

# Beyond Evil

By Donna Raider

## Chapter 1

The first kill had been the hardest. He had maintained control until he reached the safety of his car. Yanking off his hood, he threw up on himself. He was thankful for the long, black robe. It kept the vomit from soiling his slacks and shirt.

Killing living things had become easier over time. Now, giving up live offerings barely phased him. The offerings had grown in importance and size. The first had been a lamb, then a small calf. The pregnant cow had been difficult. Tonight, was the first night of the festival. He wondered what he would be required to sacrifice tonight.

##

Leah was standing in a group, talking. Mika entered the room, her eyes already searching for her wife. It took Mika less than thirty seconds to locate her.

Mika was golden, a breath of light in an otherwise boring and gray setting. Leah watched her from under hooded eyes. Mika was drawn to Leah much like the gravitational pull of the moon to earth. She was Mika's world. A light touch at Leah's lower back told her Mika was there.

"Gentleman I would like you to meet my wife, Priest Mika Cross."

Everyone smiled, playing nice. What they really wanted to do was challenge Mika for her. A quick glance at the way

Mika looked at Leah told them, it would be a battle to the death, and they would lose.

The band started playing and Leah excused herself. "I believe they are playing our song, darling." She had no idea what song the band was playing; she only knew she wanted to be in Mika's arms.

The dance ended and they walked toward an empty table. There was no doubt Mika belonged to the woman. Leah's body language made that clear; the way she stood close to Mika; and the way Leah lightly touched her, reminding her she was hers. Leah smiled at her and spoke in soft low tones meant only for Mika. Occasionally she leaned into Mika with a familiarity borne from years of intimacy. It was clear she was the focal point of Mika's world. Mika adored her. Mika pulled out Leah's chair and sat down beside her at the table. Leah's hand rested intimately on the inside of her wife's thigh.

The Governor's Inauguration Ball was an elaborate affair. Mika and Leah had been surprised to receive the invitation. Leah's overwhelming win in the small-town mayor's race had put her on the radar of the political parties in her state. Although she and her family were fiscal conservatives, neither political party particularly appealed to her. Both parties seemed intent on pillaging America and mandating their own brand of morality.

A handsome man approached them and introduced himself. "I hope you won't think me forward," the man flashed a bright white grin. "I wanted to introduce myself, U.S. State Senator Cutter Brock at your service." He bent and pulled Leah's hand up to his lips and kissed it longer than necessary.

Leah raised a perfectly arched brow as she pulled her hand from the man's grasp. "My wife Mika Cross and I am Leah Cross."

“I am well aware of who you are, Madam Mayor,” Brock continued to ignore Mika and directed his comments only to Leah.

The band started to play again. Mika stood, “Darling, I believe they’re playing our song.”

A light smile played on Leah’s lips as she looked up at her wife. She slid gracefully into her arms as Mika led her away from Cutter Brock. “Thank you,” she whispered as she gazed into her smiling blue eyes.

“My pleasure, my queen,” Mika pulled her tighter against her.

##

The meeting was tonight. This was not his first meeting, but it was by far his most important. He had been selected to lead the elite group of guests gathering in the abandoned barn on the Montreat Ranch.

He picked up his attire for the meeting and pulled a black hanging bag over it. He zipped it closed and carried it to the trunk of his car. He didn’t want his meddling wife to see it.

He was scribbling her a note when she entered the room. He stuffed the note into his pocket.

“My little love bucket,” he grinned at her as he kissed her on the cheek, “I thought you had to work late tonight.”

“I do, dearest.” She walked to their bar and poured scotch for them. She handed him his glass, then clicked hers against his. “Here is to a successful meeting.

“I wanted to change into something more impressive,” she giggled. “One always feels more in charge when one knows they look their best.”

“This will be your first meeting with Mayor Cross,” he nodded his head in understanding. *No matter what you wear, you will still look like a sow in a tow sack next to her*, he thought.

He fought down the urge to regurgitate as his wife wiggled into a tight-fitting floral dress. She wobbled around their bedroom awkwardly in spike heels. He knew she expected him to comment on how sexy she looked. “Um, my love,” he overcame his revulsion and pulled her into his arms. “Why don’t you skip this meeting and stay home with me?” *Please, say no!*

“You know I would love to do that, dearest,” she said, “but Mayor Cross is counting on me to introduce her to the Chamber of Commerce members.”

He nodded and walked her to the car. He sighed loudly as she drove away. She was wealthy. She was a good cover, but God, he hated touching her.

He drove sixteen miles to a motel in Burleson. He parked in the back so no one would see his vehicle from the street. He hurriedly carried his clothes to the room he had rented earlier that day.

He showered, careful to wash away any smell of the heavy cologne he always wore. He didn’t want anyone to recognize him from his scent. Plain, clean soap was the fragrance of the hour. He changed into his black slacks and black shirt.

He closed the door of the rental car and checked to make certain no one had seen him. He drove to the meeting. He vaguely wondered what time his wife would return home tonight. He slipped the hood over his head and pulled on the black robe, after he got out of the car. While his wife was kissing up to the mayor, he would be accepting the reigns of the local chapter of the most powerful hate group in America. They had christened him Bacchus. Not a bad name, as names go.

He had no idea he was only a pawn in the ongoing battle between good and evil.

He had arrived early and was surprised to find several others were already there. As he approached the barn door,

he heard the bleating of a frightened goat. *I hope I don't have to sacrifice something tonight.* He cringed.

“Master Bacchus,” several cloaked men and women bowed as he approached. “You are early but come. Join us in a glass of wine before the ceremony.”

Bacchus nodded silently to those ministering to him and took his seat on the throne erected for him. He wondered who the men were. He tried to determine their identification from their voices but failed.

He watched lips smile through the hole cut into the hood worn by a woman—he thought. She poured him another glass of wine.

Soon the barn filled with black-robed creatures talking in low voices and bowing to him. Although it was cold outside, the wine coupled with the robe and the hood made sweat run down between his shoulder blades.

“Brothers and sisters,” a resonant voice rose above the crowd and silenced them. “We are here tonight to pay homage to the god that has been sent to lead us. I give you Master Bacchus.”

Applause and murmurs of approval ran through the crowd.

Bacchus stood and acknowledged the crowd. He wasn't certain what he was supposed to do. He merely nodded, then took his place on the throne. Again, applause and approval ran through the crowd.

“Tonight,” the resonant voice spoke, “we will make our sacrifice to our Master.”

Bacchus watched as they brought a small lamb before him. Quick hands tied the kid's feet and placed it on the altar constructed in the barn. He inhaled deeply as someone thrust a knife into his hands.

“Master, only you are worthy to make the sacrifice on our behalf. Please sacrifice this pure offering to your father for us.”

Bacchus slowly stepped toward the altar. He wondered who they thought his father was. He prayed the knife would be sharp, and then drew it forcefully across the throat of the lamb. The kid bleated once, and then lay lifeless.

He stared, stupefied at the amount of blood that had spurted onto his robe and hood. He dropped the knife on the altar and glared at his blood-covered hands.

Someone caught a large, golden chalice full of the kid's blood and held it up to him. *Surely, they don't expect me to drink this.* He swallowed the vomit that had risen into his mouth.

He held the chalice high above his head and blessed it. "Father bless this life force that I am about to share with my brethren." He pretended to drink from the cup, and then passed it to the person next to him.

He grimaced as the cup passed around the room. Everyone seemed eager to drink from it.

"We will meet here on the thirteenth of every month, the resonant voice instructed. "March 16 and 17 we will celebrate the Festival of Bacchus, in our new home. At that time, Master Bacchus will have much to share with us about our purpose. We will also have a more secure meeting place."

"There are refreshments and wine in the outer room. Please overindulge yourselves." The voice laughed loudly.

Everyone cheered and surged toward the outer room.

Bacchus found himself standing alone at the altar. He looked at the limp body of the lamb and the blood that covered the floor. *What have I gotten myself into?* He groaned inwardly.

##

Leah didn't bother putting her car into the garage. She drove it to the front door of the hacienda and quickly went inside to see her wife and children. She was shocked to find the usually festive house silent. She pulled off her heels and

walked into the great room. Mika was lying flat on her back on the floor. She was sound asleep. The babies were on their stomachs, sleeping on their mother's breasts. Mika had a protective arm over each of them. A broad smile graced Leah's lovely face as she savored the sight of her wife and babies.

As if sensing their mother's presence, the babies began to stir. Soft gurgles and cooing sounds woke Mika. They nuzzled Mika, making suckling sounds.

"Sorry, kiddos," she laughed, "you've got the wrong parent?" She sat up, still holding the twins to her chest. "I bet Queen Mommy is on her way home now to feed you." She spoke softly as Eden and Aaron mewled back at her.

In one easy motion, Mika stood. Leah always marveled at the strength of her wife. She was certain few women could rise so easily from a sitting position on the floor with two babies in their arms. A shiver ran through her as she thought of Mika's strong arms around her. It had been too long.

"Hey, there," Leah said softly.

Mika's blue eyes sparkled as they met hers. "I have missed you," she smiled. Mika walked to Leah and kissed her longingly. "I think these two are really ready for you to be home."

"Have they had their baths?" Leah asked as she transported all of them to her bedroom.

"Yes, my queen," Mika grinned. "We fell asleep waiting for you to come home."

"Where is everyone?" Leah changed into her pajamas, leaving the front open so the babies could nurse. Mika placed them on her lap.

"Our married children are in their homes. Since it's Friday night, Nana, Wanda and Vonda took the younger children to the movies." Mika settled on the love seat beside her and watched the babies nurse. "Jacob and Rachel went off together. I think they are commiserating about their love lives."

“Jacob!” Leah raised a questioning eyebrow. “Who?”

“No idea,” Mika kissed her behind the ear. “I hope it’s a woman. I did a lot of praying about Jennifer and Sara. I wasn’t certain God approved of a mortal marrying one of us until he let me save Jennifer. You know we’re supposed to reproduce.” I’m fairly certain Rachel and Lucas are in love.”

Leah nodded in agreement. “Apparently Jacob’s love isn’t reciprocated. He has been moping around here since before the babies were born. Have you spoken with him?”

“No. He will talk with me when he’s ready. He has his hands full trying to open his own law firm in Godly.” A frown wrinkled Mika’s forehead. “Is there any chance it is Lexi? She would make a nice addition to our family.”

“No,” Leah said. “I have asked him about her. He said she’s in love with someone else. He isn’t attracted to her anyway.”

“Looks like their tummies are full and they are asleep,” Mika stood and took the babies from her wife’s arms. She stole a glance at Leah’s gorgeous breasts, and then blushed as she realized Leah had caught her. “Oops, caught lusting,” Mika grinned.

She took the babies to the nursery and turned on the intercom so she could hear them if they cried.

Leah was in bed when she returned. Mika brushed her teeth and slipped into bed beside her wife. Leah’s pajamas were still unbuttoned. She snuggled against Mika and kissed between her breasts.

“I noticed mommy admiring my breasts.” Leah kissed her soundly. “I do need some help with this excess milk.”

A moan emanated from deep within Mika’s throat. “May I?”

Leah pulled Mika’s face between her breasts. “I would be so upset if you didn’t.”

Later, Mika lay still in her arms. The scent of Leah was overpowering. She smelled like honey and magnolias or a

flower garden after a spring rain. Mika loved the way she smelled.

“Are you awake?” Leah asked.

“Yes. I am just enjoying the wonderful fragrance of you.”

“I believe the rest of our family is home,” Leah said as the sound of Nana and Vonda, checking on the babies, came over the intercom. She turned off the monitoring device.

Leah played with Mika’s hair as she held her in her arms. Mika snuggled deeper between her breasts. “How long?” Mika moaned.

“Two more weeks.” Leah ran her fingers through her wife’s soft blonde curls. “Can you get away for ten days?”

“Nothing is as important as ten days with you,” Mika planted kisses on both her breasts.

“Oh, Mika,” Leah moaned. “I’m dying.”

“Um, it gets more difficult every time.” Mika kissed her soft, desirable lips. “It is because I love you more every day.

“How was your meeting tonight?” Mika changed the subject. Talking about how much they wanted each other only made it worse.

“Good.” Leah shrugged. “The chamber president is a queer little duck. She is extremely wealthy, but dresses very inappropriately. Dress is too tight and not very stylish. She seems nice enough.

“She is a size twenty but sees herself as a size eight. She giggles wiggles and makes little impromptu dance moves that would be cute on a woman half her size.”

“What’s her name?” Mika asked.

“Delta Davis. She said she comes from old oil money. Her father was a state senator.” Leah frowned as she recalled how the woman had told her everything about herself in the first fifteen minutes. “Her husband is named Harlan. He’s the manager of Walmart. She owns the local real estate office.

“Is it okay if I take Trudy to the mayor’s office with me? I am going to need all the help I can find to get this town straightened out. I’m surprised Benton Finley wasn’t jailed years ago.”

“Of course, darling,” Mika kissed her again. “Lexi and I can handle our office until she can hire a new secretary.”

##

Jacob straightened the books in his law cabinet. He had been in business a month and had handled one civil case. He had won, but he wanted something to totally engage his mind and keep his thoughts off Raíña Kaya.

He leaned back and closed his eyes. Instantly he was on Leah Madre. He looked around. He hadn’t meant to transport himself. He was just thinking about the planet and the woman. He had made no conscious effort to transport to the planet

With all his heart, Jacob prayed that God would forgive him for returning to the planet. A soft humming sound caught his attention. He stepped back into the cover of the heavy foliage around him.

Raíña Kaya followed the path that led to the pool. She was alone. Although it was pleasantly warm, she still wore his jacket. She stopped in front of his hiding place.

“Are you here, Jacob?” She held her breath, hoping the scent she had picked up was the dark-haired man. “Jacob, son of Mika and Leah, are you here?”

“Please be here,” she whispered.

“I am here, Raíña Kaya,” he stepped into view. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, no, don’t be.” She smiled warmly as she moved close to him. “I brought you here.”

“I don’t understand,” Jacob fought the desire to touch her.

“I asked God to bring you to me. I wanted to speak with you.” She held her head high as if daring anyone to question her request.

“I wondered how I got here,” he smiled, happy that she wanted to speak with him.

“Why did you leave?” She tilted her head slightly, waiting for his answer.

“I was afraid I was the serpent in your garden,” he answered truthfully. “I didn’t think God wanted me to be here.”

“You are not the serpent,” she smiled. “I have met the serpent. He is nothing like you.”

“Don’t trust him, Raíña Kaya,” Jacob was almost frantic. “Don’t believe anything he says. He is evil.”

“What is evil?” She watched him closely.

He realized she had no knowledge of good or evil. She had obeyed God and refrained from eating of the tree of knowledge. Only good filled her life. *I must do nothing to change that*, he thought.

“There are those who do bad things to others,” he tried to explain. “They try to hurt them.”

“What is hurt?” She held his gaze, trying to understand.

“Hurt is when there is such a loneliness it causes an empty, hollow feeling inside your chest.” He described how it had hurt to leave her. “Sometimes you can’t sleep or eat. Everything ceases to matter except that awful gnawing desire to be with someone.”

“You hurt me, Jacob,” she said sadly.

“Oh, no! I would never hurt you,” he cried. “I would rather die than hurt you.”

“You caused this feeling, you described, in my chest,” she insisted. “When you left, you hurt me.”

“I never meant to hurt you,” he almost whispered. “I left to keep from hurting you. To obey God.”

“It is okay with God, if you are here,” she said joyously. “I have spoken to him about you many times. He says you are good.”

“Walk with me,” he held out his hand to her.

She looked at his hand, not understanding what he wanted.

He took her hand in his. He carefully watched her eyes to see if what he was doing was okay. He laced her fingers between his.

Her eyes fixed on their joined hands. Slowly, she raised her eyes to meet his. She smiled hesitantly, then broadly, as he smiled at her.

“It is called touching,” Jacob explained. “In my world we touch the ones we love.”

“Touch?” She shrugged her shoulders. “What is love?”

Just as she had no concept of evil, she had no concept of love.

“Love is when one being cares for another being,” Jacob thought carefully before jumping off the proverbial cliff. “When a man loves a woman, he only wants to be with her. He desires no one else. She fills his thoughts and dreams. He thinks about her all the time.

“She is the most important thing in his world. He will do anything to make her happy. He only wants to be with her. He wants to touch her. He wants to hold and kiss her. He wants to protect her and please her.”

She nodded, pondering this new information.

“So,” Jacob exhaled softly, “touching is a way of showing love. Don’t your people touch?”

“Only when we are procreating,” she smiled shyly. “Otherwise, there is no reason to touch. I do like holding your hand.”

They walked for hours. He told her about his family, how brilliant they were. He laughingly told her about the new babies, how proud his mothers were. “They act as if

each new child is their first,” he laughed. “They get so excited. We all do.”

“Yes,” she smiled, “Grax is the same way. He has many children. He loves each newborn as if it were his first. Like your mothers, Grax is a wonderful parent.”

A darkness passed over Jacob’s handsome face. “I really must return home,” he said.

“I will go with you,” she looked into his eyes.

“You can’t do that,” Jacob muttered. “What would the children do without you?”

“Of course, the children.” she frowned. “I could not leave them forever, but I could visit your planet. Take me with you, please.”

“I want to so much,” he moaned. “I want to more than you can even imagine.”

“If you don’t take me,” she smiled. “You will hurt me.”

“But Grax...” Jacob stammered.

“He won’t mind, as long as I return in time for bed.” Her eyes sparkled.

“Of course,” Jacob fought the pain in his chest.

##

Jacob transported them to his new office. She looked around the room, turning in a circle to admire everything.

“This is beautiful,” she sighed.

“Queen Mommy decorated it,” he smiled.

“Take me to Queen Mommy,” Raíña Kaya commanded.

“I’m not certain how my family will feel about me bringing you to earth.” He grimaced. “Why don’t you have dinner with us, then I can break it to them gently?”

She looked at herself in the mirror. “Should I be more covered, like you?”

“Yes,” he laughed. He dressed her in a pair of tight jeans and a sweater. A pair of loafers completed the look. “There you’re perfect.”

She studied herself in the mirror, and then released her silky blonde hair. It fell in beautiful waves around her shoulders.

“Do you like to look upon me, Jacob? Do I please your eyes?”

“Oh, yes,” he breathed. He smiled thinking how she had rephrased his mother’s teasing line to Mika.

Before he realized what he was doing, Jacob leaned down and kissed her softly. She stepped into him and pressed her lips harder against his, marveling at how wonderful his lips felt on her own.

“Hey, bro…” Rachel’s greeting died on her lips as she witnessed her brother kissing the blonde goddess.

“Rachel!” Jacob jumped away from Raíña Kaya as if she had stung him.

“Queen Mommy,” Raíña Kaya bowed low to Rachel.

“No,” Jacob explained. “This is my twin sister, Rachel. She just looks like my mother, except for the blue eyes.”

“Yes,” Raíña Kaya smiled slightly, “I can see the difference now. You are very beautiful.”

“Bro, tell me you haven’t done what I think,” Rachel searched her brother’s face for an explanation.

“Rach.” Jacob’s eyes pleaded for his sister’s understanding, “This is Raíña Kaya. She will be joining us for dinner tonight.”

“Is Mom expecting her?”

“No. Se just arrived here,” Jacob said. “Would you let her know there will be one more for dinner?”

Rachel nodded. “Raíña Kaya, I look forward to dinning with you tonight.”

“And I, you.” Raíña smiled.

Jacob closed the door behind his sister. When he turned around, Raíña Kaya was standing close to him.

“I liked kissing,” Raíña Kaya smiled as she tiptoed to kiss him.

He was careful to keep his hands at his side but pressed his lips desperately against hers. He moaned as she slid her arms around his neck and pulled his lips harder against hers.

“We really need to go,” he gasped as he pulled away from her. “Queen Mommy doesn’t like stragglers for dinner.”

##

Jacob parked his jeep in the courtyard. The presence of Sara and Adam’s jeeps told him all his siblings were in the hacienda.

“This is amazing,” Raíña Kaya stared at the hacienda in awe. “This is Queen Mommy’s castle?”

“One could say that.” Jacob bit his bottom lip. He opened the door and ushered the blonde beauty into the great room.

Sounds of approval went around the room as his siblings admired Raíña Kaya. Jacob knew she was breathtaking. Apparently, his brothers and sister agreed.

“Wow! Bro,” Adam exclaimed, “where have you been keeping this beauty?”

Raíña Kaya had observed the older children during their visit to her planet. She grinned at the younger children as Jacob introduced everyone to her. Like the children of her planet, they were indescribably beautiful. The dark ones fascinated her.

The door swung open and Queen Mommy swept into the room with Mika in tow. Raíña Kaya watched Leah as she surveyed her children, her eyes coming to rest on the newcomer.

“Mom, Dad,” Jacob cupped Raíña Kaya’s elbow in his hand as he introduced her, “I would like you to meet Raíña Kaya.”

Raíña Kaya bowed to Leah.

The dark-haired beauty did something her children had never seen her do before. She bowed to Raíña Kaya.

“Welcome to our home, Raíña Kaya,” Leah smiled. “I hope everything meets your approval.”

“It does, your highness,” Raíña Kaya nodded.

Both women knew they were in the presence of royalty.

Leah offered Raíña Kaya her arm as they walked to the dining room.

Everyone went out of their way to make Jacob’s friend feel at home. The food was delightful, and something called wine made Raíña Kaya relax.

As the family moved into the great room, Raíña Kaya noticed it was dark outside. “I really must be leaving,” she whispered to Jacob. “Grax will be worried.”

“We are going to say good night,” Jacob, informed his family. “I have to get Raíña Kaya home.”

Leah and Mika walked the couple to Jacob’s jeep. “I trust we will see you later tonight, son,” Mika said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Jacob avoided his mother’s eyes.

Once they were alone, Jacob caught Raíña Kaya’s hand in his and transported them to Leah Madre.

“I had a wonderful time, Jacob. I am fascinated by your family.”

“You won their hearts.”

“May I have your jacket,” she smiled up at him.

“Are you cold?”

“No, I like the scent of you that is on your jacket.”

He slipped his jacket around her shoulders. “Do you want me to change you back to your clothes?”

“Yes, please. These clothes are too warm for my planet. Can all the beings in your world make things appear and disappear?”

“No,” he laughed. “Only my family. God made us special. He has been so good to us. He has plans for us. That is why I must not disappoint him.”

“Will I see you again?” Her eyes held the same pleading look as the last time he had left her.

“If God approves, you can send for me.” He nodded. He slowly pulled her into his arms and kissed her. It was a slow, heart-felt kiss. It was filled with all the longing and hurt they had been living with for the past few months.

“I will ask him,” she promised. She kissed him again, and then he was gone.

##

## Chapter 2

His parents were waiting for him when he returned.

His mother was the first to speak. “What is going on, young man?”

“Nothing, Queen Mommy. I would never do anything improper.” Jacob frowned. “I care too much for her.”

“Raíña Kaya,” her name flowed from Leah’s lips like silk. “Queen Kaya. You do know she is the queen of her world, don’t you?” She could tell by the shocked look on her son’s face he did not know.

“I...I had no idea,” he stammered.

##

Standing in the shadows, Leah Cross watched her wife and Lexi Cole as they discussed the façade of the hospital. Mika’s laughter floated on the morning breeze as Lexi quipped a smart reply to her question. The architect slipped her arm through the priest’s and pulled her toward the side of the building. The two continued their pleasant banter as they surveyed the work.

Mika sensed her wife’s presence and began to look for her. She stepped from the shadows. Mika’s smile was glorious, reflecting her joy at seeing Leah. “Darling,” she disengaged her arm from Lexi’s and strode toward the woman that was her world. Mika leaned down and kissed Leah gently. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“I thought you might want to join me for a coffee break,” she tilted her head slightly.

“I would love that.” Mika’s blue eyes sparkled.

“Would you like to join us,” she smiled slightly at Lexi.

“No, I need to check something on the third floor,” Lexi frowned. “The men told me there is a strange odor on that floor.”

Mika took her wife's hand and they strolled toward Lucile's.

"How are the interviews going?" Mika asked.

"Slowly." Leah grimaced, "The experienced ones have baggage and the young ones seem to think policing a town our size is a piece of cake. This is Monday. Hopefully, I will find someone by Friday."

"You have just begun the interviewing process; I am certain you will find a great police chief for our town." Mika opened the door for her as Lucile greeted them enthusiastically.

"Good morning Madam Mayor." she grinned. "Priest."

Lucile had been surprised when Mika had appeared in her full priest regalia at the election party. She had been very subdued and had stopped making risqué comments to Mika, but she wasn't sure she could refrain from commenting on the woman's good looks.

"I am going to wash my hands, darling," she said as Leah took her seat. "Just coffee for me."

"I have to tell you Madam Mayor," Lucile winked, "I find I lust after Mika even more. There is just something about a woman in uniform."

"I hardly think a priest's collar qualifies as a uniform, Lucile." Leah laughed, as Lucile poured the coffee.

"Mayor Cross." Delta Davis burst into Lucile's with her husband in tow. "What a delightful surprise."

Without an invitation, Delta and Harlan seated themselves in Leah's booth. "Coffee and pie for both of us," Delta yelled to Lucile.

"Just coffee for me," Harlan said.

Mika was disappointed to see others sitting at her wife's table. She had hoped to have some time alone with Leah. Mika was counting the days until they could start their vacation.

“Darling, I would like you to meet Delta and Harlan Davis.” Leah smiled as she caught her hand and pulled Mika into the seat beside her.

“It is a pleasure to meet you.” Mika shook hands with Harlan and turned to Delta. “Leah has told me so much about you.”

Delta giggled and batted her eyes at the beautiful priest. “I didn’t realize your wife was a priest,” she said. “Goodness, you will get to hear our confessions. No one will have any secrets from you.”

“Unless they are protestant,” Harlan pointed out.

Delta glared at her husband as if he had cursed in front of God. Harlan hung his head and remained quiet.

“Your new construction is the talk of the town,” Delta gushed. “Every chamber meeting is filled with discussion of how much our little town has prospered since your arrival.”

“I am pleased to hear that.” Mika smiled.

Leah slowly slid her hand down the inside of her wife’s leg. Although Mika had experienced the sensation daily, for over thirty-five years, it still sent an exhilarating tingle through her body.

Mika looked at Leah wanting to make eye contact, but Leah had bowed her head. A slight smile played at the corners of her lips. *I want so badly to kiss you*, Mika thought.

*Please do*, her brown eyes locked with Mika’s, daring Mika to kiss her.

Mika leaned down and quickly brushed Leah’s lips with hers.

“Priest Mika.” Lexi rushed into the diner. “You had better see this!”

“Please excuse us.” Mika rose, pulling her wife behind. “It was a pleasure meeting you both.”

Leah quickly covered her mouth and nose with her hand. The stench on the third floor was unbelievable. “Mika what is that smell?”

“Over here,” Lexi led Mika to the other side of a forklift.

Leah gagged as she looked at a pentagram drawn on the cement floor. A dead chicken lay at each of the five points of the star. The chicken’s heads were cleaved from their bodies. Splattered blood told Leah the beheading had taken place on the premises. Each star point had a cleaved head and a body. Blood was everywhere. Most of the blood was dried. She looked around to see if there were any bloody footprints or fingerprints. There were none.

Using the chicken blood, someone had written “Catholics Go Home.”

“I’ll have an officer write this up,” Leah said as she quickly moved toward the stairs.

##

“I’ll have that cup of coffee, now,” Lexi groaned.

Leah called the police as they walked back to Lucile’s. She hoped they had a protocol in place to handle situations like this.

Delta and Harlan were still in Lucile’s and started bombarding them with questions as soon as they opened the door. Delta had her husband pull two tables together creating room for Lexie; forcing them to sit with the couple.

The police officer that was writing the vandalism report entered Lucile’s. “What do you want me to do with the dead chickens?” he asked Leah.

“Put them in the freezer in the chief’s office,” Leah instructed him.

Mika knew the incident would spread all over town before sundown.

Delta Davis began holding forth on Anti-Semitism.

“That is prejudice against the Jews, dear,” Harlan mumbled.

The local mail carrier entered the diner. “Hey, Harlan,” he grinned, “I thought that was your car in the parking lot. I have a next day air for you. Signature requested.” He shoved a package in front of Davis. “Save me a trip to your house.”

Harlan signed for the package and began examining it. “I wonder what it is.”

“The best way to find out is to open it.” Delta rolled her eyes.

Harlan opened the package and found it contained several documents and surveys. An official looking letter accompanied the papers.

“Well, what is it?” Delta demanded.

“It says I have inherited a lodge,” Harlan frowned. “A place called Hidden Creek Lodge in Glen Rose, TX.

“There must be some mistake.” Lucile joined in the discussion. “That is a thriving resort. Beautiful place with all kinds of amenities. A real first-class resort right in the middle of five-hundred acres.”

Delta grabbed the letter and read it. “Yeah,” she snorted. “It does say Harlan’s distant cousin died and as his next of kin, my husband has inherited the place. Probably has back taxes due on it.”

##

A call to the number on the letter confirmed that Harlan was now the owner of Hidden Creek Lodge in Glen Rose, TX. There were no back taxes due and the ownership transfer had been handled in such a manner that no taxes were owed. The property was Harlan’s free and clear.

Harlan was excited. He couldn’t wait to visit the lodge and see what he had inherited. *Maybe I can spend the weekend,* he thought. *God I hope Delta doesn’t want to go with me.*

He broached the subject during dinner. “I thought I’d check out the lodge this weekend,” he said casually. He tried to keep the excitement from his voice.

“I can’t go this weekend” Delta spoke around the food in her mouth. “Mayor Cross has asked me to be a part of her ‘think tank’ Friday morning.”

“I understand, love bucket.” Harlan’s heart sang. Two whole days without her was more than he had ever hoped.

“Mayor Cross seems to recognize my importance in the community,” Delta continued. “I can’t disappoint her.”

“Of course, you can’t.” Harlan nodded his head in agreement.

##

Harlan accelerated on the straight stretch of highway. He loved driving fast and was in a hurry to get to the lodge. Just to be free of Delta for the weekend was like a vacation. Thank heaven Mayor Cross’ efforts to include town citizens in the workings of the mayor’s office had included his wife. She had asked Delta to serve on the citizen’s advisory committee.

A shutter ran through his body as he recalled Delta’s promise. “Maybe I can get away next weekend. We can have a second honeymoon.”

He had spent most of their first honeymoon throwing up in the bathroom. She never let him forget that his failure to perform had been very disappointing to her. He soon learned that liquor and a little weed could dull his senses enough to make having sex with her almost bearable. Occasional sex with her was a small price to pay for his respected standing in the community. Few rivaled his wife’s trust fund.

Harlan had always done the right thing. He had taken care of his elderly parents because it was the right thing to do. He had graduated college because it was the right thing to do. He had married Delta because it was the right thing to do. He continued their farce of a marriage because it was the right thing to do.

The lodge was very impressive. A huge Christmas tree was visible through the large picture window overlooking

the front of the lodge. Harlan parked his car in a spot designated for Davis. *Apparently, they are expecting me*, he thought.

As Harlan entered the lodge, a beautiful, dark-haired woman greeted him. “Mr. Davis,” she smiled, “it is a pleasure to finally meet you. I am Crystal Ethbaal, the general manager. I hope we will see a lot of you.”

“I am certain you will.” Harlan looked around the lobby of the lounge. It was immaculate and welcoming. A fire burned in the fireplace. Expensive Henredon chairs formed inviting settings around ornate coffee tables. The flickering fire reflected in their nail-head trim, while the soft leather encouraged one to relax.

“Please, relax while Wayne brings in your luggage,” Crystal invited. As she seated herself in front of the fire, a young woman brought two glasses of wine and placed them on the coffee table. Harlan took the seat across from the general manager.

“I know you will only be here for the weekend,” Crystal said, “so I took the liberty of asking all of our management staff to meet with you in the morning. We will meet with the head of the accounting department, the director of catering, the sales director, the grounds maintenance supervisor and the facilities manager. I hope that meets with your approval.”

“That is excellent, Mrs. Ethbaal.” Harlan picked up his wine.

“Miss...Miss Ethbaal,” she smiled sweetly then tipped her glass against his. “To continued success and prosperity.”

“I assumed one as beautiful as you would be married. I apologize for jumping to a conclusion. I don’t believe I have ever encountered the surname Ethbaal before,” Harlan sipped his wine.

“It is Lebanese,” Crystal explained. “My great, great grandparents were fortunate enough to make their way to America many years ago. I am third generation American.”

Harlan studied the beautiful woman as she discussed the operations of the lodge. Her long black hair fell softly around her shoulders and rested on her chest. A low-cut dress suggested an ample bosom. She leaned toward him, providing him a full view of her breasts, as she refilled his wine glass. She stood as he drained the last drop from his second glass of wine. "I am sure you are tired. She handed him a key card. Your suite is on the third floor. Wayne has placed your luggage there. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to call. Just push the red service button on your phone."

He followed her to the elevators and watched as she pushed the button to open the elevator doors. Her scent engulfed him like a bouquet of roses.

##

Alone in his room, he couldn't get the vision of Crystal's beautiful breasts out of his mind.

His suite was incredible. A fully stocked bar filled one end of the living room. A dining room and kitchen completed the open concept of the large room. He walked to the bar and poured a glass of scotch. He carried the drink toward one of the doors that led from the room. He was pleased to see he had guessed right in assuming it was his bedroom.

His pajamas lay on his bed along with a plush, fleeced-lined robe from the lodge. His bed was turned back and a fancy chocolate, rum cordial lay on his pillow. He ate the rum filled treat, enjoying the taste as he savored it on his tongue. He wished he had another piece of the sweet candy.

Sitting on the bed, exhaustion overcame him. He kicked off his shoes and removed his socks. The week had been a long one, as he had eagerly anticipated this visit to the lodge. He laid his head on the softest down pillow he had ever touched and fell asleep. Crystal filled his dreams.

A sound in the room pulled him from a deep sleep. It was completely dark. He couldn't remember turning out the lights. He moved to rise from the bed, but soft, strong hands pushed him back onto the pillows. The hands unfastened his slacks and slid them and his shorts from his body. He groaned as the hands gently unfastened his shirt and rubbed his chest.

He held his breath as the hands began exploring his body. He gasped when they touched his manhood that was standing erect. Soft lips kissed his thighs, and then traveled up to relieve the excruciating pain of his arousal. He cried out as he grasped thick, long hair and pulled the lips hard against him, rising to meet them. His breath was coming in short, hard pants as he ejaculated. He threw his head back and groaned loudly. He was lost in his own pleasure. When his breathing slowed and his head stopped spinning, he realized he was alone.

He lay still in the darkness, listening for any sound that might indicate his liberator was still in the room. Sensing that he was alone, he turned on the lamp beside his bed. A rum cordial rested on the nightstand.

##

A knock on his door pulled Harlan from a deep, sated sleep. He shook his head and tried to remember where he was. After a moment of disorientation, his mind grasped his surroundings. The events of the night flooded over him. He slipped on the robe and stumbled into the living room.

“Room service, with your breakfast, Mr. Davis,” a male voice called from the other side of the door.

Harlan opened the door and a ruddy-faced young man pushed in a food cart. He placed a carafe of hot coffee on the table along with an assortment of Danish rolls. A covered plate contained scrambled eggs, bacon, and sausage. A glass of orange juice completed the delicious breakfast.

Harlan ate his breakfast and showered. He slipped on a pair of dark jeans and a sweater. Examining himself in the mirror, he decided he wasn't a bad looking fellow. His thick black hair parted on the side. He considered getting a more up-to-date haircut—something like Jacob Cross' cut. Perhaps he should trade his horn-rimmed glasses for contacts. Better yet, maybe he would have Lasik surgery.

At five-ten, he was definitely pudgy, weighing two-hundred pounds. He had intentionally made himself look as unattractive as possible, hoping Delta would find him undesirable. It worked most of the time. He splashed on his favorite cologne and headed downstairs. He wondered if last night was a vivid dream. He hoped not.

##

Crystal was waiting for him in the lobby. "Good morning, sir," she winked. "Did you find everything to your satisfaction? Did all of our services please you?"

"Very much," Harlan nodded. "Breakfast was excellent."

"I have gathered everyone in the conference room," she motioned for him to follow her.

The meeting with the department heads was warm and informative with Crystal leading discussions and requesting information she felt Harlan needed to know. After everyone had reported their status, she excused them, asking the head of finance to stay.

"I believe you have reports for Mr. Davis," Crystal smiled.

The accountant pulled out profit and loss statements and went over them with Harlan.

Harlan gulped when he saw the bottom line for the last quarter. The lodge had made a profit of two-million dollars. He looked back through the information, quickly tracking the income and expenses of the operation. He caught his breath when he read the owner's equity line on the balance

sheet: ten-million dollars. Obviously, the lodge produced over two-million dollars a quarter in profits.

“I didn’t know if you wanted to take monthly or quarterly draws,” the accountant said. “Your cousin always took a hundred thousand a month.”

Harlan tried to move his tongue, but found his mouth was too dry to talk. Crystal knowingly handed him a glass of water. After draining the glass, he informed the accountant that he would continue his cousin’s arrangement.

“We have worked through lunch,’ Crystal sighed as she looked at her watch. “Would you mind dining with me in the café?”

“I would love to.” Harlan smiled.

##

The food at the lodge was excellent. Crystal informed him that they had one of the top chefs in the nation on their staff. “You will be amazed at dinner tonight.” She grinned.

They spent the rest of the afternoon touring the grounds in a jeep that was both fun to drive and capable of taking them anywhere they wanted to go. Crystal laughed and teased him. Occasionally, he almost let himself believe she was flirting with him.

As he dressed for dinner, he wished he had brought nicer clothes. He decided he would have to make do with his slacks and a dress shirt. He made a mental note to bring a sports jacket next time.

He became even more acutely aware of his inappropriate attire when Crystal joined him in the lobby. She wore a dark blue dress that hugged her perfect body. The neckline plunged and the slit in her skirt was thigh high. Her dangling earrings matched the beautiful necklace that adorned her chest. She looked as if she was going to a ball.

He presented her his arm. A warm feeling flowed through his body when she linked her arm through his.

Dinner was everything she had promised. The food and the conversation were extremely enjoyable. An excellent band played soft music and a few of their clients were slow dancing on the highly polished dance floor.

“Do you dance?” Crystal asked.

“Not very well, I am afraid,” Harlan replied, recalling how Delta always complained about his clumsiness.

“Let me be the judge of that.” Crystal led him to the dance floor.

He found himself lost in her arms, overcome by the soft scent of her perfume. When the song ended, he didn’t know whether he had danced or simply stood on the dance floor holding her.

“You tricked me.” She laughed as they walked back to their table. “You are an excellent dancer.”

He smiled, incredibly pleased with himself.

They finished the bottle of wine on their table and walked to the lobby.

As they waited for the elevator Crystal said, “Now that you have seen your kingdom what do you think of it?”

“It is incredible.” Harlan grinned. “You are incredible. Thank you so much for everything.”

“I will bid you adieu.” She smiled as the elevator doors opened.

“Will I see you later tonight?” he said hoarsely.

“I beg your pardon.” She frowned.

“Will I see you tomorrow?” He quickly amended his statement.

“Of course.”

##

Harlan stepped over the envelope lying under the door to his room. *Surely not a bill*, he thought. He shuddered to think what the cost of his stay would be. He picked up the envelope and opened it. He slid out a check for the last quarter, three-hundred-thousand dollars. He restrained

himself to keep from shouting. Apparently, his income from the lodge would average over a million a year.

Harlan lay quietly, trying to stay awake. He dozed off, then jerked awake. In the darkness, he could make out the silhouette of a woman standing above him. He had gone to bed naked, hoping she would visit him. She lifted the covers from his body and stood looking at him. He hoped she wouldn't find him completely repulsive. Silently, her hands began to move over his body, slowly igniting a fire he had long ago forgotten. He wanted to hold her. He wanted to make love to her. He found he couldn't move his arms. He could only lie motionless as she slowly drove him insane. The faint scent of roses floated on the air.

##

Harlan knocked softly on the door to Crystal's office. "Come in," she said.

"I wanted to let you know I am leaving and thank you for a wonderful time." Harlan smiled as he observed her beautifully decorated office. A glass flower garden in front of her floor-to-ceiling windows caught his attention. "What beautiful plants. What are they?"

Crystal rose from her desk and stood beside him, admiring the flowers. "Autumn Crocus," she said softly.

He reached out his hand to touch one of the blooms, but she stopped him. "They are deadly and there is no antidote for their poison." She explained.

"It is a shame something so beautiful can be so bad." He frowned.

"Yes," she sighed. "Evil can be beautiful, too."

## Chapter 3

Mika watched her wife as she applied her lipstick. She moaned softly as Leah walked sensuously toward her. “I am not certain this town is ready for the Queen in all her glory,” Mika said softly.

“Umm, I don’t care about this town,” Leah purred. “I only care what my beautiful wife thinks.”

“Your beautiful wife thinks she would rather skip the Christmas party and make love to you.”

“Then I have accomplished my goal.” Her soft laughter sent a tremor of desire through Mika’s body.

She tiptoed and softly kissed Mika. She caught Mika’s face between her hands and gently wiped her lipstick from Mika’s lips with her thumb. Mika leaned into her touch. “As much as I would like to stay home, you know we have to attend our first city Christmas party.”

“I know, honey.” Mika smiled. “Did you find a decent band? Musicians that can play something besides country music.”

“I did. I think you will be pleasantly surprised.”

They checked on their babies then joined their older children in the family room.

“Mom, you are breathtaking,” Adam said.

“What exactly are we doing tonight,” Jacob scowled.

“Attending the city’s Christmas party,” Mika informed her son. “Your mother will give a brief welcome speech and hand out annual staff bonuses, and then we will dine and dance.”

“At the fire station?” Jacob continued to be in a bad humor.

“At the country club in Burlson,” Mika frowned.

She shot her son a look that said, “You will change your attitude.”

“They have a new events center,” Leah enthused. “I know you will like it.”

Jacob immediately smiled and bent to kiss his mother. “Country club,” he exclaimed, “that explains why we are wearing dinner jackets and ties.”

“Your mother has put a lot of work into this,” Mika added. “She has planned every detail.”

“I am looking forward to it,” Jennifer joined the discussion. “After five days of surgery, I am ready to eat drink and be merry.”

Sara caught her wife’s hand and led her toward the door. “The town looks incredible, Mom. You really out did yourself this year.”

“Thank you, dear. Mika’s snowstorm helped tremendously.” Leah looked adoringly at her wife. “Have you ever seen a Currier and Ives Christmas card with dirt and tumbleweeds on it?”

The children laughed as they put on their coats.

“The people here are excited to have a white Christmas,” Rachel laughed. “I thought Lucas was going to cry when it started snowing.”

“Lucas was crying because you told him you have to go to Houston after Christmas,” Sara teased her younger sister.

“At least she doesn’t have to go to the other side of the world,” Jennifer huffed, as her wife pushed her out the door.

Lucas drove into the courtyard as the family loaded into their various vehicles. He was driving a new car. “I bought this for myself for Christmas.” He grinned. “I thought you might be tired of me hauling you around in a truck. He bent and kissed Rachel hello.

“Come on Jacob,” Lucas called, “We have plenty of room.”

##

Priest Mika leaned against a column in the ballroom, watching the towns people fawn over her beautiful wife. She

was gracious and charismatic. She was mingling with the attendees and thanking them for coming. People were drawn to her like a magnet. Mika frowned when she saw Cutter Brock place his hand on Leah's arm and pull her away from a group. The scowl on her face let Mika know she did not like Brock's actions. Leah yanked her arm from the senator's grasp and turned to walk away. He caught her by the arm, again and turned her around to face him. She vigorously shook her head no and tried to pull away from him. *Help me, darling*, her dark eyes locked with Mika's as her thoughts reached the priest.

Instantly, Mika was at her side. "There you are," she smiled down at her wife and linked her arm with Leah's. "I believe it is time for everyone to be seated." Without a word to Brock, the couple walked away.

"What was that all about?" Mika asked as they walked toward the dining room.

"His worthless brother applied for the police chief's job." Leah scowled. "He just got out of his fourth stint in drug rehab and Brock wanted me to hire him. These people seem to think Godly is a dumping ground for political favors. I will be reviewing the qualifications of all the administrators. I shudder to think what favors Benton Finley granted."

Mika could feel her anger and placed her hand on the small of Leah's back, a motion that always calmed and soothed her.

"Thank you, darling," she leaned back slightly increasing the pressure of Mika's hand on her.

"Mayor Cross," Trudy approached her boss, "there are seats for you and Priest Cross at the head table."

Mika pulled out her wife's chair and sat down beside her. The feel of Leah's warm hand on her thigh sent a surge through Mika. Mika tried to ignore her feelings, knowing it was going to be a long night of hand shaking and making small talk.

After the awards, and the council's presentation of a gorgeous painting for Leah's office, everyone moved to the ballroom. Mika and Leah joined their children at a large, round table. Leah noticed that Delta Davis and Cutter Brock were seated at the table next to them.

"Mayor Cross," Delta gushed, "this is the most impressive awards ceremony we have ever had for our tiny town. It is a shame we don't have a facility to hold our fancy gatherings in Godly."

"I believe you will find the community center in the new church will be more than sufficient," Leah noted. "It should be ready for use next year."

The band kicked off the evening's music with a slow dance. Cutter stood and walked to Leah. "I want to apologize for being so boorish earlier." He smiled sweetly. "I was way out of line."

"Yes, you were," Leah agreed. "Let's just enjoy the rest of the evening."

"May I have this dance?" Cutter asked.

"No," Leah said flatly. "I only dance with my wife or my sons."

"I would love to dance." Delta hefted herself from her chair and grabbed Cutter's arm, dragging him to the dance floor.

Leah chortled as Mika bowed her head to hide her gleeful smile.

"I love you so much my queen," Mika whispered in her ear. Mika's soft breath and whispered words of adoration caused Leah to clench her thighs together as a small shiver ran down her body.

"Umm," she hummed.

"Is that Harlan?" Leah watched as an attractive man walked toward their table. "He has cut his hair much like yours, Jacob."

"I believe it is," Mika affirmed. "He has really lost weight."

Harlan Davis looked like a million dollars. He had lost fifty pounds, had Lasik surgery and was sporting a great haircut. He was a dashing figure in his dark sports jacket and slacks.

“Mayor, Priest.” Harlan held out his hand to shake Mika’s hand.

“Harlan, you look amazing,” Leah exclaimed. “Very handsome.”

“Thank you,” Harlan bowed his head shyly. He wasn’t used to compliments.

“It is about time you showed up,” Delta screeched as she spotted her husband. “You remember Senator Brock, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Harlan smiled and shook hands with Cutter, who was wondering how many of his toes were broken from dancing with Delta.

As Delta dragged her husband to the dance floor, Harlan hoped she wouldn’t sweat on his new sports jacket.

“Hum,” Delta breathed heavily into her husband’s ear. “You look positively edible.”

Harlan tamped down the revulsion that rose from his stomach and threatened to fill his mouth. The last thing he wanted to do was arouse his wife. He frantically tried to think of some way to avoid going home with her tonight.

##

Mayor Leah Cross sat at her desk listening to the various department heads give their Monday morning reports.

“The Christmas party was wonderful,” they all clamored.

She knew they were all trying to get brownie points with her, so she quickly thanked them and asked for the report from the fire chief. She was trying to determine which department she wanted to review first.

An ardent multitasker, Leah opened her morning mail as she listened to the reports. A large manila envelope at the

bottom of the stack caught her attention. She silently slid her letter opener thru the top of the envelope.

“I realize you need another firefighter,” the mayor frowned, “I just do not believe Senator Brock’s brother is the man for the job.”

“Brock can throw tax dollars our way,” the chief insisted.

“I would rather we pay our own way than...,” she completely lost her train of thought, her mind whirling out of control as she looked at the photograph she had pulled from the envelope.

Leah fought to maintain her composure as she quickly shoved the photo back into the envelope.

“No one working for this city is to hire Senator Brock’s brother,” she growled. “Is that clear? You all are aware of his history and his repeated stints in rehab. We can’t afford the liability.”

They all hung their heads, unused to a mayor with ethics.

“I am afraid I must cut this meeting short. Something has come up that requires my immediate attention.” She stood and walked with the administrators to the door of her office. As soon as they departed, Leah locked her door and reached for the manila envelope.

She pulled out six photos of her wife kissing Lexi Cole. There was no doubt in her mind the photos were of Mika.

She fought down the wave of nausea that threatened to overcome her and slowly sat down in her chair. She held her hand over her mouth to suppress the scream that rose in her throat. Her heart felt as if it was too large for her chest. She pinched the bridge of her nose to stop the sudden headache that threatened to blind her.

Her hands shook as she shuffled thru the photos, showing various shots of her wife and Lexi Cole. She loved Mika so much. How could she betray her? What should she do? Confronting Mika would result in a divorce. Leah’s

pride wouldn't let her live with a person who knew she had gotten away with cheating on her. The children would be devastated. As many women have done through the ages, she decided to pretend she knew nothing about the affair. She would go on with her life with Mika as if she knew nothing of her infidelities. It would take her a long time to fall out of love with Mika.

##

Mika wondered why her wife hadn't joined her for their usual lunch rendezvous. Mika felt a little foolish lying naked, alone on the soft comforters and rugs in the cave. She knew Leah's regular department head meetings were this morning, but she always broke for lunch. She tried to contact her telepathically but received no answer. Mika was beginning to get worried when her text dinged in. "Sorry, can't make lunch today."

They had been together thirty-five years and she had never received a message like that from Leah. Mika dressed herself and transported to her office. She unlocked her door and walked into the reception area. She would walk to Leah's office at city hall, just to make certain everything was okay.

"Priest Mika," Lexi called to her from her office. "We have a ton of mail this morning. That stack is yours. I am hiring a secretary this week if it harelips the Pope."

"I beg your pardon!" Mika grinned at Lexi, as she thumbed through her mail.

"Oh, Priest Mika I am so sorry." She blushed. "I didn't mean any disrespect."

"I'll just take this mail to my office and go through it later." Mika smiled.

Mika noticed a large manila envelope at the bottom of the stack. The address was handwritten. Mika tore open the end of the envelope and gasped as photos fell onto her desk. There were six photos of her wife kissing Cutter Brock.

Mika almost became physically ill. Her knees buckled and she caught the desk to keep from falling. Leah and Brock, the thought made Mika crazy. Was her wife capable of infidelity? After all, Leah had been the poster girl for evil at one time.

Why? Why would Leah kiss Cutter Brock? Mika dragged her hands down her face, trying to think. The answer was she wouldn't.

She wondered if this was someone's sick idea of a joke. Mika slid the photos back into their envelope. She left them on her desk, locked her office door and strode toward city hall.

"Priest Mika!" Trudy jumped when she opened the door and walked to her desk.

"I need to see my wife," Mika said.

"She told me she doesn't want to be bothered by anyone," Trudy mumbled, "including you."

Mika walked to the door of Leah's office.

"It's locked," Trudy warned.

The knob turned and the door easily opened. "Oh, look." Mika grinned, "It's not."

As Mika closed the door, she locked it. Leah was standing at the window overlooking the construction site of the hospital and church. She turned as Mika entered. Three long steps put Mika at her side. She leaned down and kissed Leah.

"I do believe I would have received a warmer welcome, if I had kissed the wall," Mika teased.

Leah stepped away from her. Something was wrong. She could see it in Leah's eyes. Mika hadn't seen that look of desolation since their first encounter.

"Honey, what is wrong?" Concern lined her beautiful face as she watched Leah.

"Nothing, I am just tired." She inhaled deeply and sat down at her desk.

"I missed you at lunch." Mika smiled.

“I had things to do.” She avoided looking Mika in the eye. She had never been able to lie to Mika. Her insides ached. It had taken all the self-control she had to force herself to sit down in her desk chair instead of throwing herself into Mika’s arms. *God I love her*, she thought as tears filled her eyes.

*She loves you*, Mika thought back to her.

“Honey, what is going on?” Mika pulled her from her chair and stood Leah between her knees as she sat on her desk.

Leah pointed toward a manila envelope that was lying on her desk. Mika noticed it bore the same handwriting as the envelope in her office. Picking up the envelope, Mika transported them to her office.

Leah looked around, confused. “Why did you bring me here?”

Mika nodded toward the envelope on her desk. Leah pulled the pictures from it and gasped as she looked through the various photos of her kissing Cutter Brock.

“Oh, Mika,” she dropped the envelope and threw herself into Mika’s arms. Leah covered Mika’s face with kisses, finally coming to rest on her soft, full lips. Mika tightened her arms around Leah, and she melted into her, moaning as Mika kissed her.

Without breaking the kiss, she pushed Mika until she fell backward onto the sofa. Leah settled onto her lap, kissing Mika passionately. “I thought you... I... I love you.”

Mika slowly unbuttoned her blouse and kissed her wonderful breasts through the silk of her bra. Leah whimpered as Mika gently caught her nipple between her teeth. Mika easily released the front-hook bra and lightly traced the rise of Leah’s breast from her chest to her nipple. Leah moaned deep in her throat, just as Mika knew she would. Mika had learned many years ago that her breasts were the most sensitive part of her body. She knew just how and where to touch Leah to illicit a moan from deep in her

throat. Mika knew just what to do to make Leah cry out her name.

“Please, baby,” Leah begged.

Mika caressed and kissed her breasts until she buried her face against Mika’s shoulder to smother her pleadings. A cool breeze told Mika she had discarded their clothes. Leah cried out Mika’s name as she lowered herself onto her. Mika buried her face in Leah’s long, dark tresses, moaning in her ear and begging Leah to take her.

Mika kissed her lips while caressing both her breasts. Straddling Mika on her knees, Leah controlled the depth and ferocity of their lovemaking. “More, I need more, baby,” she pleaded.

Mika easily laid her onto the sofa, never breaking their bond and sank deep into her. She smothered Leah’s cry with her lips. Leah clawed up and down Mika’s back, urging her to move faster. “Deeper,” she begged, pulling Mika into her.

She could feel Leah’s passion reaching its pinnacle. “Bite me,” Mika whispered into her ear. “Lexi is in her office. She will hear us.”

Her nails dug into Mika’s powerful back as her teeth sank into her shoulder. Mika buried her face in Leah’s hair and wrapped her arms around Leah to smother their cries of pleasure.

They stilled. Their breath came in ragged pants as they tried to breathe normally. Mika’s heart threatened to break through the wall of her chest. Leah began to cry, clutching Mika to her. “Don’t pull from me,” she whimpered, “not yet.”

As her breathing returned to normal, she slowly began to move against Mika, firmly running her hands up and down Mika’s back. “My wonderful lover,” she whispered as Mika began to move to please her, again.

“Are you sure,” Mika whispered. “Are you okay?” It was the first time they had made love since the birth of the twins.

“I am positive,” she moaned.

##

“Any idea what is going on,” Mika said as she spread out the twelve photos of her and her wife.

“Someone is trying to cause trouble between you and me,” she mused.

The photos were taken at the Christmas party. Lexi had been expertly photoshopped into the picture with Mika and Cutter had replaced Mika in the photos with Leah. It was obvious the original photos had been of Leah and Mika.

“Whoever did this is really good,” Mika frowned as she examined the photos. “They went to a lot of trouble to create distrust between us. Everyone at the party was taking pictures with their cell phones. I have no idea who took these.”

“How did you know they weren’t authentic,” Leah asked.

“I knew you would never kiss anyone else.” Mika smiled. “You are not that kind of woman. But, you...you thought I would...”

Leah’s lips on hers stopped Mika mid-sentence.

“Will you ever completely trust me?” Mika held Leah tightly against her. “You must know how I adore you.”

“Even after all this time,” she said softly, “I am still afraid to believe my happiness can last. You are my happiness, Mika.”

“With all my heart and being, I adore you, Leah.” Mika kissed her, a long, soul-satisfying kiss, laying to rest all her fears. “You are my world. I will never hurt you.”

She stood in Mika’s arms for a long time, relishing the feel of her strong arms wrapped protectively around her. Leah’s head rested against Mika’s chest as she listened to her heartbeat. Finally, she pulled away from her. “We’d better return to my office,” she smiled. She picked up the envelopes and photos. “I will keep these.”

Mika leaned down to kiss her, and they transported to her office. “I am hungry,” Mika grinned. “Want to eat lunch with me?”

“Of course, darling.”

They stopped by Mika’s office to pick up an envelope from the county. It contained various approvals and requests for additional information on building the church. Mika wanted Leah to go over them with her during lunch.

Lexi was standing at the receptionist’s desk, curiously watching Mika’s office door. “Hello, Leah. Priest Mika, I heard sounds coming from your office.”

“I must have left on my computer.” I was watching something on YouTube.”

“Porn?” Lexi raised her eyebrows. “That is what it sounded like.”

Mika laughed aloud. “Heavens, no!”

As they entered Mika’s office, sounds came from her computer. “You get your paperwork, darling.” Leah smiled. “I will shut down your computer.”

##

Dr. Sara Cross studied the results of her latest tests. Her brother Mark watched, anxious to know if she was satisfied with the outcome. “Well?” He asked, his curiosity getting the best of him.

“They are exactly the same,” she almost whispered. “The outcome of your experiment and mine are identical.”

She threw her arms around her younger brother—who was almost a man—and began dancing around in celebration. “We did it. We actually did it.”

Mark knew Sara had been tracking the experiment since she was fifteen. He had joined her work just before his fourteenth birthday. He was pleased that she included him in her accomplishment.

While the original impetus of Sara’s work was eternal life, a side discovery had been youth. When she had burned

her original research to keep the world from finding out about her immortal parents and siblings, she began to devote her full attention to the quality of life.

She developed a serum that would allow people to retain their youthful appearance for as long as they lived. If a person used Sara's serum when they were thirty-four, they would remain as vital, attractive and active as they were at thirty-four, until the day they died. The serum wouldn't extend life; it would merely enhance the quality of life.

Like his sister, Mark was a child prodigy. He had graduated high school at fourteen and was in his second year of genetics at the University of Texas. He was much more knowledgeable in his field than most of his professors. At sixteen, he was already being courted by universities for their graduate programs. His sister's reputation and research had opened many doors for him.

"Are we ready to present this to our most difficult critics?" Mark raised an eyebrow.

"As ready as we will ever be," Sara nodded. "Tonight, after dinner."

##

"Mom, Dad," Sara said as the family left the dining room, "Mark and I would like to speak with you."

Sara reached for her wife's hand to let her know she was included in the family meeting. She also nodded to her oldest siblings.

Mark was glad that sixteen seemed to signal the arrival of adulthood in their family. He followed his six older siblings and their spouses into the study where all-important family meetings took place. He caught the hand of his twin sister, Hannah and pulled her into the room.

Leah surveyed her eight oldest children; four sets of twins that looked exactly like beautiful Mika or their gorgeous mother. They were laughing and teasing with one another, secure in their family's love.

Mika sat down on the sofa, pulling her wife down beside her. She put her arm around Leah's shoulders as she snuggled into Mika's warmth, resting her hand on Mika's thigh.

"Sara, Mark, you called this meeting," Mika smiled. "The floor is yours."

"None of us like the idea of not being recognized as your children because you look the same age as us." Sara shifted from one foot to the other as she addressed her parents. "So, Mark and I have developed a serum that anyone can take. A person can take the serum at age thirty-four, and they will remain that age physically until they die. The serum binds to the body's cells and prevents them from aging.

"They won't have eternal life, just a better quality of life. Their life span will remain the same. They simply will not age. They will always be as young and strong as the day they turned thirty-four. The serum won't prevent health issues. If it is in God's plan for them to die at age forty, they will still die at age forty.

"We have genetically tied the serum to the age thirty-four. It won't work until the recipient is thirty-four. No matter how young they take it, it won't activate until their body cells hit the thirty-four mark. It won't work if taken after the recipient has lived thirty-four years.

"We have also developed an antidote, should anyone ever wish to reverse the effects of the youth serum and age normally."

Sara looked around the room to see how her audience was accepting her news.

"Sis, that is incredible," Adam, her twin brother, said. "So, all we must do is make the serum available to everyone and pretty soon mom, dad and all of us will blend in with the masses. Everyone will simply assume we have taken the serum. They will have no idea how long we have lived because no one will live long enough to do the math on us. That is ingenious."

Leah was already assessing what needed to happen to promote the serum to potential users. “How can we mass produce your serum?”

“It is simple, Mom,” Sara answered. “Mark and I have already produced a large quantity of it. There are no side effects. We have enough serum to produce a million doses.”

“I suspect a billion doses would be better,” Leah frowned. “Can you formulate exact guidelines for the mass production of the serum?”

“Of course.” Sara smiled, pleased at how quickly her mother had assumed direction for the project.

“Darling.” Leah sent a warm surge through Mika, “We need a production facility. I will call Marcus and get him to handle marketing.”

Mika nodded. She was incredibly proud of her oldest daughter.

“What will you call it, sweetheart?” Leah asked Sara.

“Queen’s Mirror.” Sara smiled. “As in mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?”

“Just for the record,” Leah huffed, “I never said that in my life.”

Her children laughed and began to tease her.

##

Jennifer sat on the stool at the breakfast bar sipping coffee as her wife made breakfast. “You know I will be thirty-four soon,” she said.

“And we will celebrate our first wedding anniversary,” Sara smiled. “It seems like only yesterday that we committed to a lifetime together.”

“I want to take your serum,” Jennifer informed her wife. “I don’t know how long I will live, but I want to be young and desirable to you for as long as I live.”

Sara moved to stand between her wife’s knees. “You will always be desirable to me, darling,” she kissed and touched the young doctor, intentionally arousing her.

##

“Our children are pretty impressive,” Leah said, as she finished Sara’s white paper on the youth serum.

“Their mother is the impressive one.” Mika smiled as she pulled on her pajamas. “I bet you have read that and now have a complete understanding of everything you need to know to have the serum approved by the FDA by the end of the week, with a little bit of magic, of course.”

Leah wrinkled her nose. “That is my plan, darling. Do you have any idea what a nightmare this would become if it had to make it through all the governmental red tape? Not to mention the crooked politicians who would try to hi-jack it for profit. This is absolutely the biggest discovery of the century. It will make trillions of dollars.”

“In the wrong hands it could be used and distributed so unfairly,” Mika nodded.

“Sara proposes making it an over the counter product that anyone can buy,” Leah said. “It will be available to everyone. We will hold the international patent on it, so we can make certain it is inexpensive and readily available all over the world.”

“Best of all, we will fit right in with all the thirty-something people in the world,” the priest said. “No one will raise an eyebrow when they see we look the same age as our children. Being immortal will be a lot less noticeable.”

Mika leaned down to kiss her lips. “Are you ready for the babies?”

“Yes,” she nodded.

Mika quickly returned with their three-month-old twins. Leah opened her gown and reached out her arms for a baby. Mika placed Aaron in Leah’s arms and waited while she guided his tiny lips to her breast. Mika gently settled Eden in Leah’s other arm and placed her mother’s nipple in her perfect little mouth. Mika smiled as she watched her children nuzzle into their mother making soft contented sounds as they nursed.

Leah's beauty took her breath. The way her long, dark hair fell around her beautiful face as she looked down at the nursing babies. The shy smile she gave her when she realized Mika was staring at her. Her lips, Mika lived to kiss her lips. Everything about her was perfect. Mika had roamed the earth for over two-thousand years searching for her. She was almost a hundred years old but would be eternally thirty-four. They were immortal. Mika thanked her God every day for immortality. Eternity wasn't long enough to spend with the dark-eyed beauty that was her wife.

##

Leah called Marcus the next morning and informed him of Sara's discovery. He was ecstatic and more than willing to come out of early retirement to help market the product. He had discovered it cost a lot of money to maintain and educate three daughters.

Marcus insisted that she and Mika endorse the product. After all, they were living proof of the serum's success.

"I have always wondered how you stayed so young and gorgeous," Marcus said. "I had begun to think you and Mika were immortal."

A sterile, state-of-the-art manufacturing facility appeared on the ranch almost overnight. Miraculously the board of directors of every major drug chain voted to carry Queen's Mirror Youth Serum and orders flooded in from all over the country.

Sara hired the best minds from her graduating class to run the facility and maintain quality control over the product. All of them were proud to be associated with the discovery of such a phenomenal product. Dedicated scientists, they began to brainstorm with Sara to address the problem of world population.

Within a week, Marcus had scheduled the filming of several commercials. He informed Leah he would need her and Mika in New York on Monday.

##

“Darling, how would you feel about postponing our vacation until summer,” Leah stood behind her wife, massaging her shoulders.

“In favor of what?” Mika asked, glorying in the feel of Leah’s soft hands on her back and shoulders.

“We need to be in New York on Monday, to shoot the commercials.” She kissed the smooth skin between Mika’s shoulder blades. She rubbed her cheek against her back. She loved the smooth, firmness of Mika. Leah kissed up Mika’s neck, coming to rest beside her ear. “We have already made arrangements to be gone for ten days. We could have time alone in New York.” Leah’s warm breath on her ear sent shivers of desire throughout Mika’s body.

“You do know it is taking every bit of self-control I possess to keep from throwing you onto the bed and...”

Plump lips cut off Mika’s sentence as she sat in Mika’s lap and kissed her slowly, purposefully. “I have always thought self-control was very overrated,” Leah purred.

“Anywhere is fine with me, my queen,” Mika whispered as she picked Leah up and carried her to their bed, “just as long as I am with you.”

##

“Leah, Mika, it is a joy to see you both,” Marcus shook hands with his most lucrative client. “I wish to heaven you had been around with this youth serum when I was thirty-four.

“I believe you were thirty-seven when we first met you.” Leah smiled slightly. “I must say, you are still extremely handsome. The gray at the temples is very attractive.”

The couple spent the rest of the day filming commercials and discussing contracts. “We could do one of your in-depth, convoluted contracts,” Leah laughed as Marcus began negotiations, or you can simply accept one

percent of profit from all sales. I guarantee you will never need to work again.”

“Accepted,” Marcus grinned. “You always did get your way in negotiations.”

Mika watched as her gorgeous wife discussed the merits of Queen’s Mirror for the camera. Her heart swelled as she observed Leah. The cameras had always loved her. She moved about as she spoke, shoulders back, chin slightly lifted, defying anyone to contradict what she was saying. Everything that was wonderful was her wife: elegant, gracious, poised, seductive and astonishingly beautiful.

Mika licked her lips as she thought about how incredibly wonderful Leah’s lips tasted, how she slowly moved her full bottom lip against Mika’s when she kissed her. Mika suppressed an overpowering urge to kiss her.

They had relinquished lunch, preferring to spend the hour in their penthouse making love. They had missed breakfast for the same reason, so Leah was famished when they finished filming for the day. They decided to go to Vincent’s for dinner. It would be good to see Joe.

##

Joe smiled broadly when she entered his establishment. He hadn’t seen her since October. He wondered where she had been the last five months. He poured her wine and placed it in front of her. “I have missed you,” he said. She nodded and smiled brilliantly.

The priest joined her at the bar and thanked Joe when he placed a glass of wine in front of her. They studied each other in the mirror behind the bar. Joe started a song on the jukebox. The sultry sounds of *Oh, Those Dark Eyes* filled the room. The couple wordlessly moved to the dance floor and danced the most passionate tango Joe had ever seen. They clung to each other, as if they couldn’t hold one another tight enough.

They held hands as they returned to the bar. “Have dinner with me.” Mika smiled.

“Is that all you want from me?” Her look was dark and sensuous.

“Not tonight,” Mika sighed, “tonight I want so much more.”

They were dining when Carlie and Scarlett entered the restaurant.

“I don’t believe my eyes,” Carlie almost shouted. “God, we have missed you two.”

Scarlett nodded in agreement, as Mika stood to greet the two women.

“Where have you been?” Carlie asked.

“Around,” Leah sassed, “here and yonder.”

“Wow! It is so good to see you.” Carlie said. “May we join you?”

Mika nodded agreement as the two women slid into the booth.

“Stiles has desperately been trying to contact you,” Scarlett informed Leah. “They want to make a movie based on the *Catholic Murders*. Carlie wrote a book. It has been on the bestseller list for three months now. The studio has given Stiles carte blanche for production of the film provided you agree to star in it.”

“Oh, no,” Leah laughed, “I have three-month-old twins at home. I won’t be making any films.”

“Where exactly is home?” Carlie raised her eyebrows.

“Where the heart is,” Leah smiled. “Wherever Mika is.”

“Well, I must say things have calmed down considerably since you two disappeared.” Carlie frowned. “No more Catholics murdered.”

“That is good to know,” Mika nodded.

“What brings you to New York?” Scarlett asked.

“We’re filming commercials on Sara’s latest breakthrough in genetics.” Leah smiled. “Something she has been working on for the past ten years, a youth serum.”

“A what?” Scarlett grinned, hoping she had heard correctly.

“A youth serum,” Leah reiterated, “one takes one capsule anytime during their thirty-fourth year and they will be forever thirty-four.”

“Get out of here,” Carlie snorted, recalling the twenty-year-old photos she had of the couple.

“It is true,” Mika said. “It isn’t immortality. It just improves the quality of life. One will remain in the same physical condition as they were at thirty-four, until they die. It won’t lengthen one’s life, just enhance it.”

“I am thirty-four,” Carlie grinned. “Where can I get this miracle drug?”

Leah pulled two blister cards from her purse. “One for each of you,” she smiled.

“I won’t be thirty-four until next December,” Scarlett said.

“No problem,” Mika said. “You can take the serum now. It won’t kick in until your thirty-fourth birthday.”

Carlie studied the couple silently. “You took this when she first began working on it, didn’t you?”

“Someone had to be her guinea pig,” Leah smiled.

“How old are you, really?” Carlie inquired.

“Why, Detective Carlyle,” Leah feigned shock, “I can’t believe you would ask a lady her age.” Leah didn’t want to tell the woman that she would be celebrating her hundredth birthday next year.

##

Wayman Stiles slipped on to the set filming the commercial with Leah Redman. He smiled as the talented actress moved across the set, speaking into the camera.

“Hi, I am Leah Redman. Many of you have known me for the past five years as Candice Carter, the police detective on *Marked for Murder*. What you may not know is that renowned genetic researcher Sara Cross is my daughter.

When she was fifteen, Sara began work on a youth serum.” As Leah spoke, the computer inserted a brief scene of a white-coated Sara working in a sterile research lab. “When Sara announced that she had perfected the serum, my wife Mika and I were more than willing to be her human guinea pigs.”

Mika joined her wife in front of the camera. “In June, our daughter, Sara will celebrate her twenty-ninth birthday. My gorgeous wife and I will be forever thirty-four.”

Stiles stopped listening when he realized he had an incredibly beautiful and talented actress who was ageless. Visions of Oscars flashed through his mind. Winning an Oscar was definitely on Stiles’ bucket list. He had to have Leah for the lead in his movie *The Catholic Murders*. All the members of the *Marked for Murder* staff had signed contracts to make the movie. All they needed was Leah.

##

As the spots for Queen’s Mirror began airing on television, sales of the serum skyrocketed. Every talk show host was clamoring for an appearance by Leah. She gave her first interview to Riley Rabbit. After all Riley had been instrumental in many of their media antics. For the first time, the beautiful TV star made the rounds of all the talk shows. By the end of the week, Queens Mirror was a household word.

Leah slipped on her pajama top but left it open. “Away from the babies, you are going to have to take care of this problem.” She waved her hand in front of her voluptuous breasts.

Mika caught her breath as Leah leaned over her and kissed her. She noticed Mika was reading Carlie’s book on the Catholic murders. “Is it a good book?”

“Until one reaches the last page,” Mika frowned. She picked up the book, opening it to the final page and began to read the last paragraph.

*It is common knowledge that Latimore Cruzar was an international hitman for hire. Although I apprehended the actual killer, I have no idea for whom he was working. I have a list of all the Catholic clergy killed. The list is written in perfect calligraphy. In my heart, I know the writer of the list is the one behind the Catholic murders.*

“Leah, I wrote that list,” Mika said softly. Her beautiful face was dark with concern.

“I know, darling.” She lay down beside Mika and pulled her lips to her breast. She comforted her as if she were one of her children. There was nothing sexual in her actions. There was only tenderness and love. She held Mika in her arms and kissed her gently. Leah caressed her and whispered to her all night, “Baby, baby.”

##

Harlan saw his wife enter the front door of Walmart. He scurried into the stockroom, hoping she wouldn't find him. She had raped him the night before and he had no desire to see her.

He had lost weight and worked out to improve his appearance for Crystal. It hadn't occurred to him that Delta would also find him more desirable. He shuddered as he recalled how her rough hands and chapped lips had aroused him to the point she could use him to satisfy herself. He had cursed himself for not being able to control his own body. The memory of her panting and grunting made him ill. He locked himself in the bathroom and threw up.

After a long time, he emerged from the bathroom and slowly walked from the stockroom. Hopefully, she was gone.

##

“I need to go check on things at the lodge this weekend,” Harlan informed Delta over lunch.’

“Oh, dear, I had hoped to go with you,” Delta slurred around the bite of sandwich in her mouth. “But Leah is back in town and has called for a meeting of the committee. I have to go.”

“Of course, you do, love bucket,” he smiled weakly. “I understand.”

He was almost giddy as he watched his wife head toward City Hall. If he hurried, he could get to their house, pack and be gone before she got home.

He stopped by the post office to pick up the mail from his post office box. An impressive envelope caught his attention as he discarded the sales catalogs and flyers. The envelope was silver and black. His name and address were written in white ink. The return address was the logo for his lodge. He smiled as he thought of spending the weekend with Crystal. It had been a month since his last visit. He knew she would be impressed with how good he looked.

He pulled a card from the envelope. It read, *Master Bacchus requests your presence at the Festival of Bacchus, March...*

He stopped reading, trying to wrap his mind around the fact that his coven would be meeting in March at his lodge. He didn't want them there. He didn't want them coming in contact with Crystal. He wondered who had called the meeting. He was Bacchus, but someone else always planned and carried out things in his name. He had to speak with Crystal.

##

Crystal wasn't in her office when he arrived. He carried his things to his room, and then returned to the restaurant. He had been too excited to eat today. He was hungry. He was trying to think of a good reason to refuse the coven's money. He was going to tell Crystal to cancel their reservation.

He had almost finished his club sandwich when Crystal found him. "They told me you were here." She smiled as she joined him.

Her eyes slid slowly over his body, admiring the new look. "My, you are very handsome, Harlan."

He blushed and ducked his head. Her scrutiny had sent the blood racing through his veins.

"You should have let me know you were coming," she said. "I would have planned something special."

"That is why I didn't. I didn't want you to do extra work for me. You have enough to do."

She placed her soft hand on his. "I like to do things to please you," she said intimately.

"There is something I want to discuss with you," Harlan said. "I don't like this Bacchus Society using our facilities."

Crystal smiled slightly, tilted her head and stood, holding her hand out to him. "I want to show you something," she said.

Holding his hand, she led him to her office.

"This is the contract they signed with us," she said handing him a neatly typed and signed stack of papers.

The contract was for three days and four nights at the lodge. The coven had contracted for every room in the facility and the event center. The contract was for four-hundred thousand dollars. Added, expected requirements for catering and receptions would easily run the expenditure over half-a-million dollars.

"I don't believe it would be a very sound fiscal decision to try to get out of this contract," Crystal declared. "I didn't think there would be a problem. I certainly wouldn't have accepted their booking, if I had known you would disapprove of it."

Harlan nodded silently.

"The gentleman I dealt with seemed very nice," Crystal continued.

"Do you know anything about them?" Harlan asked.

“No, just that they gave me a fifty percent deposit when they signed the contract.” Crystal showed him a copy of the check stapled to the back of the contract. She sat down at her computer and quickly pulled up the lodge’s banking account on line. “The check cleared okay and the funds are in our account. What is your objection to them?”

Harlan didn’t want to tell her he knew they were a coven of witches. He didn’t want her to know he was their leader. He wasn’t even certain he was their leader. He really didn’t know his status in the cloaked group. He actually wanted to forget he had ever heard of them.

He had gone to one of their meetings in the old barn and they had made him feel good about himself. He felt important, but the killing of live animals had turned his stomach and he was beginning to think they weren’t as harmless as he had thought. He was certain the increase in livestock mutilations was connected to the coven.

He had been desperately trying to find a way to extricate himself from Delta and had decided witchcraft would do the trick. Although it was obvious, there were no true witches or warlocks in the coven, the meetings had been fun and exciting. The cloak and hood had emboldened him. It was easy to be aggressive and witty when no one knew who you were.

Now he was the owner of a successful business making more money than he could ever spend. He no longer had to tolerate his wife’s constant emasculation. He had been trying to get up the nerve to tell her he wanted a divorce.

“Harlan!” Crystal’s soft hand on his arm pulled him back to the present. “I asked you why you object to the Bacchus Society.”

“I don’t,” he said. “I, um nothing. You are doing a wonderful job of keeping the lodge booked. I appreciate your excellent work.”

“Then perhaps you will join me for dinner tonight.” She smiled.

“I would love to.”

They dined, drank wine and danced until after midnight. He knew he was falling in love with his general manager and he didn't care. Holding her so close, inhaling her perfume, and basking in her silver laughter, made him want to move into the lodge full time.

She walked him to the elevator as the lights went out in the restaurant. “Breakfast in the morning,” she raised a quizzical brow.

“I would like that.” He overcame the urge to lean down and kiss her.

“Did I mention that I really like the new Harlan?” She smiled almost shyly as the elevator door closed between them.

##

Harlan showered and shaved, just in case he was lucky enough to have a visit from his unknown lover. He was certain it was Crystal, but she was so aloof, he wasn't positive. Still, who else would touch him like that?

As in the past, he slipped between the sheets naked. The wine and thoughts of Crystal soon merged into a deep sleep. He jerked awake, as he felt someone lie down beside him. For the first time, she was in his bed, pressing the length of her body against his.

He held his breath; afraid he would scare her away. He lay still as she ran her soft hands from his chest, across his abdomen and to his manhood. She gasped as she encountered the evidence of his desire for her. No woman had ever affected him the way she did.

He slowly moved his hand to touch her. For the first time, he realized she was naked too. He inhaled sharply as he touched her full, soft breasts. He wished he could look into her eyes. She moaned softly as he began to caress her breasts. He had never imagined a woman could feel so

wonderful. She was soft and silky. Her lips drove him crazy as she kissed her way down his body.

He desperately wanted to please her as she was pleasing him. As his body took over and his mind stopped functioning, he threw his head back and groaned loudly. His hands reached for her head, but she was gone.

##

Leah was looking at the bogus photos of her and Mika. She couldn't imagine who would be vicious enough to try to tear them apart. She slid the photos back into her desk drawer when Trudy opened her office door.

"Madam Mayor," Trudy winked at her, "your last interview is here."

Leah was ready for the interview process to be completed. She was not ready for the man that filled her doorway.

At six-foot-five, and two-hundred-forty pounds, Clinton Dade's presence was overpowering. Dade had spent three years playing professional football for the Arizona Cardinals, before a reoccurring hamstring injury ended his career.

"Mr. Dade." Leah motioned for him to sit down, "Thank you for interviewing for this position."

She scanned his application as he settled his powerful frame into the visitor's chair that looked like a toy with him sitting in it. He had a Master of Science in Forensic Science Degree from the University of California at Davis. He had served as the police chief of Flagstaff, AZ with a population over sixty-five thousand. He was an expert marksman with a handgun. She wondered why he was in Texas.

"Tell me why you want this job," Leah said.

She observed him as he talked. He was ruggedly handsome. His grey eyes were clear and alert. His thick brown hair needed a trim. He looked older than his thirty-

eight years. His eyes held an agony she recognized. She had seen it in the mirror when she thought she had lost her wife.

She had called the mayor of Flagstaff to inquire about Dade. The only blemish on his record was bouts of deep depression. She decided to take a chance and hire Clinton Dade.

“How does Mrs. Dade feel about living in Texas?” She watched as his eyes narrowed and the creases in his forehead deepened.

“There is no Mrs. Dade,” he said flatly.

“When can you start work?” She needed all the abilities he had, especially the forensic capabilities.

“Tomorrow.” Dade smiled a slow measured smile. “You mean I have the job?”

“Yes. Be in my office tomorrow morning at eight. See Trudy on your way out. She will take care of the paperwork and give you the address of the company that does our uniforms.” She smiled slightly, “Can you get a haircut between now and then?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The chair creaked loudly as he stood. For the first time his smile touched his eyes. “You won’t regret this Mayor Cross. You will have the best darn police department in Texas.

“I believe you,” she agreed.

He smiled back. The first time he had smiled at a woman in a very long time.

## Chapter 4

At seven-thirty, Clinton Dade was eating breakfast at Lucile's. The uniform company had been able to fit him and his thick black hair was stylishly trimmed. He hoped Mayor Cross would approve of how he looked. He welcomed the weight of his Glock against his hip. He glanced down at the badge attached to his belt. It felt good to be back in law enforcement.

"I gotta' say you certainly look good in your new uniform," Lucile grinned as she refilled his coffee cup. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"No," Dade said.

"I'm Lucile. I own this diner."

"Clinton Dade, my friends call me Clint."

"Clint it is." Lucile laughed. She liked the handsome giant.

"Mayor Cross didn't say what happened to the last police chief," Clint gently prodded Lucile.

"Thanks to her, he is in jail," Lucile said, "along with the former mayor, and all his crooked cronies."

"She seems to be very no-nonsense," Clint nodded.

"She's a good lady," Lucile agreed. "Very strong sense of right and wrong. She's an honest-to-God ethical politician."

The diner door opened, and Delta Davis stopped so suddenly, her husband ran into her back, sending her stumbling toward Clint's table.

"You clumsy fool," Delta turned and hissed Harlan.

"I am so sorry, dear," Harlan mumbled.

"You must be our new police chief," Delta quickly surveyed Clint. "If you're as good as you look, I'd say the mayor did a good job hiring you. I'm Delta Davis. This is my husband Harlan."

Harlan hesitantly extended his hand to Clint. The new chief shook hands and stood up. Clinton Dade didn't just stand up. It took several seconds for the tall man to rise from a sitting position to his full height. He was impressive.

"It is almost eight." He smiled, "The mayor will be expecting me. It was a pleasure to meet you both."

As he walked to City Hall, Clint wondered why Harlan Davis had married Delta. Harlan was an attractive man, especially when he smiled. Delta was overweight and overbearing. Mayor Leah Cross flashed across his mind. She was just the opposite of Delta. Leah was gracious and gorgeous. She was his ideal woman. Clint had noticed the wedding ring on her hand. Pity! She was the first woman he had looked at since the death of his wife.

##

"Is that city issued," Leah gestured toward the Glock on Clint's hip.

"My personal gun." Clint grimaced. "I prefer a familiar gun. It's like an old friend."

Leah nodded. "We have an indoor firing range behind the fire station."

She led him to his office. The stack of files in the Open Cases bin told him he had plenty of work to do.

"We have sixteen police officers and nine cars," the mayor was all business. "You will have your own car and will be on call twenty-four, seven. Here are keys to all the city buildings and your patrol car. Here are the final employment forms you will need to fill out and give to Trudy by the end of the day.

"I expect all paperwork on my desk every Friday. We will have a meeting at eight every Monday morning to go over any concerns you might have and to answer any questions I might have. Do you have any questions?"

"I am sure I will after I wade through those files." Clint grinned. "I do have one question. Are you free for lunch?"

“No,” the mayor smiled happily, “I have a standing luncheon engagement with my wife.

“I will be in my office all morning, if you need to ask me any questions. We have a meeting with all your officers at four-thirty this afternoon. That will make it convenient for the ones going off duty and the ones coming on. The officers on the red-eye shift are also attending the meeting. I want to introduce you to them as soon as possible. I had Trudy pull all their personal files so you can peruse them.”

##

Harlan was nervous. He paced the floor in Jacob Cross’ waiting room. He knew Cross was a trial lawyer, but he was the only lawyer in town except Baird Stanton. Baird was a friend. Harlan didn’t want to discuss the possibility of divorcing Delta with him.

Jacob greeted Harlan with a smile. “Mr. Davis, please come in. How can I help you?”

Harlan plunged in headfirst. “I know this isn’t your field but I am considering divorcing Delta and I need some legal advice on the matter.”

“I don’t practice family law,” Jacob scowled, “but I can probably answer your questions. Is there no hope of salvaging your marriage? Have you two tried counseling with my Mika?”

“The answer to both your questions is no,” Harlan said.

Jacob had been raised to believe in the sanctity of marriage. He hated to see a couple break their commitments to one another. He still remembered how shocked he had been to learn that not all married couples loved one another as his parents did.

“You no longer feel any of the love you once felt for Mrs. Davis, when you married her?”

“I...I never loved her,” Harlan admitted. “Delta and I attended the same university. My senior year, I met her at a sorority party. She was pretty and skinny. She looked

nothing like she does now. We struck up a friendship and dated six or seven times, nothing serious.

“One night she invited me to a sorority-fraternity mix and mingle party, at a place called Belvedere ranch. There was liquor everywhere along with drugs and marijuana. I didn’t like it and wanted to leave. Delta started teasing me about being a sissy, so I agreed to stay for a couple of drinks.

“I don’t know what happened. I woke up the next morning in bed with Delta. We were both naked. She told me I had been wonderful all night. I swear, I don’t recall anything.

“She became very possessive of me and started dropping little hints about marriage. I didn’t love her. I did not intend to marry her. About six weeks after the party, she informed me she was pregnant. Of course, I did the honorable thing and married her as soon as possible.

“About three months after our wedding, I overheard her telling a friend she had tricked me and she wasn’t pregnant. That she was going to pretend to miscarry and that is what she did. She doesn’t know I am aware of how she duped me.

“How long have you been married?” Jacob asked.

“Twelve years. Honestly, it was nice to have her money, but even that no longer makes it bearable. I recently inherited a very profitable business and no longer have to tolerate her. I really only have one question. Can she get my inheritance in the divorce?”

“No,” Jacob said. “As long as you do not commingle the funds, she can’t touch your inheritance.”

“Good.” Harlan smiled. “I will go to a divorce lawyer in Cleburne. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.”

##

March brought soft rainy nights and Texas bluebonnets. Leah marveled at how the flowers had covered the countryside almost overnight.

Everything was running smoothly. Chief Dade had taken charge of the police department. The other officers liked and respected him.

Queen's Mirror had been a tremendous success. The newly completed production facility was working three shifts to fill orders from all over the world. The hospital was almost complete. Every floor displayed state-of-the-art medical equipment. The east wing of the hospital was still under construction. It was progressing slower than the rest of the facility. It housed the administration offices, and all the electrical, heating and cooling equipment that serviced the entire facility.

Mika was anxious about the construction on the church. She knew it would be another year before the hospital and research labs were finished.

"Can we bring in a new crew to construct the church?" She sat on the corner of Lexi's desk as they discussed ways to move the church construction along faster.

"We could," Lexi frowned, "but it would mean using people with whom I am not familiar. I prefer to use my own team. I trust them. I am going to check the basement of the east wing. They installed the heating and cooling systems this week. I want to make certain we got what we ordered, and everything is functioning properly. Want to come with me?"

"Sure," Mika nodded. "Let me text Leah and let her know where we are."

##

Lexi placed her hand on the security screen and waited as the device scanned her for entry. She tripped the switch that flooded the basement with light. Everything was silver and shiny against the white walls. Rows of air-conditioning units and back-up generators filled the area. Huge pipes ran the length of the ceiling carrying air, heat and electricity wherever needed.

“That is an impressive security system.” Mika frowned. “Is it really necessary?”

“These natural-gas generators will carry the facility indefinitely,” Lexi pointed out the units as she and Mika walked deeper into the cavernous room. “They are the very best back-up generators money can buy. They are also exceedingly expensive and potentially dangerous should anyone want to wreak havoc on our facility. Considering the message written in chicken blood on our walls, yes, I think it is really necessary.”

Mika nodded. “I trust your judgement in these things,” she smiled. “I wasn’t questioning your decisions. It is just difficult to imagine anyone wanting to damage a facility whose only function is to save lives.”

##

Leah watched from her office window as her wife and Lexi walked to the hospital. As they disappeared, she glanced at Mika’s text message again, “Checking basement of left wing with Lexi. Coffee in 30 at Lucile’s?”

She smiled as she recalled how she had awakened Mika earlier that morning.

A low rumbling sound tore her from her thoughts of their lovemaking. The ground shook. She watched in horror as the east wing of the hospital slowly collapsed. Clouds of smoke and dust billowed into the sky filling the space where the hospital wing had been.

Fighting the urge to transport to Mika, she bypassed the elevator and ran down the stairs and out the front door of City Hall. Jacob was running toward her. “What happened,” He screamed.

“Sounded like an explosion.” Clint joined them in the street.

“Jacob!” Leah crumbled against her son, “Mika and Lexi are in there.”

“No, Mom.” He assured her. “I just left them fifteen minutes ago.”

She showed him the text message Mika had sent her.

“Oh, God,” he cried, as flames began to lick the sky above the hospital.

Clint was already on the phone. “Get every emergency response vehicle we have to the hospital,” he growled. “Call Cleburne for backup.”

The two men followed the mayor as she began to run toward the destruction. Clint caught her arm. “You should wait here,” he said.

“My wife is in there,” Leah cried. No further explanation was needed.

Both of Godley’s firetrucks were pouring water onto the burning building. She struggled with every instinct in her to keep from lifting the debris from the east wing and hurling it into space. Once she was out of sight of others, she tried to transport to Mika. Nothing happened. She could hear the heavy equipment moving into place to begin hauling away the crumbled cement and steel.

Her eyes turned darker as a threatening thunderstorm swept across the midday sky producing a wall of heavy rain. Everyone halted, seeking refuge from the torrential downpour. The fire was out in less than a minute.

She telepathed to Sara. “Mika is in danger. I need you all, now.”

Within minutes, she had assembled her six oldest children in her office. She had used her cellphone to locate Mika’s phone.

“Mika is here,” she pointed to the east-wing basement on the building plans. “I am unable to transport to her. She must be hurt. You two enter from the east, you two from the west, you two from the north and I will enter from the south.

“We will meet here, in the center of the basement.”

“Madam Mayor,” the fire chief stopped her and her children, “You can’t go in there. The structure is dangerous.”

The chief stumbled backwards as he gazed into reflective black eyes. The look on her face told him not to get in her way. He motioned for his men to let the family pass.

Leah transported to Mika's cellphone location. She looked around but saw no sign of her wife. She pulled her cellphone from her pocket and quickly dialed Mika's phone. Light, flashing from beneath a steel beam, caught her attention. She instantly moved the twisted steel and concrete away and picked up the cell. Mika was not there.

She made her way through the slabs of concrete and daggers of rebar, hoping she was headed toward her wife. She could hear soft crying from the other side of a concrete wall. She wondered if she dared simply materializing on the other side. She decided that was dangerous and began looking for a mortal way to get to the other side.

After searching for several minutes, she lit up the dark area she was searching. Two slabs leaned against each other, creating a small passageway to the other side. She wiggled through the opening. Lexi was sitting with Mika's head resting on her lap. Leah materialized a flashlight and swung the beam around the small area.

"Mika is dead," Lexi sobbed hysterically as she caressed the bloodied cheek of the priest.

Leah surveyed the still, lifeless form of her wife. Obviously, the steel beam and slab that now penned her against the floor had fallen on Mika's head. Blood flowed from a deep gash that ran from the top of her head to her brows. It had almost halved Mika's brain. *At least it didn't sever her head*, Leah thought. She quickly gave thanks to God that her wife was still alive.

"Has she been unconscious all this time?" the mayor asked Lexi. She scowled briefly as she noticed Lexi's lipstick on Mika's lips.

Sobbing less hysterically, Lexi nodded. “I...I couldn’t free her or stop the bleeding, so I just held her. I was trying to comfort her.”

“Stand up,” Leah ordered the dazed woman. “When I lift this, you pull her out from under it.”

Lexi obeyed, knowing it was fruitless. There was no way the petite mayor could move the steel and concrete slab.

“Pull now,” Leah commanded loudly.

Lexi pulled, amazed that the woman was actually lifting the weight from her wife.

“She’s clear,” Lexi sobbed.

Leah slowly lowered the slab.

“Mom, Mika,” Sara and Jacob inched into the space. “Lexi, are you okay?”

“Thanks to your mother,” Lexi frowned, not certain what she had just witnessed.

“Sara, take Lexi to safety.” Leah began giving orders. “Jacob, help me with Mika. She is unconscious.”

“Oh, my God, Mom,” Sara gasped as she looked at her mother’s head wound. “This is serious.”

“Go, go,” Leah yelled. “We need to get her to the hospital.”

##

With Lexi gone, Leah placed her hands on Mika and healed the gash in her head. She checked for any broken bones and found none. She left the blood and dirt on her. She desperately wanted to transport Mika home, but she knew they had to show up at the hospital with her, or people would talk. As Jacob carried Mika from the wreckage, Clint and the fire chief rushed to them. Concerned hands placed Mika on a stretcher and slid her into the back of an ambulance.

“Huguley Hospital,” Leah instructed as she climbed into the back of the ambulance with her wife. It disturbed her that Mika was still unconscious.

Jacob and Sara rode in the patrol car with Clint.

##

Leah paced the corridor outside the examination room. She was fuming because the doctor had refused to let her stay with her wife. "I have a dozen other patients from this disaster," he had said sternly. "I can't have all their families in here. You wait outside!"

She briefly thought about turning the man into a ferret but decided Mika might actually need him. Breathing deeply, to calm herself, she stepped into the ladies' room and then invisibly transported to her wife's side. To her surprise, she found herself lying on top of Mika in a CAT scan machine. "This isn't good," she mumbled, as she willed herself to stand invisibly beside the device.

The door opened and several doctors rushed into the room. They examined Mika, and then prepared to run another scan. "I've never encountered anything like that before," the oldest doctor frowned. "It was as if she had two brains." He shook his head. "Has to be a machine malfunction. Let's try this again."

Leah stood silently, watching her wife. *Why is she unconscious? She should be fine.*

The machine stopped and doctors flooded the room. "This scan is more like it. We will have to schedule a meeting with the family," the senior doctor said, "in my office in fifteen minutes. I don't want to have this discussion in the waiting room."

As Leah walked from the ladies' room, the children surrounded her. "They want to meet with us," Adam took his mother's hand and led her to an elevator. "They want to discuss Mom's condition."

##

Leah shifted in her chair, crossing one leg over the other. When the doctor looked up from admiring her legs, he was surprised to find her dark eyes glaring at him. He

blushed, ashamed of his thoughts about a woman whose wife was injured.

“Ah, Mrs. Cross.” He searched for words, “Your wife seems to be just fine. She has no broken bones, no internal bleeding, no serious head injury, just a slight concussion. I can’t tell you why she is unconscious. Her brain patterns are like a woman in a coma, but I don’t think that is the case.”

Leah fought to maintain her self-control “So, what you are saying is that my wife is unconscious, and you have no idea why?”

The doctor nodded. He avoided making eye contact with her.

“What is her room number?” Leah said softly. “I need to be with her.”

##

Four days later, Leah pulled her chair closer to Mika’s bed and grasped her hand between hers. She searched the faces of her children and saw the same concern that showed in her eyes. “She will be okay,” she assured them. “It will just take some time. Would you all go home and take care of the younger children? I don’t want them to get scared when Mika doesn’t come home.”

After the children left, she studied the machines connected to her wife. She understood the readings on most of them but wasn’t certain on some of them. The one that disturbed her most was the one connected to her wife by a tube, through a small hole in the top of her head. Mika had been like this for four days.

Leah fell asleep praying for her wife. She awoke the next morning to a soft knock on the door.

“May I come in,” Jennifer opened the door. She held a fresh cup of coffee toward her mother-in-law.

“Yes, please.” Leah smiled weakly at her daughter-in-law.

“Has there been any change?” The young doctor asked as she checked the readings on the machines.

“I haven’t noticed any.” Leah frowned. “She hasn’t moved.”

Jennifer flipped through the information on the clipboard at the foot of Mika’s bed. “She has some swelling of the brain that seems to be pushing down on the brain stem.”

“What does that affect?”

“If it continues, it can damage the Reticular Activating System.” Jennifer frowned. “That is the part of the brain that is responsible for arousal and awareness.”

“Oh,” Leah whispered.

“It appears they are treating it, so the swelling should subside.” Jennifer checked the machines again. “Everything else is very normal.”

Leah leaned over her wife and placed her hands on any place she could find on her head that didn’t have an electrode. The readings on the machine instantly changed to normal. Jennifer studied the readings on the monitor.

“That is amazing,” Jennifer smiled, as she watched the ICP Monitor. She should wake soon.”

“What is that monitoring,” Leah gestured toward a monitor.

“It is an intracranial pressure monitor,” Jennifer explained.

Jennifer’s cellphone dinged a message from her wife. “Sara,” she smiled. “All the children are frantic with worry.”

“I know,” Leah grimaced. “Tell them to come. She will want to see them when she awakens.”

Jennifer stepped from the room to call her wife and give them the good news.

Leah’s heart stopped as her wife’s strong hand gripped hers tighter. Mika moved slightly in the bed, and drowsily opened her wonderful blue eyes. Leah silently thanked God for her wife.

“Mika, darling.” Leah bent over the bed and kissed her lips lightly. “I was so scared. I love you so much. Until Jennifer came in, I didn’t know what to fix.”

Mika’s eyes met hers as a smile slowly moved across her lips.

“Mom!” Sara burst into the room followed by the older children. “Jennifer said Mika was awake.”

The children surrounded Mika’s bed and began to bombard her with questions.

“Children,” Leah admonished them, “Mika has been through a very traumatic experience. Give her some room. Did you all transport here?”

The children sheepishly nodded, yes.

“Leave instantly and return as any normal mortal would.” She scowled at her offspring. They all disappeared, taking Dr. Jenifer Jordon with them.

“They are young,” she explained. “They were so worried about you. So was I.”

“My children.” Mika smiled.

“No doubt about it darling.” Leah kissed her lightly. “They are the very image of you or me.”

Mika studied her for a long time. She was incredibly beautiful, exquisite. “Who are you?”

Leah tried to hide her shock at Mika’s question. “I am Leah Cross, your wife, darling.”

The vacant stare from Mika told Leah she had no idea who she was.

“Do you know who you are?” She watched Mika’s eyes, but saw no sigh of recognition.

“I...I.” Confusion twisted Mika’s beautiful face as she tried to find an answer to her question.

“You are Mika Cross,” Leah said softly. “You and I have been married thirty-five years and have fourteen wonderful children.”

“Those were some of our children that just left?”

“Yes.” Leah nodded. “Our oldest. They are all so wonderful.”

Mika frowned, “You can’t possibly be a day over thirty.”

“I am thirty-four,” she informed Mika. “I have no idea how old you are. You and I are immortal. You are an angel and I am a witch.”

Mika smiled broadly as if comprehending what she was saying. “You are just making fun of me, aren’t you? I truly don’t remember anything.”

“Maybe you will remember this.” She leaned down and kissed her softly, slowly increasing the pressure on Mika’s lips as she moved her full lips against Mika’s. As she drew back from the kiss, she watched her eyes, waiting for some sign of recognition.

“I’ll never forget it.” Mika grinned. “You are an incredible kisser.”

“That’s it! That is all you have to say?”

“Surely you don’t expect me to believe we are the parents of children who look the same age as us.” Mika looked at her incredulously. “Let me see, and oh, yeah, you are a witch and I am an angel. We are immortal. What part of anything I just repeated sounds sane?”

“Priest Mika, it is good to have you back with us,” the doctor entered the room. He checked Mika and noted all the readings on the monitors were now normal. “Barring any unforeseen problems, you should be able to go home tomorrow.”

Mika was silent, only answering the doctor’s questions. She waited until the doctor left the room to speak to Leah.

“He called me Priest Mika?” The priest frowned. “Am I a Catholic Priest?”

“Yes,” Leah said cautiously.

“A married, Catholic Priest? Miss, I don’t know who I am, but I do know nothing you have told me makes sense.”

Leah ran her hands through her dark hair, trying to think of something that would bring back the woman she had married. “You should try to rest,” she said.

Mika leaned back on the hospital bed and surveyed the dark-haired beauty that was still holding her hand. She was without a doubt the most beautiful woman Mika had ever seen. She looked tired and worried.

“Why don’t you go home and get some sleep,” Mika said. “You can come back for me tomorrow.”

“I am fine,” Leah smiled slightly. “I’d rather stay here with you.”

##

As she watched her wife sleep peacefully, Leah wondered what had caused the explosion that had destroyed over a year’s work and almost killed Mika and Lexi. Lexi had escaped unscathed, and physically Mika was fine. Mentally was another matter. *How could she not know who I am? She is my life!*

A soft knock on the door announced the early-morning arrival of Clint Dade. “May I come in,” he whispered.

Leah nodded and stood to move to the foot of Mika’s bed so they wouldn’t disturb the sleeping woman.

“The fire chief and I have worked around the clock, trying to identify the source of the explosion,” Clint said softly. “Leah, this was no accident.”

Leah’s hand shook slightly, as she passed it over her eyes, as if trying to wipe away the cobwebs from her mind. “You mean someone intentionally caused that destruction?”

“Yeah.” Clint grimaced. “And it was no accident it happened while Priest Mika and Lexi were in the basement.” Clint held up a mangled device. “This is a detonator. It is designed to detonate remotely whenever the bomber wanted. Apparently, they wanted it to go off when Mika and Lexi were in the basement.”

Clint caught the mayor as her knees buckled. She leaned against him for support. “Why don’t we go to Lucile’s and have a cup of coffee? We don’t want to wake Priest Mika anyway.”

“No,” Leah pulled away from the arms of the police chief and walked toward her chair beside the bed. “They will release her before lunch. I will take her home, and return to my office. Please have all the information you and Fire Chief Arthur can compile ready for me then.”

“One more thing, this was perpetrated by someone on the inside. Your fence and security measures only allow those with clearance into the construction site,” Clint informed her.

##

The doctor gave Mika a clean bill of health and released her. Leah drove in silence as the priest looked at her surroundings, trying to find anything she recognized. She slyly shifted her gaze to the woman beside her. *If I were going to be married, she would definitely be my first choice,* she thought as a slight smile crossed her lips.

Leah was happy to learn that she could still read Mika’s thoughts. She wondered if Mika could read hers.

As they drove through the blip in the road that was Godly, Mika frowned at the blackened ruins at the end of Main Street. “Is that where the explosion occurred?”

Leah nodded. “Hopefully, it only affected the east wing. Structural engineers are in route to verify the safety of the rest of the hospital.”

The rest of the ride was pleasant with Mika asking occasional questions. “How many children do we have?”

“Fourteen,” she smiled shyly, “Seven sets of twins.”

Mika blatantly scanned her body. “You look like a model or a movie star,” she complimented. “You certainly don’t look like you have given birth to fourteen children or seven sets of twins.”

“I told you—

“I know, I know,” she interrupted, “we are immortal. That’s why I have no idea who I am.”

Leah turned off the main highway onto the paved road that led through a heavy iron gate, to the hacienda.

“Was anyone hurt in the explosion?”

“Nothing serious.” Leah shrugged. “Thank God no one was killed.”

“How did it happen?”

“I don’t know yet,” Leah said. “When I get back to the office, there should be a full report waiting for me.”

Mika scowled at her trying to figure out why she would command such quick action.

“I am the mayor,” Leah said. “I asked for a full report after lunch. I have no doubt there will be one.”

From the tone of her voice, Mika was certain few people would fail to comply with her requests.

“What do our children call me?”

“Mika,” she smiled as if the name pleased her.

“What do they call you?”

“From the very first child, you taught them to call me Queen Mommy.” She laughed.

“Yes.” Mika smiled, “You are very regal. I can see where Queen Mommy would suit you.”

“How do we handle this with the children?” Leah asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you want to tell them you have no memory of them or their mother or do you want to pretend everything is normal and hope your memory returns?”

“I suppose it would be very disconcerting to find that someone you loved didn’t know who you were,” Mika said thoughtfully.

“You have no idea how painful it is,” Leah said softly.

“Leah, I would never intentionally hurt you. I will trust you to lead us through this. Just tell me what to do.”

“I think we should act as normal as possible,” she bit her full, lower lip. “I will tell the children that you need to rest. We will keep you away from them as much as we can until your memory returns.”

Mika nodded. “Can you give me a run down on each of the children? Tell me their names and outstanding qualities.”

Leah described each of their children and their talents. Mika smiled broadly when she told her about their four-month-old twins Eden and Aaron.

“Who do they look like?”

“Me,” she smiled.

“They must be very beautiful.” Mika glanced at her shyly.

##

“This is our home?” Mika asked as Leah pulled through the gate and into the courtyard of the hacienda. “Wow! They must pay you a lot to be mayor.”

“Mika!” Children of all ages clamored around the vehicle as Leah parked.

A dark, handsome man, who looked like Leah, opened Mika’s car door. “We were worried about you, Mika.” He smiled “But we knew Queen Mommy would take care of you.”

A beautiful blonde woman hugged her tightly. “How do you feel, Mika?”

Leah moved quickly to Mika’s side. “Children, Mika has been through a very traumatic experience. Help me get her to our bedroom so she can lie down and rest.”

Two smaller children wrapped tiny arms around Mika’s legs as she walked. “We play horsey, Mika.” They smiled up at her.

Mika scooped both up into her arms and hugged them. They clung to her, hugging her tightly. “Maybe after dinner tonight,” she replied.

Leah led her through their home to their bedroom.

“This is huge.” Mika looked around their bedroom suite, “And beautiful. It is so peaceful, like a sanctuary.”

“Just make yourself at home,” Leah said. “I am going to take a much needed shower.”

Mika walked around the room, looking at the children’s photographs hanging on the wall. They were precisely hung, in beautiful groupings. There were several of Leah sitting in her lap, holding two babies. The way Mika looked at Leah in the photos told her she had been deeply in love with Leah. Mika wished she could remember.

A knock on the door brought her out of her thoughts. She opened the door.

“Priest Mika.” A middle-aged woman looked delighted as she thrust two beautiful babies toward her. “We are so glad you are home. Everyone was very worried about you.”

Mika automatically took the babies and held them tightly against her. They felt good in her arms. She smiled. “It is good to be home.”

“I will leave the babies with you. Leah wanted them to nurse before she went back to the office.” The woman backed from the room, pulling the door closed behind her.

Mika sat on the sofa, comfortably holding a baby on each arm. They cooed and nuzzled her as if searching for their food. “Easy, little ones.” She laughed, “Mommy will be here soon.”

Wearing a short dressing gown Leah leaned against the doorjamb and watched Mika as she talked to the babies, gently bouncing them in her arms.

“It is lunch time for them,” she smiled as she walked toward Mika.

*God, she is gorgeous,* Mika thought. She couldn’t help noticing her long, shapely legs.

Leah beamed knowing Mika found her attractive.

She sat down beside Mika on the sofa. “If you will give me one of them, I will feed them.”

Mika gently placed one of the babies into her arms. Although she was fascinated and wanted to watch, she turned her head away, when Leah uncovered her breast and placed her nipple in the baby's tiny mouth.

"This is Eden. See how long her lashes are and how beautifully her eyebrows arch naturally. Aaron is a little bigger and has thicker eyebrows.

"You can watch," Leah murmured. "You have always said there is nothing sweeter than a nursing baby. Unless it makes you uneasy."

"No," Mika said. "They are beautiful. Uh, um, the babies, I mean. I turned away out of respect for you. I was afraid it might make you uncomfortable."

"I have always enjoyed sharing this time with you and them." Her smile was glorious.

After both babies had nursed, Leah placed them back into Mika's arms. "Would you mind taking them to the nursery while I get dressed?"

"I would be happy to." Mika looked down at the sleeping babies.

Leah opened the bedroom door for Mika and stepped into the hallway.

"You will have to tell me where the nursery is," Mika said sheepishly.

"Go through the kitchen and down the hallway on the right. First door to your right is the nursery. Nana will be there."

Mika returned the babies to the nanny and quickly rejoined Leah.

"You should probably try to rest until I return home," Leah suggested.

"What time will you be home?" Mika asked.

"No later than six," she promised. She automatically tiptoed to kiss her goodbye. Mika didn't withdraw from her, but she didn't respond either.

Leah read the reports the police and fire chief had left on her desk. She was astounded that someone would want to kill Mika and Lexi, but it was evident that was the case.

Clint pushed her door open as he knocked on it. "May I come in?"

"Yes, please. I was just about to call you. I see we have hit a brick wall on leads."

"Yes. I have determined the explosive used was military-grade C4." Clint settled his lanky frame into her visitor's chair and continued. "Immediately after the explosion, I made a personal visit to the Naval Air Station in Ft. Worth. They called me this morning. They can't account for fifty M112 block, demolition charge kits. That is a little over sixty-two pounds of C4. It looks like the blasting device was a cheap little fireworks detonating device anyone can order from e-bay for around fifteen dollars.

"The good news is the perps used all their C4 to bring down your hospital, so we don't have to worry about them blowing up anything else right now."

Leah nodded.

"I was able to pull a partial print from the detonating device," he continued. "Unfortunately, it doesn't match anything in any of our data bases."

"It has been over a week since the explosion," she said. "How is Lexi?"

"Pretty shaken, but not hurt," Clint answered. "She is more concerned that her building schedule is off than for her own safety. She keeps asking about Priest Mika. How is she?"

"She is fine." Leah frowned as she recalled Lexi's lipstick on Mika's lips. She will be back in the office tomorrow."

"That's good," Clint nodded, as he checked his watch. "It is almost two. Why don't we finish this conversation over lunch at Lucile's?"

"A cup of coffee would be wonderful," Leah said.

##

Mika was in the courtyard with the children when Leah returned home. She sat in the car and watched her family talking and laughing. The children had been on a trail ride. They were going to the barn to take care of their horses. A full chorus of Queen Mommy greeted her as she joined them. Mika nodded to her.

Jacob raised an eyebrow as he noticed Mika's unusual greeting to his mother.

Leah changed clothes, fed the babies and sat down to catch her breath before dinner.

"Is everything okay?" Mika asked.

"No," she huffed, "there is definite evidence of evil connected to the explosion. Clint found traces of C4 and the remains of the detonator. Obviously, someone was trying to kill you. I don't believe they wanted to kill Lexi. She would have simply been collateral damage."

Mika frowned. "Why would anyone want to kill me?"

"You have always been extremely active in the Catholic Church. You led the movement to do away with the requirement that priest must be men and celibate. Some in the church resent you for bringing about changes.

"Do you remember anything about New York?" Leah watched Mika's eyes as she struggled to grasp a memory.

"No," she said.

"Mom, Mika, dinner is ready," Jacob tapped on their door.

##

Mika quietly watched her children as they laughed and exchanged stories about their day.

Eleven-year-olds Eve and Paul informed their parents they had been reprimanded for standing up to the bully in their class.

"Billy Ray Stuart," Eve said. "His mom used to be PTA president. He bullies Paul all the time."

“I will speak to Principal Day,” Leah said.

“No, Mom.” Paul frowned. “I can handle it. If you come to school and defend me, then everyone will think I am a mama’s boy.”

Mika nodded in agreement with her son.

After dinner, everyone moved to the family room.

“I get Mika for my horse tonight,” Athena squealed grabbing Mika’s hand and tugging her to the floor.

“Looks like it is you and me, Buddy.” Jacob fell onto all fours so Luke could climb on his back.

Mika crawled around in the middle of the floor, watching her son to see what they were supposed to do. She glanced nervously at Leah. She needed to provide her more details about their family life.

“Come on, Mika,” Jacob laughed. “We can’t race until we line up.”

Leah could tell Mika was confused and unsure what to do. “Everyone knows the rules,” Leah said, “through the dining room, down the hallway and back in here. First horse and rider to come through the door wins. Ready, set, go!”

After playtime, the children did their homework, and then headed for the shower. Mika sat in the easy chair in front of the fireplace instead of her usual place on the sofa beside her wife.

“It has been a long day,” Leah stood. “I am going to get ready for bed.”

Mika nodded and continued to sit in the chair as her wife left the room

“Is everything okay between you and mom?” Jacob looked questioningly at Mika.

“Yes, why do you ask?”

“You don’t seem like yourself tonight. You didn’t kiss mom hello, when she came home from work. You haven’t kissed her all evening. You didn’t sit by her on the sofa. You always sit on the sofa, with her tucked under your arm.”

“Oh,” Mika tried to think of something to explain her behavior. “I am still a little addled from the accident, but I am fine. I’d better join your mother. She will be looking for me.” She stood and left the room.

Mika found Leah in their garden. She was in her pajamas. The moonlight reflected from her dark hair. Mika joined her, sitting in a comfortable garden swing for two.

“If we are going to hide the fact that I have amnesia,” Mika said, “you will need to give me more information about our normal routine. Jacob just asked me if everything is okay between you and me.”

Leah nodded. “Our children would be the first to notice anything different. The most glaring thing was your lack of affection for me. You always kiss me hello and goodbye. You are always stealing kisses and hugging me. You love my lips. When we sit, we always sit together. I can’t even begin to tell you how cold and lonely it was on that sofa tonight.”

“Leah, I am so sorry. I...I...Just tell me what to do. I will do it.”

“I keep thinking a light will come on in those wonderful blue eyes and everything will be okay,” she hung her head. “Do you pray?”

“I...I haven’t,” Mika said softly. “I tried. I just couldn’t find the words.”

Mika looked down at her. The moonlight glistened in the tears Leah was fighting to control. She could see why she would love Leah’s lips. They were full and beautiful. Mika fought the urge to kiss her. “I need to take a shower.” She stood abruptly and left.

Mika put on her pajamas and walked into their bedroom. She felt awkward and uneasy. The only light in the room was the lamp on her bedside table. Leah was sleeping on the sofa, her back to Mika.

“Are you asleep,” she whispered. Leah didn’t answer her.

Mika slid into bed and turned out the light. She tried to pray, but the words wouldn't come. Did she believe in God? She was certain she did. It appeared that God had been good to her.

Leah rolled over onto her back and stared at the stars through the skylight. She knew she couldn't sleep with Mika. She couldn't lay down beside her without touching her. She wanted to hold her. No, she wanted to make love to Mika. She wanted to clutch her to her, kiss her, and bite her. She wanted Mika to make her cry out. She wanted to rake her nails down Mika's back spurring her on. God she loved her.

Leah tried to clear her mind of her desire for Mika. Obviously, someone was still trying to kill her. She wondered if they had followed them from New York. This felt different. This felt like pure evil, like the demons in the mines. She had been careful not to use her magic. She feared she would further confuse Mika.

She fell asleep. For the first time in years, dreams haunted her: the laughing, leering face of her mother, demons reaching for her, slashing her with their claws. She tossed and turned, trying to escape nameless things that were overwhelming her, running past her. She jerked awake. Suddenly she realized the evil was ignoring her. It had come for her wife!

Leah lay awake the rest of the night, keeping watch over the woman she loved.

##

The smell of freshly brewed coffee pulled Mika from a deep sleep. *I remember I love a good cup of coffee*, she thought as her feet hit the floor. She walked into the kitchen to find her wife cooking pancakes. *I love pancakes too, her pancakes.*

Mika slid her arms around Leah and pulled her against her. She turned in Mika's arms and she kissed her good

morning. When Mika released her, Leah could tell by her eyes she was only doing what she had told her to do.

“Just in case we have observers,” Mika whispered in her ear.

“Coffee is ready, if you want to pour us a cup.” Leah’s smile was genuine. “I thought I’d make your favorite breakfast this morning.”

“Thank you,” Mika stole glances at her as she poured their coffee. “Um, this coffee is incredible.”

Leah had on no makeup. She looked tired. Mika knew she had stayed with her around the clock the week she was in the hospital. She was certain Leah hadn’t gotten much rest sleeping on the sofa last night. Tonight she would sleep on the sofa and give Leah the bed.

##

Leah parked their car in front of Mika’s office. She took her inside to facilitate an easy first meeting with Lexi. She had given Mika a run down on Lexi as they drove to work. She then took her across the street, and they had coffee at Lucile’s. Leah had laughingly told her about the way Lucile shamelessly flirted with her.

“It is about time you made an appearance, sweet cheeks.” Lucile chirped as Mika walked through the door. Mika smiled at the affable woman and caught her wife’s hand as if seeking protection.

“It is good to see you,” Lucile said seriously, as she placed two cups of coffee on the table. “I thought you were a goner when that building caved in.”

“I am fine,” Mika smiled. She stiffened as her wife ran the toe of her high heel down the calf of her leg. Mika’s eyes locked with Leah’s. *She is the most sensual woman on earth*, Mika thought.

“Darling,” Leah’s husky voice pulled Mika from her thoughts of Leah, “Lucile asked you if you wanted anything to eat.”

Mika shook her head no.

“I see the chamber folks are already setting up for the street dance, tonight.” Lucile watched out the window as police officers and city workers placed detour signs on each end of Main Street. “Is your family coming tonight?”

“Of course.” Leah beamed, “I am the mayor. I have to be here.”

The doorbell dinged and a handsome giant entered the restaurant. Mika surveyed him as he joked with Lucile. His uniform told the priest he was the local police chief. At six-three, Mika rarely met men taller than she, but the chief was a good two inches taller.

“Clint please join us.” Leah invited.

“Just coffee,” he informed Lucile as he slid into the booth beside the mayor. “I was hoping to find you here. His broad smile told Mika how happy he was to see Leah. “I need to go over the plans for tonight. This is my first street dance. I just want to be certain I have all the bases covered. I am glad to see you are feeling better, Priest Mika.” Clint concluded.

“Much better.” Mika nodded.

“I had better get into the office,” Leah said. “We have a lot to do today.”

Clint stood. “I can give you a ride.”

Mika caught her wife’s hand. “I will drive her over as soon as we finish our coffee.”

Clint nodded and left.

*She is jealous,* Leah thought as she watched her wife’s face. *That is a good sign.*

##

That night the street dance was well underway when the Cross family arrived on Main Street.

Leah was delighted to find that Mika and Jacob had set up a seating area on the porch in front of their offices. It looked like a nice patio with chairs and tables.

“I thought this might provide you a place to observe the festivities and be comfortable, too.” Mika smiled as she led Leah to the area. Jacob, Lexi, Lucas and all the Cross children were in the patio area. Amber had brought drinks for everyone from Lucile’s.

Leah gazed approvingly at their area. “Whose idea was this?”

“Mika’s,” Jacob informed her.

Mika ducked her head and offered her little girl smile. “Does it please you, my queen?”

“Everything you do pleases me.” Leah’s smile was brilliant.

*She lights up the night*, Mika thought. She was wondering why she had addressed Leah as, my queen. *Where did that come from?*

“Can a lowly police chief join this party?” Clint looked down at Leah, “or is it only for the Cross family?”

“Of course, you may join us.” Leah motioned to a chair across from her.

After discussing the obvious success of the street dance and watching the rest of the family dance, Clint stood and held his hand toward Leah. “I am a pretty good boot scooter.” He smiled. “Want to take a chance on me?”

“No,” Leah said instantly, “I only dance with my wife.”

“Can she boot scoot?” Clint snorted.

“With the best of them.” Leah laughed pulling Mika into the street.

“Can I boot scoot?” Mika asked.

Leah placed Mika’s hands on her hips and slid her arms around Mika’s neck. “Why don’t you just do whatever feels good?” Leah flirted with her.

As Mika began to move her feet, she found the fast-paced music made dancing simple. She liked the feel of Leah moving with her, following her every move. Dancing with Leah was easy and exciting. The band started playing something slower. The words they sang, “You make loving

you easy,” certainly described Mika’s feelings about the woman in her arms.

Mika pulled Leah tighter against her and tried to overcome the surge of desire that shot through her. Leah looked up at her in surprise. “Why, Priest!” she teased, “I believe you want me.”

Leah melted into her, clutching Mika to her. Thankful to find out her head injury had caused no damage to her reticular activating system.

Mika nuzzled her nose in Leah’s raven hair, inhaling the overpowering scent of her. *Yes, I could easily fall in love with this woman.*

As they walked back to their table, Mika noticed a circle forming around two people. She called Leah’s attention to the gathering. “A fight?”

As they pushed their way through the group, they were surprised to find their son Paul squaring off with Billy Ray Stuart who out weighted him by twenty-five pounds. Leah was aghast that Bitsy and her husband were encouraging their son to, “Whip his butt.”

Mika started toward the two boys, but her wife’s hand stopped her. As adults and children watched, Billy Ray wet his pants. Not just a little bit, but enough that it soaked his light- colored jeans, ran down his legs, filled his boots and puddled at his feet. In horror, the bully looked down at himself and burst into tears.

“What is going on here?” the police chief shoved into the circle. “Everyone get back to the street dance. You,” he pointed to Billy Ray’s parents, “why didn’t you stop this when it started?”

“Take your son and leave the dance, now,” Clint barked.

“Why do we have to leave,” Bitsy squealed. “The mayor’s kid started it.”

“I saw your son push him from behind,” Clint glared. “We have no place for troublemakers at a community function. You need to leave.”

Mika walked to her son and placed her hand on the boy's shoulder. "Let's go sit down, son."

##

As soon as she closed their bedroom door, Mika burst out laughing. Leah joined into her merriment.

"Can you believe that little bully wet his pants?" The priest laughed.

Leah didn't tell him she had made that happen.

Mika spread the sheets and placed a pillow on the sofa. She was stretched out on the sofa by the time Leah finished removing her makeup. It was about a foot too short for her.

"What are you doing?" Leah demanded.

"You take the bed tonight," Mika said. "I know you are tired. You haven't had a good night's sleep in over a week."

"This is ridiculous," Leah huffed. "Your feet hang over the end of the sofa. Our bed is big enough for four people. We are adults. We both can sleep in the same bed. I promise not to touch you."

Mika agreed and they got into bed, careful to stay on the furthest edges of their side.

Mika woke slowly, luxuriating in the warm, softness that seemed to envelope her. Leah was soft and silky. Mika's eyes popped open as she realized Leah was wrapped around her. Mika was on her back. Leah's head rested on her shoulder. Leah's arm and leg draped over her. It felt so right.

During the night, they had gravitated to the center of the bed and wrapped around each other. Mika lay still, not wanting to let go of the euphoric feeling of holding Leah in her arms. *I think I am falling in love with her*, she thought.

Leah moved slightly, pushing closer to Mika. Mika lay still, pretending to be asleep. Mika felt Leah's body jerk as she realized she was in her arms. Leah slowly extricated herself from Mika and silently left their bed. She could wait. Mika's thoughts were all she needed to give her hope.