

CHAPTER ONE

Those eyes - those beautiful tormented eyes that met her own and made her heart flood with love and sorrow. His eyes appeared to be filled with pain that mirrored her own. His jaw clenched tightly in effort to quell any emotion that threatened to seep to the surface as he watched her burn. Smoke and townspeople occasionally blocked their view of each other, but when their eyes met, an intense feeling washed over her. She understood why this must happen even if he didn't.

Her wrists burned from the rope that bound her hands behind the post. With every struggle, it bit deeper into her flesh and made her bite the inside of her mouth to keep from screaming. She bit so hard it broke the thin layer of skin and her mouth was filled with the metallic taste of her own blood. The heat of the flames inched closer, and she turned away from the smoke to cough and gasp for precious clean air. Her throat burned from the smoke she'd inhaled and her body tensed from the assaulting heat of the fire that ignited more of the wood near her body and caught the hem of her dress. The wind blew her skirt up enough to expose the skin there, leaving her more vulnerable than before. It had pushed the flames up the cedar towards her with the gust of wind. The fire rose higher, licking at the wood and inching closer to her bare legs.

It started to become painful, she looked up at the sky, offering up a silent prayer to whoever listened. A high-pitched scream left her mouth as the fire reached her body and engulfed the fabric of her dress, igniting a rush of flames and pain that she'd never before experienced. There was no way to escape the blaze, her bound hands were of no use to her as she struggled for a moment before finally falling limp and allowing the flames to ravage her. Her screams echoed into the night.

Lexie woke screaming and quickly sat up in bed. She frantically pat her legs and body then realized it was only a dream. The odd part of her realization upon waking was that she swore she smelled the pungent odor of burning wood and flesh. She ran her hands over her face then let out a heavy sigh and fell back against her pillows. When she finally opened her eyes, she looked up at the spinning ceiling fan and groaned. Looking at the clock would be pointless. This had been happening for weeks now. The reoccurring dreams would wake her at the same time every morning. When she finally did glance over at it, the time staring back at her wasn't a shock.

3:04 a.m. exactly like the last seven times this month.

“Imagine that,” she murmured before fluffing her pillows and turning away from the clock, attempting to fall back to sleep and salvage some of her rest. Tomorrow would be a long day. Lexie was certain that all the coffee in the world wouldn’t be enough to make her appear lively. Her brows knit together in frustration as she closed her eyes and hoped sleep would take her soon.

The next morning, Lexie reluctantly sat up in bed. Despite not feeling one hundred percent rested, she was determined to get on with the day. Her mouth fell open in a wide yawn as she stretched. She reached over to grab the notebook and pen from her nightstand. The dreams she’d been having for weeks continued to plague her. The latest character to these dreams - a long-haired, handsome man with a brooding face and pained eyes. Those eyes. Lexie couldn’t remember much about him, only that he’d appear when she was in distress in her dreams and he wouldn’t speak.

Tapping the pencil against her lips, she looked up from writing down her dream and pondered for a moment. As she sketched his face from memory, she thought about what her Aunt Tilly said. *Dreams always have meaning if you dig deep within yourself to see it.* She had yet to figure this particular meaning out. The dreams all held the same theme – pain. Even though they appeared the same, they were vastly different. It boggled her for a while now, but she refused to sit and dwell on it. After she wrote all the details down and sketched what she remembered, she placed the book and pencil in its spot and got out of bed. Quickly throwing her hair into a messy ponytail, she headed into her bathroom for a morning shower.

After her shower, she looked refreshed and awake. As awake as any person with about thirty hours of sleep in the last eight days could be. She brushed her teeth, making a mental to-do list as she went about her morning routine. As soon as she disconnected her Bluetooth and headed out to the living room, her phone began to ring.

She chuckled and answered it, “I’m about to walk out the door.”

“You’re always late.” The other voice said.

“I’ll be there in five. That’s hardly late.” Lexie said with a smirk. “Besides, Stacy. We both know you’re casually checking out the guy who works across the street.”

“How’d you--” Stacy growled with one eye closed. “You and your intuition. He smiled at me again.” Her lopsided smile grew before she took another sip of coffee.

“And you haven’t talked to him because…”

“You know why.” Stacy sighed and changed the subject. “Hurry before the coffee gets cold. We have a client meeting at ten.”

“Be there soon.” Lexie grabbed her keys and purse, locked up and headed down the sidewalk to Café du Monde, a few blocks from her apartment. New Orleans had a unique scent. Beignets, coffee, swamp, alcohol, vomit, nature, seafood, all mixed together created something that a New Orleans native had become accustomed to and found comforting, as odd as that sounded. She took a right on Decatur Street and looked into the windows of the small shops as she passed them. An art gallery with new artwork in the window, a cigar shop where different scents drifted from within, an Emo/gothic clothing store, and a small souvenir shop with New Orleans memorabilia. A smile spread across her lips when she noticed the new bath bombs and bath salts being put out in one of the boutiques she often frequented with Stacy.

An alert on her cell caught her attention for a moment. It was a reminder for the Art Gallery show coming up. She had yet to submit a piece and part of it was fear. No, most of it was fear. Lexie wasn’t sure her talent was something she wanted to share with the world. All of her work as of late had been images from her dreams and all filled with such somber moods.

Lexie slid her phone back into her purse and continued her walk, crossing the street as she passed the French Market. The closer she got to the square, the familiar sounds of horses hooves hitting the pavement as they left and returned to the black fence outside Jackson Square mixed with sounds of a Jazz sax playing near the Cafe. Mix in a few horns here and there, chatter, different instruments around the square, and the sound of the nearby statue person blowing a whistle as he acted like a robot and you’d realize you were in Jackson Square. You could also hear the steamboat playing its pipe organs as it prepared for another tour. Those sounds defined the heartbeat of New Orleans.

The Café barely had an empty chair. As soon as one table would clear, another party would sit. Lexie spotted Stacy waving at her from their usual spot near the back. She weaved her way through the crowds of sitting people and waiters then smiled and hugged her best friend before sitting. “See, five minutes.”

Stacy laughed, “More like ten, but who’s counting? I ordered our usual.” She looked down at the powered goodness on her plate and her mouth watered. She lifted one of the pieces

of fried dough covered in powdered sugar and took a bite. Stacy did the same. She took a sip of coffee and sat back, “So, who’s the client?”

“Mr. Kent. He’s got a collection of artifacts from Salem and Europe. Today he’s bringing it all in to be looked at and cataloged for the museum. Some things he wants to auction in New York but wanted to make sure he didn’t separate anything that needed to stay together.”

“I see. Anyone else after that?”

“Just cataloging those two shipments from Pennsylvania. I think they wanted to switch up a few of the exhibits.”

Lexie checked her watch and nodded. She loved the fact that her job had limited flexibility and her schedule wasn’t so tight. It left her time to focus on her art when she needed the break from life. It opened up the possibility of her actually putting her work out into the world. Lately, she’d been avoiding art shows altogether. It was still a sore spot for her since the last show she attended and no one bought a thing. Her ego took a hit that day.

“Lex!” Stacy snapped her fingers and chuckled when Lexie finally looked at her.

“Yeah, yeah. Got it. Sorry. Didn’t get much sleep, I’m a total space cadet today.” She took more bites of her food and Stacy wrote some things down in her planner. Stacy was the organized one, Lexie was the fly-by-the-seat-of-her-pants kind of girl.

“Still having those nightmares?”

“Yeah, this time I felt like I was screaming. Well, I think I did scream. Woke myself up screaming.”

“What did your aunt say?”

Lexie sighed, “What she says every time. You know my aunt is a little... kooky.”

“What, you don’t believe her?”

“And you do?”

“Well, if my aunt told me I had gifts I’d want to know what they were. I mean, your intuition is sometimes a little creepy. Besides, you could be this great and powerful wizard and not even realize it.”

“Woah, lay off the Harry Potter will ya?”

Stacy laughed and held up her hand, “Totally reading a new series. It’s about witches.”

“Oh, lovely.” Lexie did have a few secrets she hadn’t told Stacy yet. Hell, she wasn’t sure she should or if she’d be believed. What she did tell Stacy was that her aunt said she had

abilities, but she didn't go into detail. She always thought it was some old New Orleans voodoo tale. After all, her aunt owned one of the most popular Wiccan shops in the city and was a central hub for tourists.

Lexie had a close relationship with her Aunt Tilly, but she had a hard time believing in all the *magic* her aunt claimed she possessed. All her life, she'd been told she was special and had gifts, that if used and nurtured correctly, could make her powerful. Her Aunt Tilly was eccentric and sometimes a bit kooky, but she always owned her nature and never tried to be anything she wasn't. Lexie respected her for that.

"Oh, come on, you know you love it, too. I've seen you in your Aunt Tilly's shop. You're a natural at explaining things to customers." Stacy referred to the rare instances Lexie would help out in the shop.

"That's just... knowledge of products." Lexie shrugged.

"Bull. You love magic and you know it. Ooooo, what if your dreams have something to do with magic?"

"Stacy- No, really. We're not doing this." She left money for a tip and stood up as Stacy looked up at her and gave her a look of disappointment.

"You're just scared. Stop thinking worst-case scenario." Stacy got up and grabbed her things and her coffee, tipping it towards Lexie as she spoke, "You. Are. In. denial." She gave Lexie a playful wink and started walking towards the trolley car station they took every day to get to the Central city.

"Yeah, yeah. So you say."