

## Chapter 14

Dressed in old jeans, an old loose T-shirt, and her running shoes, Abby hurried down Iberville Street and came to a sudden halt at the corner on Bourbon Street. Her hair hung loose, and her arms, crossed tightly over her chest, clearly communicated that she wanted to be left alone. She looked enough like a French Quarter local to be ignored by all the revelers. Even if someone she knew happened to be partying or dining in the French Quarter, they would never recognize her.

Right now, she wasn't sure she recognized herself.

"What the hell am I doing?" she mumbled to herself.

Royal Street was a block away. She still had time to change her mind. She should change her mind. It would be the prudent and reasonable thing to do.

But she hadn't been feeling very prudent or reasonable lately, and she couldn't seem to rally those feelings now. Apprehension, however, was in full bloom, rampaging through every nerve of her body.

Other things were blooming as well, things she couldn't control. Just thinking of the man she had invented made her insides bubble and her panties go damp.

She leaned against an old brick building, trying to remember what she had been thinking when she'd promised Giselle she would do this... this thing, whatever it was.

Have a mind-blowing fantasy, with a sumptuous man included, in whatever way I want him involved. No consequences. No one would ever know, except Giselle, and this woman at the shop, whom Giselle insisted could be trusted completely. And I can do all of this in just a few minutes of my time in the middle of the night. Have some fun before the cage door slams shut on me. That's what I was thinking.

Abby looked at the smiling, laughing people meandering up and down Bourbon Street. Many were couples, their ages running the gauntlet from barley out of their teens to some in their golden

years. Some walked hand in hand, some with arms linked, some with their arms wrapped around the others waist. Some playfully snuck a peak inside the open doors of the strip clubs while others hurried past. Some stopped to listen to a street band and toss money into their open guitar case.

But the one thing each couple seemed to have in common was a companionship they obviously enjoyed.

Again, as had been happening for days now, a terrible sense of loneliness, of being trapped in a cage, nearly bowled her over.

Even if only a fraction of the tantalizing fantasies she'd had all week actually came true, it might be enough to stave off insanity for a while. But what about the loneliness? The best that could be hoped for there would be a short reprieve. As soon as the fantasy was over, that cold and empty feeling would pour right back over her, and maybe even be worse for having evaded it for a time.

"Screw it," she mumbled. "I promised Giselle." She tucked her chin to her chest, and kept walking, leaving the cheerful decadence of Bourbon Street behind.

When she finally reached Maison du Fantasie, she scanned the street quickly. A few couples were window shopping, taking in the fabulously expensive wares in the windows of the Royal Street antique shops. She recognized no one, and dressed as she was, she was pretty sure no one would recognize her. She grasped the handle with something akin to a sense of relief. No matter what happened tonight, at least she'd had the balls – or ovaries – to come this far, to dare this much. At least she'd kept her promise to Giselle.

Maybe there was a bit of her Mom in her after all.

The heavy door swung open effortlessly, and she stepped inside the cool, sumptuous interior. Giselle's description of the shop as feminine sexual elegance didn't do it justice. Polished woods, delicate laces, rich velvets and brocades, soft scents sandalwood and something else that she couldn't quite identify... it all made the arrangements of sex toys and other lusty items seem tasteful. Everything in the shop was for women, things to please women for their own sakes, not just gadgets

bought to please men. It all came together in a way that made her feel sexy and very feminine instead of raunchy and naughty.

Well, maybe a little naughty.

The deeper she wandered into the shop, the more the outside world ceased to exist. Her tension melted slightly as she fingered a teal silk robe trimmed in lace and tied with silver ribbons. She spotted a silver dildo nestled in a bed of teal velvet on the rosewood table next to the robe, an obvious companion to the silk robe. She brazenly picked it up. She could almost imagine the softness of the silk on her naked body as the silver cock—

“May I help you?”

Abby dropped the silver dildo back into its velvet nest and spun around. A tall, willowy woman who could almost win a look-a-like contest for Sophia Lorne, smiled at her.

“You’re Madame Claudine.”

“So I am.”

“A friend of mine, Giselle, told me about you, about this place.”

Madame Claudine smiled softly and nodded. “And you have come for something very special, I take it?”

Abby dug into her purse and pulled out the card. She handed it to Madame Claudine.

“I’m Abigail Dupre. Everyone calls me Abby.”

“You truly desire to do this, Abby, of your own accord?”

Abby could only nod. To speak might give her more reasonable nature the opportunity to scream “not just no, but hell no!” and bolt out the store.

“Then you must agree to the conditions,” Madame Claudine’s right hand gently grasping Abby by the right wrist. Abby’s heart was beating so hard she was sure Madame Claudine could feel her rapid pulse pounding in her veins.

“This is a once in a lifetime chance. It will not come again.” She folded one of Abby’s finger

down over the card.

“You cannot speak of this to anyone except another woman who has gone through the fantasy, as Giselle did, or who is ready to hear of it’s possibilities, as you are when Giselle spoke of it to you.”

Another finger folded over the card.

“At the end, you will give this gift to another woman, and thus keep the chain unbroken,”

Madame Claudine said, folding down a third finger.

“Finally, this is your fantasy. What happens is your responsibility alone, and you will see it to its end.” She folded Abby’s fourth finger over the card.

She looked Abby in the eye. “Do you agree? Say yea or nay.”

Again, Abby nodded.

Madame Claudie shook her head. “Words have power. You must speak it.”

“Yes... I mean, yea. I agree.”

“So mote it be.” Madame Claudine folded her thumb over the card, balling Abby’s hand into a fist. A flash of silver light shot through her tightly closed fingers, and radiated throughout her body. It disappeared as quickly as it had come, leaving her confused and shaking. Madame Claudine let go of her wrist, and when she opened her hand, the card was gone.

Abby looked at her now empty hand, then back up at the calmly smiling woman, who acted as if nothing odd had just happened.

“What the hell just happened?”

“All will become clear at the end. You have a few moments before midnight,” she said. “I encourage women to find something in the shop, something special, to take with them into the fantasy. Sometime, as it was with your friend Giselle, an item finds the woman, but you will have to find your own. Look around. It is here, waiting for you. I will be back for you at 5 minutes before midnight.

This is too much, Abby thought, as she began wandering through the large shop and the smaller side alcoves. She should gather her wits and run out the shop, now.

But she'd spent all week thinking about what her ultimate fantasy would be, and that in itself had been a unexpectedly pleasurable experience. She was here already, and despite her reasonable nature, she was damned intrigued by the whole show. How long had it been since she had been intrigued by anything?

Besides, there was still that damned promise she'd made to Giselle.

And this chance would never come again.

Never.

Abby found herself in a room filled with unusual items that were an odd combination of punk, bondage, and midevil items, all very feminine in nature and somehow, vaguely familiar. Black leather predominated the room... thigh-high boots, whips with threads of silver running through them, chain collars, tight-fitting corsets, and other things she could not determine the use for. There were also leather tunics, the type that Robin Hood might have worn, and a myriad of leather accessories. As with the entire shop, the items were displayed in a decidedly feminine fashion. Their very nature should have made her uncomfortable uncomfortable. Instead, they elicited a spark of excitement in her belly, and even a sense of wild, untamed power.

To be a powerful woman was part of her fantasy, but far from dominating a male, she wanted a man that was her equal. And just because she always had two feet planted firmly on the ground most of the time didn't mean that she didn't occasionally want to be swept off of them.

A bright glimmer of silver caught her eye. In the corner of the room, artfully displayed on a tall white pillar, were a pair of black leather wrist cuffs studded with silver. In the center of each cuff was a silver medallion of a horse. She'd always wanted a horse, which was an area of major disagreement between her and her Father. He'd felt horses were too expensive, a waste of money and time, time better spent on furthering her political career. More influential people could be met on a golf green than on a bridle path.

She finger the design, and instantly knew the cuffs would accompany her into the fantasy.

Abby slipped them on and snapped the silver clasps closed just as Madame Claudine entered the room.

“An interesting choice,” Madame Claudine said, nodding toward the wrist cuffs.

“I like horses, but these cuffs are for bondage, and I’m not into bondage. I mean, I like the horses, on the cuffs. Not that I have anything against people that do get off on bondage, you see. I don’t – it’s just not for me. I mean--” Abby sighed and took a deep breath. “I babbling, and I don’t know why because I never babble. I want the cuffs, even though I have absolutely no idea why I chose them.”

“Perhaps they chose you, and as for bondage... well, I can only say that not all things are as they first appear to be. It is nearly time. Follow me.”

They headed back to the main room, where Madame Claudine led her to a door just on the side of the large rosewood checkout counter. Ruby-red in color – just like the card – and very large. A panel made of what seemed to be pearl was in the very center of the door.

“That was not here when I first came in. I’m sure it wasn’t.”

“It is the Chambre du Fantasie,” Madame said. “Place your hand on the panel, and speak your fantasy, then enter as the clock strikes midnight.”

She stood before the door. “I’m not sure about this. I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“Very few women have, my dear. It is a very special gift that has come your way.”

“But why me? Why now? There must be others who are more in need of this... this gift.”

Madame shrugged. “The universe is a strange place. It has a way of giving what is needed to those that need it. At this time in your life, you must need this, or it would not have come your way. And it will not come your way again.”

Somewhere in the shop, a clock began to chime. “Time is short. You must state your desires and go through the door now, or not at all.”

Abby nodded. When she put her hand on the pearl panel, a warmth flooded through her. “I want to be a powerful, free woman, free to choose my own life, free to choose my own mate. I want a male

companionship, someone that recognizes me for who I really am, not just for the advantages I can bring him, someone that can satisfy my every desire. I want to know what it feels like to let go and have wild sex with a lover that satisfies me completely. Make him really handsome, black hair, blue eyes, well built, with a big.... um... cock, one he knows how to use on a woman. I guess what I really want is to not be so afraid of what will happen in the future. I want to live in the now, be able to fight back when I need to, to be adventurous and daring. And the man... don't forget him.”

The 12<sup>th</sup> and last stroke chimed on the clock. The ruby door opened.

“Your fantasy begins. If you so accept it, you must go through the door now.”

Abby stepped through the door, into a room of white mist. The cuffs on her wrist suddenly tightened and grew hot. She tried to tug them off only to find the silver clasps fused together. She spun around to find the exit out of the room... and found nothing but white mist.

“Madame Claudine!”

No one answered. She retraced her steps – she had only taken a few coming through the door – but found nothingness in front of her. White, misty nothingness.

Panic gripped her. It was some kind of a trap! It must be!

A gust of wind blew across her face, and the mist began to clear. Leaves seemed to grow around her, then branches. She felt rough bark under her hands, and her feet balanced precariously on a curved surface.

A tree. She stood in a tree. A very big tree, and she was half-way up in the branches. A young woman stood beside her, dressed in a smooth, brown buckskin tunic. Her belt and the trim on her quiver of arrows were of polished brass, as was the handle of the short sword that protruded from the sheath on her belt. Her long brown hair swung in a platted ponytail on top her head, ending in a brass ball the size of a golf ball. Swung just the right way, the ball could easily be a deadly weapon. Her brown eyes glanced at Abby, then with a slight nod, she stared intently at the forest floor.

Abby looked down, and caught her breath. She was dressed in a similar fashion, but in a black

tunic with silver trim. She wore a belt that matched the cuffs on her wrist, embellished with a silver medallion of a horse, and the short sword at her waist had a polished silver handle. Her own hair, still blond, swung in a similar ponytail and sported a similar ball of silver. Her feet were covered in black moccasins, with laces running up to her knees. The softness of the leather shoes let her feet grip the branch while protecting her skin from the rough bark.

She remembered the moccasins. She had paid dearly for them at the last fall fair, but they were worth every rubet she had spent on them, being strong enough to run fast on even rough ground, yet flexible enough to easily climb a cliff or a tree.

I never bought any such thing! How can I remember something I never did?

But she did remember, the shoes and so much more.

She was Abbia, warrior of Haven Home, strongest of them all, leader of the Warrior Clan. Just last fall, she had come to Haven Home from the South, through the deep mists of the Ox Trail Valley, and stayed to help them in their time of need, to help them fight against the dominating males of Cane.

And right now, she and her women were hunting, deep in the Carriel Forest, far from the Haven Home. Not game for the table. No, today they hunted for a weakness in their enemy's ranks. If all went well, there would be no killing this time, or so she hoped. Instead, they could come home only with prized information.

They hid in the trees, waiting for the hated cat-men to come down the path, following the false trails her women had left for them earlier. Waiting to see if the new potion the Witches Clan had made could truly keep the phenomenal senses of the cat-men from smelling them, from finding their hiding places in the trees. Praying the potion would work.

And if the potion didn't work, if they were discovered, she and her women would be under attack by a raiding party of cat-men scouts and a Cain hunting party that was now known to be a great deal larger than they had anticipated. If there was a battle, several of the men would die, and a few of her women would probably be captured as slaves or killed in the process. But it was the only way to

know if the potion worked as the Witches believed it would. So they'd stood in the trees, waiting for the cat men, trying to keep their nerves under control.

A subtle movement in the bushes below caught her eye. The wait was over. For good or ill, soon they would know, and it could change the course of the war.

What the hell kind of fantasy is this! War? Deadly battles? Capture as slaves? Where was the handsome man she's asked for? The only people that surrounded her were women.

Her Romeo certainly couldn't be a cat man. They were humans males call "cats" for their unique ability to see in the dark and climb trees like a cat, and their animal-like sense of smell. They were small, thin and light, as far a cry from her idea of her fantasy man as Pomeranian was from a Bull Mastiff.

The girl at her side – Setta was her name – suddenly stiffened and grasped her arm. Without making a sound, she pointed to the forest floor, indicating that a movement had caught her eye. A moment later, Abbia spotted a cat-man scout, then several more, moving stealthily through the underbrush, invisible to all but the highly trained eyes of her warriors. Setta waved a signal in the air, seen by others of her hidden clan. The test was at hand. Soon they would know if the potion worked.

The scouts stopped and sniffed the air. Abbia held her breath and prepared herself for battle should the potion fail to completely cover their scent.

But failure was not written on the wind this day. The scouts stopped under the very tree in which she and Setta perched, checking the area frantically for the smell of women. They had lost the trail at the point her women had applied the potion and climbed up the trees. The cat-men had no idea where their prey had gone. They moved off down the trail, desperately trying to recapture the women's scent.

Setta turned to her and smiled broadly, and Abbia, breaking into smile, could not help but to shoot her a cheerful thumbs up.

"Success!" Setta hand-signed to her. "It worked!"

“On a few scouts,” Abbia signled back. “There are a lot more cat-men running with the Cain hunters. The rest of the scouts must go past without noticing us. It only takes one to smell us. If they all pass without finding us, then we’ll know for sure.”

While they waited for the main party to reach them, Abbia marveled at her ability to speak and read in sign language. She had always wanted to learn, yet never seemed to find the time. Suddenly, she was a pro. Maybe Giselle was right. Maybe it was magic.

A ripple of excitement ran down her back, settling at the base of her spine, tingling in a way that was almost erotic. Every part of her felt alive and on edge in a strangely pleasant way. Damned if she wasn’t having fun! After all, it was only a fantasy. She couldn’t really get hurt.

But how the hell is all this happening? Was she hallucinating? A drug of some kind in the white mist? That seemed the most plausible explanation. Surly she was still in that white room, breathing in some kind of hallucinogenic.

Damn it! What if I test positive on some drug test now? I can just see me Father’s face when it hits the papers... City’s Council Member a Drug Addict. Lovely!

“You are in great danger! Get out of here, now!”

Abbia nearly jumped off her branch. The voice had been right in her ear.

“Who said that?” she signed to Setta.

“Said what?” Setta signed back.

“I just heard someone say we had to get out of here.”

“No one spoke, Abbia, nor would they since you commanded silence.”

“A large hunting party is heading your way. You can’t beat them... way too many. Get the hell out of here!”

“There it is again!” Abbia empathically signed.

Setta’s confused expression clearly told her that she’d heard nothing.

“A male voice. I know what I heard.”

'Too late!'

Abbia shook her head, as if to clear a buzzing from her ears. The voice was in her mind!

“Stupid females! Not a bit of sense.”

And now it was insulting her!

A loud thundering came from path the cat-men hand just gone down. It grew louder and harder, shaking the ground as if a mammoth was coming down the path. Just as the hunting party came into the clearing, an immense black stallion charged down the path, screaming a terrifying war cry that only a furious stallion can manage.

Abbia watched in fascination as the beast attacked. Everything about the horse fascinated her. It was a Frisian, black as coal, with a coat so silky that it caught and reflected patches of sunlight. His mane and tail were pure silk... wavy, long, exquisite. 19 hands high at the very least, with powerful muscles and a broad back. Huge, yet not bulky like a draft horse. No, this fellow was finely chiseled, gorgeously sculptured, easily the most exquisite piece of horse-flesh she had ever seen.

But it was the eyes that enthralled her. Blue. So blue that she could easily see them from her perch in the tree. Crystal blue. Shocking blue. Like the waters of Hawaii in her Mom's photo. Never in her life has she seen blue eyes on a horse.

The Cain hunters on horse-back found themselves flung to the ground by their terrified ponies, and they quickly scuttled into the underbrush, leaving the battle to the cat men. The stallion's rage scattered them in all directions as it reared and came down hard, kicking out with his powerful back legs at those attacking him from the rear. What could possibly have pissed off the massive horse so bad?

But there were too many cat-men for the horse. Abbia reflexively grabbed the hilt of her sword and crouched, itching to jump down and join the battle and bash in a few heads, but Setta grasped her wrist. “Too many,” she signed. “There's nothing you can do.”

She let go of her sword and grasped a branch in agitation. She hated to see such a magnificent

animal hurt. He had an opening to the west. Why the hell didn't it just turn and run?

With one last bellow of fury, the stallion abandoned the attack, turned toward the break in the cat-men's line, and thundered westward through the forest. The cat-men quickly gathered themselves into a pack and raced down the path after their attacker, while the Cain men scrambled away in the other direction in pursuit of their terrified ponies. A few moments after the battle had begun, it was over, and the women were alone in the forest.

Setta turned to her, a stunned expression on her face. Abbia had a feeling that it mirrored her own expression.

“What just happened?” Setta asked.

Abbia shook her head. “I don't know, but this is no time to discuss it. Let's get out of here while we can.”

Quickly and quietly, she gathered her band together. They made their way to the edge of the forest toward the North, retrieved their small mountain ponies, and headed for Haven Home.

As they rode hard across the plain, Abbia's mind churned in turmoil. The voice in her mind... it had to have come from the horse. A magnificent horse, but a horse none the less.

Was she going crazy? This was her fantasy. She had invented it. What did it say about her state of mind that she was creating a situation in which she was having some kind of mind-meld with an animal? That she had apparently put herself in the middle of some kind of male versus female war?

What kind of person was hidden under the exterior of Abigail Dupre?

Yesterday, she would have known the answer.

Today, she didn't have a clue.