

A man with a beard and short brown hair is shirtless, looking intensely at the camera. A woman with long blonde hair is behind him, her face partially visible as she looks over his shoulder. Her hand is resting on his chest. The background is dark, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting the man's features and the woman's hair. The overall mood is sensual and mysterious.

ALL IS FAIR IN LOVE AND WAR,
ESPECIALLY WHEN THE LOOT IS A
WOMAN HE'S SET ON HAVING.

F + G

Geomancer

SEVEN FORBIDDEN ARTS #5

CHARMAINE PAULS

Geomancist

**Seven Forbidden Arts
Book 5**

Charmaine Pauls



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For Noleen

Chapter One

Sean Rivers woke up with a jerk from his dream. In his room above Jerry's Pub, the early sun made the yellow curtains glow. The rest of Cartagena was still asleep. He wiped a hand over his sweat-ridden face and cursed his Scottish bones for waking every morning.

He didn't deserve to wake.

He didn't deserve to breathe.

In his dream, Maddy died all over again. He watched helplessly, night after night, as the earth cracked and swallowed her whole. Her dark blue eyes, a mirror image of his own, pleaded with him, even as her fingers slipped from his slick grip. He didn't break eye contact. He saw terror and death in her gaze. Down and down she went with flailing arms and a red billowing skirt ... and then the terrible thump.

A shudder tingled down his spine. The nausea he woke with every morning had become as familiar to him as eating and pissing. He had learned to live with the discomfort, as one would tolerate a persistent flu. He swallowed back the acid in his throat and let his stomach settle. The urge to throw up left him with a queasiness that locked his teeth together.

He needed a shower and a shave. The smoke from the bar clung to his damp skin and hair. He massaged his jaw in an effort to release some of the tension that made the joints ache and welcomed the sharp pricks of his stubble in his palm. It reminded him that he had crossed the border from subconscious suffering to wakeful torture. The real nightmare, the one of facing another day, had just begun.

He sat up and pressed his thumbs hard into his eyes, exorcising the mental image of the dream that lingered. Sparks popped across his black vision. Wiping the guilt away wasn't as easy. The only thing that gave him enough motivation to battle on was finishing what he and Maddy had started. Opening a cocktail bar in Colombia had been her dream. They'd made a great team, the

best mixologists in the country, but she had always been a better performer than him.

Another month or so and he'd have enough money to make it happen. Jerry promised he'd wait until Sean could afford to take over the rent. The plan was to convert the sleazy bar into a classy cocktail lounge and to open in six months, on Maddy's birthday. Until then, he was content to work in Jerry's bar.

Every bone in his body felt battered. The pub had closed at two in the morning when the die-hard bikers had left. He'd spent the next two hours stacking chairs and tables, scrubbing floors, washing glasses, cleaning windows, carrying crates of empty bottles outside, and hauling full ones in. Jerry had people for those chores, but it put off wrestling with his dream for another couple of hours. Even if physical exhaustion never delivered the redemption he was after, he still tried. The mind with its built-in survival instinct was a fucked-up thing. Even if the heart had given up, the mind carried on, poking sticks into the wheels, trying to find coping mechanisms and defenses. In his case, physical labor had become his outlet.

Knowing there was no way he'd go back to sleep, he swung his legs from the bed. His hand habitually went to his throat to touch the crystal pendant Maddy had given him for their twenty-seventh birthday, the last one she ever celebrated. The heavy weight was strangely absent. He felt around his collarbone and gripped nothing but skin. Though he knew the leather string wasn't there, he jumped up and stalked to the mirror on the wall. The only image reflecting back at him was the formula tattooed on his left pec—Newton's law of gravity.

He turned back to the bed with a feeling of dread. He had not taken it off since the day Maddy put it around his neck, not because as a geomancist he knew the significance of the stone—he had long since given up on the hope that it could save him—but because it was the last thing she'd given him.

"Crystal," she'd said, "to purify and protect." It had become his reminder of the promise he had made himself not to let her dream die with the body that had been lowered into the Highland soil of their homeland. The dream was the only part of her he could keep alive.

He walked back to the bed, ripped the sheets down, and turned the pillow over. It had to have come off in the night. There was no sign of it. Going down on his knees, he checked under the bed. Nothing. Had he lost it last night, while he was mixing mood cocktails for the bar's clientele? Had it dropped off on the way to the Turkish grub joint up the road where he had dinner?

Grabbing the T-shirt he had worn the night before, he marched to the open window and plucked the curtains aside. The air was already humid. Not a breeze blew in from the sea. Today, the ocean view failed to catch his attention.

Geomancist

He pushed his palms on the windowsill and peered down at the cobblestone street in the hope of spotting the lost necklace. If he'd dropped it outside, the chances of finding it were slim. Someone could have picked it up by now. He scrutinized the length of the street, but nothing glittered in the sun. He'd have to go down to look for it. It was a ridiculous notion, but he felt incomplete. It was as if Maddy's dream had been ripped from his body, out of his reach.

Nobody was moving around yet. The shops below were shuttered. The bustle of brooms sweeping the pavements would only start in a couple of hours. Restaurants and stores wouldn't open until much later. He was about to pull the smoke drenched T-shirt over his head when a woman turned the corner and strutted down the street. Something about her made Sean pause.

She was a delicate, young-looking lass, on the short side. Her steps were purposeful, as if she did everything with a predetermined focus. Her head was held high and her back straight. She made a good deal of noise with glittery, platform flip-flops that beat the pavement. She wore a bright blue bikini with white, see-through pants and over-sized sunglasses with pink lenses. A white silk scarf was twisted around her neck. No blouse or T-shirt, just the bikini top stretching over the firm mounds of her chest. Her breasts were almost too big for her tiny body. In a city like Cartagena, it wasn't wise for a woman walking alone to flaunt tits like that. Dark blonde curls that reached her jawline bobbed energetically to the rhythm of her feet.

She was a looker, all right, but what halted him wasn't her beauty. It was her lust for life; a hopeful determination that bounced off the pavement with every clack of her heels. He knew it couldn't last. Life's cruelties would find her. She reminded him of what he had once been and of all he had lost.

She carried a canvas beach bag the size of a suitcase over her shoulder. It was too early for the beach. Not even the umbrella and chair vendors would be out yet. Instead of turning for the stairs on the beach side, she stopped right in front of Jerry's Pub and banged on the door.

What the hell? She knocked a second time before he had gathered himself enough to lean from the window and call down, "Can I help you?"

The female lifted her heart-shaped face and pushed her sunglasses over her hair. She had green eyes with brown specs and freckles running over her nose and cheeks. On closer inspection, he noticed she wasn't as young as her figure had first made him think. Definitely not a teenager. Late twenties maybe. There were fine creases around the corners of her eyes, suggesting someone who smiled a lot.

Her gaze traveled up and down his naked chest and finally ended on his face. "Is this the premises that's for rent?"

Rent?

Charmaine Pauls

She turned in a semi-circle with outstretched arms. "This is perfect—sea view, busy street, prime spot. Say, how many customers do you have on a weekend night?"

Believing Jerry would never go back on his word, he told her, "You've got the wrong address."

She squinted at the number on the wall. "Nope. Number eight."

"Hold on just a wee sec. I don't—"

"Can I see the inside?"

He lifted a finger. "Wait right there."

She didn't answer, only started tapping her foot on the concrete.

Sean jerked the T-shirt over his head and pulled on a pair of more or less clean jeans over his boxer shorts. He took the stairs two by two down to the bar. When he opened the door, his visitor cocked her head and blew out a puff of air. He was going to tell her she was lost, but she moved around him, light as a pussycat on her feet. She swirled through the room toward the bar. A whiff of green apples and something fresh and lively, like daisies, followed in her wake.

"Perfect." White plastic bangles clanked together as she swept her arm over the lounge area. "The reception can be here." Her head turned to the bar counter. "And the refreshments will be over there."

She tapped a pretty bow-shaped mouth with an index finger. Sean's attention was riveted by the blue varnish and miniscule white flower with which her nail was decorated. She might as well have tackled him to the floor and gagged him from the way his body remained immobile and his mouth useless. He was too dumbfounded to speak.

"The massage room will have to be upstairs, to profit from the view."

The only thing upstairs was his bedroom. At last, with the threat to his private sanctuary, he managed to find his voice again. "Hold it right there, pussycat. What are you talking about? This is Jerry's bar." *Soon to be his.*

She cocked an eyebrow, as if to say, 'So?' and untied the scarf around her neck. To add insult to injury, she wore his pendant around her neck.

Sean's jaw dropped and then clenched. "What the...?"

Was this some cruel joke? He reached for the necklace, but she took a step back, her hand covering her throat.

"Where did you get that?" He crossed his arms. It was all he could do to prevent himself from snatching it from her delicate neck.

Her fist closed around the crystal. "I found it. It's mine."

"No, it's not." He advanced on her, and she took another step back. "I've been looking for that."

"Finders keepers."

"You don't want to push me, not on this."

Geomancist

She lifted her chin. “Prove that it’s yours.”

Without breaking eye contact, he threw a thumb over his shoulder to the framed photo of him and Jerry hanging on the wall.

Her gaze followed the path of his finger. She took three delicate steps around him and stopped in front of the frame. It was a picture Maddy had taken of him and Jerry on the night of their birthday party. They had celebrated here in the bar, just after she had given him the pendant. The crystal had caught the flash of the camera, causing a white halo on the photograph. When they had the print developed, Maddy said the white circle of light—angelic light—was an omen of death. He pushed his sister’s voice from his mind and trained his attention on the female who studied the picture with a tilted head.

When she turned back to face him, Sean held out his open palm in silent instruction. Obediently, she lifted the leather string over her head and placed the precious crystal in his hand. His fingers closed around the stone with relief.

“I found it in front of the kebab shop,” she said with a smile.

The gesture was genuine, creasing the corners of her eyes into something that reminded him too much of a warm sun shining on a cold Highland lake, like homecoming.

Only when it was secured around his neck did he say, “I’m glad you did.”

Her expression turned curious. “It means a lot to you.”

“You said something about rent?” he said, deliberately cutting further interrogation short.

Her green-brown eyes scrutinized him from top to bottom before her gaze flittered over the formula of the first law of thermodynamics tattooed on the inside of his upper right-arm. He was especially fond of that law—energy couldn’t be created or destroyed.

“You’re Sean, aren’t you?” Without waiting for his confirmation, she continued, “You sound and look even more Scottish than what I imagined. What made you decide to move to Colombia? How long since you’ve relocated? Three years? You have to give me some expat tips. Weather must be a big improvement over the Highlands. That’s where you’re from, right? I hear you have this knack for blind mixing a drink to suit a customer’s mood. Never get it wrong. Say, what would you mix for me?” Her hips rocked gently as she shifted her weight.

He took a deep, long breath on her behalf. She was a nosy, inexhaustible kitten with long cat lashes and wee pads-on-her-paws kinds of steps. Would she be playful if a man made a move, or would her tail sweep and her tiny claws come out? What would he mix for her? He took in every inch of her small, lithe body. She’d be a spicy Thai ice latte spiked with vodka. Poison in a small bottle. Suddenly his curiosity was stirring, but not about the possible reasons

why she had barged through the door and spoke no sense about rent. It was the kind of curiosity that stirred in a man's pants.

He narrowed his eyes a fraction. "What did you say your name is?"

"Sorry." She brushed her palms on her transparent pants and held out her dainty hand. "Asia Sommer."

He managed to contain the frown that almost slipped out. His hand folded around hers. Her skin was pleasantly warm. "Asia, like the continent?"

She gave an apologetic shrug. "My mother wanted to name me after my father, but since she didn't know his name, she named me after the continent he was from instead."

Damn. What was he supposed to say to that?

"Anyway," she looked away, "I'm here to see Jerry."

What was Jerry brewing behind his back? Sean was territorial about the bar, and Jerry damn well knew it. "As you can see, he's not in."

She knew a lot about him. She could be working for a gift hunter or a government agency. The whole rent thing could be a set-up. Suspicion tightened his throat. "How do you know so much about me, pussycat?" His lips twitched, but there was no humor in his tone. "Are you a stalker?"

Her smile faltered a fraction at his downright rudeness, and he felt a loss of warmth, as sure as he'd feel a shadow stretch over that sunny piece of Highland her crinkling eyes had conjured.

"I read the article about your Liquid Oscar in the Wine magazine," she said. "It was all over the gossip magazines, too."

Ah. That unwanted publicity. The nomination had been an error, one that hadn't come from his side. A well-intending Jerry had thought it would be good for their business. Little did he know it could cost Sean his life.

"When will he be in?" she continued.

"Not until tonight."

"I'll come back then."

"You'll be wasting your time." His voice could freeze the air. "The premises are not for rent."

"Maybe you're uninformed?" she said with a hopeful inclination.

Like hell. His tone dropped a few degrees more, resembling the brittle Antarctic glaciers. "I don't think so."

She flinched a little. "At what time will he be here?"

She wrapped her arms around herself. The way it pushed up her breasts made him want her to come back, but not for Jerry.

"Nine should do it." The full-blown smile he gave her wasn't warm. She seemed even more unsettled. "Shall I give him a message?" With each second, he sounded more like a cold-hearted bastard trying to get rid of her.

Geomancist

“Please.” The word whispered past her lips.

He imagined her saying the word from a bed of twisted sheets. Would she whisper, or would she scream? The thought made him hard.

“Just tell him Asia was here, and I’ll come back tonight. And please,” her mint eyes took on an urgent light, “tell him not to offer the contract to anyone else until he’s spoken to me.”

He rubbed at the back of his neck to eliminate the itch a premonition invited.

“What exactly did Jerry promise you, pussycat? I’d hate to see you disappointed.”

The echo of the smile that still clung to her lips disappeared. “I wish you wouldn’t call me that. It’s objectifying.”

“Oh?” He raised a mocking brow. “What pet name do you prefer?”

“None.” Her demeanor turned business-like. “I’ll be back tonight.”

He grabbed the ends of her scarf before she could turn. “You haven’t told me what Jerry promised you.”

Caution flickered in her eyes. “Look, I’m sorry if this means you’re going to lose your job. I understand it can’t be easy. If a spa required a barman, I promise I would’ve worked something out with you. I’m sure there are plenty of bars in town that’ll pay handsomely for your skills.”

His temples pulsed. His hearing got stuck on ‘lose your job’ and then it fast-forwarded and tripped over ‘spa’.

“A fucking what?” he said softly.

Her stance turned defensive. If at all possible, her back straightened more. “A spa, where people have beauty and relaxation treatments, in case you don’t grasp the meaning of the word.”

Anger heated his ears. “This is what Jerry agreed to, aye?”

“Not exactly. He’s looking at getting out of his lease, and I’m looking at renting. It’s a win-win for both of us. What I’m doing with the place afterward is really none of his business or yours.”

“You’re wrong, pussycat. It’s every bit my business.”

“I refuse to argue with you.” She lifted her chin. “I’m leaving. I can see when I’m not welcome, but I *will* be back tonight.”

She tried to take a step back, but he still held fast to her scarf. He twisted the ends around his hands, reeling her in. Her pupils expanded. The chocolate chips danced around in her green irises as her eyes flickered between his own. Ah fuck, he couldn’t help himself. He could fall into those pools and vanish there.

Charmaine Pauls

“By all means, come back tonight. I encourage it, but it won’t be for sealing a deal with Jerry. It won’t be for more than a complimentary drink.” His eyes trailed over her. “Unless you want it to be.”

She jerked on her scarf, almost tearing the fragile fabric from his hands. He let the material unwind slowly, taking his time to release her.

Stumbling a step back, a butterfly rhythm fluttered under the delicate skin in the hollow of her neck. “Are you always such a jerk?”

“Here I thought I was flattering you.” His obstinate hard-on certainly was.

“To think I was going to ask for your autograph,” she said with a condescending smile before racing across the floor.

“I’ll save you a front seat at the bar,” he called after her.

The minute the door slammed behind her, he rushed upstairs and rummaged through his jacket pockets for his phone. He dialed Jerry’s number, but all he got was voice mail. Forfeiting the much-needed shower, he pulled on his leather jacket, grabbing his helmet and keys on the way to the door. Twenty minutes later he stopped in front of Jerry’s cabin in a cheap harbor location. A note on the door read, ‘Gone fishing’. He slammed his hand on the handle bar of his bike. He didn’t know what the deal with Asia was, but giving up the bar was not in the cards, not in his lifetime.

* * * *

The evening’s preparations kept Sean busy until late afternoon. The stock had to be counted, new orders placed, the till balanced, and the figures captured on Jerry’s dinosaur software program. When Suzie, their head waitress, arrived, he left her in charge to go for his workout at the gym and his daily jog along the beach.

He was downright pissed off about the morning’s surprise visit. Even if he kept on telling himself it was a misunderstanding, he couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling he’d developed since Asia had swept into his morning with her compact little body and rounded ass. The bar was his. It was so close. One more month was all he needed.

He took ten minutes to shower and change into his black jeans and Einstein T-shirt before going downstairs. Living in a bachelor pad on top of the bar was cramped, but it saved him the cost of renting a place, money he could put into the dream.

At eight, Jerry sauntered through the door, sporting his biker look. “Hey, bro.” He slapped Sean’s palm in a high five. “What’s up?”

Sean dropped the stock list on the bar counter. “I was hoping you’d tell me.”

“Whoa.” Jerry held up his hands. “What’s eating you?”

Geomancist

“A wee lass called Asia.”

“Shit.” Jerry scratched his jaw. “I wanted to talk to you about that.”

“She beat you to it.”

Jerry hung his head, studying Sean from lowered lashes. “Times are tough, man.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

Jerry gave a drawn-out sigh. “I wanted to hang in there for you. I really did, bro.”

“Wait.” Sean walked around the bar and stopped in front of his boss. “Just wait a sec. Why does this sound like a fucking apology?”

“Sean, man, you know we’ve been losing customers.”

They’d been losing customers because holidaymakers didn’t come to Latin American paradise for Irish pubs with pool tables. He’d been telling Jerry that for the past two years. They needed to upgrade, to put tables outside facing the beach, to serve fancy, expensive cocktails, and make it a joint where glitzy singles could meet and mingle. The biker theme was long since cold coffee.

“Yes,” Sean said. “We’re losing drinking customers because you’re a hard-headed mule.”

“Maybe you were right about all the fancy shit and pretentious mixes, but it doesn’t matter now. I can’t make the bills. It’s over, man.”

Sean slammed his palm down on the counter. “Why didn’t you tell me? Just one more month, Jerry. I’ve almost got it together.”

“I tried.”

“I thought your landlord was okay with cutting you slack.”

“I have a new landlord.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The old one sold out. New one wants to clean out the business, get rid of the bad debt. No more credit.”

“Did you explain to him that I’m supposed to take over the lease?”

“Yeah. He won’t give me more time. Called here yesterday to tell me he’s got someone else interested.”

“The Asia doll?”

“Yeah.”

“We could have made a plan.”

“What plan? You need five grand just for a deposit.”

“So you decided to turn it into a fucking beauty salon?”

“Not me. The landlord said whoever comes up with the money first gets the deal.”

His hope rose again. “Does that mean she hasn’t signed a contract yet?”

“As far as I know, no. She’s also short of cash.”

Charmaine Pauls

“Fuck.” Sean threw his head back. “Shit. Looks like we’re in for a money fucking race.”

Jerry knew how much this meant to him. He’d employed Maddy, for Christ’s sake. He knew the cocktail bar was her dream. If it had gone this far, Jerry had to be deeper in the shit than what Sean ever thought.

“If you want to keep the place we can—” Sean started.

“No. I told you. I’m too old for this. I want out. I *need* out.” Jerry sighed. “Look, if you just take Juan’s offer to mix at his party, you’ll have enough money.”

“I’m not taking his money.”

“Ten thousand fucking dollars is a grand sum, Sean.”

“It’s drug money.”

“All money’s tainted. All money gets dirty somewhere along the line.”

“I’m not going to gig for a drug kingpin and that’s that.”

He flicked Sean’s T-shirt. “What other ideas do you have, Einstein?”

Sean didn’t answer.

“Unless you want to see a beauty salon go up on the very spot you’re standing on, you better reconsider.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“I only got the call yesterday. I was going to, after tonight’s gig. I didn’t expect the woman to march in here and spill the beans this morning.”

Sean already had a name and a design—*Starlight*, in bright blue letters on a silver background, surrounded by stars. Maddy would have liked it.

Jerry placed a hand on Sean’s shoulder. “There must be other locations, if this doesn’t work out.”

“This is the best location in town, and you know it.”

More importantly, Maddy had worked here, and her presence lingered. It was the only place he could still feel her without having to succumb to the nightmare. It was his and Maddy’s dream. He wouldn’t fail her, but doing a gig for Juan Hernandez, hell no.

Jerry squeezed his shoulder and dropped his arm. “I wish there was another way.” Apparently, with nothing left to say, he walked into the office at the back and closed the door.

Juan’s event organizer, Leona, had been on Sean’s case about playing private barman at the kingpin’s exclusive fiftieth birthday party for months. Sean was surprised he hadn’t yet been hijacked at gunpoint or had a kneecap knocked in. The whole city knew the Colombian drug lord had rented an island off the coast of Cartagena for the weeklong celebration. Fifty of his closest friends and influential business partners had been invited. A symbolic number for a dangerous man. It also happened to be the fiftieth celebration of Juan’s

father's drug business, the one Juan had taken over at the age of thirty. The party was going to be a cesspool of criminals, something Sean had no desire to be a part of.

He went back to preparing his nightly presentation, which was the opening show of the house, so to speak. When the doors opened at nine, he'd execute the performance he'd practiced during the day to the beat of funky house music. Jerry was on lights, maneuvering the spots and colored lasers. Matching the music, lights, and the liquor to the choreography was a complicated business. The routine changed every day. Tonight, he had a fire-blowing trick up his sleeve. He called the mix he had invented for the occasion Fire Dance. It also meant they'd had to stock up on the booze that made the mix. If there was a feature cocktail on the menu, it was always ordered three times more than the usual.

After a quick run-through with Rod on music, he settled behind the bar and waited for the stampede. People would compete for tables, pushing to get as close as possible to the counter. They'd buy a mood cocktail, for which he was famous, drink it quickly, and leave. As soon as the music and lights were dead and the show ended, they'd seek out the more glamorous clubs in town. Only Jerry's dwindling amount of regulars in biker jackets would remain, nursing a beer or a whiskey, which made them hardly enough dough to cover their costs.

"Suzie," he said as she passed by, "reserve a VIP seat for Miss Asia Sommer. She's coming in to see Jerry at nine." He hoped he could sway the kitten, get her mind off this crazy spa idea of hers.

"Sure. What kind of a name is that, anyway?" she called back.

Freddy, the bouncer, checked his wristwatch and looked at Sean for his cue. It should have been Jerry who gave the signal, but it had been a while since Jerry paid real interest in his business. All Jerry wanted these days was to retire, not that he was that old. Sean nodded, and Freddy pulled the doors open, letting in a stream of girls in revealing glitter evening dresses and ridiculously high heels followed by men dressed in white linen shirts and pressed dress pants.

His eyes fell on a glamorous group who came through the door and Sean froze. The crowd opened effortlessly around the men and women as they made their way to the only group table in the lounge area at the back. Fuck all the laws of nature he had ever tattooed on his body. Others were staring, too. It was hard to miss them, due to their physical perfection. Even the atmosphere had changed. They gave off an air of dangerous power and demanded attention, if not respect.

He knew a group of forbidden arts practitioners when he saw them. He was one of them, after all. The reason he and Maddy had moved to Colombia had been to escape the hunters who were after their gift. Being a waitress and

barman had initially been a way of making a living, until Maddy had found her passion in mixology.

He lowered his head and studied the group as they took their seats. He had made it his job to know all there was to know about his kind. It was essential for survival. Knowledge was power. His old man back home in Scotland had a friend in government who was a sponsor of the paranormal crime taskforce who sat down with cool indifference, acting as if their only goal was a night on the town and a good time. Sean knew better.

Cain Jones, the commander of the team, sat down first. The red birthmark on his handsome face flashed as he smiled at the woman next to him. She was tall and toned with eyes that shone turquoise against her coffee skin. Maya Martin, hydromancist. Sean had heard she could split the sea with a flick of her fingers. Her red silk dress pulled up her well-defined calf to her thigh as she sat down and gingerly balanced a black stiletto on the low table in front of her.

The man on her left pulled the fabric down over her knee and cupped it possessively. Timothy Fardel's blond curls fell over his dark eyes. The Australian ambassador to New York and Maya's husband didn't possess one of the seven arts, but he harbored his own secret; he was a dhampir.

On the other side of Cain sat Josselin de Arradon, the team leader and one of the most dangerous men that walked the face of the earth. Joss was a direct descendant of ancient French royalty. He owned a castle in Brittany they had converted into the team's base in France. He was the last bloodsucker on earth. He could discern just about anything about anyone by tasting a drop of their blood. His long hair fell in tresses around his rugged face. His ankle-length leather jacket and pants stretched over powerful thighs and an impressive set of abs as he twisted his tall frame on the too-small chair.

The delicate Japanese woman he pulled into his lap was their pyromancist—Clelia d'Ambois. She was the most powerful firestarter who ever existed. It was said she could turn stone to ash in a second. Her skin was ghostly white against the black ass-hugging velvet shorts and long patent leather boots. Joss' thumb brushed over her pale shoulder as she leaned back against him, and when she unexpectedly turned her coal-black eyes on Sean, he glanced away instinctively. They had a spark to them, and even if he knew she was a diligent animal activist and known to be soft natured, he had no desire to experience first-hand the trouble she could detonate with those eyes. Joss and Clelia had recently had a baby, a little boy who had inherited his father's title. Laudren should be about nine months old.

Next to Clelia sat Katherine White, the other mother in the team. She was married to the Russian aeromancist, Lann Dréan, and ran the library of hand-

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written books in his privately owned monastery turned team base in Santiago, Chile. Kat and Lann's son, Thomas, was almost two.

Sitting on her left, Lann pulled the mass of hair into a ponytail at the base of her neck and kissed her throat. The Russian was slender, but of muscular build, with the freakiest damn yellow eyes Sean had ever seen. His long blond hair was braided down his back, exposing his slightly elongated ears, pierced with a ring at the top. Those slender fingers could not only crush a neck with a mere squeeze, but could also pull a flash of lightning from the sky that could toast their whole bar, not to mention stir the weather patterns into any mix he craved. Of course, being a part of Cain's team, he would have sworn to use his art only for the good of mankind. Tinkering with the weather could have a detrimental effect on the planet. It could wipe out mankind, or give a man the power to control crops and therefore nations. Until Kat had given him a son, Lann had been the last of his kind. Thomas had inherited his father's art. It was still too early to say if Laudren, Joss and Clelia's boy, was going to be a bloodsucker like his father, or a pyromancist like his mother.

Finally, Sean's attention focused on the single man who stood behind Joss. Bono Black. The Senegalese pilot worked for Joss. He could fly just about anything with a throttle and a pair of wings. His onyx skin shimmered under the light. His expression was difficult to read, maybe because of the eye patch. When he turned his head toward Sean, the diamond stud in his ear caught the light. He crossed his arms over his chest, his muscles bulging.

This was bad. Why was Cain's whole team gathered in Jerry's bar? Sean had been careful about hiding his true nature. If what he was came to light, he'd be more hunted than ever before and possibly eliminated by the government. Anyone with a forbidden art could steal someone else's by turning their soul dark and then killing them. God knew, his soul didn't need more turning. It was black enough as it was.

He jumped when Jerry spoke next to him.

"What's with the dreaming, Sean? Let's get the show on the road."

Cain Jones had finally caught up with him. There was no choice but to face the music. He didn't know what they wanted, but he had a bad feeling. He should have known the day wouldn't turn out good when he woke up without his pendant. First the feisty wee Asia and now this. With a last glance at the threat in the corner, Sean started his show.

The lights flicked on and danced on him as the music started pumping. He flexed his arms and shook his fingers. He shot a practiced smile at the girls in the front row, who started screaming. He flipped a bottle of Vodka up in the air. It summersaulted twice before he caught it on the back of his forearm and rolled it across his shoulders to his left hand. As he gripped it, he threw two

lemons in the air with his right and juggled the fruit while he filled a silver mixer with a shot of the alcohol. When the lemons came down, he was ready with the knife, slicing them in the air. He squeezed, did a twirl, caught the juice in the container, and picked up the Baileys, which he balanced on his bicep. He bounced the Nachtmusik off his forearm, propelled both bottles and caught the stream of white and brown liquid with the shaker in the air.

A redhead in the front pulled her bra from under her shirt and threw it on the bar. He knew what that meant. She was volunteering for the fun part, but unruly dark blonde curls invaded his mind. In no way was he allowing a pussycat named Asia to turn his Starlight cocktail bar into a massage parlor. Pushing the thought away with a scowl, he threw up the mixer. The liquid dropped slower than the metal, giving the illusion of it being suspended in the air. Before it hit the counter, the mixer was back in his grip, the alcohol hitting the silver holder.

The crowd cheered. He had another few moves planned, but he wanted to end the show sooner than later. He needed to know why Cain was here. He flicked a shot glass into the air and walked a bottle of brandy on his arm. When it reached his shoulder, he tipped it, catching a shot in the glass. He took the glass in his mouth while juggling three bottles and laced his throat and tongue with the brandy. When he exhaled, he struck a match, and a blue flame ran into the air. With the crowd clapping and cheering, he held his hand to the bra-less girl and guided her with a swift movement onto the counter. She knew what to do. She lay down and moved her shirt up, exposing her belly. He hopped on the counter and took a wide-legged stance over her, shaking the mixer between his thumb and little finger. He dipped the container. A shiver ran over her skin as he poured a line of liquid from just under her breasts to her navel. The alcohol he had kept in the back of his mouth caught the spark when he flicked a lighter. He blew it over her skin. The blue flame caught the new energy to feed on and ran with a soft whoosh over the liquid trail. His volunteer shrieked with a mixture of excitement and fright, but he was quick to lick the blue heat away.

As he offered the girl a hand to sit up, his eyes lifted and locked onto mint ones with chocolate specs. Energetic curls fell all around the delicate heart-shaped face. Asia rolled her eyes and turned away from the counter. By the time Sean put the sticky girl back on her feet and handed her a hand towel from behind the bar, Asia had disappeared in the crowd.

Jerry put a hand on his arm. "Fucking brilliant, bro. Well done, man. Why did you cut it short?"

Before he could answer, Suzie came up to the bar. She leaned on the counter and glanced at the paranormal crime taskforce team. "Mood drinks for the lot of them." She looked back at Sean. "Who the hell *are* they?"

Geomancist

“Holiday makers,” he said.

“Panty wetting, orgasmic looking holiday makers.” She motioned at the bar. “Shall I wait?”

“I’ve got it.” He wanted to deliver the drinks himself.

Part of his appeal was his ability to guess his clients’ preferences and mix a drink to match their mood. He kept his attention on the group at the back as he started preparing their order.

Ten minutes later, he made his way across the floor with a tray.

Cain looked up when he approached. “Sean Rivers. Impressive show.”

Any doubt that they didn’t know of his art was gone. He could see it in Cain’s eyes. It wouldn’t help to beat around the bush.

He put a martini glass in front of Clelia and lit the liquid. A Flaming Lamborghini for the firestarter. Calvados, neat, for Joss. Coffee liqueur with a dash of Amarula for Kat. For Lann he had prepared vodka with a layer of Absinth, a Fishbowl for Maya, and scotch for Tim. Bono would have a beer. For Cain, he had mixed a Death Row, his own creation.

Cain applauded slowly. “Well done.” His gaze moved over the drinks. “I presume this means we don’t need to introduce ourselves.”

Sean handed the tray to a passing waitress. “What do you want?”

Cain motioned to a chair. “Pull up a seat.”

“No thanks. I’m not planning on spending that much time with you.”

A grin plucked at the corner of Cain’s mouth. “Like to jump straight into business?”

“Not usually.” Sean took a wide stance and crossed his arms. “You’re the exception. Tell me what you want and then get the hell out of Jerry’s bar.”

“Tsk tsk.” Cain traced the shape of his mouth with a forefinger. “Didn’t Alan teach you manners?”

“Leave my father out of this,” he hissed.

All eyes were trained on him with curious interest. None seemed threatening. At least, not life threatening.

“We’re not here to steal your art,” Joss said, “so don’t piss in your pants.”

Sean ignored the insult. He probably earned it. “I know. It’s not in your code of conduct.”

“You’ve done your homework, Brave Heart,” Maya said with a smirk, “but your father shouldn’t share information he’s not supposed to have.”

“I’ll ask one more time, and then I walk away. What do you want?”

“We need you to do a job for us,” Cain said.

Sean gave a soft laugh. “Forget it.”

“I know you’ve taken a vow not to use your gift since your sister died,” Cain continued, “so I’m not asking for your geomancist ability.”

Charmaine Pauls

Sean went cold, as he did every time he thought about how he'd fucked up with his gift. His voice was barely audible. "You don't want to bring that up."

"We need information on Juan Hernandez," Cain said. "I believe you have the perfect cover."

Sean suddenly understood. "I'm not spying for you."

"All we ask is a week," Cain said. "The week on Isla del Pirata where he'll celebrate his birthday."

"I already said no to him. What makes you think I'll change my mind?"

Cain leaned back in his seat and pressed his fingertips together. "The fact that you need money to take over this bar."

"I'm not doing it with drug money."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm offering to pay you for the job. It'll be with our money."

"Thanks for the kindhearted offer, but I don't think so."

"You don't have other means of getting the cash together before the end of the month, and I believe you have a new competitor."

Sean's blood started simmering. "What the hell do you know about the deal or Asia?" Slowly, realization set in. "Son of a bitch. You're the new landlord, aren't you?"

Cain smiled in answer.

Disbelief vibrated in Sean's voice, even though he knew the truth. "You bought the property."

"It was a good investment."

His blood went from simmering to boiling. "That's fucking blackmail."

"Call it what you want," Joss said. "It's a means to your end."

Cain regarded him with cold calculation. "Don't you want to make your dream come true?"

"You set me up against the lass."

"I simply mentioned that the location would be great for what she has in mind," Cain said.

"You're using her, you son of a bitch, to get me to take your offer."

"In a couple of months' time, you won't even remember the young lady in question. You'd have moved on, and so would she."

"You promised her the premises."

"No, I said whoever comes up with the money first can have the lease."

"When I take over the lease, what are you going to tell her? That you fucked her over?"

"There's more at stake than a pretty young lady's aspirations, Sean. She'll get over it."

Geomancist

Sean pulled his hands through his hair. "I can't believe you're making me do this."

"I'm not making you do anything. You have a choice."

"Like hell." He turned away from the faces watching him as if he was an interesting show. He propped his hands on his hips and lifted his face to the ceiling.

He couldn't fail Maddy. Cain was wrong. There was no choice, and he fucking hated it.

He turned slowly back to Cain. "You're a piece of shit."

Bono cleared his throat. "Watch your language in front of the ladies, Sean."

"I knew you'd come around," Cain said.

"You have enough power to squash Juan. You don't need my help."

"We are going to *squash* him," Lann said with an indifferent smile, his Russian accent strong, "but we need information first."

"How did you find me?" Sean said.

All heads turned to the ambassador.

Tim shrugged. "Government connections," he said with an Australian drawl. "A friend of a friend of your father." He glanced at Kat. "I had help with research, also."

Kat gave Sean a friendly smile. "It wasn't too hard. Natural disasters don't occur every day."

Sean held up his hands. "Stop." The disaster that claimed his sister's life was the one subject that was off-limits.

"Think of it as saving mankind," Clelia said, her voice soft and clear, her French accent less prominent than her husband's.

"What do you need me to do?" Sean said through tight lips, looking from one member to the next. They had him by the balls. He hated admitting his defeat.

"He has a connection to a man called Godfrey," Cain said. "Surname unknown, but he's previously gone by a false name of Reid. Juan is investing money from his drug operation in Godfrey's business." Cain paused for his words to sink in. "Do you understand the implications of what I'm telling you?"

"Yes," Sean bit out. "Godfrey's the bad guy, and Juan's drug money is helping to build his business, which must be either illegal, or dangerous, or both."

"Get me info on Godfrey's whereabouts. I'll pay you double what Juan offered you."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"You're a clever fellow," Cain said. "You'll figure it out, once you're on the island."

Sean wiped a hand over his face and pressed his thumbs on his eyes. "What if I don't succeed?"

"Our deal's off, and you're looking at Cartagena's new spa," Cain said, motioning around the room. "Failure is not an option."

Cain lifted his hand. Joss took an iPad from his pocket and placed it on the leader's palm.

"This will be your communication link to us," Cain said. "Maya will show you how it works." He stood and offered Sean his hand. "I'm looking forward to working with you, Mr. Rivers."

Sean accepted the hand and shook on the deal. What else was there to do?

Maya got to her feet. "Is there a quiet place where we can work?"

"Jerry's office." Sean couldn't look at the team members a minute longer. He hated being played, and Cain had manipulated him like a damn puppet, using his guilt over Maddy's death and the only reason he had left for living in the dirtiest way possible.

As he turned to cross the floor, a small hand gripped his upper arm. Sean looked down into Asia's flashing eyes.

"You could have told me this morning," she said.

His atmosphere immediately turned several degrees happier. Despite her anger, or maybe because of it, she was a sight for sore eyes with her flushed cheeks and heated eyes, not to mention the tight, white mini-dress that stretched over her curves.

"Tell you what, pussycat?"

"Don't play dumb with me," she said in a spanking way. "That we'll be competing for the premises." She nodded in the direction of the office. "I just spoke to Jerry. You thought withholding the information from me was going to somehow give you the upper hand? Or did you just enjoy making me look stupid?"

"We won't be competing for anything. The lease is mine. I'm sorry, kitten. If it were anything else, I would have given it to you gladly, wrapped in fancy paper and tied with a bonny bow, but not the bar." He softened his voice. "Let me get you that complimentary drink I promised you."

Her fingers tightened over the tattoo on his skin, sending sparking bolts to his bones.

"You take your victory prematurely. Jerry told me you refused a job offer from Juan Hernandez." She lifted her chin. "Well, I've accepted."

"You've what?" he exploded.

Geomancist

“Your skills are not the only ones that are sought after. He needed a masseuse for a week’s treatments. He’s just found her.” She gave him a sweet smile. “The bet’s on.”

She tried to walk away, but he caught her wrist. “Don’t do this.”

She looked at where his fingers were curled around her arm. “I didn’t give you permission to touch me.”

“No? Did I give you permission to touch me? If I’m not mistaken, your warm wee hand rested invitingly on my arm not a minute ago. An eye for an eye?” He held fast for another second, but dropped his hand when her expression became alarmed. “You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“We’ll see about that, Mr. Rivers. I never back out of a challenge. You just threw one at my feet.”

He reached for her again. “Asia, listen to me—”

She jerked her arm from his hand and stomped away, her curls shining blonde and pure in the dirty lights of the bar.

Sean became aware of the amused stares of his supernatural audience.

“To hell with all of you,” he mumbled before he turned for the office, Maya in tow.