

The Wanderers 1: The Yearning

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Chapter One

You will want as I want. You will know insatiable lust, but no peace.

—Desiree Zazou

Despite the danger she faced, unending desire drove Jasmine Dante through the Blue Bliss Club, a hangout for locals in Key West. Slow-dancing couples clung to each other in the intimate atmosphere. Turquoise lighting provided a dreamy underwater feel while tiny azure bulbs sparkled like Christmas decorations on palms flanking the bar.

Her heart pounded in fear and lust. A curious combination she couldn't fight since Desiree Zazou had cursed her, intent on revenge for taking Connor Rolands, the man Desiree craved.

Jasmine hadn't stolen him away.

Her innocence didn't matter. Desiree's jealousy was too strong and she wanted Jasmine dead.

She was close to that now.

Months before, she would have laughed at the notion and considered curses, spells, or whatnot mere superstitions that belonged in a horror movie rather than in her life. No more. She was living the nightmare and couldn't stop what she'd come for tonight...why she was at this place hunting men.

A guy she hungered for sat on the last stool at the bar. No more than midthirties, he wore his long black hair tied back. Sharp, masculine features, dark eyes and a coppery complexion revealed his Native American heritage. Unlike the other men, he didn't wear the ubiquitous flowered shirt, shorts, and flip-flops. Black mocs hugged his

large feet. Jeans and a T-shirt the color of midnight clothed his lean, muscular frame. A bold eagle tattoo peeked from beneath his right sleeve.

She longed to have her mouth on the strong design, licking his flesh while stroking his hard abdominal muscles and beneath his jeans' waistband, seeking the thick, fragrant curls below. Unendurable yearning sliced through her, quickening her pulse.

She advanced.

His attention didn't stray from tonight's band, a new group named Engaged. Their R&B throbbed soulfully, evoking the seductive richness of Alicia Keys, Jennifer Hudson, and Toni Braxton. The lead singer, a slight young woman with heartache in her eyes, seemed to perform for him alone.

As if they were together and he was waiting for her set to end.

Panic flared, pushing Jasmine to do something. *Like what? Fight another woman over a man I don't know?* The notion was ludicrous and daunting. But since crossing paths with Desiree, everything paled beneath consuming lust.

"You will want as I want."

Sweat slipped from Jasmine's temple to her cheek.

The singer dipped her head in a farewell gesture to the man then sang with equal passion to another guy who leaned against the satiny blue wall.

She's playing to her audience. It's part of her act. She might not even know him. Though relieved, Jasmine trembled and halted.

Someone bumped into her. She stepped aside.

A young redhead in a scarlet Band-Aid dress tottered to the man, her gait unsteady from drugs or too many drinks. He regarded her blurry smile and offered a guarded expression in return. She twisted her hair and held it back then pressed close, her ample breasts snuggled into his sculpted biceps, her mouth to his ear.

He lifted his dark eyebrows.

Jasmine couldn't tell if his reaction was surprise or interest. Afraid to lose her chance with him, she motioned for a server. The twentysomething girl—Sara, by her name tag—trotted up. "Hey."

"Hi." Jasmine spoke at the same level as Sara so the music and singer didn't drown her out. "See that man at the bar on the last stool?"

"You kidding? Me and about a dozen other women got him in our sights, including the one who's with him now. You thinking about sending him a drink?"

"Whatever he's having." She pulled a twenty from her evening bag, afraid to use a credit card the police could trace back to her after someone reported him missing.

Sara shoved the bill into the front pocket of her cobalt blue apron. "What's your name? So I can tell him."

Jasmine couldn't chance anyone putting a name to her face. "Have the bartender point me out. And keep the change. Please."

"You got it." Sara offered a savvy wink then wove through the crowd.

A bouncer sporting a goatee and shaved skull watched the redhead.

She clung to the man and chattered without pause.

Annoyance built in his dark eyes.

Three giggling young women joined the redhead. Each wore skimpy, skintight dresses in rainbow shades—bright yellow, grass green, and purple as deep as a bruise. They tried to coax their friend back to the dance floor.

She flung out her hand, shooing them away.

The bouncer strode over and said something.

The young woman gave him a frown.

A tense moment passed. The other girls convinced the troublemaker to leave.

Jasmine feared the man would also take off, fed up with aggressive females. If that happened, her sole choice would be to follow him outside. Then what? She could pretend to want to know the time or ask for directions to another bar, maybe one on

touristy Duval Street. Or she could invite him to join her. If he didn't, she might not find someone else to ease her ravenous yearning as she sensed he could. Her connection to him was already strong enough to convince her no other man would do. He would stay in her blood the entire time and worsen her lust.

Seconds crept by. The air hissed with uncertainty.

He settled back on his stool, absorbed by the smooth tenor sax and the songstress's smoky vocals.

Jasmine remembered to breathe. Given his interest in the band, he might be a musician. He'd behaved like a gentleman, considering his restraint with the redhead. However, this was a public place. She had no idea what he might do once they were alone. Travis, the last man she'd chosen, would have harmed her, had it not been for her sisters' intervention.

Her insides rolled with dread.

Violet and Lily sat at a corner table, their apprehension palpable. Lily, her youngest sibling, rose to join her. Violet grabbed Lily's arm, a reminder to sit. Worried they might argue and ruin everything, Jasmine shook her head, warning them not to be obvious. To the casual observer and especially to the man, they shouldn't appear to know each other. To her relief, they didn't look like sisters. Violet, with her light brown hair, hazel eyes, and pale complexion, resembled their late mom. So did Lily, even though she'd dyed her brown hair platinum and wore it in a close-cropped boyish style. Jasmine had her late dad's olive coloring, dark brown hair, and blue-green eyes.

Violet inclined her head toward the man.

The bartender slid a Dos Equis to him. They exchanged comments then the woman lifted a slender forefinger and pointed to Jasmine.

He turned.

Heat surged to Jasmine's cheeks. Crushing need prevented her from taking a full breath.

In his hooded eyes lay fulfillment, no matter how fleeting—his confining weight trapping her, his untied hair skimming her bare shoulders, his mouth hard and ruthless. A virile male she wouldn't have dared approach before Desiree had changed her destiny.

The curse drew Jasmine to this man as the road to hell seduces a born sinner. She walked in time to the music's sensual beats. Inwardly, a part of her cowered. For him and what would soon come, she offered a welcoming smile.

He returned her greeting easily and took in her black halter dress. Its low-cut top and short skirt tantalized.

"Hi." Her voice seemed throatier than she recalled, nothing like the woman she'd been. She leaned close so he could hear her above the band and caught his clean, soapy scent. Her thoughts derailed. She fought her compulsion to cup his face and brush her lips over his. "Mind if I join you?"

His gaze lifted from her black high-heel slides. Unashamed interest flickered across his face. "I'd be disappointed if you didn't." He pushed to his feet.

She raised her face. Though she was tall like her father, her height was no match for his. He had to be six-three. Anticipation rippled in her belly. "In that case, I wouldn't want to disappoint you."

"I doubt you will."

His baritone soothed and enticed.

Her legs went watery. She sank to a stool and tried to hide her arousal. If he guessed what she had to have, he might grow wary and leave.

The band ended their set.

Still looking forlorn, the singer caressed her microphone. "We'll be back in a few."

Groans and protests rose from the crowd.

He ignored them and regarded Jasmine. "Thanks for the drink. What are you having?" He motioned for the bartender.

"Just a sip of your beer, if you don't mind." She couldn't risk losing control by drinking. "I'm watching my weight."

"False alarm." He waved off the bartender and gave Jasmine his brew. "No, you're not."

She gripped the bottle. "What?"

"You don't have to watch your weight." He settled on his stool and studied her. "You're fine just as you are."

The old Jasmine flushed in delight and embarrassment. The woman she'd become gave him a feline smile. "If you say so."

"What's your name?"

The question rattled her when it shouldn't have. She struggled to remember the fake one she and her sisters had concocted but came up with nothing except Jane Doe or Mary Smith, generic and unbelievable choices.

He waited.

Her cheeks burned. Never a good liar, she caved. "Jasmine Dante." She offered her hand. "And you are?"

"Happy to make your acquaintance, Jasmine." A roguish grin crinkled his eyes, mellowing his features. His large hand covered and warmed hers.

She liked his effortless confidence and calm strength. It recalled her father's behavior with her mother.

He squeezed her fingers.

The small intimacy reached her soul, leaving her breathless and lighthearted. "So, do you go by Happy or do you prefer the more formal Make Your Acquaintance?"

He chuckled and released her hand. "Call me Mike."

"Ah, a nickname. I like that; Mike...?" She sipped his brew, giving him time to add his last name and more.

He didn't.

Unease seeped through her previous comfort. Travis had offered nothing except that he owned a body-piercing shop. He hadn't confided his violent past. No matter her attraction to Mike or her cruel need, Jasmine couldn't take another gamble on her safety. She had to find out about him, but how?

Perfumed flesh and liquor scents thickened the air. Animated chatter created a din near the tables. Someone laughed too loud. A woman squealed.

Jasmine gave him the bottle. "Are you a musician?"

He enjoyed a sip and shook his head. "Never came close, not even in high school when it's more or less required to be considered cool." He appeared amused. "Why would you think I played?"

"You haven't noticed anything except the band. Is that why you're here tonight?"

"I like their sound. What brings you here?"

"I thought going out tonight might be fun."

A deeper smile tugged at his rich mouth. "It might be. So, tell me about yourself, Jasmine."

Again, he'd taken command of their conversation, as a cop would. He acted like one, never answering a question. However, his long hair didn't fit with the occupation, unless he worked undercover in vice. "You first. I insist."

"Why?" He glanced at her breasts. "I'm not half as interesting as you."

"Let me be the judge. Please."

Something flickered in his eyes. Confusion? Fascination? He put the bottle on the bar. "My name's Mike Stearn. I spend my days in front of a computer."

Jasmine fought to hide her surprise. Of all the jobs she might have given him, none would have called for using a PC full-time. He didn't look like a programmer or an Xbox junkie. "You're a novelist?"

He laughed, an easy, rumbling sound. "I swear I don't have a creative bone in my body."

She smiled. "Then that leaves being a hacker. You're a computer bad boy?"

His laughter wound down. He rested his arm on the bar. "Hardly. I'm an outside consultant for various federal and state agencies."

That could include law enforcement. Her throat tightened. Not wanting to grill him too obviously, she wagged her finger. "Please tell me the IRS isn't included in your work."

"You cheat on your taxes?"

She gave herself to men she didn't know to relieve her oppressive hunger, which put her in danger. Tonight's plan was supposed to end that. "No, but if you could divulge a few tips on how I might get away with it, I'd be forever in your debt."

"Sorry." He ran his thumb over his mouth to tame his smile. "I have no affiliation with the IRS."

"FBI?"

His expression gave nothing away.

Anxious, she threw out guesses. "CIA?" No response. "DOD?" He didn't even blink. "FHA?" He regarded her with increasing amusement. She played into it. "MTV? DVD? JD? CD—"

"Enough." He put up his hand. His shoulders shook with laughter. "Before you go through every acronym you know, I will tell you this much—I used to be with the U.S. Marshals Service, all right?"

Jasmine nodded but worried his consulting work required him to carry a gun. That would play havoc with tonight's plan.

She took him in. No weapon bulged beneath his shirt or by his jeans' waistband.

A scar ran near his tattoo. The puckered pink skin looked frail and vulnerable on his sinewy arm. She touched the uneven surface. His muscle jumped. Compassion, rather than an indecent urge, weakened her. "Is this from a bullet? Did someone try to kill you? Is that why you left the Marshals Service and went into consulting?"

His features clouded, cautioning her not to pursue the subject. He grabbed the Dos Equis and finished a fourth.

Her spirits sank. Her need grew. She feared he'd leave because of her foolish questions.

He cocked one eyebrow. "How about we talk about you?"

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Want to know what happens next?

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