

CHAPTER 1 ver (01 12-22-11)

“I miss orgasms.” Giselle VanHarte peered morosely into her glass of wine. “Mind blowing, moaning and screaming, kin to dying orgasms.” With a flick of her wrist, she downed the last mouthful of excellent Cabernet, then looked up.

Abby, Suzette and Raven stared at her, their animated conversation silenced. Damn, the wine was really talking loud tonight.

“Oookay, time to order espresso.” She pushed to her feet. Before she could escape to find the waiter for their private room, Abby, sitting beside her, clamped a hand on her wrist.

“You don’t give an answer like that when I ask, ‘How’s Richard?’ and then expect to disappear.”

“I thought you and Richard had done the horizontal,” Raven observed, also finishing her wine, a Merlot since she stubbornly refused to drink Cabernet.

“We did. More than once.” Twice qualified as more than once.

Suzette must have caught her involuntary flicker of annoyance. “Not too special?”

“Only a ripple of thrill,” Giselle admitted. Hardly satisfying after a near year drought, and come to think of it, that previous episode hadn’t been so special either. Especially since she knew what the real, explosive deal felt like.

“Maybe it’s a temporary problem,” Raven suggested, then paused as Jacques, their waiter with excellent instincts, timed his entry in perfect coordination with them finishing the melt-in-your-mouth beef Wellington.

“Dessert and coffee, mademoiselles?” Jacques asked as he removed the dishes with expert ease.

“Is the coconut cake available tonight?”

“Certainement. Three?”

“Always,” Giselle answered him with a laugh.

Regardless of whatever diet any one of them happened to be on any given month, these first-

Friday-of-the-month dinners were always a free day. Four close friends, and a few hours to indulge in good wine, good food, and good conversation with no limitations. Usually they met in one of their homes, except when it was Giselle's turn to host. She always chose this French Quarter bistro – mostly because of the coconut cake. Regardless of the meeting place or food, three things were consistent: the conversation, the friendship, and the support these women shared with her.

Giselle lifted a mental toast to her friends -- Abby XXX, Raven XXX, and Suzette XXX. Different in looks, in temperament, in age, in history, in careers, yet despite the differences they remained close. They had seen her through some rough times, and she had been there for their trials, too. Most recently, they'd survived Katrina together, had helped each other rebuild shattered homes and lives.

Jacques left with promises of espresso and cake, and those friends pivoted as one to focus their attention back on her.

There were some disadvantages to long years of friendship.

“About Richard,,” Abby started right back up again. “Maybe it’s just temporary. The getting-to-know-you awkwardness. First sex jitters. Something you and Richard can work through together.”

“No.”

“We need a field trip,” Giselle said, trying to change the subject.

But Raven had no intention of letting go so easily. “And I know the perfect place. I heard about this place in the Quarter. Maison du Fantasie. A women’s boutique... a sensuality boutique. Maybe you could find some feathers or aphrodisiac spices or kinky leather straps.”

“Or a vibrator,” suggested Giselle drily.

Abby, however, was giving Giselle a studied look. “What did you mean by no? Not temporary or not working on it together?”

“Can we have dessert before we get into the dull details?”

“No way this is going to be dull,” Raven chuckled.

“Just let me get caffeine and sugar into my veins.” Delaying the inevitable, she knew. She recognized those determined looks. When the three of them ganged together to worm information out of the fourth, they were unstoppable.

And, since she'd opened her mouth, she deserved their curiosity. Hell, maybe she wanted to talk.

With precise timing again, Jacques reentered, wheeling a small cart. He set out the coffee and plates of cake, left an urn with extra coffee on the table, and then primly folded his hands. “Will there be anything else?” At their refusal, he discreetly laid the check on the cart and left.

They shared a moment of silence as they savored first bites of sweet cake, then Giselle took a fortifying sip of espresso and admitted, “It's over. I'm not seeing Richard any more.”

“What?” Surprise was a two voice choir.

“He wasn't . . .” He wasn't Dominic, damn him. Although whether she was damning Richard or Dom, she wasn't sure. “He wasn't what I want.”

She wasn't even allowed one more bite of cake before Suzette demanded, “Richard not the right one? How? He's good looking, has a steady and well-paying job, dresses well, knows the proper wines.”

Ouch. Even her friends viewed them as a matched couple.

“Did he hit you? Verbal abuse?” asked Abby.

“No. Nothing like that.” Abuse would have taken too much passion.

“So what happened with the Dick?”

“You never liked him, did you, Abby?”

“I tried to conceal that fact.”

“Like the night you called him an asshole?”

“He was being one, and your counter argument wasn't too strong. Taken as a whole, I suppose Richard's decent enough.”

“Damning with faint praise?”

She shrugged. “I think you need someone less than fifteen years older than you. You’ve turned staid enough.”

Giselle speared another mouthful of cake. “Thanks,” she said with a tint of bitterness. “You make me sound like I’m fifty-six, instead of twenty-six.”

“Back to the orgasms,” Raven interrupted, bluntly. “Did you break it off because you didn’t...?”

“Yes. No. The sex was only the catalyst.”

“That bad?”

“That . . . bland. And selfish.” The second time, when she was still unsatisfied, she’d suggested he tongue her. Not an unreasonable request, she’d figured, since she’d just given him a stellar blow job. And he’d refused. Oh, he’d had a complimentary excuse – teach me what you like later, honey, too exhausted after your fine performance. Damn, but she was talented, he’d added, caressing her cheek. Then, he’d fallen asleep.

All the niggling doubts, the festering little warning signs she’d been deliberately ignoring, had settled into her as she’d laid there. Listening to him snore, she’d realized she was achingly bored.

She wanted to be more than a performance.

She didn’t want to have to teach anyone, anything. Been there, done that.

When her parents had died just after her eighteenth birthday, she’d taken on a secure, decent-paying job at the New Orleans History Center and the responsibility of raising her three unruly, grieving, younger brothers rather than seeing the family separated or raised by their prig-assed uncle.

And, she’d done a damn fine job. All three were following their dreams – a career as a marine biologist, an acceptance at Juilliard to study piano, a year at Oxford.

She’d tucked away her dreams to do what needed to be done, and she didn’t at all regret that decision. Now, though, it was “me” time.

Except, she didn't know what her dreams were any more. Her life had become a medium-sized, monochromatic monotone, and nothing excited her.

"Then, forget Richard," Raven agreed. "Get someone young and fun."

"What do you want instead?" Suzette asked.

"I don't know. Excitement?"

Suzette lifted a brow. "You're asking me? The one person in this group who is least likely to recognize excitement in any form?"

"What's in your gut, Giselle?" Raven asked.

"I want . . . I want a man who makes my knees weak and my breath stop with a mere kiss on the corner of my mouth." The words suddenly tumbled out, without thought or censorship, as unvoiced yearnings took shape. "Someone who knows how to fuck and how to make love and knows the difference. Who makes the stars spin when he does both with me. I want danger, thrills. A dangerous, mysterious lover. I want magic back in my life. You know, the spark of the unknown. Fireworks."

"Sounds risky. Can you handle that?" Suzette's skepticism was evident. "You? The woman who owns insurance policies to cover every threat, who won't cross the street against the light, and who reads five reviews before she'll decide if she wants to see a movie? Face it, Giselle, you're not a risk taker."

"I haven't been able to risk taking risks," she defended herself. "Not when I was responsible for the boys. Not until now, and no, I don't know if I could handle danger very well, but I'd like to try. Even if only for a little bit. I want to live again."

Silence descended over the table. Abby, the one who'd known her the longest, looked pensive, as though she were mulling over something. "Fireworks. Yeah, that used to be you, Gis."

"Getting back to orgasms," Kate interrupted. "When was your last, Giselle?"

"I've had them," she mumbled.

Kate was not fooled. "Let me clarify. When was your last mind blowing, moaning and

screaming, kin to dying orgasm?”

Giselle’s jaw tightened. “Eight years ago.”

“Eight years!”

“Don’t give me grief. None of you are getting much either unless there’s batteries involved.”

Abby’s eyes narrowed. “Before or after graduation?”

“Before.”

“Oh, my, God, you slept with Dominic Fitzpatrick.”

“We didn’t sleep.”

Raven leaned forward. “He was that good?”

“Oh, yeah. Better than the rumors. He knew what he was doing.” Smiling, Giselle downed a slug of hot espresso, her mouth burning almost as hot as the rest of her body had burned those nights. Damn, but she could almost feel the cup of his hand against her neck. His lips teasing hers. The jolt of electricity when his hands clasped hers, holding her still for the slide of his body. She shifted, memory making her wet, as she tightened involuntarily, gripping the memory of his thick cock inside her, a slow plunging, a slower withdrawal.

“Who,” demanded Suzette, “is Dominic Fitzpatrick?”

“A dream,” Giselle answered, blinking away the memory. She must have had too much wine, the scene was more potent, more concrete than it had been in years.

“He came to our high school when we were seniors,” Abby explained, since they’d met Raven and Suzette some years after high school. “No one knew where he’d come from, who he lived with, anything about him before he appeared in our school. Gis even tried to steal his record from the school office.”

“You helped.”

“And ended up in detention. Come to think of it, I spent most of high school in detention because of your schemes.”

Giselle saw Raven's curious look, as though seeing a side of her she'd never known before. All Raven and Suzette knew was the safe Giselle, after she'd lost the young and daring part. "We spent time in detention, and I still didn't find the file."

"All we knew," continued Abby, "was that he was a top student in chemistry, that he devoured books on ancient history and mythology, and that, because of him, both our cross country team and our fencing team had their best year ever."

"He didn't talk much, but within a week everyone knew who the 'new kid' Dom was."

"Consensus? Sexy, dark hair, sexier walk, mmmm body, Giselle said, "with a voice that could charm the birds from the trees."

Abby laughed. "Or any girl in that school out of her thong."

"Guilty," agreed Giselle, her nipples hard as another memory took vivid center stage. Dom's mouth sucking her breasts deep. Oh, honey, she could actually feel his tongue flicking across them. She leaned back and crossed her arms.

"Except," Abby continued thoughtfully, "you're the only person I know who actually did sleep with him. Everything else was just rumor and wishful thinking."

"Where is this paragon now?" Suzette asked.

"I don't know." Giselle let out a long, slow breath, knowing it did no good to revisit that past. Dredging it up only made her present seem more colorless. Still, her skin tingled, and she pressed her thighs against her own ready wetness. "For two weeks we made love and we fucked and I was wrapped in the stars. We had such plans, to tour all remote corners of the world."

"I didn't know that," Abby said indignantly.

"I never told anyone. Then . . . graduation, my parents died, the world stopped. My brothers needed me. By the time I thought past my tears, Dom had vanished."

"Not very gentlemanly to leave you without even offering a shoulder to cry on," insisted Kate.

"I'm not sure he knew what had happened. He'd already left town before graduation, said he

didn't need that ceremony. I did, so I was supposed to meet him after the graduation party rounds. I didn't show, and when I called his cell, it had been disconnected. I couldn't find a single trace of him. It was as though Dominic Fitzpatrick no longer existed." She let out a pent up breath. "Past history. But, that's why I miss orgasms. I'd like to find that feeling again. That magic."

#

Both the tipsiness of the alcohol and the caffeine buzz of the espresso had worn off when they ended this month's dinner. They exchanged hugs and cheek kisses, agreed to meet next at Abby's, and then separated.

Giselle strolled through the April evening, in no hurry to reach her car. The warm, humid evening beckoned. She loved the Quarter. It was the heart of New Orleans, from the first settlers to the seed of recovery after Katrina. Tonight, the lights from the bars and restaurants erased the moonlight and stars, but the air held the rich dampness of the Mississippi River. Passing the New Orleans History Center where she worked, she was reminded again of the feelings she'd finally expressed tonight.

The fact that her life had turned into that monochromatic monotone -- get up, exercise, eat a healthy breakfast, go to work, research other people's questions through the dusty books and old manuscripts, socialize with coworkers, go out with Richard or friends, or go home to books and TV. A decent, comfortable life, one she was having trouble letting go of, but one that no longer satisfied her deeper, and darker, and scarier, yearnings.

She crossed St. Louis Street and a glint, like a yellow diamond caught her eye. She stopped to look into the shop window. Arcana was the name of the store; it had opened a month ago, about the time she'd begun feeling so unsatisfied. Part new age, part antique, part magic, part gallery, yet none of these labels fit. Every day, she passed here and every day something compelled her to stop, to gaze into the window.

Each time she stopped, the feeling she was missing out on life strengthened. Maybe she connected the two, maybe that was why the trickle of fear always kept her from going in.

For each day the window contained something different, one object only. Something unique and precious. The first night it had been a painting, full of swirling colors of fire. At the casual glance it had appeared to be strictly abstract. Only by staring at it had the amorphous shapes taken substance, become a man and a woman with their naked limbs entangled. Only on further staring could you see the ecstasy on the woman's face and the tenderness in the way the man cupped her scarlet-tipped breast. Once it had been a crystal ball, not filled with the smoke of the future, but with cut facets that reflected the lights until it had appeared as the sun.

Tonight it was a piece of amber, a pendant hung from a gold chain. The interior of the amber glowed despite the lack of lighting in the window. The rich color and the shadows within the gold depths intrigued her. A puff of wind caressed her, as hot and damp as a lover's breath against her throat and nipples. She put her hand to her chest, almost feeling the heavy weight of the amber between her suddenly tight breasts.

The store was open, its posted hours four PM to one AM. On impulse she went in. The interior was stark – red lacquer and ebony wood and white silk. Definitely not cluttered, each item in the sparse displays made as powerful an impact as the window objects d'art.

"That pendant in the window? Is it for sale?" she asked the clerk.

"Yes it is. Ten thousand dollars."

Giselle swallowed. Impossible price for her, unless she were to empty her savings.

"It's from the owner's personal collection and one of a kind. He puts a high value on such rarities," the clerk added, giving her a pitying look.

Giselle wasn't ready to give up. Perhaps he knew of some less expensive pieces. Before she could speak, though, her glance caught on a small picture behind the register, and her heart snagged against her stomach. Dom?

She blinked, and then looked again. No, she'd mistaken the hat for dark hair. The man was at least seventy if he was a day. But, something about him felt familiar. "Is that the owner? What's his

name?”

“Yes, that’s Nicolai Christopher.”

“I’d like to talk with him.” She passed her card over to the clerk. “My cell’s on that.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Thanks,” she murmured, and then left.

Back outside amidst the heat and the jazz and the hawkers for exotic dangers, she took a deep breath. Damn, why was everything reminding her of Dom? Time she found that mind blowing orgasm with someone other than a memory.

The cries of the Bourbon Street hawkers faded, leaving the plaintive notes of a lone saxophone. Curious that a musician would showcase his wares so far from the paying crowds, she followed the sound, away from the commercial hubbub, deeper into the shadowed quiet until she found the musician.

A wizened black man played, seemingly oblivious to anything but his muse. His eyes were closed as he lifted the bell of the sax toward the clear skies and played his heart-squeezing homage to the night and to the loneliness of love lost. She swallowed against the tears collected in her throat and drew in a ragged breath, surprised the plaintive song had affected her so deeply.

The last note faded. Giselle clapped and laid a ten dollar bill in the musician’s open case. He finally looked at her then and smiled, revealing a mouth of tobacco-stained teeth, gaps, and two gold caps. “Bless you.” He tipped his porkpie hat to her, picked up his case, and then strolled away, disappearing into the darkness of the narrow, unlit street, almost as if he’d never existed.

With his departure, the door he’d been standing in front of was revealed. A discreet silver-lettered sign on it caught her eye.

Maison du Fantasie.

Where had she heard . . .? Oh, yeah, Raven had mentioned it tonight. A sex store for women. Giselle gave it the once over. Smoky cut glass windows that allowed no peeking into the interior,

classy script lettering on a wood-toned door, elegant glass sconces of light, nothing garish. Only the name gave a clue as to what was inside. Shouldn't a place selling sex toys be featured prominently near Bourbon Street, not tucked away into this less-traveled section of the French Quarter?

What the hell. Couldn't hurt to check it out.

She pulled open the heavy doors and stepped into the cooler interior. At first, she thought she'd stepped into the wrong store – not a gaudy tit or T-shirt to be seen -- only a large room with a rosewood counter at the far side, with niches and cloistered rooms off the edges. As she walked deeper inside, as the displays took on detail, she sucked in a breath.

Outside might be demure and nondescript, but inside was an immersion into feminine sexuality and sensuality. Shades of rose dominated the color scheme, in all different textured fabrics. Velvet on the chairs, brocade on the walls, silk on the tiny display tables. Slow jazz played in the background, too faint to pick up the melody. Sandalwood and bergamot incense sticks sent thin plumes of smoke upward, yet the aroma wasn't cloying, as incense could be. Instead, whenever she took a breath, the faint, sensual scent stroked and aroused.

A tall, willowy woman of uncertain age – 50ish, maybe? – and certain grace glided over to her. With her thick dark hair and her confident bearing, long-sleeved silk blouse and tailored skirt, she reminded Giselle of Sophia Loren. Her name, according to the small silver-scripted nametag, was Madame Claudine. “May I help you?”

“I just want to look around.”

“Of course, please let me know if you have any questions.”

Giselle wandered, studying the merchandise and displays. Feathers, aphrodisiac oils, flavored coffees, body paints, silk lingerie, magical masks – no sense was left unstimulated. In a small room off the main floor, she found the more adventurous toys, everything from manacles to cock rings to velvet-strapped whips. Every sexual toy and enhancement she'd heard of and a few she hadn't. Another room offered a selection of vibrators. She picked up the smooth as silk, hard as steel version,

considering, then put it down.

Maison du Fantasie catered to every feminine fantasy from the tame and delicate to the raunchy and bold, yet all of it was treated as a sensual, natural part of life. Nothing about the shop jarred, nothing seemed lurid or held the taint of “nudge-nudge, wink-wink” slithery backroom. Settees and slipper chairs invited browsers to relax. This was a place where a woman could feel comfortable, invited even, to explore her sexuality.

Giselle wandered back into the main room and paused at the book display, picking up and glancing through random choices, when a slice of color caught her eye. A book, a thin, red, leather book. One that looked vaguely familiar. She eased it from the stack, her spine tightening as she saw the title: *The Wand and the Cup*.

No, it couldn't be. She opened to the first page. The script was elaborate and difficult to read; she squinted as she strove to read the words.

Thy diamond dew, fresh raised by thine sweet cavern

Join with the salt drops from the seas of mine lust

Soft mountains, pink and pebble-tipped, stretched toward the skies

Hard oak, fire-red to submit

One body, plunged and rent. One body devoured and claimed.

The essences of duality merged. One body now, one heart and soul.

One unconquered power.

Prepare.

The last lines of the poem faded into the satin night, for she discovered she'd whispered them aloud. She'd heard those words before, murmured in the deep tones of a man who could charm the thong off a woman by the mere stroke of her name.

One of the tamer poems in the erotic book, she remembered, yet the words lingered inside her in the throbbing pulses of her vagina, in the hard tips of her breasts. Her entire body felt tight, charged

with too much energy for her skin.

The last time she'd seen this book, heard this erotic poetry, Dom had been reading it to her. It had roused her to a pitch of excitement, until she'd had to fuck the man who shared it with her. Fuck they did. Crude as the word was, there was none other that quite described that night. The poems had the same effect on Dom as on her. Oh, honey, but he'd been insatiable. So had she, for that matter. Their coupling, their fucking marathon had quite literally rocked her world. And the stars had spun around them both.

Dom had claimed the book was more than simple poetry, that it was the key to magic. Then, the book had frightened her as much as it fascinated and excited her. Much like the man who had read it to her.

Magic, yeah, right. She snapped the book shut, uneasy, her thumb tracing the edges of the pages, her palm clamped tight to the supple leather.

Madame Claudine walked over to her, her sharp dark eyes narrowing a bit as she saw the book Giselle clutched. But her voice was smooth and cordial as she asked, "Did you find something you want? We'll be closing in twenty minutes."

Giselle reached out with the book, intent on putting it back on the shelf. Instead she found herself handing it to Madame. "Yes, I'd like this."

Madame's smile deepened. "A good choice."

The shop was emptying as Giselle paid for the book. Madame Claudine handed her a thin burgundy bag with the book inside. "Read the poem on page seventy-seven. I think you'll find it especially intriguing."

"Ah, thanks, I will." Weird. Giselle tucked the package under her arm. Did Madame Claudine expect her to read it right now?

She wound her way toward the exit, the book warm against her side, bitten by a sudden curiosity to see just which poem Madame Claudine recommended. When she pushed open the doors

and stepped through them into the sultry night, the compulsion to read the poem became almost irresistible. “When I get to the car,” she muttered, as though some unseen voice scolded her for not reading it.

She hadn’t taken one step away when the bag slipped from her grip and dropped to the sidewalk. The book slid out and fell open. A breeze fluttered the pages wider. Giselle bent to pick up the book, and then swallowed against the sudden chalkiness in her throat. Light from the door sconces shone on the creamy pages. Page seventy-seven.

Stuck in the book there was a thin card, about four by six. Somebody’s bookmark? She picked up the card, and the silver lettering glowed, highlighted by the light from the sconces. It looked elegant, like an invitation to a krewe ball.

Giselle read it aloud as she pushed to her feet.

“The chain of blessings extends from woman to woman. As you stand at a threshold, this is given to you by a woman so blessed, so indulged. Once chance alone shall you receive. Present this card at Maison du Fantasie any Friday night. At the between time of midnight, step through the ruby door. Indulge your feminine heart’s most secret desire and your womanly soul’s most powerful craving. Live your deepest fantasy.”

A chance to indulge in a fantasy? Presented from woman to woman? Apparently Madame Claudine hid a few secrets in this shop. Intriguing, but utterly . . . impossible. How could you simply walk into a shop and lay your fantasy bare, without a recommendation, without vetting how things would be set up? Without a few precautions? She tucked the card back into the book, planning to toss it when she found a garbage can, when the poem caught her eye.

Dangerous desires come to my night.

Lead me into the shadowy silver ecstasies of my lover

My heart stops, grows, weeps as the cock doth crow

While dangerous colors paint my body in our pleasures.

Yet my lover I shall not fail,

For all else be but the choice of safe emptiness.

The choice of safe emptiness. How God awful. Giselle shivered, suddenly cold and hollow. A metallic taste tightened her throat as she realized, this was Friday night. She checked her watch. And five minutes to midnight.

Like this invitation had been meant for her.

She glanced between the poem and the card as the words echoed. The choice of safe emptiness. If she walked away tonight, she'd never come back. Not to this shop, not to her fantasy, not to a dangerous future. Somehow, she knew to her bones that if she walked away tonight, if she walked away from this risk, then grabbing for the magic and the stars would get harder and harder. She'd be left with old memories, not new sensations.

Take a fucking chance, Giselle.

Clutching the card, she shoved open the doors and strode back into Maison du Fantasie, just as Madame Claudine finished waiting on the final customer. After showing the woman out the door, Madame joined Giselle. "Did you forget something?"

A flutter kicked up in Giselle's belly. Nike time. Do this, Giselle, or admit you've lost any claim to kick ass guts and resign yourself to life's mediocrity.

Giselle held out the card. "This. Tonight."

"Of course."

"What's the fee?"

"Paid for by the woman who passed on that card. If you take a card at the end of your fantasy, you will make your donation for a woman to receive your largesse. Hold the card in your palm."

Giselle turned her hand palm side up, the card resting atop.

Lightly, Madame gripped her wrist. "These are the conditions. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity, leave now and it will not come again; you cannot speak of it to any but another woman

who has gone through the fantasy or who is ready to hear of it; at the end, you can gift this to one woman alone and keep the chain unbroken; and finally accept this is your fantasy. What happens is your responsibility alone, and you will see it to its end.” With each condition, she folded over one of Giselle’s fingers, until she was left with just a thumb outstretched. “Do you accept? Yea or nay?”

The flutter turned to a whirlpool, and a scandalized voice of reason whispered this was very risky, very odd. Take a chance, Gis. Gripping the leather poetry book with her other hand, she lifted her thumb in the symbol of agreement. “Yes, I accept.”

“So mote it be,” murmured Madame Claudine, her manicured hand closing briefly about Giselle’s.

Light flared from the card, encircling her hand in a flash of warm silver. Within a heartbeat, the warmth circled her throat, her heart, her opposite wrist, her groin, banding each in a metallic shimmer. Then, as quickly as it had come, the light vanished, as did the card.

“What--?”

“Follow me.”

At the back of the store, Giselle was startled to see the outline of a ruby-shaded door in the rose, watered-silk wall coverings. At the center was a pearl panel. How had she missed seeing that in her browsing?

“That is Le Chambre du Fantasie,” Madame said, nodding toward the door.

“Um, do you need to know my fantasy? Get something set up?”

“Cover the pearl with your palm, speak your fantasy aloud, enter as the clock strikes, and all will be arranged.”

Giselle placed her hand on the pearl panel, startled with how warm it was.

“Your fantasy,” Madame prodded.

“I want a spectacular orgasm.” Giselle took a deep breath. “I want danger, a dangerous, thrilling lover. A man who creates poetic, sexual magic with me, like in this book. I want . . . magic

back in my life.”

The mantel clock atop a small escritoire began to strike.

“Your fantasy begins,” murmured Madame, “if you so accept it. Do you, Giselle VanHarte?”

“I do.”

The ruby door opened.

Giselle went inside, to a small chamber of all white. At least, she thought it was small, but it was hard to tell with the swirling wisps of fog. The white of the walls, floor, and ceiling all blended together, the only break being the faint outline of the door she had just come through behind her. Then, that small point of orientation faded, and she was trapped in white.

She stepped forward, hesitant and determined. At once the white and the mist disappeared, and she was in a pewter-shaded anteroom. The only things inside were a small locker, with one of those locks you could set with a four-digit code, a mirror, and a rack of clothes. “What--?”

A frisson of fear skittered up her spine, then she shrugged it off. Hell, this was just theatrics. This was the backroom of a French Quarter shop.

There was a small sign on the rack of clothes. She read it aloud. “‘The clothes are new, provided especially for you, Giselle. If you desire, choose a costume to wear. Leave in the locker all belongings. Except the book.’ Oookay, Madame must have snuck in here while I was in that white room.” Then, she realized that Madame probably now had to set up some scenery for role playing. “So what costumes did you provide?”

On the rack were three outfits: a deliciously elegant red silk evening gown, a flowing white satin peignoir, and a pair of black leather pants and jacket with a sleeveless ribbed top.

No debates here. She pulled the black leather off the rack, shed her own outer clothes, and then shimmied into the form-fitting pants, grateful that she’d worn her thong. This was not the outfit for pantie lines, not with leather so thin and supple it felt like tissue. A pair of heeled sandals completed the outfit. She stowed her own clothes and purse in the locker, set the lock, put the poetry book in a

thin leather satchel with the outfit, and then took a look at herself in the mirror.

Damn, but she looked the part. The outfit molded to her skin and the dark highlighted her brown eyes and gave her a mysterious aura. She ran her fingers through her shaggy, gold-brown hair, combing it off her shoulders. “Resist this, fantasy lover,” she giggled, striking a pose, then called out, “Okay, I’m ready.”

As if she was heard, the pewter nothingness of the anteroom began to change. The locker, the clothes faded into the grey blend, while a spot of color grew, coalescing into a featureless gate of red-black darkness.

“Gone this far, Giselle. No wimping out.” Besides, there was nowhere else to go, but forward, although she supposed, if she shouted loud enough, Madame would come and rescue her.

How humiliating would that be, to admit she’d lost her nerve—and her sole chance—at the first sign of nothing.

“Besides, it’s my fantasy. A little play-acting. What can go wrong?”

With that bit of bravado, Giselle stepped through the gate.