

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

VOLUME 2

EDITED BY KELLI COLLINS
& USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR JAID BLACK

SOMETHING WICKED

THIS WAY COMES

JAID BLACK DIANA HUNTER

REGINA CARLYSLE KATALINA LEON

AUBREY ROSS LAURANN DORNER

Scarred and Kilt

Laurann Dohner

Matty has a new neighbor, and she strongly suspects the kilt-wearing hottie is a vampire—he only goes out at night, has weird visitors and the blood bank is making regular deliveries. But he doesn't seem to hurt anyone, so "live and let live" is Matty's motto. Until she sees a guy armed with crosses and wooden stakes breaking into the neighbor's house. Matty charges to the rescue—and ends up in Mr. Hottie's bed...and on his desk...and...

Tinderbox

Regina Carlysle

Set in the same world as Jaguar Hunger.

Private investigators Nate and Daniel don't expect to find their mate while working a case. But they recognize Olivia as theirs the second they catch the missing woman's scent—the scent of a female jaguar shifter in heat. Nate and Daniel's task?

Find then claim Livvy in every raw, animalistic way possible...and release her inner beast.

Asterion

Katalina Leon

Betrayed by her village chief, Larisa is brought to a mysterious island and left bound in a subterranean labyrinth, where drops of her blood summon the mythical Minotaur. She expects the man-beast to take her life...but it's her *body* that's sacrificed. Darron, a shapeshifting being, ravishes Larisa, and she gives herself freely to the pleasure—a decision that will change both their worlds forever.

Decadent Dance

Aubrey Ross

Surely the dress Zoe purchased did *not* transport her to an alien ship, right? No. Hallucinations. Must be. Though...the gorgeous alien who greets her seems real enough. And the sex? Out of this world.

Vaden has waited years for his Decadent Dancer, and though Zoe swears she didn't know what the dress could do, Vaden has been lonely too long to be easily thwarted. He'll use every sensual trick he knows to convince Zoe she's right where she belongs.

Sahara Heat

Diana Hunter

As a favor to a friend, author Carla Braun agrees to meet with archaeologist Josef Anderson to discuss his recent desert find. To her dismay, the man's infuriating...as well as tall, blond, gorgeous—and into BDSM. If she can look beyond Dr. Anderson's cool exterior, Carla just might discover some scorching *Sahara Heat*...

Fatman & Robyn

Jaid Black

Jake Chamberlin, star quarterback of the New York Bloods, has a not-so-little secret—he's into chubby chicks. He does all he can to resist temptation, but when Jake bumps into the gorgeous Robyn DiMarco at a bistro in Little Italy, all bets are off.

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Chapter One

He's back. Matty leaned closer to the window, glanced at the clock across her bedroom and realized he'd barely beaten the sun rising. Her focus returned to the house across the street as the man climbed out of the back of the limousine, his near-white braid trailing down his back to his waist, seeming to glow from the street lamp.

He turned, bent down, talking to someone inside the black vehicle. She could hear his deep chuckle with her window open. His muscular arm braced on the roof of the car, thick biceps displayed in the black tank top he'd chosen, and it stretched across a broad chest.

"Have a good one," he told his ride home, the brogue as clear as the deep baritone of his voice.

It gave her chills every time she heard it. He pushed the car door closed and glanced at the sky, before striding briskly toward his home.

Matty grinned at seeing the blue plaid kilt he wore. She never thought she'd find a guy wearing a skirt hot but that was before she'd glimpsed "Kilt". She'd dubbed him that since she didn't know his real name. She'd raided his mailbox a few times

but the only name on the ads had been the old homeowner.

Kilt had moved in three months before and it had become a habit of hers to watch him whenever possible. She hated it when he unlocked his door to disappear inside.

Lights turned on and off as he moved through the house. She knew where he'd go, it was always the same routine. The first two floors of the house went dark. She looked up and sure enough, the vented attic glowed slightly, barely noticeable unless someone was looking for it. He slept there during the day.

I have it bad for a guy who I'm pretty sure is a vampire. The thought made her back away from the window. She normally wouldn't believe in such things but it made sense. She'd never seen him during the daytime. He didn't answer his door, only seemed awake at night, and he always made it home before the sun rose. It would account for his weird visitors. Most of them were reject dressers from various time periods.

He could be allergic, one of those rare people sickened by the sun, but she'd noticed the white van making deliveries every Monday and Friday. She'd called in a favor with her friend at the police department to run the plates and it had been registered to a blood bank. It all fit and the facts seemed clear.

She remained seated in her chair, waiting for the sun to rise, and knew she'd go to bed soon. Matty had her own reasons for keeping the hours she did. She'd let her guard down once during the night and now the darkness frightened her. Dawn broke and the sky pinkened with streaks as she watched. She stood, stretched her arms

high and twisted her hips a little to alleviate the stiffness from sitting too long.

A black van pulled up to the curb across the street and she frowned. It wasn't one she'd seen before, could only be visiting her house or Kilt's, and that wasn't feasible. No one ever came to see her and anyone who knew him wouldn't arrive after the sun rose. She stepped back into the shadows, watching as a man climbed from the driver's side. He opened the slide door and leaned in.

She grabbed her binoculars and could make out the interior of his van. The guy had crosses, two long wooden stakes, and what appeared to be a squirt gun of the gallon-sized variety that kids loved to play with during the summer.

Oh shit. Kilt seemed to have been discovered by someone who obviously intended to do him harm. She bit her lip as the guy wedged the stakes and crosses between his pants and belt, then hoisted up the plastic weapon she suspected held holy water. The van door slammed closed, the stranger studied Kilt's house and crept toward the side gate.

Matty bit her lip. She shouldn't interfere but she liked to watch her neighbor. He hadn't ever bothered her, no one on the block had disappeared, and he wouldn't have blood delivered if he were a killer. He'd be getting it for free by attacking people.

"Damn," she muttered, rushing for her nightstand.

She grabbed the gun and the stun gun, not wanting to kill the stranger but ready to if it came down to him or her. The small screwdriver she kept to change the batteries on her remote came with her. She jogged out of her room, down the stairs,

and exited the front door. Her bare feet flew across her grass, barely slowed on the pavement, and she reached Kilt's front door.

The locks were flimsy and he didn't have an alarm pad. She grimaced. It was stupid not to use technology but maybe he didn't want responders coming to his home if it were ever triggered. She used the screwdriver to stab into the deadbolt lock and it turned the bolt. She wiggled the tip between the door handle and the wall, closed her eyes, and smiled when it popped open. *Simple as pie*. Her hand pushed open the front door.

Yeah, I'm definitely going to have a talk with my neighbor about his cheap taste in hardware. She glanced around, closed the door behind her and sprinted for the stairs. The intruder was probably still trying to work his way into the house. He'd have to figure out how to wiggle the back slider until the lock popped or get through a window. She doubted he'd be brave enough to smash glass for fear of drawing attention of other homeowners to his trespassing.

She avoided the bedrooms, sure Kilt wouldn't be there, and headed for the door at the end of the hallway. She hesitated when her fingers touched the handle. Every vampire movie she'd ever seen flashed through her memory and she drew back. No way would she enter the attic. Her neighbor could attack her. She spun instead, stepped into the laundry area and waited.

The bedrooms all had thick curtains, the doors open, but hardly any light filtered into the second floor. Her ears strained and she heard someone coming up the stairs. The stranger had a heavy tread, breathed loudly as if he'd done something to get a workout, and her hand reached for the gun she'd shoved inside her robe pocket.

Fingers curved around metal. The weight comforted her as she slid her other hand into the matching pocket, grabbing the stun gun.

A light clicked on near the stairs, illuminating the hallway. She hesitated before inching forward. She peeked around the wall to watch the stranger disappear into the room and she tiptoed down the hallway. She pressed against the wall next to the room he searched and waited.

The closet jerked open inside the bedroom, the guy obviously looking for Kilt, and he softly cursed. Matty's hand tightened on the button of the stun gun, her other hand ready to jerk out the gun if needed. The shadow moved on the floor as he stalked closer.

Her heart pounded but she had surprise on her side. She lunged as the shadow grew larger. The guy startled when he faced Matty. His brown eyes widened as he stared at her face, another advantage she had, and her hand shot out. The metal bars touched the guy just as she pushed the button.

The clicking noise seemed to create a beat for the stranger to dance to as his body began to shake, twitch, and she watched him pale. His arm shot out while he jerked around, struck her face, but it didn't hurt. She pulled away quickly. She didn't ease up on shocking him until his eyes rolled up and the guy collapsed on the floor unconscious.

She stepped over his body into the bedroom. Her gaze swept the room and landed on the drape ties hanging uselessly from the wall. She retrieved them, returned to the intruder, and used her foot to roll him over. His limp body flopped

onto his belly. She braced her knee on his ass and quickly tied his wrists behind his back. She returned to the wall to remove a second set of drape ties. She pulled up each of his ankles, hogtied him tightly, and began disarming him.

She tossed the crosses, his plastic water weapon, and both stakes toward the window. It wasn't easy but she pushed him onto his side, her hands sliding over his body, and found a knife hidden inside an ankle strap. He also had a pocket knife stashed in the front pocket of his shirt. She tossed those into the pile. Matty let him drop to his stomach and rose to her feet.

A quick study of her handiwork assured her the guy wouldn't be going anywhere without someone untying him. She backed away and glanced around the room again. The desk beckoned as she approached it.

Kilt didn't have anything personal inside the drawers, no bills stated his name, and no letterhead on his print paper. Her disappointment rose. She wanted to find out something about her mysterious, hunky neighbor, knowing she'd never get another opportunity to be inside his home. She turned to leave but something blocked the bedroom door to draw her attention.

Her mouth fell open as Kilt stepped into the room wearing just the blue plaid kilt and with a big, dangerous-looking sword gripped in his hand. His blue eyes were striking as they shifted away from the intruder and met her stare. A frown curved his firm lips but he didn't speak. His unbraided hair had obviously just been washed, the damp strands flowing down his muscular chest to his waist. Drops of water dotted his tan skin as if he'd just jumped from the shower.

Mute, Matty gawked at the bronzed god who silently watched her. His sword lowered when she met his gaze again. His intense gaze fascinated her. *It's probably not a good idea to stare into them in case movies are right and he can control my mind.* She didn't glance away. He wouldn't be calmly standing there watching her if he wanted to do harm. He'd have attacked already.

He tilted his head slightly, his gaze roamed down her body, and he took a step closer. "Who are you and what are you doing inside my home?"

She cleared her throat. "Um, I live across the street. I saw that dirtball park in front of your house and realized he meant to break in. I'm kind of the neighborhood watch." Her ratty robe embarrassed her. He probably thought she was insane. "I'm not with him."

"You tied him well. Thank you."

She loved his husky voice and the accent was flat out hot. So was he with his handsome good looks. The danger factor actually made him sexier. A real vampire stood feet away and seemed grateful to her.

A real vampire. She resisted the urge to faint. She'd been half joking but the laugh was on her.

"I'd like to repay you. Name what you want."

She hadn't dated in the five years since her attack and it made her lonely. The one thing that came to mind would have been wrong to ask. She shook her head, refusing to ask him to show her what he wore under that kilt despite the curiosity she'd had since she'd laid eyes on him. *Totally inappropriate and don't go there.*

"I should be going home now. I'll leave you to deal with your intruder."

Chapter Two

Blaron regarded the woman, inhaling the scents inside the room. The hunter on the floor wore a cheap, offensive cologne and was stinking of sweat and fear. It nearly masked the sweeter, tempting feminine fragrances of his neighbor. He hadn't seen her before but he believed her reason for being there. His gaze traveled down her well-worn robe, her shapely legs peeking from beneath the thigh-length material, and her bare feet. Her face intrigued him.

A scar ran down the side of her jaw, another at her temple, and at her cheek near her ear. They didn't distract from her delicate, attractive features. Big, blue eyes stared at him with a mixture of awe and wariness. He didn't pick up fear coming from her but her heart raced. He could hear the fast beat, tormenting him just a little.

He'd showered, oblivious to the happenings inside his home until he'd turned the water off. The noise of someone moving around the floor below had been alarming. The hunter surprised him, he'd been careful to hide his identity, but the female stunned him. He knew humans fought crime by watching their neighbors' homes but he'd never been aware of her presence. It worried him that his senses had failed him of her surveillance.

She took a hesitant step toward him, her intent to flee, but he didn't budge from blocking the doorway. He wasn't allowing her to leave until he assessed the threat she posed to his safety. His study of her switched to the hunter on the floor.

A male lay on his side by the bed, his arms and feet bound at the center of his back, and his terrified gaze watched Blaron. He shifted his gaze, noticed the pile of weapons, and his mouth pressed firmly together. The male had intended to kill him. He glared at his enemy.

"Who are you?"

"I have friends," the guy whined. "They will come, evil demon." The guy twisted his head to shoot a murderous glare at the woman. "They'll kill your minion too."

Confusion made Blaron frown. "My what?"

The hunter jerked his head at the woman. "Her. Your lover who guards you while you are in your death sleep. Release me, son of Satan. It's my duty to send you back to hell."

He hid a wince, glanced at the woman, and knew he couldn't just allow her to stroll out of his home. She'd seen and heard too much. "Good luck with that, hunter. You're the one who has been caught."

"My friends will come and they'll kill you and that hideous bitch who feeds you. I can see why she'd sink so low as to protect a monster. She's one too."

Blaron noticed instantly how the woman's features paled, she lowered her head to allow some of her curly blonde hair to drop forward to hide the worst of her scars, and her shoulders sagged a little. Anger hit him instantly that the insulting words had

made her courageous spirit withdraw. Only a strong female would attack a larger male, to come to a neighbor's defense, both of which she'd done for a stranger. He admired her for that. She was female, probably sensitive about her flaws, and he moved before he allowed his temper to cool. His bare foot nailed the rude bastard in the side.

The hunter gasped from the pain, the sharp kick knocked him against the bed, and he blacked out. The female raised her head, realized what Blaron done, and she stared at him with a mixture of amusement and finally fear.

"I detest rudeness from a guest, especially an uninvited one." He paused. "My apologies, lass."

She held his gaze confidently and licked her lips. The sight of her pink tongue darting out did something to his body that stunned him. His cock twitched, filled with blood, and he lowered his sword in front of him to rest the tip on the floor. The flat metal hid his response by keeping his kilt from lifting in the front.

"Five years ago I awoke to a burglar who decided to try to rape me at knifepoint. I fought, he sliced my face a few times and stabbed me." She paused, emotional turmoil making her voice tremble. "I fought back. He ended up dying while I survived." Her eyes glinted with pride. "I'm not so pretty anymore but I'm still breathing. I count that as a win."

"Why did you try to save me?"

"It sucks being awoken to some jerk intent on causing harm. I've had that done to me. You haven't eaten anyone on the block, I assume you're bag-fed since you

get those nifty deliveries, and we sleep during the same hours." She hesitated. "I have a live and let live policy. I don't care what you are as long as you're not hurting anyone."

Shock tore through him once again. She knew what he was or at least suspected. He could see it in her wary regard. He wondered if she figured it out after disarming the hunter from the weapons used to kill a vampire according to myth or if she'd guessed long before. She knew about the blood deliveries to his home from what she'd mentioned and had taken note of the fact that he hadn't fed on anyone on the block. *Yet she still came to my aid.* It made his cock stir more, the blood he'd drunk before his shower flowing there, and he wondered how vampire-friendly she would be if she guessed how attracted he was to her.

"Even if you aren't technically alive, the motto still applies." She took another hesitant step closer. "Could you please move? I'm up past my bedtime and I assume you are too. I'll leave you to deal with him. As far as I'm concerned I never saw him, this didn't happen, and you're just a regular guy."

"Nay," he murmured. "You can't leave yet, lass."

She backed up, alarm registering on her face, as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Don't make me regret what I did. I have heard no good deed goes unpunished but it would suck if that's true." She grimaced. "Forget the suck part. Bad pun I didn't intend to make considering the circumstances."

Blaron really liked her. He managed to stifle a grin. "We're not safe. My home has been invaded and his friends may be watching it. They tend to travel in groups.

You're a target if you leave. They believe you're in cahoots with me."

He didn't believe it. Group hunters traveled in packs but they also attacked in them. They'd have arrived already if the hunter had friends watching his back. Blaron wasn't willing to allow the woman to leave yet though. She intrigued him. Spending a little more time around her proved too tempting to resist.

He'd release her when he was ready to. She posed no real threat to him once he abandoned his home. He'd have to move, no longer safe where he lived after one hunter had found him. No one would believe her if she decided to rant about vampires. No one ever did.

"I'll not harm you." He wanted to assure her of it, feeling the brute if he frightened the wee bonnie lass after she'd shown such bravery. "I wouldn't sleep days if I knew you were harmed because of me. I also wish to know why you came to my aid. It was very courageous of you to help knowing you'd be facing me."

"I actually thought you'd be sleeping."

"I don't fall to my death sleep when the sun rises as they portray in movies and books."

Interest sparked in her pretty eyes. "Really?"

"Truly." He glanced at the water gun. "Holy water is just wet, the spike would've hurt something fierce, but I doubt that scrawny wretch would've gotten close enough to me to do any damage. I tend to be a light sleeper."

"I bet." She shifted her stance. "So what happens now?"

"I need to call some friends. They'll come get him and us. We need to go

somewhere safe."

Her gaze flickered to the thick drapes covering the windows, sun lighting the edges. "The sun is up."

"That's unfortunate but I'm old enough to withstand a little of it before I suffer any real damage."

He didn't miss the curiosity in her gaze. He guessed she wanted to ask him his age but refrained.

"I have a gun in my pocket. I'll be perfectly safe returning home. I just live across the street and I have no qualms about shooting idiots."

He grinned, unable to resist. She was brave and cute. "Thank you for not pointing it at me."

"I doubt bullets would hurt you."

They'd hurt all right but he wasn't about to admit that. She wouldn't be able to kill him but if she shot him enough times she'd sure slow him down enough for her to flee outside. He wouldn't dare pursue her into the sunshine with those injuries. He kept that information to himself.

"I'll make that call." He backed up for the phone on the table, lifted it, and his body tensed in case she attempted to dart past him. He glanced away to dial but she remained still. The phone rang a few times and someone at the club answered.

"I've been compromised," he stated softly. "A hunter is tied up and I need an evacuation for three immediately."

"Yes sir." The male growled. "We're coming."

He hung up and moved to keep his kilt from lifting, his weapon pointed down in front of him to do it, and also not to alarm the lass.

"They are coming."

"Who are they?"

He hesitated. "Friends."

"Not vampires?"

"No." He made sure to keep his sword in place even as his body started to cool. He noticed a discoloration forming on her cheek, having missed it before, and realized she'd been harmed. "He hit you?"

She reached up and rubbed the spot, her fingertips brushing tenderly over the area. "It's okay. He flopped around a bit when I tagged him with the stun gun and he got lucky before he fell down."

Blaron moved before he considered she might feel threatened as he advanced. Her arm dropped and she backed up instantly. He paused but continued to advance.

"Easy. I'm just going to take a look."

She bumped into his desk, not having anywhere else to go, and he paused feet in front of her. He noticed her shorter height, realize she really was a wee bit of a lass, and his hand rose to trace her skin. She was soft, warm, and peered up at him with a mixture of fear and curiosity. His body responded to her appealing scent and her lovely eyes.

"I'll not harm you." He lowered his voice to a husky tone.

His gaze lowered from her eyes to the mark on her pale skin. It was slightly warmer and he inhaled, picking up a very slight hint of blood scent coming from her. He wanted to groan as his body tensed and his fangs began to ache under the gums where they were hidden, matching the awareness of his equally affected cock.

"He cut the inside of your mouth."

Her eyebrows shot up with surprise. "How did you know that?"

His fangs grew longer and he muted the groan he nearly uttered. "I can fix it for you." He traced his tongue over one fang, careful to keep them hidden from her, and lowered his head. "Will you trust me?"

"I don't know."

She was too damn cute. "Close your eyes, tilt your head back and open your mouth."

"No way. I had a boy tell me that once and he tried to kiss me."

"That's what I plan to do. I can heal you with my tongue."

She strained against the desk. "I think that's a bad idea and I don't even know you."

"You came to my aid. I owe you, lass. Allow me to heal what that wretch did. It won't hurt. I promise I won't be biting you."

Chapter Three

Kilt was absolutely the sexiest guy in Matty's opinion. His eyes stared deeply into hers and she had the urge to allow him to do anything he wanted. She wondered if he had an ability to control someone's mind but she didn't feel any different. The inside of her mouth did hurt and the coppery taste of blood wasn't her favorite. The fact that he promised not to bite or hurt her made her less afraid.

A gorgeous, half naked man wanted to kiss her to fix her boo-boo. *He's a vampire. Don't forget that,* she warned. *Too bad I wasn't hurt in a more interesting place.* That thought made her want to wince. The mental image of the tall, muscular vampire dropping to his knees to lay some lip on other parts of her body assured her that she'd spent way too many years dateless without sex.

Matty decided to do something rash. She'd learned how short life could be after she'd nearly lost hers. Regrets were a bitch. She wanted him to kiss her, wanted to feel alive for once, and Kilt was too much of a temptation to resist. *You only live once and what do you have to lose? Your life isn't exactly exciting.*

"Okay, but only because you haven't eaten any of our neighbors and you haven't even tried to disarm me. I'm willing to trust you."

He smiled, his lips pressed together, and lowered his head more until their faces were a mere inch apart. His eyes were stunning and something she could stare into for hours without getting bored. She remembered he'd wanted her to close her eyes, which would have totally screwed up that "look into my eyes" movie stuff if he were trying to control her mind.

She closed them, tilted her head back and slightly parted her lips. Her body tensed, waiting to see if she'd just made a horrible mistake or if he was as honest as he seemed. He got credit for not denying what he was.

He wasn't a butterfly kisser, a man who just tenderly brushed his lips over hers. The vampire was more direct. He dominated with force when he took possession of her mouth by firmly covering hers with his. His tongue invaded, delved inside and explored. He tasted sweet and he knew what he was doing.

Her hands splayed on his chest for something to cling to, another surprise because for a dead guy, he was literally hot. Firm muscles were just under his skin and his arm wrapped around her waist to tug her tightly against his firm body.

She felt something hard press between their bodies but it was shoved to the side and she realized it had been his sword. She barely noticed the sound of it bumping the wood of the desk and the soft thump when it hit the carpet.

The arm around her waist adjusted her a little until her butt shelved on the top of the desk and his hips pressed against her thighs. She spread them slightly, lost in the passion that surged between them, and didn't care that it should have alarmed her to respond so strongly to a stranger when he deepened the kiss.

His hips nudged against her legs tighter, spreading her wider apart, until her robe parted enough for the soft material of his kilt to brush her inner thighs. That wasn't the only thing she felt as another hard object pressed against her mound. It wasn't his sword this time and she knew he was as aroused by their kiss as she was.

His free hand curved around her ribcage and he cupped her breast through the material. She moaned against his tongue and her hands trailed up his chest, loving the feel of him, and wrapped around his neck. Her fingers slid into his platinum tresses until they found his scalp, pulling him even closer. He had silky, wonderful curls that felt right laced around her fingers. His touch on her breast was firm as he squeezed. She moaned louder as a throbbing ache between her thighs made her spread them farther apart, hoping he'd step closer.

She felt his fangs extend while they kissed but it didn't alarm her. She ran her tongue over the point of one and he growled deep in response, his hips grinding against her pussy, and desire turned into a burning need to have him inside her. Matty couldn't remember wanting a man more.

His hips moved in a way that mimicked fucking her, the hard press of his cock rubbing her clit, and even through layers of clothing it was enough to make her hotter, needier and insane with wanting him. She didn't care he was a vampire or that she wasn't one to end up sitting at the edge of a desk wrapped around a stranger. All that mattered was he didn't stop.

Kilt released her breast, bowed his back to put room between their stomachs, and his hand slid between them. She felt a tug at her waist when he yanked on her robe belt. It came free and he used his hand to pull it apart to open it up. Her legs

wrapped around the back of his thighs, trying to pull him closer, but he stopped rocking against her.

He found the bottom of her nightshirt, jerked it up, and his big hand withdrew. She tried to break the kiss to protest the fact that he wasn't rubbing up against her clit anymore, a little stunned at how fast things were progressing between them, but his mouth followed hers when she attempted to pull away. She wasn't trying hard since she had a death grip on the back of his head to keep him tight against her mouth. Her heels rubbed his warm legs that were exposed below his kilt.

Something crashed to the floor near the desk when he knocked things out of the way by clearing the top of it with a sweep of his hand and her back pressed against the hard surface. He came down on top of her, bending over to keep her flat. Her legs rose and wrapped around his hips.

His hand returned to her, wiggling between their bodies, and she felt a tug at her hips. She didn't care since there was only his kiss and the need to be taken by him. Material bunched between her stomach and his, and strong, sure fingers stroked her clit. His touch drew a moan from her and she gasped into his mouth. They were skin to skin, her panties gone, and the feeling had to be the best thing she'd ever experienced. Her body burned and she used her grip around his hips with her legs to try to make him enter her.

Matty knew she was close to climax. The guy rubbed circles over the swollen bundle of nerves and her body tensed. He leaned closer, his hand withdrew from between them, and the thick crown of his shaft pressed against the slick opening of her pussy. His mouth tore from hers right as he began to enter her with his cock. He

was incredibly hard, it felt amazing, and she cried out as her head tilted back. She was coming before he'd even worked his thick shaft all the way inside her.

His mouth brushed a kiss on her neck and a jolt of pain sent her over the edge into a blinding climax as pain turned into sheer pleasure. White hot waves of it slammed her as he began to pound in and out of her body, her vaginal muscles flexing tightly around the thick shaft that penetrated her deeper.

She cried out, a small part of her mind realized he'd bitten into her, fed on her blood, but it felt too good as another climax gripped her. Her fingernails clutched his head tighter against the cradle of her neck and the big, powerful body nearly crushed her. He groaned against her throat and his body shook with enough force the desk under them rattled. His fangs withdrew, a hot tongue swiped the bite, and he cursed softly as he continued to spill his release into her welcoming body. Warmth spread inside her pussy from it, nearly triggering a third climax.

Matty was in a daze, panting, her body going lax as she fought the urge to drift to sleep. Her eyes opened when he raised slightly, his face all she could see, and his incredibly gaze held hers. Passion and satisfaction were two emotions she could understand as he peered at her, because she probably had the same ones on display.

"Ah lass," he murmured. "I didn't mean to bite but I couldn't help it. That was remarkable."

She licked her lips, tried to think, but the room began to spin as she suffered a moment of lightheadedness. The gaze holding hers seemed to darken in color and

flash regret.

"I'll take care of you. You're such a wee one and I took much. It was the passion. You'll be fine. Sleep. I will protect you with my life."

For some insane reason she trusted him. He'd just taken her blood, had sex with her, and she closed her eyes. A sense of peace filled her before she blacked out.

Blaron shifted his gaze to her neck. He bent, licking at the drops of blood that remained on her healing skin. He hadn't meant to bite into her but he couldn't have stopped for anything. The passion that had flared between them had been a force not even a vampire as old as he could resist.

His spine stiffened when he realized there were two added scents inside the room now and two sets of lungs that hadn't been sucking in air before. He jerked his head around to glare at the two men who stared at the floor just inside the bedroom. Both wore leather from neck to foot, had arrived far too quickly in his opinion, and neither met his angry glare.

"Sorry," one of them muttered. "We didn't realize you were having a private moment. We just rushed in, worried about you."

"Drag the hunter out and give me a minute."

"Yes sir," they said in unison, moving to grab the human from the floor, and hauled him off by his limbs.

Blaron cursed as he straightened the lass's robe. He bent, grabbed his sword, and slid it into the scabbard he'd had sewn on the side of all his kilts. He damned the

males for their quick response and himself for losing his mind over a sweet-smelling female who fascinated him.

His hands slid under the lass, he cradled her gently in his arms and walked out of the room with her snug against his bare chest. He glanced around his home for the last time. He couldn't come back. It would be too dangerous.

Both brothers waited near the front door. One of them stepped forward, his arms lifting. "I'll take her from you, sir."

The other one offered a hooded cape. "This should shield you from the worst of it. We parked the van in the driveway. We have a team on motorcycles scouting the area. It will be the last thing the hunters ever do if they try to follow."

"I have her. No one touches her but me."

"But the sun wi—"

"Just toss the damn thing over my head and wrap it around me." Anger stirred. "She's mine and not to be touched by another."

Both males backed up instantly, alarmed. The one with the cloak hesitated and approached.

"Apologies. I didn't know you'd taken a companion."

Blaron stared down at the scarred yet beautiful face of the woman sleeping peacefully in his arms. "Nor had I until I kissed her. She's the one."

Shock still reverberated through him. Every vampire wanted to find the perfect companion but he'd never expected to find his. It had seemed more of a romantic myth but nothing else could explain the way they'd both lost their minds the moment

their lips had touched.

“Send in a cleanup crew to remove all trace I was ever here and inhale her scent to track where she came from. She lives across the street but I’m not certain which house belongs to her. Pack her up and make it look good when you do what needs done. She won’t be returning.”

Chapter Four

Matty was slow to wake, a haze of sleep and erotic dreams tempting her to keep her eyes closed. She may have drifted back off but a big, warm hand on her bare hip slid upward to her lower stomach.

"Wake for me, lass," a husky masculine voice with a sexy accent rasped near her ear. "You need to eat. I've been worried about you."

Alarm jolted her to full wakefulness as her eyes flew open to stare into the handsome face of her neighbor. Kilt was in bed with her, it was dark inside whatever room they were in, and only a few small lamps gave off enough light for her to see by.

"Easy, lass. You're safe. We're underground inside a club a friend of mine owns. My home has been compromised and we'll stay here until we find somewhere else to go."

She was pinned by his hand on her stomach, one of his bare, muscular thighs was over the top of her naked ones, and a sheet was tangled between them. "What am I doing here? Where are my clothes?" Her hands yanked the sheet up higher on her chest. Her breasts had barely been covered.

"It wasn't safe for you to go home. Remember the hunter?"

"You bit me." She remembered that.

"Aye. I did. I'm sorry about that but I was lost to the passion. You're fine. I'd never harm you but I admit I took a little much. It made you weak and sleepy. Are you ready to eat? I have a fine meal awaiting you."

More of her senses were waking once she got past the alarm of being naked in an unfamiliar place with a stranger. The room was chilly, she smelled food, and it was unusually quiet. A vampire had sex with her and had bitten into her neck. She blushed and tried to wiggle away from him. He hesitated and moved his leg to release hers while his hand unpinned her. She lunged away, rolled, but kept the sheet fisted in her hands.

The bed was a large four poster and she gasped when she nearly rolled off the edge. It was higher from the floor than any bed she'd ever been on. She stared down at the concrete floor, knew that would have hurt if she'd taken a dive, and an arm hooked around her waist to drag her butt a few inches back from the edge.

"Careful."

"Where did you say we are?"

The bed moved as he sat up and she turned to glance down his body. The sheet had been pulled nearly off him when she'd tried to flee. Only part of it covered his hip but there was no missing the condition of his body since the material tented over his lap. Her gaze flew to his face.

"Underground. There's a club above us but we're safe. No one knows where we

are or that this place even exists. Would you enjoy a bath before your meal? The club serves to both my kind and yours. I've been assured the food is top notch."

She gaped at him a little. "It's a vampire club? Seriously? Isn't that a bit obvious if you're trying to hide your existence?"

"Aye but we fit better in the setting. It's too cliché to be believable." He hesitated. "Don't feel fear. No one will touch you." He hesitated. "What's your name?"

Her cheeks burned. She'd had sex with him, shared a bed afterward even if she hadn't been aware of it, and they hadn't even exchanged names. "Matty. And yours?"

"Blaron."

She stared at Kilt. He was so handsome and his long hair against his tan skin drew her attention. The desire to touch him made her hands clutch the sheet tighter. "I should go home."

He hesitated. "Why don't you eat first? I'll draw you a bath."

He rolled the other way, leaving the cover of the sheet, and she couldn't help stare at his perfect, beefy ass. It was paler than the rest of him, obvious he had tan lines, and that confused her as he slid off the bed. He bent, reached for something on the floor, and when he straightened, he pulled up a red kilt. He secured it at his waist and turned to face her.

"I'll retrieve you a robe from the bath. My friend who owns the club has these guestrooms stocked with spare ones." He walked into the darkness, out of the reach of the dim light, and bright light came on across the room from the open bathroom

door. She glimpsed a large tub and he returned holding a blood-red robe.

"It's a bit gaudy. I apologize. A nice pale blue would be more fitting for your creamy complexion but beggars can't be choosers. We're at the mercy of my friend for a few days."

"Um..."

He stopped at the edge of the bed feet from her, dropped the robe, and arched a blond eyebrow. "Is there something you wish to ask me?"

"You have tan lines."

"It was from before. You stay the way you were when you were changed. I was a farmer once and spent a lot of time in the sun."

"You mean before you became a vampire?" It felt odd even saying that word aloud.

"I went to war with my friend who now owns this club. One night a saucy wench came to comfort some of the injured lads in camp. She chose me and I believed I'd gone to heaven when she lured me out into the darkness." He paused. "I was flattered she seemed to want me out of all the others she could've picked. I was a lad, she was pretty, and I thought she wanted to share her charms. It turns out she was looking for some sturdy warriors to travel with and protect her. She turned me and my friend."

Matty let that information settle. "Where is she now?"

He hesitated. "She died a long time ago. She had a preference for feeding from large humans such as myself. One night she didn't distract him enough before she

sank her fangs into him.”

“I’m sorry.” She wasn’t sure what else to say. “Did you love her?”

He shook his head. “I detested her, she wasn’t likeable, but she taught us how to survive. We owed her and we did our best to protect her. She never allowed us to go hunting with her though. One night she chose to feed off a male who fought back. He was skilled with a sword.”

She wasn’t sure what to say. They stared at each other. He took a step back.

“Dress in the robe, eat, and take a bath. Don’t leave the room. I need to make some arrangements and will return soon.” He stared at her. “No one will harm you but I can’t promise that if you were to reach the club above us. There are unfamiliar vampires up there who don’t know you are with me. It wouldn’t be safe.”

“Okay.” She wanted to go home but eating and take a bath first sounded good. He couldn’t do anything until the sun went down and she couldn’t have slept all day. She wished there was a clock but a quick sweep of the room with her gaze didn’t show one. “You’ll be right back?”

“Twenty minutes at most. Just stay inside the room and no one will bother you. I stay here occasionally.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything, Matty.”

He said it in a husky, sexy way with that accent of his that she loved to hear. “Why do you always come home in a limo right before dawn? What do you do every night after you leave home? Do you have a job?”

He hesitated.

She had a sinking feeling from the little information she learned that she knew what he did at night. "You hunt for food?"

"No. I'm a bagger now. My hunting for blood from hosts is long over as soon as we were able to bribe blood banks into selling it to us. Not all vampires share that approach but we don't like harming anyone. My friends and I actually go after vampires who kill humans. It's too dangerous these days to do it and it's no longer a necessity to survive. I don't drive and that's why my friend who owns this club sends a car for me every evening."

"Will you be working tonight? Can you drop me off at my house?"

He hesitated. "I'm taking the evening off. We'll talk when I return. Eat, lass. Enjoy a warm bath." He glanced around the room. "It may look a bit rough with the concrete but the amenities in the bathroom are very modern."

He spun on his bare feet and walked to the door. His sword rested against the wall. He grabbed it up as he jerked open the door and disappeared into the darkness. No lights lit the hallway. She shivered at the thought of trying to sneak out. She was in some basement. The smell of food drove her to inch closer to the side of the bed, release the sheet, and slide off the edge. The cold floor made her shiver as she tied the thick, fancy robe around her waist.

* * * * *

"What are you doing?"

Blaron frowned at his friend. "Asking you for the night off and can you have someone find me a good home? I'm not holing up with you for long, Lethal."

"I'm stunned you brought a human here."

"She's special."

Lethal tilted his head and a grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I see. You fed from her, I take it? What happened to your sworn oath of not taking blood even from willing women?"

Anger tensed Blaron's body. "She's the one."

Shock gripped the other vampire's features. "How did you find her?"

"She found me. It seems she's a neighbor, saw a hunter sneaking into my home, and came to save me."

"That little thing you carried in came to your defense?" He chuckled. "What did she do? Scream to warn you?"

"She had hog tied the hunter by the time I reached them. She's quick and smart."

"Have you told her that you plan to keep her?"

"I'm getting there."

"Good luck. I take it she knows what we are?"

"She guessed before she ever met me. She's a brave lass."

His friend leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk he sat behind. "Good luck telling her the truth. She won't be happy."

"Maybe she will be."

Lethal chuckled. "Always the optimist. Let me know how it goes or perhaps I'll hear the screaming from my office. We'll go hunting without you tonight. You stay to inform your lass of her future." He opened a drawer and withdrew handcuffs lined with fur. "Here's to love. You may need these to convince her to stay."

Blaron stood. "I won't be needing those."

"Take them. It's best to be prepared." All humor faded from his features. "She's a danger to us if you don't convince her to stay with you. You brought her here and I don't wish to close the club down."

"She has no idea where we are."

"She's guarded to make sure she doesn't snoop around or try to leave?"

"No. She won't flee."

Lethal stood, glaring. "She is the enemy if she does. Are we clear?"

"Perfectly." Blaron gripped the handle of his sword. "Don't threaten her, Lethal. She's mine and we'll fight if you try to harm a hair on her precious head."

Lethal's stance relaxed. "Make sure we have no reason to come to blows. Friends are hard to keep as the years wear on. I don't want to lose you."

They regarded each other and Blaron released his sword. He grabbed the handcuffs off the desk. "I'll be in my room."

"Have fun!"

Blaron departed quickly. "Asshole."

"It takes one to know one."

Chapter Five

Matty rose from the warm bath, her hair washed, and tucked a towel around her body. The door in the other room opened. She froze, afraid it might not be Kilt but instead some other vampire. The door closed and she heard a growl.

"Matty? Are you in there?"

"I'll be right out."

She knew that Scottish brogue. He'd come back. She dried off quickly, wished for clothing, but only had the robe to put on. The blood red color of it made her feel like a walking advertisement for a vampire meal on legs. *Bad pun. Don't go there.* Her hand hesitated at the door but she turned the handle, opening it up.

It surprised her to see that Kilt had showered and changed. His long hair was still damp and the sight of him in loose black pants was enough to make her gawk. He looked like some kind of blond pirate out of a film with his long hair, the breeches, and a sword hung low from a belt secured at his waist. He stared at her with his sexy eyes when she finally stopped noticing his shirtless, muscled chest. The guy had the best body she'd ever seen.

"You ate." He looked pleased as he smiled. "I take it was enjoyable? The plate is

clean.”

“They serve good food. You were right.”

He shrugged, drawing attention to those broad shoulders. “I had heard but I don’t eat food anymore.”

“Ever?”

“I used to but it’s been a long time.”

“So you can eat it though?”

He hesitated. “I don’t need it and I lost the urge to eat with others a good hundred years ago. Blood is what I need.”

She unconsciously reached up and touched her neck. There wasn’t a mark where he’d bitten her, she’d check in the mirror, but the memory remained. Kilt followed her hand with his gaze and licked his lips. The air between them seemed to warm up in the chilly room as both of them were reminded of what they’d done together on his desk.

Matty dropped her hand quickly. “Have you eaten?”

He hesitated. “Are you offering to feed me?”

She took a step back and bumped the doorway of the bathroom, missing the opening, and halted. “No.”

He reached for his waist, unfastened the belt, and turned his back on her to place his sword on the table by the bed. She watched him, leery of what would happen. The guy weighed at least a hundred pounds more than her and was bodybuilder big.

Their gazes met when he faced her.

"I fed and showered to give you time to yourself. We need to talk."

"Yes, we do. I need to go home. I'm sure that I'm safe. That jerk was after you, not me."

"You haven't asked what I did to him."

She hesitated. "I don't want to know."

"Fair enough." He took a hesitant step toward her. "I'm an honorable man. I want you to know that. You'll learn but we don't know each other well." He stopped feet from her, watching her closely. "I'd never cause you harm and I'd give my life to protect yours. Those are things you can always count on from me. I'm honest and I can pledge total loyalty to you. I'm a bag feeder so there won't be any other women in my arms."

Mute, Matty listened. It sounded as if he were trying to make something more out of the crazy one-morning stand they'd had. Her heartbeat increased. The idea of dating him wasn't totally a bad one. She'd never forget him and admitted he'd become a part of her life while she'd watched him from her bedroom window. He said he wouldn't be returning to his house and that meant she wouldn't see him again as soon as they said goodbye.

"In the old days a vampire couple would've fed off humans. The best way to assure a human could survive without knowing what we were was feeding off them during sex." His cheeks blushed slightly. "Those days are over and I'd kill anyone who touched you even for feeding purposes."

"Um..." No words formed.

"I'm saying this wrong. I'm not good with words but the passion between us can't be denied. I'm attracted to you, the sex was incredible, and sleeping with you wrapped inside my arms, against my body, was heaven on Earth. I've never known such rightness as touching you."

For a guy not good with words, he said the right ones to melt her heart. She still couldn't talk though. He shocked her more by dropping to his knees before her and stared up at her face with sincerity.

"You bring me to my knees. I pledge my life to yours, Matty. I'll do whatever it takes to convince you to be my companion."

She swallowed hard. "What is that? Your girlfriend?"

He hesitated and offered a hand, holding it out to her. She placed her trembling one in his. He brought it to his lips to place a kiss on the back of her hand, turned it in his, kissed her palm. His gaze never left hers.

"It's a lover, a friend, and you'd use the term wife. It's a lifetime commitment and we don't age. I'm going to be honest with you. It's forever and that could be a long time. I've met a vampire over a thousand years old."

Her knees locked together to keep her on her feet and the wall at her back kept her standing. "You want to turn me? Make me a vampire?"

He nodded, still holding her hand. "I don't want to lose you to old age or illness. Humans are frail. You'd be much stronger as a vampire."

She yanked her hand out of his and hugged her waist. "No."

Pain etched on his features. "Why not? Isn't that something tempting? You'll never age and I'll always protect you. I'm a skilled warrior. Only the sun can kill you or a beheading. No one would ever get close enough to stake you to the ground or touch that pretty head of yours."

"I...this is insane. You don't even know me. We had sex once and while I kind of thought you might be a vampire, you're real. I'm still reeling from the fact they exist and why would you offer that to me? I don't understand."

"Kisses don't lie and nor do our bodies. You're a perfect fit for me."

"It was sex one time. That's crazy to think just because it was good that we should get married. We're strangers."

"We'll have a long time to get to know each other." He smiled. "I look forward to it." He paused. "And if you believe that was just good sex I obviously need to take my time the next round." His gaze lowered to the tie of her belt. "Open it up. I'm on my knees already and just hook a leg over my shoulder." He brushed his hair back, winked, and licked his lips. "I'll show you greatness."

Her jaw dropped open. "You..."

"Plan to do a little worshipping of your bonnie body." He reached for her.

Matty launched herself against the wall, avoided his hands, and ran for the door. The guy planned to seduce her, bite into her again, and make her a bloodsucking creature of the night. That wasn't on her "to do" list. He might be hot, have a rocking body, be totally hung, but no guy was worth giving up chocolate forever. Besides that, they were strangers.

She nearly reached the door when an arm snagged her from behind around her waist. Kilt hugged her to his body, wrapped his other arm over her chest, and lifted her right off her feet. She twisted her head to stare at him with fear as he frowned at her, inches from her face.

"Don't be afraid."

"Put me down!"

"I won't hurt you. Are you afraid it's going to be painful? It won't."

"I don't even know you and I'm not ready to get married. Or whatever you call it." She struggled but his strong arms refused to release her. She did however feel his body respond when something hard pressed against her ass. She froze and gawked at him.

"Sorry." He shrugged, turned them both to face the bed, and sighed. "I can't help it. I want you despite this not being the best time to be sporting a pole."

"A pole?"

He cleared his throat. "My dick is hard any time I touch you. Is that clearer?"

He gently dropped her on the bed and Matty rolled, sat up, and her gaze lowered to the breeches. He either wasn't wearing underwear or they were thin because his "pole" was pointing straight out, the material of his pants stretched taut. She raised her eyes to stare at him.

"We're not having sex and don't bite me."

"How about we make love but I don't bite? I'm prepared this time for how strongly I will react to you." He grinned. "I need to convince you it's better than good

between us." He stared at her lap. "Open the robe and I'll take you to heaven."

"Um, no. Fangs and that area aren't meeting. No way. I don't have any piercings down there and never plan to get any."

He chuckled. "Do you know what fangs are good for when I'm licking you?" He parted his teeth, revealing they were fully extended. "They fit perfectly on the sides of that pretty little pearl to give my tongue full access. I won't have to use my hands to keep you spread enough to get to it well. They will be otherwise occupied."

The vivid picture he painted made her breath freeze inside her lungs and her body responded. She inched back, scooting away from him. "I think I should go home."

"Damn. I was afraid of this." He frowned. "You're scared. I won't force you to turn but you've got to at least give us a chance before you say no."

"You want to date me?" She paused, considering that. They could get to know each other. It wasn't as if she had a social life. The idea of it wasn't scary. Of course they wouldn't be going out to dinner since he admitted not eating food. Maybe they could see movies together. "We could try that."

He turned and reached for his sword. Fear gripped her. Would he kill her for refusing to become a vampire? He discarded it and fiddled with the belt he'd removed. He turned, holding up fur-lined handcuffs, and her fear eased. The relief was short-lived when he lunged at her.

Blaron hated to do it but he needed to convince Matty they belonged together.

She cried out when he grabbed her, he was careful not to hurt her, but she put up a hell of a fight when he stripped her of her robe. He was careful not to bruise her creamy skin as he gripped her wrists, tugged her up the bed as her feet kicked at him, and secured her wrists through the bars of the headboard.

“Asshole!” She tried to kick him in the face.

He dodged her foot, barely, and grunted when it impacted his shoulder instead. The lass had fire and he loved her a little more for it. His Matty was a fighter. He wouldn’t bite her, he would refrain from tasting her blood. She struggled when he released her, her hips rising from the bed, her feet flat on the mattress, and his cock hurt from the sight as she twisted and wiggled.

He backed away and reached for the waist of his borrowed breeches. He hated the feel of them, the constricting material rubbing the crown of his straining cock, and sighed with relief as he tugged them down. He sat, yanking the damn things off his legs and tossed them to the floor. He was a kilt man. He moved on his hands and knees, watching her wear herself out, and grinned at the curses she muttered. His lass had a mouth of a sailor when her temper was riled. He found it adorable.

She’d learn he’d never take her by force. He’d never be a brute to her but this was for her own good. Lethal would try to harm her if she attempted to run away, and her old life was gone. Guilt ate at him a little bit over that but he’d been in shock after finding her.

Chapter Six

"Now, Matty," he sighed. "Calm down."

She glared at him. "Let me go. This is your idea of convincing me you're honorable? Stripping me and handcuffing me to a bed?"

"It's not perfect but it will do."

"Jerk. Asshole. Creep!"

He grinned. "I just heard you use more colorful terms."

"You're amused?" She'd fought the restraints until she grew tired. "This isn't funny."

"It's not." His gaze lowered down her body. "Open those pretty thighs for me and I'll improve your mood. I won't bite you this time and I won't turn you during the heat of passion. You have my word as a gentleman."

She snorted. "You're a vampire."

"I'm one who wants to pleasure you."

"You want my blood. You admitted to using sex to get women to allow you to feed off them."

He looked hurt at her words. They stared at each other and he sighed.

"You're more than that to me."

"Let me go, Blaron."

"Give us a chance first. I will convince you or give your life back."

She wanted to believe him. *Why does it feel as though I'm making a deal with the devil? A hot, sexy one, who keeps staring at my thighs as if I'm a big kid's meal he's starving for.* She hated how her nipples hardened, knowing it didn't have a thing to do with the room temperature but more for what would happen if she gave him access to her pussy.

"You're saying if we have sex again, you'll let me go it doesn't convince me to marry you? You know that's screwed up, right?"

He smiled again. "I do love that term. Up. Down. Hard. Fast. Slow." His eyes seemed to glow. "Any way that will please you and make you scream out my name while I'm inside that tight, wonderful sheath of yours."

Her body wanted him, tingled from his words, and it pissed her off. "Fine. Your word, Blaron." She glared at him. "Do your worst but I'm going home." She took a deep breath. "No biting."

"No biting. I love a challenge, lass."

His hands reached for her and she spread her thighs at his urging. She dropped her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. No matter how good he might be at oral sex, she had a life to get back to. She probably had nothing to worry about. Men had gone down on her before but it hadn't been great. They sure hadn't made her

scream their names.

She relaxed when the bed moved and he spread her thighs apart. She glanced down, saw him sprawled out on his belly, his face inches from her pussy, and he raised his arms. They braced over her legs to hold them down. His gaze met hers and he gave her a cocky grin that showed his fangs.

"They won't cut you and I'll show you how you're going to love them."

Fear and excitement fought for dominance. She'd kill him when he let her go if he bit her tender skin. He breathed on her clit, making her more aware of the vulnerable position she was in, and she pulled on the handcuffs that refused to release her wrists. The sensation of being tied and pinned to the bed had a certain amount of sexual appeal.

He lowered his head and growled softly, a masculine sound that turned her on. He nuzzled his mouth against her folds, she tensed when she felt two fangs brush her clit, and they pressed tight against her skin on either side of it. It seemed to push the bundle of nerves closer to the tongue that teased her with a slow trace of the tip of it. Matty squeezed her eyes closed and her fingers wrapped around the chains of the handcuffs.

He tortured her with flicks of his tongue over her clit until it throbbed. When he applied pressure, pushed the flat of his tongue against it to rub, she tried to buck her hips but the weight of his arms kept her down. She jerked though when he reached up and both of his hands found her straining nipples. He pinched them between his thumbs and forefingers, rolling the taut nipples, and her body tensed.

Moans broke from her lips. His forearms pinned her but his fingers drove her crazy. "Faster. Please?" She hated begging but she wanted to come so bad it hurt.

He refused to quicken the pace. Instead he kept the slow gliding of his tongue until she cried out, the orgasm ripping through her body. His tongue paused until she stopped trembling and the pleasure eased. His hands stopped pinching and instead massaged her breasts, kneading them gently. She gasped when he began again, his tongue fixating on her clit.

"I can't," she panted. "Too sensitive."

He ignored her and she cried out when he began sucking on her instead. Strong tugs of his mouth with the occasional swipe of his tongue made her writhe and moan. She came again, his name bursting from her lips.

"Blaron!"

He mouth pulled away. "Will you marry me?"

"No."

"I'm not done."

"You can't mean to keep doing that until I say yes." She had a sinking feeling he did. And damn him, he was good at it. She wouldn't survive hours of him licking her.

"Aye, lass. I do."

"Bastard!"

He chuckled. "But I'm all yours."

She gasped when he nuzzled his mouth against her pussy again, his fangs fitting

around her clit, and his tongue licked her slowly. Her toes curled, feeling the side of his ribs, and hoped she at least tickled him. Her breathing grew faster as she panted and he refused to let up until she came again. She screamed his name that time. Her body bucked from the intensity of it. He pulled away.

"Matty?" His voice was a little rough sounding. "What say you?"

"Fuck you."

He growled. "That's next."

She gasped when he sat back on his haunches. He gripped her thighs, crawled in closer until they were spread over him, and his cock pressed against the opening of her pussy. She stared at him, a little afraid of the dark, dangerous look on his handsome face.

"I won't hurt you but I have to have you. Say yes."

She nodded, wanting him. She hurt inside, needing to be filled. The orgasms had been great but they'd felt a little empty. He entered her, her body stretching around his thick cock, and both of them moaned.

His hands slid down her thighs, cupped her ass and adjusted her a little higher on his lap. He rocked them, fucking her deep and fast. His thumb moved to press over her clit and Matty went wild. The sensation of him inside her and touching her clit, his powerful body taking hers, too much ecstasy to handle with the ability to think. She screamed out as she came and opened her eyes in time to watch Blaron throw back his head, his body tensed, and he shouted out her name as he came inside her. He shivered, his muscular, sweaty body the sexiest sight ever, and his chin lowered

and their gazes met.

"What say you, Matty?"

She couldn't form words. She was too blown away by what he'd just done to her and too out of breath. His eyebrow arched as he smiled.

"Again? Okay, Matty. I can go all night and day for you." He adjusted his hold on her, running his fingers over her lower stomach. "We'll both learn new limits of how much we can survive."

He began to move inside her, still hard, this time in slow, long drives, nearly withdrawing from her pussy, only to drive back in deep. He paused there, staring into her eyes, and withdrew. Her fingers clamped around the chains and her back arched. Blaron smiled.

"I've had hundreds of years to learn how to please a woman but none mattered as much as you. Think of doing this every night."

She moaned in response when he brushed a thumb over her swollen clit. Her vaginal muscles clenched, and Blaron groaned.

"Matty, my love, say yes to me."

She nodded, wanting to come again. His hand released her ass and he bent over her, bracing his arm on the bed next to her ribcage. His mouth took hers in a kiss that was so tender, so passionate, that she wished she could cling to him. Her wrists strained against the handcuffs and she whimpered in protest.

More of his weight came down on her and his fingers brushed hers and she felt a hard jerk on the chain. Her arms lowered when he snapped the restraints. Her

fingers delved into his hair, holding his mouth closer while she kissed him back. His hips rocked them into another shared orgasm and he broke the kiss when they both cried out.

"Love me, Matty. Allow me to love you, darlin'."

She opened her eyes to stare into his. "This is totally not fair."

He smiled. "Love isn't fair but it sure feels amazing, doesn't it? We're right for each other. I'll keep convincing you."

"I'm never going to win an argument with you, am I?"

He chuckled. "I'll let you win sometimes. I like the idea of you restraining me to a bed and convincing me you're right."

The idea of him tied down at her mercy excited her. He smiled. "I hear your heart racing. Like that, do you? I'd allow you to do anything to me you want. I'd welcome it. We'll be happy together."

Her life flashed inside her mind. She'd become a recluse, no life outside of her home, and she'd been lonely. Blaron was offering her a life with him. She trailed her hands down to his cheeks, staring into his eyes, and knew she didn't want to lose him. It might be scary to face an unknown future but at least it was one. He gave her such a look of longing and hope that she believed he wanted to be with her.

"Will it hurt?"

"I'll love you always and make you happy. There'll never be pain in my arms."

"I mean turning."

He grinned. "No. I will let you drink from me while I drink from you. It's not the way you've seen in movies. We'll sleep after, both of us tired, and when you wake you'll feel the same. You'll just need to drink blood from a bag."

She grimaced.

He chuckled. "For you I'll drink from the bags and you can drink from me. Way more pleasurable and it's what a good man does for his woman."

"It sounds gross."

"You know how it feels when I lick your little pussy? The fangs feel almost as good when you sink them into my skin and drink from me. It's sexual and I'll fuck you while you do it. I promise you're going to love it. I just may have to quit my job since we won't want to climb out of bed for a few hundred years."

She took a deep breath. "Okay."

He kissed her again, the passion between them igniting, and he slowly began to fuck her. Matty moaned when he pulled his mouth away. Their gazes met.

"Drink from me, love." He brought his wrist to his mouth, bit down, and pressed it against her parted lips.

She thought she'd gag but he began to fuck her hard and deep as his fangs sank into her neck. Pleasure and pain blurred as she drank. The taste of blood barely registered. It was just Blaron, the bliss his body gave hers, and the taste of him. She grew lightheaded as she came. The climax made her pull her mouth away from his wrist when she cried out his name.

Blaron's fangs left her skin and he licked her wound. He turned his head, met her

gaze and smiled while he licked his wrist closed.

“That’s it, love. Sleep. I’ll clean us and we’ll cuddle until we wake. I’m with you.”

Matty closed her eyes, too tired to even speak.

Epilogue

Matty woke when two strong arms lifted her. She was confused until she met Blaron's gorgeous eyes. The blue of them seemed more brilliant, more breathtaking, and he'd put her on his lap straddling him as he sat naked against the headboard on their bed. Memory returned and she stared at him as her hands gripped his bare shoulders.

"I survived? Am I dead?" She flushed at her words. "I mean, am I the living dead now?"

He grinned. "You are alive but you're a vampire."

She hesitated, trying to see if she felt any different. She didn't. Disappointment hit. "I don't think it worked. I'm still just me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Mmmm." He grinned. "This is going to feel really good. Just go with instincts."

"What are you talking about?"

He released her hip and reached over to the side of the bed. She saw the small dagger in his hand and tensed. He grinned wider and pressed the tip against his

neck.

"The things I'm willing to do for love but you need to learn how to get your fangs out. The scent of blood will do it. Just don't fight or think about what you're doing."

She watched in horrified fascination as he cut his skin. Blood welled and he tossed away the dagger, grabbing her hip again. The smell of it filled her nose, her eyes widened, and her gums tingled, nearly seemed to throb, and she opened her mouth to ask him what was happening to her.

"Whath—" She paused, her voice sounding funny and touched her mouth. Something sharp made her cry out and stare at her fingertip. Blood welled.

"Easy." He laughed. "They are sharp. Careful or one of us will need to lick whatever you cut with them." He tilted his head. "Look at my neck, Matty love. I fed before I woke you. It's your turn."

Her gaze tore from her finger to his neck. Hunger rose and she inched closer.

"Go with it, love."

She couldn't stop. She licked at the blood, the taste made her moan, and she bit into him. The feel of her fangs piercing his skin created a jolt to rush throughout her body and pure pleasure struck. She clutched at Blaron, moaning, pressing her breasts tightly against his skin, frantically rubbing against him, needing to come so badly it hurt.

"Yes," he groaned, his hands gliding down her sides to cup her ass. "Ride me."

Desire burned through Matty. She wanted him to fuck her. She pulled her mouth away, remembered to lick at his skin, and stared into his eyes. Her hips lifted and

she wiggled until his cock aligned perfectly with her pussy. She sank down on him, her body sleek with need already, and cried out as she came just from the feel of him stretching her. Her body quaked and Blaron groaned.

Their gazes met. "Bite me again and it will make us both come."

She hesitated. "I love you."

He smiled. "I love you too."

"This is kind of crazy. We barely know each other."

His hands caressed her skin. "We have forever together to learn and what is between us is strong."

She moved on his shaft, moaning. "You're irresistible, in my defense."

"I can be persuasive when I'm after the thing I want most in the world and that's you." He turned his head, offering her his neck. "Take me, my brave, beautiful Matty. I'm yours."

The sincerity of his words made happy tears fill her eyes. He meant it. He didn't see her scars. He loved her and had given her an entirely new life to share with him. She was sexy, desirable and beautiful to him. Something inside her knew as she brushed her lips over his neck that they'd be happy together. They had forever to get it right and any arguments with him in the future promised to be very pleasurable.

Tinderbox

Regina Carlisle

Chapter One

Carlos Montoya Lopez saw the world through the eyes of a bird of prey. From behind the glass wall of his office at the San Antonio Police Department, he took in the comings and goings in the precinct, most typical of a hot, crime-infested night. Garishly dressed hookers rubbed shoulders with thieves and gangbangers while police officers tried to maintain order.

As a hawk shifter, and the last of his species, Carlos often found himself relegated to observing life, rather than actually living it. He'd become used to it, often shrugging off self-pity as a useless emotion.

Central Texas thrived with other shifter activity, however. Though Lone Star shifters tended to be reclusive, antisocial groups, being familiar with each other was key to their survival, as was keeping the truth of their existence secret from humans.

Carlos watched as two of those *others*, Nathan Ames and Daniel White Horse, made their way purposefully to his office. One of the crimes on Carlos' desk demanded the help of shifters, and the two jaguars might be just who Carlos needed to solve the case quickly.

Daniel and Nate were private investigators, highly capable of finding missing

persons. And in the case of a missing shifter, they were invaluable.

Daniel stopped in the open doorway of Carlos' office and rapped once on the doorframe. "What's up, Carlos? We came as soon as we got your message."

Nate didn't wait for an invitation to enter but sauntered in and made himself right at home by sprawling into an empty chair. "We figured it was important if you were calling so late. Tell us what you need."

Carlos waited for Daniel to take a seat then grabbed a remote from his desk before turning to face a monitor hanging on the wall. "A couple of hours ago, mall security cameras caught a carjacking gone wrong. Looks like a dumbass kid freaked out in the process of stealing a car and took the owner too."

The trio went quiet as video from mall security filled the screen, showing a sea of cars and trucks and a lone woman carrying a couple of department store bags and a purse the size of a small suitcase. Darkness was just settling in but the lot was well lit, allowing them to easily watch as the blonde stopped, juggled the bags and dug into her purse, extracting a set of car keys. Not an unusual sight—until a lean, lanky figure wearing a hoodie and what looked like a ski mask moved in behind her.

"Really? A ski mask? You've gotta be shittin' me." Nate shook his head and Daniel grunted in response. They went quiet again as the crime unfolded. The audio was crap but the woman seemed to shriek when Ski Mask grabbed her. Her feet kicked out and then back to land a solid blow on the kid's legs. The instant he released her, she did what any red-blooded female would do. She swung her enormous purse right at his head.

"Good move," Daniel said. "Typical, but a good move."

The whole bag-swinging thing proved to be ineffectual, however, as she lost her grip and it flew from her fingers to land harmlessly on the pavement. She didn't let that stop her though. Instantly she was on her attacker like a spider monkey, clawing and scratching until the carjacker's hood fell back and the woman was holding his ski mask in one clenched fist.

"Yep. Just a kid. A damn stupid kid," Daniel said, shifting to lean forward intently. "And she has a good look at him now."

"I figured that's why he took her," Carlos replied.

The men quieted again, taking in the panicked movements of the punk, watching as he swiftly pulled a gun from the waist of his jeans and landed a solid blow to the victim's head. Standing over her body, he looked around frantically for a second or two before locating her keys and tossing her into the trunk of her own car. The whole scene took less than two minutes.

When the monitor went black, Carlos turned off the machine and opened a lower drawer of his desk. "So this is where you come in. She's a shifter." He pulled out the black leather purse the victim had lost in her struggle and tossed it to Daniel, who caught it deftly. "We have cops all over the city looking for her car, but you know shifters are better trackers than any human. She's definitely not a hawk. I would have recognized the scent instantly. I suspect she's one of yours. Or maybe panther."

Daniel sniffed at the bag—and instantly gave Nate a sharp look.

The other jaguar shifter did the same, sniffing deeply then closing his eyes briefly

and running his hands over the leather in an almost reverent fashion.

As he gingerly set the purse on the desk, Nate looked at Carlos. "She's one of ours. Gods! Unmated. There haven't been new female jags in our area for longer than I can remember."

"If she'd been mated, she would have torn the little shithead to pieces," Daniel added. His dark brows pulled together in a scowl. "Her being unmated makes her vulnerable. Until she shifts for the first time, she's only about as strong as an average human woman. We need to find her, pronto."

Carlos studied the two tough jag males, sensed their urgency, and knew they'd find her soon. He just hoped the scared kid didn't kill her before they managed it.

* * * * *

Would she die tonight? Tomorrow? The scent of earth and all things musty and old curled through her nostrils and the blindfold tied over her eyes made the world so very dark. Even without that bit of cotton, she knew she was hidden away so carefully that it would be a miracle if she were found alive.

The shaking and trembling had subsided a long time ago and she'd already stopped guessing how many hours had passed since she'd been taken. Olivia thought back on the moment when she'd left the mall. It had been getting dark, and she knew that for a woman alone there was always the possibility of danger, but in her pompous conceit, she'd thought herself impervious to the sinister deeds of humans.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Damn it. Here came the tears again when she'd thought she was done with all that. Maybe they'd reappeared to remind her that, no, she wasn't invincible after all. Since childhood she'd known she was more than human. She was shifter. Livvy also knew that until she was properly mated, she wouldn't possess the strength to protect herself properly.

Well, that had been proved in spades tonight when she'd allowed herself to be taken by a pimply-faced kid.

Jaguar blood ran heavy in her veins, but tonight it hadn't done her a darn bit of good.

Before her death, her mother had talked about the day Livy would meet her mates and shift into the beast she was meant to be. Uh-uh. Not happening now. She didn't know a soul in this town; no one knew she was missing. Despair and rage, frustration and the inevitable, bittersweet regret filled her. She wanted to scream over her loss but there was no one around to hear and, in the end, she was a practical, modern woman who could only concentrate on escape.

Livvy yanked at the bonds that held her hands behind her back. Ropes. Rough and ragged, they dug into her wrists but she barely felt the pain. If she were mated, she'd have them snapped and lying in shreds and she'd be out of this hellhole, wherever it was. But nope. No mates.

Wasn't she just lucky as hell?

Ah, that was nice. Anger was always better than despair. Her mother hadn't

raised her to be a weakling and Livvy called on those lessons now as she tried to figure a way out of this mess. She'd better work fast. She had no idea when her assailant might return or what his plans were, but she didn't intend to hang around and find out.

Livvy thrashed and pulled at her bonds for what seemed ages, but to no avail. She desperately needed some kind of weapon but she was trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey and seemingly helpless on the hard dirt floor.

Summoning what little bit of energy she had left, she wiggled around, managing to scoot a few inches at a time in her attempt to find something sharp that she could use to cut her bindings. Surely she could do this. Livvy had always been slightly stronger and faster than human females. But her arms were screaming a ragged protest each time she moved. What she wouldn't give to be fully jaguar at this moment.

A scent rolled through the air. Wild, savage and strangely familiar.

Livvy's spectacular hearing picked up the padding of footsteps and the occasional cough-like sound distinctive to her species.

She was no longer alone.

She knew some of her kind lived in this part of central Texas, but to date, she'd met none. Yet she could smell the scent of jaguars in the stagnant air, feel the heat of them even through the walls of her prison. The sounds of stealth continued. A raspy cough was answered by another.

Livvy went still. Tension radiated through her body and she caught her breath as

her heartbeat accelerated. A sudden burst of energy zipped and zinged around her and the familiar sexual heat she'd experienced randomly over the past few weeks kicked into high gear.

Talk about bad timing.

The sizzle and pop in the atmosphere told her all she needed to know and before she could blink, she heard the sound of the door crashing inward. Hands touched her. Male hands that were hotter than those of humans.

Shifter.

"You're okay now," a deep voice murmured. "We've got you, honey. You're safe."

The blindfold was lifted from her head and Livvy squinted into the semi-darkness of what appeared to be some kind of old shed. Two pairs of mesmerizing dark eyes looked down at her, concern and anger stamped on their owners' faces. Both men were naked and, even in the dim glow of the moon filtering through a single grimy window, the rugged beauty of each was impossible to miss. She might have been virtually blind moments ago but she sure as hell wasn't now.

"I'm Daniel White Horse," the largest of the two said. Native American features marked his stoic, wildly savage face. His brows, thick and black, were drawn with concern over his eyes and he scanned her body quickly, as if checking for injury. Then his gaze connected with hers again and the force of his presence wrapped around her like a balm. "This is my friend Nathan Ames. We're private investigators and we've been assisting the police since you were taken."

The other man, Nathan, leaned over her, bringing with him one of the distinctive

scents she caught earlier. His saddle-brown mane was thick and wavy, hanging to his broad, broad shoulders. "Let's get this tape off, hmm? Might hurt a little." Carefully he peeled the duct tape from her mouth and, after tossing it aside, cupped her cheek with his palm. His eyes narrowed on her lips and his nostrils flared. "We know from your scent that you're one of us, Olivia Russell. You have nothing to fear. We'll protect you with our lives. How are you feeling? Are you hurt?"

She glanced from one savior to the other and drew her tongue over parchment-dry lips. Without warning, tremors set in and her teeth started to chatter. "Thank you. I'm good. Fine. He didn't hurt me."

"Good. That's good," Nathan said as Daniel scooped her up in his arms.

The huge Native American shifter glanced at her, his strong jaw working. "Let's get you some air."

"Air would be good," she whispered. His arms tightened protectively, muscles bunching, and the heat of his flesh called to every primitive instinct she possessed. It was a hell of a time to notice such a thing but she was much too close to her time of change. Unavoidable. Nature had taken over and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it. Olivia trembled.

"Hang on. We'll get you to the truck. Gotta cut these ropes."

And just like that, Daniel began to run, the preternatural speed of their species kicking into high gear. She closed her eyes as the night air whipped her hair into a frenzy of motion.

Before she could blink, Daniel was placing her on a soft patch of ground near a

big, black beast of a truck. Nathan quickly cut the restraints with two slashes from a wicked-looking blade. Olivia screamed when she brought her arms forward and pain raced through her abused limbs.

Neither man said a word, each just took an arm to rub as blood rushed back through veins that had lost circulation hours and hours ago. Silently they massaged her hands, wrists and arms, until the pain subsided and she lay in limp relief on the ground. Someone, she was unsure who, pressed a bottle of water to her parched lips.

This time it was Nathan who lifted her, placing her in the front seat of the truck. She let her head loll back and watched in quiet awe as they pulled on jeans, boots and tee shirts. She might be stressed to the max and exhausted but she wasn't dead. Sexual hunger rolled through her body as she took in the sculpted lines of each massive shifter. The scent of them hit her senses in a blast of epic proportions and her nipples instantly tightened beneath the satin cups of her bra.

On the cusp of changing, her *time* rushing toward her like a runaway train, Livvy felt her clit swelling to press against the seam of her jeans. She was going into heat and the early signs she'd experienced were *nothing* compared with these new sensations, the overload of lust sweeping through her. She knew there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it so she gritted her teeth and slammed her eyes shut. Nature had chosen a poor time to push her over the sharp edge of sexual hunger.

Daniel and Nathan climbed into the truck and it was as if every bit of air was sucked from the expansive cab. Even in her vast inexperience with all this changing

stuff, she knew the scent of her animalistic desire filled the space.

Both male shifters turned to stare at her. Tension radiated from them and the very air became a tinderbox destined to ignite at any moment.

Embarrassed heat climbed over Livvy's face to mingle with the hot flash of lust that consumed her. Ill-timed. All of it. If she could have crawled into a hole somewhere, she would have. Deep inside her body, her beast shifted, moved, cried out for the men sitting beside her—recognizing these males as mates who would claim her and bring her bursting to life.

Recognized them. Mates!

"Fuck." Daniel's curse was low and throaty as he started the ignition and stomped on the gas. "I smell your heat. How close are you?"

Nathan pulled her against him and Olivia whimpered. "C-close. Coming on for weeks but nothing like this. I'm sorry!"

"Don't apologize. Not to us." Nathan settled his face against her hair. "What you're feeling is the most natural thing in the world for jag shifters. Daniel and I have waited for over two hundred years to find our mate and without warning, you've fallen into our laps. You know how rare female jags are. It's a miracle. *You* are a miracle. Believe it."

While Nathan pulled her tighter against his big, hard body, she watched Daniel punch a number into his cell phone. "Carlos? Daniel White Horse. We've found Olivia Russell alive and well. Yeah. Yes, it's great news," he said. "Nate and I found her trussed up in a shed north of San Antonio. Heavily wooded area." He paused. "That's

right. Yeah, she's okay." Daniel glanced at her. "No, no sexual assault. No sign of the shithead who took her but we haven't gone through the shed. That's up to you guys. We just got her out of there. Once she's settled down a little bit, I'll call with more details. Yes, I know you'll need to talk with her ASAP."

Nathan's hand lazily stroked her arm.

Daniel's voice, dark and husky, pulled hypnotically at her senses as he finished the call. Several minutes later, he braked to a stop in front of a huge two-story limestone house that had "history" stamped all over it. The place sparkled like a diamond in moonlight, looking like the home she'd never thought to have.

She couldn't think about that now.

A whipcord of rapidly spiraling lust ripped through Livvy so suddenly, she gasped sharply, gaining the attention of both men. A high, agonized cry burst from her lips. Savage need wound through her core, coiling like a snake in her belly, and she knew her eyes had gone wide. Sweat beaded on her forehead. Nathan wrapped his arms around her tightly. "Shit. We have to get her inside. Quick."

"Gods! Not now," she breathed, clinging to the man who held her.

"Hang on."

Olivia slammed her eyes shut. "Help me!"

No doubt the proximity to two healthy male animals coupled with the stress of her ordeal had worked its magic on her rapidly changing body. There would be no courtship, no slow mating. The time was here. Now. Once she accepted them into her body, there would be no going back. They would be mated strangers, really, but

already her beast recognized them, accepted them. Could she do any less? The time for affection, maybe for love, would have to come later.

Struggling for breath as Daniel glanced her way, Olivia felt sexual tension ratchet up yet another notch in her hungry body. Dangerous. Thrilling. Scary as hell. Need was like a living thing sparking fires that only these two males could extinguish.

From that moment on, everything blurred as a low buzzing began in her brain. Her body was drenched, her pussy creaming, throbbing, pulsing as wild jaguar blood heated to dangerous levels in her unmated body. The feel of Nathan's heavy cock prodding her ass through layers of cloth ratcheted up her frustration levels.

Nathan threw open the door of the truck then pulled her onto his lap. As if from a great distance, she heard another door slam. Suddenly Daniel was there at the side of the vehicle, and together, he and Nathan turned her until her legs dangled outside.

Then Nathan held her steady as Daniel yanked off her shoes, jeans and panties in one smooth move.

"Let us help, Olivia," Nathan whispered into her ear. "Gods, let us fuck you. We've waited so long to find our mate."

Tears filled her eyes as emotion crashed over her. *Mates. Lovers. Forever.*

The words reverberated in her mind. Relief, along with hunger, consumed her. She belonged here. It was kismet. Meant to be. It was a gift from the gods that she be in this place at this exact time. There was no reasoning with fate.

"Look at me, Olivia," Nathan said. Focusing on his starkly handsome face, she

recognized the compassion, the raw need in his eyes. "We know you're scared but we'll get through this together. Just know we accept you as our mate. From this moment on there is no going back. Understand?"

She nodded then caught her breath as another, stronger flash of lust bolted through her body. Nathan cupped her face and kissed her with voracious hunger. His tongue speared into her mouth, tasting deeply, drinking the soft whimpers that poured from her throat. Naked from the waist down, she felt Nathan's hand move below her shirt, touching bare flesh, teasing her belly then finally wandering higher to cup her breast.

Then Olivia went still as Daniel parted her thighs, settled them over his broad shoulders. He parted her labia with his fingers and buried his lips in her aching flesh. The stark lash of his tongue, his hot breath against her hypersensitive flesh, tore another wild cry from her lips, but Nathan drank the sound.

Holding on for dear life, she clutched at Daniel's long black hair as he ate her out. Sucking, licking, drinking the cream from her body, he finally speared his tongue deep. Her vaginal walls clenched around his thrusting tongue and instant orgasm blasted outward in ever-expanding waves, but the release was short-lived as her jaguar heat intensified, bringing with it the urge for more.

Nathan whispered indecipherable words against her temple and Daniel looked up at her from his position between her thighs, his eyes dark, beautiful and filled with some unnamed emotion. "Let's get her inside, brother."

Nathan carried her from the truck and before she could fathom what was

happening, she was inside the house and the force of her heat was fully upon her again. Olivia closed her eyes, drawing on every reserve of calm she possessed as Nathan carried her up a flight of stairs.

Closing her eyes, she heard the low hum of the air conditioner but it did nothing to cool the heat in her blood. Her body made demands she was ill equipped to fully understand. Yes, her mom had warned her that changing from woman to beast was traumatic and potentially deadly without the sexual aid of not one, but two jaguar males. Still, she hadn't fully understood the truth of the matter until now.

At the moment, she could only thank the gods they'd found her in time.

Nathan carried her into a massive master suite and as Daniel yanked down the covers on the huge bed, she was stripped of her remaining clothing...a simple top and her bra. As she sat on the edge of the bed, avidly watching the guys remove their clothing, she marveled at how fortunate she'd been to be rescued by such hot-as-hell specimens of jaguar flesh.

Daniel's hair—thick, black and shiny—hung past his broad shoulders. His body was bronzed and hard, rounded by muscle and supported by long, sturdy legs. Nathan was built much the same, hard as hell, with enough muscular beauty to make her fingers itch to touch. Instead of brown, as she'd first thought, his eyes were dark green and tilted slightly at the edges, giving him a catlike appearance. Rather appropriate since, after all, he *was* a cat. A gorgeous, big, very manly cat.

Olivia's mouth went dry at the sight of them and desire raced over her flesh, leaving in its wake a need impossible to ignore.

"Now," she whispered, amazed at her boldness. "Hurry."

Nathan went to his knees between her spread thighs to draw one taut nipple into his mouth. Tonguing the hard flesh, he nipped and sucked until a fresh rain of cream drenched her hot pussy.

"We dreamed our mate would be beautiful, but we never imagined..." he breathed against her breast. His fingers moved over her, skimming her ribs and belly, before moving lower to study the damp, fevered flesh of her pussy. His mouth worked at her nipple and Olivia's head dropped back like the broken stem of a flower as passion flowed like liquid honey through her body.

Daniel settled behind her on the bed, his hands moving into action, his mouth skimming the length of her bare back. Teasing with his teeth and tongue, he stroked her, his hands warm, so very warm on her skin. A languid lassitude carried Livvy under.

"Nathan. Daniel. Gods, you feel so perfect! I never imagined it would be this way."

Daniel rose behind her and leaned close to whisper in her ear. The hard muscles of his chest rubbed against her back and pleasure spiked again. Olivia sucked in a breath and held it.

"We aim to please, sweetheart. We're here," he murmured. "We'll fuck you until you tell us to stop and then we'll claim you in the way of our people. Count on it. You belong to us, Olivia. And before it's all done, your beast will be born."

"Livvy! Call me Livvy."

She felt his lips curve into a smile against her cheek seconds before he gently tugged her into the center of the big bed.

Before she could gasp another breath, both men were upon her, their hungry mouths attached to her nipples.

Pleasure poured over her like a song as their hands moved over her heated body. Ribs, belly, breasts and thighs. No part of her was left untouched, and when they sent busy fingers over her slit, parted her and delved inside, raw passion bolted through her. Trembling, she bowed her back, writhing against their marauding touch. Fingers dipped heavily into her cunt and Livvy cried out, her voice wavering in the still air.

Daniel and Nathan exchanged an indecipherable glance and apparently came to some unspoken agreement, because together they pulled her into a sitting position. Daniel moved behind her, his long legs resting on either side of her thighs, while Nathan remained on his knees near the foot of the bed.

Livvy was on fire for them, her body out of control, and the only thought in her mind was relief. Daniel's cock felt heavy, thick and oh so very long as it pressed against the cleft of her ass. Before her, Nathan fisted his hand over his own sizeable erection.

Olivia wet her lips and panting little breaths whipped rapidly from her lungs. Up and down, over and over, Nathan worked his hard flesh and it was impossible, even in the dimly lit room, to miss the drop of fluid that settled on the head of his cock.

Nathan's face was a mask of agonized patience as Daniel hooked his feet around

her ankles to spread her open. Nathan looked hungrily at her pussy as his hand moved faster and faster over his cock. Finally Daniel lifted her body until her pussy hovered over the head of his penis. With a raw shout, he lowered her until she was filled to the hilt.

Her wild cry broke free as he thrust high into her body, and when Livvy's head dropped back against Daniel's chest, Nathan crawled toward her, finding a place between her open thighs. His mouth latched on to her clit and he sucked gently as Daniel continued to slide his girth into her unclaimed body. In. Out. Deeper. Higher. He thrust so deeply she didn't know where he began and she ended. And through it all, Nathan's hot mouth devoured her, causing a conflagration of sensation to send wave after wave of raw pleasure pounding through her bloodstream.

The impatient little jaguar buried deep inside her body clawed to break free and she swore the warm brush of fur swept her innards in the beast's effort to be born.

Not yet.

It was too soon for all that, but in the meantime, she would absorb this totally new experience as her body readied itself for shift from woman to beast.

Wicked fingers of pleasure danced over her spine and somehow she still felt needy. She wanted more, harder, faster. Longing washed over her and then she felt movement, a shifting. Nathan's mouth left her pussy and when she opened her eyes, the head of his cock brushed her lips.

Without prodding, without coercion, she opened her mouth and took him deep.

Sucking his cock, loving the low sounds he made as she licked and nibbled, Olivia

felt fingers in her hair, hands on her body and the inevitable release of any inhibition she'd ever possessed.

Feeling wild and free for the first time in her life, she embraced the lust in her belly and the rightness of it all as her vaginal walls gripped Daniel, holding him deep. She reveled in the taste of gorgeous Nathan's cock thrusting into her mouth and felt that moment of stillness before he climaxed against her tongue.

She heard Daniel's low growl as his body went still and in that singular moment of the wildest, most perfect pleasure she'd ever known, her body seized, coiling then releasing like a tightly wound spring.

Chapter Two

"She's beautiful, Nate," Daniel said as he lifted one of Livvy's thick blonde curls with the tip of a finger. Unable to stop the direction of his thoughts, he remembered each detail of the past crazy night. It was obvious to him that full heat wasn't upon her yet, but the bit she'd experienced was more than she could handle after everything she'd been through. After providing her with a glass of wine and a hot bath, they had tucked her into bed, where she'd fallen into a deep sleep.

As sunlight streamed between the slats of the plantation shutters, Daniel sprawled naked on the bed watching Livvy, who still lay in exhausted slumber. His friend of more years than he could count was currently stretched out on her other side.

Nate reached down to tuck the sheet around her opulent, curvy little body, watching her with possessive eyes. Daniel understood how he felt. He was a man of few words, but at the moment, he could actually envision himself writing sonnets to this woman who was now their mate. Pretty damn dumb but so what?

Her eyes behind the closed lids were the exact color of the bluebonnets that dotted the Texas hillsides each spring. Her nose, small and tipped up a tiny bit at the

end, sat above full lips that were wide and expressive. All of that soft beauty was framed by a delicate oval face. Daniel knew he and Nate would have adored and treasured any mate the gods deemed fit to send them, yet he'd never imaged they would be so damn lucky. Even now his cock hardened in response to this female.

Nate glanced at him across Livvy's still body and smiled. "Yeah. She's ours. I still can't believe the woman taken from that parking lot ended up being our mate. My beast recognized her scent immediately."

"Mine too."

His friend looked down at her once more and the normally wild look in his eyes was tamed by a softness Daniel had never seen before. "Poor little darlin'. She's exhausted. Let's grab some coffee and let her rest." Nate climbed from the bed, tugged jeans over his bare ass and headed out the bedroom door.

Nate was right. Though it was downright tempting to lay here watching her sleep, they needed to talk and daylight was burnin'. There were the inevitable phone calls to make and plans to set into motion. And when Livvy woke up? Well, she'd have a million and one questions.

Reluctantly, Daniel stood from the bed and pulled on his own jeans before padding down the stairs. Heading into the kitchen, he smelled the scent of coffee brewing. Nate was already pulling a skillet down from a circular rack above the tile-topped island in the center of the big space. So he chipped in and removed eggs, thickly sliced ham and juice from the fridge. Livvy would be hungry when she woke up and with her change coming upon her so quickly, she must keep up her strength

for the ordeal ahead.

For a female jaguar, the transition from woman to giant cat was a dangerous proposition. Without mates to ease her, to quench the ferocious heat that would invade her body, she could very well die.

Over the centuries of their species' existence, the change had whittled down females to minimal numbers. With far more males in existence, ménage marriages were commonplace among their kind. It had been that way for hundreds of years. The three of them would live together for the duration of their very long lives, hunt, raise offspring and try their hardest to fit seamlessly into the human world.

Daniel's biggest regret was there had been no time for them to get to know each other, but it would come. He had to believe that.

After devouring a massive breakfast, they cleaned up the mess, leaving out a single plate for their brand-new mate, and then got down to important business.

"The way I figure it, Livvy will be into full-blown heat within the next few days," he said. "We really pushed our luck with Lieutenant Lopez last night by not taking her straight to the police department, but it's unavoidable today."

Nate grabbed his cell phone. "You're right. I'll call and set up a time for early this afternoon. We still don't know how much she can tell them but they're in charge. It's up to them to catch this creep. Why don't you call Noah and Aaron and let them know what's happening and that we won't be in the office today."

Noah Littlehawk and Aaron O'Malley were their bosses and the owners of Jaguar Investigations. Several years ago, he and Nate had settled in this area and signed on

with the private investigation firm, which, unbeknownst to the rest of the world, was owned and operated by jag shifters. A fast friendship had grown among the guys and with Noah and Aaron's mate, Violet. Their species were solitary beings yet it was good to have something of a family, a sense of home and belonging.

Hopefully they could give this gift to Olivia.

They'd just finished with their calls when, senses alerted, they both looked up to see Livvy framed in the kitchen door wearing one of Daniel's oldest tee shirts and an uncertain smile. Her embarrassment was obvious as red flags of color stained her fair skin, and immediately he and Nate jumped to their feet.

Nate reached her first, put one arm around her and pulled her close. "Good mornin', sweetheart." He pressed a kiss to her temple.

Daniel gave her a teasing once-over. His ancient Stones tee hung to her knees and she looked adorable with all those blonde curls lying against the black of the shirt. "Looks a hell of a lot better on you than it ever did on me."

"I hope you don't mind."

"Hell no," he said, stepping closer. He lifted her chin and pressed a bold kiss on her swollen lips. Then he focused a sharp gaze on her. "Anything that's ours is now yours, and you're welcome to it, although I suspect we need to collect your things."

Surprisingly, she leaned into them both and shook her head. "I just don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything, Livvy." Nate took her hand and steered her toward the breakfast table. "You have to eat. You've got to be starving."

At that instant her tummy growled. Livvy gasped, making both men laugh, and soon they scrambled around the kitchen, frying ham and eggs, pouring coffee and juice. Through it all, she sat watching them quietly. Daniel knew this had to be so surreal for her. She was in a new and unfamiliar place with two strange men who kept staring at her as if they wanted to eat her up with a spoon. Just looking at her caused his heartbeat to speed. His cock went hard behind the fly of his jeans.

Nate wasn't handling the proximity to their mate any better. He cast covert glances her way and, damn, if he didn't look distinctly uncomfortable.

In the end, Daniel was proud of the way they held it together. As she devoured enough food to feed the starving hordes, he and Nate exchanged glances and Daniel knew they were equally nervous. It wasn't every day they found themselves cooking a simple breakfast for a stranger who was destined to be their mate.

His friend stood and fetched the coffeepot to pour her another cup and Livvy looked up and smiled a bit. "Thanks, Nathan."

"Call me Nate."

She nodded then glanced Daniel's way. "And should I call you Dan?"

"Not if you want me to answer." He smiled at her, hoping he didn't look scary as hell since he really didn't smile all that often. A sudden wide grin split her lips and he stilled. Damn, if she didn't look like a blast of sunshine.

When she'd finished her meal, they walked through wide double doors onto the back patio that overlooked a massive pool. "You have such a beautiful house," she said as she sat primly in a chair behind a glass-topped table. "I didn't see much of it

last night."

"How about a tour later?" Nathan leaned against one of two big pillars holding up the roof of the patio.

"I'd love that."

Daniel sat next to her and took her hand, absently stroking her skin. "Right now, we have to collect your things, honey. We'll have to make a trip into the police station and I know time is a premium for you right now. Nate and I feel we should get you back here as quickly as possible. We need this business done."

"Collecting my stuff shouldn't be a problem," Livvy said.

Daniel noticed a fine bead of sweat dotting her brow. The morning was cool so he knew it wasn't from external heat, but *internal*. She was close. So close. He felt the fine trembling of her fingers and he tightened his hold, hoping to give her comfort. The scent of female jaguar heat hung heavy around her.

She glanced between him and Nate. "I've only been in town for about a month. Been staying at a hotel until I could find a place. Before that, I lived in Guadalajara with my mom. My dads were killed by hunters when I was little, so it was just she and I. She died recently, and...and with the change coming over me, I knew I had to come this way. Long ago, Mom told me there were jag communities in south and central Texas, even said she'd known a few from San Antonio. This seemed a good place to start my search. I'd planned to head to Arizona or New Mexico if I didn't have any luck here. I knew it was important that I find mates and my people."

Nate moved to her other side. When he sat, he rubbed a hand soothingly down

her back as if he too sensed things were heating up fast. "And find us you did, darlin'. Thank the gods."

Must have been scary as hell for her to head out into the unknown, Daniel thought as he leaned close to drag the scent of her into his lungs. Female jags led very sheltered lives. "We'll head into town and get your things then get this interview with the police done. How does that sound?"

Without warning, she gasped and her eyes washed over with tears. "We have to hurry. Gods! I'm running out of time." She bolted to her feet and the chair she'd been sitting in crashed to the patio floor. Her hands fluttered aimlessly in the vicinity of her chest as panic filled her eyes.

"Oh no," she whispered, her voice raw with fear, her eyes dilated as she glanced between Daniel and Nate. "Not again!"

A blast of heat swept the air, covering Daniel like a heavy blanket, and he knew damn good and well what was happening as she spun on her heel and ran back into the house.

He and Nate exchanged a hard look and wasted no time following behind her.

Fire whipped through Olivia's blood as she raced through the house, up the stairs and into the bathroom. Earlier she'd noted the size and opulence, but now nothing entered her mind except finding relief from the overwhelming heat that swept her body.

Her nipples tightened painfully, pressing against the cotton of her tee shirt, and

cream flooded from her pussy to dampen her thighs. Livvy's beast, hungering for birth, rolled and stretched inside her as she yanked open the glass door of the shower and turned on the cold water full blast. Clothes and all, she stepped beneath the frigid spray, a scream hovering at the edge of her lips.

She closed her eyes as the water washed the tears from her cheeks. Her mother had warned her of the animalistic heat, the overwhelming urge to mate, but had never once clued her in about the loss of self that came along with it.

She hated it! It shamed her to feel so helpless, to suffer this loss of control.

When in the throes of these violent sexual urges, nearly every vestige of *human* disappeared, leaving a clawing, hissing animal in her place. She was no longer Livvy, a generally sweet and tenderhearted woman who loved to laugh. She became something else entirely.

It terrified her, and she knew this was merely the beginning.

Suddenly the door of the shower burst open.

Jerking open her eyes, Livvy backed against the wall and stared at the naked men who'd crowded into the space. As of last night she was truly mated to them, but, despite their kindness, their consideration, the utter sexiness of them, they were still strangers.

They were also her knights in shining armor, and for them to see her on edge this way was horrifying to a woman who'd lived so privately.

Hot tears sprang to her eyes again as lust tore through her core. It felt as if a million tiny fingers stroked the most sensitive places on her body. Her nipples. Her

clit. Reaching out, she grabbed both Nate and Daniel, squeezing the rock-hard flesh of their shoulders. "I have no control! Gods!" The words choked from her lips and, even in her despair, she noted compassion edged with hunger in the eyes of her mates.

Simultaneously the men reached for the hem of her sodden tee shirt and peeled it from her body. Daniel wrapped her in his arms, whispering against her temple. "We've got you."

Nate joined them, his eyes beautiful, catlike and feral yet tinged with tenderness. His hair was wet, clinging to his very broad shoulders and to his strong neck. "Shh, baby. Shh. Let us make it better. Trust us. Don't be afraid."

Livvy opened her mouth to speak but only a soundless cry emerged as the heat of their bodies further enflamed her own. Mouths, lips, tongues and teeth brushed her throat. Big, warm hands stroked her torso, fanning the sensations raging through her to a fever pitch. Daniel latched on to a diamond-hard nipple, sucking it strongly into the heat of his mouth.

Crying out, she fisted her hands in his drenched hair to hold him closer. Busy fingers, Nate's, parted her labia then slid through the creamy flesh of her pussy. He circled her throbbing clit, pressing lightly, but Livvy knew it wasn't enough, would never be enough.

A frustrated sound swept her throat to echo through the small enclosure and then Nate's fingers speared deep and fast into her cunt, the thrusts working in tandem with the sucking motions of Daniel's mouth.

A desperate whimper broke free as the first hard climax hit her. Shaking in the arms of her mates, she felt another orgasm wind through her belly. Livvy sucked in a breath.

Daniel released her nipple then stared into her eyes. He cupped the breast he'd abandoned and stroked the still-pulsing bud with his thumb. "She's coming up again, Nate."

"Don't talk over me," she gasped. "I'm in heat, not stupid."

A ghost of a smile flickered over Daniel's lips. "Sassy woman. I like that."

"Don't mind Daniel." Nate settled his chin in the bend of her neck and shoulder then grinned at her. "He's a mite slow on the uptake."

His eyes sparkled with mischief and through the haze of sexual awakening, her heart tightened with affection. But then suddenly she couldn't think as that insidious coil of lust grew tighter and tighter in her belly.

Both men, perhaps feeling the escalating beat of her heart, moved into action. Daniel turned her around and he and Nate lifted her between them until her hot pussy was poised over the head of Nate's thick cock. Clinging like a monkey, she wound her arms and legs around his water-slick body.

Daniel gripped her thighs to hold her tightly in place against Nate as he slid his heavy erection between the globes of her butt. For the flash of an instant, she wondered how she would feel when he finally breached her there. She knew he would. It was only a matter of time.

As if sensing her thoughts, he leaned in to whisper, "Take Nate's cock,

sweetheart. He's dying for you to slide down over him."

Affection slid through her mind, soothing her, calming her. She felt the vibrations of it roll through her thoughts and realized that, already, her mates were establishing an emotional connection. Eventually she would hear their thoughts as nature connected them with steely strings. This was only the beginning of what they would share. Together.

Nate's face seemed carved of granite. Drops of water clung to his heavy lashes and strong jaw. His eye narrowed with a feral intensity that was impossible to ignore. Gorgeous didn't begin to describe him. Lust zipped through her veins like molten gold, prodding her clit and the inner walls of her pussy.

"Take it. Now." Nate groaned the words and then his head went back. Livvy saw a flash of fang, heard the low coughing sound that burst from between his clenched teeth and felt her own gums begin to tingle.

Sandwiched between her men, Olivia hesitated until Nate gripped his cock, dragging it over sensitized flesh that wept for more. A sigh of longing, another indrawn breath filled her lungs and, finally sliding home, she whimpered as he filled her and then began to thrust deep, deeper, harder, faster.

Her head fell back against Daniel's broad chest. His hands cupped her breasts, kneading them, flicking the nipples with his thumbs until they ached. As Nate fucked her, Daniel thrust his erection between her ass cheeks. She heard his low growl of pleasure, the way his lungs bellowed as he worked to draw each breath.

Together they fucked her, marking her as their own with each rapid stroke.

Pleasure spiraled tighter and tighter inside her. Livvy's arms and legs tingled with each touch and her beast, her impatient beast, stretched somewhere deep inside, begging for attention. A low sound, distinctly jaguar, burst from her throat as she lost all remnants of control.

But she no longer cared. She yearned for release. She needed to be fucked, taken, *controlled*, and giving up her prideful notions had never been so ridiculously easy as it was now, with thrilling pleasure washing dizzily over her.

Livvy cried out and her body seized as Nate and Daniel drove her over the edge of desire into a heaven so profound as to be unexplainable. As they spoke unintelligible words into her skin, holding her tightly between them, *home* spoke to her from somewhere deep in her heart and she suddenly knew she'd found that place, here, with them. She knew all at once that she never wanted to leave.

Peace, love and acceptance were hers if she were brave enough to take it for herself.

Chapter Three

Nate held her trembling body tightly, still connected intimately as frigid water sluiced over their skin. He glanced at Daniel, who immediately turned the shower off and stepped from the glass enclosure. Tightening his arms, Nate slid his cheek over her wet hair and watched Daniel quickly dry off then grab a couple of towels.

"You okay, sweetheart?"

"I-I think so," she answered on a shaky breath.

"Good. Then hang on and we'll get you all fixed up." Gently, Nate untangled her arms and legs until she stood in front of him. That she was here with them after all their years of searching was still unbelievable to him, and he sure as hell didn't want to fuck anything up. The last thing he and Daniel needed was to get off on the wrong foot with their newfound mate. Just looking at her naked body had him ready to go off like a rocket all over again but more than anything right now, he just wanted to kiss her. She looked so uncertain, his heart squeezed.

Cupping her cheek, Nate tipped up her face. "Don't be embarrassed, Olivia. You're breakin' my heart."

She shook her head a little. "I can't help it. This loss of control makes me feel so

needy.”

“You *do* need us now, Livvy. It’s just a fact and nothing at all to be ashamed of. Embrace what’s coming. I know you can do that. You’re strong. Daniel and I have seen it. We are so damn proud of you. You have to believe that.”

He stroked the edge of his thumb over her pretty cheek and gave in to what he’d wanted since the first moment he’d touched her. Bending low, he tilted his head and kissed her, gently at first and then harder. Her taste was the sweetest aphrodisiac. He dipped his tongue deep, tasting hunger, acceptance and passion. All three wrapped around him as her breath swept his mouth. Nate drank it down then returned it, hoping they could build on these moments. The three of them.

Daniel made a sound and Nate reluctantly broke the connection, noting the quizzical expression on Olivia’s face as she stared at him. Her lips were swollen from his kiss but before he could do what he wanted and take her lips again, Daniel wrapped her in a soft, dry towel and led her from the shower.

Nate dried himself and watched Daniel’s tender care as he wiped the white cotton over her body then tucked the cloth around her. By the time they entered the bedroom, Nate had regained some control of his emotions.

The woman made his hands shake, and that was a fact. She made him want to lay her on the nearest horizontal surface and fuck her as if she were the last woman on earth. And, of course, for Daniel and him, she *was*. She belonged to them.

For Nate and Daniel, Olivia Russell was forever.

Fighting the lump in his throat, he watched as she primly sat on the edge of the

bed. He'd noticed that about Livvy. Everything about her was feminine and graceful, and Nate realized again how fortunate they were.

Daniel cleared his throat. "We washed your clothes, honey. Just hang on and I'll fetch them from the dryer."

Red flags of color dotted her high cheekbones. "Thank you. I could have done that."

He grinned and shook his head. "You'd better get used to Nate and me taking care of you. Give me a minute to pull on some jeans and I'll run and grab your stuff. We probably need to get a move on since we need to meet with Lieutenant Lopez in a few hours."

After Daniel had gone, Nate shrugged into his own jeans as Livvy looked around the room. "Do you like it?"

"The room? Yes, it's beautiful, but somehow I can't imagine you guys liking the whole girly motif." She smiled shyly as she took in the hand-carved four-poster bed with its pale-yellow spread. A matching vanity dresser sat in one corner and an old-fashioned wardrobe rested along one wall. Along with the antiques were modern touches that included a large flat-screen television hanging on one wall.

Nathan laughed. "It's not our room, honey, it's yours. In case you haven't noticed, Daniel and I aren't a couple. We're like brothers. Best friends. Comrades and partners in the search for our mate. Looks to me like we finally got lucky."

Livvy reddened again and shook her head, laughing a little. "I have so much to learn about you guys."

"We aren't going anywhere. We have plenty of time."

"Well, if this is my room, where do *you* sleep?"

Nate lifted a brow and grinned. "Hopefully with *you* but we both have our own rooms right across the hall. We'll give you a tour of everything whenever you want. Mainly we just want you to be happy here."

Livvy stood and tugged the towel tighter over her breasts as she walked around the room, finally stopping at the vanity dresser with its adjustable mirrors. Smiling, she picked up a delicate crystal perfume bottle. "It's beautiful. Is this for me?"

Nate sprawled on the unmade bed and crossed his feet at the ankles, wallowing in the sight of her admiring the things they'd bought over the years. "Yep. Still remember the day Daniel and I bought that. It was at the turn of the century, nineteen of two, I think, and we were traveling in San Francisco."

He shrugged. "We weren't having any luck finding a mate in Texas so in an act of frustration, we headed to the West Coast. Just to explore, really. One day we walked into a store and thought...I don't know, maybe our future mate would fill it with something that smelled pretty. We figured maybe she'd like something like that. Matter of fact, we furnished almost this entire room with things we found in our travels."

She turned, a look of wonder on her face. "Even then you were picking out things?"

Nate nodded, remembering the exuberance of their youth and how they'd longed to find the one woman who would belong to them.

Women of their species were lucky. Once they went into heat, around the age of thirty, they mated. They didn't suffer the years of loneliness—sometimes hundreds—experienced by many males.

Realizing again how very lucky he and Daniel were, Nate smiled. "How could we not, honey? We were just a couple of young cubs. Impatient. We've been waiting for a very long time. Looking. Scenting the air. One day we'll tell you all about our travels and how damn hard we searched for you."

Livvy looked again at the crystal bottle, tracing it with the tip of her finger, and when she glanced back at him, Nate's breath hitched. Her gaze had gone all soft. Tears filled her eyes, making them shine in the sunlight.

"I love the bottle, Nathan. I love it very much."

* * * * *

A little over a week later, as the hot afternoon sun beat down upon her and her guest, Olivia reached into an ice bucket in the center of the patio table and grabbed a chilled bottle of white wine. Topping off Violet's glass and then her own, she replaced the bottle in its bed of ice, marveling at how relaxing the past few hours had been.

"Good thing jag shifters can't get drunk, huh?" Livvy smiled at Violet Littlehawk—O'Malley, who aside from Livvy's mom was the only other shifter female she'd ever met. "Don't know what the guys would think if they came home from work and I was sloshed. Not the best way to start things off with them, huh?"

Violet, a beautiful brunette, grinned and lifted her glass. "Oh honey, I doubt they'd mind all that much, but tipsy is good and I'm definitely *that*." Noah Littlehawk and Aaron O'Malley's mate had arrived earlier, bearing gifts of home-baked goodies and several nice bottles of wine. "I can't tell you how great it is to finally have another woman in the area. With all these alpha-type jags around, we're definitely outnumbered."

"But the question is, would you want it any other way?"

Violet laughed. "Hell no. I love things just the way they are." The smile faded from her face as she leaned back in her chair. "Any word from the police about the man who grabbed you?"

"Yes, they arrested him, and it didn't take them long either. Lieutenant Lopez got in touch yesterday and said he'd been arrested in the Dallas area. As Lopez suspected, he was mostly just a scared kid. From what he told Nate and Daniel, the guy confessed. In the beginning, he just wanted to jack my car but the dumb punk took me when I got a good look at his face."

Violet shivered. "Scary shit."

"Thank the gods Daniel and Nate found me when they did."

"Providence. Meant to be." Violet reached across the table and took her hand. Instant kinship wrapped around Olivia, soothing and peaceful. Having a friend was such a good thing. Especially now. "Are you okay? I know full change hasn't happened yet, just the beginnings of it, but I wondered if you had questions."

Livvy sighed. "So many. Mom was great about preparing me for the physical

aspect of what I'll be going through but I'm still a little confused about the emotional stuff."

"Oh sweetie, I understand. Noah and Aaron were strangers to me too. I was so afraid and alone when the heat came over me. There was nothing to do but take a deep breath and accept what was coming. Unstoppable."

Livvy thought back to the fast and furious matings between the three of them. Pleasure whipped unexpectedly through her veins, practically stealing her breath. Powerful. Intense. And it was only the beginning.

Since the morning after her arrival, they'd left her in her room at night, undemanding and patient, saying only that she should rest. Despite that, she knew they wanted her, hungered for her. As the days moved by they returned to work but the rest of their time was spent filling her in on their lives, their thoughts and worries. They included her in their plans for the future with an ease that was astonishing. She'd learned Nathan had a wicked, outrageous sense of humor and sometimes Daniel tended to brood. No, they weren't perfect, but then neither was she.

"I can't help but be a little afraid," she finally said. Her gaze connected with Violet's and she saw understanding there. "The little bit of sexual hunger that I've experienced with them up until now has been so powerful. I can't imagine more."

"You have to trust them to see you through this, Livvy."

She shrugged. "I do trust them. Already I feel bound to them. We're connected in a way I can't begin to understand. It's so weird how it happens."

"Tell me about it. We're raised knowing that it's a mystical union but until it happens, we have no real understanding. Finally we accept, thankful that we've found our mates. We live, we love. That's good enough for me. You'll make it through your first shift just fine. I know it. Daniel and Nate are good men. I've known them for several years and know how they've longed to find you. They'll treat you as the treasure you are."

Dusk had fallen by the time Violet finally headed for home. Despite several glasses of wine, Olivia wasn't as relaxed as she'd been earlier. A fine trembling set up in her limbs and a rush of adrenaline whipped through her bloodstream, alerting her to sudden changes in her body. Dizzy, she leaned against the wide front door and closed her eyes.

Was it time? Was it coming?

Livvy forced air into her lungs. Her heartbeat accelerated to tap out a frantic beat. Logically she knew full heat could come upon her at any moment, and what she'd experienced earlier was only a precursor to that eventuality. Yes, she'd been in heat for over a week, but what had come before was nothing compared to the furnace-blast she knew would overtake her just before she finally managed to shift.

Oddly conflicted, she wanted to embrace this, get it over with, yet another part of her felt such fear of the unknown, she wanted to scream. Terror seized her briefly, along with pounding waves of lust and hunger.

Wishing the guys would hurry home, she breathed deeply and decided to try occupying her mind with mundane tasks. Anything was preferable to the gripping

fear.

Heading through the living room, Livvy jerked to a stop when unexpected and unbearable fire lanced through her belly.

A curling rope of intense sexual need blasted downward to settle in her pussy.

It was here. Now. It was upon her.

Gasping as cream flooded her panties, Olivia fell to her knees. Tears poured from her eyes as she shoved her hands into the front of her stretchy shorts to tease her aching flesh. A cry broke from her lips when she thrust her fingers deep and instant orgasm racked her body with endless spasms.

Her nipples hardened painfully to press against the satiny cups of her bra. The sensation was more than she could bear and she whipped her tee shirt off and threw it aside. The bra quickly followed as she took her nipples with drenched fingers and plied them steadily, squeezing and releasing, hoping to give herself relief from the ache of sexual hunger. Air burst from her lungs on a low moan and pleasure streaked from her nipples to rip through her core as a jungle beat thrummed in her blood. Her bones ached oddly as the beast moved in her struggle to be born.

Gods!

Frantically, Livvy crawled on shaking hands and knees to the coffee table where she'd left her phone. Pressing speed dial, she connected instantly with Daniel.

"Home!" she gasped. "Hurry..." And then there was nothing as the phone fell from her trembling fingers.

A red haze filled her mind, leaving her suddenly disoriented. Summoning every

last bit of strength as the raging lust tore through her body, Livvy crawled toward the foot of the stairs, collapsing there in a heap of agony. Sexual hunger flashed in pulsing waves with no beginning and no end and there was nothing she could do but wait for help.

Unaware of how much time had passed, she wept when she finally heard the sounds of doors slamming and boot heels striking against hardwood floors. The vibrations swept over her like a million tiny ants marching across her skin.

Strong arms wrapped around her, lifting her, and she vaguely felt movement as someone carried her up the stairs. Livvy opened her eyes and stared into Daniel's face. Worry curved his black brows and his jaw was tense. "I've got you," he murmured.

"Fuck me, Daniel. Nownownow!"

Daniel growled a response, moving with her into the bedroom. Her frantic gaze swept the room to see Nate stripping off his clothes. Gods, he was beautiful. They both were. Muscles bunched and moved on Nathan's back as he bent to strip the bedcovers to the foot of the bed. Her nipples pressed against Daniel's muscular chest and she turned her attention to the man who held her so protectively.

She needed to tell him to hurry. She wanted to scream the words but they'd all fled her brain. Opening her mouth on a soundless cry, she gasped when Daniel pressed her against the nearest wall. Her shorts and panties disappeared in a flash, and as the next wave of lust speared her, his cock thrust deep.

Savagely he fucked her against the wall and she could do nothing but hold on for

the wild ride. Each heavy upstroke brushed searing, pulsing nerve endings. The walls of her pussy contracted, hanging on, squeezing until one sensation barreled headlong into the next. With each hard stroke of his cock pounding deep, the heat increased until it knotted tighter and tighter. A scream broke from her throat as her nails dug deep into the hot flesh of Daniel's back.

Sliding her eyes open, dazed, she noted the flash of fang, the fierce expression he wore—and knew this was only the beginning.

Daniel kissed her, his breath hot in her mouth as air pumped quickly from his lungs. His tongue brushed hers, teasing mercilessly. Loving the taste of him, needing the connection, she returned his kiss, eating at his mouth as if starved.

When Daniel moved her away from the wall, she felt warm flesh at her back, realizing Nate had joined them. Her breasts were crushed against Daniel's chest and Nathan stroked his nudity against her in a sinuous motion. The perfection of his body made her mouth water and then he made a low purring sound that caused his chest to vibrate, setting off another round of need inside her body. Without breaking Daniel's kiss, she reached back to clutch Nathan's head. He rested his lips against her neck and lightly scraped that tender flesh with his fangs.

Livvy tensed as raw sensation tore through her.

Nothing was over. There would be no reprieve as her beast clawed to break free.

Daniel withdrew his cock from her body and stepped back, letting Nathan pull her into his arms. Daniel crawled onto the mattress and lay flat on his back, giving his friend a telling look. Without hesitation, Nate arranged her body over Daniel's face,

her thighs rested on either side of his head.

When his hot breath brushed her quivering flesh, she gasped. Livvy's lips hovered over the head of Daniel's thick, still-erect cock. Unable to resist, she dragged her tongue over the heavy head, licking a drop of moisture that clung there. Daniel went still. Tension radiated from his big body.

"Suck him, Livvy. He needs you. Hell, I need you too. Come on," Nate whispered. "Yeah, that's it, sweet darlin'. Open your mouth and take him. Ah yeah. That's right. Now you just keep that up. After you come I'm going to fuck your hot pussy."

Olivia was too far gone to respond.

Nathan stroked the lines of her back, his touch warm, as she filled her hands with Daniel's balls. They were drawn up tightly against his body and she realized belatedly that he'd not yet come. A savage sense of possession filled her, knowing these men belonged to her, and suddenly her need to shift into her beast took a backseat to pleasing her mates. Swallowing him down became the easiest, sexiest thing she'd ever done as she plied the heavy stalk with her tongue, sucking Daniel, sipping his strength with tugs and pulls of her mouth.

That distinctive jaguar coughing sound broke from his throat to vibrate against her pussy as he began to eat her out, spearing his tongue deep then dragging it over her trembling skin. As he drew her clit into his mouth, Daniel's hands gripped her thighs. Intent on his task, he devoured her flesh as they moved in tandem, each reaching for that spectacular moment of climax. Pleasure spiked sharply, drawing from her a cry that was muffled by Daniel's cock between her lips. Higher and higher

she climbed, riding Daniel's mouth. The power of her climax poured over her as Daniel, too, reached crisis point. His body stiffened seconds before his cum jetted into her mouth.

Livvy barely had time to come down from the euphoria. No rest. No time to breathe. The men moved, changing things up until she was face-to-face with Daniel. He leaned against the headboard, watching her with eyes filled with a lush mixture of desire and satisfaction. Her knees settled on either side of his thighs. He kissed her deeply while Nathan, who had moved into place behind her, stroked her trembling pussy. Breaking the possessive kiss, she gripped Daniel's broad shoulders as Nathan played with her. Daniel stroked her breasts as he whispered seductive promises against her hair.

Nathan moved his hands over her sides, stroking her flesh with his warm palms before focusing his concentration on her butt. "Ready for me? I need to fuck you, Livvy."

Speaking was beyond her so she didn't try. Clenching her teeth on the flesh of Daniel's shoulder, she held on her dear life as Nathan dipped a finger into her pussy. The feel of two pairs of hands on her body was indescribable. Anticipation built...

Nate groaned low then buried his hard cock deep.

Pistoning hard and fast, he brought Livvy's body up again while Daniel stroked her clit, pinching, rubbing the hard knot of flesh. Sensations crashed through her, one after the other. Needing them both, needing them now, she reached beneath her for Daniel's cock and fisted it. Male hunger, powerful lust surrounded her and fire flashed

through her limbs. Nathan thrust deeper, harder, as energy hummed through the air. Her body seized in a massive climax...

Nathan and Daniel broke simultaneously and as Livvy spiraled out of control, her men came with her.

Chapter Four

Days of marathon sex left the three of them limp with satisfaction, raw with emotion and so exhausted they could barely move. Respites were brief but they took the short moments they were given by the gods to eat, bathe and rest.

There was no doubt in Livvy's mind that humans would be physically unable to handle something like this. She'd always been faster than human women. Stronger too. But as the changes in her body began, she'd started to feel more animal than human. Impossibly there was little soreness and it was obvious her mates weren't suffering either.

Extreme passion, at least for her, had also brought with it even stronger emotions. Thoughts of love teased the perimeter of her mind. Impossible, yet there it was.

Nate and Daniel were perfect, perfect for *her*, and she couldn't imagine her life without them.

Livvy lay between her mates, utterly satiated, her limbs entwined with theirs, and felt a comfort, a feeling of home that she'd never known before. It was on the tip of her tongue to be honest and tell them how she felt but she held off. Maybe it was

prideful of her but she wanted the words to come from them first.

Silly thing, pride. Once she'd claimed her beast and changed from woman to giant jungle cat, her mates would communicate telepathically with her. There would be no secrets, no subterfuge. Just honesty. Then all would be revealed.

As the moon rode heavy in the sky, Daniel trailed a cool, damp cloth over her hot body while Nathan lazily drew his tongue over her nipple.

"That feels so good," she whispered, loving the attention of her mates. "Do you think it'll be much longer? I feel her. She's close...so close."

Nathan released her nipple and looked down at her. "These things take time, sweetheart. Before long you'll—"

Olivia gasped as a blast of energy caused her back to bow against the mattress.

"What the—?" Daniel sat upright and tossed the cloth aside. "What *is* that?"

"You feel it too?" Olivia's eyes went wide and her gums tingled painfully. A low cough broke from her lips and she started to shake.

"Daniel, open the doors," Nate yelled as he released her body long enough to reach for something on the nightstand. Olivia didn't know what it was and didn't really care, because suddenly her beast rolled, hissing her need to be born in a tone that only Olivia could hear. The brush of fur rubbed her belly, the friction setting off a volcanic fire that rolled through her cunt in a low wave. Another coughing sound broke from her lips and her fangs burst free of her gums.

Thrashing on the bed, the sizzle and pop of crazy energy zinging through her blood, she cried out for Daniel and Nathan.

Daniel grabbed her shoulders and she went still. Fear ripped through her and she bit her lip to stifle a scream, drawing blood. She stared into her mate's intense black eyes.

"You're ready. Don't fight the energy and don't fight *us*, Olivia. She's ready to come now so you just hang on tight. We'll take you at once, giving you every bit of our power. Do you understand?"

She must have nodded because he murmured, "Good, that's good. We've been holding back, honey, but we can't do that anymore."

Nathan took the hand that lay curled against the sheets and wrapped it around his cock. "Feel how much we want you. Our beasts want you too. Trust us."

The time for talking ended as the energy surrounding them grew in strength. Lust slid through Livvy as her jaguar struggled to break free. Cream drenched her pussy and her body burned to be fucked, taken.

Nathan drew her over his body, his cock pressing where she most needed him, but the relief was short-lived. Clawing and scratching, frantic for relief, she rose over him and impaled herself on his stiff erection. Nathan's hips thrust high and hard. He cried out, a raw, savage sound, his fangs flashing white in the darkness.

Hands pushed her down until her breasts were flattened against Nathan's chest.

From his position behind her, Daniel bent to her ear. "I'm going to fuck your ass now, Olivia. You'll feel some lube, some pressure. Hang on tight, honey. You'll feel our full power before this night is over."

She barely noticed as Daniel spread the cool fluid but stilled when his fingers

circled slowly at her entrance. When he slid one inside to the first knuckle, followed quickly by a second, dark pleasure ripped through Livvy and the feel of Nathan's cock buried deep in her pussy intensified. Nonsensical words broke free, mingled with her heavy cries.

Daniel pressed his fingers deeper, scissoring them to widen her for his possession.

Her heart drummed, threatening to burst as he finally, finally settled the head of his cock at the entrance to her anus...

When he pressed inside, she moaned.

As Daniel pushed in, Nathan eased out.

A scream ripped from her throat.

The men moved in rhythm, filling every empty space. Their voices filled her head. It was here. Now. It was time, and the telepathic connection roared through her brain.

So damn good. Daniel groaned.

Yes. Gods yes! Livvy's own voice rang sharply in her mind.

"Damn. Damn! It's here. We're connected," Nathan said aloud, gasping as he moved relentlessly in and out of her body. *Finally.*

Olivia wanted to continue the magical conversation but the only things rolling through her mind were hisses and growls. Her beast was taking over and Olivia wasn't sure she liked it. Fighting for supremacy was futile, she knew; the beast would always win.

“Don’t fight her, sweetheart,” Daniel said. “You won’t lose yourself. Not permanently. I promise.”

Nate pushed higher and harder into her pussy, rotating his hips until pleasure burst over her clit and vibrated through her core. She tightened her body and both men hissed with pleasure. Magical energy beat through her body, lashing her with intensity she couldn’t begin to describe. A blast of power shook her and she realized it came from her mates.

They pulled out all the stops as they fucked her mindless.

Hanging on through the storm, through the pinnacle of an orgasm more powerful than she’d ever experienced before, she felt Daniel’s teeth pierce her shoulder and then Nate’s, their claiming complete.

There was no pain. Only pleasure. It roared through her seemingly with no beginning and no end. Strong. Overwhelming. Yet somehow peaceful.

* * * * *

Livvy opened her eyes yet knew those eyes were no longer human. Everything was amplified, shadows dissolving into a fine mist before blowing away to leave the world clear and bright despite the darkness of the night. Looking down at herself, filled with wonder, she noted the buff color of her coat as she lay panting on the big bed.

Near her, lolling in perfect splendor, were her mates, both black jags. The power of them overwhelmed her.

You're beautiful, Olivia. Nathan scooted closer to nuzzle against her throat.

I feel so strange...but wonderful. Wow.

Daniel laughed. *A feeble word for such an undertaking, but yeah. And I second Nate's sentiments. You are perfect. Perfect for us.*

Eager to try things out, Olivia leaped from the bed to pad around the room. She sniffed at the floor, eyed her two males then finally made her way to the open doors of the bedroom. *How thoughtful. Can we? Please?*

Male laughter echoed in her mind. Within seconds they joined her and together the trio headed out the doors and into the night. The second-floor balcony featured wide steps so Olivia ran down them and soon the three were loping across the yard and out into the woods beyond.

A Texas moon hung high in the sky as they explored this new world. Olivia playfully chased a rabbit from its hiding place and eyed a lazy raccoon before she turned to see them watching her. So patient. So loving.

Loving?

Oh yes.

She need only open her mind to confirm it.

* * * * *

Hours flew by. Enjoying her surroundings in jag form was exhilarating, so thrilling that it was tough for Livvy to contain her excitement. She wanted to explore this

fascinating world forever, but fearing the rigors of tonight's activities were taking their toll, she raced back to her mates, who'd been endlessly patient. Now Nate and Daniel gently nudged her back toward the house.

When she stood by the bed once more, Livvy cocked her head. *What now? How do I turn back? This has been amazing but I'm ready to be the old me again.*

Easy, sweetheart. Just think of yourself as human and bam, poof, you're done. Nathan moved close to her and before she could blink, he'd shifted into his gorgeous male body.

Bam and poof?

Daniel laughed. *That's about it.* Then he, too, shifted into his human body and watched her with a small smile. "You can do it."

Livvy blinked at them both then conjured a vision of the old Olivia, the one who'd been reborn tonight—and suddenly she was in human form and flat on her back on the rumpled bed.

Those naughty men had put her right where they wanted her.

Daniel and Nate pinned her with their bodies, both grinning like idiots, and joy filled her. Soon she was laughing along with them. Hugging them both, she squealed as pleasure took her over the edge of sanity. "We did it! Oh my gods! I love you guys!"

In unison, her mates drew back to look at her. "I thought maybe that was a little bit of love I felt from you when we were out there tonight," Daniel said quietly. "It's true, isn't it? You love us?"

Olivia looked at these men who'd saved her, cared for her and loved her through the greatest trauma of her life. Her eyes welled with tears. Reaching up, she cupped a hand on each ruggedly beautiful face and smiled. "No, Daniel. It wasn't a 'little bit of love'. What a measly description of how you've filled me up, touched my heart and made me complete. Both of you. I love you with my whole heart."

Nathan's smile was heartbreakingly tender as he turned his face into her palm and pressed a kiss there. "And we love you, Olivia. For now and for always."

Epilogue

A short time earlier

A lone hawk perched on a gnarled branch of a live oak, watching the activities below with a mixture of satisfaction and jealousy.

Yes. Jealousy. He wasn't proud of it.

He'd long ago given up on finding his lady hawk, but as he watched the male jags introduce their brand-new mate to the magic of her beast, he felt a twinge of hope.

Crazy thing...hope. A sane creature wouldn't delude himself this way.

Still, the hawk was compassionate enough to be happy for the threesome. Down below, the males watched indulgently as their mate scampered across the forest floor, scaring raccoons and rabbits from their hiding places until finally she seemed to tire of the game.

When the three of them reentered the house, the hawk blinked. A brisk wind ruffled his golden feathers and he cocked his head, unconsciously listening as he had a million times before.

Was she out there? Somewhere? Only the gods knew.

Defeated, lonely, the hawk shook off bittersweet emotions and, with a wild cry,

spread his wings, taking flight over the broad Texas sky.

Asterion

Katalina Leon

Author Note

The familiar Greek myth of the Minotaur shares its ancestry with a far older tradition that stretches back to cave art from Crete's Neolithic period. Once upon a time, in the earliest years of the Bronze Age, mighty Minoan, the greatest trading power in the Aegean, worshipped a divine star being who allegedly came to Earth to live among them.

"Asterion" literally means "star", and is strongly associated with Bronze Age Minoan kings, who, in order to rule, were said to take the form of the Cretan bull of the sun.

The exact beliefs of Bronze Age Minoans can only be guessed, but archeologists have discovered bronze coins stamped with Asterion's image. The coins often depict a kneeling bull-king along with a star-shaped flower and possibly the constellation Taurus. It is speculated the coins are attempting to show Asterion's divine place on both Earth and amongst the stars.

Old stories are like coins—they always have two sides. *Asterion* is my side of the coin. It's a highly speculative and purely fictional tale of a young woman's encounter with one of the original Asterion...

Chapter One

The Middle Bronze Age

Somewhere in the Aegean, between the Greek shoreline and the island of Crete

The deep Aegean, which had been a brilliant blue early in the morning, was now a dark, glassy mirror. A heavy layer of fog obscured the sun. The morning's brisk wind had stilled and the square sail on the tiny fishing skiff hung slack from the mast.

Larisa huddled at the front of the small craft, glaring hatefully at her captor as he laboriously rowed the skiff into the dense fog. It was just she and Catullus, alone on the sea.

Wily old Catullus was the village's newly self-elected chief. He was stout, soft-limbed and the journey was taking an obvious toll on his stamina. But Larisa couldn't help him row even if she were so inclined. He'd bound her wrists tightly and tethered her to the boat to prevent her from leaping overboard and drowning herself.

Catullus sweated profusely as he rowed, and she wondered how long he could endure the exhausting task. He closed his eyes and groaned in heaving agony as the paddles seemed to cling to the surface of the water.

Larisa took advantage of his distraction and leaned slightly to dangle her bound

wrists in the soothing water. Her long brown ringlets fell around her face like a veil. As she leaned farther, her slight movement caused the boat to dip.

Catullus' eyes flew open in alarm. "What are you doing?" He leaned forward and yanked Larisa upright. "No tricks. I have my eyes on you. I'll not be cheated of my tribute to King Minos."

Her gaze narrowed. "Do you really believe that showing up uninvited on the palace steps—with an unsolicited sacrifice to the Minotaur—is going to make you a great favorite with King Minos? I think it makes you look desperate."

Disdain spread across Catullus' face. "There is a higher purpose to my plan, which I don't expect you to understand. I can be of service to King Minos. I'm tired of living in a dusty little village, separated from the powerful world I should be part of."

"What would King Minos want with your services? You think only of yourself. You're a traitor to your own village."

"Warfare has reduced our village to women, children and frail old men." Catullus huffed in disgust. "We can't survive another surprise attack from the Aetolians. Given how brutally our neighbors have treated us of late, I'm strongly inclined to seek the favor and protection of King Minos. I'm certain he'll welcome the added wealth from our realm—which I can now provide, thanks to the rich orchards and fields *you* forfeit.

"My generous gift of land and a feminine sacrifice for the Minotaur will no doubt earn me an honored residence within the Palace of Knossos. I'm looking forward to my new life, and I'm sure King Minos will be more appreciative of *my* refined

qualities than those of the doddering fools in our village.”

“What refined qualities? You truly think mighty King Minos is in need of another scheming opportunist to slobber at his feet? If he is, he’ll be delighted to meet you.”

“How dare you! I am your elder and chief.” Catullus’ face flushed with rage. “You speak too freely and say too much—both are poor qualities in a woman.”

“You stole my land! It’s not yours to give. And don’t think I’m unaware you cheated at lots. I know I was deliberately given the shortest straw.” Larisa looked away before a tear streaked down her cheek. She’d already been tricked, robbed and sentenced to death. The last thing she wanted to do was give Catullus the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

The dense fog hovering above the surface of the sea was now so oppressive, the daytime sky appeared dusk. “You don’t even know where we’re going, do you? You’re just rowing into the fog. How do you even know the tiny island we glimpsed on the horizon this morning was King Minos’ island? My father said Minoa was a two-day journey from our shore and that there were countless islands in the Aegean.”

“Don’t speak of your father!” Catullus snapped.

“Why? Could it be you dread to hear the truth? That my father, Chief of Kreios, was a braver man and better leader to our tribe than you’ll ever be?” Larisa stealthily slid her foot across the floorboards of the boat, hoping to catch her toe on an amphora of water and steal a sip before Catullus snatched it away, as he’d done all day. She licked her parched lips in frustration as she tried several times to reach the clay jar but failed.

Catullus protectively slid the amphora beyond Larisa's reach. "What little water we have is for me. I'm doing all the hard work."

"Wouldn't it have been easier to pay those fishermen we met this morning to row us to the correct island, instead of stealing their boat?"

"Why pay when I can do it myself?" Perspiration trickled down Catullus' round face. "Besides, I couldn't allow you to tell your sad story to the fishermen and attempt to recruit their help. As you can see, I've thought of everything. It's true that I am unaccustomed to the sea, but it is the slight price I pay for being a warrior of the mountains."

"You're no warrior!" Larisa scoffed. "Your own son foolishly blurted out that you turned and fled from battle, while the real warriors of our tribe stayed to fight and lost their lives. Ares said you hid inside a hollow log while the battle raged past. It was your *cowardice* that saved your life during the last devastating conflict, not your swordsmanship. The sole reason anyone in our village would consider you chief is because you're the last mature man left alive. It's certainly not your valor that recommends you. My father and my betrothed, Alecto, died with honor. You have none."

"Shut your mouth!" Catullus stopped rowing just long enough to focus a look of utter loathing on Larisa. "It didn't have to be this way. I want you to know, it was your vicious tongue that condemned you to the labyrinth. If not for your steady stream of poisonous words, I might not have been forced to dispose of you. Had you respected my new station in life, instead of railed against it, we might have peacefully lived *together*."

Larisa scowled. "I'd rather die than share your bed."

"Your death is coming soon enough. You can be certain of that." Catullus dipped the oars back into the water and rowed. His black gaze became beady. "Before I hand you over to the Minotaur, maybe I'll help myself to what Alecto never had the chance to claim on his wedding night."

"Wouldn't that defeat the purpose of a virgin sacrifice?"

"Would a grunting, bull-headed beast even know the difference as it rips its jagged teeth into your flesh?" Catullus paused for effect. "I think not."

"A grunting beast? Are you referring to yourself?"

The boat scraped against a partially submerged rock as it drifted into a narrow inlet. A gravel beach and steep cliffs came into view as the lapping surf ran the boat aground with a jolt. Larisa realized the ocean current, if not Catullus' lackluster rowing, had carried them to an island.

She looked upward as the fog lifted—and saw a dazzling palace, with ornately painted columns and frescoed walls that shimmered in vibrant shades of earthy red, golden ochre, turquoise and green. The entire palace was ablaze with colors and patterns unlike anything she'd ever seen. The elegant palace crowned the cliffs in majestic silence.

"It's so beautiful." She stared in awe, noticing there was not a living thing in sight. "And so lonely."

"Where is everyone?" Catullus grumbled. "Do they not have an official to greet visiting dignitaries from the mainland?"

"You're not a dignitary," Larisa sniffed. "Perhaps they don't welcome uninvited guests, and at this very moment have a row of hidden archers poised on those cliffs with their razor-tipped arrows aimed at your heart."

Catullus gasped in horror and dropped to the floor of the boat to cower.

Larisa laughed at his antics as Catullus curled into a ball. "I'm sorry there's no hollow log on this beach for you to hide inside."

"You weren't there," Catullus snarled. "You have no idea. The Aetolians are bloodthirsty brutes."

"Yet my father, Alecto and other brave men stood their ground and fought back. That's the only reason Kreios didn't fall to the Aetolians. Ares told me he watched the men charge the enemy with swords slashing before he ran off to search for you."

The eerie lowing of a bull echoed against the cliffs.

The tiny hairs on the back of Larisa's neck bristled, and she looked up.

A towering figure with the head of a bull appeared at the top of the cliff. Dressed in a flowing black robe, the horned figure seemed to look down at them.

Catullus glanced upward with bulging eyes. "Is that the Minotaur?" His bottom lip quivered in terror as he scooted toward the back of the boat. "Is it possible the Minoans allow such a vicious creature to roam freely?"

The figure lifted a wing-like sleeve high into the air and appeared to beckon them toward a staircase carved into the side of the cliff.

"It's not the Minotaur, you fool." Larisa thrust her wrists forward to be untied. "It's some sort of priest wearing a mask. He wants us to climb the stairs."

Catullus froze. "Perhaps this was a mistake. Maybe we should leave..." His hands reached for the oars and rowed backward, but the paddles merely scraped beach pebbles and the boat didn't budge.

The priest addressed them in a booming voice. "Is that young woman a bride for the labyrinth?"

"Yes." Catullus' head bobbed nervously. He turned toward Larisa and mumbled, "Bride? A sacrificial ritual isn't a *wedding*. What an odd way to phrase something so brutal. These Minoans are very strange people...I'm not sure I want to meet them."

The priest pulled a golden dagger from its sheath and pointed the blade toward Catullus. "Bring her into the palace. The Master shall judge you both."

"Yes, my lord." Catullus immediately unknotted the rope that tethered Larisa to the boat, his face filled with fear. "By all that's dark in Hades, I don't want to go up there! This place is so foreboding. I have a sickening feeling in the pit of my gut—this island is doomed. I want to leave."

"This was your idea. You brought me here to die. What did you expect?"

Catullus spoke through tensed lips. "I was hoping for something less somber and intimidating, more along the lines of a festive royal court."

Larisa rolled her eyes. "I'm not a bit surprised. This is *exactly* what I was expecting."

"Don't delay." The priest's deep voice rang over the cliffs. "The Master knows you're here. Asterion waits." He turned and walked away.

Catullus trembled as he stepped out of the shallow boat and offered Larisa his

hand.

Larisa lifted her bound wrists expectantly. "Untie my wrists too."

Catullus stared at the leather thong around Larisa's wrists and shook his head. "I don't dare. If you run away again, the way you did in the village, I'm certain these people will kill me."

"What you've done to me is wrong. I'm proud I gave you a hard chase. It's not my fault you can't run uphill." She ignored Catullus offered hand, which hung unclaimed in the air, and rose from the boat unassisted. "I'm thirsty. May I have water?"

Catullus frowned. "Why bother? Your life will be over soon." He unstopped the clay amphora, held it to his lips and tipped his head back to swallow the last of the water.

A bull's bellowing roar shook the earth from within and made the tiniest pebbles on the beach leap and shiver.

Catullus dropped the empty jar to the ground. "What was that? It sounded like it came from inside the island!"

"That sounds like doom to me." Larisa's lips curled with a slight smile. "The great difference between you and me is, I'm not afraid to die. When I cross the river Styx, I'll see my mother, father and Alecto again. Who will *you* meet in Hades—other wretched souls? I'm certain you can expect to be seated beside the most miserable men in Hades' cowards' corner."

"Shut your mouth and get moving." Catullus took hold of the rope tether, still tied to Larisa's bound wrists, and used it like a leash to drag her toward a twisting flight

of steps carved into the cliffside.

"Slow down." Larisa tugged against the tether as her sandaled feet crunched across the shifting rocks. Catullus pulled her forward as if leading a stubborn mule. With her wrists tied in front of her, it became more difficult to balance with each uncertain stride. The hem of her linen tunic swept against the wet, mossy rocks, and soon looked as damp and green as the many tidal puddles on the beach.

"Hurry up," Catullus goaded. "Let's get this over with."

"Ah, you no longer sound so keen on taking up residence in the royal palace." She stumbled forward a few more steps. "What changed your mind? Was it the island's gloomy atmosphere? You should give it a chance," she heckled. "Perhaps you'll enjoy sharing sleeping quarters with that bull-masked priest and his razor-sharp dagger. Sweet dreams."

Catullus gave the tether a swift yank. "I'm done talking to you."

Larisa's eyes scanned the shallow tide pools as she walked. At the edge of one pool was a golden rock the perfect shape of a star. She stopped abruptly and knelt beside the pool, forcing Catullus to stop as well. She leaned down to touch the odd stone with the tip of her finger but the moment she came into contact with it, the star curled away from her and slowly crept toward the center of the pool.

She gasped in surprise. "That rock is a live animal! It's not what I thought it was at all."

"Who cares?" Catullus hauled Larisa to her feet and pushed her toward the stairs that zigzagged up the cliff.

The steps were narrow and the climb precarious. Larisa looked only at her feet, refusing to glance at the jagged rocks below, but at last they reached the top of the cliff, where the full splendor of the palace was revealed.

The structure was tremendous, far larger than the village of Kreios, with columns as tall and thick as giant trees and rooms stacked upon rooms, with staircases leading up and out. The colorful patterns glimpsed from the beach were actually beautifully depicted scenes of men and women dancing, fantastical sea creatures with large round eyes—and everywhere Larisa looked, powerful outlines of charging bulls. All the outer walls were covered in bulls with sweeping horns, leaping over stars.

The palace was visually stunning but oppressively silent. There were no attendants, no spiraling smoke from a cook fire, not even a cat or dog resting in the shade. There was not a soul in sight. "Where do you think the priest went?" Larisa's whispered words echoed ominously against the palace's smooth walls.

"I don't know but I'm glad he's no longer around." Catullus nervously approached a grand temple. "Something about him was not right. He gave me the shivers."

They climbed glittering white marble steps, which led to a hall of carved red columns that looked like a forest of delicately painted trees.

The interior of the hall was spacious and airy. Thousands of tiny oil lamps flickered in niches surrounding a large shrine at the front of the hall, ornamented with a massive bull's head carved from glossy blue-black obsidian. The bull had beautiful, compassionate eyes and a golden star in the center of its forehead. Its

ivory horns were trimmed with gold and lapis lazuli, and reached so wide they brushed each side of the hall.

"Why have you come to the Palace of Asterion?" A deep male voice echoed around them, seeming to emanate from all directions at once.

"Is this not King Minos' palace?" Catullus squeaked.

"No!" the voice thundered. "This is not a palace of the living. For years, no one has come to this island—and that is how we want it."

Larisa turned, looking all around her, hoping to catch a glimpse of the mysterious speaker.

"The Palace of Asterion is a dangerous place." The disembodied voice rose higher. "We moved our people away nearly a generation ago. No one resides here any longer, except for the guardian priests who have pledged to die with the island. How did you find the island through the enchanted fog?"

Larisa dared to speak. "Our boat found the island."

The voice softened. "What is your name, woman?"

"Larisa of Kreios."

The voice dropped in volume and spoke calmly. "Larisa, I'm told you are to be offered to the labyrinth. Do you have a lover or any living family?"

"No." She answered quietly and waited through an uncomfortably long silence. She nervously held her breath until her pulse throbbed in her temples.

"I will accept this woman." The voice echoed against the ceiling. "Bring Larisa to

the labyrinth.”

The masked priest approached from behind a shadowy column and claimed the tether from Catullus. No hands were visible; only voluminous fabric reached forward.

Larisa stared into the priest’s face, trying to catch a glimpse of eyes behind the mask, and was startled to see there were none. There appeared to be no human beneath the mask and robe, only a vaporous blackness that somehow managed to hold the costume aloft. Her spine shivered at the sight.

“What about me?” Catullus cautiously approached the shrine. “I’ve suffered much hardship to deliver a fine sacrifice to the labyrinth. Is there a reward for my efforts?”

“Yes,” the voice hissed. “You shall be returned to your boat and cast toward your shore. Should you make any attempt to return to the island, a one-eyed, eight-limbed sea monster will snatch you from the boat and drag you to the coldest, darkest depths of the sea.”

Catullus blanched. “I receive nothing?”

The voice remained silent.

The priest’s flowing sleeve silently pointed toward the exit. Catullus looked mortified as he turned and quickly strode from the palace.

The priest gave Larisa’s tether a gentle tug to urge her forward. She looked carefully for evidence of hands or feet, but again saw none as he silently led her through a maze of columns and polished hallways. They finally arrived at a fragrant garden courtyard filled with the most varied herbs and exotic fruit trees Larisa had ever seen.

An ornate mosaic pathway twisted through the elegant gardens, past pear trees and banks of star-shaped flowers. The path ended abruptly at a rocky field of charcoal-gray pumice that stood naked beneath a slate sky. No living thing grew beyond the path. The rocky field's only distinguishing feature was a large mound topped with a stone statue twice the height of a man, which appeared to be a crescent moon lying on its back. Larisa peered closely at the crescent and realized she was actually looking at a weathered carving of horns. A row of blazing torches led to the statue, sending slender swirls of black smoke curling into the humid air.

The priest stepped onto the rocky field and walked toward the statue.

Larisa was forced to walk behind, each footstep on the chaotically shifting rocks precarious. She watched in awe as the priest strode easily ahead without displacing a single stone.

They followed the torches to the far side of the mound, where a rocky alcove contained what appeared to be a torch-lit doorway sealed with a stone slab. The slab bore the image of a bull. The priest stepped forward, pressed a star carved into the forehead of the animal and the slab shifted with a terrible grating before pivoting open. A rush of cool air escaped through the dark doorway.

Larisa glanced past the priest's shoulder to the tomblike sanctum beyond. The torches barely lit the darkness of what appeared to be a vast subterranean cavern.

The priest picked up a torch with an unseen hand and motioned for Larisa to walk through the doorway.

She realized this was the entrance to the dreaded labyrinth...

A loud rumble, like the roar of a titanic beast, shook the earth. Fate was mere footsteps away. Her knees trembled as the first jolt of true, primal fear gripped her.

Larisa came to a halt. "Draw your dagger and kill me now!" she pleaded. "Show mercy before you throw my body to the creature."

The priest turned his head and spoke in a voice that sounded as if he were whispering through a hollow reed. "It is *you* who must show mercy to Asterion. For years this island sat in isolation, deliberately hidden beyond view and reach of all, and yet you found it. Your flesh and blood shall make the Star Bull whole. Through your sacrifice, that which has solely been spirit can now become flesh. Our last Asterion can cross the island portal before it is destroyed. This is a great day."

Larisa frowned in confusion, not comprehending much of anything the priest had said. A roar louder than the most violent thunderstorm erupted from deep within the earth and left her heart pounding.

"Asterion wants you. It's meant to be." The priest led her past the doorway and onto the steps of the cave. "Follow me."

She stepped into the dimly lit entrance, using timid taps of her foot to carefully guide herself down the steeply sloping path. She'd taken only a few steps when the priest suddenly turned back and sealed the doorway behind them. Larisa gasped as the stone slab pivoted shut with a grate of stone on stone, trapping them inside and denying all daylight.

"There's no going back." The priest's voice was a faint whisper. "Stay close."

Except for a ring of light surrounding the torch, the darkness beyond was

unfathomable. As they descended into the depths of the cavern, the air became cool and dank. The smoke from the torch stung her eyes. Her shoulder brushed against a clump of clingy roots and the almost hairy texture made her recoil in horror.

After a long descent, they reached a level floor. The faint sound of dripping water echoed from within an immense-feeling cavern. The torch illuminated a small area of floor and a tall, sturdy-looking stone column, which the priest steered her toward. Atop the column was another head of a bull carved in stone, this one with a heavy bronze ring through its nose.

The priest set the torch near the column. His sleeves reached toward Larisa. "Rise."

She gasped in shock as her wrists rose as if by magic. The priest deftly secured her bound wrists to the ring with a whisper of a touch as Larisa trembled in fear.

The masked figure leaned closer. "During Asterion's first hours in a physical body, he will have little self-control. You must be secured to the column to prevent you from fleeing into the labyrinth and being trampled or lost." He drew the golden dagger from his robe, pressed the tip to Larisa's clenched fist and a tiny trickle of blood appeared.

Larisa glanced upward, tensely biting her lip. The small cut barely registered as pain but the priest's ominous motions left her breathless with terror.

The priest caught a few drops of blood on the tip of the blade and lifted it toward the head at the top of the column. Larisa watched as a dark crimson trace of her blood was smeared across the star carved on the bull's forehead.

The moment the blood touched the star, the ground shook and the thundering snort of a bull echoed from within the labyrinth.

A heartbeat later, the click of heavy hooves pounded the floor.

"It is done." The priest stepped away from Larisa. "Asterion has been summoned into flesh."

Then the priest dissolved in front of her eyes, quickly becoming so transparent the glowing torch shown clearly through his robe. His image faded until he completely disappeared into vaporous black smoke.

And Larisa was left to face the beast alone.

Chapter Two

The bellowing cry of a large animal rolled through the cavern. Larisa froze against the column, frantically glancing side to side as the chilling sounds of a snorting bull filled the air. The flickering torch provided minimal light, exaggerating shadows and revealing only vague details about the labyrinth. She squinted at what appeared to be several entrances to the chamber across the cavern, but she couldn't be sure.

She strained to hear from which direction the creature would approach as a shudder of terror gripped her.

Nothing happened.

She waited breathlessly for many long moments as silence reigned. There were no noticeable animal sounds or movements within the labyrinth. The air hung heavy and a cold sweat broke across her brow. A frightened little whimper escaped her lips. Where was it? What was it doing? Why couldn't she hear the beast walking toward her? Her wrists twisted anxiously from the ring. She listened for some clue the monster was near but the faint sound of dripping water was all she heard.

Harrumph!

She heard a single loud animal noise and trembled.

Snort!

Her eyes strained to see beyond the flickering shadows as her fear intensified.

The click of what sounded like hooves echoed through the cavern, each clopping step signaling a creature of great size moving closer. Every muscle in her body tensed. She wanted to cry out but was too terrified to release the hysterical scream building in her lungs.

A massive black bull, far larger than any she had ever seen in the fields, burst into the cavern with a loud *snort!* It thrashed its massive horns from side to side and briskly pawed the ground with a hoof.

Then bull looked directly at Larisa, huffed loudly...

And charged.

The beast pounded toward her with the speed and crushing power of a rolling boulder. Larisa screamed.

The bull skidded to a halt an arm's length in front of her. She rose on tiptoe and arched away from the beast's massive head and sharp-tipped horns. The earthy scent of field beast filled her nostrils.

The bull stared into her eyes as its tail swished back and forth. *Huff, huff.* Bursts of warm, moist breath panted from the beast's muzzle. Every breath sounded like a large bellows drawing air into its massive chest.

Larisa waited in painful suspense to be gored or bitten by the wild creature.

Don't be afraid. I'm not going to harm you.

The deep, gentle voice of a man floated into her thoughts.

She glanced around, expecting to see the priest lurking in the shadows whispering strange words, but saw no one. "Who's speaking?" she whispered.

My name is Darron. The bull inched closer. Its snout brushed the very tip of her nose and sniffed her skin. *I've waited years for this. I began to believe it would never happen. I am honored you've been offered to me.*

She gasped in alarm. Was a *bull* truly speaking to her? Entering her thoughts? This was madness beyond all madness!

Phouff! The bull bellowed in her face, its booming roar resonating through the chamber. It galloped around the column, flicking its tail in agitation before bursting into a snorting charge at the far wall. The bull abruptly stopped just short of the wall, swung its head around and looked at her.

A body is a wonderful thing! He enthusiastically stomped in a tight circle. *I've had it described to me many times but nothing could have prepared me for how it actually feels. It's almost too much. So many strong sensations... It's like feeling everything at once!*

His ecstatic words continued to directly penetrate her mind. "Are you really speaking to me?" she asked.

The bull glanced at her sideways. *Yes, I am, and just as soon as I get my bearings about breathing, moving, thinking and feeling, I'll take a more traditional form.* The bull ran in circles around the cavern, snorting with joy.

Larisa watched the dizzying sight, suppressing incredulous laughter.

I'm doing great! It's not so hard. I'm going to attempt a new form. The bull knelt before her on its forelegs and somewhat clumsily lowered to the ground. *I've waited ages to do this.* The bull fell onto its side with a deep thud and began to vigorously roll back and forth, kicking its legs in the air.

She was alarmed to see a creature of such size thrashing against the stone and felt certain it would harm itself, but as she watched, the bull slowly transformed...

As it rolled on the floor, a man's body took form.

Hoofed limbs became muscular legs and arms, articulate hands. A man's broad shoulders and chest appeared.

Finally Darron cautiously rose on two human legs covered in thick, dark hair.

Larisa gasped when she looked at his handsome face, with its strong jaw and high cheekbones framed by dark, wavy hair. His up-tipped brown eyes appeared highly intelligent. His noble face was nothing like an animal's—except for a broad set of sweeping horns still attached to his head, which made his tall frame appear even larger. A faint swishing motion behind his thigh alerted her to the presence of a bull's tail.

"What are you?" she asked cautiously. "Are you an outcast god?"

"Can we speak of that later?" He grinned. "I want to enjoy this moment." He slowly lifted one foot and then the other before carefully approaching her with an expression of wonderment on his face. "Walking on two legs is tricky!" He stood close and stared into her face. "And looking at you through a man's eyes is a very different experience than looking at you as a bull."

His approving gaze swept over her. "I feel quite strange standing near you. My heart's pounding." His fingertips grazed her arm, touching with gentle curiosity. "You're so soft. I would never have felt the smoothness of your skin through a hoof." He stared at his fingers. "Hands are amazing!" He lightly brushed the tip of one long finger against her parched lips. A look of concern crossed his face. He turned and walked away.

Larisa sighed in relief and allowed her arms to hang limply from the bonds. Certainly this situation was strange, but it wasn't nearly as awful as she'd expected. Darron, as he had introduced himself, did not inspire terror. The man radiated awe and curiosity.

Based on his reactions, she guessed she was as great a mystery to him as he to her. Except for a couple of decidedly bovine features, he was as breathtaking as any god she could image. She gazed in admiration at the rippling muscles on his back as he moved about the cavern, glancing side to side and seemingly searching for something. He disappeared around a shadowy corner of the chamber.

A moment later she heard water dripping into a container. The sound deepened with every drop collected. Soon, Darron returned holding an earthen bowl of water. He stood before her and offered it. "Drink."

She hesitantly sniffed the water. It carried the faint scent of minerals but other than that, the water appeared fresh and was very welcome. She bowed her head to eagerly drink. She also noticed Darron's scent had subtly changed. He no longer smelled like a beast. His skin now carried the light, musky scent of a man. A scent she found strongly enticing.

Darron tipped the bowl and helped her to drink it all.

She instantly felt better and was ready for more water, but was afraid to ask. She thought it best to show gratitude first and whispered a shaky, "Thank you."

He moved closer, brushing his chest against hers. A slight puff of moist breath bathed her face. A glimmer of what looked like pure male ferocity flashed in his eyes.

She tensed. Now what? "You seem decent," she pleaded softly. "Let me go or do what you're going to do, but please don't hurt me."

Darron softly exhaled. His hands stroked the sides of her bare arms. "I don't wish to hurt you."

The light touch of his broad hands on her skin caused a cascade of unsettling sensations. Her arms already tingled from being hoisted above her head for so long. She gently rolled her wrists to bring some blood to her fingertips.

Darron's hands traveled toward her raised wrists. His fingers brushed against the leather bonds and hovered there.

She wondered if he was deliberating about whether or not to untie her. Her heart pounded with hope. Would he set her free?

His hands lowered to gently cup the sides of her face.

She tipped her chin upward. He was studying her, seemingly drawing in every detail with intense focus. There was an awed spark in his eyes that almost verged on worship. No one had ever looked at her that way. His expression left her breathless.

He leaned closer and she felt the firm nudge of a hard cock against her belly, and gasped.

"I need this..." His hands lowered to her thighs and gently stroked their rounded curves. "Will you allow it?"

Larisa was too stunned to answer.

She simply nodded.

He lifted the hem of her tunic to her hips and slid his hand between her legs to part them. His fingers slowly circled the thick tangle of dark curls before one dipped between the lips of her sex, searching for the tiny bud hidden there. He carefully explored her body until he found it and pressed down with lazily, circling strokes.

She sighed at his restrained tenderness. His gentle touch and obvious interest in her pleasure eased her fears. A rush of heat flooded between her thighs. She arched toward him and moaned when a surprisingly strong jolt of pleasure rocked her body.

Abruptly he took hold of her hips and lifted her against the column. Larisa felt weightless in his grasp. A blissful feeling of surrender followed.

Darron pinned her body with his and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He slowly rubbed her wet sex with the head of his cock, making it slick, then pressed gently but persistently between her thighs.

His thick cock slid deep inside her in a single unhurried thrust.

She gulped a startled breath at the first stroke's harsh stretch but by the second and third slow thrusts, she loved the faint burn. The silky hair on his thighs brushed lightly against her skin. The sensation of being completely filled was stunning. She tightened her legs around his hips to lock him in place as he moved cautiously inside her. She wished her hands were free to stroke her bud and add to the rising

pleasure, but the tether held her wrists taut.

Heat rolled off his skin as his body covered her. His hips pumped with smooth, graceful motions but as he grew more excited, the pace sped and his breath panted near her ear.

Judging by the gruff, breathy sounds, Larisa knew he was close to climax. Her mind reeled. A god was taking her—and it felt wonderful. She floated on every exciting sensation as the slick stroke of his shaft began to rub against her bud at exactly the right angle.

Larisa rolled her hips against him with abandon; their bodies fit perfectly. The feeling was so unbelievably good it surprised her when it got even better, and a shudder of unbearable pleasure broke over her with a wave of gripping contractions. The final release was so strong, her lips parted on a long, sweet moan.

Darron's hands firmly gripped her hips and hoisted her higher. His uninhibited strokes sped. His chest pinned her firmly against the column as his body tensed. He came with his own crashing climax that left him trembling. He pressed close and remained almost motionless inside her for what felt like forever, wringing every last bit of pleasure from the act.

She gulped a deep breath as full realization of what she'd done rushed forward. She had mated with a god. And loved it.

What kind of woman did that make her? A goddess or a doomed consort? In every tale of mortal women who had been abducted, ravished or who'd willingly made love to a god, it always ended badly for the mortal. Everyone knew contact with a god

drastically changed a woman's fate. Darron seemed so caring. The act of shared pleasure had been beautiful...but surely tragedy lay ahead.

Darron carefully lowered her feet to the floor. Larisa immediately felt his warm seed trickle down her thighs.

He untied the tether from the bronze ring and unbound Larisa's wrists. He tossed the tether aside, swept her into his arms and drew her close to his chest. "I'm going to keep you."

Her fingertips tingled from being lowered too quickly but she allowed herself to relax in his arms and lightly brushed her face against the soft strands of hair running down the center of his chest. He was big and solid and she felt herself melting against him from sheer exhaustion.

Darron cradled her in his arms. His tail swished quietly as he walked beyond the cavernous chamber and into the narrow passageways of the labyrinth, which were lit with a blazing torch at every turn. She tried to ignore the unsettling sound of the tail by listening to the thump of his heart deep in his chest.

There were many twists in the path as they journeyed deeper into the labyrinth. Darron walked for what felt like forever. The ground slightly trembled beneath their feet regularly, as if the island were a great beast shifting its weight and groaning. Tiny plumes of dust and debris trickled down the walls.

Finally they came to a small chamber furnished with lush furs laid atop a sweet-smelling straw mattress. Darron stopped and gently lowered her feet to the floor.

His eyes drooped. "This must be what tired feels like?" He lay down on the

mattress with an exhausted sigh, his long body stretching the length of the bed. He reached out, took hold of her wrist and pulled her down beside him. His big arms locked around her, holding her captive against his chest. "If I fell asleep, would you run away?"

She felt comforted in his arms. "No."

He kissed the top of her head. "I like having you near." He held her close as his breathing slowed.

Soon he slept, and not long after, so did Larisa. A beautiful but strangely agitated dream followed...

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Larisa was floating in a beautiful place that appeared to be made of blindingly bright, rainbow-colored light. The atmosphere was as thick as honey and hummed with vibrancy. These seemed no distinct impression of up or down and nothing around her possessed true solidity.

She glided beneath a roaring waterfall of shimmering light, passing right through it with no physical sensation at all. Fluid, translucent walls of pastel-tinted light also proved to be no barrier; she easily crossed through those as well.

This place slightly resembled the Palace of Asterion, with its pattern-embellished columns of light and its soaring grandeur, but its ethereal beauty was far beyond anything she could compare it to.

She became aware of male voices arguing and moved toward a glowing gathering

of tall, slender beings that reminded her of candle flames. They flickered with colored light and shifted shape as they spoke.

The tallest, brightest being spoke in somber tones. "We made a grave mistake opening portals on Earth, helping some Earthlings while ignoring others. We've done irreparable damage to the Earth beings and will no doubt face council censure."

A second being, this one with a coppery glow, angrily flared upward. For some reason, Larisa was certain this being was Darron.

"That's not true." Darron's words weren't actually spoken by a mouth but his voice clearly addressed the other. "Earthlings are eager to learn. They show more promise than any group we've ever contacted. They are special, and possess a tenacious strength of spirit we could learn from. They know things we don't. Deeper partnering with Earthlings could evolve into a relationship of equals."

"Equals?" The tall being indignantly expanded in size until he glowed white-hot. "How would that be possible? Asteria is a world of pure thought and abstracts. If we agree upon it, it manifests. The people of Earth are still stabbing each other with metal and scratching in the dirt to survive. We are *not* equals."

"Pardon me, Elder, but you're wrong," Darron insisted. "I've observed Earth for a millennium. You wouldn't believe how difficult and short men's lives are. Every day they're mired in hardship but their hearts and minds are noble. They're intelligent and have high aspirations. To endure all they do, I'm certain the creator who made us all granted them something extra. They do many things we do but in limited bodies that feel great pleasure and deep pain. They face death as an unknown."

Unlike us, they have no idea what comes next. They embrace each harrowing moment of life knowing there may never be another."

"Darron." The flickering Elder cooled his light to a pale golden glow. "The Asterions have been on Earth for too long. We've taken the form of beasts and men and walked among the people of Earth. In the early days, it did no harm, but humanity has reached a crucial point and must now move forward on its own, if it is to move forward at all. We should step back and observe the seeds that have already been planted. If Earth is worthwhile, we can return someday and teach them something more."

"It's not all about us teaching *them*. The people of Earth can teach *us*!"

The Elder balked. "Where is the merit in that?"

"You've never taken a body. You don't know the many lessons Earth could offer us," Darron persisted. "We've been going about our transactions with Earth all wrong. If I am allowed to use the island portal one last time, I'll try to master the many difficulties of becoming a man; take my chances in a human body and relish what lessons I receive."

"It is too great a risk." The Elder flared upward again. "Your life on Earth will be short and uncertain. The island's condition is precarious, molten rock is roiling beneath it as we speak. It will not last much longer. Maintaining the island's labyrinth portal placed humans in unnecessary danger. That's why it was sealed to the world years ago within the enchanted fog."

"I don't care if my Earth life is brief. A single day in a body would be worth it."

The Elder loomed taller still and flickered an angry shade of red. "But there is an even greater danger to you. If you bond with Earth, your spirit may become trapped in the soil indefinitely. It is possible you might never return to Asteria. Century after century I've waited in vain for the return of many young Asterions. Your own sister Hathor stubbornly continues to reside in Egypt. When one of her physical bodies dies, she immediately takes another. She has birthed generations of Earthly children and is now so strongly bonded to Earth that I fear we may never see her again. Your brother Brahma has all but disappeared in the east and also shows no interest in returning to Asteria."

"Is that your worst fear, Elder? That my siblings and I will stay on Earth and never come home?" Darron's flame flickered warmly with what felt to Larisa like compassion. "Asteria is perfect. Nothing changes here. There are no challenges left to be conquered and I know there is much more to learn elsewhere. Earth can be harsh, but it is a good teacher. Please allow the Minoan portal to be opened one last time."

"No," the Elder said. "There is no sense in provoking an already unstable situation. Anything you might teach the people of Minoa will only cause a greater imbalance with their neighbors."

"Or it could speed their progress in ways that benefit all," Darron pleaded. "Elder, it's already too late for me. I've fallen in love with Earth. For a thousand years my spirit has beaten a well-worn path to the island. In my thoughts and dreams, I go there endlessly. I can't even image using another portal."

"In the island's last days, may I be given permission to take physical form if a

human who needs me comes to the island?"

"Darron." The Elder's voice softened on a sigh. "You know it's more complicated than that. The council will consider granting permission for a final trip to Earth... within strict limitations. You would be allowed one purely human incarnation but that body will be as vulnerable as anyone else's. As an Asterion, you would be able to manifest physical matter, but I ask that you rely on your wits and abilities to inspire instead."

"Thank you." Darron flickered brightly.

"There are no guarantees." The Elder's light cooled to amber. "Your time within the labyrinth will be lonely. The island has been emptied of people. Incorporeal guards have been put in place to protect the portal until the island's demise. The guardian priests will be your only company. It's entirely possible your spirit might remain trapped in the labyrinth without a physical form for months or even years. Without the proper blood rituals and grounding, you might never receive a physical body. During your time away, you could lose your place of honor on the Asterion council. Are you willing to journey to Earth and take that chance?"

"Yes." Darron's voice rose. "Send me now."

Chapter Three

Larisa awoke to the sound of a rumbling growl. She gasped in alarm, bolted upright on the straw mattress and stared at the unfamiliar surroundings of the torch-lit labyrinth.

"You're finally awake." Darron stirred beside her. His arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her back down. "I was just thinking of home and feeling restless." He patted his abdomen. "There's a strange emptiness inside."

A low growl grumbled again. She realized the rumbling noise was her own empty stomach. "We're hungry. I haven't eaten since yesterday."

"I haven't eaten ever." He chuckled. "I was waiting to share my first meal with you."

She glanced to her right and saw several clay amphorae and a platter brimming with fresh fruit, bread, olives and cheese. She sat up again and impulsively reached for a pear. "This is a welcome surprise. I'm starving." She bit into the juicy pear, savoring its sweetness.

Darron sat and also picked up a pear, brought it to his lips and bit it nearly in half. The large chunk lodged in his mouth and stretched his jaw wide. Juice dribbled down

his chin as he tried to bite the unwieldy portion. He looked startled and froze, seemingly at a loss as to what to do next.

"Chew smaller bites." She smiled at his dilemma. "Be careful, don't breathe in and swallow food at the same time."

It appeared to be too late. He choked a bit and his eyes watered as he grimaced and swallowed. Darron spit out the uneaten portion of pear with a gasp. "That hurt. Eating looks so simple, yet it's not."

Larisa reached for an amphora, which she hoped was filled with water, and passed it to Darron.

He held the amphora to his lips and drank. A trickle of dark wine escaped the side of his mouth. "*This* I like."

"Go lightly with the wine, especially since you've not had it before. You might want to start with water."

"I tried water." He took another long drink. "I prefer wine."

She watched with amusement as he drank. Every few moments he looked directly at her with a sleepy, sexy expression. He appeared young, perhaps a few years older than her. His large, dark eyes were luminous, reflecting just the slightest hint of something otherworldly.

"I dreamed I saw Asteria," she cautiously said.

"That wasn't a dream. It was a shared thought. Asterions do that. I was remembering my decision to come here while you were sleeping." Darron paused. "I'm very pleased you were able to share the thought too." He leaned closer. "When

you're ready, we can share more. But first I want you to eat something." His voice carried a note of formality. "May I feed you?" His gaze focused on her with bright intensity as he reached for a small bunch of red grapes and tugged one free.

Her stomach growled loudly. Everything on the platter looked delicious and she wanted it, but beneath Darron's sweet gesture, Larisa had a feeling the act of sharing food with him meant more than simply filling her belly.

He held a dark grape to her lips. A look of expectation shone in his eyes.

For a moment the fruit hovered unclaimed in front of her. "What exactly am I saying yes to?"

He smiled slightly. "In allowing me to feed you, you give consent to take the next part of the journey."

Her curiosity to know more was overwhelming, and so she accepted the grape from his fingertips, enjoying its tart flavor.

A surprising thing happened next.

Larisa looked directly at him and, briefly, his face shimmered, becoming a sparkling beacon of light and not a man at all. His image was so brilliant she could barely look upon it. She squinted against the glare and glanced away, waiting for the brief but startling vision to fade.

A moment later he was once again a handsome man with big brown eyes and an ivory set of horns sweeping outward from his head. She gasped in quiet astonishment.

"That's my true face, and it's not appropriate for Earth." Darron's hand lightly

brushed against hers. "From the first moment I heard tales of Earth, I knew I belonged here, and waited patiently for the opportunity to cross into your world. So few Asterions are allowed to come. I've dreamed of living as a man and being part of Earth." He gently fed her another grape. "There are no vineyards, orchards or animals where I come from. Sex, as you understand it, does not exist. I observed Earth for years but I'd never experienced anything so pleasurable as taking the form of a man and enjoying my first sexual taste of you. I want to thank you for that gift."

He lifted a round loaf of dense bread from the platter, tore it in two and handed her half. "Tear off a piece and feed it to me." A note of hope lifted his voice. "Please."

She tore a small chunk of bread from the loaf and cautiously brought it to his lips. "Why did you appear as a bull within the labyrinth?"

He took the piece of bread from her fingertips and carefully chewed and swallowed. "When the Asterions first came to Earth many generations ago, we took the form of animals that humans would admire, covet and make use of. Living among you as animals was the easiest way to become accustomed to Earthly bodies and observe humanity without causing conflict.

"Many of us found adapting to the complex emotions of the human mind, and the conflicting needs of a body, extremely challenging. Most Asterions were only able to make half the transition toward becoming human. Over time, the Asterion council lost interest in trying to master physical bodies, but a few persisted and became adept as Earthlings. A traditional animal such as a bull is still the simplest and most comfortable form to take; it's large, powerful and, on this small island, only a human

would dare challenge it.”

A little shiver of apprehension raced through her. She knew “Asterion” was an ancient word, older than stone, which meant “starry master” or “ruler of stars”. She leaned closer. “*Are you a god?*”

“No.” He reached for more wine. “Don’t be intimidated by the word ‘Asterion’. I’m physically different from you but our souls are similar. I envy all that you have, and all that you can enjoy on Earth. I begged the council for the chance to live a single lifetime as a man.” He gently pushed the platter toward her. “Share with me. Eat and drink your fill. Afterward, there’s something I want to show you.”

Larisa helped herself to a little of everything and washed it all down with a generous serving of wine. Darron ate and drank also. His gaze carefully watched her every choice from the platter. He ate whichever items she chose, following her lead. When she was finished eating the simple but delicious fare, she sighed contently.

“Come here.” He kicked free of the bed covers and stretched across the mattress, exposing perfectly formed, muscular legs that were now faintly dusted with a few silky hairs instead of a brushy animal pelt.

She admired the long legs and swept her gaze toward the deeply flushed shaft of his thick cock, its tip glistening.

“Lie with me.” His hand slowly stroked the mattress, inviting her near. “I need you beside me.”

She slowly reclined and stretched across the mattress at his side. She gazed into his strongly angled face, thinking him to be the masculine ideal, if still a bit too

animal-like with the horns. Her fingertips stroked against the soft strands of hair on his broad chest as her body nestled against him.

"What do you think of me?" He brushed a curl from her face.

"Don't you already know?" She lightly kissed the warm skin on his chest. "You're the most beautiful being I've ever seen." The uncensored words blurted past her lips.

He smiled. "I think the same about you." He gently slid on top of her, carefully taking his weight on his elbows. His legs parted her own as he settled between her thighs. His lips lightly brushed against Larisa's.

A breathless thrill raced through her as she parted her lips and allowed his tongue to glide across hers.

His hand lowered to tenderly stroke the side of her thigh and gently nudge her tunic higher. "I want you," he whispered. "Do you want me?"

"Yes." A rising wave of lust overtook her as she helped Darron lift the hem of her tunic to her hips. Her skin tingled in anticipation of sharing more pleasure with him. She forgot about the horns on his head and could hardly wait for the thrilling sensations of having his strong body moving inside hers, making her feel good again.

His hands cradled the back of her head and held her close in a sweetly demanding kiss. She loved his touch. It was raw lust tempered with gentleness. She sensed how careful he was being to not rush or startle her. A flood of excitement raced through her as his mouth covered hers with hungry kisses.

His cock pressed between her thighs, brushing against her wet sex. He almost held his breath as his gaze met hers and waited.

Larisa reached down, took hold of the shaft and slowly rubbed the wet crown against her bud, loving the shivers of arousal that zipped through her. As soon as the crown was thoroughly slick, she guided him inside.

He slid into her with ease, exhaling a ragged breath as he sank deeper. "Wrap your arms around me," he pleaded.

She locked her arms around his shoulders and squeezed his lean hips between her thighs. It was pure pleasure to twine her limbs around his solid frame, as his body slowly moved between her legs. As his motions gradually sped, he grew more excited, and so did she. Larisa arched against the furs as they moved together in perfectly matched rhythm.

His breath panted in harsh bursts and she knew he was reaching climax. She was on fire too and tilted her hips upward to rub her bud against the fast-stroking shaft. Her hands slid across the solid curves of his buttocks and clutched to anchor him against her as she came. Her skin flushed with heat and for a fleeting moment, even the soles of her feet tingled before the full, stunning release rippled through her core. She collapsed beneath him with a sigh.

Darron's hips pumped faster before a violent shudder passed through his body. He threw his head back, thrust deep and groaned as he released a long, drenching rush of hot seed inside her. His hips slowly rocked for several long strokes as he finished.

While his breathing calmed, she continued to hold him close and smooth her fingers through his hair.

When he was finally capable of speaking, he whispered, "Larisa." The next words were spoken just as softly. "Would you welcome a child that belonged to both my world and yours?"

His words were so serious, her skin pebbled with tension. "Do you know I'm with child, or are you just asking?" She shifted beneath him. "Would the child be more like me?" She hesitated. "Or you?"

He smiled. "It would be an equal blend of Asterion and Earthling."

Her hand sank lower on his back, until she felt... "I meant...would the child have a tail and horns?"

"Would it be a disgrace if that happened?" he asked innocently.

"The child could never pass for human."

His brow furrowed. "The child would be half Asterion and no doubt a very valuable member of any group. Several of Hathor's daughters were born with cow's heads and they are absolutely beloved in Egypt, and considered to be very desirable..."

She gulped a deep breath. "Let's discuss this later. There may be nothing to worry about."

"That's right." His fingertips lightly stroked the sides of her face. "With your help and love, I can fully become a man and live above in the sunlight. I want that more than anything."

"I don't understand," she whispered.

Darron smiled at her with a sweet, slightly crooked grin. "You don't like my tail,

do you?"

She shifted uncomfortably, not knowing what to say.

"Please be honest," He glanced over his shoulder at the offending appendage.

She gazed at his strong profile lit by flickering torchlight. There was plenty to appreciate about him. His face was ruggedly handsome and his solid warrior's body made her feel wonderful. Even his ivory horns had an air of majesty. Why did he have to bring up the one thing that troubled her? "It's not that I dislike it..." She hesitated. "It's just so—animal."

He stood and offered his hand. "Come with me."

She grasped his hand and rose, smoothing her rumpled tunic with her other palm. "Where are we going?"

"Deeper into the heart of the labyrinth."

"Why?"

"For me, the only way out is by going inward. On Asteria, a labyrinth is considered the ideal safe place to begin life on Earth. Some visiting Asterions never fully attained human form, or even left the labyrinth. I want more. I want to live above as a man, but to do that I must have the permission of the Asterion council and a specific purpose to fulfill on Earth. Perhaps we can find that purpose together." He glanced over his shoulder at his flicking tail then smiled. "Don't worry—it will be gone soon."

He reached for the torch with his free hand, removing it from a niche in the wall. "Follow me."

They left the small chamber and walked into a passageway that split into three narrower paths. Darron chose one that barely accommodated the width of his horns. "I hope I picked the right passageway," he mumbled. "It's a lot easier navigating a labyrinth as a formless spirit. I usually just floated through obstacles, instead of walking around them."

"You don't know your way around down here? You said you were here for years."

"I was, but being in a physical body makes it an entirely new experience. Now five physical senses are involved. There are features to the labyrinth that simply did not register with my spirit-self, such as textures and smells...even shadows, if you can image, were something I never had to cope with." The tip of one horn scraped the wall and he winced and pulled away. "See? I'm still learning. Before, I simply followed a thought and the thought would take me directly where I wanted to go. It was much easier."

He glanced at her. "But I have no regrets about taking a physical body. This is the best adventure I've ever had."

"What exactly were you?"

"Light, is the easiest answer. I had far less substance than the priest you met upon your arrival."

"Is the priest an Asterion too?"

"No, he's from another race of beings who are also interested in the denser physical realms, but they have yet to master the art of taking on any sort of physical form. These beings, like the Asterions, are in awe of Earth and all that is possible

here. They're here simply to assist our work and observe."

"Why did you wait so long to take form?"

"I had no choice. I had to be physically initiated into your realm. I couldn't simply will myself through the portal, though I did try." He laughed quietly. "Someone had to come to the labyrinth and offer a few drops of blood in order for me to take physical form."

Larisa became disoriented as they negotiated the many twisting turns, and was convinced they were wandering in circles. At every corner she expected to see the straw mattress and half-eaten platter of food, but eventually they came to a rounded chamber with a large, sparkling silver mirror embedded in the wall.

As they approached the mirror, it rippled to life as if it were the calm surface of a pool.

"Go ahead," Darron encouraged. "Look into the mirror; it's the past made clear. Of course you can't go back, but you can see it for what it was."

A chill skittered over her skin. "What will I see?"

"I don't know." Darron released Larisa's hand and allowed her to approach the mirror alone. "It's not my past."

She cautiously stood before the mirror, at first seeing only her reflection of long curls and large brown eyes—then the surface rippled and the image of her dead fiancé Alecto shimmered into form.

Alecto looked back at her in death as he had in life, with restless fire burning in his dark eyes. He was a man of action and quick temper who was always ready to

fight. At the slightest hint of battle, he was the first to gather his weapons and sound the call. A great warrior, inspiring and brave, Alecto was the son her father never had, and he had been her father's first choice of a husband. Larisa's father had arranged her marriage to Alecto shortly before their deaths.

Alecto had clearly been the right man to follow in her father's footsteps as warrior chief, but had he been the right man to provide a loving household for Larisa? That question had never been broached.

Alecto continued to stare back at her with narrowed eyes. His stern expression almost dared her to entertain warm thoughts about him. He was from another tribe, and he and Larisa had known very little about each other, a fact that didn't matter to Alecto. She was a chief's daughter and therefore a worthy prize. That was all he required in a wife. She had only been alone with him on the rare occasion. All she truly knew about Alecto was what she had gathered with her eyes or overheard while they were in the company of others. Alecto and her father had mostly shared detailed conversations about weapons and battle strategies.

In the mirror, beyond Alecto, the faint image of a flickering campfire crackled and she was reminded of the single sweet thing they had shared. One night, beside a campfire when no one was looking, he'd grabbed her wrist, pulled her onto his lap and kissed her deliriously.

Larisa had loved it. The kiss had left her breathless and proved to be an exciting invitation to a new world of desire. She'd instantly wanted to experience more, but aside from the stolen kiss by the fire, they'd been strangers. She'd been left wondering about all the things she didn't know about Alecto and never would.

The mirror darkened and Alecto's image faded. Larisa had wanted love, a home and children of her own, and Alecto had been the one chosen to provide those things. But she realized Alecto would never have been happy staying home with a wife and children. He'd been forever on the march. When he died, she'd felt great sorrow for his unlived life—but she now felt deeper sorrow for the narrowness of that life.

"What are you thinking?" Darron whispered.

"I was thinking how tragic it is that the people of my village spend all their energy and lives fighting with our neighbors and achieving so little. When our boat washed ashore, I was awestruck by the Palace of Asterion. I never dreamed such splendor existed. My village is made of mud thatch and each cottage is so tiny you can barely spread your arms without striking a wall. When I saw what the Minoans could build, I wanted to shout, 'Why can't we achieve that? Why must we spend all our time fighting?'

"My father and Alecto were obsessed with battle. They were brave men. I respect them both but what a waste it all was. They left little of value behind. During their lives, not a moment was spent on making the future better or more beautiful."

Darron gazed at her. "Do you think the people of your village would be interested in learning new ways?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "I would hope so. I want to learn to paint the images I saw on the Minoan palace walls..."

He picked up the torch, took her hand and led her out of the mirror chamber.

They walked another twisting passageway, this time coming upon a dripping grotto. The air was warm and humid. Steam rose from a natural hot spring.

Darron set the torch into the wall and waded into the spring. He motioned for Larisa to follow. "Bathe with me." He walked to the middle of the clear spring until the water reached his shoulders.

She stood nervously at the edge. "I can't swim."

He held his arms open. "I'll hold you. You're safe with me."

She *did* feel safe with him. Her hands tugged the tunic over her head and tossed it aside. She waded waist-deep into the warm water.

Darron approached and scooped her into his arms, moving them deeper.

Larisa wrapped her arms securely around his neck and enjoyed pressing her body against the warm expanse of his chest. He felt so solid and secure, she could fully appreciate the spring and allow herself to gently float. "This feels wonderful."

He showered the side of her face with kisses. His hands roamed lovingly over her skin. "I want to do something for you." He walked toward the far edge of the spring and sat her on a smooth rock.

"What are you doing?" She noticed a bright glint in his eyes.

"You've given me so much pleasure, I wish to return the favor." He parted her thighs. "Wrap your legs around my neck so I can taste you."

A blush warmed her cheeks. He was putting her first? The thought of his beautiful mouth kissing her sex was terrifically exciting. She lifted her legs and slid them over his shoulders, then leaned back on her elbows and watched as he carefully

positioned his face in front of her sex.

His lips lightly brushed against her bud. "I've been dreaming of this." He pressed a soft kiss to her mons. His long, wavy hair tickled her inner thighs as his face slowly moved from side to side. His tongue gently stroked between her lips, searching for her bud with languorous circles, causing thrilling sensations that built in intensity.

Larisa relaxed the grip of her thighs to make herself more accessible. The warm caress of his mouth was stunning.

Darron teased her with light flicking motions—before bearing down to fiercely suck.

She gasped. Her hips arched upward from the overwhelming pleasure.

He lifted his face. "Too hard?"

She shook her head. "It's perfect." She guided his head lower and held him captive between her thighs, desperately needing him to continue. "Don't stop." Larisa rocked her hips.

As his mouth worked her bud, he slid a long finger inside her and stroked.

She wanted to go wild from the tremendous amount of energy building inside her body and almost needed to scream. Her thighs pressed against the sides of his face as she rubbed her bud hard against his lips.

His lips slowly drew her bud to a peak. He made a gentle coaxing motion with his crooked finger that lured her closer to the edge of climax.

Larisa tensed. For a startling moment she felt as if she were floating, weightless. Her stomach muscles clenched as a strong climax broke and left her face flushed.

She panted shallow breaths and rode the sensation for as long as possible. As the last rolling waves of pleasure passed, she had to will herself to relax and release him from her tensed legs.

He rose from between her parted thighs with a proud smile. "I'll do that every day if you'll allow it."

Her mind had gone completely blank. "I'd love it!" she gasped, then laughed. She really couldn't image Alecto putting her desires first, or even caring if she received pleasure. Darron's surprising attitude was welcome.

Darron took hold of her and once more lifted her into the spring, turning in a lazy circle. "I'll try my best to make you happy every day."

She wrapped her legs around his waist. The sole of her foot brushed against the solid curve of his buttocks, but...

She didn't feel a tail.

Larisa bolted upright, straining to glance over his shoulder. "Where is it?"

"The tail's gone." Darron grinned. "You're not going to miss it, are you?"

She kissed his lips. "No."

"The more you share with me, the more human I become. Taking an Earthly body brings great responsibilities." A note of somberness crept into his voice. "Larisa, I have one more important thing to show you." He moved toward the edge of the spring once more. "Will you walk to the heart of the labyrinth with me?" He climbed out of the water and offered his hand. "I need your help making a decision."

She took his hand and allowed him to pull her up. "What decision?" Water

sheeted from her body as she reached for her rumpled tunic and pulled it over her head.

“The heart of the labyrinth is a direct portal to Asteria. If I am to stay on Earth in physical form, I must have the Asterion council’s permission to do something that’s never been done.”

He picked up the torch and beckoned her forward. “Come.”

Chapter Four

They walked a sloping passageway that eventually opened into a spacious, domed cavern with a ceiling that soared upward into shadow. The curved walls were embellished with meticulously carved glyphs. The floor of the cavern was covered in an intricate mosaic of twisted knots leading to the center of the design, which held a beautiful star.

Darron pointed toward the star. "That's the star of Asteria. It's the gateway home, but this portal has become unstable. The Asterions will not use it again." He closed his eyes, bowed his head and appeared to fall into deep thought.

A blindingly bright flame appeared in the center of the star and stretched upward toward the highest point of the cavern. The deep, authoritative voice of the Elder spoke.

"Darron, are you ready to return? The council senses that indeed the island will soon be destroyed when Thera erupts. The inevitable is near."

Darron drew a tense breath. "I wish to stay on Earth."

"That will not be possible," the Elder insisted. "This portal will close."

"I ask permission to open a new portal in a new land."

"What new land?" The towering flame flashed an acidic shade of yellow and flickered erratically.

"I'm not sure." Darron's chin dipped. "I have not yet left the labyrinth to explore Earth."

"You don't even know where you're going?" the Elder huffed. "The portals we currently maintain are controversial enough. We don't need another. What inspired such a rash notion?"

"A young woman was brought to the labyrinth. I believe her people could benefit from contact with the Asterions."

The Elder's flame flickered wildly. "But you're not certain?"

"No." Darron hung his head.

"Darron," the Elder scolded. "You will not be allowed to wander aimlessly. You can stay on Earth only if you have a clear purpose."

"I wish to be a teacher," Darron insisted.

"To retain an Earthly body, an Asterion must also take a mate." The Elder's height shortened and the light became a soothing shade of pale blue. "Do you have an Earth partner willing to work with you?"

Darron glanced at Larisa. "Elder, may I have a moment of privacy to settle a personal matter?"

"Privacy?" the Elder scoffed. "Asterions do not require or embrace privacy. You are already speaking the sort of nonsense I hear from Hathor. I believe Earth is a dangerous influence on Asterions."

"Please, Elder. I must speak with Larisa."

A long moment of silence followed.

"More time will be granted." The Elder's light flickered to a warm glow. "The council has suggested to me that you be allowed to take care of this matter in your own way. Limited permission to remain on Earth for one lifetime is granted."

Darron beamed. "Thank you."

"Because you are the last Asterion to go to Earth, the council has granted you liberties previously not given. You shall be allowed to live as a man without council supervision. Your victories and mistakes shall solely be your own. Do not waste this rare opportunity or provide cause for me to be summoned again. This place holds no appeal for me. As we part, I ask that you not completely abandon Asteria. What you learn about Earth will be of interest to us."

With that, the Elder's light became a stretched, transparent wisp before fading completely.

Darron knelt on one knee in the center of the labyrinth and looked into Larisa's eyes. "Larisa, would you willingly accept me as your husband and welcome a child from me? Asterions mate for all lifetimes. What I ask of you is nothing trivial, and I will understand and respect whatever decision you make." He paused and bowed his head. "If not, please tell me now. I'll make sure you safely leave the island before I return to my realm. Whatever you choose, know that I have only gratitude for the beautiful experiences you've shared with me."

Larisa inhaled a tense breath. "For all lifetimes? What does that mean?"

"It means with the council's permission we could share many lives together on Earth, or possibly you might visit Asteria someday, but that time would be a long way off. Today, all I can offer is one lifetime, but as an Asterion I'm hoping to spend many with you."

She slowly lowered to her knees beside him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Darron, you're the only man who's ever shown any respect for my feelings or offered me a choice. The Asterions will have to wait a little longer for your homecoming. I'm keeping you with me on Earth." Her hands gently stroked the side of his face, encouraging him to look up. "I think you're the right mate for me."

He lifted his face, joy brimming in his eyes—and the horns on his head fell to the floor with a hollow clatter. More dark, wavy hair immediately took their place, leaving no visible sign they'd ever existed.

Darron gently picked up one of the newly shed horns. "We'll need this later."

He took hold of her hand and stood, helping Larisa to her feet as well. As he straightened to his full height, suddenly the shadows of the labyrinth receded. A burst of bright light lifted them upward.

In a heartbeat, the labyrinth faded away and they found themselves standing on the sunny mountain road that led to Larisa's home village of Kreios.

Larisa gaped in shock. "How did we get here?"

Darron smiled. "I thought us here. It's an Asterion trick."

She laughed. "It's amazing! Are you sure you're not a god?" She glanced down and gasped as she saw her tattered linen tunic had vanished and an elegant white

gown of flowing silk had taken its place, its sweeping sleeves embroidered with gold thread. Larisa twirled in awe. The long sleeves floated around her like snowy wings. "It's beautiful!"

Darron wore snug leather leggings and armor fit for a king. He was stunning in a gleaming bronze breastplate with the ornately hammered imprint of a bull emblazoned across the chest. To her eyes, he was everything noble.

He smiled and tucked the horn into his belt. "My bride looks lovely. Do you like the dress? Can we get married in your village?"

She froze. "Darron, I can't go back to my village. I won't be welcome. Catullus will have me shunned."

"No he won't."

"You don't understand—"

"I do." His eyes lit with their first real touch of mischief. He determinedly marched uphill. "I know exactly what needs to be done."

Larisa hurried to catch up. As they approached her home, the villagers turned out en masse to stare at her and Darron.

An old woman bravely walked up to Larisa and touched the hem of her sleeve. "You were sacrificed to the Minotaur. Are you a ghost now?"

"No." Larisa's gaze swept the crowd, looking for Catullus. "I'm very much alive—and I want my land back."

She finally spotted Catullus lurking behind a tree.

"Don't touch her or look into her eyes!" Catullus blubbered. "She was claimed by a frightful creature of the underworld and she should have stayed there!"

"I *am* the frightful creature." Darron's armor shimmered magnificently in the sunlight as he addressed the crowd. "I'm Larisa's new husband...and I'd like to be your chief."

"I'm the chief!" Catullus bellowed. "You're not one of us!"

Larisa smiled proudly. "Darron is an honored leader in his realm, and he has much to share with us that will make our lives better. He's the Master of the Palace of Asterion, and it is dazzling." She pointed at Catullus. "Catullus himself saw it. Darron's people know so much. Give him a chance and you will be amazed at what he can teach us."

"Like what?" Catullus sneered. "What could this stranger possibly do for the village that I couldn't do?"

Darron pulled the horn from his belt. "I'll give Larisa a new home. I'll also build the village a grand palace, where peoples from all tribes can gather and learn. You will be able to study mathematics, philosophy and architecture. You may not understand now, but you will. You'll quickly see the benefit of uniting with your neighbors and advancing together instead of constantly warring against each other. It will change your lives greatly." He looked toward Larisa. "Where is your land?"

She pointed toward a nearby rolling hillside of orchards and fields.

Darron strode toward the hillside, the entire village walking a short distance behind. When he reached Larisa's land, he waved his hand in warning. "Everyone

stay back." As soon as the villagers walked a safe distance away, he thrust the horn into the ground. "The new portal shall be here!"

The moment the horn struck the earth, the ground rumbled violently. Many gasped in terror and ran toward the village. Stones reared suddenly from the trembling ground and a beautifully constructed alabaster palace appeared, with grand halls and tall stone columns. Platters of food and jars of wine magically filled the front arcade.

Larisa stared in utter shock.

"Do you like it?" Darron asked gently. "It is a wedding gift." He looked down the road at the frightened villagers. "Larisa, call them back. Tell them they're welcome to all we have." He turned toward Catullus and took a menacing step closer. "Do you think *you* could offer the same?"

Catullus blanched and backed away.

"Run!" Darron demanded in a booming voice. "Run as fast as you can and never come back to this village or I'll throw you to the Minotaur! You'll be trampled, slashed and your blood drank dry. Your hideous death won't come soon enough!"

Catullus screamed and ran like a fool.

Darron grinned at Larisa. "Is there anyone else you would like me to deal with?"

"No." Larisa smiled and walked up to Darron, hooking her arm through his. "If you wish to be a trusted teacher to my tribe, it might be wise to distance yourself from the Minotaur. My people fear it. Perhaps this is a good time to change the Asterion approach?"

"I'm sure you're right. See, I'm already learning from you." Darron drew her close to his heart. "Let's go to the village and bring everyone back so we can have a wedding."

"I have a better idea." Larisa rose on tiptoe and kissed Darron's lips. "Why don't you show me our new home first?" A tingle of excitement warmed her skin. "Would any of those elegant rooms have a mattress?"

"Every room has a mattress," he said innocently.

She led him up the gleaming steps of their palace home. "Let's make a game of it. Why don't you pick your favorite room and we'll test one of the mattresses?"

Larisa bolted away from him with an echoing burst of laughter and raced through the polished halls of the palace. The new home was tremendous and she was able to dash full speed without bumping into anything. Her sandals skidded across the slick floors as she darted ahead of Darron and swung behind a marble column to catch her breath.

Darron caught up to Larisa with ease and lifted her into his arms, laughing. He strode down a long hallway and entered a simple but lovely room with a veranda that opened onto the orchard beyond. He gazed toward the rolling hillside planted with blossoming fruit trees. "I like *this* room."

He gently set her down on a straw mattress covered in linens and colorful blue and green silk. He took hold of her gown, tugged it over her head and tossed it aside.

"This room's a good choice." Larisa leaned back provocatively and stretched

naked across the bed. "It has a great view."

Darron looked at her with lust brimming in his eyes. "I like the view of *you* best." He quickly stripped away his armor and clothing and reclined beside her on the mattress, lazily rolling onto his back. "Mount me, Larisa. I wish to look at your beautiful face while you climax."

She gracefully slid on top of him and brushed her fingertips across his chest, stopping to tease his tiny nipples. She bent to kiss his lips.

"This is wonderful. I already love this life." His eyes fell to half-mast as she kissed him. He looked completely lost in the experience. "Put me inside you," he pleaded.

She took hold of his shaft and guided him inside her body. She was already so wet, his entry was easy. A tiny cry of pleasure escaped her lips as she sank down and felt the full stretch of penetration.

He slowly arched his hips with the most blissful expression on his face. "I'm so glad to be on Earth with you. My heart feels like it's going to burst. I can't image anything better than this."

"Oh, it gets better." She slowly rocked her hips, already feeling the beautiful tension building. "Wait until you hold your firstborn..."

Decadent Dance

Aubrey Ross

Chapter One

"Just one more stop and I promise I'll call it a night." Sophie looked at Zoe with her puppy dog eyes and Zoe knew she was doomed.

"Auditions start at six a.m. and I should be there before they start. This is the first time I've worked with this director and I've heard she can be a regular pain in the ass."

"Unlike you?" Sophie laughed. "I'll be quick. I promise." She looped her arm through Zoe's to ensure her cooperation then hustled along the narrow sidewalk. They were only nine blocks from the Theater District, but the personality of Manhattan's neighborhoods could change drastically with the turn of a corner. "My mom will only have one fiftieth birthday. I want to find something really special."

After releasing an exasperated sigh, Zoe relaxed into the rhythm of Sophie's brisk walk and accepted the inevitable. "Are you sure this place is open?" Did Sophie even know where the hell they were going? It wasn't unusual for her enthusiasm to get them into trouble.

Sophie was the first person Zoe had met when she came to New York seven years ago and they were still best friends. Zoe's pragmatic nature was the perfect balance

for Sophie's willingness to try anything.

"There it is!" Sophie rushed them across the car-lined street. A motorist honked as he passed and flipped them the bird. "Oh bite me! You weren't even close."

Zoe just shook her head and dragged Sophie up onto the opposite sidewalk, having long since grown accustomed to her friend's passionate outbursts.

The faint scent of incense tickled Zoe's nose as they stepped over the threshold and into the cluttered store. Glass cases contained all sorts of jewelry and small curiosities, while the walls were lined with shelves displaying less valuable wares. Zoe could detect no rhyme or reason to the shop, but it certainly offered a large selection. Some of the items looked antique, yet others were obviously modern.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?"

The man's deep voice startled Zoe and she gasped as she turned around. "I didn't see you there."

His lips curved with the hint of a smile. The man wasn't tall or broad, and with mouse-brown hair and common blue eyes, there was nothing remarkable about him, yet Zoe's skin prickled and a tingle sped down her spine.

"I'm just waiting for my friend." She motioned toward Sophie, who was being helped by a woman about the same age as the man.

Not easily dissuaded, he asked, "What interests you?"

"I'm a dancer." No, that wasn't accurate anymore. "Actually, I'm a choreographer." Like so many in her profession, her ambition had held up longer than her body. One nasty ankle break and she was tossed from the footlights and

banished to roles behind the scenes. She'd tried every form of rehabilitation Western and Eastern medicine had to offer, with the same result. The doctors swore she was lucky to be walking, but she would never dance professionally again.

"A ballerina?" His gaze narrowed and he shook his head. "No, you strike me as more in tune with modern rhythms. Something sultry and flowing. You want to tell stories through movements."

She smiled. "You're very perceptive."

"And you are totally stuck." Suddenly his common blue eyes pierced her with laser intensity and his features seemed to sharpen. "You've been struggling for months, searching every source you can think of, but nothing interests your muse."

Zoe swallowed hard, trying to conceal her shock. How the hell had he known...

His shop was spitting distance from Broadway. Who wasn't hungry for inspiration in this ultra-competitive district? Relaxing her shoulders while maintaining her guard, she looked at the salesman with more respect. Anyone who could read people that easily could be dangerous.

"I have something I think you'll enjoy." He turned and wended his way along the uneven aisle.

She glared at his back then glanced at the door, tempted to wait outside for Sophie. But what if he actually had something interesting? She looked around and shook her head. Fat chance of that in a place like this.

In the end, boredom won out and she followed the man to the office tucked away in the back corner of the shop. She stood in the doorway, making sure he couldn't

close her in. His motivation appeared to be financial, not nefarious, but one never knew.

He opened a tall cabinet beside the battered desk and pulled out a garment hanging on a padded hanger. He smoothed down the light brown material then turned it around, so she could see what he held.

The design was...interesting. A short, capped sleeve on one side, bare arm on the other, formfitting bodice with a short, flared skirt. It had either been designed for a child or the fabric was stretchy. From one angle it looked supple, like animal hide, then it caught the light and gleamed with a metallic sheen. How bizarre.

"Where did you get that?" She motioned him closer to the doorway, refusing to step inside.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

She carefully grasped each side of the narrow bodice and tested her theory. It was soft to the touch and stretchy, but it still looked like animal hide. Until the light made it glow. "It's obviously a costume. What show is it from?"

"Not a show. More like a program. It's used to perform the Decadent Dance."

"The Decadent Dance? Like spinning around a shiny pole with my private parts on display? Not interested."

He shook his head with an enigmatic smile and handed her the costume. A small drawstring bag was hooked around the hanger and dangled down inside the dress.

"What's in there?"

He blocked her hand as she reached for the pouch. "That comes with the dress,

but you must purchase the garment to learn its secrets."

"I see." She had to give him props for creativity. "So that's your angle." Even if it was a clever hoax, she had to admit he was entertaining. "Is that cabinet full of these things? I bet you get tons of dancers in here."

"The dress is the only one of its kind on this planet."

"On this planet?" She arched her brow at him as a cold shiver raced through her. "Are there dresses like this on Mars?"

He smiled and reached for the dress. She neatly turned away. "Slip of the tongue, my dear. I simply meant it's one of a kind."

"What are you asking for it?" It was doubtlessly a novelty, but perhaps the secret of the Decadent Dance would finally kick-start her imagination.

"How much can you afford?" he asked with a triumphant grin.

* * * * *

Vaden stared at the control band on his forearm, too shocked to move a muscle.

It had been four solar cycles since he'd paid for his Decadent Dancer. One by one, all those in his acquaintance who had risked their hard-earned credits on the iffy scheme had been rewarded for their patience. He was the only one remaining whose contract had yet to be fulfilled.

If the blinking light on his control band could be trusted, that was about to change.

He thrust his pulse pistol into the bracket on the thigh plate of his armor and ran from the shooting range. Rather than explain his odd behavior, he held up his arm as he passed the security gate. The sentinel waved him on and wished him luck.

By the time he reached the transport bay, he was out of breath and grinning like a fool.

"Congratulations, Commander Nassar." Warder returned his smile. "I've been expecting you."

"The signal is real? My dancer has activated her tracker? She's ready to transport?"

The transport chief shrugged. "I'm not sure any of them are actually ready for what awaits them once they arrive. But her tracker signal is live, so that means she's ready to make the trip." Warder finally noticed that Vaden was still fully armored and concern creased his brow. "Shall I wait while you change? You don't look very welcoming."

"I'll explain my appearance once she's on board. I will not risk losing that signal."

With a respectful incline of his head, the transport chief turned back to his controls. "Well, put on your best smile, Sir. She's on her way."

* * * * *

Zoe flew through the blackness, her screams long since faded to pathetic whimpers. If that stupid chant had been some sort of lethal curse, why was it taking so long for her to die?

The night had started out so well. The costume fit like a glove, the strange, sometimes shiny material surprisingly soft against her skin. Even the cheesy booklet—which told of brave warriors, neglected and forgotten by the ruthless people they protected—had entertained her while she'd soaked her aching feet. Then she'd decided to play along and see if the role sparked her imagination.

So she'd stood in the middle of her living room and recited the ridiculous chant.

Nothing had happened as she struggled through the awkward phrases the first time. But the second time, she paused before each phrase and spoke more carefully...

The sense of motion gradually slowed, which sped Zoe's already racing heart. A violent rushing, like the roar of a storm, made her wish she could cover her ears. She felt as if she were being sucked through a giant Hoover and was about to hit the vacuum bag.

Light bled through the darkness then individual sounds separated themselves from the din. She tried to scream again, but her raw throat wouldn't cooperate with the fresh rush of terror. What the hell was happening? She hadn't eaten or drunk anything in hours. This couldn't be a wacky reaction or some accidental overdose...

The dress!

Had her pores absorbed some sort of hallucinogenic? Decadent Dance indeed! She hadn't lost her mind. She'd tumbled down the rabbit hole!

Her feet hit something solid and pain ricocheted up her legs. Her dry throat surrendered a strangled cry then she collapsed onto her hands and knees. Her hair

streamed forward, insulating her from her surroundings. Was it better to fight an acid trip or just go with the flow? She wasn't into recreational drugs. In fact, she felt guilty each time she took an aspirin.

That salesman was in for one hell of a lawsuit. That was for sure.

Beneath her, the floor looked like metal that had been buffed to a satin finish. She listened, trying to decide if she wanted to lift her head or just pray that the hallucination would end. Was anything left of her apartment or was she completely immersed in this drug-induced fantasyland?

A gruff voice spoke words she didn't understand. That wasn't good. Was someone in her apartment? He repeated the same phrases, as if speaking louder would help with the translation.

Massive hands wrapped around her upper arms and she screamed.

Okay, that felt way too real!

He dragged her to her feet as she flipped her hair out of her eyes and looked up—way the hell up.

One glance at his face convinced Zoe he was part of the synaptic joyride, so she allowed herself to relax just a bit. But why did he feel so real?

"I don't understand you." She felt obligated to respond so he didn't think she was ignoring him.

His skin was smoke gray and his unusual black lips made her want to trace them with the tip of her finger—or better yet, her tongue. Sculpted armor contoured to his entire body, leaving only his head and hands free. Midnight blue with silver inlay

across the shoulders and down each arm, the protective suit was surprisingly beautiful. As was the man wearing the armor.

She'd hoped to kick-start her imagination, but this was ridiculous. Even with his unusual coloring, the man's features were basically humanoid. His angular cheekbones and sharply defined jawline made him appear harsh and refined at the same time. But his eyes... Distinct silver slashes divided his bright-blue irises into pie-shaped wedges, and even the whites of his eyes were tinged with blue. His jet-black hair had been buzzed in what could only be described as a military style. Too bad. She could imagine it long and flowing, adding to his elfin mystique.

He spoke again, slowly this time, his silver-streaked gaze boring into hers.

She shook her head and twisted out of his grasp. "I don't speak...alien."

He looked at a person standing to her left, a person she hadn't noticed before. Though his coloring was similar to the warrior elf's, this man was smaller and much less intimidating. She took a step toward him and Warrior Elf's arm wrapped around her waist, jerking her back against his body.

His harsh words made it obvious he didn't want her talking to the other man.

"Fine." She slowly turned around and looked into his strange yet beautiful eyes. "What do you suggest we do?"

If this was all some drug-induced hallucination, why did everything seem so real? Trepidation gripped her belly and rekindled her fear. It had to be the dress. What other explanation could there be? She'd been sucked through a wormhole and—

No. That only worked when someone was already cruising around in a spaceship.

The smaller man said something to the warrior and the warrior replied, but his gaze never left Zoe's face. The smaller man approached with obvious reluctance, his gaze continually darting toward the man holding her. The smaller man held some sort of instrument, which looked a little too much like a gun for Zoe's peace of mind.

"Wait a goddamn minute!" She tried to twist away, but the warrior trapped her arms at her sides and held her firmly as the other man went to work. "What are you doing?"

He moved her hair away from her neck and pressed the gun-thing against her skull just behind her ear. She wasn't sure if she should hold still so he didn't scramble her brain or fight like hell to prevent the same thing. If she died in a hallucination, would she die in reality?

She heard a snap and a sharp sting made her gasp.

The warrior said something, his tone low and...soothing? Was that possible?

"What was that?" She worked her arm out from under his hand and rubbed the spot where she'd been shot. No gaping hole, not even a speck of blood. All she felt was the long arms supporting her. "You can let go now." He didn't budge. "Who are you?"

"Finally."

Had she actually understood what he just said? She bent back her head until she could see his handsome face. Wow. Her imagination was making up for lost time. "Can you understand me now?"

He stepped back, his hands coming to rest on her shoulders. "I apologize for the

confusion." His lips moved slightly out of sync with the words she was hearing, but that was so much better than not being able to understand him at all. "The translator microbes in the dress must have malfunctioned."

Translator microbes? Seriously? That's it. No more sci-fi marathons!

"Where am I?"

His brow creased and the silver slashes in his eyes gleamed. "Was your destination not explained to you?" He eased back far enough to sweep his gaze up and down the length of her body. "You are dressed for the Decadent Dance."

Shit. She tried to remember all the crap she'd read in the booklet. Apparently her subconscious had been taking notes. "I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding."

"Was the dress forced upon you?"

Was he offering her an out? If she told him she wasn't a willing participant, would the hallucination fade away? And did she really want it to end? Pathetic as it was, this was the most exciting thing that had happened to her in ages. She looked into his alien eyes and her heart gave a rebellious flutter. "I wasn't forced, but I didn't realize—"

"You're overwhelmed. That's understandable. Many dancers are skittish for the first couple of days." He glanced at the other man and said, "Thank you, Warder. This would not have been possible without your skill."

Before she could figure out exactly what that meant, the warrior took her by the hand and led her into a curved corridor. The same non-reflective metal had been used in the corridor, but the walls and ceiling were seamlessly molded and smooth,

like flat-sided tubes.

This was all so strange. Was it transpiring within her mind or was she traipsing about her apartment, lost in a drug-induced haze? No. There was no way her apartment could accommodate their range of movement. She must be absorbed completely in a chemical reality.

A violent shiver nearly shook her hand right out of the warrior's grasp and his fingers tightened around her wrist. "Where are you taking me?" He ignored her and kept right on walking, so she dug in her heels. "Don't ignore me. It's rude."

"You were obviously upset by your arrival and anything I say is likely to upset you even more. I thought it best to continue to my cabin and—"

"Why are you taking me to your cabin? I'd be more comfortable if you—"

Rather than argue, he bent, shoved his armored shoulder into her belly and lifted her off the floor.

"Are you kidding me?" She gritted her teeth. "You did *not* just throw me over your shoulder like a sack of potatoes."

"I didn't?" He had the audacity to laugh. "Unless the microbe failed again, that's exactly what I just did."

Vaden wrapped one arm around his dancer's legs and explored her delightfully rounded ass with his other hand. She gasped then struggled, shoving against his back and trying in vain to kick her feet. Good. He liked his women spirited. No passive female could survive in the Disputed Territories and it would be many cycles

still before this ship would see anything resembling civilization.

"Get your paws off me! I'll report you to the captain or whoever's in charge of this... Are we on a spaceship?"

She sounded genuinely confused and her body relaxed against him. "Didn't your agent go over the details? Did you not read the contract before you signed?"

"Contract? I never signed a contract."

He didn't miss the hopeful catch in her voice. Did she honestly believe she could back out so easily? She should have read the fine print. Long-range transportation was especially hard on human physiology. She couldn't return to her home world for twelve lunar cycles, regardless of her discontent. He set her down beside the door of his cabin as he scanned it open. Then he ushered her inside before she remembered to object.

She came to a sudden stop in the middle of the room and paused to look around. He took advantage of her distraction and unfastened the buckles on his armor as he crossed to the wall locker. He'd left his helmet in the transport bay, but he'd send for it in the morning. He wanted nothing to distract him from his exploration of his Decadent Dancer.

Her gaze was still examining the furnishings as he closed his armor inside the secure compartment. All he wore now was a formfitting pair of black pants and his protective undershirt. What did she find so enthralling about his quarters? Everything was compact and functional, as things must be aboard long-range vessels. She was acting as if she'd never been on a spaceship before.

He remained a step back and studied her as thoroughly as she studied the accommodations. She was younger than he'd expected. Most females this young weren't desperate enough to accept a position as a Decadent Dancer. Her sleek black hair barely brushed her shoulders, but the style perfectly suited her delicate features. Her cheeks were still flushed from her inverted position. The deep-rose color matched her lush lips. With her face in profile, he could see the long, curved sweep of her lashes.

She completed her assessment of his cabin and turned to look at him. Her dark eyes rounded and she took an automatic step back. "Holy Mother of God."

Vaden looked down, half expecting to find some gushing wound. "What is the matter with you?"

"I thought it was the armor." She gestured toward his upper body, but her gaze gravitated lower. "You are...huge."

She was the strangest woman he'd ever met. Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Unique was intriguing, and she was definitely unique. "Many of my men are both taller and stronger than me. Have all the men on Earth shriveled?"

"No, but there aren't many built like you." She fiddled with the hem of her dress and muttered something about her imagination. "Are we here to do what I think we're here to do?"

He tensed. He'd heard that some of the dancers tried to renege or escape their responsibilities. Life in the Disputed Territories wasn't easy. He could see why a female might be intimidated once she was faced with the reality of... But all she'd

seen so far was him!

"I will ask again. Did you willingly put on the dress or were you coerced in some way?"

He saw indecision in her eyes and his gut clenched. If she spoke the lie hovering on the tip of her tongue, he would sell her contract to the highest bidder. He could not abide liars, would not tolerate the destruction that inevitably followed in their wake.

"I willingly put on the dress," she admitted, "but I had no idea what it signified."

"How can that possibly be true? Where did you get the dress?"

She licked her lips, anxiety evident in every move she made. "I don't even know your name."

Was she avoiding the answer so she could construct a feasible story? His temper began to heat. "You agreed to dance with a man without knowing so much as his name?"

"I never agreed to any of this! That's what I'm trying to explain." Her tone was sharper now, her eyes beseeching.

"I'm Commander Nassar. Vaden Nassar. You may call me Vaden."

She nodded, though she didn't repeat his name. "Zoe."

"Can we dispense with this nonsense now? I have waited four cycles for my dancer. I have no intention of leaving this room until we dance."

"Even if I had no idea what would happen when I put on the dress?"

"I don't believe that's what happened. I think you took my credits and paid off your debts or spent them on frivolities, and now that it's time to earn those credits, you're trying to escape your responsibilities." He scooped her up and tossed her onto his bed. She landed with a little yelp and tried to crawl off the other side. He was so distracted by the sight of her long, toned legs and her smooth ass cheeks peeking out despite the solid black garment she wore beneath the dress that he nearly forgot to intercept her retreat.

She wiggled and twisted, but soon he had her beneath him, hands pinned above her head. Her legs framed his hips and the dress bunched about her waist. Her large, dark eyes stared up at him, anger and uncertainty obvious in her expressive gaze. "Why would I imagine this? I'm not a...whore."

Imagine? Had she yet to accept this was real?

Rather than delve into her first question, he dealt with her second point. He shifted her wrists to one hand so he could touch her face. "I know some men share their dancers. Females are extremely rare out here in the Territories. I have no intention of sharing you with anyone."

"So I'll only service you?"

Why did she sound so bitter? Were the microbes not accurately translating their words? "It's been six Earth years since I've touched a woman. Four of those years I was waiting for you."

"No, you were waiting for—"

He silenced her with his mouth. Her strategy was clearly to argue and complain

until he lost his erection. Not bloody likely. His cock had stretched to full attention the instant his indicator light started blinking, and he was likely to stay hard until he'd spilled inside her at least three times.

Keeping her wrists firmly pinned with one hand, he reached down with the other and tore away the small black undergarment. The dress was meant to give him easy access to all her soft female parts, but she'd obviously intended to resist him from the beginning. Well, enough of her nonsense.

She was a Decadent Dancer—and he wanted to dance!

A muffled cry escaped her mouth as he covered her mound with his palm. Her heat sank into his skin, promising greater warmth to come. He wanted to soothe her, didn't want their first time to be quite this adversarial, but she needed to understand their positions were nonnegotiable. She was his dance partner. Her only responsibility was to "service" his body, regardless of how upsetting she found the word.

Then a possibility insinuated itself into his mind and his heart gave a sickening lurch.

Had they sent him a cursed virgin? Was she even younger than she looked? The thought of being a woman's only dance partner had a strange appeal, but dealing with her fear and the pain he would cause while rending her hymen far outweighed the thrill of exclusivity.

Vaden slowly worked his middle finger into her warm slit, amazed by the heat and softness. Her legs tensed against his sides, but his torso held her thighs apart.

He easily found the center of her pussy—and slipped inside.

Thank the heavens. She was not a terrified virgin. Just a stubborn female about to be plowed by a dance-starved man!

Chapter Two

Zoe was utterly helpless, and yet she wasn't afraid. None of this was real, after all. Vaden was the personification of her darkest fantasies. He had the body of a barbarian warlord and the face of an elfin god. And as if that weren't enough, he was so desperate for sex that he thought she was perfect. What more could any woman want?

She hadn't set out to expand her reality through chemistry, but now that she was over the rainbow, she intended to enjoy every minute of this incredible fantasy. Hopefully she'd come down with her mental faculties intact, and then she'd find herself a damn good lawyer.

Vaden's lips moved over hers, caressing and coaxing until she parted for his tongue. Even then he didn't thrust inside like some overanxious schoolboy. He used finesse and an experienced man's patience. It wasn't surprising that he knew how to kiss. He was a figment of her imagination.

His tongue slowly retreated as he lifted his head. "Are you ready to dance with me now? This will be much better for you if I don't have to hold you down."

"What happens if I say no?" She stared into his silver-streaked eyes, pretty sure

she wasn't going to refuse. Some part of her psyche obviously needed this experience or her mind would have explored different images.

"I'll keep kissing you until you change your mind."

"Why has it been so long since you—"

He took her hand and pressed it against his erection, his eyes narrowed and bright. "If you want me to be gentle, we need to stop talking."

"Fair enough." His hand moved but her fingers lingered, emboldened by his obvious pleasure. Hallucination or alien or dream, he was the most desirable man she'd ever seen. She seemed to be trapped in this alternate reality, so why not enjoy the ride? Her fingers curved over his thickness then skated along his length, the clingy material no real barrier between his hardness and her curiosity.

Should she ask about protection? She shook away the impulse. This wasn't real!

"I know what you're thinking," he said with a sexy smile.

Of course he did. He was an extension of her own mind. "Do tell."

"We no longer transmit disease through sexual contact and what we're about to do cannot result in pregnancy. Procreation is more complicated with my species."

"Which is?"

"Paridagon." He balanced on his knees as he pulled off his shirt. "My home world is Paridago, though I've not been home since I was a child."

She watched his muscles ripple and a silver pattern on his smoky skin shimmered in the diffused light. Unable to resist the temptation, she sat and raised her hand,

tentatively touching his chest. "Are these tattoos?"

"No, the pattern occurs naturally. Each marking is as unique as the loops on your fingertips."

Like rivulets of liquid silver flowing through fog, the intricate pattern began in the middle of his chest then branched out and expanded over his shoulders. It curved around his upper arms, ran the length of each forearm, then fanned out across the tops of his hands and formed individual strands that ringed his fingers.

"It's...beautiful." She settled for the word when more masculine adjectives failed to do the pattern justice. "Is it only on your upper body?"

"You can explore to your heart's content—after." He grasped the hem of her dress and whipped it off in one smooth motion then urged her onto her back.

He paused, the hunger in his gaze so painfully obvious it made her ache as well. She wasn't sure why, but she raised her hands above her head and placed them as they'd been before. Only this time she was a willing prisoner, ready for the Decadent Dance.

His hands glided from her upraised arms to her knees in a never-ending pattern of strokes and squeezes. He leaned down and kissed her mouth for a moment then moved on to her breasts. And not just her nipples. He licked and sucked every curve, swell and hollow. She arched against his lips and clutched the back of his head, no longer able to remain passive as her senses caught fire.

She'd had sexual dreams before, though nothing had come close to matching the sensations zinging through her body. But this wasn't a dream. She wasn't awake. Her

perceptions were being altered by whatever chemical compound the dress had contained. Right?

Vaden tore his mouth from her breast and frantically unfastened his pants, then his gaze focused on her pussy and he growled. The feral sound sent lustful tingles bouncing through her body.

Slipping off the foot of the bed, he knelt on the floor and dragged her hips to the edge of the mattress. Then he draped her legs over his shoulders and lowered his head between her thighs. Zoe looked down along her naked body and into the shimmering eyes of her alien lover. His gaze narrowed and his tongue slowly pushed between her folds.

Oh yeah! Right there! He knew exactly where to touch and just how hard to press. She moaned helplessly and rocked against his mouth, pushing up into his lurid kiss, never wanting him to stop.

His tongue circled and flicked, teasing her clit until she hovered on the brink of release. Then he shot to his feet and her legs slid to the bends of his elbows. He found the opening to her body and hesitated just long enough to coat himself with her cream.

"Ready?" He sounded so delightfully desperate, she wouldn't have refused even if she'd been afraid, which she wasn't.

She pushed to her elbows, needing to see their bodies joining. Her eyes widened then narrowed as a wave of scalding pleasure blurred her vision. Vaden's shaft shimmered with silver markings as it disappeared into her wet core. His pants

bunched around his knees, revealing that the silver pattern was indeed echoed on his lower body.

He drew his hips back and thrust deep and all thoughts of his markings disappeared. Her inner walls stretched tight around his thickness, each forceful thrust filling her right to the point of pain. Tangible, inescapable, *real*.

Restlessness trickled into her comfortable haze as realizations buzzed through her brain. His rich scent was unlike anything she'd ever smelled before and everything about this felt wondrous and new.

And real!

Each touch, each brush of his fingertips, each thrust of his cock into her core forced her closer to the inevitable conclusion that this was no hallucination. His hips sped and her panic mounted. If this was really happening, where was she and how had she gotten here?

He grasped her hips and cried out his pleasure as he spilled his seed deep inside her. Zoe felt each hot spurt. She fell back to the bed then covered her face with her hands. "I want to wake up now. Please, God, let me wake up."

Vaden stared down at his dancer's stricken expression, torn between confusion and horror. His first instinct was to shake and berate her for her foolishness, but he looked closer and reconsidered such a harsh reaction. He hadn't felt her pussy ripple around his cock, which meant she'd found no pleasure in their dance. Was that all there was to her odd behavior? Did she find his skills lacking?

He carefully separated their bodies and shed his pants. Perhaps if they were both naked she would feel less vulnerable. He moved her to the middle of the bed and lay down beside her. Slipping his forearm under her pillow, he propped himself up so he could see her face.

"It is not unusual for dancer partners not to finish at the same time."

"I don't think the word 'dance' means the same thing here as it does on Earth, but let's go back to the beginning. Where am I?" She sat up and scooted as far away from him as she could without leaving the bed.

Rather than review all the reasons she should know her location, Vaden simply supplied the information. "You are on the *Bron en Tarr*, currently in Sector 219 of the Disputed Territories."

"You said you're a commander." She pulled back the bedding and covered herself with the sheet. "Is this your ship?"

"Yes." He sighed. "I thought we were beyond all this."

"I thought...never mind what I thought. How was I brought here? All I remember is a sucking sensation that felt as if it would tear me apart."

She drew the sheet up to her chin, which helped with his concentration if not his patience. They'd already danced. Why play these games now? "Long-range transportation is especially hard on the human body. Regulations require a minimum of twelve lunar cycles in between voyages. That's why I can't send you back, even if I wanted to—which I do not."

"Twelve 'lunar cycles'?" She paused as she either sorted it out or her microbes

provided the translation. "You mean I'm stuck here for a year?"

What was she hoping to gain by this foolishness? She was naked and in his bed and his seed was already inside her. It made no sense. "I contracted you for five *solar* cycles, sweetheart. You're stuck here for *five* years."

Everyone had warned him not to contract an Earth woman. Their export regulations were ridiculous and their insistence on discretion convoluted interplanetary protocols. Vaden had no idea why Earth governments were so determined to keep their general populations ignorant of "alien" interaction, and it really wasn't his concern. Zoe was. Human females could be volatile. They could also be passionate and almost as intelligent as Paridagon females.

Besides, he had debated whether or not to participate in the program for so long, the only contracts left had been for Earth women.

Zoe's lovely eyes looked into his with such misery he nearly dragged her back into his arms, but then she opened her mouth and began to speak.

"Please, just listen for a minute. I bought the dress from a man in the city where I live. He also gave me a booklet, but I had no reason to think the story was anything other than an amusing tale. And the only thing I signed was a credit card receipt."

"What was explained in the booklet?" The contract contained a basic history of his people. He now suspected she'd read the contract and didn't realize what she'd read.

Her eyes widened and she stared past him into nothingness. "Oh my God. I knew I'd heard that name before." She blinked away the memory and looked at him again. "The booklet was all about the Paridago wars. According to the story, you won

glorious battles against the Stagen hordes, a race of beings both cruel and ruthless. After much sacrifice and bloodshed, the war was all but won. All that was left was to negotiate the borders, but the bureaucrats failed, leaving the territories in dispute. So it fell back to the warriors to keep full-scale war from breaking out all over again."

He snorted. "That about sums it up. We've had no choice but to stay and fight while less honorable men returned to their comfortable lives back in the inner systems. Of course, their lives are only comfortable because we're foolish enough to hold back the enemy."

She nodded as understanding gradually focused her gaze. "The war has gone on decades longer than anyone imagined, so female companionship has become a real problem."

"To say the least."

"When I read the story, it made me think of mail-order brides." A wistful catch came into her voice as she used the unfamiliar term.

"I don't understand the reference."

"At times in human history, females were scarce in certain parts of the planet where I live. Men had no choice but to offer money, or land, to lure women to their remote locations."

Was that the source of her discontent? She wanted compensation for dancing with him? "A large transfer of funds should have taken place when you agreed to be my dance partner. I didn't expect you to do this for nothing. If the contract had been executed properly, you would have lived comfortably on Earth for the rest of your life

once your obligation was concluded.”

“Then I’m glad I was basically kidnapped. I’m not a whore.” She seemed even more upset than before and he had no idea how to defuse her.

He’d saved and gone without even the most basic luxuries for the better part of two solar cycles so he could purchase her contract. Granted, he now had a dance partner, but it galled him to know he’d been robbed.

No, *they’d* been robbed. The money was meant for Zoe and if she hadn’t received it, then it stood to reason the man who sold her the dress *had*. Whether or not she wanted the money, Vaden intended to investigate the crime.

She folded her legs beneath her and tucked the sheet under her arms. The sheet stretched just tight enough that her nipples made tempting shadows beneath the stark white material. Desire sparked within him, reaching for the surface, ready to play. He snapped his gaze back to her face and released another sigh. How could he help her not feel like a whore when her primary purpose for being here was to dance with him?

“Let’s talk basic vocabulary,” she suggested. “What does the word ‘dance’ mean to you?”

He grinned, his gaze drifting back to those shadowy nipples. “How about if I demonstrate?”

“Are there more than one kind of dances? You referred to what we did as a Decadent Dance. What other kinds are there? Better yet, what’s the generic definition for the word ‘dance’?”

If this would settle her down and ease her anxiety, he'd indulge her. To a point. "A dance is any series of movements that has no other purpose but pleasure. Dances can be innocent, or joyous, or celebratory, or downright *decadent*."

She nodded then fell silent for a long time. "Are events ever held so that people can dance with each other?"

His cock had already started to rise. He wasn't sure how long he could indulge her need for chatter. "I think I remember such things from my childhood, but obviously nothing like that takes place on a border ship."

"What makes this a border ship?"

The question seemed self-evident, but he clarified. "It patrols the borders of the Disputed Territories."

"How many women are on board this ship?"

"Including you?" She nodded. "Sixteen."

"And how many men?"

"Three hundred and ninety-two."

She just stared at him as the color drained from her face.

"Zoe, you are mine." He let his tone ring with finality then he reached for her, amazed when she didn't flinch away. "No one will touch you but me. You are safe." She seemed too stunned to move, so he scooped her up and carried her into the bathroom, enjoying the warmth of her small body as she snuggled against his chest.

He set her down inside the shower stall and activated the spray with a voice

command. She didn't say a word, but those big, dark eyes watched every move he made. When water needed to be rationed, chemical foam replaced the soothing mist, but they'd taken on supplies three days before.

"What's your fascination with various forms of dance?" he asked as the water saturated her dark hair.

"That's how I make my living."

"What?" Her casual admission shouldn't have bothered him. She was the one who'd balked at being labeled a whore.

She laughed. "Not what you're thinking. On Earth, people not only enjoy dancing. They enjoy watching others dance."

"People pay credits to watch you—"

"Not Decadent Dancing, you pervert." She flung a handful of water toward him. "The other kinds, joyful, playful, even sorrowful dances. We express all sorts of emotions and tell all sorts of stories through movement and music."

"I have never heard music."

Zoe looked up at Vaden, her heart just about to break. Chills coated her forearms and made her shiver. "You've never heard music? Honestly?"

"Why would I lie?" He turned to face the mist, but Zoe couldn't tell if he was embarrassed or annoyed. "I know the definition of the word. I simply have no frame of reference for such a thing."

Oh for an mp3 player or even a windup gramophone. How could she make him understand what music was if he'd never heard anything like it before?

Sensing his emotional retreat, she slipped her arms around his waist and pressed against his back. He tensed for a moment but didn't push her away. If all he'd wanted was a "dance partner", he would have left the cabin as soon as his lust was sated. Vaden was obviously lonely. He'd answered her questions and done his best to calm her fears. All of which made him even more attractive than his amazing body and surreal face.

"Music is important to you?" His tone was hushed and tense.

"Very much so." Was he uncomfortable with the unfamiliar concept or was her casual touch arousing him? She moved her hands to his hips then stepped back, feeling deprived as their bodies separated. "If there's no Paridagon equivalent of music, you're going to get really tired of hearing me sing."

He turned around and looked at her, but his expression was impossible to read. They finished showering in companionable silence, Zoe lost in thought.

Purpose burned away her helplessness and allowed her to think beyond the moment. It was obvious she wasn't going home anytime soon, so there was no sense making Vaden miserable. He hadn't done this to her. The jerk who'd sold her the dress was responsible for this debacle, but he was well out of reach for at least twelve "lunar cycles".

So the question became, what did she want to do with her time while she was stuck in this galaxy? Obviously, she wanted to learn as much about these people as

possible, but she also wanted to share a bit of her culture with them.

The performing arts were her life. She'd had her first dance class at age four and performed in high school and community theater productions. Her dream had been to attend Julliard, but she'd landed a role on Broadway at sixteen instead and spared herself the burden of massive student loans.

Now she was faced with the most miraculous opportunity imaginable. An entire population who had never experienced the wonder of music or dance? It was tragic, and yet it fired her up as nothing else could.

Perhaps she'd been brought here for a reason. Artistic Ambassador to Paridago?

Vaden handed her a towel as she stepped out of the shower with a smile. "Thanks." She could start with her dance partner and see how her efforts were received.

"Have you worked through your confusion? You seem...better now."

With her new crusade to guide her, she didn't feel so lost. She suspected her bouts of homesickness and anger were far from over, but she had a clear grasp on what was and what was not within her grasp. "I'm trying not to take this out on you."

"Then I'll do the same." Before she could anticipate his meaning, he was on his knees and his face was pressed into the juncture of her thighs. "Your conflict distracted from your pleasure and you didn't find release." He grasped her thighs, urging them apart and bending one knee as her weight shifted to her other foot. "Now you will finish what we started." She didn't much care for his bossy tone, but he swiped her cleft with an enthusiastic lick and she forgot to be annoyed. "I'll never

tire of your taste."

Words any woman was happy to hear. She rested her head against the wall and hooked her leg over his arm, opening herself for his questing mouth. His lips were warm and his tongue felt so perfect against her clit. Within seconds she was trembling with the first spasm of an orgasm.

"Not yet, Z." He circled her opening with his tongue, drawing the tingles away from her clit. "I want a more leisurely taste."

"Taste as long as you like." She laughed. "I love the way you make me feel."

His tongue traced her slit over and over then he gently sucked on each delicate fold. He slowly circled her opening until she grabbed the back of his head and ground herself against his mouth. His sexy chuckle assured her that he was aware of her need and still he avoided her most sensitive spots, preferring to drive her insane instead.

Finally his lips closed around her clit and carefully pulled.

She arched and shook with the orgasm he'd denied her for so long. Before the last spasm passed, he thrust two fingers into her passage and started the sequence all over again. His fingers slid in and out, his tongue lashed her swollen clit and the pleasure rocketed even higher.

When he finally raised his head, Zoe was dazed and dizzy, her legs so shaky she slid down the wall. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, his tongue tasting of her pleasure, a fact that sent aftershocks pulsing through her overstimulated core.

"I think you're trying to kill me," she whispered against his damp lips.

"No. That's just a taste of what awaits you when I return."

"You're leaving?"

He laughed. "I have a ship to run. I am the commander."

"I'll let you go if you show me how to do one thing?"

His ink-black brows arched. "I didn't realize I needed your permission to leave."

She pushed to her feet and smiled. "I didn't mean it like that. I'd like to prepare a surprise for you and I need to be able to record different sounds, preferably overlapping. You turned on the shower with a voice command. Can your ship's computer make layered audio files?"

"Of course." He held out his hand.

She quickly wrapped herself in a towel before she took his hand then followed him to the built-in desk in the far corner of the outer room. He demonstrated the basic controls and created a level-one logon, which would allow her access to all non-sensitive computer functions.

"This will allow you to access video files about this galaxy. I know you must be curious about the worlds and peoples you'll encounter. The majority of my men are Paridagon like me, but there are several other species as well. I've highlighted files on the others."

"Thank you."

He nodded and went to the closet, where he pulled on a solid black uniform. It seemed a shame to cover up his shimmering markings, but the matte material contoured to his impressive shape and she reconsidered. He looked like an action

figure come to life. She pressed her lips together to hide her smile. Damn, the man was fine!

"I'll have food brought to you if I'm unable to return in a reasonable timeframe, but you must not leave the cabin." All softness was gone from his voice and expression. He was all commander now. "If I have need of you, I'll send someone to fetch you."

She didn't appreciate his condescending tone, but she nodded.

He had almost reached the door when she said, "Vaden?" He looked back and she dropped the towel. "Do you care if I raid your closet? All my clothes are back on Earth."

Chapter Three

The little hellion! Vaden stood at the central command station, staring out across his orderly bridge, but all he could see was Zoe's alabaster skin, her full breasts and supple legs. He wanted her again.

No, he hadn't stopped wanting her since she'd appeared in the transport bay, disoriented and babbling, dark eyes wide with fear. Her taste still lingered on his tongue and yet he wanted her to sit on his face, shaking with pleasure until her cream flowed into his mouth. He wanted to push his cock inside her so deep and so hard that she would never—

"Commander?" The amusement in Kovar's voice snapped Vaden back to reality. His second-in-command joined him on the raised dais and asked, "Is there a problem, Sir?"

He scanned the multitude of readings displayed on the console then shook his head. "Everything is fine. I'm just a bit distracted this afternoon."

Kovar grinned and lowered his voice. "Then the rumors are true? Your dancer finally arrived?"

Vaden sighed. Kovar knew him too well for a brush-off. They'd served together

since induction training. "She did, but there are complications."

"Complications? Was she injured during transportation? Which planet is she from?"

"Earth."

"Ah. Human females can be crafty."

Anger surged through Vaden so suddenly his fist was halfway to Kovar's face before he realized what he was doing. Kovar simply laughed, which only compounded Vaden's irritation. Zoe was not crafty. She was making the best of a situation she didn't understand, a situation into which she had been duped.

"And they tend to trigger our primal natures," Kovar continued. "Guess I don't have to ask if she's affected you that way."

"I need to—"

"Go. And keep your cock inside her until you're able to concentrate again."

Kovar wasn't the only one laughing as Vaden rushed from the command deck, but he didn't care. Kovar was right. Until he could stop obsessing about his dancer, he was a hindrance, not a help. Too impatient to wait for a lift, he slid down the utility ladder to the accommodations level two decks below.

He scanned his cabin door open—and staggered to a halt as it closed behind him. What the hell was she doing?

Every object in the room that wasn't fused to the floor had been piled on the bunk or slid against the wall. She stood in the middle of the room dressed in one of his

undershirts, which she had belted with the neck cloth from his dress uniform.

"Oh, I'm not ready for you yet!" Her full lower lip rolled outward, coming precariously close to a pout. "Can you come back in about an hour?"

Not at all the reception he'd expected. He stalked toward her and grabbed her ass with both hands, sliding her up his body. "But I'm ready to come right now." He barely gave her time to wrap her arms around his neck before his mouth claimed hers.

She made a soft sound in her throat that could have been surprise or fear, so he waited for her lips to part before he plundered the warm interior of her mouth. She wrapped her long legs around his waist, her body settling more comfortably against his.

Wrapping one arm around her hips, he freed his other hand to roam. She wore nothing beneath the shirt and he'd never felt anything as soft as her ass cheeks. "I missed you." He whispered the words against her lips then kissed her again before she could reply. He didn't want to hear more excuses for why she didn't want him. She hadn't actually refused him, but the only time she'd indicated any interest in dancing was when she'd dropped the towel.

Easing back just far enough to separate their mouths, she whispered, "I sort of trashed the bed. Will the desk take my weight?"

He looked into her eyes, and desire—and something brighter, something almost alien to him—curled through his being. Refusing to analyze the emotions while his body burned, Vaden rushed to the nearest wall and pressed her back firmly against

the smooth surface.

"The only thing that needs to take your weight is me, and I'm more than capable."

To his surprise, she let go of his neck and loosened her legs, trusting him to support her as she reached between their bodies. "Then let's see what you brought me."

The seam on his pants parted and her warm fingers closed around his cock. He closed his eyes and groaned at the simple pleasure of being touched by her.

"Are you sure you don't want me to warm you up first? I wouldn't mind a closer look at those markings."

The last thing he needed was "warming up", but her curiosity was obvious. Unable to resist the sweet temptation, he released her legs and let her slide to the floor. He kept her caged between the wall and his body, enjoying the subtly aggressive pose. She was his, only his, and it appeared as if she was starting to accept the fact.

He moved back, giving her enough room to kneel. Then he put his hands on the wall and let her play.

She opened the front of his pants as far as possible, but that didn't seem to satisfy her. She tugged the material to his knees then motioned to his boots. "Can I take them off?" His throat was so dry he couldn't reply, so he shook his head. "You're returning to work as soon as we're done?"

The disappointment in her tone pleased him far more than it should have. She'd

made amazing progress in a few short hours. He'd be a fool to rush her now. With a challenging smile, he flexed his abs and drew her attention back to her task.

She traced the markings up his thigh and across his hip, but rather than descend as the pattern did, she skimmed her fingers across his lower belly then explored his inner thigh.

Wicked, wicked little dancer. Had she always been a tease or was this payback for the times he'd kept her waiting?

"Is the pattern sensitive?" She leaned in and followed the intricate lines from hipbone to mid-thigh with the tip of her tongue, and his head dropped back on his shoulders. The wet heat sank into his flesh and stoked the fires deep inside him. She had no idea what she was doing or how fast he could lose control if she didn't stop, but he didn't have the strength to pull her mouth away.

His cock twitched and his balls tightened—and most shocking of all, his minor penile shaft started to protrude above the other.

How was this possible? Zoe was human. They couldn't possibly be compatible.

Knowing she would be shocked, perhaps repulsed by the differences in their physiology, he tried to pull her back to her feet.

She shrugged off his hands and gingerly touched the tip of his minor cock. "What is this?" She sounded curious, maybe even fascinated.

"Don't touch it or I'll..." He gulped in air, forcing his stubborn body to relax. And still the appendage lengthened and thickened until it was nearly as large as the shaft below. "I'll completely lose control."

"Okay, no touching. Is that what it looks like? Are you a buy-one-get-one-free sort of guy?"

He laughed and pulled her to her feet, bringing her hands to his shoulders. "I'm not human. Paridagon males have control over their primary penis. The minor one... It's highly unusual for it to emerge unless I'm with a Paridagon female."

"Why?"

"The primary penis is for pleasure. The minor is required for reproduction."

She nodded, obviously intrigued by the discovery. "This is what you meant when you said you couldn't get me pregnant before. Do you need to use both for reproduction or just the smaller one?"

"Both." He really wasn't in the mood for a lengthy conversation about Paridagon biology.

"Then our species can crossbreed?" She was clearly shocked.

"It takes extensive hormone therapy, which prepares the female's body to nurture the mixed-blood offspring. There is still no risk that I will impregnate you."

Her gaze returned to his groin and a bit of the curiosity faded from her eyes. "If you got me pregnant, that would pretty much ensure that I'd stay here with you. Even after the contract lapsed."

He cupped her chin and raised her face. "I would never do that to you. If I could..."

"If you could what?"

He clenched his jaw and lowered his arms to his sides. Why couldn't she leave well enough alone? "I almost said if I could send you back, I would. But I despise liars, so I will not lie. I don't want you to leave. I'm sorry you didn't choose to be here and I will do everything in my power to make your stay...pleasant. But right now you're stuck with me."

"Pleasant?" Her warm smile burned through the tension as her hands slid down his body. "With two cocks, I'm pretty sure you can do better than 'pleasant'."

"I should try to retract—" One of her hands closed around each shaft and he groaned. "It's far more extreme when I use both." He was panting so hard he could barely form the words. "My body releases hormones that produce a sort of frenzy. I'm not sure you are ready for Paridagon dancing."

Sinking into a deep knee bend, she spread her legs wide as she smiled into his eyes. "Is it dangerous or just intense?"

If she kept this up she was going to find out!

The shirt barely covered her crotch, but her legs were bare and the position was overtly provocative. She licked the tip of one cock and then the other. His minor shaft was so sensitive, the pleasure blinded him and his heart momentarily lost its rhythm. Then she focused on his major cock, sucking him deep as her hand gently worked his other shaft.

He would not spill in her mouth. He wanted to feel her ass and her cunt clench him together as she came. No other sensation would satisfy; everything else was just dancing.

Pulling her to her feet, he tore the tie from her waist and took off the borrowed shirt. Then he tugged his boots off so violently one went flying across the room. She helped him out of his pants and his uniform top soon joined the other garments strewn about the floor.

They came together skin-to-skin, rubbing and pressing, exploring with eager hands as their mouths fused in a soul-stealing kiss. This was happening so fast. He was staggered by the depths of his desire, but she must be completely overwhelmed.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" He searched her eyes for the answer, not sure he could trust her words. She was utterly dependent upon him and they both knew it. Still, he didn't want her to offer her body out of a sense of obligation. "We can wait until I'm calmer, more in control."

"Everything about this is wild and wondrous. Why should this be any different? I didn't go out looking for an adventure, but here I am. I intend to savor every moment we have together and experience everything this world has to offer."

The ending insinuated by her words was that she'd return to Earth. He closed his eyes for a moment as disappointment flooded his soul. What had he expected? She hadn't even come here of her own free will.

He took a deep breath and released the discouragement, replacing it with determination. The soonest she could leave was one solar cycle. That meant he had one Earth year to convince her to stay.

Pushing his hands into her silky hair, he paused for another long, deep kiss. "We

can either take time to unload the bed or we can be creative."

"Creative." She nipped his lower lip. "I'm tired of waiting."

Her claim made him smile. He was so hard he could use either of his cocks as a weapon and *she* was tired of waiting? The desk would probably hold her weight, but it was too narrow for true comfort. Instead, he positioned her in front of it, her forearms resting on the desktop, feet spread apart.

"I should keep you naked, so all I have to do is bend you over the nearest piece of furniture."

She laughed and wiggled her butt. "Isn't that what you've done?"

He pushed his hand between her thighs and groaned as her wet folds closed around his fingers. "I think you missed me too."

She rocked her hips, lightly riding his hand. "I think you're right."

If he hoped to be gentle at all, he couldn't postpone this any longer. He squeezed the base of his minor cock and moisture beaded all over his shaft. "Have you ever taken a man in your ass before?"

She shivered and her pussy tightened around his finger. Obviously, she was excited by the thought. "Only once, but I have a toy I really like that goes...back there."

"Let's see how this compares to your toy." He withdrew his fingers and positioned himself at both her entrances. Possessive heat spiraled through his torso and set his balls on fire. No human could give her what he could give. No one else would ever—

He cut himself off. One step at a time.

Zoe held perfectly still, naked and trembling. She was on a starship in a distant galaxy, about to surrender her body completely to the most captivating male she'd ever encountered. How had this happened? She'd gone from denial, to dread, to fury, to a sort of fragile acceptance all in the course of a day.

Was she still in shock? Was that why everything felt right when Vaden touched her?

He bent his knees and eased one of his cocks just inside her pussy.

One of his cocks! Could anything be more alien? Or feel more amazing?

His other cock pressed against her anus. He'd called this his "minor penis". It was thinner than the other, which made it perfect for where it was going. He wrapped his arms around her, one hand cupping her breast while the other covered her mound. His middle finger sank between her folds and circled her clit.

"Do you accept me, Zoe? Will you take all I have to give?"

"Yes." The word sent a thrill ricocheting through her body and her clit twitched beneath his finger. She pushed back slowly, driving her body onto his slick shafts. He was hard, but smooth and slippery and her body opened to accommodate him. She'd expected burning, maybe a little pain, but all she felt was blessed fullness. "Wow."

Unable to fight the instinct, she squeezed him as hard as she could and sensation radiated through her abdomen.

"Don't stop." His finger flicked across her clit, encouraging the spontaneous clenches. "Do it again."

He was plastered to her back, his cocks completely engulfed within her body. She squeezed and squeezed, the back of her head pressing into his shoulder. Her pulse raced and her skin tingled, her muscles on the verge of cramping. "I feel strange, sort of edgy."

"I warned you."

"I think I need you to move."

Not needing any more encouragement, he pulled back then thrust hard. The motion accented the sensations and added to her restlessness. She slammed her hips back, doubling the impact of his next stroke, and pleasure detonated deep inside her.

She screamed as her inner muscles contracted in rippling waves, but he didn't stop. Each long, steady stroke created a new spasm, pushing the pleasure to a higher peak. Lights danced before her eyes and still he fucked her, filling her body with forceful command.

He slowed for a time, waiting as she floated back down. Then he moved both hands to her hips and pounded into her even harder than before. Zoe had never understood how anyone could enjoy rough sex, but her body craved every aggressive drive, needing his frenzy.

She lost count of her orgasms, couldn't believe that he was still on his feet.

Then he pulled her up and wrapped his arms around her, crossing them over her chest. He stilled and she thought something was wrong. Then his cocks swelled, stretching her tighter than she dreamed possible. He shuddered against her back,

groaning with each distinct spasm. He came and came, his climaxes slow and rhythmic.

"I never dreamed..."

His voice was so thick with emotion, she turned her head and looked up at him. "What?"

"When I contracted a dancer, I knew I would enjoy physical pleasure, perhaps even companionship. I never dreamed she would be capable of providing me with a true Paridagon joining. I am humbled and I am thrilled."

She wasn't sure how to respond to his mood so she just smiled at him. He carefully separated their bodies then swept her into his arms. Without a word, he carried her into the bathroom and into the shower. His hands glided over her body with something frighteningly close to reverence.

When he reached between her legs, she grabbed his wrist. "I can do that."

"It's tradition. Don't deny me or I'll be insulted."

She had no idea if it were true or if he just wanted to play with her pussy, but a few seconds later she didn't care. Rather than arousing, his touch was gentle and soothing and she was a bit disappointed when he told the water to turn off and led her back into the main room of the cabin.

He dried her with a towel and handed her the shirt she'd borrowed that morning. She pulled it on and found the red sash she'd been using as a belt. By the time she'd completed her ensemble, he was dressed again in his severe black uniform.

"I need to return to work. I've neglected my duties long enough." He sounded

genuinely reluctant. "Before I go, would you like to explain why you rearranged the furniture?"

"I wasn't finished, but I'll show you what I have so far." She looked around the disorganized room and pointed to the desk they'd utilized so recently. "Please stand over there."

His gaze narrowed, but he ambled to the desk then leaned against the edge and crossed his arms over his chest. "Carry on."

The tender lover who'd insisted on washing her so intimately was once again buried inside the autocratic commander. She'd seen the transition often enough now to find it amusing. Well, he'd allowed her to take a virtual tour of his world. It was time for him to see a glimpse of hers.

"Computer, loop playback, file name 'It's Just the Rain.'" She'd just started to work out the choreography when he'd returned to the cabin. She'd have to let the music flow through her and express herself as best she could. Unfortunately, the music was several layers of her own voice, which she found more than a little distracting. But she loved the song and she loved to dance.

She closed her eyes and listened, concentrating on the lyrics instead of the delivery. Then she raised her arms and opened her eyes and told the story with her body. She spun and arched, stretched and leapt, carefully centering her weight each time her damaged ankle came into play.

Loss and longing swept through her as the melancholy song began again. She allowed the emotions to flow, guiding her steps and shaping her movements. She

thought of her friends and family, the home she might never see again. Sophie's image drove the pain deeper and Zoe's body expressed her grief. She had to let go of the world she'd known and focus on the future. This was strange and unexpected, an opportunity beyond her wildest dreams.

Her gaze collided with Vaden's and a new wave of feelings inundated her mind. Hope swelled, pushing out her sadness and lightening her steps. She spun faster as she thought of the pleasure they'd shared and the mysteries she'd yet to uncover. This was far more than an incendiary love affair. Her warrior elf had given her an entire galaxy to explore!

Excited and energized, she reached the end of the song and halted the playback. She kept her face averted for a moment, afraid to look at Vaden, unsure of his reaction to something so...alien.

He moved away from the desk, stepping into her line of vision, so she turned her head and looked at him. "That voice was yours?" Unable to speak past the lump in her throat, she nodded. "And these movements are what humans call dancing?"

Again all she could do was nod. This was what she did, who she was. If he rejected her art...

There could be no future for them? Had she really allowed herself to open that door? "I know it's strange. I just wanted you to—"

He placed his fingers against her lips, his gaze more silver than blue. "I have never seen anything so beautiful or heard a more poignant sound. I can't decide if I should lock you away so no one else will realize what a treasure I've found, or..."

"Or?" Her heart was pounding so hard she could barely contain her happy tears.

"Even I understand such beauty is meant to be shared." A tear escaped the corner of her eye and slid down her cheek. "Why are you crying?" He caught the tear with his knuckle then wiped her cheek with the pad of his thumb.

"Earlier, I was ready to kill the man who sold me that ridiculous dress, now I feel like I owe him everything."

He smiled. "Do you think you can be content in a world without music?"

"Obviously, I'll simply make my own."

He brushed his mouth over hers then pulled back and asked, "Can others be taught to make those sounds?"

"It's called singing, and many can, others cannot."

"Would you be willing to try?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Many of the other dancers have complained that they have nothing to occupy their time while their men are working. Would you be willing to teach them how to move as you move and sing?"

"Teaching others how to dance—as I was just dancing, not as *you* like to dance—was my occupation on Earth. If the other women are interested, I would enjoy teaching them." She looked around and laughed. "We'll have to find a better place for the lessons. This room is really not big enough."

"I'll find somewhere for you, perhaps one of the smaller cargo bays." He kissed

her on the forehead and heaved a heavy sigh. "I really need to go, but I really don't want to."

"Go on." She slapped him on the ass, feeling wonderfully empowered. "We have the rest of our lives to play house."

His gaze brightened and he echoed, "The rest of our lives?"

She wasn't about to make it that easy for him. "I'm stuck here for at least a year. We'll see what happens after that."

He swept her into his arms and kissed her with slow, tender insistency. "Until tonight."

She waited until he'd gone to let out a joyful shout. Her life had gone from mediocre to miraculous in the span of a day—and she was never going back!

Sahara Heat

Diana Hunter

Prologue

Fine grains of sand drifted under the tent flaps, swirling in small eddies over finely woven carpets, not stopping their dance until they rested against a mahogany chest nestled beside a chair of sandalwood. A hand, long since bereft of life, rested on the lid in a final caress, a silk robe nothing but tatters around the bones. Far across the Sahara, a small breeze, warmed by the sun, transformed into a wind and, picking up speed and sand, became a storm that roared across the empty dunes. And when it reached the tent and its lone occupant, the dust storm swallowed it whole, covering it from the sight of men.

Chapter One

"You want me to do what?"

Carla stopped in the middle of the mall and pulled the cell phone from her ear, staring at the touchpad as if she could read her friend's face to determine if she was pulling one of her usual practical jokes. From the speaker, she could hear Angie uttering reassurances.

A harried mother pushing a stroller and towing a toddler gave Carla a dirty look for her sudden stop, so Carla put the cell back to her ear and moved to a nearby bench, where she could sit and wrestle with her friend's request in relative privacy.

"Angie, slow down. Tell me again what you want, in short, simple sentences."

"Listen then! My partner and I have a great find. I really think this woman's story needs to be told."

"What woman's story? And isn't that what you usually do?" Carla asked, confused. Angie had been a working archeologist ever since they'd graduated from college together. "I thought you guys dug up bones to find out their stories."

She heard Angie's long-suffering sigh wafting through her phone from six thousand miles away. "Among other reasons, yes. But I'm not asking you to write a

nonfiction report. This needs something more. It needs a real writer's touch."

"Gee, thanks." Despite Angie's compliment, Carla couldn't keep the sarcasm out of her voice. Her career track had been decidedly spottier than her best friend's.

Graduating with a degree in theater, Carla had begun teaching high school English to pay the bills while she worked to get her acting career on the road to stardom. Although she had managed to get a few small walk-ons, acting hadn't panned out and she'd turned to writing as an outlet for her creative muse.

While working her day job, Carla began to write romance novels, selling her first manuscript after two long years of collecting rejection slips. She was still proud of her stack of rejection letters. They represented her perseverance and determination to succeed at *something*.

And she had. Just last year she had finished teaching in June and tendered her resignation, finally making the move from teacher to full-time writer.

She was far from a millionaire, though. While it was true she occasionally traveled to a location to soak up the atmosphere, she really didn't have the time or money to jet off to the Sahara Desert and research some old bones.

Angie's powers of persuasion, however, were in full swing. "I mean it, Carla. What we've found out is incredible. Josef, my partner—you remember him; he's the gorgeous hunk I keep telling you about. Anyway, he's the lead archeologist on the dig and he's coming back to New York to make a presentation to the museum. Don't worry, I'm not asking you to fly all the way to Egypt on spec. I want you to meet with Josef in New York and get him to tell you the details. I promise you, you'll be

hooked.”

“Are you sure you’re not just trying to set me up on a blind date from the Sahara Desert?” Carla remembered the disastrous last time her friend had tried to set her up with someone.

Angie laughed. “Not this time. Promise. This is totally on the up and up. Tell you what—just meet with him. Listen to the story. He’ll give you all the bare facts. What I want you to do is fill in the details. I think, once you hear him through, you’ll want to write this woman’s story in all its glory. If I’m wrong, then just thank him for his time and walk away. Deal?”

Carla sighed and glanced around her comfortable suburban setting. At least meeting him in New York meant not flying to the hot Sahara. “Deal.”

* * * * *

Why am I so nervous? Carla stepped off the elevator and straightened her suit jacket for the sixth time since entering the building. All she was going to do was listen politely to what the man had to say, thank him for his time and send him on his way. Angie’s intentions *might* be aboveboard, but Carla still suspected she was being set up.

No matter what story the archeologist had to tell, she wouldn’t be interested. She already had far too many irons in the fire, with two books in edits, two more manuscripts partly finished and an article due to *The Romancer* on how to maintain the delicate balance between character and plot and still keep the romance hot. The

last thing she needed was another project.

A middle-aged secretary led her into a small meeting room, informing her that Dr. Anderson was held up in another meeting and would join her as soon as he finished. With a smirk, the secretary closed the door behind her as she left.

Wonder what that was all about? Shrugging, Carla looked around the small, windowless room. Several artifacts hung on the walls and she wandered from one to another, whiling away the time.

When a few minutes stretched into half an hour, she plopped herself into a chair and drummed her fingers on the table in irritation. Her time was just as precious as "Dr. Anderson's" and she could be home, working on one of the stories currently clamoring for attention in her brain.

The second hand on her watch ticked toward forty-five minutes. With an impatient push, Carla shoved herself away from the small table and yanked the door open, intending to vent her anger on the smug secretary before departing the building in a relieved huff.

"I'm not waiting any longer. You can tell Dr. Josef—"

So intent was she on yelling at the secretary, Carla body-slammed a wall that shouldn't have been there. She reeled backward, off balance...

A tall, brawny blond god caught her, and she gasped.

Dr. Josef Anderson, Ph.D., caught the woman before she fell to the floor even as he fought to maintain his own balance. Grabbing her waist, he instinctively pulled her

close, one part of his brain registering several important things as he battled to keep them both upright...

Her hair was burnished auburn and fell in waves past her shoulders. The waist beneath his hands was small, yet he felt the strength in her muscles as she recovered her balance. And she wore the most wonderful perfume that reminded him of sunny spring mornings in the desert after a midnight rain.

Then she spoke—and his initial image of the woman splintered.

"If you're Dr. Anderson, you're forty-five minutes late. I'm tired of waiting. I'm leaving."

Josef still held her tightly. "You're welcome for my catching you, Ms. Braun. I'm so happy I could prevent you from falling and hitting your head on the table, saving you some stitches or, at the very least, a big goose egg."

A very pretty blush rose up her neck and flushed her cheeks. She dropped her gaze, apparently trying to hide her bad manners.

Josef tightened his grip on her waist, just to see how she would react.

He almost laughed at her predictability. With strength surprising in such a petite body, she pushed against his chest and stepped back. But he had caught the slight intake of breath that signaled a very physical reaction to his closeness before she'd distanced herself.

Of course, she'd caused a bit of a physical reaction in him as well. His cock stirred in a most irritating way. *Intriguing*. He leaned against the doorjamb and watched her brush the hair from her eyes with an impatient gesture as she gathered her wits and

sent a venomous glare in his direction.

Finally the woman tugged her jacket back into place and tossed her head, flinging that glorious hair over her shoulder and out of her face. "Thank you. I was just leaving."

"So I see." His gaze took in the smart business suit that did its best to hide the slim figure of the woman before him. Taking his time, he let his gaze wander down along the curve of her hip, over the graceful arc of a calf to the sensible pumps on her feet. The navy-blue hue of the suit did nothing to set off the beautiful blush of her cheeks or match the decidedly angry hazel eyes that flashed at him.

"Well, Ms. Braun, I promised Dr. DiPaolo that I would meet you, and you undoubtedly promised you would meet with me. Since we've now met, we can just part ways, having fulfilled our word, if you like." A pang of regret took him by surprise even as he let her off the hook. He hadn't expected Carla Braun to look so... intriguing.

Her chin came up. "She told me you had a story for me. You might as well tell me the basic facts. She'll quiz us both and you know it."

Josef nodded. "She will. But I'd get around her."

The way he said it rankled. Carla doubted very much that Dr. Anderson got his way as often as he thought he did. More likely Angie got *her* way and simply made it seem as if it were his idea.

The archeologist stepped aside and gestured for her to leave, inviting her to end

the meeting. But Carla's stubborn streak rose. Who was *he* to dismiss her? How dare he assume she wasn't interested in following up on this story!

Okay, so she wasn't. But she wasn't going to let *him* know that.

"I'd love to hear the story you have to tell, Dr. Anderson." With a deliberate smirk, she marched back to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down.

He followed her with barely concealed reluctance. His slow steps gave Carla an opportunity to take a longer look at the archeologist. Angie hadn't been kidding. He was gorgeous. With shoulders a linebacker would envy, the sculpted, straight lines of Nordic heritage and tarnished blond hair that hung in a ponytail to the middle of his back, he personified the image of some ancient Viking raider come to shore to wreak havoc.

Right now, however, his gray eyes glittered with irritation. Good. Why should she be the only one put out?

"Ms. Braun, you need to know I'm against Dr. DiPaolo's desire to romanticize this story. Quite honestly, I don't believe in letting people like you exploit the past to create fictional stories about real people. Sorry, but this is science and history, not some throbbing romance novel with heaving bosoms and men with rippling muscles."

"Ha! A lot you know about romance novels. When's the last time you read one?" She wasn't about to admit she was a sucker for those rippling muscles, especially if accompanied by a good, hard, six-pack abdomen.

Her glance fell to Dr. Anderson's chest, hidden under a plain white shirt, dark tie and rumpled gray suit. She had felt the strength in that chest when she fell into him

in the doorway. Now that she had recovered from her shock, the memory of the firm muscles under that shirt momentarily distracted her.

"It doesn't matter, they're all the same. She doesn't need to be dragged through some torrid descriptions of her love affairs. The princess deserves better than that."

"Hmmm...a princess? Angie didn't mention that." Carla gestured to the only other chair in the small room. "Might as well make yourself comfortable, Dr. Anderson. You're going to have to tell me the story now."

Josef gritted his teeth. The meeting with the museum director had already taken up more time than he'd expected and now this slip of a woman wanted more. He checked his watch. Damn and damn again—he still hadn't set it to New York time. When did that next flight for Egypt leave? Spending the night in this damnable city didn't thrill him one bit.

Unless he had someone to spend it with...

He let his gaze travel over Carla again, wondering what she'd look like tied for his pleasure. Something Angie had told him about her friend niggled at the back of his brain, but he couldn't quite recall it.

Dismissing the thought as unimportant, he gave an exaggerated bow as he pulled out a chair and turned it backward, straddling the seat and resting his hands along the back just to watch the annoyance cross her face at his cavalier attitude. He wasn't disappointed. Needling her and watching her blush gave him a rush. Affecting insolence, he started the story.

"Once upon a time, there was a rich princess who... Don't you want to take notes or something?"

"Be as obnoxious as you like, Dr. Anderson. I'm just here to listen. If the story has as much merit as Angie seems to think, then I'll read the nonfiction report the two of you have written and go from there. Pray continue with your fascinating account."

She certainly could hold her own. And surprisingly, he enjoyed their verbal sparring, finding the woman before him...engaging. Without changing his demeanor, he kept his tone nonchalant and related the tale of the Bedouin princess.

"She lived several centuries ago, part of a nomadic tribe of Bedouins. We only know her as Princess M, daughter of a sheikh. The find is remarkable in that the tribe wasn't very large, nor was it important. Yet the embroidery on the scraps of clothing that survived show an intricacy we've seen today only in the larger families. The rich blue and purple dyes used, the silk material of her robes, tell us a great deal about her family's position, however. As do the pottery pieces."

Carla leaned forward and Josef resisted the urge to grin. In spite of her reluctance, the story intrigued her. A strand of hair slipped off her shoulder and she unconsciously tucked it behind her ear, cocking her head to the side and narrowing those hazel eyes. He continued.

"The find was also remarkable in that it even came to light. We estimate the tent and its occupant have been buried under the sand for over a thousand years."

"I know the desert is dry, but I would have thought everything would've rotted or worn away after all that time."

Josef nodded. "There *is* extensive decay of the clothing and tenting material. But once this tent was buried, it stayed buried...deep. Preserving the rest. It's hard to measure the sands of the Sahara; the wind is constantly changing its shape. But the sandstorm that buried the princess must've put her over five hundred feet below the surface for most of the intervening millennium. We only found her now thanks to another storm and a lost sheep. The shepherd boy who found the remains of the tent thought at first that it was poachers. He ran back to get his father and uncles and they came with guns drawn."

"And what did they find?"

"A black tent called a *bayt*, partitioned into two spaces, not so different from their own except the inside was filled with sand. At first they dug it out, thinking there was someone who needed rescuing. The front half of the tent, however, was empty. When one of them unearthed an ancient pot just behind the center curtain, they finally realized this wasn't a case of poachers caught out in a storm."

Josef snorted. "Thankfully one of the men understood the significance of the find. They stopped digging before they did any real damage, knowing that museums around the world would pay good money to excavate it. Dr. DiPaolo and I were lucky enough to get the dig. We found the skeleton only after several weeks of sand removal."

When he didn't continue, Carla prodded him. "So is that it? Some kid finds a black tent rising out of the desert like a mirage, only this one is real and comes complete with skeleton? There must be something more."

Josef nodded. "Very perceptive. While that alone is certainly a good find, it's not what has your friend all excited."

"What else did you find there?"

"Beside the woman was a trunk. Inside were several lengths of cloth in excellent condition, some with the same embroidered pattern that we found on the remnants of the princess's robes. There was also a man's shirt, same pattern. You should know, these patterns were often handed down from one generation to the next. Woven into them were family identification and status. The better a woman was with her needle, the better the pattern. The better the pattern, the better the status. This woman was magnificent."

"How do you know she embroidered them?"

"Because below the layers of clothing, we found her letters."

"Letters? How long ago was this?"

"Writing's been around for more than a thousand years, you know."

Carla hastened to explain. "I know. I'm just surprised at a *Bedouin woman* writing letters. Seems out of character."

"It is. That's what makes this not just a good find, but a great one. She's unique. The letters were written in a form of Arabic with smatterings of Old French."

"Old French? What on earth was a Frenchman doing in the Sahara Desert a thousand years ago?"

Josef watched the wheels turn and gave her time. She twirled a strand of her hair and an errant thought popped into his head—what would that silkiness feel like

draped over his cock?

An image of her bending over him, teasing him with her hair, came to mind.

She slapped the table and he jerked, giving a small cough to cover the fact that his mind had gone off on a sensual tangent. A shift of his chair also allowed him to stealthily readjust his cock, which had decided to weigh in on the alluring nature of the woman across from him.

"Got it. A Frenchman in the Sahara a thousand years ago? Had to have been the Crusades."

"Yes. The Crusades."

"So you're saying a Muslim Bedouin princess fell in love with a Christian French knight?"

Josef nodded.

Carla sat back and rolled her eyes. "You've got to be kidding me. This plot's been done to death! I can tell you six Hollywood movies using the same device off the top of my head. Next you'll be telling me you found a mummy nearby complete with hieroglyphics and a curse."

"I figured you wouldn't take this seriously." Josef slid his chair back and stood up. Too bad. He had almost decided another night in New York could be just what he needed.

She stood as well. "I *am* taking you seriously, Dr. Anderson. So seriously that I'll read your dry report as soon as you hand me the copy Angie said you'd give me. But I'm not writing a story that's already hackneyed, no matter how truthful it might be,

and I'm not wasting any more of my time. Good day."

Carla held out her hand. Josef knew full well what she wanted and deliberately misunderstood. Instead of fetching the report, currently tucked in the bag he'd left behind the receptionist's desk, he reached forward to take her proffered hand in his and give it a good shake.

She instinctively tried to pull her hand back, but he didn't let go. The woman needed to have her comfort zone invaded. What *was* it about her that made him want to do just that? Hell, made him want to toss her onto the table and make love to her? She did nothing but annoy him, yet something pulled him in.

"I don't want you to write a story about the princess," he murmured, catching another whiff of her spicy perfume. He steeled himself against it and stared into those wide hazel eyes. "I don't want to give you my report, either."

"Angie said... If you don't, Dr. DiPaolo will make life difficult for you."

"Is that a threat?" Josef noted she made no attempt to step back, despite the fact that she was flustered. Her cheeks had turned a delightful shade of pink and her gaze refused to meet his.

"It's a simple statement of the truth." Now she *did* make a move backward. He didn't relinquish his hold on her hand, pulling it closer to his chest.

"May I have my hand back, please?" She still didn't look at him, but he could hear exasperation building in her voice. Why was he having such fun baiting her? She was nothing to him but a coworker's distracting friend. He should be on his way back to the airport already.

"Why is keeping your friend happy so important to you? She's thousands of miles away and won't know if I give you the report or not, if you don't tell her."

She yanked and he let go. Her arm flew back and now she did meet his gaze, her eyes blazing.

"Angie's a friend. Friends don't lie to each other. Just give me the damn report and we can call this quits."

"Have dinner with me tonight and I'll give it to you then."

She eyed him in confusion. "Why can't you give it to me now?"

"Because I want to give it to you after dinner."

"Are you asking me out on a date?"

Josef couldn't quite believe it himself. The invitation had flown out his mouth before he'd realized he'd even thought the thought. But once spoken, he liked the idea.

"Apparently, I am."

Carla briefly thought of Angie's penchant for setting up blind dates. Had she been suckered again? Her friend didn't understand how Carla could go through life without a boyfriend on the end of a leash at all times.

What Angie couldn't get through her head was that Carla didn't want to hold the leash—she wanted her leash held.

Pursing her lips to keep from smiling at the thought, Carla turned to gaze at an

artifact under glass on the side of the room, pretending to consider his offer. Did he know what she wrote? Or that her own sexual predilections were reflected in all her heroines?

Despite his dismissive behavior earlier, she *did* like the way his gray eyes had lit up when speaking about the princess. Passion flared under that rumpled suit and brusque demeanor. She was sure of it. Turning, she held out her hand once more.

"I accept."

"You do?"

The disbelief made her chuckle. "Yes, Dr. Anderson. I do. I haven't been in the city in a while," she gestured around the room as if it included the entire island, "I might as well make use of the time. Day's shot for getting any decent writing done, anyway."

"Gee, I'm so glad you're deigning to spend some time with me."

His dry tone didn't fool her. "You're playing me, Dr. Anderson. I'll have dinner with you tonight, you'll tell me a little more about this Bedouin princess, hand me the report and we'll go our merry ways. Then you can go back and tell Dr. DiPaolo you went through with your blind date and she'll be suitably upset with both of us that we didn't fall into the sack with each other, madly in love with plans to live happily ever after."

For a moment he just frowned, as if he didn't know what she meant. Then the light dawned and she liked the way his brow smoothed. What would he look like with his hair down? Probably a wild Viking. She could just picture him with Thor's hammer

in his fist, hair blown back by the winds of Valhalla or wherever it was Norse gods lived. He'd stride up to her, enfold her in his arm, his corded muscles holding her tight...

Carla hefted her purse over her shoulder and turned away quickly, lest her eyes give away her suddenly naughty thoughts.

Josef waited at the door, his hand on the knob. "I don't know the city very well. What would be a good place for dinner?"

Carla hesitated only a second, still not making eye contact. "Maxwell's. Down in the Village."

"Seven o'clock."

"I'll be there."

He opened the door and stepped aside to let her through first. As she passed him, his hand rested briefly on the small of her back, giving her a shiver. He took her hand and touched a kiss to the back in an old-fashioned gesture of civility. "Til tonight," he murmured.

Her heart beating hard, Carla merely nodded and stepped out of the office with as much dignity as she could muster when her knees felt like jelly.

Josef watched her go through the glass door and down the hall, very impressed with the view. A small cough brought him back. The secretary wagged her finger at him with a knowing smile.

"You're a very bad man, Dr. Josef. You are too good with the ladies."

"Oh, Annalie, if only you were single..."

"Go on with you now. I suppose you need me to make a reservation for the night?"

"Some place called Maxwell's?" Josef shrugged. "Down in the Village, if that helps."

"I can do that. But I meant for a hotel."

Josef laughed. "You have an evil mind, Annalie. I have no intention of taking the lovely Ms. Braun to bed with me tonight."

The secretary's look informed him she didn't believe one word of it. "But you *are* staying the night, yes? In the city you say you hate so much."

The raised eyebrow indicated she knew exactly where Dr. Josef's thoughts had gone as he'd watched the young woman walk down the corridor. Josef chuckled. "Yes, Annalie. I need reservations for dinner—and a hotel."

"Yes, Dr. Josef."

With a grin, he retrieved his leather bag from behind her desk, pausing to plant a kiss on the woman's cheek before sauntering out the glass door himself, wondering where in this city he could find some good stout rope.

Chapter Two

Carla left her car in an all-day parking lot. Driving *to* Manhattan was fun, driving *in* Manhattan was not. Taking the subway, she first made her way to Macy's department store. The business suit said everything she'd wanted it to say and it hadn't made one bit of difference to Dr. Josef Anderson. Whatever had possessed them, he'd asked her on a date and she'd accepted.

Now she needed an outfit that sent an entirely different message.

As she browsed the racks, though, she vacillated on exactly what that message should be. This blouse screamed "slut" but that blouse blushed "virgin". Wasn't there anything in the middle? And the skirts were no better. Lately she'd taken to wearing peasant-type skirts, long and full and graceful. But those said "earth mother"—and no one wanted to fuck an earth mother.

The thought stopped her in the process of rifling through another rack.

That was the question, right there. Did she want him to take her to bed tonight?

Hell yes. Her fictional heroes satisfied her in lots of ways. They said all the right things at just the right times. They read her mind and told her what she wanted them to tell her.

Not like Dr. Anderson. A smile played on her lips as she remembered the feel of his chest under her hands. They might've gotten off on a bad foot, but she was intrigued enough to go to dinner with him just to get that damn report.

She turned to another rack. Despite Angie's assumptions, Carla had dated several men over the past few years. For a variety of reasons, however, nothing had ever clicked. Her brand of sex just wasn't very common. What would make her think Angie's archeologist would be interested in sex with a BDSM flavor?

Dr. Josef Anderson would be on a flight back to Egypt within a day, two at most. She'd liked the feel of his hand on her back, the way he'd held her tightly to him when she'd fallen. He wasn't looking for a long-term relationship. That was okay, neither was she.

Did he expect to get lucky tonight?

She eyed the low-cut blouse in her hand. Kinky sex or not, she certainly hoped so.

* * * * *

Josef dropped his purchases on the king-sized bed that took up most of the small hotel room. All he wanted was cheap and clean, and Annalie had found him both. The lone receptionist downstairs had been very helpful in finding a hardware store not too far away and he'd spent the afternoon mooning over the chains and locks he would love to employ to hold a woman captive.

Someday. Someday when he stopped wandering the globe in search of ancient artifacts and new discoveries. Someday when he bought himself a cabin in the

mountains and could fill it with all sorts of nefarious workings. Someday, when he found a woman worth building it for.

He grinned as he hefted a hank of white cotton rope. It could be used in so many ways. The image of Carla squirming on the bed's white sheets, her body neatly spread for his inspection, lingered in his imagination. Would she go for it? Was she the adventurous type? Knowing his archeological partner, any friend of Angie's had to be willing to take a few risks. And, judging from Carla's wit and blushes when he'd touched her this morning, Josef thought he just might get his wish.

Holding that positive thought, he ventured to a fetish store and picked up a set of leather cuffs that would give him options—should Carla be amenable. While the thought of hogtying her made his cock stir, that might prove to be too extreme for a first date. Such an activity would need to wait for at least date three.

He chuckled as he made his way back to the hotel. *Best not to count your submissives before they're trained*, he mused. *And you're on your way back to Egypt tomorrow in any case.*

Back in his room, he took his time setting the scene, fully intending to get her up here tonight and knowing just the ploy that would work.

She wanted that report? She'd have to come and get it.

Burying the packet deep in his leather bag, he headed into the shower.

* * * * *

Carla checked her watch. Perfect. Right on time for dinner with a man who looked

like a Viking god and had the temperament to boot. She grinned as she stepped off the subway. Why hadn't his parents just named him Thor and been done with it?

She saw him before he saw her. Not surprising, as he stood a head taller than most. He was still a half-block away, coming toward the restaurant from the opposite direction. Heads turned as he passed, not all of them women's. Carla hid her smile. Perfection was perfection, and it gave her a little thrill that both genders appreciated his incredible physique.

But then the crowd parted and she got a full look at what had turned those heads. He'd changed out of the rumpled gray suit that had given him a faint air of universities and museums, and into a simple pair of tan pants and an open-front, crisp white shirt. In the warm summer air, he'd turned the sleeves back, giving a glimpse of the strong muscles she'd felt this morning.

The brown belt he wore encircled a narrow waist, and the tailored pants with the sharp creases and cuffed hems harkened back to a time when men were men. Judging from all the fluttering eyelashes, several women would gladly forsake women's lib for one night with such a man.

Carla's steps slowed as she took in that gorgeous sight—and its implications. She'd come into the city that morning more as a favor for a friend, her attention still involved in the stories that were ever-present in her mind. But as she watched Josef approach, her imaginary heroes bowed and left, understanding that this flesh-and-blood hero would make mincemeat of them.

He saw her and smiled and Carla's heart leapt into her throat. How had she not

noticed his dimples this morning? Her mind really must not have been in attendance. They crinkled his cheeks into ripples of merriment and she smiled in response.

"Ms. Braun, I see you are punctual." His voice, smooth and rich, held just a note of scholarly approval.

"I'm anxious to get my hands on...your report, Dr. Anderson."

He laughed and Carla liked the sound. A baritone, she noted. A full, rich baritone laugh that turned her coy smile into a real one.

"Angie would be very disappointed if we didn't at least reach the stage where we stopped being so formal. Will you call me Josef?"

"You're right." She held out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Josef. I'm Carla."

He took her hand and turned it palm up. For a moment she thought he might kiss it, but instead he ran a finger over her palm. "You have a strong lifeline and a penchant for adventure."

She chuckled. "I'm not so sure about that. I like my adventure where I control the outcome—in my head."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "And never in real life?"

Carla's breath fluttered. "Only when I know I'll be safe. Or in safe hands."

Josef still held her hand, his eyes suddenly serious. "I would never hurt you, Carla."

She looked at him, surprised, and he smoothly backtracked. "Angie would never forgive me."

Carla tried to conceal her disappointment. "No," she agreed. "Angie's my best friend, despite the physical distance."

Josef's eyes narrowed. He hadn't intended to get so serious there and had covered up his statement with a flippant remark. But her mask had dropped and he'd seen the vulnerability she had so successfully hidden that morning. Cursing himself that he hadn't stopped in a bookstore to buy one of her novels, he gestured to the restaurant's door.

"Are you hungry?"

The smile she gave him seemed perfunctory and he realized she wore her emotions on her face. What she felt, she expressed. The woman had no hidden agendas, no games that she played.

He'd also noted her knee-length full skirt—topped by a blouse with a neckline that plunged most enticingly. The short, capped sleeves showed off slender arms that were uniformly white, compared to the deep tan of his own. In his mind, he'd already thought about how to undress her. Did she wear panties? Should he bind her first and then remove the skirt?

"Josef?"

He came back to the present quickly. "I'm sorry. You were saying?"

She looked up at him through thick lashes, the coy smile back. "You looked like a wolf ready to devour me."

He laughed as a cover to his true intent. "All in good time, little Red. I need to

eat your grandmother first.” Josef took her elbow and started to turn her toward the door, but her next words stopped him.

“I’d rather you ate *me* and not my grandmother.”

Did she mean what he thought she meant? Judging by the way her cheeks had turned bright pink, he thought she did.

“Carla...” He studied her face, which she had turned to him in challenge, despite her blushing cheeks. “We didn’t get off to a very good start this morning. I was cranky after a long plane ride and giving a presentation I didn’t want to give. This dinner was to be my way of making it up to you.”

“Not as a means to get me into bed?”

Was that hurt in her eyes? “Well...” he hedged.

“Josef, we’re two adults with a mutual friend who thinks she knows better than everyone else. Yes, we did get off to a bad start this morning. My head was still filled with all my current works in progress and the thought of starting another, especially one with—you have to admit—an overdone plot by romance book standards, just put me in a bad mood.”

He started to reply and stopped when she held up her hand.

“This is probably going to feed into your ego, but I find you a very attractive man, Dr. Josef Anderson. I’m generally not this forward, but you’re leaving for your dig in the Sahara shortly and I’ll spend the rest of my days kicking myself for not taking advantage of this moment if I don’t...” She trailed off as if trying to find her courage.

“Don’t what?” He wanted a particular conclusion, but it had to come from her.

There could be no coercion if this was to be safe—for both of them.

She rolled her eyes and bounced on the balls of her sandal-clad feet. The heels made her a little taller but she still barely came to his chin. He took that petite chin in his fingers and turned her face toward his.

“Don’t what?” he asked softly.

She blushed furiously now. Taking a deep breath, her words came out in a rush. “If I don’t go to bed with you.”

“I’d love to see you tied to my hotel bed, ready and—”

“I knew it! I just knew you had to be!”

She laughed, and Josef, though enjoying the pure delight in the sound, also felt very confused. He was confessing his rather kinky sexual preferences and she seemed...elated?

“You knew what, Carla?”

“Okay, so I didn’t know, I hoped. Josef,” she tossed her head to indicate the door, “let’s bag this and walk for a bit, shall we?”

Josef shrugged, totally lost. “Sure, why not?”

“Which way is your hotel?”

He pointed and she turned. “Let’s talk and we can walk in that direction.”

* * * * *

The streets teemed with people enjoying a beautiful, sunny evening in New York,

but for the two of them the streets might as well have been empty. They talked, and Carla confessed her own sexual preferences as they went along.

"So you're telling me you're a submissive, and Angie knows it." The careful, scholarly side of Josef wanted to be sure he had all the facts straight before he took her up to the room he'd already prepared.

"Exactly. The two of us don't tell each other *everything*, but we're friends. And, of course, she's read my books."

Again Josef gave himself a mental kick in the shins for not including a bookstore in his afternoon of shopping. "I'm almost afraid to ask, but what, again, do you write?"

"Erotic romance with a BDSM twist."

Josef felt as if he'd been hit with a sledgehammer. "Why, that little minx..."

Carla gave him a look of confusion. "Excuse me?"

"Angie. Dr. DiPaolo. I should wring her pretty little neck." He looked at Carla. "She set us up."

Carla's laugh rang true. "You're just figuring that out?"

"She knows a bit about my sexual predilections, and she made up this whole cock-and-bull story of you needing to write the princess's tale just to get the two of us together."

Carla considered his conclusion. "She might actually want me to write the story. She's a sucker for historical romance. But she also knows it's not my forte, so you may be right."

Josef stopped and indicated a small door squeezed in between a pizza parlor and an electronics store. "My hotel."

"And I suppose the report is upstairs in your room?"

There was no mistaking the twinkle in her eye. Josef nodded and she grinned.

But he needed to be sure. He pulled her into his arms right in the middle of the busy sidewalk. "If I take you up and ask for your total obedience, you'll give it to me? A stranger?"

"Angie talks about you all the time and she vouches for you. I trust her opinion."

"Angie talks about me?" He frowned. "What does she say?"

"She's been angling to get the two of us together for a while, always telling me how perfect you are for me." Carla shrugged. "After tonight, I'll know if she's right or not."

"I want you to have a safeword."

"I want me to have a safeword. Will the traffic lights do? It's pretty standard, I know, but..."

"It'll do. Green if everything's okay, yellow if you need a break. Red only if you want the date to stop immediately. Limits?"

Carla didn't hesitate. "No kids, no animals, no human waste products, no blood."

He chuckled. "I'm on board with all of that."

Carla took a deep breath, calming the sudden butterflies in her stomach. Giving

him a long look, she took the plunge. "Perfect. I'm ready when you are."

He tilted her head up, his fingers strong on her chin. "We've never even kissed, Ms. Braun."

Her breath caught as his lips touched hers. A gentle kiss that deepened as his arms tightened around her waist to pull her closer. She raised her hands, sliding them along the crispness of his shirt, feeling the strength of the muscles underneath. Around them, horns honked, engines roared and people crowded. Carla felt nothing but his incredible presence encircling her, overwhelming her, protecting her.

And when his tongue pressed against her lips, demanding entrance, she opened for him, letting him possess her mouth, enjoying the incredible confidence and domination of his will. His arms tightened further and she eagerly returned his kiss, letting him know she wanted this.

"Get a room!"

They parted, Carla blushing furiously, Josef only grinning. The speaker was already gone but the sentiment hung between them.

Josef took her hand and bent to whisper in her ear.

"Come, little one."

The words sent a shiver down her spine.

Putting her hand in his, Carla followed him into the building.

Chapter Three

Josef paused just outside the door to his room. He still held Carla's hand and now he pulled her palm to his lips. Such delicate fingers she had. Long and slender, like his own, except she wore her calluses in different places. He rubbed his thumb over the permanent ridge at the top of her middle finger.

"You still write longhand?"

She nodded, her voice quiet. "When I get stuck. Getting away from the computer seems to access a different part of my brain. I think differently with a pencil in my hand than I do in front of a computer screen."

He kissed the callus and drew her close. The spicy scent of her perfume filled his senses and he inhaled deeply. "If I do this right, tonight you won't be thinking at all."

"If you do this right, I won't *want* to think."

"No topping from the bottom," he warned. He had experience with women who acted one way on this side of the bedroom door—and completely differently on the other. He tipped Carla's face up to his, searching her eyes for any sign of a Domme.

She shook her head, her gaze steady. "Once inside, I'm yours."

A slow smile of satisfaction spread over his face. Hoping this woman who stuck to

her guns when she felt she was right could also set aside her independence when it came to sex, he turned to slide the card into the lock. A thought occurred to him and he hesitated.

"I believe in honesty between a Dom and a sub," he told her. "Trust builds on honesty and we need trust in order to continue."

Carla looked puzzled. "Is there something you forgot to tell me? Like you have a wife or something?"

Josef smiled. "Not quite so drastic. It's just that, well, I'd rather hoped you and I might spend the evening together, so I..." He glanced at the still-closed door.

"You prepared the room."

He shrugged, feeling a little sheepish. "I did."

She reached up and kissed him full on the lips. "I was rather hoping you might have," she confessed.

"You're not angry?"

"I probably should be, that you thought me so easy a pushover, but in truth, I'd rather think that you liked me enough to want to spend time with me." Her voice dropped to a low murmur. "Time spent in there." With a nod of her head, she indicated the room beyond the closed door.

"Then wait here."

Carla nodded and stepped back as he slid his keycard into the lock. Briefly she

had a very dirty thought about that action, but he slipped inside the room and shut the door behind him before she could give it voice. Which was probably a good thing. Her sense of humor had gotten her into trouble with Doms in the past. Sometimes it was hard to remain submissive when an opportunity arose for a particularly good zinger. And she was a sucker for a good punch line.

The hallway remained empty, for which she was grateful. She needed this. She wasn't into one-night stands, and it had been a while since she'd last played. Then she chuckled to herself. What was *this*, if not a one-night layover? He'd be on a plane for Egypt in the morning and back to his sandy princess.

And herself? She'd be back at her computer, rejuvenated and ready to write some very sexy stories, if all went well. Tonight was a win-win if Dr. Josef Anderson could perform as well as she thought he could.

The door opened—and Carla stifled a gasp.

He'd taken off his shoes and stood barefoot on the hotel's plush carpet. His long blond hair hung loose, framing his Nordic face, a face now filled with power and desire. Where before that power had expressed itself in arrogance, it now took the form of authority and pure male sexuality.

His shirt hung open, revealing a smooth chest and tight muscles, muscles that had turned her knees weak this morning when she first ran into him and he'd caught her so easily. He'd set her on her feet as if she weighed nothing. He could so easily crush her and yet he'd held her as delicately as a rose.

Carla locked her knees lest she melt right there in the hallway.

Behind him, the room glowed with the light of over a dozen candles. Josef held out his hand in invitation. Without hesitation, she took it.

A surge of triumph coursed through him and Josef smiled, stepped back and led her past the short hallway. He turned her around to face away from him, taking a moment to shrug his shirt off. Stepping closer, he let the shirt fall at her feet, so she would know he was now naked from the waist up. But when she tried to turn to see, he encircled her waist with his hands, pulling her against him a little more roughly than he'd intended.

She didn't protest and without giving her time to recover, he slid his hands around and up her chest. Her intake of breath stirred his cock and he reveled in the feel of her. He let his hands roam, pushing down her skirt, pulling up her blouse, cupping her breasts in her bra then pressing those delightful orbs flat against her ribs. She was his to explore, his to fondle, to tease, to take.

Carla's hands came up, resting over his as she leaned back, her head resting on his chest. She made a move as if to turn toward him but he didn't allow it, keeping her pressed to his front so she could feel his rising cock against the small of her back. The easy submission she offered fed his control and his balls tightened.

Josef wanted her naked. Now. Still not giving her time to process his swift actions, he grabbed her blouse and pulled it off over her head, glorying in the way her shoulder-length tresses fell against soft, white shoulders. Unable to resist the feel of such silkiness, Josef tangled his fist in Carla's hair, gentling his touch slightly

to pull her head back even as his other hand encircled her exposed throat.

"You are my plaything." His fingers pressed ever so lightly against her stretched skin. In answer, she raised her chin higher, giving her vulnerability to him as a gift. His cock grew hard.

This was a woman worth dominating.

He turned her around, still holding her tightly, not losing his grip on her hair. Her eyes were already losing focus. The small whimper from the back of her throat urged him on. He needed to taste that whimper, feel the softness of the lips that suppressed it.

Bringing his face to hers, he kissed her. Hard. She didn't give way at first and so he forced his tongue inside. A second later he rejoiced that she not only opened for him, but pressed back, giving herself and pushing him on.

He loved the taste of her, of her lips, of her tongue. Pulling her lip between his teeth, he nipped until she gasped. Her breasts pressed against him, her nipples stiff points. But the bra was in the way. Josef reached behind her, unclasped the bra and slid the straps off her arms. Two beautiful, round breasts, nipples hard with desire, rested against his chest.

His left hand still fisted in her hair, he pulled her head back again, palming a naked breast with his free hand. Josef bent her backward and her arms went around his neck even as she arched her back in offering.

He dove for the nipple, sucking it, pulling it with his teeth as her fingers twisted in his hair. How long had it been since he'd had such a willing woman? One who so

freely gave herself into his hands? He needed to get his pants off soon or his cock would burst right through the fabric. Carla's hands moved over his body, urging him forward. Did she have any idea how close he was to losing control and taking her right there?

Whirling around, he backed her to the bed, laying her down, keeping his body pressed to hers, engulfing her with his strength and size. For her sake, as well as his, he needed to get her tied down.

A rope that ran under the mattress connected the cuffs he'd bought earlier. Once those cuffs were secured around her wrists, she'd be unable to bring her arms together.

Plundering her mouth again, he slid her arms up and apart. But to fasten them into the cuffs, he had to stand and he didn't want to. He wanted to touch this woman, explore every centimeter of her body, discover every sound she could make. Lifting himself, he forced a deep breath, exerting control over his own animal instincts. He would know her, in every sense of the word. But he had time. He would savor every discovery like a connoisseur lingering over a fine merlot.

Josef knew the sudden loss of his body would throw her mind off balance again, and so he abruptly stood and stepped to the head of the bed.

Carla's mind reeled. The onslaught had been fast and overwhelming. She resisted her first instinct to fight him off, bracing herself instead and letting him in. He had accepted that submission with a passion that left her breathless and unable to focus

as her body responded with passionate lust. She ached to have him inside her, her nipples tingling with his touch, her clit swelling with need, her pussy damp and ready. Damn but he was good. Her body was remembering what it was like to be awakened after too long a time spent dormant, too long a time spent wrapped in fictional lives.

But he'd left her. Trying to orient herself, she felt soft leather encircle her wrist and she twisted to look up along the bed. Something glittered in his hand. He flashed it so she could see a small gold lock. Another moment and the snick of it closing told her she was caught. A quick tug confirmed it and her pussy flooded even as she tamped down the mewl of protest that rose in her throat.

Her eyes never left him as he walked along the bedside, not returning her look, not touching her. He still wore the pressed khaki pants and the easy way he sauntered around the end of the bed made her heart pound. A lord of all he surveyed, a Norse god to whom she owed obedience, a man of discipline, control and power. A man who commanded deference and respect.

Positioned too far down on the bed, Carla's arm didn't quite reach to the cuff on the other side but Josef didn't let that deter him. He simply hooked his hands under her arms and pulled her farther up the bed as if she were just a thing, a lightweight object he needed to place. The thought made her pussy clench.

"You have become my toy. My plaything." He leaned down and put his mouth near her ear. "And yet, this is no game, little one. This is very real. Very real indeed."

Josef smoothed the hair from her face. Carla felt a familiar tug in the pit of her

stomach at his nearness—excitement combined with desire with a small dollop of fear tossed in for good measure, all of which combined to twist her insides into a huge knot of eager wanting.

“Yes Sir,” she murmured, pulling her arms to test what kind of movement he’d left her. Too loose and the game would be over quickly. Too tight and she’d have to call “yellow” to have him fix the bindings.

Carla discovered she could move her arms up and down a little, but with her body centered on the bed, they still remained over her head and spread apart. He let her challenge him, quietly waiting while she figured out what he already knew. Her bindings were tight. She would go nowhere until he let her.

She still wore her skirt and panties, the latter quite soaked with the juices of her need. With a nod, she acquiesced, acknowledging his authority.

He sat on the bed beside her. The sudden nearness of all that power made her gasp and she took a deep breath to still the qualm that flared in her gut. She was essentially helpless, unable to prevent him from doing whatever he wanted.

He touched her, ever so lightly, and she suppressed a grin. Oh yeah, he had the magic. His fingertips trailed over her naked breasts, idly exploring, his gaze never leaving her face. She tried to keep her eyes open, to watch him as he watched her, but his touch ignited her body, every finger leaving a trail of fire behind.

His hand dipped along her side and her eyes flew open as her body jerked her out of the moment.

“Ticklish there?”

She took a deep breath. "Very."

Deliberately, he lightly brushed the area again, intently watching her reactions. Again she jumped and grimaced. His fingers ran over her hip and came back to the same spot and she flinched again. She wanted to cry out for him to stop, yet gave him her forbearance until she knew what he wanted.

"Thank you, little one, for your patience. Now I know where the ticklish spot is." He paused as if considering. "You didn't mention tickling as a limit. Do you want to add it to your list?"

Did she? She'd been tickled breathless before and while she didn't necessarily enjoy it, she couldn't say it bothered her either. When she didn't answer after several seconds, Josef nodded.

"I see. Well then, I shall simply file away the information to use or not use, as I see fit."

Carla nodded. "I think that's best."

She saw a mischievous twinkle in his eye and he trailed his fingers to her other side. Her warning glance didn't stop him and he managed to find the ticklish spot on that side. He approached it from different directions until satisfied he knew exactly where it was and what level of touch set her off. A firm hand did nothing; a featherlight touch could send her body into paroxysms of laughter.

And through it all, her need for him grew stronger. Josef took the time to learn her body, to play with it as if it were a finely tuned instrument. His slow, almost scientific deliberation sent her blood racing as his touches pushed her into true

submissiveness.

Josef looked down at the woman tied to the bed, astounded by the way she responded. She gave herself so freely, allowed him to hold power over her even in the littlest things. Granted, he had pushed her only a little, but she gave the promise of so much more.

Leaning down, he sucked the closest nipple into his mouth, tasting her, curious as to how she would respond. A whimper exploded from her and he fought the urge to smile. Gloating could be a powerful tool, but not one to be used lightly or too often. Instead, he nipped that wonderful little bud with his teeth, gently biting, then laving with his tongue and sucking it in again.

"Oh God, Josef, you're going to make me come!"

He heard the desperation in her voice and sat up to look in her eyes, his hand covering the now-wet breast. As he talked to her, his fingers played with her nipple, pinching, twisting, keeping it in his possession.

"We're just getting started, little one. Can you trust me enough to give me power even over your orgasms?"

Her breath, ragged and uneven, made her voice waver. "I think so."

"Think so' is not good enough." He pinched the nipple hard, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger. She gasped and arched her back.

"Yes," she cried out. "Yes, I can trust you enough to give you my orgasms. Please, please let me come now, though."

Josef released the nipple, giving her breast a light slap.

"Not yet."

She let out a cry of frustration and collapsed back on the bed. He liked seeing her eyes slightly unfocused. Already she was sliding toward subspace. If he played his cards right, he'd take her far deeper. And orgasm denial was one way to move her in that direction.

Besides which, it gave him a huge power rush. He totally controlled her now, and his cock, already semi-hard, pressed more insistently against his slacks.

"This skirt has to go," he declared and reached for the buttons that closed it on the side. But that put his fingers quite close to her ticklish spot. With a mischievous smile, he reached over, knowing her gaze was on him. She'd expect him to tickle her.

But a mind fuck is all about the unexpected. Four buttons held her skirt closed and he opened the first two quickly and efficiently. The strap of her bikini panties was a sexy red stripe against her white skin. Pausing to trace the top with his finger, he waited until she closed her eyes, lulled by his slow touch, before using his other hand on her opposite side to tickle her.

Her eyes flew open and her laughter came in gasps as he alternated between pulling down her skirt and panties together and tickling her on both sides, his laughter joining hers. Finally Josef flung Carla's clothes to the side and bounced onto the bed beside her, the two of them breathless and giggling.

It took her several tries, but finally Carla caught enough breath to speak an entire

sentence. "You are a nefarious Dom, aren't you?"

"I try to be."

"I can't see you very well."

"Do you need to?"

"Just want to."

He obliged by propping his head up on one hand. His gray eyes, bright with enjoyment, seemed to read her mind. "You like my nefariousness."

Carla shook her head then acquiesced. "I do."

"Even when I do this?"

His hand slipped between her thighs, pulling her leg toward him, hooking his own leg over to prevent her from moving back. Not that she would, but the fact that choice wasn't an option gave her that warm feeling in her belly again. He pushed her other thigh away, spreading her legs for his pleasure.

Her pleasure.

His hand slipped over her mound, Josef's fingers twining in the small hairs she kept neatly trimmed before he slid a solitary finger into her slit and over her engorged clit. She gasped and instinctively her legs tried to close.

"Unh-unh." His voice held a note of reprimand. "Keep those legs open. You're mine, remember? Mine to explore as I want."

She moved her right leg away, her left still pinioned. In reward, his finger slid over her clit again, sending another wave of desire coursing through her body. All

she could do was to lie back and enjoy the ride.

Letting go wasn't ever easy. Part of her always wanted to maintain at least a modicum of control. She feared ever releasing herself to another entirely. What if she never got herself back?

Yet in Josef's hands, she felt safe, knew that he wouldn't let her go too far. Taking another step toward complete abandonment, she relaxed her legs and let him play with her most private parts.

Sensing the change in her, Josef pressed his advantage, sliding his fingers down to her soaked pussy. She was ready. She was more than ready. How had she managed to keep control so long?

Yet he was selfish. Denying orgasms allowed the body's energy to build so that, when it finally released, the resulting explosion would make for an incredible ride. And he wanted to be inside her when that happened. They would ride together.

Quickly he stood, his cock fueled by her cries of protest as he once more left her body on the edge. Stripping off his pants and briefs, he turned to face her, to give her a good look at what she was about to be invaded with.

Freed, his cock stretched nearly the length of Carla's forearm. The thick shaft, now ridged with veins filled nearly to bursting, looked to be almost as big around as one of her slender wrists. Carla's eyes widened in appreciation, which made his balls bunch in anticipation.

But he had to be certain she was ready. She was his to dominate, to tie up, to

play with, but not to hurt. He liked Ms. Carla Braun far too much to scare her away after one evening together. And there was the little fact that causing harm went against his nature.

Of course, he didn't need to tell her that. Let her think what she would, it was all a part of the slow psychological game he played with her mind.

"I'm going to take you hard, Carla. You'll stretch for me and welcome me in."

"Please..." Her voice trailed off and he didn't know if she begged for or against his entrance.

"Color," he demanded.

She arched her back and brought her knees up, her legs open wide. "Green."

And yet her brow furrowed and her breath caught. Perfect.

Quickly slipping on a condom, he stretched out beside her once more. "Beg me," he whispered as his hand slid possessively between her legs and to her pussy. Her clit, still swollen from his previous use, peeked through her nether lips and Josef fingered it, watching her head toss between her captured arms.

"Please, Josef. Please take me."

"Where? Where do you want to go?" His voice, rough with desire, pushed her deeper.

"I want...I want... Dammit, I want to come!" She nearly screamed the last word before dropping her voice, pleading, "Please, Josef. Please let me come."

He slipped a finger inside her, quickly adding a second one. "Not until given

permission," he told her, sliding in a third finger to stretch her.

Above her head, her hands balled into fists as she clenched her muscles, her determination to obey him holding steady. He slid in a fourth finger and realized that, with a little more work, he could slide his entire fist inside.

His cock protested that thought, however. His own need overruled and he shifted his weight, poising between her legs. Even sheathed, he could feel the heat from her pussy drawing him in.

"Open for me," he murmured, rubbing the tip of his cock in her juices.

"Yes," she replied, pressing her hips upward and inviting him inside.

Moving gently, he pressed the sensitive tip of his cock against her pussy, testing her, testing himself. Such a delicate agony, to be so close to her warm embrace... He slid out and in again, still no farther than the ridge just behind the head of his cock. To go deeper would destroy the remaining shreds of his control.

And then she opened her eyes. Trust and openness showed there. She mouthed a single word, "Please," and his control shattered.

He entered her deeply, feeling her muscles protest, listening to her cry out as he filled her. His muscles worked to pull out and plunge in again, her body giving way. A third thrust and she moved with him. She pulled him in, her tight pussy begging, needing to be taken.

God, he wanted to come! But not yet. He still had that modicum of control. Not until he felt her go over the edge. Groaning out his need, he pushed in and held himself inside, tormenting them both.

"Open your eyes, Carla. Let me see you come."

She obeyed, his control over her complete. Agony mingled with ecstasy in her eyes as he commanded her body. She was his to possess, his to own. She gave him everything.

"Come for me, little one. Let me feel..."

The muscles of her pussy contracted painfully around his cock and her body arched. Her eyes lost focus although her gaze never left his face. He'd glimpsed the passion she was capable of before, now it beamed from her in unfettered, raw emotion. She gave her orgasm with every part of her being.

Passion begets passion. His balls tightened painfully and he knew his control was doomed. Never before had a woman given so much of herself so completely. She held nothing back. Her complete submission undid him.

He could hold off no longer. He moved with her, feeding her orgasm, prolonging it. She was beautiful, and she was his. Holding himself still, he relished the pain in his balls, the raw sensitivity of his cock before forcing himself just a hair deeper.

Their bodies convulsed together. The abyss opened and willingly he dropped into it, their souls connected, their bodies one. Her pussy contracted around his cock, the muscles pulling his seed from him in hot spurts. The condom filled and still she urged him on, milking him of every last drop.

And when he was empty, when the world slowly came back into focus, he looked down at the woman who had so totally undone him. A strand of hair had fallen across her face, a face still flushed with their shared passion. Slowly she opened her

eyes and smiled at him.

His arms shook in shock. This woman, a one-night layover in a city he hated, had somehow entered his heart. He wanted her. For more than just this one evening. Lowering himself, he laid his head beside hers, his softening cock still buried deep in her pussy.

"Thank you," he whispered in her ear.

Chapter Four

Carla drifted in a haze of satiated relaxation. Josef had stayed inside her until nature parted them, releasing them both from her firm grip. He'd unlocked the cuffs and removed his condom, then climbed onto the bed beside her, pulling her into his arms, where she drifted between sleep and contentment.

His stomach growled. She chuckled and turned over to face him. His hair, unbound and falling over his shoulders, gave him a rakish air, and the guilty grin did nothing to dispel the image of a satisfied Norseman.

"Sorry 'bout that."

He spoke slowly, replete, his voice as languid as she felt. Did she have any bones left? Apparently so, for she reached up and cupped his face with her hand.

"Smile for me," she told him, her voice as languorous as his.

"Why?" Even as he asked, he did her bidding.

She grinned in return, her fingers exploring the wonderful valleys and ridges of his dimpled cheeks. "Because I like how your face crinkles when you do."

His stomach growled again and he sighed. "Sorry again, but a man's stomach has a mind of its own."

Taking a deep breath, she rolled onto her back and stretched, her body aching in all the right places. His hand fell onto her breast, kneading it, and he moved closer, placing little kisses on her skin. She moaned and ran her hand down his back.

At which point his stomach became positively insistent. She snorted in laughter as he sat up and looked at the offending part of his anatomy.

"I guess I shouldn't have skipped lunch if I was also going to skip dinner."

"You didn't eat lunch? No wonder." Giving a final stretch, Carla sat up. "We need to feed you or you'll faint on the plane back to Egypt."

Josef's eyes grew serious. "I *do* need to go back, Carla."

She put her hand over his. "I know. I'm not asking for anything, Josef."

"I'll be gone for another three months before returning to the university for a semester of teaching."

Carla just nodded, unsure where he was going with this and not wanting to make a fool of herself.

"When I return, will you... I mean, would you be interested in..." His voice trailed off.

Carla smiled and squeezed his hand. "I think Dr. DiPaolo would be very unhappy with us if we didn't."

This time Carla's stomach gurgled and they both burst out laughing. "I skipped lunch as well," she admitted.

"Well then, in this city that never sleeps, let's go find us some food, woman."

"Agreed." She stood and picked up her panties and skirt, still bunched in the corner where he'd thrown them. But his arms were around her before she could untangle them. Turning toward that incredible chest, she reached up and slid a lock of his blond behind his back. He bent to kiss her and she held on to his muscled shoulder, surprised that she could possibly want more after all he'd given her this evening.

And when the kiss ended, he bussed her on the nose and informed her, "After we've eaten, I know a good fetish shop that has a magnificent flogger in the window. And I just happen to know the back that I need to try it out on."

"You do, do you?"

"I do." He kissed her again and Carla felt her pussy clench at the thought of being at his mercy again.

"Then let's eat quickly and go shopping," she murmured against his lips. "I wouldn't want to disappoint Angie by not taking advantage of every moment of this blind date she set up."

"Nor would I, little one, nor would I."

Quickly dressing, Carla marveled at what the day had wrought.

And she still didn't have that damn report.

Grinning, she followed him into the hallway and waited as he closed the door. Maybe she'd pick it up—next time.

Fatman & Robyn

Jaid Black

Prologue

"Fetishes of any sort are a direct result of the Oedipus complex," the doctor sniffed. "Was your mother fat?"

"No."

"Aha! Then your mother was thin and you subconsciously reject your innate attraction to her by fantasizing about plus-sized women."

Jake Chamberlin rolled his eyes and sighed. Fully reclined on Dr. Jordan's couch, he wasn't sure if the Freudian psychiatrist could see his frustration or not. "My mother wasn't thin either," Jake growled, running a hand over the line of his jaw. "She was average. Dead-ass average."

"And your rejection of average has resulted in your current fascination with chubby women. It's so blatantly obvious."

"Blatantly obvious?"

"Yes. A blind man could see it."

I can't believe I'm paying this fucking moron \$300 an hour. "I see," Jake drawled.

The pompous doctor had an answer for everything. He reminded Jake of those TV psychics who changed their interpretations of events based on the answers their

audience members gave. The shrink had missed his calling. He should have been on some obscure cable channel wearing a swami's turban and looking into a crystal ball as he dispensed advice from the nether regions of time and space. Lord knows he might have been more effective.

Closing his eyes, he tuned out Dr. Snake-Oil-Salesman and took a deep breath. The only blatantly obvious thing happening in this room was the realization that this psychoanalyst wouldn't be any more help to Jake than had the other five shrinks who'd preceded him. Six psychiatrists, two faith healers and a weird back-alley voodoo priestess later, fucking a stick-thin model was no more appealing now than it had ever been.

Jake needed to get over this unnatural attraction to what society labeled "chubby chicks", and he needed to do it quickly. The star quarterback of the New York Bloods should have a trophy wife—a young, blonde, stick-thin Barbie doll with fake tits and a sprayed-on tan. That's what all men in his position coveted and he should be no exception to the rule. He didn't like being different. He wanted to be the man society expected him to be.

"...because your mother's average weight was so arousing, you subconsciously began fantasizing about..."

Jake sat up, frowning. He didn't have time for this bullshit. The Bloods had their work cut out for them. One more win and they'd be Super Bowl bound. At age thirty-seven, he knew this was his last shot at the ring. He should have retired two years ago after sustaining his third knee injury, but Jake had wanted to retire as a winner.

He'd deal with his problems after he had that ring on his finger. And, he thought with a grunt, after he found someone who could actually help him.

"This is stupid!" Jake snapped, standing up. At six-foot-five-inches and weighing in the vicinity of two hundred-sixty pounds, he knew he was an intimidating figure to most people. He supposed by the wary look on Dr. Quack's face that the shrink was no exception. He didn't care. The fucker had wasted enough of his time. "I don't want to fuck my mother. Not consciously, subconsciously or unconsciously!" *I'll have nightmares tonight just from the suggestion!* "Using your own logic, I think *you* are the one who wants to fuck his mother. It's all you can think about!"

"Well, of course I do on a subconscious level," Dr. Jordan whined. "All men do."

Jake grimaced. He would need counseling to get over this counseling. His brown eyes narrowed. "Thank God I'm not like all men." He picked up his leather coat and shrugged into it. "Get some help, dude," he advised as he stalked toward the door. "Seriously."

Chapter One

Three months later

Robyn DiMarco decided that if today wasn't the most aggravating day of her thirty-four years of life, it certainly rated right up there. She had woken this morning to hair that wouldn't be tamed, broken plumbing, loud garbage trucks and a coffeepot on the fritz. To top it all off, the elevator in the co-op she lived and worked in had apparently joined a union and opted to go on strike. The clock hadn't even chimed noon and already she was tired, hungry, caffeine-deprived and, six flights of stairs later, rather surly.

"Yo! You gonna fix this elevator in my lifetime or what?"

"I could crawl to Jersey faster than this!"

"What about the water? My kids' laundry doesn't clean itself, ya know!"

Exiting the stairwell, Robyn walked through the lobby and headed toward the front door. Completely in agreement with the other co-op owners who were bickering back and forth with the building's maintenance manager, she harrumphed her solidarity before opening the heavy door standing between herself and Mulberry Street. Ordinarily she would have been polite and at least said a passing hello to her

neighbors, but she needed a cup or three of coffee before politeness was biologically capable of setting in.

Besides, she was a writer. Coffee was a must for her occupation, and those suspense novels weren't going to write themselves.

"Yo! Robby! Where you going?"

Robyn sighed. She wasn't in the mood to be civil to the others in her co-op. The fact that she was related to all of them made her feel even less inclined. That was the good part about family, she conceded. You could have your bitchy moments and all would still be forgiven. Well...eventually, anyway.

"What are you? My damn keeper?" Robyn asked in fluent Italian, turning to face her brother. "I need air and I need coffee. And not necessarily in that order."

Dominic "Nicky" DiMarco flashed her a grin. The same devilish smile that had broken the hearts of countless women. "Bring me back some, sis," he returned in English. "Coffee, I mean. You can keep the air."

She rolled her eyes. "Your generosity knows no bounds."

"That's what she said."

"And that is soooo last Tuesday, Nicky."

"So is your hair."

"That's what he said."

"That don't make any kinda sense!"

Robyn grunted, conceding defeat. She'd pick a verbal fight with her brother later.

Like after she'd pumped enough caffeine in her system to regain her usual bitchy wit. "I'll bring you back some coffee," Robyn growled as she turned and reopened the front door. Her speech reverted to Italian, the constant flip-flop in languages a natural part of life for those native to New York City's Little Italy. "And a muzzle for your mouth."

"And cannoli," Nicky called out to her rapidly departing backside. "Plain! No chocolate chips."

Robyn smiled her first real smile of the day. Her annoyingly loveable Romeo of a brother would get his cannoli. And he'd get it with chocolate chips.

* * * * *

Jake decided that being a freshly minted Super Bowl hero was anti-climatic when you didn't have a sexy woman to celebrate with and fawn all over you.

That his idea of what made a woman sexy wasn't shared by the average male was starting to matter less and less. Especially since he couldn't even pretend anymore. Shutting his eyes and fantasizing that whatever stick-thin model he happened to be fucking at the time looked a lot less sticklike and a lot more voluptuous no longer worked. As soon as he touched her body and his hands felt nothing but skin stretched over bones...

He frowned, recalling his last disaster of a date with that Swedish underwear model. His dick had gone limp inside her. He supposed his cock was bigger while soft than most men's were while fully erect, because Ingrid hadn't appeared to notice.

He'd managed to keep up the charade until she got her rocks off, faked an orgasm at the precise moment she climaxed, made some dumb excuse about needing to wake up early the next morning and got the fuck out of there. That had been four long months ago.

Sitting in the far corner of Cha Chas, his favorite bistro in Little Italy, Jake absently toyed with his Super Bowl ring while he did his best to go unnoticed. He wasn't in the mood to sign autographs or talk to any dipshit reporters. He was in the mood to eat pasta and get laid. A man with a sexual appetite like his couldn't be celibate for this long without a consequence. Judging from how rock hard his dick was for no reason, he supposed a serious case of blue balls was that consequence.

Sitting with his back toward most of the other patrons, Jake broodingly stared at the bistro's pastry counter. He asked himself why he cared what other people thought about his sexual preference. For the first time in his life, he could understand how a gay man felt when he knew it was time to come out of the closet. Jake was as far from gay as a man could be, but it was the best analogy he could think of.

I love chubby chicks. So fucking what?

At least he didn't get wood from fantasizing about his own mother like that psycho shrink. He didn't want to eat dirt, get shit on or smell strange women's underwear, like on that TV special he'd seen about fetishes. And he wasn't anything like Tony, the Bloods' star receiver. Holy shit! What a mess that guy was. What the press didn't know about his teammate—but Jake unfortunately did—was that Tony would only date women who were unnaturally hairy in all the wrong places and who didn't mind him wearing a diaper to bed before they fucked.

Jake pursed his lips. Why Tony had confided that particular piece of information in him, he had no idea. To this day he couldn't pass by a box of Pampers in the grocery store without grimacing.

Deep in distressed thought, Jake absently ran a hand through his thick mane of hair, which reminded him that he needed to stop by the barber shop to get it buzzed off. He'd never let his dark hair go so long without a trim. He preferred to keep it crew-cut short and the shit was damn near to his shoulders now.

Distraction and depression, he decided. The state of his hair, like everything else not working in his life, was a direct result of distraction and depression.

"Ciao, bella signora!"

"Ciao, Marco! Ho bisogno di cannoli."

"Nicky?"

"Sì."

Jake glanced over to the pastry counter in time to watch one of Cha Chas' employees share a laugh with a customer. He started to look away, uninterested because he couldn't understand a word they were saying, but found himself doing a double take instead.

He stilled. His damn dick that wouldn't stay down for nothing got impossibly stiffer. "Holy shit," he mumbled.

Jake's dark eyes narrowed in desire as he watched the embodiment of his every sexual fantasy throw her head back and laugh. Her laughter was vibrant, enthusiastic and very real. And, he thought, unable to stop himself from cracking a half-smile, her

happiness was apparently contagious.

The mystery woman finished her conversation with the bistro's employee, then turned and walked toward the empty table next to his. She didn't notice Jake, which was fine by him, because it gave him more time to stare at her.

You. Are. Fucking. Hot.

The more he saw, the harder he got.

She was average in height and very, very curvy. She wore a tight little yellow sundress that, thankfully, left little to the imagination. Her breasts were round and large, her hips wide and provocative. He loved the way they swayed as she walked, tugging at the sundress, forcing her to show off legs that Jake wanted wrapped around his waist in the worst way. Her thighs were fleshy, not bony, thin or muscular. As she sat down at the table nearest him, Jake couldn't help but notice her tummy wasn't flat either. There was flesh there—sexy, hot, rounded flesh that looked so ripe and perfect.

Everything about her looked...right.

She didn't look stereotypically Italian-American, not that he would have minded if she had. Jake had always found women of Mediterranean heritage to be the embodiment of sexiness. But Italian women, at least in theory, were supposed to have dark hair and eyes. Jake's mystery woman had the curly hair he expected to see in this part of town, but it was a warm honey color that appeared to be natural. Her eyes, sparkly green, were definitely real and not contact lenses. He could always tell when someone with naturally dark eyes was wearing fakes because the lenses

never seemed to completely cover the iris of the eyes.

Her skin, however, was very Mediterranean. She had a natural olive undertone that had darkened into a fuck-me bronze with the sun. The contrast of brown skin against light eyes was powerful, causing her baby greens to glow just a little.

Jake shifted in his seat. He blew out a slow, measured breath and counted to ten. He wished that he'd masturbated before he'd left his apartment because if his cock got any harder, it was conceivable that it might explode.

Fuck! I need to rub one out before I fucking die.

And then she smiled at him and his dick situation became unbearable. She had dimples, for fuck's sake. Everything he'd ever fantasized about in a woman and she had dimples to boot.

Jake tried to smile back but, judging by the expression on her face, he doubted he'd succeeded. She gave him the same look he'd seen other women give to those crazy, unbathed dudes with ZZ Top beards who walked around Times Square talking to themselves and shouting at passersby to repent because the end of times was near.

Jake's mystery woman quickly averted her gaze and sipped from her cup of Italian coffee. She glanced everywhere but at him, apparently trying to stave off any possibility that he might engage her in conversation that involved telling her to repent.

Great! Why didn't I masturbate before I left this morning?!

Pissed off at himself, his dick and the universe in general, Jake decided it was

time to pull out the mental big guns. He thought back on Dr. Jordan and his belief that all men wanted to fuck their mothers. Jake forced himself to consider what his own mom might look like naked—*Jesus H Christ!*—and the very image was, thank the Lord above, enough to make his cock deflate faster than a popped balloon.

Jake whimpered, the image in his mind's eye more painful than his previous erection. The woman of his fevered fantasies gave him an almost imperceptible sideways glance. Clearing her throat, she stood up and moved to a different table.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuuuuuuck!

Robyn had thought the guy sitting in front of her was the epitome of handsome, but she quickly surmised that his looks were only part of the package—and she certainly didn't want what came with them. When she smiled at him, his face turned red and a pained expression crossed his face. She wasn't certain if he was insane or if he needed to use the toilet—either way, no good.

Too bad, too. He really was good-looking with his dark hair and eyes, strong jaw and Roman nose. And his body...

She sighed. No words could do that hard gladiator's body a lick of justice. And wasn't it her luck that the first guy who'd managed to snag her attention in months was either crazy, constipated or both. Could this day get any more annoying? She frowned, doubting it.

Glancing away, Robyn pretended to be inordinately fascinated by her cup of *caffè con panna*. She didn't want to embarrass the man or make him feel inferior in any

way. He couldn't help that he was different, after all.

Poor man. Now that she thought about it, he was probably one of those idiot savants like on *Rainman*. Dustin Hoffman had deserved that Oscar, she decided. His portrayal of Raymond had been hauntingly reminiscent of the man sitting before her. The coincidence tugged at her heartstrings.

The man whimpered, garnering her attention. He squeezed his eyes closed real tight and started mumbling to himself.

Robyn's jaw dropped. She quickly decided that her heartstrings could go to hell.

This guy was no idiot savant. He was just plain crazy. While the former produced empathy, the latter invoked nothing but good old-fashioned fear.

She stood up, praying to God the man was too absorbed in his own delirious thoughts to notice. Feeling his dark gaze following her, she inwardly cursed then motioned to Marco to hurry up with her brother's cannoli.

Robyn plopped down on a chair at a different table while she waited. It was official. This was definitely the most aggravating day of her life.

Chapter Two

He was following her. She hadn't visually confirmed the hunch yet, but she knew he was. All of her senses screamed that she was being tailed. The situation was alarming. All Robyn had wanted was a damn cup of coffee and now she was being hunted by Conan the Crazy, Constipated Barbarian.

Fine, she thought, with grim satisfaction. He could go ahead and follow her home. Nicky would be there. Her brother would take a baseball bat to his head before turning him over to the police. Or worse for the loony tune, the Mulberry Street version of the police.

Robyn picked up her pace. There was something familiar about the guy and she couldn't pinpoint precisely what it was. Had he followed her before and she simply hadn't noticed? The dramatic writer in her sternly weighed that possibility.

Bah! It didn't matter. Now that she'd worked out in her mind how this scenario would play out, she was very eager to get home. She might not even tease Nicky with the chocolate chip cannoli before giving him the box of plain ones. She'd never been more desirous of her brother's presence in her life. It was amazing how Nicky'd gone from being an annoying little shit to the hero of her heart in the blink of an eye.

Still, she needed to know if her hunch was correct. Maybe the stranger wasn't tracking her. Perhaps her writer's imagination had taken over, causing her to feel unnecessary alarm.

Robyn came to an abrupt halt in the middle of Mulberry Street. A bag of coffees and two boxes of cannoli in her hands, she whirled around like a waitressing pro, spilling nothing. Her heart rate picked up as she scanned the crowd for her nemesis. Little Italy was jammed with tourists as usual, making the task somewhat challenging.

Her breath caught. There he was.

Eyes wide as saucers, Robyn spun back around and ran like hell.

She was grateful Marco had wrapped the coffee tightly because the last thing she needed was scorching liquid burning the hell out of her. Never mind the fact that her frazzled brain was going to need one of the cups as soon as she reached the safety of her home.

Robyn could hear her crazed stalker muttering something as he closed in on her from behind. *Holy shit! Nicky better be within shouting distance!*

She was almost to her building. Another few steps and—

Two large, maniacal hands seized Robyn from behind. She gasped, her heart falling into the pit of her stomach. Half a dozen scenarios about how to escape flooded her mind, including throwing her precious, hot coffee right in her attacker's face. Uncertain what to do—and really wanting her damn coffee unscathed—Robyn did the only other thing she could think of. She screamed.

"Nickyyyyyyyyyyy!"

Jake had never felt like a bigger moron. He should have caught up to her long ago and tried to explain himself—minus the erection part—but he'd been too busy ogling her round, sexy ass to think straight. And now she was screaming for some damn Nicky person. He just hoped Nicky was another woman and not her boyfriend. *After all this, she'd better not be spoken for!*

"Hey, hey, calm down," Jake urged, easing up on her shoulders. "I'm not going to hurt you. Iya..." He tried to think of a plausible explanation for following her. Preferably one that didn't make him come across as the stalker he was behaving like. "You forgot something at Cha Chas and I was trying to catch up so I could give it to you."

Her screeching came to an abrupt halt. He let go of her shoulders altogether so she could turn around and face him.

Fuck! The woman was too beautiful, too sexy. His damn dick started stiffening again, which was the last thing he needed to happen at this point. *Mom naked...mom naked...mom naked...*

"Are you okay?" the woman asked, sounding unsure of the situation. She spoke to him in a slow, loud, overly patient tone. The same tone people tended to use when speaking to foreigners. Or unstable nutjobs. "Do you need me to get you some help?"

Jake frowned. "Lady, I'm not a psychopath."

"I'm sure you're not."

That same damn tone of voice. Jake sighed. "I know I was acting like one," he muttered. "It's just..." *Tell the truth, but not the whole truth or you'll appear even weirder than you already do.* "I— It's been a very long day already."

She said nothing to that. Hopefully that was progress.

Fuck! He'd never felt so inept around a woman in his life. He tended to come across as arrogant and a little too sure of himself. But around her? He might as well be drooling in a cup or frothing at the mouth. One more fuck-up and he'd be wearing the "village idiot" sign around his neck.

"Look, I'm sorry," Jake said sincerely. "I could tell I frightened you back at the bistro and I just wanted to apologize."

Her expression was still wary, but softening. Her shoulders even looked like they were unclenching a bit.

"I was...uh...I was in a lot of physical pain." *That's true at least.* "And I think that physical pain got lost in translation," he admitted. He ran a hand over his jaw. "When I saw your expression, I realized I probably looked crazy."

She chuckled softly. Definite progress. He tried to grin back, but Jake had never been much of a smiler. Hopefully that wouldn't count against him and his half-grin would suffice.

"Well, a little crazy," she confessed. Those sexy dimples popped out again. "At first I thought you were...you know...special."

"Special?"

"Like Rainman."

"Shit."

She laughed. Jesus, she had the best laugh.

"And then when you started mumbling to yourself, I admit I thought that you might be...uh..."

"Eleven eggs short of a dozen?"

"Yeah," she chuckled, her green eyes amused. "Something like that."

He found the situation amusing too, but he still didn't want her to think of him like that. It wasn't the world's best position for asking a lady out. "I'm Jake," he said. He gave her a sheepish look. "AKA 'Simple Simon'."

She laughed again, a warm, welcoming sound that made her seem impossibly more beautiful to him than she already did. Now if he could manage not to fuck things up again they might make progress of the dating kind.

"I'm Robyn," she said, smiling. "It's nice to meet you. I'd shake your hand, but, uh..."

Jake's eyes darted down to the bag and two boxes in her hands. "Let me help you with that," he offered. "I mean—if you're okay with that."

She started to say something—but just then a big Italian dude came flying out the door of the building Robyn had tried to get into before Jake had stopped her. The guy had a baseball bat in his hand and a lot of attitude written across his face.

This had to be Nicky. Jake's jaw tightened. Definitely not a woman.

"Yo! Who the fuck are you? Why the fuck are you messing with my little sis—"

Robyn was his sister. Just his sister!

"Yo, Jake Chamberlin! *Pisan!*" The baseball bat was quickly tossed aside. Nicky pounded Jake on the back, smiling from ear to ear. Jake shook his hand and nodded back.

Robyn's eyes widened. "You know him, Nicky?"

"What? You don't?" Nicky sighed like a martyr. He looked at Jake. "My sister...she don't watch sports, bro."

Jake had figured that out long ago. Most women would have been thrilled to find themselves sitting next to Jake Chamberlin back at the bistro. Robyn had been anything but thrilled. Not only had she failed to recognize him, she'd thought he was batshit crazy.

"Yeah," Jake muttered. "I had that feeling."

"Robyn, this is Jake-fuckin-Chamberlin!" Nicky went on. "The quarterback of the New York Bloods!"

"Former quarterback," Jake cut in. "I retired after the Super Bowl."

"The Super Bowl *winner!* And hometown hero, *pisan.*"

Once upon a time Jake had enjoyed his status as a sports icon. In this moment, he found himself wishing Nicky hadn't enlightened her. He wanted Robyn to get to know *him*—the real him—not the guy who'd taken the New York Bloods to Super Bowl victory.

"Nicky, here," Robyn said, loading him down with everything in her hands. "Would you put these in my apartment for me? Your cannoli is in one of the boxes and make sure you leave me one of the coffees."

"But—"

"Dominic—please...?"

He sighed. "All right." He nodded at Jake. "Good to meet you, bro. Congrats on the ring."

"Thank you," Jake said. He gave Nicky a firm pat on the back. "Good to meet you too."

Robyn watched her brother disappear into the building before turning to face Jake. "I'm sorry about my brother. He lives and breathes sports." She rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "I've never seen him make all over another man like that. It was creeping me out, to tell you the truth."

Jake chuckled. Jesus, the woman could even make him laugh. "I'm used to it. No biggie."

A thoughtful look crossed Robyn's face, as if she were trying to figure out a puzzle. "You looked familiar to me back at Cha Chas and I guess that's why. I've probably seen you on TV or something before." She shrugged. "Who knows. Anyway, a quarterback, huh? That means you play...uh...don't tell me...give me a second... Baseball? No! Football! Football, right?"

Jake felt like a deer caught in headlights. He supposed he didn't have to worry about her wanting to get to know the quarterback rather than the real him. She

hadn't even guessed the right sport the first time. He didn't know whether to be offended, humored or relieved. He chose the latter two.

"Football," Jake murmured.

She nodded. "It's good you retired. Too violent in my opinion."

"You're telling me. I sustained three knee injuries during my career."

Her expression softened. "That explains the pain you were in."

"Huh?"

"The pain you were in at Cha Chas."

"Yeahhh," Jake drawled, thinking quickly. "It was my knee." *My wie-knee but never mind.* "Very painful."

"I'm sorry." Her smile was sympathetic. "Look," Robyn said, "I think I've taken up enough of your time. It was very sweet of you to come explain yourself. But I'm sure you have other things to do and I need to get to work."

I just want to be near you. "Yeah, sorry if I made you late to work."

She waved that away. "I work from home so it's no inconvenience." She smiled, the twinkle back in her gorgeous eyes. She held out her hand to shake his. "It was nice to meet you, Jake Chamberlin. I'm Robyn DiMarco. The guy with the baseball bat was my brother, Dominic DiMarco. We call him Nicky."

So she wasn't married. And if she had been in the past, she now loathed the guy enough to ditch his last name and take back her original one. Good.

"Robyn DiMarco. A beautiful name for a beautiful lady." Jake took her hand, but

rather than shake it, he held it to his lips for a soft kiss. "The pleasure is all mine."

She visibly gulped. Was that good or was that bad?

"Yes, well..." She blinked and shook her head a little. "If you're ever in our neighborhood again..." She grinned, regaining her composure. "I won't run from you screaming next time."

Jake smiled. Well, a three-quarter smile. It was a first for him, but then he could barely remember his own name around this woman. "Sounds good."

Robyn started to walk away. He wanted to go with her in the worst way, but he knew it would be too much too soon.

"Oh!" Robyn said, spinning around to face him. "You said I forgot something at Cha Chas?"

"Yeah, you did," Jake murmured.

"What was it?"

"My number."

Chapter Three

They met for coffee at Cha Chas three days later. Robyn couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed so much and so hard. Jake wasn't prone toward smiling and probably came off as overly serious to most people, but she'd quickly figured him out. He was amusing as hell once you understood his dry wit and facial expressions. His lips didn't curve up very much, but his dark eyes lit up and danced in a playful manner quite frequently.

"I thought you were Italian when we first met," Robyn admitted. "You definitely look it. But your last name is Chamberlin...what is your heritage?"

"Trailer park."

Robyn grinned. "I'm serious."

"Unfortunately so am I," Jake returned. He shrugged. "I have no idea where my people came from. I got my mom and that's it. My dad left when I was a kid."

"No brothers or sisters?"

"Nope."

"Cousins?"

"Not that I know of."

Robyn's heart wrenched for him. She couldn't imagine growing up like that. She had been surrounded by people who loved her. She only had one sibling, true, but her family as a whole was huge. "I'm sorry."

As to Jake's heritage, she'd never before met somebody who didn't know where they came from, but then, she had lived her entire life on Mulberry Street. In Little Italy, you grew up not only knowing you were Italian, but you also knew the exact village your people heralded from. And every last one of her friends and acquaintances still had relatives back in those villages in the Old Country.

"No need to be sorry. My mom and I are real close. I'm just glad I was able to get her out of that trailer park and into a nice apartment near me."

Robyn smiled. His family consisted of only two, but he was loyal to it. A good sign, to her way of thinking.

"So you're divorced," Jake said, switching topics. "How long?"

"A long time," Robyn answered. She blew out a breath as she tried to remember. "At least ten years."

"Can I ask what went wrong?"

"We didn't see eye to eye." Robyn shrugged. "Paulie—that was his name—he thought it was okay to get jealous of other men and beat me up for it. I disagreed."

Jake's eyes narrowed. "I'll kill him."

Something in that simple, protective statement made her heart flutter in a way it never had before. She had quickly surmised that Jake was the jealous type—he'd already stared down three men just for looking at her—but he'd never hurt her.

Robyn knew the difference. Jake was territorial and protective, just like Nicky, but he wasn't abusive.

"Too late. Someone else already did," Robyn admitted.

Jake's eyebrows shot up.

"Let's just say there were a lot of people around here who didn't like him. But no, my family had nothing to do with it. Not that Nicky didn't do a little damage. But my brother's baseball bat was the least of Paulie's problems."

Jake inclined his head. "Got you."

The conversation turned to various topics, some serious, some humorous. The more time Robyn spent with Jake, the more she didn't want their afternoon together to end. She didn't know where this was going, if anywhere, but she certainly was enjoying the journey toward figuring it out.

Jake Chamberlin. Broodingly handsome, powerfully built and filled with surprises. Just when she discovered a new layer to his personality, he surprised her with yet another one.

Robyn inwardly sighed. If she didn't watch herself, she could easily fall for this man.

Jake had never felt so comfortable with a woman in his life. He still got a painful hard-on every time Robyn smiled, or bent over, or breathed for that matter, but he also genuinely enjoyed her company. He actually liked talking to her. Talking! Conversation had never been his strong suit, especially with women, but it seemed

to come naturally with her.

And he was starting to pick up on something else too. Judging by the way other men kept staring at Robyn, he realized he wasn't the only man who preferred a fleshy body to skin stretched over bones. He just wished they'd stare at any woman *but* her. Still, all the local men who walked into Cha Chas with women on their arms seemed to share his preference for females who were ripe all over.

Maybe his fetish wasn't a fetish after all. Maybe he was actually normal. Hell, he'd only ever lived in society's two extremes—trailer park and ridiculous wealth. Both of those extremes held up emaciated women as the end-all, be-all of beauty—and both were Whitey McWhite town.

After thirty-seven years, Jake was finally starting to understand what "it's a cultural thing" meant. And he finally felt as if he'd found the culture he belonged in. He was an Italian trapped in Trailer Park Bob's life.

It was time to sell the hunting rifle and trailer hitch; at long last, Jake had found his way home.

* * * * *

Robyn looked at herself from all angles in the full-length mirror. She smoothed out her dress and then played with her hair. Should she wear it up or down? She frowned, trying to decide what would look best with her little red dress and matching heels. In the end, she opted to loosely pin her hair up and let a few tendrils of curls fall to frame her face.

She smiled into the mirror. She looked pretty good, if she did say so herself.

"He's gonna love you, sis. You look gorgeous."

Wide-eyed, Robyn whirled around. "Nicky! I didn't hear you come in." She affectionately bopped him on the head. "You scared the piss out of me."

"I don't see nothing runnin' down your legs."

She frowned. "That's gross."

He grinned. "Grossing you out is my brotherly duty."

"Pfft! Not tonight. My nerves are already on edge."

Her brother's expression grew serious. His conversation flipped into Italian. "What's going on? You change your mind about Jake? I can make up an excuse for you if you want me to."

She waved that away. "No, no, I haven't changed my mind about him. It's...you know...our family." She sighed. "They can be so embarrassing."

Nicky chuckled, his speech reverting back to English. "Yeah but they *are* our family. Better to rip that Band-Aid off now on your first date and get it over with."

"Second date. We met for coffee at Cha Chas already."

"Oh yeah. How'd that go?"

She sighed, recalling it as if it were yesterday. Then again, it *had* been yesterday. "Wonderful," she breathed out, probably sounding too nostalgic. "We talked for hours. I've never had that instant connection with anyone before, not even with Paulie. It's a little scary," Robyn admitted.

"I'd say that's a good thing, seeing as how Paulie turned out to be a piece of shit."

Robyn snorted at that as she took a seat on the edge of her bed. "You got me there. Still," she sighed, "Jake will probably run for the hills after he meets the family, Nicky." She grinned. "I know I would."

Nicky winked. "I don't know. Uncle Vito can be pretty funny."

Robyn snorted at that. "If you call making farting sounds under your armpit after you've had one too many bottles of Chianti 'funny', then yeah, he's a real riot."

* * * * *

Robyn buried her face in her hands while Uncle Vito farted out the national anthem under his armpit. She should have known better than to let Jake meet her family this soon. Armpit farting aside, a man accustomed to a family of two probably found their sheer numbers overwhelming.

Every time the DiMarcos had a family get-together, they locked down their entire building on Mulberry Street, left the doors to everybody's apartments wide open and made their way from one family member's place to the next, eating, drinking, laughing and dancing. Ordinarily Robyn lived for these nights, but then, ordinarily she wasn't hoping to impress a non-Italian man who didn't have his own version of Uncle Vito back at home.

"Eat something, Robby," her mother chided. "Your Jake is enjoying himself. Don't worry so much."

"Maaaa," Robyn whined, raising her head. "Can you please ask your brother to behave?"

"Bah!" Maria DiMarco waved that away. "Vito is harmless. Besides, he's like a Band-Aid. Better to rip it off now than—"

"Nicky already gave me the Band-Aid speech."

"There you go. Besides, it looks like your Jake is laughing."

Her Jake. She wanted him to be *her* Jake. She just hoped tonight didn't irreparably damage her chances.

Robyn sighed and decided to make the best of the situation. She *was* hungry and there was no turning back now. Besides, she thought, bemused as her gaze zeroed in on Jake, he really was laughing. She shook her head. The appreciation of rude noises was apparently a source of male amusement regardless of their roots.

"Your father is really taking to him," Maria whispered. "I was a little worried he wouldn't when you told us he wasn't Italian."

"So was I," Robyn confided. "I guess being the former quarterback of Pop's precious Bloods was close enough to Italian for him."

Maria chuckled. "It would seem so." She affectionately grabbed Robyn's chin, forcing her to look up. "Come, baby. Enjoy yourself! I made all your favorite foods and I'd like to see you eat them."

Robyn smiled. "I love you, Ma."

"I love you too, *bambina*. Now have some fun!"

Robyn nodded. Taking a deep breath, she stood up and decided to behave like her usual, gregarious self. Jake would either love it or hate it. She decided it would be his loss if he hated it.

Jake watched, mesmerized, as Robyn danced to traditional Italian music with her father and cousins. Nicky had explained that the dance was called *Tarantella Napoletana* and that it originated in Naples, the birthplace of the DiMarco family. It was beautiful—*she* was beautiful, and breathtaking.

He had fallen in lust at first sight with Robyn. He hadn't expected something deeper to come from carnal attraction, but he'd be a damn liar if he said his thoughts hadn't already strayed that way a time or ten. He loved everything about her. Her smile, her laughter, her conversation and her family. And then there was the small matter of her not exactly small body...

Fuck! There goes my dick again.

"My sister has always been a good dancer," Nicky said with pride.

Jake shifted in his seat. He'd been so lost in thoughts of Robyn that he'd forgotten her brother was seated right next to him. "Yeah," he hoarsely agreed. "She's amazing."

Jake cleared his throat and looked away from Robyn. He was pretty sure a change in scenery was the only thing that would help his dick go down. "Something ironic," Jake said, glancing at Nicky. "She has the same name as my favorite suspense writer."

Nicky grinned. "You want to know something more ironic?"

"What's that?"

"My sister *is* your favorite suspense writer."

It took a lot to startle Jake. Dominic DiMarco had managed to do just that.

"Robyn is...she's *that* Robyn?!"

"The one and only."

"I thought those books were written by a dude!"

Nicky shrugged. "She never lets her picture get put on the jacket covers. Sexism, she says."

"Sexism?"

"She told me female suspense writers aren't backed by their publishers as seriously as male ones, so if they don't have ambiguous names they usually take male pseudonyms. Robyn happened to have a name that could go either way."

"Why don't they back them?"

"Don't know. Maybe they think suspense fans won't read a woman's work. Kinda like how romance fans probably won't read a novel written by Bob Jones."

"But she's famous enough now that it wouldn't matter."

Nicky winked. "True. Robby doesn't try to conceal it so much these days, but she does like her anonymity."

Jake understood that particular desire all too well. Now that he was retired he wanted to fall off society's radar and lead a normal life. Get married, have kids—that

kind of stuff. He hoped the transition from football hero to average Joe wouldn't be long in coming. It wasn't like he was a movie star or rock singer.

Nicky continued talking, but his voice was drowned out by the music and Jake's thoughts. Now Jake understood why Robyn had been inordinately fascinated yesterday by what he'd had to say about his favorite writer's books—they were her books! He should have been angry that she'd semi-deceived him, but he wasn't. She'd wanted him to like the real her, not the writer her. The same as he'd wanted Robyn to like the real him.

Jesus. In her own right, the woman was as famous as Jake. Had he thought being a quarterback would impress her? It hadn't. She undoubtedly knew some of the same people he knew...she'd just chosen not to join their superficial circles. And now that Jake had gotten a taste of her world, he didn't blame her.

Hell, he envied her.

Chapter Four

The last month had been pure bliss for Robyn. She and Jake had been all but inseparable. When she wasn't working and he didn't have to put in an appearance at some event he was still bound by contract to attend, they'd been together. In another month he wouldn't have any contractual obligations remaining, and he'd already told her that he hoped that meant they'd be spending even more time enjoying each other's company.

Robyn smiled to herself. She had always been the type who enjoyed dating, but she'd never wanted a guy around all the time. Jake, it seemed, was changing her mind.

But there was one rather serious problem...

Robyn blew out a breath as she stood on the balcony of Jake's apartment. Inside, Jake was throwing a very belated Super Bowl party for his teammates and their significant others. Robyn was enjoying herself for the most part, but she didn't have very much in common with any of the other female guests. They were the type of Manhattanites she'd spent her entire life avoiding—superficial, pompous and consumed with self-importance.

She'd always found "the trendies", as she liked to call them, something of a conundrum. They were all about appearing classy, yet oblivious to the fact that their lack of tact and inclusiveness actually made them classless.

Besides, she had been raised on Mulberry Street. In Little Italy, people stuck together whether rich or poor, famous or unknown. Everything was about "the family" and "the family" included the entire community. Her world was so different from the Upper East Side, where "the family" included Me, Myself and I.

A chilly evening wind swept the balcony, causing Robyn to shiver. She took a few steps back into an alcove to hide her bare arms and legs from the elements. She knew she couldn't stay out here much longer without appearing rude, but she'd really needed the mental break the solitude of the balcony provided. Just a few more precious minutes and she'd rejoin Jake inside.

The doors to the balcony swung open, catching Robyn off guard. She instinctively took a big step backward, farther into the alcove.

A gaggle of blonde women—fashion models, if she remembered correctly—walked out onto the balcony with champagne flutes in their hands. They were quickly joined by four men who still played for the Bloods. Robyn wondered if she should clear her throat so they'd know she was out here too, but the next words she heard caused her to decide against that.

"What the hell is Jake doing with that cow?" one of the blondes asked.

Another blonde giggled. "He's parading her around like he actually thinks she's pretty! Did he lose a bet?"

"Oh come on," a burly redheaded guy said, "she's the ultimate catch."

"The ultimate catch?" the first blonde repeated. Her tone was pompously amused. "How so?"

"She's the ultimate catch if you're a fisherman," the redhead explained. He grinned. "The bigger the catch, the bigger the trophy!"

Laughter broke out on the balcony. Robyn's eyes widened and her shoulders tensed.

"Jake caught himself a whale! Would that be first prize for a Podunk fisherman?"

"Absolutely."

"Hey now," an African-American man cut in. "This ain't cool." He shook his head as if disgusted, immediately endearing himself to Robyn. "Y'all can think what you want, but it don't mean you got the right to say it. And I happen to think his girl is damn hot!"

A single tear tracked down Robyn's cheek. She was grateful to Jake's friend for defending her to the others, especially since the feisty Robyn she'd been all her life was reacting more like a frozen statue than an angry she-warrior. But then, she had never thought of herself as fat before—their entire conversation had thrown her off-kilter. Where she came from, she'd always been considered attractive and desirable, yet everyone here except Tyrone apparently saw her as quite the opposite.

"Tyrone, please," one of the models returned. "That's a nice speech, but Jake is embarrassing himself by being seen with that cow. Besides," she pointed out by waving a hand, "I don't see you escorting Moby Dick to any Bloods parties."

"You don't see me escorting *nobody* to a Bloods party because girls from Harlem got no interest in being around mean, skinny bitches like y'all." His ebony face crinkled in disgust. "Go inside and eat something you'll puke up later. Roger, Tony, Jeff—get these bitches out of my fuckin' sight."

"Calm down, bro," the redhead said, holding up his hands. "You don't need to be rude to—"

"Apparently I do. Get the fuck out of my sight!"

The blondes stared open-mouthed at Tyrone even as the other three football players whisked them off the balcony and closed the door behind them. Robyn stood there in the shadows shivering. She felt frozen, unable to move. The only warmth she could feel was around her eyes, where tears she refused to let spill battled to get out.

Please don't see me, Tyrone. Thank you for your kindness, but please don't see me like this.

Too late. Robyn knew she'd been spotted the second Tyrone glanced toward the alcove. His eyes widened in recognition. And still she couldn't move.

"Robyn," Tyrone said quietly, walking toward her, "I'm sorry you heard all that." He stopped in front of her and placed his hands on her shivering shoulders. She found herself grateful for the much-needed warmth and gentle human contact. His kindness caused another one of those damn tears to trickle down. "They just a bunch of stank-ass, meth-addict bitches." He raised one giant hand to her face and softly swiped at the rogue tear. "And they jealous because you, girl, managed to get Jake

while all them done tried and failed.”

Robyn found her first smile. It was small, but it was still a smile.

“They think I’m fat and ugly,” Robyn quietly stated. “I’ve never heard anybody talk about me so meanly before.”

“That’s because it ain’t true!” Tyrone vehemently assured her. “Girl, I got wood the second I saw you.” He flashed a grin that showed off perfect teeth. “Don’t be tellin’ Jake that though.”

She searched his handsome face. He was truly a gracious, big-hearted gentleman. “Thank you. For everything.”

He nodded in understanding. “Anything else I can do to help?”

Robyn pondered that question for a moment. “Actually there is.”

“What’s that?”

“Can you get me out of here unseen by anyone?” she whispered. “Even Jake?” She shook her head faintly. “I don’t want him to see me like this.”

Tyrone slowly nodded. “Done.”

Chapter Five

Robyn should have taken a cab back to Mulberry Street, but that would have involved talking to the driver, however briefly, and she wasn't ready to speak to anyone. Lost in thought, she opted to walk instead.

The rain started hammering down not even ten minutes into her journey home and continued all the way into the streets of Little Italy. She was drenched from head to toe, but couldn't find the energy to care. All she could think about was what she'd heard on the balcony.

Jake is embarrassing himself by being seen with that cow...

Was he embarrassing himself? They lived in two totally separate worlds and apparently in his world, beauty was much different than it was in hers.

In Robyn's experience, outward beauty required fleshy thighs, heavy breasts, wide hips and a noticeable tummy. To the men on Mulberry Street, this was the embodiment of desirability and equated to fertility and healthiness in their minds.

And *true* beauty...well, that was something intangible, something that radiated outward from within. Beauty was in the vivaciousness in which you danced, the love of life that radiated across your face when you broke bread with the family, the

joyous way you made others feel about themselves.

Skinny or thick, true beauty had no look to it.

By the time Robyn dragged herself up to her apartment, she was cold, soaked and shivering.

Her family was waiting for her in Nicky's apartment across the hall, as if they knew what had happened tonight. As they sprang in near unison out of Nicky's front door, she could see the concern written all over their faces.

As it turned out, they *did* know. At least a little of the story.

"Jake is looking all over for you!" Robyn's mother chastised. "He's worried sick and so were we!"

"What happened, sis?" Nicky asked, throwing a towel around her. "Why did you leave without telling Jake?"

Robyn still couldn't find the energy to speak. At least not about that. "I need a hot bath," she said unblinkingly, her voice scratchy. "I'm so tired and cold."

"Of course, *bambina*," her father, Louie, said soothingly, wrapping his arms around her. Robyn breathed in the familiar, safe scent of him. "Nicky, go run the water for your sister."

"Sure, Pops."

Her father was quiet for a long moment, and then, "I understand now is not the time to talk, but you'll tell me and Mama what happened tomorrow, *si*?"

"*Si*," she whispered.

"I need to know only one thing tonight."

"Che cosa?" What?

"Did this Jake hurt you in any way, physically or otherwise?"

"No, Pop. Jake would never do that. I promise."

Louie nodded, satisfied. "Your mother left *babbà* in your fridge and a big pot of soup on your stove. She just took it over so it should still be piping hot." He kissed Robyn's head. "Go take a hot bath and eat some hot soup, *bambina*. I love you and we'll discuss this tomorrow."

She didn't want to move. She felt warm and safe for the first time in hours. "*Sì*, Papa. I love you too."

* * * * *

Jake felt sick to his stomach. He'd looked everywhere for Robyn and couldn't find her. He'd checked every shop and bistro in Little Italy, gone to her apartment twice, scoped out her favorite bookstores and hangouts, and searched everywhere he could think to look. It was as if she'd vanished into thin air.

The moment Tyrone had called him aside and told him what had happened, Jake had furiously thrown everyone but his buddy out of his apartment. He'd asked Tyrone to repeat the story again to make sure he hadn't missed anything.

"She was crying when you found her?" Jake asked.

"Yeah, man," Tyrone confirmed. "I ain't exactly known for having much of a heart,

but whatever piece I got left broke for that girl."

Just as Jake's was breaking now. He had assumed Robyn would head straight home, but she hadn't. If anything bad happened to her, he'd never forgive himself.

Goddamn it! He should have known better than to bring a wonderful lady like Robyn into a den of vicious she-wolves. And all for some dumbass party he should have thrown months ago to get it over with.

Still scouring the streets, Jake felt his cell phone vibrate in his jeans pocket. He stopped dead in his tracks and fished it out, praying it was Robyn.

No. But it was from Nicky. A text message.

Robby's home safe and sound but she won't talk to nobody. She took a bath, our Ma fed her some soup and put her to bed. Thought you'd wanna know. Nicky

Jake sighed as relief flooded through him. He typed back a reply as fast as his big fingers would let him.

Thank God. Be there in 10. Let me in. Jake

She wasn't talking, but she was safe. That was a start. "Taxi!"

Chapter Six

Unable to sleep, Robyn pulled on her favorite warm and fuzzy red bathrobe with matching slippers and padded into the kitchen. There was a bottle of Chianti that Uncle Vito had somehow missed and she was pretty sure that bottle had her name written all over it. As she unscrewed the cork, a devastating reality hit her in the chest harder than a wall of bricks.

Life with Jake could never work out.

For all they shared in common, the worlds they inhabited were far too different to reconcile. Now that Robyn understood the rules in his realm, she knew she couldn't be a part of it. With the exception of Tyrone, she'd feel constantly under scrutiny by the others...and always coming up short. That was no way for a woman to live. It would suck the life and self-esteem right out of her.

She plopped down at the kitchen table and drank a swig of Chianti straight from the bottle.

For the past month there had been one burning question in the back of her mind and now the answer smacked her in the face. Why, Robyn had wondered a dozen times, had Jake never tried to make love to her? She grimaced, mortified by the idea

that while he enjoyed her company, her body might be repulsive to him.

She closed her eyes and sighed. Tonight she would allow herself to feel like a broken-down Humpty Dumpty, but tomorrow she would put herself back together again. She didn't need all the king's horses and all the king's men for that—Robyn DiMarco was a strong, proud, beautiful, Italian-American woman who could handle the job all by herself.

Robyn raised the bottle of Chianti back to her lips. A knock on her front door startled her, almost making her chip a tooth. She cursed under her breath as she placed the bottle on the table and stood.

Her family was aware she wanted this night alone and for all they knew, she was already sound asleep. She should have been aggravated, but Robyn realized they were simply worried about her. Resigned to the inevitable "talk", she decided now was as good a time as any to get it over with.

"Ma," Robyn said, opening her front door, "you and Pop can come on in and—"

Robyn stilled. Her pulse skyrocketed. She hadn't expected to see *him*. Not this soon, anyway. He hadn't even buzzed her intercom to ask to be let into the building. How had he gotten inside?

"Jake," Robyn breathed out, her gaze raking over him. He was even more soaking wet than she'd been when she'd first arrived home, which was saying a lot. "What are you doing here?"

Jake drank in the sight of her, a dozen different emotions waging war inside him.

She looked so fucking cute in her fuzzy red bathrobe and slippers—they matched the color of the polish on her finger- and toenails—but now wasn't the time for that.

"Don't ever leave me like that again," Jake said hoarsely, stepping in uninvited and closing the door behind him. He locked it just to make certain they weren't interrupted. "I was worried sick! Do you have any idea what you put me through? Or your family, for that matter?"

Her lips worked up and down, but no words came out. She took a giant step backward, away from him.

"Tyrone told me everything," Jake continued. "I am sorrier than words can say that what happened to you actually happened, but you scared the shit out of me! Don't ever do—"

"Jake," Robyn softly interrupted. She held up a palm. "This isn't going to work out."

Jake stilled. His dark eyes widened. Her words shook him to the core.

Jesus, don't leave me now. It took me my entire life to find you.

"I don't accept that," Jake ground out. "How can you just give up on us that easily?" He raised a fist and pounded it into his other palm. "I won't fucking let you!"

Her green eyes, usually so sparkly, looked dim. "I'm sorry," she whispered, "but your world is too different from mine."

"That's not *my* world, and it never was. I might have tried to convince myself otherwise for several years, but it never felt right. *You* feel right. *We* feel right. For fuck's sake, Mulberry Street feels right!"

Robyn bit down on her lower lip. He didn't know if that was a good sign or a bad one.

"I love you," Jake said wearily. "I'm *in* love with you. I want to marry you and get you pregnant like yesterday. I won't let you walk away, baby." His voice sounded hoarse even to him. "I need you too fucking much."

Robyn's beautiful eyes teared up. He really wished he was better at reading women because, again, he didn't know if that was a good sign or a death sentence. Either way, he didn't like her crying. It tore at his heart.

"Why, then, have you never tried to make love to me?" Robyn quietly asked.

"I didn't want to scare you off! I was waiting and praying like hell you'd make the first—"

Jake's eyes narrowed in dawning comprehension. "Is that what this is about? You think I'm not physically attracted to you?"

She nodded.

Jake shook his head to clear it. He ran a hand through his dark hair that Robyn hadn't wanted him to cut off.

"You want the truth?" Jake murmured. "The whole truth?"

Robyn's entire body seemed to tense. "Nothing but."

"Okay, you asked for it." Jake's eyes narrowed further. "The truth is that the moment I saw you, my dick got so hard it was painful. *That* was the pain that got lost in translation, not my damn knee."

Robyn's eyes widened.

"The truth is I was muttering to myself in the bistro that day because I was trying to talk my erection down so I could approach you and ask you out."

Could her eyes get any wider? Jake took a step toward her.

"The truth is I have had to masturbate three times a day—every fucking day—since the moment I laid eyes on you to keep from throwing myself on top of you like a damn animal."

She visibly gulped. He took another step toward her, completely closing the distance between them.

"The truth is...you are the sexiest woman I have ever seen in my entire goddamn life, and there's not a supermodel alive who can hold a fucking candle to you."

Robyn searched his face, as if looking for clues that he was telling the truth.

"Take off my jeans, baby," he murmured, "and you'll see just how hot you make me."

Silence ensued, a long pause that seemed to last a lifetime. And then, much to his surprise, Robyn backed up a step and started undoing the belt to her bathrobe.

Jake swallowed against the invisible knot in his throat. His cock was already painfully stiff and she hadn't even removed her robe yet. *Don't change your mind, baby. Please don't change your—*

Her robe dropped to the floor. His pulse picked up and his dark eyes grew heavy-lidded. Jake slowly exhaled. He'd pictured Robyn naked a thousand times, but no fantasy could have prepared him for the real deal.

"You're so fucking sexy," he said thickly as his gaze traveled up and down the length of her naked body.

His cock was so hard and his mind so consumed with pure, unadulterated lust that he couldn't be sure if he'd said those words aloud or just thought them. His narrowed gaze flicked to her full, heavy breasts, causing Jake's throat to go dry. He didn't find skin stretched over silicone any more desirable than skin stretched over bones. Robyn's tits were large and flawlessly rounded, and very real. And her stiff, pink nipples...

Jake's breathing grew heavier. He'd be sucking on those nipples for hours.

His intense gaze wandered lower, to her ample hips and softly rounded belly, before lowering farther to drink in the sight of her gorgeous cunt. The hair on her pussy was short and well-manicured, a tiny little patch of dark gold that told him she came by that honey-colored hair naturally.

He blew out a breath. Her ripe, fertile body was perfect. She was perfect, period. Robyn was everything he'd ever wanted, in bed or out of it.

"Let's go to your bedroom, baby," Jake said hoarsely.

He forced himself to blink as if awakening from a trance and quickly removed his rain-soaked clothes. He heard her breath catch as she stared at his erect cock, which damn near made him come. He had waited his entire life to be inside a woman this arousing and he couldn't wait another second.

Jake's mouth came down hard on Robyn's, his big hands crudely groping all over her naked body like an eager virgin. He briefly worried he was being too rough, but

that fear was hastily cast aside. Robyn wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him with the same animalistic intensity. She moaned into his mouth as their tongues clashed and dueled, her fingers threading through his thick mane of dark hair.

Jake lifted Robyn into his arms, their kiss never breaking, and hurriedly carried her into the bedroom. He laid her on the bed as gently as his aroused state could manage, his body quickly and heavily covering hers.

"I need to be inside you," Jake growled, tearing his mouth from Robyn's. His breathing was heavy, his gaze unwavering as he waited for her permission. "*Now.*"

Robyn said nothing with her lips, but everything with her body. She spread her legs wide before rearing up a little to tease him with her pussy. The scent of her arousal perfumed the air, damn near forcing him to spill himself right then.

Jake hissed out a breath, his jaw clenching, as he grabbed his cock by the base. His gaze bored into Robyn's as he guided himself to her wet, tight opening. "You're mine now, baby," Jake ground out, his tone possessive. "Don't ever try to leave me again."

Her lips parted as if to speak. Jake groaned as he surged inside her tight cunt, impaling her with one long, hard thrust.

She felt so fucking good—warm, tight and sticky.

Robyn moaned, whatever she had been about to say forgotten as he seated himself fully inside her. Jake's breathing couldn't have been heavier. He had wanted to be slow and gentle with Robyn for their first time together, but higher thinking eluded him.

"My pussy," Jake told her through gritted teeth. Unfamiliar with displays of emotion, he couldn't verbalize how deeply Robyn had scared him when she'd said things between them were over. His nostrils flared in remembered pain. "You understand me?"

Robyn's eyes widened. He didn't wait for a reply and didn't want one because he was never letting her go. Jake pulled his cock halfway out and surged inside her again, earning him a gasp.

He wasted no time in fucking her hard, rooting in and out of her tiny cunt like an animal. They moaned as one, Robyn's legs wrapped around his waist as he mercilessly impaled her.

"Jake," she groaned, meeting him thrust for thrust. "Fuck me harder."

The dirty words were like a drug that he craved to hear again and again. His jaw tensed as he gave her what she wanted, burying his stiff cock inside her tight, sticky pussy to the hilt. He drove into her harder, faster, showing no mercy. The sound of wet skin slapping against wet skin filled the bedroom. The combined scent of their arousal permeated the air, a heady aphrodisiac.

Jake could feel her pussy clenching, telling him she was close to coming. He picked up the pace, pistoning in and out of her like a man obsessed. He fucked her hard and ruthlessly, over and over, again and again and again.

"*Jake,*" she moaned as he fucked her. "*Oh God—oh Jake!*"

Robyn came loudly and violently, thrashing beneath him, her pussy muscles trying to milk his cock for cum. His teeth gritted and his jaw tightened further, as he

continued to rut inside her like a feral animal.

She was his every fantasy come true, the woman he'd waited a lifetime to find and claim as his own. Knowing Robyn was underneath him, his cock branding her with every thrust, made him feel more primitive and possessive than he could have ever thought himself capable. He fucked her soaked cunt deeper and harder, his dominant strokes marking her as his. He wanted this moment to never end, but he couldn't hold back a second longer.

"Here I come, baby," Jake rasped, his stiff cock repeatedly plunging into her. He thrust into her pussy once, twice, three times more and—

"Oh shit, oh God—*Robyn!*"

His eyes squeezed closed and his body jerked on top of hers as he came, his hot cum spurting into her cunt in the longest, most brutal orgasm of his life. She threw her hips at him as he continued to fuck her, her pussy draining his cock of all it had to give. Jake groaned, the sensation unlike anything he'd ever felt before.

Their bodies gradually began to relax, his thrusts becoming slower and gentler, until their movements came to a satisfied end. A peaceful fatigue enveloped Jake as he rolled onto his back, forcing Robyn to his side. They laid there in silence, their breathing steadying, as Jake fought the urge to sleep. It was a battle he knew he was losing.

Not willing to take any chances that she might try to leave him as he slept, Jake wrapped Robyn securely in his arms. Satisfied that she wasn't going anywhere, he closed his eyes and succumbed to sleep.

Chapter Seven

Robyn had never, not ever, felt more beautiful, sexually alive and loved than she had these past three days. Unable to keep their hands off each other, she and Jake hadn't left the bed other than to groom themselves or eat with her family. She had a manuscript due soon so she realized they couldn't carry on forever like this, but she intended to enjoy every moment until work forced her from the bed.

Robyn sucked in her breath as Jake kissed all over her body. He couldn't seem to get enough of sucking on her nipples and pussy, a fact that was headier than she didn't know what. Right now his warm mouth was latched on to one of her stiff nipples, sucking it as if he never wanted to stop. He reminded her of a kid in a candy store. Her nipples, of course, *were* his candy.

"Jake," she whispered, her head falling back against the pillows, "that feels so good."

He sucked on her nipple a while longer, then released it with a popping sound. He trailed slow, sexy kisses down her belly, then lower still, until his face was buried between her legs.

"I can make you feel better, baby," Jake murmured. His tongue darted out and

swiped her pussy from slit to clit. She sucked in a breath. "A lot better."

As usual, he didn't disappoint. Robyn moaned as his tongue snaked around her clit, drawing it into the heat of his mouth. He flicked his tongue all over it in rapid succession, dragging a groan out of her.

"Jake," she gasped, "stop teasing me." He was making her delirious—giving her enough to become painfully aroused, but not enough to find release.

He flicked harder at her clit. "Tell me what you want, baby." And a little bit faster. "Tell me."

"Suck it," she throatily begged. "*Please.*"

He continued flicking at her clit, toying with her.

She began having delirious thoughts that revolved around somehow forcing him to suck, but her mind was nearly mush and she couldn't form any coherent words let alone plans of action. Just when Robyn decided she couldn't take the torture anymore, Jake finally, thankfully, went in for the kill.

Robyn's hips involuntarily bucked up as he drew her clit determinedly into his mouth. He sucked on her firmly, exactly the way he knew she loved, extracting moan after euphoric moan from her.

"Just like that," she panted, wrapping her legs around his neck. He sucked on her harder, making little "mmm" sounds that drove her wild. "*Oh yes—oh God yes.*" Her head thrashed back and forth on the pillows. She used her legs to pull him tighter against her, grinding her pussy into his mouth. A growl erupted from his throat, the sound territorial and primal. She resisted coming, trying to stave off her orgasm even

as the sensual knot in her belly tightened. His growl deepened, became more guttural, as if demanding she give him what he wanted.

She was coming and there was no stopping it. The tense coil in her belly exploded.

"Jaaaaake," she moaned, her entire body convulsing as she popped. She came long and loudly. *"Oh. My. God. Oh. My— Jaaaaake!"*

Blood rushed to Robyn's face, heating it. Her nipples jutted up so stiffly they ached. Her clit was so sensitive she couldn't stand it, yet he kept sucking as though he'd never let go. He forced a second, more powerful orgasm on her, causing her to all but rear off the bed as she screamed out his name. A feeling of immeasurable pleasure mingled with pain tore through her body, the sounds coming from her akin to those of a wounded animal.

"You're killing me," Robyn panted, half delirious. "Oh my God, Jake—"

And then he was fucking her, thrusting into her hard, forcing her sensitized body to come as many times as he wanted. He moaned as he rode her, his hips rocketing back and forth as he pummeled her drenched pussy with his cock. He had come not even thirty minutes ago so she knew this round would last a while. Wrapping her legs around his hips, she gluttonously reveled in every thrust he had to give.

Jake palmed her breasts, tweaking her nipples as he rode her. By the time they came together, both of them groaning in pleasure, Robyn was so tired that she knew sleep was inevitable.

He rolled off her, his breathing labored. She snuggled up against him, warm and

safe in his arms, and fell into a happy slumber.

* * * * *

Robyn wasn't certain how long they slept, but she awoke to find Jake staring down at her. She smiled softly up to him, more content than she had ever been in her life.

His gaze, usually gratified after they made love, looked troubled. Her smile slowly faded as worry set in. "Jake?" she whispered. "Is something wrong?"

He remained silent, causing Robyn's alarm to grow. She tried to sit up, but he easily nudged her back down with his heavily muscled body. "Jake, talk to me. You're freaking me out here."

The silence continued for a long moment. She began feeling quite vulnerable, but refused to show it. And then finally, after what felt an eternity, the silence was broken with Jake's sigh. She raised an eyebrow, asking him without words to confide in her.

You better not even think of leaving me, Jake Chamberlin. You did everything you could to make me fall for you! Now that you've got me, you damn sure better not—

"Are you still wanting to give up on us?" Jake asked, his voice flat. "Because I know I can't force you to keep me around, no matter how much I wish otherwise."

Robyn's eyes slowly widened. He was still thinking about that even after she'd fully given herself to him these past three days? She blinked. Robyn DiMarco didn't sleep with just anyone. She shook her head a little, deciding that his previous

girlfriends must have been nothing like her.

"Do you know something, Jake?" Robyn asked.

He hesitated, as if uncertain he wanted to hear her answer. "What?"

"I've been on more dates than I can count. Men ask me out all the time—"

"I don't think I want to hear this," he angrily cut in.

"Yet I can easily count how many men I've allowed in my bed," Robyn continued. She reached up and touched his jaw. "That's an easy tabulation." Her eyes sparkled. "You would be the second."

Jake stilled, processing that. His gaze searched her face. "You mean you haven't slept with anyone since your divorce?"

She shrugged. "My ex...that was a disaster, as you know. So I decided to wait until I fell in love with a man who I was one hundred and ten percent certain was nothing like him."

A small, barely perceptible half-smile tugged at the corner of Jake's mouth. "You saying you're in love with me?" he murmured.

Robyn rolled her eyes good-naturedly and thumped him on his massive chest. "Yes, Simple Simon! That's exactly what I'm saying," she laughed. She searched his face, her expression growing serious. "But your world... I can't thrive in a place like that."

"That makes two of us," he sighed.

Her heart soared with hope. "Can you really give that up?" Robyn squeaked. She

cleared her throat. "Really?"

Jake smiled—a true, genuine, full-fledged smile.

"There's nothing to give up, baby," he admitted. "I would have walked away from that bullshit after my contract expired anyway." He absently rubbed his jaw, the stubble there so sexy to her. "The only two people from that life I want to keep around are my mom and Tyrone—they never fit in any better than I did anyway."

Robyn smiled. "I'm extremely fond of both of them."

"They feel the same way about you." Jake gave her an affectionate squeeze. "With or without you, I'm walking, baby girl," he murmured. "I just hope it's *with* your sexy ass."

I am so in love with this man! "You couldn't get rid of me if you tried," Robyn promised, her heart soaring somewhere far above cloud nine.

Jake smiled—again! "I think you got a thing for Rainmen," he teased.

She grinned. "Nah. Only for *my* Rainman."

Epilogue

Six months later

Jake smiled as he watched his new bride dance the *Tarantella Napoletana* with Nicky and her father. He decided to let her enjoy it because it was the last time she'd be dancing for about seven months. They had found out only yesterday, the night before their wedding, that Robyn was pregnant. To say they were ecstatic would be the world's greatest understatement.

He was going to be a father and he had just become a husband. Jake felt like the luckiest man alive. No Super Bowl ring came close to the ring he now wore on his finger. The world he'd gladly left behind was all smoke and mirrors, but Robyn was very real and now completely his.

His wife smiled at him as she danced. Fuck, but he had never thought he could be this happy! Even his mom seemed livelier yet more serene now that they'd officially moved out of the Upper East Side and into the Mulberry Street building. She lived in an apartment across from Robyn's parents because, as Maria DiMarco said, "Eileen is one of us now."

His gaze flicked over to the two mothers in question. They were embroiled in

conversation as Maria herded his mom over toward a table of drinking DiMarco men. Jake couldn't make out everything Maria was saying, but he heard the words "Uncle Vito" and "Band-Aid" as they passed by. He grinned.

To the rest of the world, Little Italy was famous for food, wine, festivals and, yeah, the mafia. To Jake Chamberlin, retired quarterback of the New York Bloods, Little Italy was where he'd finally found himself. It was the place where miracles like Robyn and their baby took place. It was...home.

And there was no place like it.

About the Authors

Laurann Dohner

I'm a full-time "in-house supervisor" (sounds *much* better than plain ol' housewife), mother and writer. I'm addicted to caramel iced coffee, the occasional candy bar (or two) and trying to get at least five hours of sleep at night.

I love to write all kinds of stories. I think the best part about writing is the fact that real life is always uncertain, always tossing things at us that we have no control over, but when you write, you can make sure there's always a happy ending. I *love* that about writing. I love to sit down at my computer desk, put on my headphones and listen to loud music to block out the world around me, so I can create worlds in front of me.

E-books by Laurann Dohner

Cyborg Seduction 1: Burning Up Flint

Cyborg Seduction 2: Kissing Steel

Cyborg Seduction 3: Melting Iron

Cyborg Seduction 4: Touching Ice

Cyborg Seduction 5: Stealing Coal

Cyborg Seduction 6: Redeeming Zorus

Cyborg Seduction 7: Taunting Krell

Mating Heat 1: Mate Set

Mating Heat 2: His Purrfect Mate

New Species 1: Fury

New Species 2: Slade

New Species 3: Valiant

New Species 4: Justice

New Species 5: Brawn

New Species 6: Wrath

New Species 7: Tiger

Riding the Raines 1: Propositioning Mr. Raine

Riding the Raines 2: Raine on Me

Something Wicked This Way Comes, Volume 1 *anthology*

Zorn Warriors 1: Ral's Woman

Zorn Warriors 2: Kidnapping Casey

Zorn Warriors 3: Tempting Rever

Zorn Warriors 4: Berrr's Vow

Print books by Laurann Dohner

Cyborg Seduction 1: Burning Up Flint

Cyborg Seduction 2: Kissing Steal

Cyborg Seduction 3: Melting Iron

Cyborg Seduction 4: Touching Ice

Cyborg Seduction 5: Stealing Coal

New Species 1: Fury

New Species 2: Slade

Something Wicked This Way Comes *Volume 1*

Zorn Warriors 1 & 2: Loving Zorn

Zorn Warriors 3: Tempting Rever

Zorn Warriors 4: Berrr's Vow

Regina Carlysle

Regina Carlysle is an award-winning, multi-published author. She likes books that are hot, edgy and often humorous, and puts all three of those elements into each of her stories. Regina lives in west Texas and is a doting, fawning and over-indulgent mother to her two kids. When she's not penning steamy erotic tales or hot contemporary stories, she's indulging in long chats with friends who help her stay sane and keep her laughing.

E-books by Regina Carlysle

Drilled

Eagle's Refuge

Ellora's Cavemen: Flavors of Ecstasy IV *anthology*

Feral Moon

High Plains Shifters 1: Highland Beast

High Plains Shifters 2: Lone Star Lycan

High Plains Shifters 3: Ringo's Ride

High Plains Shifters 4: Edge of Nowhere

High Plains Shifters 5: Lawman

Jaguar Hunger

Killer Curves

Mistletoe Magic: Breath of Magic

Mistletoe Magic: Elven Magic *with Cindy Spencer Paper & Desiree Holt*

Panther Moon

Return of the Daredevil

Return to Delight

Spanish Topaz

Tempting Tess

Trouble in a Stetson

Print books by Regina Carlysle

Aged to Perfection *anthology*

Cougar Challenge: Needing a Cougar *anthology*

Ellora's Cavemen: Flavors of Ecstasy IV *anthology*

High Plains Shifters: Lone Star Beasts

High Plains Shifters: Riding the Edge

Mistletoe Magic *anthology*

Sequins, Saddles and Spurs *anthology*

Tempting Turquoise *anthology*

Torrid Topaz *anthology*

Katalina Leon

I love writing for Ellora's Cave. I was an avid fan long before I had the courage to write my own stories. For many years I was primarily a painter. I started writing several years ago when I felt the need to fill a larger canvas and tell bigger stories without actually taking up more space. lol

Ellora's Cave books provided my imagination with everything I loved about traditional romance novels, without the coyness. They were painted in bold colors and I loved the variety of authors and genres offered. I loved it so much I started writing so I could get in on the fun.

I've been very fortunate to live an adventurous life, with the love of my life and fellow artist at my side. My husband and I share our lives with a wonderful son and a very sweet border collie named Molly.

E-books by Katalina Leon

Adult Education

Beautiful Stranger

Blue Apples

Nice Package

Noblesword

Owned by Rome

Sugar Roux Voodoo

Print books by Katalina Leon

Succulent *anthology*

Aubrey Ross

Aubrey Ross writes an eclectic assortment of erotic fiction. From power struggles between futuristic clans to adventurous mystic guardians, her stories are filled with passion and imagination. Some of her recent awards include an EPPIE finalist, two Passionate Plume finalists and a CAPA nomination from the Romance Studio.

With a pampered cat curled on the corner of her desk, Aubrey dreams up fascinating words and larger than life adventures—and wouldn't have it any other way!

E-books by Aubrey Ross

[Crimson Awakening](#)

[Crimson Carousel 1: A Taste of Twilight](#)

[Crimson Carousel 2: A Taste of Midnight](#)

[Crimson Carousel 3: A Taste of Oblivion](#)

[Crimson Carousel 4: A Taste of Dawn](#)

Crimson Prey

Crimson Thrall

Dream Warriors

Ellora's Cavemen: Flavors of Ecstasy IV *anthology*

Enemy Embrace 1: Rebel

Enemy Embrace 2: Toymaker

Enemy Embrace 3: Replicant

Enemy Embrace 4: Mystic

Enemy Embrace 5: Madam

Enslaved Hearts 1: Captives

Enslaved Hearts 2: Pleasures

Enslaved Hearts 3: Secrets

Intimate Invasion 1: Forgotten Hope

Intimate Invasion 2: Forsaken Desire

Intimate Invasion 3: Forced Alliance

Mystic Keepers 1: Refugee

Mystic Keepers 2: Cayenne

Mystic Keepers 3: Krystle

Mystic Keepers 4: Lorrان

Mystic Keepers 5: Rammi

Mystic Keepers 6: Minuette

Mystic Keepers 7: Elita

Mystic Keepers 8: Felise

Sensual Captivity 1: Seducer

Sensual Captivity 2: Shifter

Sensual Captivity 3: Sorcerer

Sensual Captivity 4: Specter

Sensual Captivity 5: Seer

Sworn Protectors 1: Onset of Darkness

Soul Kisses

Velvet Deception

Print books by Aubrey Ross

Candy Cravings *anthology*

Dream Warriors

Ellora's Cavemen: Flavors of Ecstasy IV *anthology*

Sensual Captivity 1: Seducer

Sensual Captivity 2: Shifter

Sensual Captivity 3: Sorcerer

Sensual Captivity 4: Specter

Sensual Captivity 5: Seer

Velvet Deception

Diana Hunter

For many years, Diana Hunter confined herself to mainstream writing. Her interest in the world of dominance and submission, dormant for years, bloomed when she met a man who was willing to let her explore the submissive side of her personality. In her academic approach to learning about the lifestyle, she discovered hundreds of short stories that existed on the topic, but none of them seemed to express her view of a D/s relationship. Challenged by a friend to write a better one, she wrote her first BDSM novel, *Secret Submission*, published by Ellora's Cave Publishing.

E-books by Diana Hunter

A Devil in Winter

Cabin Fever

Diamond in the Snow

Ellora's Cavemen: Tales from the Temple III *anthology*

Hooked

[Kara's Captain](#)

[Love in the Afternoon](#)

[New York Moment](#)

[Promise for Now](#)

[Remembered Love](#)

[Secret Submission](#)

[Services Rendered](#)

[Stitches in Time](#)

[Stress Relief](#)

[Submission Revealed](#)

Print books by Diana Hunter

[Cabin Fever](#)

[Diamond Studs](#) anthology

[Ellora's Cavemen: Tales from the Temple III](#) anthology

[Love and Learn](#) anthology

[Getting What She Wants](#) anthology

[Secret Submission](#)

[Stress Relief](#)

Submission Revealed

Winter Studs anthology

Jaid Black

Jaid Black is the pseudonym for Ellora's Cave's owner and founder Tina M. Engler. She has been featured in every available news outlet, from the *Washington Post* and *L.A. Times* to *Forbes* magazine, Fox News and the *Montel Show*. Ms. Engler was officially recognized by *Romantic Times Magazine* with their first ever Trail Blazer award as *the* mastermind of erotic romance as you know and love it today. Writing as Jaid Black, her books have received numerous distinctions, including a nomination for the Henry Miller award for the best literary sex scene written in the English language.

E-books by Jaid Black

Trek Mi Q'an Series

- The Empress' New Clothes
- Seized
- No Mercy

- Enslaved
- No Escape
- No Fear
- Dementia
- "Devilish Dot" in *Manaconda* anthology
- Never a Slave
- Guide to Trek Mi Q'an

Single Titles

- Adam & Evil
- After the Storm (*writing as Tia Isabella*)
- Before the Fire (*writing as Tia Isabella*)
- Bossy & Clyde
- Breeding Ground
- Death Row: The Trilogy
- God of Fire
- Politically Incorrect: Stalked
- Politically Incorrect: Subjugated
- Sins of the Father
- The Hunger
- The Mastering
- The Obsession

- [The Possession](#)
- [Tremors](#)
- [Vanished](#)
- [Warlord](#)

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Multiple Author Anthologies

- ["Besieged"](#) in *The Hunted*
- ["The Beckoned"](#) in *Ellora's Cavemen: Tales from the Temple IV*
- ["Seeds of Yesterday"](#) in *Ellora's Cavemen: Legendary Tails IV*
- ["The Addiction"](#) in *Something Wicked This Way Comes, Volume 1*

Print books by Jaid Black

[After the Storm](#) *(writing as Tia Isabella)*

[All She Wants](#) *anthology*

[Bedtime, Playtime](#) *anthology*

[Breeding Ground](#)

[Death Row: The Trilogy](#)

[Ellora's Cavemen: Legendary Tails IV](#) *anthology*

[Ellora's Cavemen: Tales from the Temple IV](#) *anthology*

[Enchained](#) *anthology*

Forbidden Fantasies *anthology*

Lost in Trek: Guide to Trek Mi Q'an

Manaconda *anthology*

Notorious

The Best of Jain Black

The Hunted *anthology*

The Possession

Trek Mi Q'an: Conquest

Trek Mi Q'an: Enslaved

Trek Mi Q'an: No Mercy

Trek Mi Q'an: Seized

Trek Mi Q'an: The Empress' New Clothes

Warrior *anthology*

10th Anniversary Editions

Death Row: The Trilogy

Notorious (*Sins of the Father, The Hunger, Politically Incorrect: Stalked*)

The Best of Jaid Black (*Tremors, The Obsession, Vanished*)

The Possession

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