom, as well as a digital voice recorder. They'd use the bathroom down the hall that the men were now sharing.

They once again assembled a team at Tammy's house an hour before sunset Sunday evening. This time, with Ellis and Mandaline there to lend assistance, as well as Brad, Anna, and Mina. The entire time, Sachi tried to quell her nerves.

And her libido.

It would be too tempting to drag one or both of her men off somewhere in the darkened house and get it on with them.

Down, girl. Detective work now, dirty time later.

It wasn't dark yet. While Brad handled the equipment wrangling, Sachi grabbed Oscar and John. "Come with."

"Oooh." John grinned.

"Not *that*. Work."

"Damn," Oscar muttered.

She led them across the backyard and through the fence. Well, she crossed through the fence, and Oscar and John stood there, staring at her through it.

"What?" she asked when she realized they weren't right behind her.

"You want us to go in *there*?" John asked.

"Um, yeah," Sachi said. "You're a plumber. Aren't you used to going under houses and shit?"

Oscar snorted and John backhanded his shoulder. "Hey," Oscar protested, "she said 'and shit' and it was funny. Because it's true. Because, you know, you're a plumber and stuff."

John glared at him.

Sachi wanted to laugh but, more importantly, she wanted to walk a little ways into the woods, and not alone. She snapped her fingers and pointed to the ground in front of her. "Move. Your. Asses. *Right now*."

The men glanced at each other and scrambled to comply.

She turned before they could spot her pleased smirk.

With the deepening shadows, she switched on the small LED flashlight she'd brought with her and played it through the trees and brush. Palmettos, pine trees, oak trees, vines and weeds—it was a smorgasbord of vegetation.

Except...

She picked her way over to a section of pine needles covering the ground that almost looked like a path. As she studied it, the more she was convinced that's just what it was.

"What?" John asked.

"Follow me." She ducked under a branch and tried to stay with the path. If they looked back, they couldn't see the house or yard any longer.

A shriek split the air. She whirled around to see Oscar doing wild ninja karate moves in midair. As he gathered himself, he scrubbed his hands over his face.

"Sorry. Spider web."

John laughed, long and hard. He looked like he was about to say something to pick on Oscar when Sachi decided to nip that shit right in the bud. She tapped him on his shoulder and pointed down at his jeans. "Looks like a tick on you."

"Oh my god, where?" He started doing a jig in place, swatting at his legs as Sachi shook her head and turned back to the suspected trail.

"Oh, sorry," she drawled. "My bad."

Oscar laughed.

They will keep me on my toes.

And she didn't mind a bit.

"Very funny," John muttered from behind her.

The trail didn't end as much as it petered out. The thick layer of pine needles and leaves covering what exposed ground there was concealed any tracks there might have been. When she looked back, she could see places where they'd scuffed the

pine needles.

Especially the two places where Oscar and John had done their impromptu insect interpretive dances.

“Can we please head back before we become the subject of a Discovery Channel documentary on missing persons who vanish without a trace a few feet short of civilization?” John asked.

A shiver ran up her spine. Julie had died in a house in the middle of a state park. Minutes from armed rangers and the freaking Interstate, for chrissake.

She switched off the light, allowing the shadows to sink in around them.

She felt like they were being watched.

“Okay,” she said. “Beat feet, buddies. Back to the house.”

“You first,” Oscar said, looking around nervously. “I want you in front of me in case there’s something behind us.”

“Ditto,” John said, dropping his voice. “You feel it? Creepy. I don’t want you bringing up the rear.”

She switched the light on again and retraced their steps, relieved when they stepped into the backyard a few minutes later.

She walked over to the garden shed, which bore a padlock. Fingering it, she looked at John. “Do you have a key?”

“No. Just Aunt Tammy.” The old wooden building had seen better days, but looked sturdy. Homemade, with a window facing the overgrown acreage on one side that allowed daylight in, it sat about halfway between the house and the rear fence line.

Sachi found Tammy in the kitchen. “You said stuff was moved in the garden shed. What stuff, exactly?”

“Oh, a shovel, rake, things like that. Garden tools. And I think some of the twine is gone from a spool of it I have in there, but it’s hard to say for sure. I took new pictures in there, but nothing’s moved since I noticed it several weeks ago. Just the hose outside.”

Sachi stared out the kitchen window that looked over the backyard, an idea forming in her mind.

“How’s the equipment wrangling going, Brad?”

He’d just walked into the kitchen, clipboard in hand. “You all right, Sachi?”

“Yeah, fine. Well?”

“Everything’s ready to go.”

“Good. I need a digital voice recorder, please. And Mandaline.”

Her friend looked up. “Who, me?”

“Yeah, you, witchypoo. Come with.”

Brad dug one out of his pocket and handed it to Sachi. She, with Mandaline in tow, headed back to the garden shed.

“Mind cluing me in, sweetie?” Mandaline asked.

“I think I need a power boost.” She switched on the recorder and spoke her name, the time and date, and the location of the investigation. With the recorder in her right hand, she laced fingers with Mandaline with her left hand. They were alone in the backyard with the lights off, cloaked in darkness with the cloudy sky above them obscuring the moon and stars.

“Goddess Above, Goddess Below. We seek answers, please make it so.” Normally, they didn’t resort to ritual at this point in an investigation, but Sachi wanted to see if she could coax Herbert into reappearing. “We call out to Herbert Evans.”

She held the recorder up, falling silent, holding perfectly still.

Nothing.

Nothing she could hear or see, at least. And nothing on the playback, either.

She looked at Mandaline, who shrugged.

She tried again. “Herbert, you asked me to help Tammy. I want to, but I need help from you.”

Again, nothing.

Sachi was about to ask one more time when Mandaline’s grip crushed her hand. She clamped her jaw shut to keep from letting out a howl of pain when she realized where Mandaline was pointing with her free hand.

There, in the darkness on the other side of the fence, a glowing green light briefly appeared.

Sachi tried to dart after it, but Mandaline suddenly defied gravity and apparently gained a thousand pounds of weight in addition to a bear-trap grip. Either that, or the woman dug her heels into the turf.

“No!” Mandaline hissed, dragging Sachi back toward the house. Mandaline wouldn’t let go of her until they reached the porch and got the FLIR. By the time they and Brad returned to the fence, the light was nowhere to be seen and there was nothing on the FLIR except a small shape that was likely a squirrel or a rat in a tree.

“Dammit,” Sachi groused.

“Where was it?” Brad asked.

“Hard to say, exactly,” Mandaline said. “We were over by the shed.”

When they ran the stationary camera footage back, Brad realized the IR camera he’d set up to capture the backyard had

apparently shifted after he set it. It only captured video of Mandaline and Sachi by the shed, but its range stopped about five yards before the fence. He readjusted it and they hoped it would catch something this time.

They split up. Mandaline and Anna worked outside, trying to ambush the mysterious lights again, equipped with a handheld IR and the FLIR camera. Sachi went into the powder room alone and tried to replicate her experience from the previous investigation.

Nothing.

By ten o'clock, Sachi was growing frustrated with their lack of progress. She pulled John and Oscar aside. "I've got an idea," she told them, "but I need your help."

She detailed how she wanted to go to the back side of the property with an IR camera and the FLIR. Ellis picked the moment to walk into the living room. "Sorry, I overheard you. You're not going to do that without me."

"What?"

He grabbed her arm and pulled her down the hall, away from the other two men. "Sorry, but Mandaline would have my nuts, and I prefer them attached. I'll go with you."

"Why you?"

He lifted the hem of his shirt, exposing the handgun tucked into a holster in the front waistband of his shorts. She knew he had a concealed carry permit.

"Ah. Slick."

"Got it? They can go, too," he said, hooking a thumb over his shoulder and indicating Oscar and John, "but I *am* going."

"Okay. Your logic trumps my stubbornness, chief."

"Good."

A few minutes later, despite Mandaline's reservations, the four of them were outfitted with red flashlights, the FLIR and a handheld IR camera, and two different voice recorders.

They took Oscar's car, Sachi riding shotgun and navigating, the glow from her phone's map function lighting her face. When the dot matched on the map, she looked up and, sure enough, the small trail appeared in the beam of the headlights.

"Here. Park here."

Oscar shut the car off. When he switched off the headlights, Sachi realized the only light was from her phone. After activating a walking app that would map their exact path, she shut her phone off, letting her eyes adjust.

No lights were visible anywhere around them outside the car. With the cloudy night, trees and shadows blended together, making it nearly impossible to distinguish the road from anything else.

"Wow," Oscar muttered. "That's dark."

"Yeah," Ellis agreed. "You sure you want to do this tonight, Sachi?"

"Yeah." She clicked on her red flashlight before opening the door and stepping out, the men following suit and the dome light inside once again screwing up her night vision. As they all stood there, other than the ticking of the car's engine, the breeze in the trees, and their own footsteps, there weren't any other typical nighttime sounds she'd normally associate with the woods. No insects, nothing.

"My weird-o-meter is pegged," John said.

She had the FLIR, while she passed the IR camera to John after showing him how to use it. Oscar got one of the digital voice recorders while she carried the other.

She didn't want Ellis to have his hands full.

Just in case.

There weren't any tracks she could see leading from the dirt of the road to the path, but then again, the recent rains could have easily washed them away.

No other tracks from that day, at least.

When they reached the path, John pulled Sachi behind him and started leading the way, Oscar right behind him. They made Sachi stay between them and Ellis, not wanting her bringing up the rear, either.

She made frequent sweeps of the area, including their rear, to make sure there wasn't anyone behind them.

Other than a small animal she suspected was a raccoon or an opossum, they were alone.

"Light," she whispered, warning the men to close their eyes. They did as she checked her phone. The path, if it continued following the direction she suspected, would lead them directly to the back side of the property.

She shut it off and closed her eyes for a moment to let them acclimate. "Okay, let's keep going."

"What are you hoping to find?" John asked.

"I don't know. All I know is something is causing those lights and everything else Tammy is reporting. And we don't have any answers yet. This is as good a place as any to look."

They kept walking. Still nothing. After thirty minutes, she checked her phone again. "Okay, this should be her property."

The thick covering of pine needles over most of the trail made finding footprints impossible.

Then, somewhere up ahead, she spotted the greenish light.

“Quick, move!” she hissed at John and Oscar.

Before she could get the FLIR up and focused on the area, the light disappeared. The underbrush was too thick for the camera to penetrate very far.

“Dammit.”

“I saw it,” John said, a different tone in his voice. “I believe you.”

“Me, too,” Oscar said.

Ellis touched her shoulder. “Keep that up and going, Sachi,” he said, his serious tone chilling her. “Don’t stop watching it.”

“It’ll fuck my night vision.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want any surprises.”

“Anyone think we should call the cops?” Oscar suggested.

“And tell them what?” Sachi asked. “Oh, hi, we’re on state land and looking for ghosts, and we think we saw something.”

John snorted.

“Oh,” Oscar said.

She realized how it had come out sounding and gentled her tone. “I’m sorry, sweetie. I’m just...tense. I don’t mean to be a bitch.”

Ellis let out a soft snort.

If it wasn’t for the fact that he had volunteered to go with them, and the fact that she knew he was armed, she would have stomped his foot, Mandaline’s guy or not. Fortunately for him and his toes, Sachi never tolerated horseplay around firearms.

They came upon another path intersecting the one they were on. It disappeared into Tammy Evans’ property to the south, and deeper into state lands to the north.

“Wait.” She trained her light to the north, where there were breaks in the pine needle covering, exposing the dirt below. She hurried over, feeling the grin spreading across her face. “Aha.”

“What?” the three men asked.

She pointed the beam of light at where she wanted them to look. “Last time I checked, ghosts usually don’t leave deep, fresh sneaker prints in the dirt.”

Chapter Eighteen

Ellis walked over. “Yeah, those look like sneakers to me. And it looks like whoever it was headed south toward Tammy’s property.”

There were no tracks heading north.

They all turned to face south, where the path wound its way into the underbrush on Tammy Evans’ land. Silently, they started walking that way, stopping once the trail again petered out the way the one had from the fence line at the house.

With the FLIR in hand, Sachi swept the area. Still nothing but them.

“I want to keep going.” She pointed. “We can pick our way through this stuff. It’s not a good path, but it’s manageable.”

“I don’t know if this is a good idea,” John said. “There could be snakes or anything around here.”

“We’re already here,” Oscar said. “We might as well see this through. Tonight or in daylight, what difference does it make?”

“At least in daylight we can see. I feel like we’re being watched, and definitely feel like I’m at a disadvantage.”

“Check our location,” Ellis told her.

“Okay. Light.” Although her night vision, with the FLIR display, was already ruined. She checked their location on her phone. They were definitely on Tammy Evans’ land, but far closer to the northern boundary than she thought they’d be. It looked like the path wound more to the east than she’d guessed.

“Give Oscar the FLIR,” Ellis said. “You keep your phone going and check our location.”

“Why?”

“I want to know where we are,” he said. “And I want to know how we can get back to the car in a hurry if we need to.”

“Roger.”

With John in the lead, she helped guide them more to the south and west, a heading that should take them right through the center of the property.

It was after eleven, and Mandaline had been blowing up both Sachi’s and Ellis’ cell phones with worried text messages checking on their progress, when John stopped them.

“Son of a bitch.”

Sachi’s heart raced. “What? What is it?”

He lowered the IR camera and pointed. “Right there.”

She trained her red flashlight where he was pointing. Then, not sure she was believing what she was seeing, she swapped it out for her regular LED flashlight.

“Light.”

Ellis nodded as he pulled out his cell phone. “*Now* we call the cops.”

There had to be at least thirty marijuana plants in five-gallon buckets scattered throughout the small area. Some of the taller ones were tied up to stakes or sapling trees using twine.

There were also five five-gallon buckets of water.

“She’s not crazy,” John said, relief in his tone. “Oh, my god. Aunt Tammy’s really not crazy.”

Ellis gave the dispatcher on the other end of the line the information. When he ended the call, he said, “Sachi, can you mark this location?”

“Yeah.” She saved it. “Now what?”

Ellis looked nervous and dropped his voice to a whisper. “I suspect the light we saw is connected to whoever is responsible for this grow operation. Let’s get the fuck out of here and back to the car. The deputies will meet us there. Get us back there as fast as you can.”

This time, Ellis led the way with Sachi guiding him and them moving a lot faster. They made it back to the car in twenty minutes. Three deputies were parked there and waiting for them. Ellis took Sachi’s phone after she showed him how to use the app. He left her, Oscar, and John at the car with one of the deputies, while he led the other two deputies back into the woods.

John leaned against the car, arms crossed, staring up at the cloudy sky. He looked serene.

“You all right?”

He nodded, smiling. “Great. Thank you.”

“Huh?”

He pulled her in for a hug, his breath warm against her scalp. “Thank you for figuring it out.”

“Yeah, well, it’s just part of the puzzle. It doesn’t explain what I saw in the bathroom.”

“I don’t care if you saw Thomas freaking Edison in the bathroom, this means Aunt Tammy isn’t losing her mind.”

Oscar stepped in close. “Can I join this group hug?”

“Of course,” John said.

Both their auras had taken on a clearer color, the tension they’d been experiencing during their walk through the woods now completely gone.

It was almost one in the morning when they returned to Tammy’s house, another deputy with them to take statements from Mandaline and Tammy, since Mandaline had seen the light with Sachi. After he left, Mandaline hugged Sachi.

“Good work, you.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still bummed I didn’t catch the aura or any EVPs.”

“Hey, we can keep investigating,” Mandaline assured her.

Tammy looked unsettled. “I’m glad you figured it out, but I almost wish it’d been a ghost doing it. Now I don’t even feel safe. Not that that’s your fault, Sachi,” she quickly added.

“Well, guess it worked out that we moved in,” Oscar said.

Yes, it had worked out well, but it also bummed Sachi. She knew it was more than a tad on the selfish side, but it would be hard to have happy time with her guys while they were living with Tammy.

Yet she didn’t feel right about asking them to move in with her, either, and leave the elderly woman alone considering what they’d discovered.

Especially since the deputies hadn’t yet found anyone associated with the grow operation. Once it was dismantled, no telling what might happen, or if the person or people would come after Tammy for revenge.

Sachi knew she and her guys would just have to make do. If it meant stolen moments here and there when they weren’t snuggled on the couch and watching TV at Tammy’s, then that was what it would have to be.

At least she’d made a huge positive change in her life. And it wasn’t like the men were going anywhere. A few months to settle into their relationship, get to know each other better, with some extra sexual tension thrown into the mix, wouldn’t hurt any of them.

Maybe it’d even help make their alone times that much sweeter.

It would also give her time to get rid of the last vestiges of fear still coursing through her, indecision, worry that maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all. Wanting to make sure her brain agreed with her heart and her libido about the guys and this relationship, and that it wasn’t simply loneliness and horniness that made her feel the way she did about them, auras notwithstanding.

She pulled the guys aside, into Oscar’s bedroom. “I really don’t feel right about you guys not being here with her at night. At least one of you. I can come over every night, but it might mean for a while that we don’t...you know...at least not here. I’d feel horrible if someone hurt her one night because we were out boinking.”

The men both let out sighs of relief. John squeezed her hands. “Thank you, sweetheart. You read my mind.”

“Mine, too,” Oscar said, pulling her in for a hug. “We can take our time. I know how you feel about us, and it might frustrate all of us at times, but I’m okay taking it slow. For Aunt Tammy’s sake.”

Well, it also meant it would get her out of having to admit it to her dad anytime soon.

And it would give her time to rid her soul of the niggling doubts that wanted to creep in anytime she was away from the men and couldn’t see their auras for reassurance.

Maybe she needed to slow things down. Maybe just taking the leap of faith was enough for now to put her life on the right path.

She forced a smile and nodded. “This will be okay.”

They returned to the porch, where no one was currently sitting at the monitors, considering all the excitement of what had happened. It looked like at some point the stationary IR camera in the backyard had gotten knocked askew again.

“Dammit,” she muttered. She walked out into the backyard to adjust the camera, then back to check it on the monitor. She wasn’t sure whose turn it was to babysit the monitors, but she was too tired to get into it with anyone. Besides, they’d figured out the issues outside were human in origin.

She saw several of the others trying to coax EVPs in other parts of the house, including Anna and Mina crammed together in the powder room, Anna sitting on the counter and Mina on the toilet lid, both of them focused on the corner.

The backyard camera was still a little off. More out of habit than anything, she went to adjust it again. When she turned, she thought she caught a flash of greenish light out of the corner of her eye. When she wheeled around, heart pounding, she didn’t see anything.

Just the garden shed.

The camera’s location, on a tripod in the yard, meant she’d have to pass the garden shed to get back to the house. She could take the long way around and go to the front door, but that felt silly.

She started to call out, then remembered her phone in her pocket and texted Ellis, keeping one eye on the shed.

Get ur ass onto back porch. Now. Quiet.

She returned her phone to her pocket and waited.

When Ellis opened the back porch's screen door a moment later, she held up her arm and pointed at the shed.

Then, knowing it was possibly one of the stupidest things she could do, she headed for the shed.

Ellis sprinted to intercept her, now with John and Oscar standing on the stoop just outside the porch. She twisted away from Ellis and rounded the back side of the garden shed.

Nothing.

He tried to drag her away, but she yanked her arm free and held up a finger at him. Pulling her phone out, she started to text him to call the cops when a flash of greenish glow caught her eye from the garden shed window.

She grabbed Ellis and pulled him back from the shed so she could whisper in his ear.

"You stay here. He's inside. I'll go call 911."

Ellis nodded, drawing his handgun and keeping it ready.

She hurried back to the house, dialing as she ran. She grabbed Oscar and John and the others and pulled them back into the house as she went.

The first two deputies rolled into the yard less than five minutes later, without lights and siren, as Sachi had suggested. When the deputies converged on the shed, Ellis holstered his gun and retreated to the house. A third deputy with a K-9 arrived moments later.

One of the deputies, with the key to the padlock in hand, started to unlock it while the K-9 handler held back, his dog excitedly pulling and barking on the leash.

The third deputy, standing behind the shed, let out a shout as something exploded out of the back of the shed toward him.

All hell broke loose, the K-9 handler going after the dark shape running across the yard and releasing his dog. Seconds later, screams of pain and fear filled the air as the dog attacked and locked on, the deputies shouting orders at the suspect.

Finally, one of the deputies approached the house. "All clear."

Everyone poured out into the yard. "How'd he get out of the shed?" Tammy asked.

"A panel on the back was loose," the deputy explained. "Looks like he's familiar with it."

"I suspect," Sachi said, "that he's the one who was using your garden tools. Either the shed was like that, or he pulled the boards loose himself."

"Well I'll be damned," Tammy said, making Oscar and John chuckle at her expletive.

As two of the deputies marched the handcuffed suspect through the yard, another got the shed door unlocked and found the green glow stick he'd had, shoved into an open bag of potting soil.

"Wait a minute," John said, walking up to the deputies. "Son of a bitch!"

"What is it?" Sachi asked.

"This fucker works for me! What the hell?"

That led to several rounds of questions. It turned out that the suspect, whose name was Matt Dennis, had once overheard John talking about his aunt and her property. Knowing it was private property that was never used, at least that portion of it, he and his roommate, who'd helped him set it up and run it, considered it a safe place for their budding grow operation.

And they'd been using water from her hose, rather than trying to haul it all the way in. His car was actually parked in one of the day-use areas on state land where camping was permitted, meaning it wouldn't raise suspicion. He had a small tent and supplies set up to explain his presence if anyone stumbled across him that night, and had prepared the explanation that he'd gotten turned around and lost if anyone found him outside of the camping area. The men took turns tending the operation, and tonight was his turn.

The glow sticks were easier and lighter to deal with than flashlights, and he thought they would be harder to spot.

Before the deputies left with the suspect, they reported that other deputies had already gone and arrested the roommate at the men's apartment.

"I think it's time we pack up," Mandaline said. "It's after two, and frankly, we've all had more than enough excitement for the night."

Sachi, her nerves fried and adrenaline still surging through her system, agreed. "I think we've done more than enough damage for one investigation. I can come out by myself on a different night to try to figure out what I saw in the powder room."

Tammy hugged Sachi. "Thank you, dear."

She glanced over at her men. "You're welcome. Sorry it wasn't what you thought it would be."

"No, it's better." She smiled at Sachi and dropped her voice. "Herbert said he'll still talk to me."

Chapter Nineteen

After packing their equipment and returning to the shop, Mandaline shooed Sachi home. “We’ll unload in the morning. For now, I want to go home and sleep.”

Brad and Ellis nodded, and Anna and Mina needed no convincing.

Sachi nodded. “Me, too.” It wasn’t quite four, but she felt like she’d been up several days straight when combined with how she’d spent the night before. She made her way home and sat in her car in the driveway for a moment. It was weird seeing her dad’s SUV parked there with a Florida license plate on the back.

Weird in a *good* way.

Then again, there was that. She didn’t want to sneak around behind her dad’s back. She was proud of Oscar and John proud to be with them.

Sneaking around would look like she felt she was ashamed of what she was doing, and she wasn’t.

But she wasn’t sure how her father might react.

She rested her head against the steering wheel. *Why can’t I let go of my fear?* With the drug guy and his roommate apprehended, it meant she and John and Oscar could now be free to carry on with their relationship without the guilt of making sure Tammy wasn’t alone at night in the house.

In every other aspect of her life, she’d gone after what she wanted with a vicious tenacity her friends seemed to admire.

Why not this? I survived the Clarys and what they did to me and Mom.

Julie’s voice piped up in her brain. “*Anything else is easy, now, if you quit using your fears as both a crutch and a shield. Just believe.*”

She let out a ragged breath. She didn’t know if that was Julie’s spirit speaking to her, or just wishful mental conjuring on her part.

It didn’t matter. The voice was right either way.

She started the car again and drove, letting her instincts guide the way. Her dad wasn’t expecting her home until after he left for work, anyway. When she pulled into the end of Tammy Evans’ driveway, she stared down the dark, curving expanse illuminated by her headlights.

Just knock on the door. Or call them so you don’t wake her up.

She didn’t have to do either. When pulled up behind the men’s cars and shut her car and headlights off, the front door opened. John and Oscar both emerged and walked down, standing and waiting for her.

Nut. Up.

She opened her car door and slowly got out, not trusting her legs to hold her. Shaky, from nerves as much as the lingering effects of the earlier adrenaline rush, she walked as far as the front of her car, where she leaned against it.

With her gaze focused on the ground, she crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m scared,” she whispered.

Then they were both there, surrounding her, their arms around her, holding her and not even trying to feel her up or anything. Just...there.

For her.

With her.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I’m terrified, not just scared. I know you guys were okay if we needed to back up and take things slow, but that won’t work for me. I *need* you guys. I need *forever*. I can’t do this for fun or just friends with bennies. I’ve been alone for so long, and I don’t want to go back to that. And I’m scared how my dad’s going to react, but I know I have to deal with that, too.”

They stared at her.

“Please say something.”

John nuzzled the top of her head. “We’re scared, too. We don’t want to screw this up and hurt you. We want forever, too.”

“Both of us, with you,” Oscar added. “And yeah, we’re scared. And not just because we’re terrified we’ll end up getting turned into frogs or something.” His comment drew a laugh from her.

She looked up into his blue eyes and read the fear there.

“I’ll warn you, I’m still a massive emotional DIY project. Can you be patient with me?”

“Absolutely,” they said together.

The force of their words, the tone of their conviction and determination, slammed into the dam she’d built around herself, shattering it.

She wanted to fall into their arms and let them make her forget about the world, about who she had been, about what had

happened to her. Wanted them to show her the promise of how good it could be if she'd just let it happen.

John looked back at the house when a light went on inside the living room. "Crap," he muttered. "Aunt Tammy's still awake."

Aaaand there's the cold splash of reality. She wiped at her face. "It's okay. It's late, and—"

John silenced her with a gentle, tender kiss. Not even any tongue, just the sweet press of his lips against hers, stealing her heart and soul. Before she could even process that, he released her so Oscar could also kiss her, just as hot and chaste and oh, so beautiful.

"Tonight," Oscar muttered, his voice hoarse. "I don't want to be without you another night. And now there's no reason not to be."

"Me, either," John said. "We can go get a hotel room or something."

The idea hit her so hard it nearly knocked her back on her heels. She placed a hand on his chest. "No. I got it. Go tell her you're going out and follow me back to the store."

Oscar frowned. "The store?"

She grinned. "Mandaline and the guys stayed at the house again tonight. Park in back. We'll have the apartment to ourselves."

Both men bolted for the front door. She was laughing as she ran to get behind the wheel and start her car.

It took everything she had not to speed on her way into town. She had just gotten the back door unlocked and the alarm off when the two men both pulled into the parking area, on either side of her car, John in his work van and Oscar in his own car. They hurried into the store, Oscar slamming and locking the door behind him.

Sachi wanted to rip their clothes off them right that moment, but decided having Mandaline walking in to find a trail of clothing wasn't exactly how she wanted her friend to find out they'd taken over the apartment and spent what little was left of the night there.

Taking their hands, she led them to the stairs, only releasing them so she could quickly ascend to the apartment.

Once upstairs, she kicked off her sneakers and turned, suddenly engulfed in Oscar's arms. Somewhere in the middle of kissing him, then John, all three of them were naked.

As she draped her arms over Oscar's shoulders and buried her hands in his hair, John stepped behind her, firmly wedging her between them as he started nibbling on her neck.

"We're new at this, too," he said. "You're not the only emotional DIY project. If you can be patient with us, we can be patient with you. We'll all figure this out along the way."

She broke her kiss with Oscar to tip her head back and meet John's gaze. "I know this sounds crazy, but I knew I was in love with you both almost from when I first met you guys."

He stroked her cheek. "Love you, too, sweetheart."

She refocused on Oscar. He nodded. "Love you so hard, I can't remember what it felt like to hurt before."

Whatever happened, no matter how much shit they caught from their respective parents, they'd handle it together. Of that she was now certain.

They made it into the bedroom. She knew her energy tank was almost empty, but she didn't want to go to sleep without first sating her need.

She grabbed a condom and rolled it onto John, straddling him and impaling herself with a satisfied sigh. "That's what I'm talking about," she said.

Oscar knelt behind her, her body pressed against his, and reached around to find her clit. With his other hand playing with her nipples, back and forth, he murmured in her ear. "Come for us like this, baby. Let us take care of you."

It wouldn't take long. She still felt supersensitive from the night before, and the low simmer her body had maintained all night during the investigation finally boiled over. With the feel of John's cock buried deep inside her and hitting all the right places within her cunt, the first orgasm cut loose and rolled around inside her.

"Yeah," John grunted, trying to hold back. "Just like that, baby."

She rode him, her release lasting what felt like forever, her body completely on autopilot with Oscar at the helm. Only when he was finally satisfied that she'd come did he relent, both arms cradling her body.

John grabbed her hips and thrust up, hard and fast, finishing with a sexy grunt of his own that seemed to impossibly stir her clit's interest again.

That was something she couldn't get enough of, knowing that she was giving them pleasure, too, that they were as helpless against her as she was against them. A mutual vulnerability that comforted and assured her mind that she'd made the right decision.

John got out of bed to go clean up in the bathroom. When he returned, they all switched positions. This time, with Sachi on her back on the bed and Oscar kneeling between her legs. As he rolled the condom onto his stiff cock, he said, "Let's see if I

can't last a little longer than this morning."

"There's always Dildous downstairs," John teased.

Her eyes widened. "Oh, no. *Hell* no. That thing is fucking huge. It'd rip me apart. I'm perfectly happy with the equipment the Goddess blessed you guys with."

Oscar slowly sank his cock inside her well-prepared cunt. "You sure, baby?" he asked. "We could stuff you with that and never have to worry about going limp."

"You bring that thing within twenty feet of me when I'm naked, and you see how fast you lose your nuts."

He thrust, grinning and pulling her focus back to the matter at hand. "Aw, don't worry. I have other ways I can think of stuffing you." He leaned in and kissed her. "Much better ways."

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" John asked.

"Oh, yeah. Not tonight, but after we have a little time to get your 'conditioning' up," he joked. "I want to have you impaled on both our cocks, one of us in this sweet pussy of yours, and one of us in your ass. What do you say about that, baby?"

Well, there wasn't much she could say, because between the uber-sexy thought and the way his body rubbed against her clit with each stroke, it triggered her orgasm.

John leaned in, sucking one of her nipples, playing with the other with his hand and intensifying the feelings.

Oscar *tsked*. "Oh, if you think you're going to coax me into coming by squeezing my cock with that sweet pussy of yours, baby, think again. I've got your number now, and I'm going to fuck another one right out of you."

She had to pry her eyes open to stare up at him. His blue gaze twinkled with mischievous glee. Yes, the thought of having them both fucking her at the same time was...*hawwwwt*.

"I think we just found your magic button, baby," Oscar said, his voice slipping into a deeper, sexy, throaty tone. "I think you want us to do all sorts of dirty things to you, don't you?"

She nodded, unable to speak, hypnotized by his gaze.

She let out a soft cry of pleasure as John's teeth grazed her nipple at the same time he pinched the other a little harder with his fingers.

"You like knowing you're the only woman we're ever going to be with again, don't you?" Oscar asked.

She nodded.

His sexy smile widened. "You like knowing we're going to fill you with our cocks any way we want, don't you?"

From her past, a flashback struggled to gain a foothold, a memory of what Jacob had said during his attack, and she desperately fought it back.

These men loved her. Wanted her. Needed her as much as she needed them. She focused instead on the blue auras swirling around and through her, surrounding her, encasing her as well as them.

It steadied her nerves and focused her mind.

"I love you both," she whispered, needing the anchor in her mind.

John released her nipple and kissed her. "We love you, too, baby," he said. "So much."

Oscar leaned in and kissed her, too. "We love you so much, you have no idea."

And with that, her body made her mind up for her, the orgasm catching her by surprise and flowing through her. Her eyes slammed shut, her body held captive by the feel of Oscar's cock fucking her so sweetly and so well, and now how John used both his hands on her breasts, whispering in her ear, "That's it, baby. Come for us. Let us make you feel good."

Good? Blessed Hecate, it was fucking *awesome*. Amazing. Nothing in her life had ever prepared her for how damn good it could feel.

Only when Oscar was sure that he'd gotten her over again did he speed up, thrusting harder, faster. John moved out of the way and Oscar leaned in, so she wrapped her arms around him.

"Come for me," she whispered in his ear.

He let out a cry of his own, finally falling still, capturing her lips and kissing her as he caught his breath.

After a moment, John broke the silence. "And with that, kiddies, we need to get some sleep. I can be a little late to work, but I still have to go."

A few moments later, after Oscar returned from the bathroom, Sachi was almost asleep and tucked between the men.

John, then Oscar kissed her forehead.

She thought it was the sweetest thing in the world.

That she was the luckiest woman in the world.

"Good night, sweetheart," they whispered.

"Good night."

Chapter Twenty

Sachi thought the sound was the most fucking annoying alarm clock in the world.

Who the fuck makes an alarm that sounds like knocking?

“Hello?”

Her eyes popped open. No alarm clock sounded like Mandaline.

She sat up and realized the time on the cable box read 7:59.

“Shit! Um, just a minute!” She reached to either side of her and shoved both men, who’d slept through Mandaline’s knocking.

After climbing out of bed, Sachi grabbed the top sheet and wrapped it around her, cracking the bedroom door only wide enough that she could slip through it and close it again.

“Um, hi.”

Mandaline held out a mug of coffee. She also wore an annoying smirk. “Good morning.” She hooked a thumb over her shoulder. “I’m assuming the pile of clothes in the living room belongs to you and yours?”

Mandaline’s smile transformed into a broad, beaming grin.

Sachi had given Mandaline credit for her unusually great self-restraint the night before, for not mentioning anything about Oscar and John while they were on the investigation.

But her friend’s pleased smile said it all.

“Um, yeah.” She sipped at the coffee, which Mandaline had prepared exactly the way she liked. “Thanks. Sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“For...um...” She didn’t know.

She shrugged.

Mandaline started laughing and carefully hugged her so as not to spill the coffee. “Congratulations, Snark Queen. I’m glad the great and mighty Dildous blessed your union.”

“He didn’t bless shit. It’s still downstairs under the register, and unused. Just the way he needs to stay.

Mandaline headed for the stairwell with a wave. “Unless you brought a spare change of clothes, you might want to run home. You’ve got a reading at eleven.” She started downstairs.

Dammit. She’d forgotten about that. Sachi left the mug of coffee on the kitchen counter and ran to scoop up their clothes. When she threw the bedroom door open, she heard a loud *crack*, followed by John’s howl of pain.

When she got the door open, he was bent over, holding his forehead.

She winced. “Sorry.”

“You didn’t warn me I’d need a crash helmet to be your guy.”

She dumped the clothes on the bed and went to examine his wound as he finally straightened.

Oscar looked like he was doing his best not to laugh. She turned to him. “There’s one of those reusable gel cold packs in the freezer,” she told him. “Grab him one and a dish towel.”

“I need to get my clothes—”

“Move your ass!”

He streaked, naked, through the doorway.

She got John back to the bed and sitting on the edge. Fortunately, she hadn’t hit him hard enough to break the skin, but he might have a bruise and a goose-egg there in a few hours.

Oscar returned with the towel-wrapped gel pack. She took it from him and held it to John’s forehead.

“You owe me,” John grouched.

“I know, sweetie,” she said, feeling genuine remorse. “Sorry. I didn’t think you’d be standing right there.”

“We were trying to hear.”

“Is she mad?” Oscar asked.

“No, witchypoo is pleased as punch.”

“I hope your dad’s that easy,” Oscar said.

“You and me, both.”

The men had enough forethought to grab spare clothes the night before, so she let them take their showers first. She’d take hers at home and walked downstairs with them to kiss them good-bye at the back door.

When Sachi turned, Mandaline was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, a smile on her face.

“What?” Sachi asked.

Mandaline grinned and held her arms open wide for Sachi. Unable to help herself, Sachi ran to her friend, laughing and

crying as Mandaline engulfed her in a hug.

"I'm so happy for you, sweetie," Mandaline whispered in her ear.

"They love me," she sobbed. "Can you believe that crap? They actually love *me*!"

Mandaline held her at arm's length and brushed Sachi's hair from her face before cradling her cheeks in her hands. "Of course I believe it. I could tell last night the way you all felt about each other. There is no doubt in my mind those two men are absolutely right for you." She pulled Sachi close again, holding her. "And congratulations. You deserve this happiness, you really do."

"Yeah, well, I might be asking you to help me tell that to my dad."

"He'll be okay."

"How can you be so certain?"

"Duh. I'm a witch. And your best friend. And your father loves you. He'll understand. Well, might not understand, but he'll be happy that you're happy. That's the kind of guy he is."

"Your parents weren't so hot about it."

Mandaline shrugged. "They won't give me grief about it, though. They know they don't have a choice but to accept Brac and Ellis. Ellis' folks were all right with it. It still doesn't matter. The only people who matter are the three of you."

She released Sachi. "Now go home, get your shower, and get your butt back here, you damn slacker." Her grin belied her words.

"Yes, ma'am!" She snapped Mandaline a salute. She had to run upstairs to get her purse and keys, but she was soon home and in her own shower and standing there wondering how the hell her whole world had just upended itself and flipped inside out in the space of a couple of weeks.

Not that it really matters, I guess. Only the end result mattered.

And that end result was that she couldn't recall a happier time in her life.

* * * *

Sachi had a skeet student that afternoon. Between working and then, she'd spent the day texting back and forth with Oscar and John. They'd agreed they'd meet her later at her house to have dinner with her and her dad.

She figured it was better to break the news to him with a little bit of backup. She also decided she wanted it done and over with and not stressing her out. She refused to sneak around with the guys in her own house.

As far as full-time living arrangements, they'd figure that out over the next few weeks. They'd have to tell Aunt Tammy, but hoped based on what the men had told Sachi that she wouldn't be too disappointed by their departure.

Her dad wasn't home yet when Sachi arrived. She'd opted for easy, spaghetti and store-bought meatballs with a side salad and garlic bread.

She'd also stopped by the drugstore and picked up her own supply of condoms and lube, which she stashed in her bedside table.

I really need to make a doctor appointment.

The men arrived while her dad was in the shower.

"Is he in a good mood?" Oscar asked.

"As good as any, I guess," she said. "He's always been fairly even-tempered. And he really seems to like his new job."

"That's good, right?" John asked.

"I hope so."

The introductions went well, her dad happy to chat with the men as they ate, glad to finally meet them.

Sachi waited until they had finished eating to break the news. She was sitting directly across from her dad at the four-person table and it took every ounce of strength she had to force herself to keep her gaze focused on him and not stare down at her plate.

"Dad, we have something we need to tell you."

A frown creased his brow. "We?"

"Yeah, we. I hope you'll keep an open mind about this, but me and John and Oscar are...involved."

"Involved? What does that mean?"

"It means we're together. Like Mandaline, Brad, and Ellis."

It felt like eternity passed before he spoke again. "So *together* together?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

"How long as this been going on?"

"Not real long. But...it's permanent. We're still working out the logistics of them moving in here. That's not going to

happen immediately, but they probably will be spending some nights here.”

Slowly nodding, a little smile crossed his face. “Wanting me to move out already?”

Horror filled her. “No! Daddy, no, that’s not what I—”

He chuckled. “Miki, relax. I’m teasing.” He looked from Oscar to John. “You love my daughter?”

“Yes, sir. Absolutely.”

Then to Oscar. “And you?”

“Of course I do.”

He let out a little sigh and pushed his chair back. Standing, he walked around the table to Sachi and held his arms out to her.

She stood and struggled, barely winning over the tears that wanted to fill her eyes as he hugged her.

“You love them?” he asked.

“Yes, Daddy. I love them.”

“And you’re sure this is what you want?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay then.” He turned to the men. “Mazel tov, gentlemen.” He shook a finger at them. “If you hurt her, it’s not me you have to worry about. She’s got friends who I suspect would make your lives a living hell with all their hocus-pocus.”

Sachi laughed, hugging her dad again. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“We spent a lot of years living apart. It’s good to see you look so happy and young for a change. You looked aged beyond your years when you left home. Who am I to say what’s right and what’s wrong? But I know happy when I see it. And you, sweetheart, look happy. And that makes *me* happy.”

* * * *

Oscar and John helped her clean up the kitchen before they said good night to her father and headed for the bedroom.

“You can’t make me scream my head off tonight,” she warned. “My dad being okay with this and me knowing he can hear us are two different things.”

John arched an eyebrow at her. “Is what I’m hearing that you want your mouth stuffed so full that you can’t make noises?”

She felt heat fill her face before it rolled straight to her clit. “Sure. Go with that.”

They stripped, John sitting on the bed and crooking a finger at Sachi. “Come here and let me fill that sweet mouth of yours.”

She knelt in front of him on the bed enjoying the way he scooped her hair into his hands before guiding her down to his eager cock.

Behind her, Oscar lay on the bed on his back after shoving her legs apart and sliding under her.

She needed all the muffling she could get. Oscar licked and sucked her clit for a little bit before easily sliding two fingers inside her wet cunt. All while she eagerly sucked on John’s cock, loving the way it felt hot and hard against her tongue.

“That’s it,” John whispered. “Now you can make all the noise you want, baby. Just make it around my cock.”

She closed her eyes and immersed herself in the pleasure. This was better than anything her fantasies could have ever conceived.

And she considered herself a pretty imaginative woman. Although she’d never imagined two guys for her future.

Hell, she’d never imagined *one* guy for her future.

That no longer mattered. All that mattered was they were there and loved her.

Oscar flicked at her clit as he finger-fucked her, driving her over the edge of the first of what she suspected would be several orgasms that night.

They guys were apparently eager to overcompensate for her lack of them in the past several years.

Again, not that she was complaining. She thought it was sweet and loved that about them.

She started a slow, rocking rhythm between the men, John holding back, refusing to come until he was satisfied she’d been adequately satisfied. It didn’t matter to her. She was happy to be there, falling off that cliff time and again, moaning her orgasms around his cock.

Time flowed past her, their energies sweeping through her as they made love to her, loving every second of it and wishing it’d never end.

Finally, John gave in. “You think you’ve had enough, baby?”

She didn’t know. They’d managed to send her brain to that delightful little la-la land where she wished they would never stop and hoped they stopped soon, a delicious contradiction she’d never known could exist before.

Oscar slid out from under her. "I take it that's my cue."

She heard the crinkle of a condom wrapper, then Oscar was kneeling behind her again. Now she was being seesawed between the men, between their cocks, impaled at both ends by them, mouth and cunt.

Excellent...

Oscar reached around her and fingered her clit as he fucked her. "One more, maybe?"

She started to whine no way, then it hit her and she was glad John's cock was still there to muffle the sound as she came.

John chuckled. "Looks like you got one more out of her."

"I'm sneaky that way."

She loved his sneakiness. Both of them. Everything about them.

The men started working together in a movement that would shove her deep onto the cock in her cunt before shoving her deep onto the cock down her throat. Back and forth, until finally, Oscar gripped her hips.

"Ready?"

"Yep." John's hands cupped her cheeks and he took one more thrust, his cock deep in her mouth as she started swallowing the jets of hot cum erupting from the slit. In her cunt, Oscar buried himself deep inside her, too, his pleased grunt stirring happy thoughts in her brain.

She'd made them feel like that. She'd done that to them. And yet they'd made sure they'd taken the time to get her off, many, many times before they even thought about their own release.

As they collapsed into a breathless heap on the bed, she found their hands and squeezed. "You have no idea how much I love you guys."

They squeezed back. "Love you, too, babe," Oscar said.

"Me, too," John said.

Chapter Twenty-One

They broke the news to Aunt Tammy the next evening, going over to her house for dinner.

She actually took it far better than they'd expected.

"I have a little secret of my own," she admitted. "I called Ellis on Monday at his office and talked to him. He's going to help me with a real estate attorney. He said because of the size of my property, and where it's located, I can probably file with the county to have it split and sell part of it off. I don't want to move out of my home, but I really don't need that back acreage."

"So you're not upset?" John asked.

"No, not at all. The money they estimated I might be able to make from the sale is quite substantial. I can hire someone to come in once a week and handle the yard work or chores for me. And I should probably pay for an alarm system, too. Or, if I decide in a few years I want to downsize, I'll have plenty of money to do that, especially if I sold the house."

"That sounds very reasonable," Sachi said.

"Well, it's for the best. These boys are happier now than I've seen them in a long time." She squeezed John's hand. "And it'll get Lisa off John's case."

John's mother hadn't called him back since their chat Sunday morning.

"Right now, I'm pretty sure she's not real happy with me," he said.

"Well, she'll just have to get over it, won't she?" Aunt Tammy commented.

Sachi wasn't so sure of that, based on what John had told them. She felt badly that she might be a wedge between him and his mom, but he'd assured her he didn't want her feeling like that. He also told her he'd go over to his parents' house later in the week, alone, to talk to them and break the news to them, but that he didn't want Sachi to feel guilty.

Sachi made keys for the men and gave them the alarm code for her house. John started leaving his work van at the shop instead of driving it home.

Now she had four vehicles parked in her driveway, where a few weeks ago she'd only had one. She didn't mind, other than making sure they didn't park her dad in so he could leave in the mornings. Which, oddly enough, wasn't difficult to do, because he seemed to come in late every night now.

Sachi knew she'd gladly accept this new status quo over what her life had been a few months before.

In fact, those lonely, scared days felt like a dream in many ways compared to her life now. Or a nightmare.

There was just one thing.

Now that she had her personal life on something resembling an even keel, it was time for her to figure out what the frak was going on with her dad. He was staying out late, coming home showered and not in the work clothes she knew he usually wore.

It was...weird. Her instincts and the look of his aura, what glimpses she could get of it, told her something was up.

She wanted to know exactly what that something was. Otherwise, it would bug the shit out of her.

Friday morning, she set her alarm early so she could get up and talk to him about it. Fortunately, she was able to reach up to the headboard, grab her phone, and silence it before it disturbed her men.

Getting out of bed without waking them was a little trickier, however, but she managed it.

Her father looked startled to see her walk into the kitchen. "Miki, I didn't expect you up this early."

She pulled out a chair at the table and sat. "Um, yeah. About that. I wanted to talk to you and ask—"

The sound of his bedroom door opening startled Sachi into shutting her mouth and turning around.

In her dad's bedroom doorway stood a very surprised-looking woman. Older, probably around her dad's age.

Sachi stared at her for a moment before turning back to him. "You want to provide a little context, Dad?"

"Um, sweetheart, this is Lorie Garson."

Sachi swiveled again, staring at the woman. "Garson? As in Garson Aviation?" That was the name of the company her dad was working for.

The woman, who to Sachi's relief was fully dressed, nodded with a nervous smile.

She turned back to her dad. "You're sleeping with your *boss*?"

He shrugged. "Technically. She's not the one who hired me. The manager did. She owns the company."

"Right." Sachi hauled herself up and out of her chair. "Now I understand why you didn't give me a hard time about John and Oscar." She turned to head for her bedroom.

"You aren't mad are you, sweetheart?"

"Only about getting up an hour early for no good reason." She stopped in front of the woman, smiled, and held out her hand. "Nice to finally meet you, Lorie. I'm Sachi. Even though he calls me Miki." She waved at her dad. "I'm going back to bed. Enjoy your...whatever. Next time, you don't need to sneak her in late. Or out early, either."

She closed and locked the bedroom door and climbed back into bed after dropping her robe on the floor. Oscar snuggled up to her, draping an arm around her.

“Everything okay with Dad?” he mumbled.

“Yep. He brought his booty call home.”

“What?” both men echoed.

“Get this. It’s his boss.”

Both men sat up. “What?”

She looked from Oscar to John. “*Seriously?* We can go back to sleep for another hour or more. Can we do this then?”

“Uh, nooo,” John said. “We’re awake *now*.”

She closed her eyes and let out a groan. “They’re still out there. Put on pants and go talk to them yourselves.” She rolled onto her side and pulled her pillow over her face. “This witch is going back to sleep for an hour.”

She felt the mattress move on both sides of her as the men climbed out of bed.

Seriously?

She lifted her head and watched them both grab shorts, practically fall over trying to pull them on, and then hurry out of the bedroom.

I’m not going back to sleep, apparently.

With a groan she got up, pulled on her robe, and headed back out into the living room.

Oscar and John stood in the kitchen with her dad and Lorie.

“Someone better put a mug of coffee in my hand, stat,” Sachi warned them.

It was Oscar who did that.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, sweetheart,” her dad said. “I wasn’t sure how to bring it up, and I didn’t want to upset you. And then you met Oscar and John, and there just didn’t seem to be a right way to tell you. I figured a necktie on the doorknob was too old school.”

Sachi had settled herself in the chair at the table again, the coffee mug cupped in both hands. She wryly smiled. “Yes, because this was sooo much better.” She took a sip. Everyone seemed to be waiting for her to continue. She turned off the snark. “Seriously, Dad, I’m *not* upset. I want you to be happy. It’s been…”

She swallowed back the lump in her throat. “It’s been a long time. I never expected you to stay a monk for the rest of your life. Mom wouldn’t have wanted that, either.” She took another sip. “Just be safe, kids. Wrap that rascal.”

John groaned and shook his head. “You’re too much, babe.”

Lorie finally found her voice. “Since it’s out in the open now, would you three like to join us for dinner tonight at my house?”

“We’d love to,” Sachi said before either of her men could answer. She’d shifted her focus to see her dad’s aura. The grey cloudiness in it had completely cleared away. Immediately after her mom’s death, when she first realized she could see auras, her dad’s aura had looked darkly mottled with black blotches she now understood was his deep grief and anger.

When he’d come to Florida to be with her, she noticed that it had faded out into pale grey clouds. The anxiety she’d also noticed was gone as well.

Now his aura looked a crystal clear shade of dark green, with tinges of pink around the edges matching the tinges of pink around the edges of Lorie’s aura.

Sachi didn’t know if what the two of them had would last forever, but for now it seemed they were mutually happy.

For that reason alone she would gratefully accept this woman into their family.

Before her dad and Lorie left, Sachi stood and hugged her, then him. “Love you, Daddy,” she whispered in his ear before stepping back.

He gave her a smile that lifted her heart. “Love you, too, Miki.”

After they were gone, John offered his opinion. “She seems nice.”

“Dad looks happy,” Oscar added.

“That’s because he *is* happy,” Sachi said. “I wish you two could see their auras.” She refilled her mug and headed for the bathroom. “Who wants morning shower sex?”

Behind her, the men sprang into action, racing to join her. “Me!” they both said, their eager tones making her smile.

If I’m going to be up early, I’ll damn well make it count.

The men beat her to the shower and had it going by the time she carried her coffee into the bathroom. Having the house to themselves, Sachi knew she could make as much noise as she wanted.

As much noise as her men could coax out of her. Which was, usually, quite a lot.

Oscar grabbed a couple of condoms. He handed one to John and ripped the other open and rolled it on his eager morning woody.

“Wow. You’re ready for action.”

He grinned. “Oh, baby. You have no idea.”

She took another sip of her coffee, pulled her hair up and out of the way with an elastic band, and stepped under the water. She bent over, smiling at him over her shoulder as she wiggled her ass at him.

He stepped behind her, quickly lining his cock up with her pussy before slowly sinking in all the way until his thighs were pressed against hers.

“Oh, baby,” Oscar moaned. “That’s sooo fucking good.”

John stepped in and grabbed the handheld shower head, pulling it down and switching the setting. A quickly pulsating stream of water flowed out and he knelt in front of her.

“Let’s see how many times I can make you come before he does,” he said. He sucked one of her nipples into his mouth and used his free hand to play with her other, all while directing the stream of water right at her clit.

She braced herself against his shoulders, fingers digging in as the first orgasm almost immediately swept through her.

Oh, holy hell... In just a few short days, the men had become experts at getting her off. They also seemed sweetly bound and determined to do it as frequently as possible.

Oscar held on to her waist as he slowly fucked her. “That’s only one, baby. I want at least two more out of you before I’m done.”

John released the nipple from his mouth with a wet *pop*. “That means I’ll want at least three out of you,” he added. Then he started sucking her nipple again.

Between the feel of the water on her clit and the delicious sensation of him fucking her hard and deep, not to mention John’s devilish torture of her nipples, she was soon crying out again with number two.

“One more,” Oscar said. “You can do it. Conditioning.”

She started to laugh, but then John changed the angle of the water just a little, hitting her more squarely in the clit, and number three started.

“There you go.” Oscar picked up the pace, harder and faster until, finally, he took one last thrust and buried his cock deep inside her cunt.

After a moment, he withdrew and stepped out of the shower to dispose of the condom while John stood, cradling her against him.

“You’re not done yet,” he teased. “You owe me three now.” When Oscar returned, they swapped places, John rolling a condom on before sliding his cock into her well-fucked cunt.

He held her up against his body, spreading his legs and forcing hers wider apart. “Let’s go easy on her,” he told Oscar. “Let’s get her three out of the way.”

“Roger.” She spotted the playful grin on his face as he focused the stream of water onto her clit and they were off to the races again. It took her a little longer, but John wasn’t going to get off until they’d gotten her off again. Finally, when her legs were trembling and she wasn’t even sure she could stand much longer, Oscar got the third one out of her.

“There you go, baby,” John said. “I knew you could do it.” Oscar helped hold her up while John drove his cock into her, hard and fast and deep, quickly emptying his balls into the condom.

As she stood there, Oscar’s arms around her, John leaned in and kissed her before stepping out of the shower.

“At this rate, we’ll need a second hot water heater to keep up with demand. You realize that, right?” she called out to John.

He returned, laughing. “Oh, I think I know a guy who can help you out there. But he might ask for a trade of labor.”

She hugged him, kissing him. “I think we could arrange that.”

* * * *

Lorie lived in a very nice older two-story home just east of US 41 in Masaryktown, south of Brooksville. The woman obviously had money, but the understated and homey furniture told Sachi she was a practical woman, and one who didn’t seem obsessed with putting on airs.

Sachi liked that about her.

When Lorie’s husband had died seven years earlier, she’d taken over running Garson Aviation full time and had no intentions of slowing down.

“I’m only fifty-eight. I still have plenty of energy,” she insisted. “I helped Dave run it. It wasn’t like I didn’t know what I was doing.”

Sachi smiled. She was actually a year older than her dad. The way he looked at Lorie as they were finishing up dinner preparations made Sachi want to break down in tears of the good kind. The happiness in his face, the smiles...

She hadn't seen him look like that since before her mom died.

He'd actually done the cooking, pot roast and blintzes that made Sachi's mouth water.

As the evening drew on, Lorie reached over and cupped her fingers around Sachi's father's hand. She turned her hazel gaze on Sachi. "So, your dad tells me the three of you are going to move in together?"

She nearly choked on the drink of water she'd been sipping. "Um, yeah."

"Any plans for a ceremony? I'd like to help out with the plans, if you'd let me."

Sachi nodded, smiling. "Thank you. I'd appreciate that." She glanced at Oscar and John. *'We'd appreciate that,'* she amended. "We're going to do a handfasting and keep it short and low-key. But I'd appreciate help with the reception."

"I didn't have kids of my own," she said. "I hope you don't mind I sort of would like the chance to do this for you."

Sachi pointed a finger at her dad. "If you screw this up with her, I'll make with da shoosting and hexing on you. I like her."

Michael turned his hand palm up and squeezed Lorie's hand. "Honey, believe me, I don't plan on screwing it up."

Later that night, as the three of them were returning to Sachi's house, she rode in the backseat.

"You're awfully quiet back there," Oscar said.

"Just thinking."

John looked over the seat at her. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, sure. I'm fine." She realized how that sounded and adjusted her tone. "I mean it. I'm really fine. I like her."

"That was nice of her to offer to help with the plans."

"Yeah." She stared out the window. She refused to let herself dip into the self-pity well again. Angry that it should be her mom there helping her.

Then again, if her mom were there, Sachi knew she might never have moved to Florida. Or met Oscar and John.

It wasn't a fair trade-off by any stretch of the imagination.

And that was why she knew she couldn't allow herself to entertain those thoughts.

"Just thinking?" Oscar asked.

"Yeah."

"Happy thoughts?" John asked.

She stared out the window at the darkness. They were almost back to Brooksville, with more street lights and less pasture land. "Just thoughts." She closed her eyes.

Thank you, Mom. Thank you, Julie. And thank you, Goddess. Namaste.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Mandaline was Sachi's first choice for their handfasting. Not just because she was Sachi's best friend, but because Sachi couldn't imagine anyone else doing it. Sort of the circle completed, a nice bit of symmetry since she'd conducted Mandaline's handfasting to Ellis and Brad.

The three of them had discussed Sachi maybe marrying one of them, but she wasn't in a rush to make that decision, if ever. She didn't need a piece of paper to tell her these men were hers and she was theirs. The rings the three of them would wear on their hands were far more important to her.

Well, John would wear his when he wasn't working. Sachi didn't want him losing it down a sewer pipe or hurting his hand if he got the ring caught on something.

They held the ceremony outside, at sundown, by Julie's memorial tree. Sachi had requested a far smaller gathering than they'd had for Mandaline, preferring only immediate family and friends be invited. They were holding a reception party at the store, which would be the official celebration for everyone.

Sachi wanted as few people as necessary to see her cry.

At least John's mother had finally come to terms with their unusual relationship. His dad, on the other hand, had been easy to convince.

Sachi had given Mandaline free rein with the ceremony, with her only stipulations being to please keep it as short and snarky as possible.

Mandaline stood before them, a serene smile on her face as their friends and family gathered close. "I think Julie is probably laughing and dancing and happy for us right now," she started. "She loved to play matchmaker. She couldn't have come up with a better pair of guys for our Snark Queen if she'd gotten them from a mail-order husband catalog."

Sachi breathed a sigh of relief, smiling as she stood between John and Oscar, their right hands clasping her right hand. Mandaline *was* going for snark.

Oh, thank the Goddess!

"I also think Julie would approve of the way we've all been healing. And I would hope it's with her blessings that today we recognize this handfasting between three people whose hearts have joined to become a family."

Uh, where's the snark?

Brad, who stood next to Ellis behind Mandaline with a small basket in his hands, handed her a braid of three ribbons, white, red, and green. Mandaline loosely looped the braid around their hands, tying it so the knot wouldn't come undone, but they could still free themselves from it at the end of the ceremony. "Three and three and three again. I call upon the Goddess, here and when, before us now these three do stand." A smile crossed her face. "And boy, howdy, ain't love grand."

Ahh, there it is!

Mandaline continued. "Green for prosperity and for health. Red for love and passion, may you feel its wealth. White from which all colors grow, and as above, so below. All these things and more we do you bless, all happiness to you, and all success. And since you asked for short and sweet, as I spake it"—she pointed to those gathered, who she'd obviously already coached and who joined in with her—"so mote it be."

Sachi was trying really hard not to laugh and cry at the same time, somehow managing to hold it back.

Mandaline reached back to Ellis, who handed her the ring box. She opened it plucked out Oscar's ring, handing it to Sachi and settling the order herself, something Sachi had been unsure how to handle despite the men telling her they'd be just as happy flipping a coin.

Sachi slipped it on his left ring finger. This was the part she'd agonized over. She did want to exchange vows with them, but she'd struggled and rewritten several times what she wanted to say to each of them, finally giving up and hoping the Goddess would give her inspiration.

"I love you, and I love us," she said. "Thank you for wanting me and for showing me how good it's supposed to be. May the Goddess give us many years of happiness together."

He smiled, his blue eyes as bright as his aura. "I love you, sweetheart. I promise, no matter what, I'll walk this life with you, the three of us together." Mandaline handed him the ring he was to put on Sachi's finger. Her ring was actually two halves, interlocking rings that looked like a Celtic knot when placed together. Each man would put one of the halves on her finger.

Mandaline handed John's ring to Sachi. She slipped it on his hand, enjoying the way his smile seemed to core right through her soul, gutting her in a good way, the best way ever. "I love you, and I love us. Thank you for trusting me, for trusting in us, in what this is. May the Goddess bless our years together and give us plenty of them."

Mandaline handed John the other ring, which he slipped on Sachi's finger, carefully interlocking it with the first half. "I love you, and I know life won't always be perfect, but I know it's perfect for us with the three of us together."

Brad held out a small silver, heart-shaped box that Sachi realized had belonged to Julie. On the lid was etched a pentagram. He opened the lid and Mandaline carefully removed the ribbon braid from their hands and tucked it inside the red velvet-lined interior, closing it again.

“Something old, something new,” Mandaline said. “Past and present, faith renew. May the Goddess smile on you. And as below, so up above, I wish you three all luck and love. Thus this ends now what I must say. In parting I add blessings, and namaste.”

Everyone else repeated, “Namaste.”

That did it. Sachi laughed, the tears rolling down her cheeks as John, then Oscar kissed her while everyone clapped. Mandaline handed her the box and then engulfed her in a hug.

“Thank you,” she whispered in Mandaline’s ear. “It was perfect.”

“Thank Ellis. He’s the one who told me I was being too sappy during the first draft I wrote.”

Sachi and her men were surrounded, hugs and well wishes being offered. When it was Lisa Evans’ turn to hug her, Sachi wasn’t sure how that would go, but the woman opened her arms and embraced her.

“I hope you all have a good life together. I really do.” She smiled, relieving Sachi.

Her father tapped her on the shoulder, pointing.

In Julie’s tree, a sapling oak that they’d planted as a memorial not long after her death, sat a bright red male cardinal.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she blew a kiss up to the sky.

Thanks, Mom. Love you, too.

* * * *

Lorie had apparently spent a small fortune on food and the cake, which was a gorgeous three-tiered chocolate and vanilla marble cake decorated with three ceramic cardinals at the top, two males and a female.

“Your idea, Dad?” she asked.

He smiled as he nodded.

She loved it.

All of them partied until late into the night, eventually leaving just the immediate Many Blessings staff, and Sachi and her guys.

Mandaline gave her a hug. “Go home and enjoy. We’ll clean this up.” She smiled. “Your dad told me he was spending the night at Lorie’s.”

“Thanks.”

This was one time she wouldn’t argue. They arrived home a few minutes later. First John, then Oscar, took turns carrying her in through the front door with a lot of laughter that she felt to the bottoms of her feet.

Happy. *This* was what happy felt like.

Sachi wasn’t sure what her men had planned for the night, but she suspected they had a little something special in store.

She wasn’t wrong, either. After the three of them were in bed, naked, and the men already doing those sweet, delicious things to her body with their hands and mouths that made her brain fall right out of her noggin, John opened the bedside table drawer and produced their surprise.

“Tonight, baby,” he said, “we’re going to do that last thing we said we would.”

She tried to focus on it in the dim light. “Is that a butt plug?”

“You better believe it is,” Oscar said as he nibbled on her earlobe. “We’re going to spend all night loosening that sweet ass of yours, and then we’re going to fuck your brains out.”

Well, her brains already felt like they were out, so that’d be a short trip to start with.

John grabbed a towel from the bathroom and a bottle of lube and they got her situated where they wanted her, on her back with her legs spread wide and John kneeling between them.

“Oh, where’s the insurance?” Oscar asked.

“Dang it.”

“What?” she asked.

John got out of bed and returned with a small vibrator. “See? Not Dildous.”

She started to shoot back a snarky retort, but then John turned the vibrator on and pressed it to her clit, and dammit, there went her brains again.

Oscar reached over and took charge of the vibrator, smiling at her as he did. “Just lay there and enjoy it. We got this.”

John squirted lube on his index finger and gently started massaging it on her rim.

What little tension she’d had fled as she realized he was going to take his time and go really slow. And, combined with

the vibrator, it felt really good.

Except that Oscar was being mean and not letting her come. He seemed to take great pleasure in keeping her right on the edge, sensing when to pull back, when to alternate slowly fucking her now dripping cunt with the vibrator before playing it over her clit again. At some point, John had worked his entire finger into her ass, the pleasure Oscar was giving her more than counteracting the sensations. Or maybe intensifying them.

She didn't know and didn't care, as long as they didn't stop what they were doing.

John took his time, carefully adding a second finger, slowing down and letting Oscar build her tension up without giving her release before carefully working his fingers deeper inside her tight ring. She was close to begging when John said, "Okay, let her come."

Oscar held the vibrator against her clit and she exploded, the feeling of her body clenching against the fingers in her ass only intensifying the sensation. John started finger-fucking her ass, drawing out her orgasm.

"You're ours, baby," Oscar said as he stared down at her with a smile. "We love making you lose control like this, and we plan on a lifetime together of doing it to you."

John's fingers disappeared from her ass, quickly replaced by something cool and smooth. "I'll go slow, don't worry," he assured her.

But with the help of the vibrator, it felt like everything had mixed into one long, never-ending orgasm. He slowly fucked the butt plug inside her a little at a time, in and out, stretching her rim, pausing when she thought she wasn't sure she could take it and her moans had turned into whines.

Oscar slid the vibrator into her pussy and leaned down, sucking on her clit.

That did it. She exploded again, harder than ever, and John chuckled as he slid the butt plug all the way in. "There you go, baby. See how easy that was?"

Now her ass felt full as she struggled to get used to the sensation, the intensity of the vibrator inside her and pressing on her G-spot while Oscar flicked her clit with his tongue making her cry out.

John pressed on the base of the butt plug. "That's it, sweetheart. Just get used to it for a few minutes. Once you do, we'll be able to fuck you."

Oscar alternated fucking her with the vibrator with embedding it deep inside her, his tongue doing deliciously evil things to her clit all the while. John stretched out on her other side and kissed her, slow and deep, fucking her mouth with his tongue.

Daaammnnnn...

She was well and truly screwed. Not that she was complaining, but she knew she was powerless against these two men. And she loved it.

John laced fingers with her, kissing her hand.

She squeezed and raised her hand over her head, against the pillow, his on top of hers, pulling it down.

He looked a little worried. "Sweetheart?"

"Green!" she gasped.

Her heart twisted in the good way when he took the hint. He squeezed, pressing her hand down into the pillow. She closed her eyes and reveled in the feeling of letting go, letting them have her, all of her, the good and the bad, everything.

Completely.

After a while, Oscar sat up. "I'm about to explode, and I'd rather last more than a few seconds on my wedding night, thank you very much."

John got up and grabbed a condom out of the drawer. They didn't usually use them anymore now that she was on the pill, but she suspected it was more because of where he was planning on putting his cock.

Oscar switched the vibrator off and rolled her on top of him, slowly sliding his cock into her pussy. "Oh, baby," he gasped, his hands on her ass keeping her from moving. "Stay very, very still."

She whined as John carefully withdrew the butt plug from her. "I know, sweetheart. We'll make it feel really good again here in just a minute." When it was out, he squirted more lube over his condom-sheathed cock and pressed the head of it against her rim. "Here you go, baby."

It took everything she had not to try to fuck herself back and forth on him, wanting traction against her clit and unable to move because of Oscar holding her still. John took his time, slowly fucking himself in and out a little bit with every thrust, carefully, until she felt his thighs pressing against her ass.

He let out a breath. "Okay, there. Sit up."

She could barely move. It felt like all her bones had been transformed to the same jelly Dildos were made out of. Oscar pushed and John pulled her upright, wrapping an arm around her waist to hold her body against his.

She heard the vibrator click on again, and Oscar pressed it against her clit.

Good? Fuck that, it felt *fantastic*. She hooked an arm around John's neck and held on tight, rocking what little she could

with John keeping her held firmly in place. The muscles of her ass and cunt clamped down on their cocks, intensifying the pleasure more than she thought possible.

“Oh, baby,” Oscar gasped. “Damn!”

“That’s it,” John murmured in her ear. “You just keep riding us until we’re ready to let you stop coming and start fucking you.”

The world spun away, nothing existing but them and their love and their energy and the pleasure they were giving her. She suspected she’d be sore in the morning, but she didn’t care. She’d remember this moment, this pleasure, and smile with every ache and pain.

And probably ask them to do it again the next night.

Because...*damn*.

She’d long ago gotten used to the normal sweet aches and pains having two eager lovers caused in her. Now it looked like she’d have to get used to a whole new set.

More conditioning...

Everything blended together, time, pleasure, every sensation. Finally, Oscar chuckled. “I think she’s almost worn out.”

“Is that right, baby?” John asked. “Are you almost worn out?”

She couldn’t talk. She wasn’t sure she remembered how at that point. She did manage a nod.

“All right. Then one more.” His hands cupped her breasts, playing with her nipples, pinching and rolling them between his fingers. “One more, and we’ll let you have a little rest before we make you come some more.”

She sobbed as another orgasm rolled through her. *I will never, ever, complain I’m horny again*. Not if the men could do this to her. It had reached the delicious tipping point where she hoped it stopped, and she hoped it never stopped, both ends of the spectrum waging war within her clit and nervous system.

Finally, Oscar pulled the vibrator away and switched it off. John gently lowered her on top of him and slowly started fucking her. Every movement he made caused her clit to rub against Oscar’s body, sending more tingles through her, aftershocks rippling through her muscles.

Oscar kissed her tenderly, holding her while John fucked her ass. She tried to meet his thrusts and realized with jelly bones that wasn’t possible. So instead she lay there and enjoyed it.

Not like that was a challenge or anything.

She did manage to reach one hand up and behind her, wiggling her fingers at him. He took the hint and clasped it, holding on as his release grew closer, his grip growing tighter until she heard that sound she loved so much rolling from his lips.

Oscar started moving under her now. “Goddamn, I thought I’d never hold on.” Holding her hips, he thrust up into her. Once more her body gave in, her swollen, sensitive clit unable to resist the sensation.

She squeezed her eyes closed, carried along and unable to do anything but enjoy it. Oscar noticed. “Oh, baby, you just came for us again, didn’t you?”

“Damn right she did,” John said. “I felt it.”

Any worries he might have had about holding out were for naught. He held on long enough to fuck yet one last, smaller, gentler orgasm out of her before finally giving in. He buried his cock deep into her pussy and fell still with a soft moan.

John held himself propped up with his arms and kissed the nape of her neck. “Are you okay?”

“Mmm hmn.”

He chuckled. “Okay.” Carefully, he withdrew and headed to the bathroom. She heard him clean up and he returned a moment later, wiping her down with a warm washcloth he tossed into the bathroom before climbing in next to them.

“You going to stay there all night?” he asked her, humor in his tone.

“Not my fault you broke me in the good way.”

Oscar rolled onto his side, putting her in the middle. She loved that normally they didn’t have to hurry to pull out to dispose of a condom with her now on the pill.

Snuggled tightly between them, she let out a sigh. “How much recovery time do I get?”

John chuckled. “I think it’s more how much time *we* need to recover.”

“Well, recover fast, boys. I want to do that again with the roles reversed.”

“That butt plug is *not* going up my ass,” Oscar said.

She poked him. “I meant *you* in my ass. Although, now that you mention it—”

“Nope,” he quickly said. “My cock, your ass. That’s good.”

She giggled.

Since when the *hell* did she fucking *giggle*?

Since apparently these two men had somehow healed her soul.

Chapter Twenty-Three

They took turns driving from Spokane. They also took their time, stopping at scenic vistas and other points of interest. They spent the night in Missoula.

When Sachi awoke the next morning to the dreary, grey early October Montana morning, she felt only peace as she stood at the hotel room window and stared out at the landscape.

As it should be.

No fear, not even a hint of anxiety. Just the beautiful and somewhat rugged landscape laid out around the town.

Oscar stepped out of bed and walked up behind her, slipping his arms around her waist. He nibbled on the side of her neck. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” She smiled and turned in his arms, draping hers over his shoulders. “Very.”

“You’re sure?”

She stood on tiptoe to kiss him. “Very.”

“Hey,” John mumbled from the bed. “Some of us are trying to sleep.”

She walked over and jumped onto the bed, bouncing him.

“Hey!”

Leaning in, she kissed him. “Wake up, grumpy. Breakfast awaits.”

“Yeah? Well, sleep would await if you’d let it. This is supposed to be our vacation.”

Despite his initial protestations, they showered, dressed, packed, ate breakfast, and got back on the road less than two hours later. She wanted to reach the town well before dark, wanted to be back on the road again to wherever their instinct took them.

When they reached the town, she had Oscar stop at the same little grocery store where she’d bought flowers a few months earlier. This time, she bought two bundles.

They headed to the cemetery without talking, her peace settling around her like a thick, soft, comfortable cloak. Then she led the way to her mom’s grave and knelt in front of it, placing one of the bundles of flowers there.

“Mom, this is John and Oscar. I...” She swallowed back her tears. “I wish you could have met them. Dad loves them. And Dad’s happy, too. Thank you for guiding us all these years. I miss you and love you so much, but I know life had to move on. The other option...it wasn’t an option for me. It wouldn’t be honoring you to not keep living and to be happy.”

She kissed her fingers and pressed them to the cool granite headstone. Then she stood and reached for the other bundle of flowers that Oscar had carried for her.

Slowly, on trembling legs, she walked across the cemetery, searching, until she finally found the graves.

Michelle Clary had apparently disowned her husband. When she prearranged her son’s funeral arrangements the day before she had him disconnected from life support—the day she committed suicide—she’d arranged for a double headstone and their two graves.

Sachi knew from her father’s talks with the deputies involved in her shooting case a few months earlier that the person who’d loaned Jackson the truck he drove from Montana to Florida had paid for Jackson’s cremation and then scattered the ashes here at the graves of the mother and son.

The friend had also written a heartfelt letter of apology to Sachi and Mandaline for their inadvertent role in the attack, swearing that if they’d realized what he was up to, or had known where he was going, they would have called law enforcement.

She believed them. She had no reason not to, despite her father’s cynical view that they were trying to avoid a civil lawsuit.

That wasn’t something she was interested in pursuing anyway.

Sachi leaned down and tucked the other bundle of flowers against Michelle’s side of the headstone. Then she straightened, hands clasped in front of her, and stared at it for a moment.

Her men stood behind her, silent and supportive, their loving energy washing off them and through her.

“I’m sorry our paths crossed the way they did, Michelle. I know you didn’t blame me or my mom for what happened. The note you left said that much. I hope you’re at peace. I also wanted to tell you that I don’t hold you responsible, either. And while I will never absolve Jacob or Jackson for what they did, I do offer forgiveness. I can’t hold on to my anger and let it ruin my life the way it ruined Jackson’s.”

She took a deep, ragged breath and held her hands out in front of her, palms pressed together in a gesture of respect, and offered a slight bow. “Namaste, Michelle. Brightest blessings. I hope wherever you are, that your soul, and the souls of Jacob and Jackson, are at peace. Aho.”

Across the cemetery, a small flock of cardinals, male and female, took flight.

Sachi closed her eyes. *Thank you, Mom.*

With her arms hooked through John's and Oscar's they made their way back to the rental car and headed north toward I-

90.

"Which way do you want to head, sweetie?" John asked. "East or west?"

She smiled. "East. I want to see Devils Tower."

"Then east it shall be," Oscar said from the backseat.

As Sachi settled in the passenger seat, her hand resting on John's thigh, she glanced over the seat at Oscar.

Over the past couple of months she'd managed to develop a filter so their blue auras, and her own—which she now saw outside of a mirror—weren't so distracting. She could almost filter them out the way she could other people's auras.

Oscar smiled at her. "Mom and Dad asked me again about coming out there for Thanksgiving."

"I think Ruth thinks she's going to talk us into moving out there," John said. "She's been giving me hints."

Sachi laughed and faced forward again, staring out the windshield at the road ahead of them. "Not a chance in hell of that. Florida is our home." She was looking forward to spending this Thanksgiving with her father, the first one they'd spent together since she'd left home.

Maybe another Thanksgiving they would fly out, but this year, she wanted to be with her dad. Her men had agreed with her, and Lorie was going to join them all at Mandaline's house for the first Thanksgiving they'd be hosting there.

She hoped Oscar's parents' feelings wouldn't be hurt, but that was currently the least of Sachi's concerns. Their friend, Libbie, who ran the bakery, was at the top of her thoughts.

The two hunks Libbie had recently rented an apartment to were meant to be with Libbie. Sachi could see it in their auras every time she was around the three of them, and Mandaline had verified that with observations of her own.

She suspected a jug of her special homemade spiked Samhain cider would be a helpful gift for the three. She'd have enough time when they returned to Florida to make a batch of it. It'd be over two weeks before Samhain.

"Whatcha thinking about so hard?" John asked her.

She smiled. "Oh, just plotting and scheming."

"Libbie?" Oscar asked.

"Yep."

"You and Mandaline are bound and determined to shove her at those two guys, aren't you?" John asked.

"I sense a return of Dildous," Oscar quipped.

She grinned. "What do *you* think?"

"Oh, boy," the men said.

As she settled back in her seat, Sachi felt the smile on her face. It felt good.

It felt *right*.

Being *happy* felt right.

And she realized for the first time that, ever since meeting the men, she no longer felt lost.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tymber Dalton lives in the Tampa Bay region of Florida with her husband (aka “The World’s Best Husband™”) and too many pets. Active in the BDSM lifestyle, the two-time EPIC winner is also the bestselling author of over fifty books, such as *The Reluctant Dom*, *The Denim Dom*, *Cardinal’s Rule*, the Love Slave for Two series, the Triple Trouble series, the Coffeeshop Coven series, the Good Will Ghost Hunting series, and many more.

She loves to hear from readers! Please feel free to drop by her website and sign up for updates to keep abreast of the latest news, views, snarkage, and releases. (Don’t forget to look up her writing alter egos Lesli Richardson, Tessa Monroe, and Macy Largo.)

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