

CHAPTER 1



Sean Rivers jerked awake from his dream. In his room above Jerry's Pub, the thin yellow curtains glowed with the first light of the sun. The rest of Cartagena would still be asleep.

Lucky them.

He shifted on the lumpy mattress, trying to get comfortable in the hope of catching another hour of shuteye, but the humidity was already thick in the air, making his T-shirt stick to his skin. It was useless. He might as well get up.

Wiping a hand over his face, he blew out a sigh. As always, the guilt weighed heaviest on his chest after waking, when the past was still so fresh in his mind it blurred the lines between then and the present. In the dream, Maddy had died again. He'd watched helplessly, just like he did every other night, as the earth had cracked open and swallowed her whole. Her dark blue eyes, a mirror image of his own, had pleaded with him even as her fingers had slipped from his slick grip. He hadn't broken eye contact. He'd seen the terror in her gaze as she'd fallen down and down with flailing arms and a billowing skirt. And then the terrible thump.

A shudder slithered down his spine. The nausea in the pit of his stomach had become as familiar as eating and pissing. He'd learned to

live with the symptom as one would tolerate a persistent allergy. Swallowing back the acid in his throat, he inhaled the stale air and focused on his breathing until the urge to throw up passed.

The smoke from the bar clung to the sheets, the mattress, and his hair and damp skin. He needed a shower. He massaged his jaw in an effort to ease some of the tension in the joints. The sharp pricks of his stubble told him he needed a shave, too. Yet, he lingered another moment, putting off getting up, because once he did, the real nightmare, the one of facing another day, would begin.

When he couldn't lie on the sweat-drenched sheet any longer, he sat up and pressed his thumbs against his eyes until sparks popped behind his eyelids. It exorcized the lingering mental image of the dream, but wiping away the guilt wasn't as easy. The only purpose that motivated him 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'd always been a better performer than him.

Another month or so, and he'd have enough money to finally make it happen. Jerry had 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 slave away in Jerry's bar, even if the long hours and manual labor left every bone in his body battered.

The pub had closed at two in the morning when the die-hard customers 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 nightmares for another couple of hours. Physical exhaustion never delivered the redemption he was after, but he still tried. The mind with its built-in survival instinct was a fucked-up thing. The heart might give up, yet, the mind carried on, poking sticks into the wheels by trying to find coping mechanisms and defenses. In his case, physical labor had become his outlet.

He swung his legs from the bed and habitually reached for the crystal pendant on the necklace Maddy had given him for their twenty-

seventh birthday, the last one she'd celebrated, but the weight of the stone was absent. He felt around his collarbone, touching nothing but skin. Despite the heat, his skin turned cold.

It couldn't be gone.

Impossible.

Already knowing what he'd see, he jumped up and stalked to the mirror on the wall.

Fuck.

It *was* gone.

The only adornment—if that was the right word—reflecting back at him was the tattoo of the formula on his left pec. Newton's law of gravity.

Dread filled his veins. He hadn't taken the necklace off since the day Maddy had put it around his neck, not because as a geomancist he knew the significance of the stone but because it was the last thing she'd given him.

"Crystal," she'd said, "to always protect you."

He'd long since given up on the hope that the stone could salvage his soul. To him, it served as a reminder of the promise he'd made himself not to let her dream die, too. The dream was the only part of her he could keep alive.

Rushing back to the bed, he ripped down the sheets and turned the pillow over. Maybe the necklace had come off in the night. But no. There was no sign of it.

Fuck. Fuck.

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 where he'd bought dinner?

He grabbed the T-shirt he'd worn the night before from the chair, marched to the open window, and yanked the curtains aside. Not a breeze blew in from the sea. Pushing his palms on the windowsill, he peered at the cobblestone street. 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. Even so, if he'd dropped the

necklace outside, the chances of finding it were slim. Someone could've picked it up by now. He had to go down to look for it. He had to find it.

Hurriedly, he pulled the T-shirt over his head. He was just about to turn when a young woman rounded the corner and strutted down the street. Holding her head high and her back straight, she beat the pavement with glittery flip-flops. The purposefulness of those steps made him pause. Her gait was different to that of the holidaymakers who strolled through the streets. This woman walked with single-minded focus and something else, something he noticed because he'd long since lost it—a youthful optimism about life.

Unable to look away, he studied her more closely. Curvy and on the short side, she looked voluptuous and young. Her attire consisted of thin transparent linen pants that she wore over a bright blue bikini. A white silk scarf was draped around her neck. No blouse or T-shirt, just the bikini top stretching over her generous breasts. To round off the look, she sported over-sized sunglasses with pink lenses. Dark blonde curls that reached her jawline bobbed energetically to the rhythm of her feet.

She was a looker, all right, but it wasn't her prettiness that held his attention. It was that hopeful determination that emanated from her stride. Pity needled his gut. That sparkly luster for life wouldn't last. Sooner than later, reality and its cruelties would find her.

Expecting her to head for the stairs that gave access to the beach, he gave a start when she stopped right in front of Jerry's Pub and banged on the door. Baffled, he stared at the golden crown of her head.

It wasn't until she knocked a second time that he leaned from the window and called, "Can I help you?"

The woman tilted a heart-shaped face toward the sound of his voice and pushed her sunglasses over her hair. She assessed him with spearmint green eyes. Freckles dusted her nose and cheeks. On closer inspection, she wasn't as young as he'd thought. Late twenties maybe. The creases around the corners of her eyes suggested someone who smiled a lot.

Her gaze travelled over his chest before coming to a stop on his face. "Is this the premises that's for rent?"

Rent?

Turning in a semi-circle with outstretched arms, she said in a bright voice, "This is perfect. Sea view, busy street, prime spot. Say, how many customers do you have on a weekend night?"

"You've got the wrong address, lass."

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

"Hold on just a sec. I don't—"

"Can I see the inside?"

He lifted a finger. "Wait right there."

It seemed he'd have to go down and sort out this misunderstanding. A very untimely misunderstanding, might he add. He didn't have time for this now. He needed to go hunting for his necklace.

After pulling a clean pair of 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. Before he could tell her she was lost, she flittered around him, as light as a pussycat on her feet, and swirled through the room toward the bar. A whiff of green apples and something fresh and pretty 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." She turned to the bar counter. "And the refreshments will be over there."

The blue varnish and miniscule white flowers that decorated her nails drew his attention as she tapped her bow-shaped lips with an index finger.

"The massage room will have to be upstairs to profit from the view," she continued with a thoughtful air.

There was only one room upstairs, and that was his bedroom.

"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 loosened the silk scarf around her neck. A crystal pendant on a leather string rested snugly in her cleavage.

What in the gods name?

Was this a joke?

That was his necklace.

It had to be an illusion, his mind playing tricks on him. Yet, there it was, as real as it gets.

“Is something the matter?” she asked, her eyebrows snapping together.

Unable to stop himself, he reached for the necklace, but she took a step back and covered her throat with a hand.

“Where did you get that?” he asked with a tight jaw.

She closed her fingers around the crystal. “I found it. It’s mine.”

“It’s not.” He advanced on her. “It’s mine. I’ve been looking for that.”

She took another step back. “Finders keepers.”

“You don’t want to push me, not on this.”

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

That was easy enough. He threw a thumb over his shoulder toward the framed photo on the wall.

She followed the path of his finger with her gaze, took three steps around him, and stopped in front of the frame. It was the picture Maddy had taken of him and Jerry on the night of their birthday party just after she’d given him the pendant. They’d celebrated here in the bar. The crystal had caught the flash of the camera, making a white halo on the photograph. When they’d developed the print, Maddy had said the white circle of light was a bad omen.

Pushing his sister’s memory from his mind, he trained his attention on the woman studying the picture with a tilted head.

When she turned back to face him, Sean held out his palm in silent instruction. Obediently, she lifted the leather string over her head and placed the precious crystal in his hand. Relief flooded through him when he closed his fingers around the pendant. The sharp edges pressed with welcoming familiarity into his fist. He took a moment to let the shape and weight reassure him before he relaxed his tight hold and pulled the leather string over his head.

“I found it in front of the kebab shop,” she said with a smile that creased the corners of her eyes.

“I’m glad you did.”

She searched his eyes. “It means a lot to you, doesn’t it?”

Crossing his arms, he cut off her probing by getting straight to the point. “You mentioned something about rent?”

She continued to examine him openly, scrutinizing him from top to bottom before fixing her gaze on the formula of the first law of thermodynamics tattooed on his upper right-arm, or at least on the part that was visible from under his sleeve. Energy couldn’t be created or destroyed. He was especially fond of that law.

“You’re Sean, aren’t you?” Without waiting for 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. The weather here must be a big improvement over the Highlands. That’s where you’re from, right? I hear you have this knack for intuitively mixing a drink to suit a customer’s mood. Apparently, you never get it wrong.”

He took a deep, long breath on her behalf. She was a nosy little kitten with long, blond lashes and pretty green cat eyes. Would she be playful if a man made a move or would she sweep her tail and show her claws?

Her hips rocked gently as she shifted her weight. “Say, what would you mix for me?”

He dragged his gaze over her small body and perfect curves. She’d be a spicy Thai iced latte spiked with vodka. Poison in a small bottle. She piqued his curiosity, and it wasn’t about the reason why she’d 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 was?”

“Sorry.” She brushed her palms over her thighs and held out a dainty hand. “Asia Sommer.”

Folding his fingers around hers, he held back a frown. “Asia, like the continent?” Her skin was pleasantly warm.

She shrugged. “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 around the room. “I’m here to see Jerry.”

Sean was territorial about the bar, and Jerry damn well knew it. Jerry wouldn’t go behind his back. Suspicion tightened Sean’s gut. What if her excuse for barging in here was just a front? For a stranger, Asia 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.

“As you can see, he’s not in,” he said. “However, I’m curious. How do you know so much about me, pussycat?” He gave her a humorless smile. “Are you a stalker?”

The warmth in her eyes evaporated. “I read the article about your Liquid Oscar in the Wine magazine.” She wrinkled her nose. “Sorry to crush your big ego.”

She definitely had claws. At least that explained how she knew his name and what he did for a living. The publicity was unfortunate. 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.

“Well?” she said, arching a brow. “When will Jerry be in?”

He watched her carefully, still not trusting her motives. “Not until tonight.”

“I’ll come back then.”

“You’ll be wasting your time,” he said in a chilly tone. “The premises are not for rent.”

Her icy smile matched his tone. “Maybe you’re uninformed.”

Like hell. “I don’t think so.”

Propping her hands on her hips, she asked, “At what time will he be here?”

“Nine should do it. Shall I give him a message?” he asked pointedly, making it clear she was imposing on his turf and his time.

“Please,” she said sweetly. “Tell him Asia was here and that I’ll come back tonight. And tell him not to offer the contract to anyone else until he’s spoken to me.”

Clenching his jaw, he took a step toward her. “What exactly did Jerry promise you, pussycat? Because I’d hate to see you disappointed.”

Ire sparked in her eyes. “Don’t call me that. It’s objectifying.”

“Is that so?” For some reason, he suddenly felt like playing cat and mouse. “What pet name do you prefer?”

“None.” She pulled herself to her full height. “I’ll be back tonight.”

As she took a step toward the door, he grabbed the ends of her scarf and held her back. “You haven’t told me what Jerry promised you.”

She gripped the fabric, trying to pull it from his grasp. “Let go.”

“Not until you tell me what this is all about.”

Uttering a sigh, she said, “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 hearing got stuck on *lose your job* and then it fast-forwarded to *spa*. “A fucking what?”

If at all possible, her back turned even more rigid. “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 or your business.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, pussycat,” he said, twisting the scarf ends around his hands and reeling her in. “It’s every bit my business.”

“I refuse to argue with you.” She gave him a haughty look. “I’m leaving, but I *will* be back tonight. Now, let go of me.”

He did no such thing. “By all means, come back tonight. I’ll even encourage it, but it won’t be for sealing a deal with Jerry. It won’t be for more than a complimentary drink.” He trailed his gaze over her. “Unless you *want* it to be more.”

With eyes spitting fire, she jerked on her scarf, almost tearing the fabric from his hands. He let the material unwind slowly, taking his time to release her.

Stumbling a step back, she regarded him with disdain. “Are you always such a jerk?”

“And here I thought I was flattering you.” His semi 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 the pockets of his leather jacket for his phone. Once he’d located it, he dialed Jerry’s number, but all he got was voice mail. Forfeiting the much-needed shower, he pulled on his jacket and grabbed 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 handlebar of his bike. He didn’t know what the deal was with Asia, but giving up the bar was not in the cards, not in his lifetime.



THE PREPARATIONS for the evening kept Sean busy until late afternoon. The stock had to be counted, new orders placed, the cash register balanced, and the expenses and sales captured in Jerry’s dinosaur software accounting 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 needed the strenuous exercise as a vent for his frustration. He was still pissed off about that morning’s surprise visit. No doubt it was a misunderstanding, yet, he couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling in his gut.

The bar was his.

It was so close. One more month was all he needed.

Back at the pub, he took ten minutes to shower and change into his black jeans and favorite 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 a studded leather vest and a red headband. “Hey, bro.” He gave Sean a high five. “What’s up?”

Sean dropped the stock list on the bar counter. "I was hoping you'd tell me."

"Hell." Jerry regarded Sean from under bushy eyebrows. "What's eating you?"

"A lass called Asia."

"Shit." Jerry scratched his jaw, suddenly looking everywhere but at Sean. "I wanted to talk to you about that."

Sean narrowed his eyes, his uneasiness morphing into cold dread and hot anger. His tone was deceptively calm as he said, "It looks like she beat you to it."

Jerry hung his head and met Sean's eyes tentatively. "Times are tough, man."

Tightening his fingers on the edge of the counter, Sean asked, "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 rounded the bar and stopped in front of his boss. "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 by putting tables outside facing the beach. They needed 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.

"We're losing drinking customers because you're a hard-headed mule," Sean said.

"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."

Over?

Just like that?

He refused to accept it.

Slamming a palm on the counter, Sean said, "Just one more month, Jerry. I've almost got it together."

Jerry looked away again. "I tried."

Desperate, Sean continued, "I thought your landlord was okay with cutting you slack."

"I have a new landlord," Jerry mumbled.

None of this made fucking sense. "What are you talking about?"

"The old one sold out. The new one wants to get rid of the bad debt and start with a clean slate." Reluctantly, Jerry met his gaze. "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. He called yesterday to tell me he's got someone else interested."

"The Asia doll?"

Jerry rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah."

"We could've made a plan," Sean gritted out as anger, disappointed, and desperation braided together in his gut.

"What plan?" Jerry raised his hands, palms up. "You need five grand just for a deposit."

"So you decided to turn it into a fucking beauty salon?" Sean exclaimed.

"Not me," Jerry replied in a reasonable tone. "The landlord said whoever comes up with the money first gets the deal."

Wait. Whoever comes up with the money first?

A flicker of hope rose from the despair that had taken root in Sean's soul. "Does that mean she hasn't signed a contract, yet?"

"As far as I know, no. She's also short of cash."

Suppressing the urge to pump a fist in the air, Sean let the information settle. Slowly, his lips curved into a smile. "Then it seems we're in for a money race."

"Sean," Jerry said with caution.

He shrugged. "What?"

Jerry knew how much the pub meant to him. He'd employed Maddy, for Christ's sake. He knew the cocktail bar had been her dream.

A slither of reason returned. If things 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," Jerry said quickly. "I told you. I'm too old for this. I want out."

I *need* out.” He sighed. “Look, if you just take Juan’s offer to mix at his party, you’ll have enough money.”

At the mention of Juan’s name, Sean clenched his jaw. “I’m not taking his money.”

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

“It’s drug money,” Sean said, all but spitting the words.

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

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

Jerry 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 right on the spot where you’re standing, you better reconsider.”

Blowing out a long, laborious sigh, Sean asked, “Why didn’t you fucking say something?”

“I only got the call yesterday.” Jerry scratched his head. “I was going to talk to you after tonight’s gig. I didn’t expect the woman to march in here before I had time to warn you.”

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

Jerry gripped 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. He wouldn’t fail her, but doing a gig for Juan Hernandez, hell no.

Jerry squeezed his shoulder before letting go. “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 his kneecaps 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'd invented for the occasion Fire Dance. It also meant they 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 drinks.

After a quick practice run with Rod who was in charge of the 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 Jerry hardly enough dough to cover his 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." Maybe he could sway the kitten and get her mind off this crazy spa idea of hers. It was a feeble hope, but it couldn't hurt to try.

"Sure." Calling back from over her shoulder, she asked, "What kind of a name is that, anyway?"

Freddy, the bouncer, checked his wristwatch and looked at Sean for his cue. It should've 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. When Sean nodded,

Freddy opened the door, letting in a throng of women in short evening dresses and high heels followed by men dressed in white linen shirts and fancy slacks.

A particularly glamorous group filtered through the door. Sean froze. As if sensing the dangerous power emanating from the women and men who'd just entered, the crowd cleared a path, letting them through to the only group table in the lounge area at the back. Everyone was staring. Their physical perfection made it hard not to notice them. Even the atmosphere had changed. They demanded attention, if not respect.

Well, well. Fuck him and all the laws of nature he'd tattooed on his body. 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.

Lowering his head, he studied the group as they arrived at the table. He'd made it his job to know all there was to know about his kind. It was essential for survival. Knowledge was power. Back in Scotland, his old man had a friend in government who was a sponsor of the paranormal crime task force who took their seats with cool indifference, acting as if their only goal was a night out on the town and a good time.

Sean knew better.

Cain Jones, the commander of the team, was discernable because of the birthmark on his cheek. The red mark stretched as he smiled at the woman on his left. Tall and toned with eyes that shone a bright turquoise against her smooth, coffee-colored skin, she could only be Maya Martin, the hydromancist. It was said she could split the sea like Moses with a flick of her fingers. A red silk dress pulled up at her well-defined calf to her thigh as she gingerly balanced a black stiletto on the low table in front of her.

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

Josselin de Arradon flanked Cain on the right. The team leader was one of the most dangerous men that walked the face of the earth. A direct descendant of ancient French royalty, he owned a castle in Brittany that served as the team's base in France. Joss was the last surviving bloodsucker in the world. He could discern just about anything about anyone by tasting a drop of their blood. Shoulder-length hair fell in tresses around his rugged face. A black shirt and dark pants stretched over an impressively broad chest and powerful thighs as he twisted his tall frame onto the too-small chair.

The delicate Japanese woman he pulled onto his lap was the team's pyromancist. Clelia d'Ambois was the most powerful firestarter who ever existed. The rumors that had reached his ears reported that she could turn stone to ash. Set off against black velvet shorts and patent leather boots, her skin appeared ghostly white. Joss brushed a thumb over her pale shoulder as she leaned her back against his chest. When she turned her coal-black eyes on Sean, he glanced away instinctively. Those black pools had a spark to them, and even if he knew she was an animal activist and known to be soft natured, he had no desire to invite either her irk or her husband's jealousy. Joss and Clelia had recently birthed a baby, which was nothing short of a miracle for their kind, seeing that mothers of gifted babies usually died at birth. The boy, Laudren, should be nine months old.

The only other mother in the team, Katherine White, was seated next to Clelia. Married to the Russian aeromancist, Lann Dréan, she ran the library of antique 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 her mass of burgundy hair into a ponytail at the base of her neck and kissed her throat. The Russian was slender but of muscular build and sported the freakiest damn yellow eyes Sean had seen. His long blond hair was braided down his back, exposing his slightly elongated ears. 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 would toast their whole bar. His unique power allowed him to stir the weather patterns into any mix he craved. Of course, being a part of Cain's team, he would've sworn to use his art

only for the good of mankind. Tinkering with the weather could have detrimental effects on the planet. It could give a man the power to control crops and therefore nations, or it could wipe out mankind entirely. Until Kat had given him a son, Lann had been the last of his kind. Thomas had inherited his father's gift. Unlike Thomas, Laudren was too young to exhibit any powers, yet. It was impossible to say if he'd be a bloodsucker like his father or a pyromancist like his mother.

Finally, Sean focused his attention on the last member of the team. Bono Black had taken up a standing position behind Joss, his chest muscles bulging as he crossed his arms. His expression was difficult to read, maybe because of the eye patch that covered his left eye. His onyx skin seemed to glow under the overhead lights. The diamond stud in his ear caught a light shard from the disco ball, reflecting it back at Sean in a small zap of lightning, and then it was gone when Bono turned his head. Strictly speaking, the Senegalese pilot worked for Joss, but Joss deployed him for team missions. He could fly just about anything with a throttle and a pair of wings.

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 killing them.

He gave a start when Jerry spoke next to him.

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

This could only mean that 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 didn't have a good feeling about this. He should've known the day would turn out bad when he'd woken up without his pendant. First the feisty Asia and now this. With a last glance at the threat in the corner, Sean started his show.

As the lasers came on to dance over him, the music started pumping. He flexed his arms and shook his fingers. The girls in the front row screamed when he gave them his practiced smile. Grabbing the bottle of vodka on the counter, he flipped it in the air. The bottle summersaulted twice before he caught it on the back of his forearm and rolled it across his shoulders to his left hand. At the same time as

catching the neck of the bottle, he threw two lemons in the air and juggled them with his right hand while pouring a shot of vodka in a silver shaker. 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 shaker, and grabbed 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 counter. That meant she was volunteering for the fun part. From nowhere, unruly dark blond curls invaded his mind. In no way was he allowing a pussycat named Asia to turn his *Starlight* into a massage parlor. Pushing away the thought, he concentrated on tossing the shaker with exactly the right force. The liquid dropped slower than the metal, giving the illusion of being suspended in the air. Before the liquor could spill on the counter, the shaker was back in his hand, the alcohol neatly hitting the bottom.

The crowd cheered. He had a few other 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. The brandy would quickly heat in his mouth, making it more combustible. 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 braless 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 before tipping the container. A shiver ran over her skin as he poured a line of liquor from just under her breasts to her navel. The alcohol he'd kept in the back of his mouth caught the spark when he flicked the lighter one of the spectators handed him. Crouching down, he blew over her skin. The blue flame caught the new energy to feed on and ran with a

soft whoosh over the liquor 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 gaze landed on a pair of spearmint green eyes in the middle of the crowd. The owner of those eyes had a heart-shaped face framed by bouncy curls. It was none other than the unwanted visitor of that morning.

Meeting his gaze, Asia rolled her eyes and turned away. By the time Sean had put the sticky girl back on her feet and handed her a hand towel from behind the bar, Asia had disappeared.

Jerry sucker punched his arm. "Fucking brilliant, bro. Why did you cut it short?"

Before he could answer, Suzie leaned over the counter. "Hey, Sean?" Throwing a thumb in the direction of the table Cain Jones and his team occupied, she said, "Mood drinks for the lot of them." She made big eyes. "Who the hell *are* they?"

"Holidaymakers," he said in a flat tone.

"Panty wetting, orgasmic looking holidaymakers." She popped her chewing gum. "Shall I wait?"

"They look like those fancy, entitled rich folks who cruise around here on their private yachts," Jerry said with a frown.

Suzie gave him a sweet smile. "You mean the kind of folks your business needs."

Scoffing, Jerry waved at a group of regulars that entered and made his way over.

"You better not make them wait," Suzie said, glancing at the special task force team.

"Go serve the other customers," Sean said. "I'll handle their order."

He kept his attention on the group at the back as he prepared their order.

Ten minutes later, he made his way over with a tray.

Cain looked up when he stopped at their table. "Sean Rivers. Impressive show."

Any doubt that they didn't know about his art vanished. They knew who he was, and they didn't come here for his famous mood drinks. There was no point in beating 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, vodka with a layer of Absinth. A Fishbowl for Maya, and scotch for Tim. Bono would have a beer. He'd mixed his own creation for Cain, a drink he'd just baptized Death Row.

Cain applauded slowly. "Well done." Taking in the drinks, he said, "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 vacant chair. "Pull up a seat."

"No, thanks. I'm not planning on hanging around that long."

Cain's lips quirked. "Ah. You prefer to jump straight into business."

Taking a wide stance, Sean crossed his arms. "Tell me what you want and then get the hell out of Jerry's bar."

"Tsk, tsk." Cain rubbed a thumb over his lips. "Didn't Alan teach you manners?"

"Leave my father out of this," Sean said, balling his fists so hard his knuckles cracked.

"We're not here to steal your art," Joss said, "so don't piss in your pants."

"I know," Sean replied with a sneer. "It's not in your code of conduct."

"You've done your homework," Maya said, giving him a snide smile, "but your father shouldn't share information he's not supposed to have."

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

"I'll ask one more time, and then I walk away," Sean said. "What do you want?"

Cain steepled his fingers, studying Sean. "We need you to do a job for us."

Sean laughed. "Forget it."

"I know you've taken a vow not to use your gift since your sister's death," Cain said. "I'm not asking you to use your geomancist abilities."

Sean went cold like 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 continued. "I believe you have the perfect cover."

Suddenly, Sean 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. "The fact that you need money to take over this bar."

Sean gritted his teeth. "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."

Cain's smile said he knew more about Sean than what Sean cared for the commander to know. "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?" Then another realization hit him. "Son of a bitch. You're the new landlord, aren't you?"

Cain only grinned.

Disbelief sounded in Sean's voice. "You bought the property."

"It was a good investment," Cain said.

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

"You set me up against the lass," he said, still unable to believe his ears.

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

"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,” Cain said. “You would’ve moved on, and she would’ve, too.”

Sean dropped his arms at his sides. “You promised her the premises.”

“No,” Cain said evenly. “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.”

Stabbing his fingers into his hair, Sean said, “I can’t believe you’re making me do this.”

“I’m not making you do anything,” Cain raised a brow. “You have a choice.”

“Like hell.” He couldn’t fail Maddy. There was no choice, and he hated it. “You’re a piece of shit, Cain.”

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

“I knew you’d come around,” Cain said, looking too damn satisfied with himself.

Desperate, Sean grabbed at straws. “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.”

This was one big fucking mess. He’d been so careful about staying in hiding and keeping his gift a secret. “How did you find me?”

All heads turned to the ambassador.

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

Kat’s expression was friendly. “It wasn’t too hard. Natural disasters don’t occur every day.”

Sean held up a hand. “Do *not* mention that event.” The disaster that had 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 and her French accent less prominent than her husband’s.

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

“Juan is connected to a man called Godfrey,” Cain said. “His surname is unknown, but he’s previously gone by the 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, dangerous, or both.”

“Get me info on Godfrey’s whereabouts,” Cain said. “I’ll pay you double what Juan offered you.”

Sean laughed again. “How am I supposed to do that?”

“You’re a clever guy,” Cain said. “You’ll figure it out once you’re on the island.”

Sean wiped a hand over his jaw. “What if I don’t succeed?”

“If you fail to get the information, our deal is off, and you’re looking at Cartagena’s new spa,” Cain said, motioning around the room.

When Cain lifted his hand, Joss took a mini tablet 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 a hand. “I’m looking forward to working with you, Mr. Rivers.”

What choice did he have but to shake on the deal? There was nothing else he could do.

Maya got to her feet. “Is there a private 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’ve told me this morning,” she said.

The atmosphere immediately turned several degrees hotter.

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 dress that stretched over her curves.

“Tell you what, pussycat?”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” she said, narrowing her green gaze. “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,” he said. “The lease is mine. I’m sorry, pussycat. If it were anything else, I would’ve given it to you gladly. I would’ve even wrapped it in fancy paper and tied it with a pretty bow.” Regret for the way in which Cain had manipulated her to get to him made him say, “Let me get you that complimentary drink I promised you.”

She tightened her fingers where they rested on his tattoo, sending bolts of electricity to his bones.

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

He gaped at her. “You’ve what?”

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

When she turned, 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 hand was on my arm not a minute ago. An eye for an eye?” He held fast for another second, but dropped his hand when alarm set into her eyes. “Look, Asia. This is a dumb move. You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“We’ll see about that, Mr. Rivers. I never back out of a challenge.” Inching closer, she continued in a soft voice, “And you just threw one at me.”

He reached for her again. “Listen to me—”

Of course, the feisty little kitten did exactly the opposite, stomping away with her blond curls bouncing to the rhythm of her feet.

Becoming aware of the amused stares of his supernatural audience, Sean mumbled, “To hell with all of you,” before he turned for the office with Maya in tow.