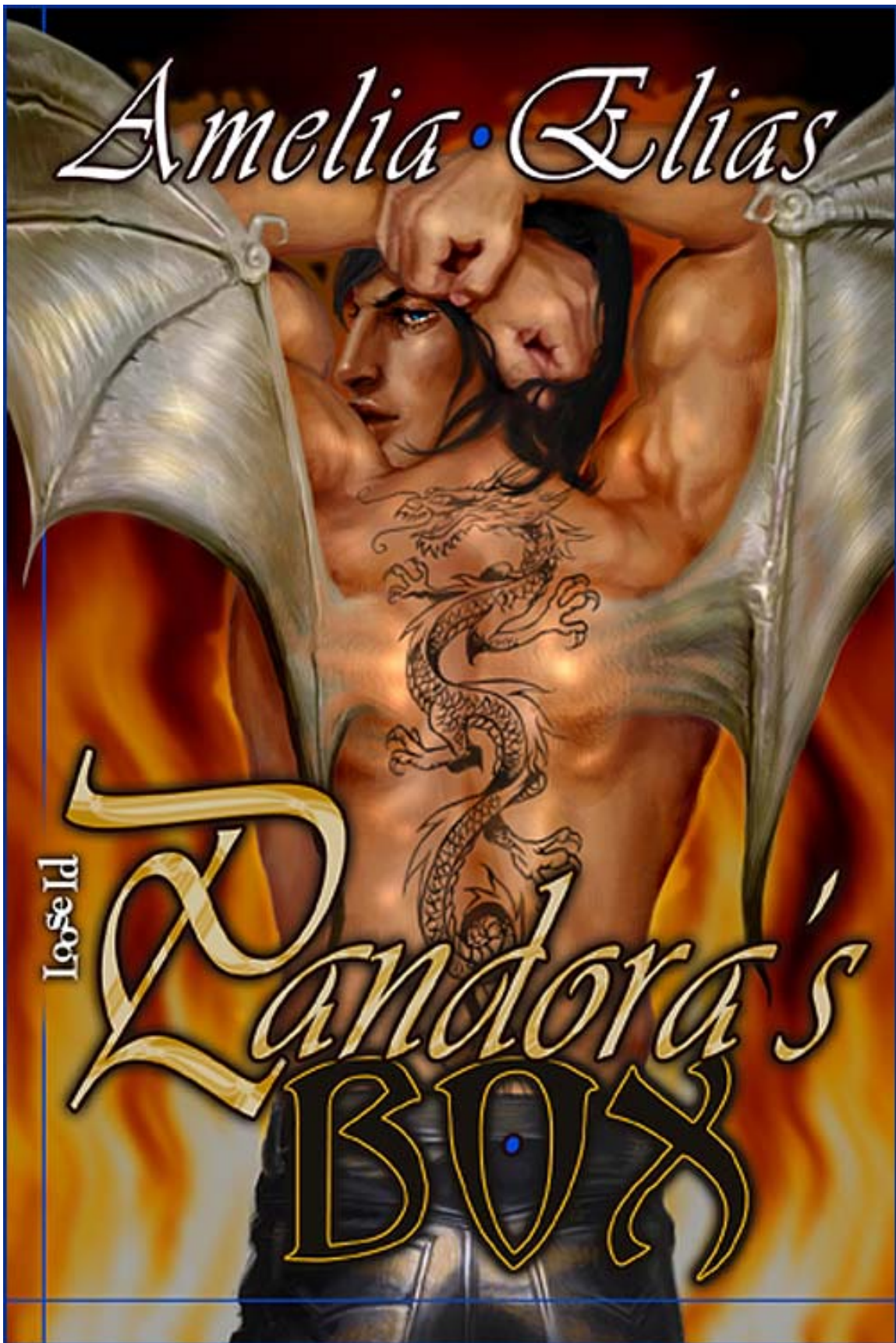


Amelia • Elias



Loose Id

Landora's
BOX

Praise for the writing of Amelia Elias

Pandora's Box

The opening line of Amelia Elias's book made me start laughing, and I don't think I stopped once from there on in. Brazen and hilarious, *Pandora's Box* is a wild, hilarious ride with steam, a brassy heroine and a hero you wouldn't want to take home to momma for fear she'd steal him!

-- Rachel Carrington, author of *Nights in Black Satin* (coming soon from Loose Id)

Pandora's Box had me from the very first sentence, and never let go. Tera and Rowan give new meaning to the words "all-consuming passion", and will make you wish you had one of your own.

-- Raine Weaver, author of *Rhenn* (Loose Id)

Amelia Elias's *Pandora's Box* packs a punch! Rowan was the epitome of a "tortured" hero. And Tera - what a kick ass heroine with a wonderful muddled past. Terrific sex and a truly satisfying ending. Fasten your seatbelts and get ready for one Hell (and I do mean Hell) of a ride!

-- Jeanne Barrack, author of *Sapphire Flames* (Loose Id)

Pandora's Box is a hot, spicy read that had me laughing and writhing in my seat from the first chapter! The steaming chemistry between the very alpha Rowan and the witty, spunky Tera had me glued to my screen. Amelia Elias has created an intriguing story with twists and turns that are sure to make this a favorite for readers!

-- Flesa Black, author of *Refuge: Fortress* (Loose Id)

PANDORA'S BOX

Amelia Elias

LooseId
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* * * * *

This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content, graphic language, and brief violence.

Pandora's Box

Amelia Elias

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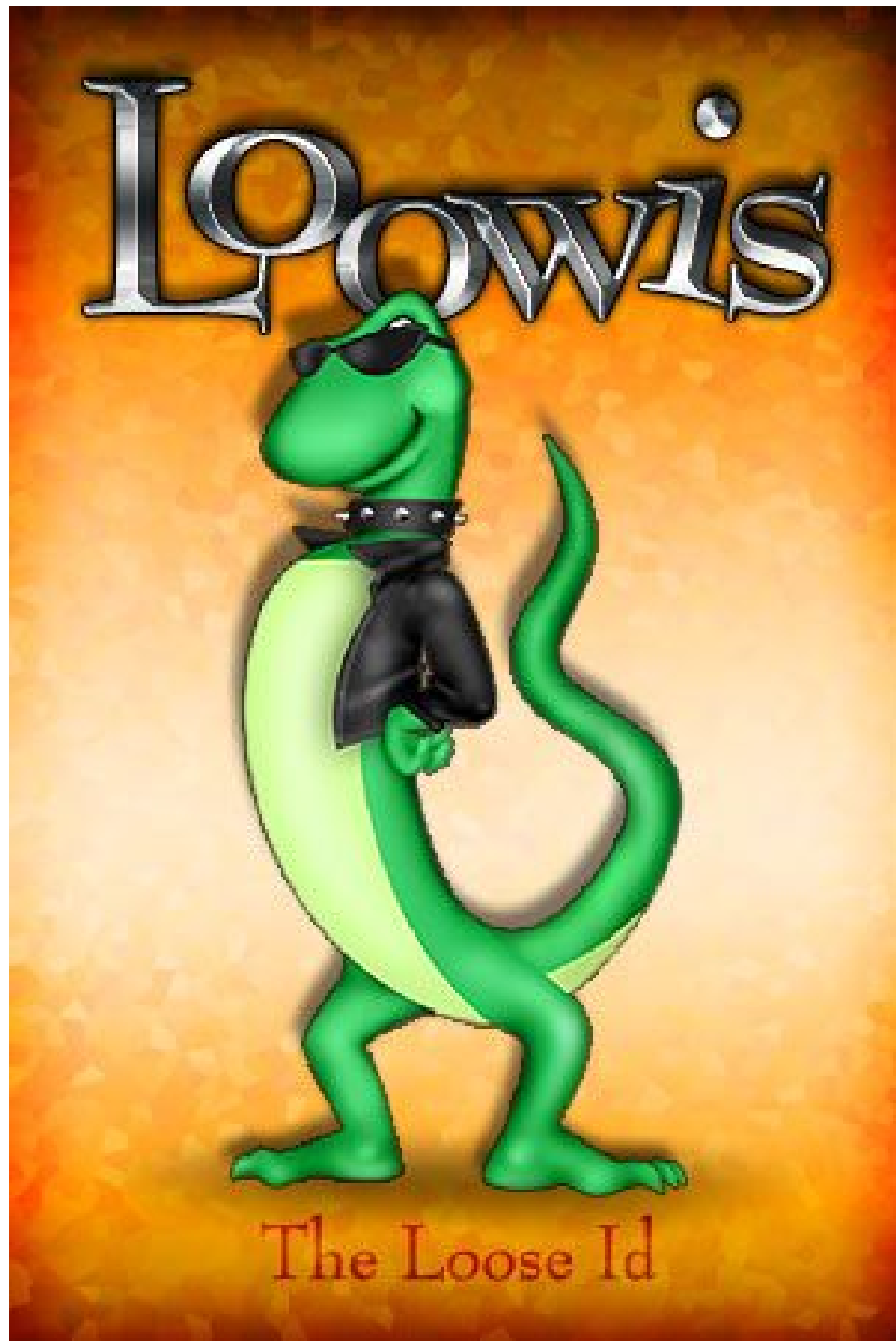
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Chapter One

Some mornings, it just doesn't pay to push the pussy off your face.

Days like this one should come with a warning. Instead of waking up to the weather on the clock-radio, I'd have had a lot more use for an advisory that went something like this: "Today's the winter solstice. We're expecting a fifty-percent chance of inexplicable spooky shit and a ninety-percent chance of life-altering events. Meteorologists are recommending that folks stay in bed with the covers over their heads."

Instead, I discovered that it would be an overcast day, the fog should burn off by ten, the high would be around forty, and rain was vaguely possible, but not likely. Dreary, in other words. Christmas in Texas is often merry like that. I shoved the cat off my head -- damn the thing, it wasn't even mine; the neighbor refused to keep it inside his own apartment. Ignoring her outraged yowl that probably meant she wanted food, I stumbled into the kitchen in search of coffee.

In fact, the first indication that today would be any different from any other day in my so-exciting life didn't come until noon, when I ran over the zombie.

Until that moment, it had been an ordinary, even a good, day. I consumed about a gallon of coffee and ate a stale donut in the car on the way to my shop. I actually managed to

find a parking space less than a block from my store, which was almost an impossibility in downtown Austin. There were no drunks sleeping it off by the shop's back door, and no one had puked anywhere near the front one.

Must've been a quiet night on 6th Street, the infamous Music Capital of the World.

Pandora's Box, my adult novelty shop, had done a booming business last night before I locked up at one a.m. Even though I wouldn't reopen until one p.m., I had enough paperwork to keep me busy for the rest of the morning.

Anyone who thinks selling vibrators and French Ticklers to giggling, red-faced college students is a dream job has never done the paperwork that goes with it. There's the deposits, the inventory, the ordering, the scheduling ... the list goes on. I think that if it weren't for the endless supply of sexy lingerie available to me -- at discount prices, of course -- I'd have taken a job flipping burgers long ago. So, after spending a couple of hours descending into the hell of IRS regulations and percentages, I decided I really and truly deserved a nice lunch, complete with a margarita.

So what if it was only eleven? It was after five somewhere in the world.

Giving up the prime parking spot was a wrench, but I really deserved that 'rita. I locked the shop behind me and had hit the button on my keyring to unlock the car when the hair at the back of my neck stood on end. Shivers that had nothing to do with the chilly breeze chased up and down my spine. I froze for the briefest instant, like a rabbit will when the hawk's shadow falls over it.

Someone was watching me.

That certainty was so strong that I didn't even try convincing myself that I was imagining things. One hand on the shop's door handle and the other clutching my keys, I scanned the street, resisting the urge to duck back inside and hide.

I found him almost at once. He stood across the street, lounging against the wall of a tattoo parlor with his hands in the pockets of a black leather duster that flapped in the breeze like bat wings, and making no effort to hide the fact that he was staring at me.

Something about that stare made me shudder. I'm used to being stared at, don't get me wrong -- at five-eleven, with copper-penny hair down to my waist and the kind of figure most commonly described as voluptuous, I'm used to men ogling me. Hell, I'd taken to wearing black leather bustiers just to see which would bulge more, my double Ds or their eyes. But this was different.

This man wasn't watching me like he wanted to fuck me. He was watching me like he wanted to *devour* me.

And heaven help me, in that instant, being devoured sounded pretty damn good. Even from that distance I could tell he was tall, well over six feet -- wonder of wonders, a man I'd have to look *up* at. His black hair brushed the collar of his duster, and while I couldn't see his eyes through the mirrored sunglasses he wore, his face put Brad Pitt to shame, all chiseled cheekbones and firm, full lips. As I stared back at him, those lips curved into a half-smile that just might have been the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

He broke the spell after a moment that felt like an hour by simply straightening and inclining his head to me in an old-worldly bow. My paralysis broken, I rushed to my car and jumped in, slamming down the locks and breathing like I'd run a marathon. My hands shook as I started the engine.

When I looked up, he was gone.

"Get a grip, Tera," I scolded myself, resting my head on the steering wheel and trying to calm down. All right, so a gorgeous guy had stared at me. So what? I'd done my share of staring back, and gorgeous guys were a dime a dozen on 6th Street. He hadn't done anything even remotely threatening, so why was I still shaking like a leaf?

Finally I pulled it together enough to drop the car into reverse and back out. Forget the gorgeous guy and get lunch; that was the goal. Nuevo Leon was only a few blocks away on East 7th, and they had killer fajitas.

After lunch -- and a frosty 'rita -- I felt much better. It had started raining while I was inside, and I spared a passing thought to the incompetence of the weather man as I hurried out to the car, hoping I wouldn't get my suede jacket too wet. I'd just bought it a week ago, and I wasn't quite ready to ruin it yet. Even on clearance, it cost a pretty penny.

Of course it waited until I was out the door before the sky opened and it started pouring. So much for the suede.

Maybe I was a little pissed about the jacket. Maybe it was the wet road. Hell, maybe it was the margarita, though I'm no lightweight when it comes to tequila. Whatever the reason, I didn't see the man in the crosswalk until I was less than ten feet from him.

There's nothing in the world like the sound of a body hitting your bumper. It's a sickening, crunching sound that sticks in your head and plays over and over like a broken record. I had the car in park and the door flung open to leap out before I'd even got my seatbelt off, and I almost strangled myself before I managed to unsnap it.

"Oh, my God, oh, fuck, oh, my fucking God," I moaned, running around the hood and praying I hadn't just created a new statistic. A pair of beefy legs stuck out at odd angles from under the front of my car. I barely managed not to puke at the sight of them. "Hey, are you okay?" I asked stupidly, because it was more than obvious that this guy was not okay and had very little chance of being okay ever again. My stomach was trying to evict the fajitas, and I swallowed hard before reaching out and patting his nearer leg, God only knows why. "Hey, are you --"

My words ended in a yelp as a massive hand clamped over my wrist and pulled hard. I fell right on my ass and yelled with the shock of the cold rainwater splashing up my skirt. Another great pull, and I just barely got my free hand up in time to catch myself before my

face slammed into the bumper. *Bumper's having a busy day*, I thought inanely. It made no sense, but neither did this guy trying to drag me under my car with him.

"You shouldn't have touched him, you know. He'll get energy from that."

That voice would've sent a chill down my spine even without the hot caress of lips against my ear. Dark, dangerous, rasping, and sexy as hell, it was the voice of every woman's secret fantasies.

Nothing could've been more out of place in this nightmare.

Before I could so much as blink, another man's hand was on my arm, sliding down the ruined suede until his fingers encircled my wrist. His hand was warm just above the other man's cold, viselike grip. The contrast of his tanned skin beside the other man's pale, almost greenish flesh sent another wave of nausea through me.

"*Everto*," he murmured, and something like a static shock shot along my skin. My victim jerked his hand back with a howl, and my rescuer pulled me to my feet, lifting me around the waist as though I were some petite cheerleader instead of an Amazon.

I shoved him away and stumbled back, teetering on the edge of the lane and almost earning my own close-up examination of the pavement as a truck zoomed by not six inches from me, horn blaring the whole way. "What the hell?" I watched the legs under my car shriveling like something out of *The Wizard of Oz*. "What the *hell*?"

Have I mentioned that I'm not eloquent under stress?

Belatedly, I realized that my questionable savior was none other than the dark man I'd seen outside my shop. "Hey, are you following me?" I demanded.

He was even more gorgeous close up, damn him. He gave me that little grin again and leaned his hip against my car, looking for all the world as though there wasn't a man disintegrating less than a foot away from his steel-toed boots. "Have been for two days now," he said mildly. "Not too observant, are you?"

I drew myself up to my full height, intending to let him know exactly what I thought of stalkers in general and him in particular, but two things happened before I could speak. The first was that the guy I'd run down let out one final howl and exploded in a puff of the foulest-smelling smoke imaginable.

The second was that I heard sirens approaching.

The dark man didn't appear too worried, but my heart leapt into my throat. "Oh, God, they're going to arrest me," I moaned, grabbing the car to keep from falling over. I've been in jail before, and I didn't want to go back, not for any reason.

He rolled his eyes at my distress. "Get in the car," he said, pushing me toward the passenger side and taking the driver's seat himself. "There's nothing to arrest you for, Tera. No body means no evidence, and no harm, no foul." I gaped at him over the roof, shocked all over again that he knew my name, and he grinned again. "Get in, and I'll explain. Stand there, and I'll drive off without you. Your choice."

Nothing about him suggested that he was even remotely kidding, so I yanked open the passenger door and fell onto the seat. "You're stealing my car," I said as he pulled away from the curb and flipped the headlights on. "You're stealing my car and leaving the scene of the accident. And kidnapping me. Do you have any idea how illegal this is?"

He laughed. *He really shouldn't be allowed to do that*, I thought, my head still spinning. No man should be allowed to sound sexy while I was contemplating how many years in prison I'd just earned. It was too damn distracting.

"Listen, Tera, you've got nothing to worry about from the cops. That wasn't a man," he said as he changed lanes.

I closed my eyes and rested my forehead against the cold window. "Yeah, okay, I can go with that," I said, hearing that sickening *thud* of the body hitting my car again and once more struggling to keep my fajitas where they were. "It was a dog. A big one." I tried not to remember, and failed. "A big dog wearing jeans and sneakers."

Another laugh. "It was a zombie," he said. "You really didn't know that?"

I know it's hard to believe, but only then did I really think about the fact that I was alone with a man I knew absolutely nothing about and driving to who-knew-where with him. I looked out the window and saw downtown rolling smoothly by. "Where are you taking me?"

"Back to your very fascinating shop, of course."

I must have gasped or something, because he glanced over at me. His sunglasses were off now, and for a moment I was captured by his eyes. Deep, electric blue, they danced with hypnotic light like golden sparks. He blinked and the lights were gone, if they'd ever really been there at all. "Surprised?"

"Um -- well, yeah," I admitted. It was the understatement of the year, but I couldn't think of anything more fitting. "Didn't you say you'd been following me?"

He nodded. "And I could've kidnapped you at any time during the last two days if I'd wanted to," he said. The man had no idea how to reassure someone. "Clearly, I don't want to."

Don't ask, I told my mouth. *Don't ask, because you really do not want to know.*

My mouth apparently wasn't taking orders today. "Why are you following me, then?"

The car stopped, and he ran a fingertip down my cheek. That one simple caress sparked fire in my blood. Need sizzled through every nerve. Good God, this man could bottle sex appeal and sell it for millions. He bent closer, and it was all I could do not to close my eyes and lean into him, grab him, and kiss him senseless. Maybe it was the adrenaline, but I'd never had such a powerful reaction to any man in my life.

When he spoke, I almost moaned with disappointment that he wasn't putting that mouth to a better use. "Go inside," he murmured, his breath warm on my lips. "You'll be seeing me again."

It took a long moment for me to realize he really wasn't going to kiss me. I opened my eyes to glare but found myself glaring at his profile -- he wasn't even looking at me. I flung open the door, belatedly noticing that we were indeed outside my shop, and slammed the car door behind me just in case he hadn't noticed that I was seriously pissed off.

I think he laughed. It was hard to hear over the rev of the engine as he shot away with a squeal of rubber.

In my car!

"Hey, get back here, you impotent rat bastard!" I cried as the taillights of my sedan vanished around the corner.

A group of college girls who'd been staring at my window displays laughed. "Yeah, you tell him!" one said, provoking another round of giggles.

Oh, how it sucked to be a small business operator in that moment. No matter how much I longed to wipe the smile off Miss Nineteen-And-Perky's face, she *was* a potential customer. At least I had the sense to keep an extra set of keys in my purse, so I wasn't totally screwed. "Yeah, whatever," I muttered, unlocking my shop and hearing the group follow me inside even though I didn't technically open for another fifteen minutes.

What the hell. I got my revenge on Miss Nineteen by putting flat batteries in the dildo she bought. Fuck her if she can't take a joke.

Chapter Two

It might have been the best weekday take I'd ever had. I scowled the entire time. Half the Longhorn football team showed up -- naturally making the requisite jokes about their personal long horns, har har, yuck, yuck, yuck, never heard that one before -- followed by one of the most intimidating women I'd ever seen. Steel-gray hair in a bun, smart, tailored suit, briefcase, manicure, she had the whole dress-for-success package perfected.

She grilled me for close to an hour on the pros and cons of the various personal lubricants I stocked, then tried on about ten different lingerie sets, working her way all the way through the vinyl-and-whips section. You'd be surprised how often I get her type in there, proving you couldn't tell books by covers.

She was in the wrong section, though. I could feel it. I have a knack for seeing beyond the cover, always have. I steered her toward the things that seemed most appropriate for her, and it wasn't what you'd expect from the ball-buster appearance. This ball-buster didn't want more armor -- her business suit and immaculate bun were enough of that. She needed to let her hair down in bed, literally as well as figuratively. She needed to be soft for once.

As always, once I persuaded her to try the things I suggested, she loved them. Cotton-candy pink, palest lavender, sheer gauze and lace-topped thigh-highs. G-strings with bows at

the back. A blindfold with a rhinestone kitten on it, a saucy look in its beaded little eyes. She dropped a couple hundred bucks on toys and bought just about everything I showed her, and when she tucked her bags into the smart leather briefcase with a smile, I knew I'd earned a customer for life.

Then, briefcase full of sex, she walked out like she'd done nothing more exciting than pick up a new three-ring binder.

Hmm. There's a thought. Note to self: create a bondage set called the Three Ring Binder and put it on sale during back-to-school week.

By the time Wren arrived at five, I was more than ready for a break. My only employee was on time for once, which was a good thing for her. Her white-blond spiked hair was green-tipped today, a surprisingly flattering look for her, especially with her porcelain-pale skin. I briefly hated her for being able to wear any color in the rainbow without looking washed out and half-dead. "Hey, boss bitch, what crawled up your ass and died?" she greeted me cheerfully, slipping behind the counter and turning the radio from the metal station to talk radio.

I flipped it right back. "People don't come in here to listen to the news, Wren," I growled.

She shrugged. Despite the fact that it was forty or so degrees outside, she wore a micro-mini and a midriff-baring mesh top that had all the insulating capacity of a spiderweb. She cocked her head to the side and gave me that look that always made me squirm. That's the problem with having a witch for an employee. Occasionally they do some weird shit that makes you squirm, which is very un-bosslike.

"Your aura is very tight and dark," she said, still staring. "There's violence there. Did you get in a fight or something?"

I rolled my eyes and reached past Wren to straighten a set of nipple clamps that had slid to the side of the display, but when I raised my hand she gasped and clutched her throat.

“What’s your problem?” I asked, genuinely concerned. I’d never seen anyone go that white before in my life.

She pointed at my wrist, her hand shaking. “You were touched by death!”

Okay, that was a little dramatic, even for Wren, but the honest horror in her eyes kept me from ragging on her about it. I tried a nonchalant shrug that didn’t even fool me. “It’s been an interesting afternoon,” I hedged, fighting the urge to tell her everything about my automobile misadventures. The skin of my wrist prickled under her scrutiny, and I rubbed it without thinking.

It was like rubbing a sunburn. “Ow!” Only then did I see the red handprint on my skin. “Oh, shit,” I whispered, holding up my hand and staring. “That’s just freaky as hell.”

Wren finally recovered some of her composure, but the green spikes were still lurid spots of color above her pale face. “You’re going to tell me exactly what happened today,” she said, and it wasn’t a request. “You’re in trouble, girlfriend. Oh, goddess, are you ever in trouble.”

She wouldn’t even let me go into the back for a cup of coffee before spilling the entire story to her -- the dark stranger watching me, the guy appearing out of nowhere in the crosswalk, the horrible sound of my car striking his body, how he’d tried to pull me under there with him before the dark man showed up to save me. I couldn’t remember the word he’d said, which frustrated Wren no end.

Wren stared at me throughout my story, not moving, not speaking, her steadily widening eyes the only sign that she even heard me. When I got to the part where my savior had dropped me off and driven away in my car, she rubbed her temples and winced. “So whose handprint is that?” she asked, her voice pitched too low for customers to hear. “The zombie or the man in black?”

“I never said he was a zombie.” I’d made certain not to. Hearing it from the dark man was more than enough for one day. Coming from Wren ... no. I wasn’t going there. The very word was ridiculous.

“What did you think he was, a Boy Scout?” The cutting tone wasn’t like Wren at all, and I stared, taken aback. “Of course he was a zombie,” she hissed, green eyes blazing beneath the green-tipped spikes of her hair. “I’ve warned you about these things, and you’ve never taken it seriously. You draw these things to you! If today wasn’t enough to prove to you that there are forces around you that you don’t understand, that you can’t run away from --”

“Whoa, whoa, back up the truck!” My knuckles were white on the counter, and I was glad the only couple in the store was engrossed in the video section. “Look, Wren, I respect your beliefs and all, but this bullshit about attracting zombies --”

She snorted at me, a sound of total derision. “Forget my beliefs, and look at what happened to you today,” she said. “Explain to me how you could run down a guy at forty miles per hour and have him not only survive, but have enough strength to yank you halfway under the car. Explain to me how he vanished in a puff of smoke when your other new friend showed up. If there’s no such thing as magic in the world, Tera, how could any of that have happened?”

Damn. She had me there. I rubbed my wrist again and tried to reason it out. No matter which way I turned it, there was no logical answer to the question. “Shit,” I whispered, reverting to my own particular eloquence when stressed.

“Very,” Wren agreed, then turned to ring up the impressive stack of videos the couple had carried to the counter. “By the way,” she said over her shoulder as she scanned the titles, “you didn’t call the cops about your car, did you?”

Her tone said it wasn’t a question. “How’d you know that?” I asked, sinking onto the tall stool behind the counter as a wave of unreality crashed over me.

I hadn't, of course. The first spare moment I'd gotten, I'd used to change out of my sopping wet clothes and into one of the new outfits we'd just hung out on the rack the day before. Think short, tight, and leather. After that, I hadn't had a second to myself. The shop had been packed with customers all afternoon, and I hadn't wanted any of them to overhear me reporting that my car had been stolen, especially not Miss Nineteen and her perky, giggly friends.

Why did I give a rat's ass if a customer heard me calling the cops? Only in retrospect did it seem like a stupid concern. No matter what my own history was, the cops had to help me if I asked. They'd have tried to find my car.

Wren just nodded as she put the videos into a bag -- black with a logo I'd designed myself, red lips with a finger over them as though keeping a very luscious secret -- and handed it to our customers. She clearly wasn't a bit surprised. When the door closed behind them, she turned back to me and leaned a hip against the counter. "Because the car is a personal item," she replied, "and I'm sure the guy who took it wouldn't have wanted you to call the cops."

My head was starting to throb. "Explain this to me in small words, okay?" I said. "Remember, you're the only full-on witch here. My knowledge of magic is limited to the Harry Potter movies."

That provoked only the ghost of a smile from her, and I knew whatever she was worried about was serious. Wren hated Harry Potter with a purple passion. "Okay, your car is something that has extended contact with you," she said. "You have lots of personal items in it. I'm guessing you've got spare clothes, some makeup, stuff like that in there. I'd guarantee you've left hair in it. This is something imbued with your spirit; does that make sense?" I nodded. "Okay. Well, possessing something like that makes it so much easier for someone to cast a spell."

"He cast a spell on me?"

I thought back to the heat of his fingertip tracing my cheek, the fire that simple caress had sparked in my veins and the hot, hungry need I'd felt for his kiss. Oh, yeah, he'd cast a spell, one of a purely sexual kind. "So he stopped me from calling the cops." The weirdest thing about it was, I believed it even before Wren nodded. "What do I do?"

She straightened, stretched, and took my hand -- the unmarked one. Normally I don't encourage any kind of physical stuff with Wren, since she swings both ways and apart from the obligatory college experimentation phase I was strictly into men, but I was freaked out enough to squeeze her hand back right then.

She smiled at me. "What do you do? I try to give you a little help, and you sit still like a good girl and let me," she said. "Come on into the back and let's break out some candles. I've got an idea."

I was curious enough to lock up the shop and put up the "Be Back Later" sign, something I only ever did in direst emergency, before following Wren into the back room.

She was holding two of our newest acquisitions, small birthday candles shaped like penises, one red and one white. She dug around in her enormous canvas shoulder bag with her free hand. I raised an eyebrow when she took out a long, thin box and a magic marker. "This should be interesting," I muttered to myself as she shoved boxes out of the way and knelt to draw a circle on the floor, murmuring softly under her breath. I backed against the little table that held our coffeemaker, to give her room.

A minute later she looked up and beckoned to me. "Sit cross-legged in the circle," she said, handing me the penis candles before opening the long box.

I laughed when she pulled out a pungent stick of incense. "You always carry Nag Champa in your purse?"

She took the lid off the sugar bowl beside the coffeepot and planted the stick upright in the sugar. I had to give her credit for creativity on her makeshift incense burner. "No, sometimes it's Zhambala or Tibetan Healing Incense," she said, ignoring my sarcasm. "The

Tibetan stuff is the best -- slow-burning and made with environmentally sound harvesting techniques. Now sit still and shut up. You must enter into this with an open mind. Your expectations impact the effectiveness.”

I bit my lip as I sat down inside the circle. Wren was really serious about this. “Sorry,” I said, holding a candle in each hand and trying to convince myself I wasn’t nervous.

She lit the incense and my candles before moving to stand in front of me, outside the circle. “Relax,” she said, giving me a little smile. “This won’t hurt a bit.” Then, before I could reply, she raised her hands to the ceiling and began to chant.

“I call upon the power that is within me and the power that is around me!

“I call upon the sentinels of the heavens!

“I call upon all good spirits and all ministering angels!

“I call for protection, for defense, and for safety!”

With each line she changed position -- before me, to my left, behind me, to my right. Three times she repeated this, moving in a circle outside the one drawn on the floor, and I shivered as the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Okay, maybe it was merely the previous spooky events of the day and maybe she’d gotten to me with her talk of my expectation determining the results, but I could’ve sworn I felt a breeze in the storeroom where none should be.

After the last line was repeated for the third time, she stepped back in front of me, eyes closed, arms still raised, and spoke again. “With white light, a force field is built around you, Tera Kenner. You are shielded and protected at all times. All negativity disperses and dissolves at the touch of the radiant light that emanates from the core of your being. All shadows flee! All harm and danger is neutralized by the touch of glowing white light. By the power within me and the power around me, only peace, love, and serenity may exist within this protective barrier.”

I was deeply impressed despite myself. If this magic of hers was real, this was one kick-ass spell she was laying on me. Again she repeated the words three times as the candles in my hands burned lower and lower. The wax melted and ran over my fingers, but didn't burn. I watched, fascinated, as the droplets of melted wax dripped to the concrete floor of the storeroom. Instead of splashing, they seemed to solidify as they fell, landing as perfect round pearls of red and white.

At last I was left holding two tiny slivers of candles as Wren completed her chant. She drew some kind of symbol in the air with both hands and cried, "As I will, so mote it be!"

And both candles guttered out at the same instant.

For a long moment there was silence. I sat within the circle, deeply regretting every cheesy witch joke I'd ever made about Wren. "Wow," I whispered finally. It was totally inadequate, but it was all I could manage.

She dropped her hands and opened her eyes, and for an instant I could see the faint reflection of candlelight in them, mimicking the sparks in the dark man's eyes -- but wait, that couldn't be right; the candles had burned out! She blinked and the illusion vanished.

Kneeling down beside me, she carefully scooped up the wax beads. "That's the best protection charm I know. I hope it's enough," she said. "How do you feel?"

Freaked out didn't seem like the most polite thing to say after what she'd just done. "I don't know," I said instead, grateful that I hadn't blurted it out anyway. My mouth has a bad habit of running away with itself.

At least, I managed not to say it until I looked down and saw that the red handprint on my wrist had vanished. "Holy fuck," I said, and Wren laughed. Things were back to normal.

Well, relatively speaking, anyway.

Chapter Three

"You gonna close early so I can give you a ride home?"

The clock chimed midnight as she spoke -- twelve loud, wet, smacking kisses accompanied by a tinny version of "I Touch Myself" by the Divinyls. The thing was gaudy as hell, had cost a small fortune to import from Switzerland, and I loved it.

I yawned, stretched, and shook my head as Wren slipped the strap of her huge purse over her shoulder. "Naah, I'll catch a cab," I said. After such a profitable day, I wasn't about to close two hours early. "You go on. I'll be fine."

"You know you still haven't called the cops about your car," Wren said in a tone that reminded me of my mother bugging me to clean my room.

I shrugged. "I'll talk to them tomorrow if he doesn't bring it back before then," I promised. "Besides, if I called them now, what would I say? 'Hey, Officer, I ran down this pedestrian outside Nuevo Leon, and then this other dude made him vanish like that witch in *The Wizard of Oz* -- oh, and by the way, he stole my car?'" I shook my head. "No, thanks. I need to come up with a better story than that."

She closed her eyes and sighed. "Truth is always the best story, Tera."

“Yeah, except when it comes to the cops. Trust me, this I know.” I nodded toward the door. “Goodnight, underling. I hereby evict you from the shop. Go home.”

She fussed and nagged for a few more minutes before finally leaving. I ran both hands through my hair and blew out a breath, very glad that this day was at least technically over and trying not to think about the report I’d have to file on my car.

Two hours later I was wishing I’d taken Wren up on her offer of a ride. The flood of customers that had swamped Pandora’s Box had dried up, and I spent most of the time between midnight and two a.m. rearranging and restocking shelves. With Christmas coming up, I wanted to make my displays just right. I’d just gotten in a new shipment of condoms, some with a tribal-tattoo style pattern on them, some in various exotic fruit flavors, and others in every color you could imagine, and I arranged the boxes temptingly right on the top shelf. These were high-quality rubbers, no bargain, discount, sure-to-break crap in my shop. It really is possible to get interesting condoms that are safe, too, and I made a point of finding them.

I had to grin as I restocked my personal favorites, the ones with a glow-in-the-dark alien face on the end. Doesn’t every girl want to get fucked with a glowing alien? These things practically flew off the shelf. Well, there’s no accounting for taste.

I almost hyperventilated myself into a dead faint when I inflated Big John the Love Doll (Realistic Rotating and Vibrating Cock!) and hung a Santa hat over the entirely unrealistic cock. No point in being totally vulgar. I used red fuzzy handcuffs to secure him to the rack in the front corner and hung stockings off both hands, each overflowing with condoms, lubricants, feather ticklers, and assorted other goodies. What can I say, Christmas inspires my creative side.

When the kissy-clock struck two, I gladly turned off the neon “Open” sign before going back to the counter to get the keys so I could lock up. The phone book was already open to the Taxi section, and I wanted to curl up in bed so bad I could taste it.

The string of bells tied to the door jingled, and I bit back a growl. "Sorry, we close at two on weekdays," I said, picking up the keys without turning around. "You're welcome to come back tomorrow."

"Don't you even want to see who you're dismissing?"

I gasped and spun around at that voice. It couldn't possibly be the guy who'd taken my car, but it was. His electric-blue eyes danced with light again as they held mine. He still wore all black, from the hair brushing his shoulders to his big, steel-toed boots. My pulse kicked into overdrive as I remembered what big boots were supposed to mean. "What are you doing here?" I said, blurting the first thing that came to mind. It was either do that or start drooling. Damn, but he was fine.

One corner of his mouth curved up in that sexy almost-smile. "I thought you'd be glad to have your car back. Besides, didn't I say you'd be seeing me again?"

He tossed my keys to me, and I was too shocked to even try to catch them. They bounced off the toe of my spike-heeled boot, and I ignored them. "Who are you?"

"My name's Rowan," he replied, moving toward me. Muscles bunched and rippled beneath the denim of his jeans with every step. His loose-limbed, predatory gait reminded me of a pacing tiger, sensual and so dangerous. I told myself not to retreat and managed to hold my ground.

Of course, the counter was at my back, so that might not have been too much of an accomplishment. "Rowan," I said, tasting the name. Dark, wild, sexy -- it suited him far too well. "Mind telling me why you took my car and just what the hell you want with me?"

He stopped in front of me and smiled again, one dark eyebrow rising for a moment. "Isn't it obvious?" he replied softly. That rasping, sexy voice sent a wave of liquid heat pooling between my thighs. God, it should be a sin to use a voice like that without warning a girl first. "Forgive me for borrowing your car, Tera. I needed to make sure there was nothing to attract attention to you before letting you have it back."

I didn't reply. Now, don't get me wrong; I realized that he hadn't answered my question -- I'm not stupid. I knew he was being deliberately evasive, and I wasn't falling for it. No, the reason I didn't reply had nothing to do with accepting his explanation and everything to do with the way he knelt in front of me.

For one insane moment, he looked like a man about to propose marriage. Then he reached out, picked up my dropped keys, and handed them to me, but he didn't rise when I took them. Our fingers brushed, and a sizzle of heat shot through me from that little touch. Heat burned down my spine and melted between my thighs. "I don't forgive you," I whispered, looking down into those deep blue eyes and trying to figure out why he could make me so damn hot with so little effort. It was hard to think of that, though, when I was also trying hard not to indulge in a dozen different hot fantasies involving the two of us in several variations of this position.

I almost melted on the spot when his hands came to rest on my ankles. That sizzle came back, arcing up my legs and collecting between my thighs in a rush of liquid heat. "What can I do to make it up to you?" Rowan asked, but his smile said he already knew.

Tera, what the hell are you doing? a voice shrieked in the back of my mind. *Don't you remember that this guy's been stalking you?*

His hands slid slowly up my calves at that moment, and I found I didn't care much about that voice. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a man like Rowan, and it had been far too long since I'd had any man at all.

And one occupational hazard of having an adult store was a chronic case of sexual frustration.

His smile told me he knew what I was thinking, and his eyes promised he could fulfill every single one of my fantasies. "Why don't you come into the back room, and I'll try to think of some way for you to make amends," I murmured, firmly locking that rational voice in a mental broom closet and hanging a Do Not Disturb sign on the door.

He shook his head as his smile crossed the line from sexy to wicked. "Why move when I'm already in the perfect position?"

My legs trembled as he leaned closer, his hot breath teasing the skin of my thighs, his dark hair falling across my skin like threads of silk. I sucked in a shaking breath and clutched the counter behind me for support as his hands glided to my knees, curling around them and gently urging my thighs to part. "The window," I whispered, glancing out at the street and the sparse traffic. "Someone could --"

Someone could see, I meant to protest, but he nuzzled the high hem of my skirt, and the sentence died on a gasp. His fingers stroked my knees, and he licked a path to my inner thigh. Each lap of his tongue sent heat through my body, tightening my nipples, making my pussy clench, making my clit throb.

"The shelves are in the way," he murmured against my skin. "If anyone looks in, they'll see no more than your face." He pulled away long enough to shoot me a wicked wink. "Maybe someone will watch you come, pretty one. Perhaps they'll think you're trying out the merchandise. Would that turn you on, knowing someone was watching?"

Those talented hands slid up the backs of my thighs and straight up my short skirt to squeeze my ass, effectively robbing me of speech. I let my head fall back and opened wider for him, wrapping a leg over his shoulder and around his back, urging that hot mouth back to my skin. He took a deep breath and chuckled. "You're already wet," he said, his fingers slipping under my panties and caressing my ass. "I can smell you. What do you want, Tera? My cock or my tongue?"

God, I wanted both, and it was almost more than I could do to choose just one. He kissed my thigh again, so high his cheek brushed my mons, and I moaned. I needed satisfaction and I needed it now. "Your tongue," I whispered, past any point of caution, past any wonder that I was letting a man I didn't know from Adam do this to me. I'd never reacted to anyone this strongly. My brain had checked out and my body was in charge, and

all my body wanted was to be sucked and fucked until I was limp and boneless with ecstasy. “Your tongue and your fingers, Rowan. You owe me before I let you fuck me.”

He laughed again, a deep vibration sexier than anything I sold. “Your wish is my command,” he said an instant before he caught the front of my panties in his fist and ripped them away with one sharp, twisting pull.

The brutality of it was a wicked turn-on. I tangled my fingers in his hair and pulled his face to me, guiding his mouth to my clit. The first flick of his tongue drew a guttural groan from me, a sound I didn’t even recognize as my own. His hands slid over me, one squeezing my ass as the other slipped underneath so his fingers could toy with my pussy as his mouth came back for more.

His tongue was magic, circling my clit, dipping into my pussy in slow, hot, wet thrusts that made me writhe, returning to my clit and licking, sucking, driving me wild. I couldn’t stop moaning. Damn, but Rowan had this down to an art; his tongue was so talented! I tightened my fingers in his hair and pressed against his face, already feeling an orgasm building just out of reach.

His fingers plunged into me, three together, hard and fast. No slow, easy warm-up for Rowan, no starting with one finger and gradually adding more, just one sudden thrust and I was filled with him. He sucked my clit between his teeth and flicked his tongue over it butterfly-quick as his fingers fucked me fast, and I came so hard I screamed and would’ve fallen had he not held me hard with his free hand.

When those wonderful fingers withdrew, I whimpered in protest, but his tongue was there to make it up to me. He licked me clean, long and slow and gloriously thorough, and this time when I came he hummed one long, low note that drew my orgasm out to unbelievable lengths. It felt like I’d never stop coming. “God, Rowan,” I moaned over and over, hardly noticing that I had a death-grip on his hair and my boot heel was digging into his back as I urged him closer. “Oh, God, oh, yes, Rowan!”

My orgasm finally ended, and I slumped back against the counter, eyes closed, breathing hard. Rowan shrugged my leg off his shoulder, and I had a bare instant to try to catch my balance before he stood and dragged me hard against him. His cock was a thick, hot ridge against my belly, and impossibly I started getting wet again at the feel of it.

Big John, with his acrobatic vibrating dick, had nothing on Rowan.

"Is it my turn now?" he growled in my ear as he grasped my hand and guided it to the front of his jeans. "Or do I still owe you more?"

More! my body demanded, but I was too blown away from the incredible orgasms he'd given me to speak yet. Instead I released the button fly of his jeans and slid my palm over his throbbing cock, delighted that nothing separated my hand from his flesh. He growled again and bit my earlobe. "Can I feel your tongue now?" he whispered.

His cock was so big, I couldn't close my fist around it. I stroked him from base to velvety tip and couldn't stop my smile when he shuddered. I wondered if he could taste as incredible as he felt, and couldn't wait to find out.

But not just yet. "No," I said, loving the feeling of power over this magnificent man. Still, glorious as that was, there was something of fantasies about him, and I was willing to see if he could fulfill them as well as I thought he might.

One way to find out. "But if you ask very nicely, I might let you take me in the back room and fuck me against the wall," I said, resting my cheek against his shoulder and waiting to see if he'd take the hint.

It was one of my favorite fantasies and one of the hardest to actually achieve. Only one of my former lovers had been able to hold me up and pin me like I wanted, to take me, ravish me, trap me there and have the strength to overpower me.

Rowan, I could tell, would have no problem at all.

He raised his head and smiled, though his eyes were blazing. "You don't want me to ask you," he said, covering my hand with his, pumping my fist around his cock. His

breathing quickened, and I rubbed my chest against his, aching to feel his hands on my breasts, his tongue on my nipples. “So I won’t.”

Before I could reply, before I could agree or protest, he suddenly threw me over his shoulder and hauled me toward the employees-only door leading to the storeroom. I squeaked with surprise and yelled out a protest, but my nipples tightened with lust again. Oh, God, he was perfect, sweeping me off my feet like I weighed no more than that little bitch Miss Nineteen had! “Put me down!” I demanded, grabbing at one of the shelves as we passed, swiping a box of condoms and punching his back. “Let go!”

I thought he’d spank me. He didn’t. He bit my ass and growled, “Shut up.”

It was all I could do not to come right then.

Rowan shoved open the storeroom door and kicked it shut behind him before dropping me on my ass on the table. He caught both my hands and wrapped them around his cock again before reaching for the zipper at the front of my blouse. “Don’t stop,” he commanded, thrusting against my hands as I stroked him.

“I’ll stop if I want to stop,” I shot back.

He growled again, a sexy sound that sent liquid heat curling between my thighs, and unzipped my shirt. My breasts ached with arousal, and I had a hard time keeping up my protests when his dark head bent and he buried his face between them. “Stop that,” I said, even as I arched my back to give him better access.

“Make me,” he said, a hard edge to his voice. “I’m going to suck your tits, Tera, and what are you going to do about it?”

Any reply I could’ve made was swallowed by a moan as he sucked my nipple into his mouth right through my satin bra. His teeth scraped and nibbled, and I closed my eyes, biting my lips to keep from begging for more. I might let him make me beg later. Right now this game was much more fun. “Don’t,” I whispered, letting one hand slide down to cup his balls.

He laughed and pushed the satin cups aside. My breasts filled his hands, his mouth, and every flick and nibble made my clit ache with need. I wanted to rub myself, to come with his cock in my hand and his mouth on my tits, but he was rocking against my palms and he'd told me not to stop. The air was cold on my wet nipples, and the contrast with his hot mouth was incredible. "Rowan!" I moaned before I could stop myself.

He shoved my hands away from his cock and pushed the condoms at me. "I want you to put one on me," he said, but he stopped me when I started to open the package. "But first, Tera, I want you to suck me."

I shook my head, salivating at the thought of tasting him. He tangled his hand in my hair and drew me off the table, urged me down onto my knees, and forced my head forward. "I'm not asking you," he whispered, wrapping his fist around his cock and rubbing his head over my lips. "I'm telling you. Suck my cock, Tera. Now."

It was more than I could resist. I opened my mouth with a completely fake whimper of protest and sucked him as deep as I possibly could. His deep, guttural groan was music to my ears. "Yeah, baby, just like that," he moaned as I licked him up and down, flicking my tongue around his sensitive rim before sucking lightly on his head. "Oh, yeah, Tera, suck me like that."

I shoved his pants down his hips and pulled him closer, digging my nails into his ass as I sucked harder, caressing his balls with a feather-soft touch as I licked him slow and soft. His cock was hot and hard and so thick it was hard to get my lips around him, silken and salty and delicious. His balls tightened in my hand, and his hips rocked in little thrusts against my mouth. I knew he was about to come, but I wasn't ready for it to be over yet.

I pulled away with a gasp, breathing just as hard as he was. "I can't stand any more," I said, making a liar of myself by licking that delicious cock once more.

He pulled my head back, and I sucked him one more time before he let me go. "Put the condom on me now," he rasped. "I'll let you suck me 'til I come later."

I tore open the packet and was glad I'd been lucky enough to grab the box of extra-large condoms. I rolled the thin sheath over him, and even this size was a tight fit. I'd never had a lover this big, but before I could get too nervous, Rowan dragged me to my feet and backed me against the closed door.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and couldn't resist rubbing my hips against his cock. "Yeah, you love my cock, don't you?" he whispered in my ear, cupping my breasts, squeezing my nipples, and rubbing his sheathed cock against my clit. "You want me to fuck you, don't you? You like it hard and wild against the wall? Does that turn you on, Tera?"

"Yes," I moaned, hardly able to think. Between his hands on my breasts and his cock sliding over my clit, every erogenous zone I had was aching with desire.

"Wicked little girl," he said, and then he seized me around the waist, lifted me completely off the floor, and pinned me to the wall with his cock just nudging my clit again.

It was the most erotic moment of my life. He supported me so easily, sliding that massive cock into my pussy an inch at a time, making me writhe and whimper before giving me more, making me beg out loud before sinking all the way inside me, impaling me on his throbbing dick. "Oh, yeah, you like that," he whispered in my ear as he withdrew, out, and out, and out, until only his cockhead was inside me. "You like getting stuffed with a big cock, don't you?"

"Oh, God, yes," I moaned as he slid back in, and in, and in, filling me more than I'd ever been filled before, so deep it felt like he'd touch my heart if he went any further.

He quickened his pace, thrusting hard and deep. "Such a tight, hot, wicked little girl, fucking a man you don't even know," he growled, his words timed with each hot thrust. "Letting me lick that pretty pussy of yours, sucking my cock, letting me make you come. You are a bad girl, aren't you?"

And with those words I came again, digging my nails into his shoulders, clenching my thighs around him as he fucked me faster, harder, driving me higher and higher, talking

dirty in my ear the entire time. Another orgasm followed right on the heels of the first, and as he raised his head to kiss me, I turned away and bit his shoulder instead to keep from screaming.

“Damn, Tera, oh hell!” Rowan shouted, his entire body going rigid as his cock bucked inside me and he came. I tightened my pussy around him, milking him for all he had, and he threw his head back and howled my name to the ceiling.

Long minutes passed before he put my feet back on the ground. I unlocked my teeth from his shoulder and sagged against him, my legs trembling, not trusting them to hold me up. “That was incredible,” I whispered, my face still pressed to his shoulder. “And I have no idea why I did it.”

He held me and brushed the hair back from my forehead to press a kiss there. It was such an unexpectedly tender gesture after our kinky little game that it robbed me of breath. “Some things are meant to happen,” he said simply. “Don’t overanalyze it.”

I smiled against his skin. “Okay,” I whispered, listening to his heart thundering beneath my ear. I wouldn’t analyze it.

I would, however, replay every hot, forbidden second of it over and over in my mind forever. Good Lord, no one had ever fucked me like that.

“I can do it again,” he whispered in my ear. “Over and over, Tera. Do you want me to?”

Now there was a stupid question if I’d ever heard one. “Hell, yeah.”

He chuckled. “Then I will,” he promised. “Go home and rest now, pretty one. Go home and think of me.” And with that he released me and turned away, buttoning his jeans as he nudged me gently aside and walked back into the shop.

“Rowan?”

He didn’t turn until he’d reached the front door. Then he glanced back and gave me that sinful smile again. “Don’t worry,” he said, pushing the door open and making me realize for the first time that I never had gotten around to locking it. “You’ll see me again.”

The same words he'd spoken to me that afternoon outside my shop. And just like before, he disappeared once they were spoken.

Chapter Four

Wednesday was my day to open late, and I slept until well past noon the next morning, much later than I usually did. When I finally awoke, I stretched like a cat, noticing for the first time the whisker-burn on my breasts and the soreness between my thighs. My body was made of lead. I felt used up, empty, like I'd been ravished within an inch of my life -- and I had, of course. Amazing how four incredible orgasms had left me feeling this way -- hungover instead of energized. Instead of grinning, I felt like groaning.

But the sex had been worth it. By damn, it definitely had.

Memories assaulted me as I lay there -- his tongue thrusting deep inside as he sucked me to orgasm in full view of anyone who happened to walk by the shop; his hands clutching my ass as he held me off the ground and fucked me against the wall; his cock, long and hot and throbbing on my tongue.

Call me crazy, but I wanted to see Rowan again more than I wanted my first cup of coffee, and right now I needed that morning hit of caffeine just about as much as I needed my next breath.

Besides, my personal motto is that orgasms are the best way to start the day.

If I couldn't have him, I'd have to make do. I couldn't resist cupping my breasts and rolling my nipples between my fingers as hot cream dampened my panties at the memories of what we'd done last night. "Rowan," I whispered, closing my eyes and imagining him there with me, imagined how he'd grab my hips as he slid that gorgeous cock deep inside me, imagined squeezing his ass and feeling those tight buns ripple as he thrust hard.

He wasn't there, of course, so I grabbed my favorite toy from the nightstand and took care of things myself. I came almost at once, pretending the slick latex was his thick cock and that the fingers playing with my clit were his instead of mine, but it wasn't the same. The vibrator filled me, but not like he had. It was like having cold pizza for breakfast after a five-course gourmet feast the night before -- it sated the need, did nothing for the craving.

And when I finally got out of bed, I was still exhausted, my head aching. Thank God the neighbor's annoying cat wasn't there, because one yowl would've sealed her doom. I'd never felt that awful after a night of hot sex. Now, a night of drinking, absolutely. But sex? No, never. It was weird.

And the need for him grew and ached like a sore tooth.

The only place I knew Rowan could find me was Pandora's, so even though this was my day to sleep in, pay the bills, lie on the couch, and read to my heart's content, I dressed and drove downtown again. It was almost scary how bad I wanted him to come back to the shop. He was a drug, and I'd have done anything for another fix.

I couldn't let him know it. If -- no, when -- I saw him again, I'd have to keep my craving to myself. I couldn't let him know the power he had over me. No man had *ever* had any power over me, and I wasn't about to let him know he was the first. No, I'd keep my craving quiet, resist if I could, make him work for it before I gave in.

Like a good pusher, Rowan was waiting at the shop when I got there. I barely remembered that I'd decided to act aloof before I got out of the car. "Back already?" I asked,

giving him a short, cool glance that wasn't nearly long enough to admire him before unlocking the back door of Pandora's. "We don't open until four today."

I knew he was behind me even before his arms came around me and pulled me back against his chest. Just that contact was enough to send hot need curling deep between my thighs. His cock hardened against my ass as one hand slid up to cup my breast. "I need another taste of you, Tera," he breathed against my ear, his fingers playing with my nipple through the rough cotton of my peasant blouse. "Don't make me wait until four to have it."

My body was melting, but my mind was awake enough now to register a protest. "How about more talking and less screwing this time?" I said, moving out of his arms with more difficulty than I liked and opening the back door. "The way I see it, you've got some explaining to do."

He didn't reply, but I wasn't worried that he'd left. I could feel his hot gaze on my back like twin lasers boring into me. I stepped inside and heard his footstep behind me before he pulled the door gently from my hand and closed it. "What would you like me to explain, Tera?" he asked, and the softness of his voice did nothing to lessen its erotic impact.

If anything, it was magnified. I shivered and forced my legs to keep moving. "Why have you been following me?" I asked, desperately trying to hold on to my reason while acutely aware that I was alone with temptation incarnate, that we were standing mere feet from the place where he'd fucked me so recently and so very, very well. Just the memory was enough to bring my nipples to full, aching attention.

"Because I want you," he replied. Just that one bald statement, no explanation, just that.

I shivered again. "You don't know me well enough to want me."

Warm breath teased the back of my neck, and I stopped as suddenly as if I'd hit a brick wall. That sizzling heat was back, waves of ravenous need, sexual desire as I'd never felt it before. "I know you," he whispered, not touching me, just letting his breath caress my neck. "You're passionate, Tera. Nothing else matters to me."

Hot as I was, that was weird enough to break me out of the spell. I took a shaky step forward and risked turning around.

Rowan's eyes burned me, deep, dangerous blue, and filled with those sparks of light -- lightning against the night sky. Wren's fears came back to me full force, and I stepped back again, wanting him more than ever and afraid of him.

Yes, just afraid, not terrified. I was too turned on to be terrified.

He followed, and I moved back. It was a dance, sexual and predatory and slow, and my pussy dripped with arousal. His nostrils flared, and I could swear he caught the scent of my lust because his eyes practically glowed. He echoed every move I made until, suddenly, he hissed and jerked back like he'd hit an electric fence. "Damn it," he snarled, a hunter denied his prey.

Only then did I look down and see that I'd stepped inside the circle Wren had drawn on the concrete floor. The blinding wave of lust receded just enough for me to form a coherent thought, and my mouth blurted it before I could command it not to. "What the fuck are you?"

He smiled. Not the sexy half-grin he'd shown me before, but a full-fledged, teeth-baring smile. I sat down hard on the cold floor from the sheer erotic power of it.

He knelt outside the circle, slowly, every move a ripple of muscle beneath the tight black sweater and leather jacket he wore. "I am an incubus," he murmured, his eyes holding mine, his power making me ache with desire even through whatever barrier the circle provided. "Your need drew me, Tera. Your pleasure feeds me. And now that you've tasted me, you need me as much as I need you."

Oh, shit, I thought. And then, for the first time in my life, I fainted.

When I came to, I was still in the circle, and Rowan was nowhere to be seen. Any doubts I might have had about whether I'd dreamed all of it were answered by my throbbing

body. It wanted fucking; it had been ready for wild, hot sex and lots of it; and it was loudly protesting that it had been denied.

Well, body, tough shit. This guy was the ultimate dead-end boyfriend, and I just was not going there. I stood slowly, swaying a little on my feet until I caught my balance, and reminding myself to give Wren a free whatever-she-wanted from the shop for drawing that circle for me. I checked my watch and found out I'd only been out for fifteen minutes or so, which was good.

Freaky supernatural shit or not, I had a business to run, and that meant that all the mundane tasks that came with it had to be performed. Right now, mundane sounded pretty damn good.

I straightened the stockroom and finished an order I'd begun but abandoned on the break table. When I got up the nerve to leave the stockroom, I went to the register to print out last night's receipts, and I happened to glance at the monitor that showed the curtained-off video alcove. Don't ask me why, but people who don't blush about buying a dildo the size of a baseball bat in front of a dozen strangers don't want to pick out erotic videos if they think someone might see them doing it.

Rowan stood in the center of the little room, eyes closed, head back, looking for all the world like a man breathing in something glorious.

And at the exact moment I noticed him, he turned and looked straight at the camera. "Gotcha," he mouthed, and I ran.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the red velvet curtain fly to the side as he burst through it, saw him leap a row of shelves like fucking Superman, and then my hand was on the doorknob back to the storeroom. I wrenched it open and darted through, my heart pounding a mile a minute and, incredibly, that electric desire racing through me again.

Tera, you're sick, I told myself as I tried to cover the distance to the circle in one leap. *Getting chased by a fucking demon turns you on?*

Yes. Damn it, it did.

Inches short of the circle, my flight from temptation ended. Rowan caught me around the waist and scooped me off the ground, spinning away from the circle and taking me straight down to the floor. "Not this time," he growled, pinning me with his hard body and cutting off any protest I might've made by simply distracting my mouth with his.

"Mmm," I said, my usual facility with words deserting me right along with my willpower as he slid his tongue in deep to play with mine. He hadn't kissed me last night, and I suddenly knew exactly what I'd been missing. Hot and deep and long and smoldering, the kiss spun on and on, robbing me of breath, making me writhe and moan and clutch him tighter. His tongue thrust in and out, mimicking what I knew was to come, and the hard ridge of his cock rode between my thighs. I was powerless to stop myself rubbing against him, the friction glorious, unbearable, nowhere near enough.

Finally he tore his mouth away, leaning back only far enough to pull the loose neck of my blouse down and bare my breasts. I cried out when his hands covered me, fingers teasing nipples to pebble-hard buds, mouth and tongue suckling, biting, spiking pleasure through me until my clit throbbed and I had all the willpower of Jell-O. "Rowan, please," I moaned, clutching at him and wishing my arms weren't trapped by the tight shirt so I could pull him still closer.

"Everything you want," he whispered as his hands found the button of my jeans.

My jeans were off in seconds, and his face was between my thighs almost before I knew what hit me. His hands clutched my hips, pulling me hard against that sucking, licking mouth, his tongue flicking heat and magic over my clit and deep inside my pussy, devouring me and bringing me to a screaming, writhing orgasm all too soon. He moaned against me and licked me faster, his mouth greedy on my flesh, drinking my pleasure and sending me higher still.

A bare instant before pleasure crossed the line to pain, he pulled away, his eyes dancing with light, glowing with it as he gazed up my body and met my dazed eyes. "More, my pretty Tera?" he asked, releasing my hips, rocking back onto his knees and peeling off his leather jacket. "Shall I make you scream again? Want my cock now, hmm?"

"God, yes," I breathed, helpless to move even when he rose to his feet and stood over me, powerless to crawl to the safety of the circle mere inches away, unable to do anything but watch him strip the clothes from a body so perfect it should be a sin to cover it. He threw his clothes carelessly aside, but none landed in the circle. It seemed nothing of his could enter that space.

That thought was driven from my mind when he tossed the last piece away and stood before me, gloriously nude and so sexy my pussy wept with desire. "Like what you see?" he asked, but that half-grin said he knew I did.

"Turn," I said, mouth as dry as cotton. "Let me see it all."

If I was giving myself to an incubus, feeding him my life force for the pleasure he could bring, then I was by damn going to milk every second of it for all the ecstasy it was worth.

He inclined his head again, that old-worldly little mock-bow, and slowly turned before me. Broad shoulders, rippling abs, and rock-hard arms gave way to a sleek, toned back and an ass so tight and hard I wished I had the energy to sit up and sink my teeth into it. As the light from the doorway fell across his skin, I saw he had a tattoo -- a dragon, fierce, vivid, and dangerous. The beast's head curled over his right shoulder and down his biceps, the body stretching across his back, claws bared, rippling with every move he made, the tail crossing his left hip and curling down his thigh. It was the most intricate and sexy tat I'd ever seen.

Then he turned again and I stared at his cock, thick and hard and powerful, rising proud and high almost to his navel. I licked my lips, remembering how it had felt in my mouth, his deep groans of pleasure as I'd sucked him. Nothing I sold, no matter how it vibrated or spun or gyrated, could come close to the pleasure his huge cock promised.

Rowan wrapped a hand around his cock and stroked himself, slowly, teasing me. “Is this what you want, Tera?” he asked, his voice low and rough, like a jungle cat’s purr. Another slow stroke, up and down, and a drop of moisture appeared at his cockhead like a pearl. I licked my lips before I could help myself. “Want me to take this big cock and fuck you hard, fuck you so deep you’ll feel me for days?”

My clit throbbed, and I squeezed my legs together against the urge to stroke myself as he was stroking his cock. No, damn it, I was not going to touch myself, not when he was naked and magnificent right in front of me and that cock was there for the taking. “Stop talking and start fucking me,” I growled, opening my legs so he could see how wet he made me.

His smile broadened, and he pulled me to my feet, my scrunched-down blouse the only thing between his flesh and mine, and drew me toward the little table in the corner. “How about you fuck me this time?” he said, sitting on the cheap plastic chair and pulling me onto his lap, my breasts level with his face, his cock hard and hot against my belly. “Take what you want,” he whispered, flexing his hips and rubbing against me.

God, talk about an invitation I couldn’t refuse. The condoms were still on the table, and I ripped one open. I reached between us as I rose up, rubbing his thick head against my clit, crying out in startled pleasure when he sucked my nipple into his mouth. My hands shook as I rolled the condom onto his cock. Slowly I slid down over him, every pull of his lips sending a wave of hot cream to my pussy, his cock stretching me to my limit, his hands and mouth demanding, claiming, owning me.

That position let me take him to the last inch, until his balls were tight against my ass, and I froze like that, eyes closed, head back, overwhelmed by the enormous sense of impalement, by his hot and demanding mouth on my nipples. He chuckled against my skin, and I knew he was gloating, reveling in his power to seduce me when I was still afraid of him.

Fury sparked through me, and suddenly I was determined that he would not gloat over me. He might feed off me, whatever, but in the end I was not going to be *taken* like some weak, mewling gothic heroine. I rose up, sliding that delicious cock almost all the way out, before coming back down hard and fast.

His chuckle stopped, turned into a groan. Good, damn him. I did it again, his cock slipping out, so slick, throbbing for me, and slammed down again, spearing heat straight to my belly. Again and again, hard, fast, using him just like he was using me, stealing his breath and my own.

Sweat ran down my back, between my breasts, and I didn't slow or stop. My pussy clenched tight around him, released him to withdraw, clenched as he stabbed back inside me. I fisted both hands in his hair and made him meet my eyes as I fucked him with all the fury and passion in my soul, lost myself in those sparkling depths, and never stopped riding him hard and fast.

His body started to shake, and he grabbed my hips, trying to slow me, but I wasn't having any of it. I bit his lip and brought a groan from him that sounded like a curse. This time when I rose up, I sank down slowly, undulating my hips, letting my pussy massage his cock all the way to the root as I took him in again.

He threw his head back and clenched his jaw. A surge of triumph rocked me. He tried to take control again, and I didn't let him, alternating between riding him hard and stroking him slow, and only when his cock jumped and throbbed inside me and he howled with pleasure did I let myself come.

My orgasm was hard and endless, wave after wave, his cock shooting heat into me and my pussy clenching around him, milking him for every drop he had. I bit his shoulder again and loved the thunder of his racing heart in my ears. Long minutes passed before I realized his head rested on my shoulder, too.

“Hellfire,” he breathed, his hands still tight on my hips. “It’s not supposed to go like that.”

I merely raised my head and gave him my own version of his mocking head bow. “Fuck you for thinking you could use me and not give something, too,” I said, then got off his cock and out of his lap before stepping back into my circle. “Door’s over there. Get the hell out, and don’t come back.”

Chapter Five

Two days passed after I watched Rowan leave, silent and hopefully just as shaken as I'd been. Twenty-four hours of feeling like pure, distilled hell and knowing that every bit of afterglow I'd deserved had been his fucking meal, then another twenty-four of my body aching, trembling, demanding more.

Again, tough shit, body. I'm no one's buffet.

Wren made me go home early that Wednesday, thinking I was catching the flu. I didn't argue with her. I wanted to have some quality time with the internet and find out how to make Rowan stay gone.

My libido howled in protest, but I ignored it. I Googled *incubus* and read every page that came up. I rolled my eyes at most of the medieval illustrations -- Rowan looked nothing like those hideous things. Let me tell you, if some scaly, winged, horned, disgusting half-animal freak tried getting a piece of my ass, I could certainly resist.

It was sexy half-smiles and electric-blue eyes that were my downfall.

Apart from the ridiculous illustrations, though, nothing I found was particularly reassuring. Incubi were persistent, possessed an insatiable lust, were mischievous, clever. They were also particularly resistant to exorcism, which explained why Wren's spell hadn't

had more effect -- she'd cast it on my body, but he'd only been daunted by the circle. I read stories about incubi possessing a bishop's wife in revenge for an attempted exorcism, and another story about an incubus building a brick wall around his victim's bed in one night to prevent the priest from coming.

I started to feel pretty damn lucky that Wren's circle had any effect on him at all.

By noon on Saturday I was going stir crazy. Wren wouldn't need me in the shop until evening, and I had to get away from those same four walls. There was only one thing to do.

Shop.

Of course, Christmas was only a few days away, so the malls would be a nightmare, but in my current state of mind, the crush of people seemed more like armor than annoyance. Safety in numbers and all that shit. Besides all that, I never have my Christmas shopping done early, or even on time, for that matter. So I threw on some jeans and a ragged, comfortable sweatshirt, tied my hair back in a ponytail, skipped the makeup, and headed to Barton Creek Square.

Once I'd managed to find a parking spot roughly a mile away from the entrance, I lost myself gladly in the crowds and sales. Jeans, sweaters, new bras at both Victoria's Secret and Frederick's of Hollywood, and naturally shoes to match -- oh, yeah, wasn't I supposed to be buying presents? I reined in my credit card and headed to the sports collectibles shop, because of all things, Wren loved baseball cards. I was pretty sure I'd promised to get her one, but damned if I could remember whose it was supposed to be.

I felt him before I saw him. Of course Rowan, the walking block of masculinity, would be right outside the sports shop. Hands draped in bags, I stopped dead in the middle of the crowd and ignored the glares and muttered curses of those who bumped into me and had to go around. I couldn't even turn around to see if he was really there. I knew he was by the way my breasts tightened and my breath caught.

"Go to hell, Rowan," I said, somehow positive he'd hear me.

“Been there, done that. No, thanks.”

I finally managed to shove my way out of the stream of shoppers and turned to face him, my back to the wall for support as that dark voice weakened my knees. Only then did I see him, tall and dark and so damn gorgeous I almost came just at the sight of his face. He smiled, stepping through the crowd as though the space between us was empty, long legs encased in tight leather, hard chest barely concealed in a tight shirt, long black trenchcoat kissing his booted heels.

Belatedly I realized that having my back to the wall might not have been the smartest idea I'd ever had.

“Miss me, pretty Tera?” he asked, bracing a palm beside my head and hypnotizing me with those electric eyes. The sparks were there now, teasing me with the glimpse of his power.

“No.” Yeah, so I lied. Sue me. “Go away.”

“No,” he said, smiling again. “Make me.”

I closed my eyes. That smile should really be illegal. I knew for a fact now that it was sinful in the truest sense of the word. “Why don't you go find some other girl to fuck to death?”

He didn't answer at once, and I opened my eyes again. Shockingly, he appeared to be really thinking the question over. When he met my eyes again, the sparks were quieter, his expression more serious. “I'm not sure,” he said at last.

“Oh, that's great. I'm supposed to calmly accept you sucking away my life or my orgasms or whatever you do, just because you don't know why you want me?” Way to go, mouth. Keep on digging that hole deeper. “It's so reassuring to know that it's nothing special about me that makes me the perfect meal. That'll comfort me a lot as I waste away and die young.”

“Oh, there’s something special about you, all right.” Rowan actually leaned back and shoved his hands in his pockets, frowning. “Your store has something to do with it,” he said, speaking musingly, almost as if his mouth was running without his permission, too.

“Walking in there, Tera ... you have no idea the amount of frustrated sexual energy in that place.”

“I’d believe it.” Hell, I probably contributed a fair amount of it, which was what attracted him to me in the first place. Then curiosity reared its head. “Can you live off it?”

He shook his head. “No. But it’s a hell of an appetizer.”

The look he gave me then told me just the thought had perked his appetite straight up. I inched away, trying to look casual as I searched for an escape. Someone knocked into him then, distracting him for a bare instant, and I made a break for it. “Sorry, not interested in being your main course,” I called over my shoulder as I tried to shove my way to the escalator.

“I’m not the only one in Austin, Tera.”

His voice, not even raised, carried clearly. I froze, three steps from the escalator, ice shuddering down my spine. “What the hell does that mean?” I asked, facing straight ahead, ignoring the odd looks I was gathering.

I felt his heat through the thick sweatshirt I wore, and when he spoke into my ear, I wasn’t surprised that he was right beside me again. “I mean just what you think I do,” he murmured. “Have you forgotten the zombie so soon? There’s another incubus here. You attract things like us, Tera. He knows about you, and he wants to acquire you. You’re safer with me, I promise you that. I prefer to savor, enjoy. Troian prefers to gorge himself.”

Oh, wonderful. Kill me slow or kill me fast. Great choice. “How about both of you fuck off and leave me alone?” I shot back. “I said not to come back, Rowan. Go away. Don’t touch me. Leave me alone! How much clearer can I make it?”

He laughed. "I don't need your permission, sweetheart, but if I did, you've already given it."

I jumped as I heard Rowan's voice, not with my ears, but in my mind. *I can do it again.* The words he'd whispered after he'd taken me against the wall of the back room of my shop. *Over and over, Tera. Do you want me to?*

And my own reply, not knowing what I was agreeing to. *"Hell, yeah."*

He chuckled as I groaned at the memory. "In fact," he murmured, clearly enjoying this, "I don't even need to touch you."

Lips traced my spine, hot, fluttering kisses from the nape of my neck all the way to my ass. My entire body shuddered, and my pussy ached, suddenly reminded of just how empty it was and how incredibly, stupendously well he could fill it. "Stop it," I whispered, my fingers clenching in a death grip on my bags.

"Make me."

I turned to see him looking at me, no trace of a smile on his face now. His eyes flashed, the golden sparks coming out to play. Goddamn it, he was so damn sexy, and I was so seriously fucked up because I wanted him, knowing what he was and knowing what would happen. There was an ATM under the escalator and I stumbled toward it, using the excuse of the machine to turn my back to the crowds, those phantom lips sucking a hickey on my inner thigh the whole time. "Not here, then," I said, breathing fast and trying to hide it as Rowan leaned casually beside me, not touching me at all.

He gave me a tight smile that held no warmth whatsoever. "Right here."

An invisible tongue flicked my right nipple. The lips moved from my thigh to my clit, teasing, just brushing my aching flesh. I closed my eyes, trying to fight the urge to grind my hips against that invisible face, to demand sucking, licking, fucking. "Damn it, Rowan --"

"Hush," he murmured, his voice almost gentle. "I'm just beginning my little demonstration, lover."

In that moment, everything went wild. Invisible hands joined the lips moving over my body, grabbing my ass, rubbing my breasts, sliding down my flanks and teasing my thighs. An army of hands. Mouths fastened on my nipples and sucked, teeth nibbled, and my clit seemed to be the centerpiece of two French-kissing tongues. I couldn't bite back a moan at the assault. It was like being the centerpiece of a massive orgy, but in the middle of the mall at the height of the Christmas-shopping frenzy.

And then his cock slid inside me.

It was so real I actually tried to shove him away, only he was out of reach. Part of my mind registered that my jeans were still tight around my hips, but the next thrust felt every bit as solid as the bags in my hands. The thick, hard cock sliding in and out of my pussy was no more real than the army of licking, sucking mouths, but I felt every throbbing inch of it, all the same. Hot cream flooded my pussy, and I bit my lip to keep from crying out in ecstasy.

Again and again that phantom cock thrust into me, so thick and long and hard that it was almost more than I could take, and every time it withdrew I had to force myself not to whimper at the loss. Rowan was watching me; I could feel it, and I turned to him as he fucked me mercilessly without laying so much as a finger on me. "God, Rowan, please," I whispered as those hands tightened on my hips, my ass, my thighs, my tits, as mouths licked nipples and earlobes and clit. "Don't make me scream here," I begged, trying not to moan aloud as my invisible lover fucked me harder.

He leaned a little closer. "Let me make you scream later," he said, his eyes almost totally golden with light now, only a hint of blue at the edges. "Choose me, as you chose me last time I had you. Come to me willingly, and I will give you every fantasy you've ever had."

His power surrounded me. More mouths arrived, sprinkling love-bites all over my body, some soft, some not. An orgasm like I'd never known was building, and I fought it, trying to remember where I was, that we were surrounded by strangers, by families, for Christ's sake.

“No,” I gasped.

He took one more step, leaning against the side of the ATM, still not touching me. Teeth fastened on my nipples, my labia, my clit. Tongues teased the imprisoned flesh. “Yes,” he hissed, the invisible cock fucking me so hard my body rocked with each thrust.

God, I was drowning in sex, surrounded by sex, and my mouth answered before I could shut it. “Yes.”

He smiled, that dark, deadly smile of his that reduced me to a quivering mound of hormones. “Then come, Tera.”

And I did. God, did I ever. My pussy exploded with pleasure, waves of ecstasy building mercilessly as the cock inside me swelled, fucking me so hard and deep it was almost painful. I choked back the scream that wanted to erupt as my own juices soaked my thighs, and I locked my knees to keep from falling. “Enough,” I gasped, knowing I was about to seriously humiliate myself if he didn't stop.

“Not enough.”

The cock pulled out of my pussy, and before I knew what was coming, hands grabbed my ass cheeks and that wet, throbbing cock was fucking its way right into my ass. My eyes flew wide. I've never liked ass, but God, the way Rowan did it, I could suddenly understand the appeal. “Oh, God,” I moaned, dropping my bags and clutching the sides of the ATM for balance.

“More, sweet Tera?” Rowan whispered, moving to stand behind me, bracing his hands just above mine, not touching me, but leaving me unable to shake the illusion that he was fucking me up the ass right in front of the entire world.

He didn't wait for me to answer, either. Maybe he knew I was beyond it. The next instant, I felt another cock nudging the lips of my pussy. “More?” he whispered in my ear, and I forgot about the mall. I forgot about the people watching. I forgot everything but living this fantasy, and I nodded.

I didn't forget what he was, and I knew I'd feel like hell when it was over. But I still wanted to feel what it was like to get fucked both ways at once.

He didn't force me. I *chose* to feel it.

The second cock slid slowly into my pussy as the other sank deep in my ass. The feeling of fullness was incredible, overwhelming, and I could no longer stifle my moans. Rowan fucked me slow, filling my pussy with that hard, thick cock as the one in my ass retreated, thrusting deep behind me as the one in my pussy withdrew. Then suddenly moving together, fucking hard and slow and so deep I could swear I felt it in my throat. All the while the tongues licking my nipples and clit didn't slow, teasing and tasting, sucking and licking and rubbing.

"Come," Rowan murmured in my ear again, and my body convulsed with ecstasy. I was gasping, holding on to the wall for dear life, Rowan's body hot behind me as the invisible gang fucked me. "Come again," he whispered when that orgasm peaked, sending me higher, forcing inarticulate, whimpering moans from my throat no matter how hard I tried to stop them.

Finally the phantom orgy ended, vanishing so suddenly I stumbled. Rowan caught me and guided me to a bench, pushing me down on my well-fucked ass before going to retrieve my bags for me. I rubbed my face and tried to catch my breath before he came back.

It was a useless effort because I lost it again as soon as he sat down beside me and I happened to glance over at his lap. Those tight leather jeans were under some serious strain from the thick erection pushing under the zipper. "Not so good for you?" I asked, crossing my arms over my tingling breasts and crossing my legs demurely. Bit late for that, but it was the best I could do. "Don't tell me you're still hungry."

He finally touched me, burying his fingers in my hair and dragging me into his ravenous kiss. I almost came again as his tongue thrust into my mouth, mimicking what had

happened to me only moments ago and what I instinctively knew would soon be happening again soon.

He pulled away before I could. "I can only feed on you while touching you," he growled, his golden eyes blazing. "That ride was free, Tera. Do you still think Troian would be better for you?"

Chapter Six

Rowan drove me back to my apartment, again claiming the driver's seat of my car as though it was his right. I knew I should be freaked that he knew where I'd parked, much less where I lived, but I was too damn tired. Still, I felt great. That afterglow I'd been missing? It was back, better than ever.

On the way, he pulled into a drive-thru and ordered two foot-long subs. I stared at him as he got my order perfect -- toasted wheat bun, no mustard, extra jalapenos -- all without asking me. The other sub, double meat with everything, surprised me. "You actually eat?"

He didn't look at me as he pulled forward to the window. "Your pleasure sustains my life," he said. "I still need to feed this body."

I didn't like the way he referred to it as "this body." It reminded me of one particularly disturbing website that claimed incubi who appeared "in the flesh" either possessed the living or reanimated the dead. The thought gave me the major willies.

Really, I was surprising myself. I could get off on fucking a demon, but the undead?
Ewwwwwww.

My mouth forged on, thankfully distracting my brain from that thought. "So, what's that body's favorite food?"

God, what an inane question.

Rowan didn't laugh, though. He looked at me as the girl at the window made change. "Why do you care? You only want one thing from me."

The girl held out the subs before I could reply, which was probably good. I couldn't really think of a good put-down for a demon. *Go to hell* was just so clichéd, and *go fuck yourself* would only give him an opening to talk about sex some more, which would likely end with me climaxing my brains out as we drove down Loop 1. Call me crazy, but as incredible as that invisible orgy had been, I didn't want any more of that. I like to hold on to someone when I come.

I'd gotten past the urge to insult him by the time he rolled up the window and pulled away. Still, I've never been good at riding in silence. "Believe it or not, I'm not in the habit of blindly fucking every man that comes across my path," I said, tearing open my bag of chips and crunching one, unapologetically talking with my mouth full. I wasn't exactly trying to impress him. "I've fed you a few times, so it's nice to finally get a meal out of you in return. I can almost call this a date, in the most messed-up sense possible, of course."

He didn't glance away from the road. "If you fucked every man who came across your path, Tera, you'd never have drawn me to you."

Well, if that didn't just shoot my disdain of promiscuousness right out of the water. "If I survive you, will you remind me to screw everything in pants, then?"

He grimaced at that. "This might be a good time to mention that incubi get fairly territorial when we choose a ... lover." That long pause had me inserting all sorts of other words. Victim? Meal? Fuck-buddy? "Until I finish with you, there will be no other men for you, and no other lovers for me."

Well, that was interesting. Demonic monogamy. Who knew? "So, you're the jealous type," I said, licking salt from my fingers. "Good to know. I'm surprised, though. Wouldn't you get double the energy if you could sap both me and some other poor guy? Less effort for

you. Just stand to the side and let us poor meal-tickets do the work, and all you have to do is soak it up.”

He made a sound that could've been a suppressed growl or a groan. “I don't want you to speak of such things,” he said through his teeth.

Must've been a growl, then.

“Well, by all means, let's make *you* happy,” I groused, finishing my chips and throwing the bag over my shoulder into the backseat. He shot me a disgusted look that I ignored. My car, after all. “Rowan, what's it like to do what you do?”

Rowan hit the brakes so hard my seatbelt locked. He swerved to the shoulder and stopped the car before turning to face me. “Why the hell are you asking so many fucking questions?” he demanded, and if I'd had any sense at all, I'd have been terrified of him.

But I already knew he intended to kill me, so what else was there to fear? Everyone had to go sometime, and going in the midst of a stellar orgasm ... it had something to say for it. “Because I want to know the answers,” I said, meeting that flashing stare without flinching. “Come on, Rowan. I've never met a real demon before. I'm giving enough to you. Is it too much to ask you to answer a few questions?”

His jaw clenched. I waited. Finally he sat back and sighed. “Fine, Tera. I'll answer your damn questions. What do you want to know?”

I bit my lip, thinking. “What does it feel like when you feed off people?”

He closed his eyes and rubbed them with one hand. “Like drinking,” he replied, his tone flat, his words clipped. “It's different every time. Sometimes it's cool, sometimes hot and spicy. With you, it's sweet as candy, like warm honey. Is that good enough for you?”

Ooh, found something that bothered him. Rowan clearly didn't like talking about himself. Well, that just meant I had to keep going until I found out why. “How do you do it?”

He opened his eyes and stared at me. “Excuse me?”

I waved vaguely. “Drink my honey or whatever. How do you do it?”

His face hardened for a moment before melting into a leer. "Lie back on that seat and I'll drink your honey," he murmured, his voice back to its full erotic power.

It pissed me off. "If you don't want to answer, say so," I said irritably, crossing my arms over my chest and pretending he wasn't turning me on again. "Don't start with the seduction bit to distract me. Besides, you said you'd answer my *questions*, plural. So far I've gotten exactly one answer. You're not done yet."

He growled again, a clear warning. "Woman ..."

I growled right back, imitating everything from his posture to his glare to his warning tone. "Demon ..."

His lips tightened, but I saw the clear spark of humor light his eyes at my imitation. I stuck my tongue out at him, and he laughed out loud. "You're crazy, Tera," he said, then ducked his head and gave me a quick kiss.

It wasn't passionate. Just a quick peck on my lips. It wasn't cold and calculating, and it wasn't hot and seductive. It was ... warm. Comforting.

Before I could react, we were driving again, and I was trying to figure out what the hell had just happened. The silence now felt companionable, not tense. I hadn't figured out a way to break it by the time we pulled up in front of my apartment building.

Nervousness swamped me when Rowan killed the engine. This was it, then. I'd known what he was the last time we'd had sex, but this time was different. I could feel the change in the atmosphere.

Two days ago, I'd screwed him because my body demanded it and because I thought I could make him go away when we were done. Now I'd chosen him as my personal incubus so he'd protect me from another of his kind who was just a little more murderous than himself. I'd chosen a slightly slower death.

It wasn't the most romantic thought in the world, and it turned my libido to ice.

Rowan grabbed the bag of subs and got out of the car. I forced myself to do the same. My feet felt like lead as I followed him up the stairs and to my own door, which he unlocked with my keys.

“Make yourself at home,” I said as he went right in, but it didn’t come out sarcastic and sassy. It came out as a croak.

He turned and looked at me as I stood just outside the door. “Aren’t you coming in?”

I bit my lip, looking at him. He was gorgeous and utterly divine standing there in my entryway, hot and male and so sexy I should’ve been tearing his clothes off and dragging him to my bed. Even the neighbor’s cat didn’t seem to be immune. She rubbed against his legs, purring so loudly I could hear it even from ten feet away.

Instead of jumping him, I took a step back, shaking my head. “I -- I forgot something,” I said, catching myself twisting the hem of my sweatshirt in my hands and making myself stop it. “In the car. My bags!” I added as inspiration struck. “I’ll just go get them.”

He was beside me, frowning, before I could so much as take a step. “What’s wrong with you?”

Damn, he moved fast when he wanted to. I inched the other way. The walkway had stairs at either end, so I’d just go the long way. “I don’t want to leave my stuff down there,” I said, not meeting his eyes. I really didn’t want to see gold sparks right now. “What if someone steals my car? It’s been known to happen ... of course, you’d know that. Stealing my car is a hobby of yours, isn’t it?”

His hand cupped my cheek, stopping me in mid-babble. “Look at me, Tera.”

I shook my head. Huh-uh, I wasn’t stupid.

He sighed. “Your bags will be fine,” he said. “Come inside. Sit down, and we’ll have something to eat, all right?”

I looked up as he drew me toward the door. “And which one of us will be eating, Rowan?” I asked before I could help myself.

“Both of us, of course.”

I let him herd me through the door, my heart sinking. He stepped past me and grabbed his sub out of the bag before holding mine out to me. “Here.”

I didn't take it. I stayed right where I was, three feet from the door, frozen in the entryway right where he'd left me. He frowned at me. “What's wrong with you?” he asked again, a hint of exasperation entering his voice. “If you didn't want this, you should've said something in the drive-thru. You could've gotten something else.”

For a moment I could only stare at him. He honestly thought I was standing here because I objected to the damn sandwich? “Forget the stupid sub!” I snapped, crossing the distance between us with two angry strides and knocking the bag out of his hand. “Just do what you're going to do and get it over with, all right? Do it so I don't have to think about it anymore, and then get out.” To my horror, I felt the sting of tears in my eyes, and I turned my back on him, hoping he hadn't seen them.

Rowan was silent for a moment that felt like an eternity. “By damn, Tera,” he murmured at last. “Are you going to be afraid of me now? After all that bullshit in the car, you're going to freak out now?”

I didn't want to answer. My mouth still had a mind of its own. “You only want one thing from me,” I said, echoing his words in the drive-thru. “Why do you care?”

This time the silence was considerably shorter, and it ended with a growl. “Hellfire, woman, you're trying my patience,” he snarled. “You're right. I don't care. You think I need your permission to come in here, to do anything I want to you? I'm not one of your soft-hearted little human lovers, Tera.”

“I know that,” I said, my voice barely a whisper to his shout. “They'd actually give a shit if I was frightened.”

He growled again, and suddenly I felt his hand on my shoulder, but instead of yanking me to him, he pushed me out of the way. “I don't need this bullshit,” he snapped, throwing

open the door and striding angrily through it, the cat right on his heels. “Fear tastes rancid, sweetheart. I’ll find something more appetizing than you.”

I stared at the door as he slammed it, stunned. He’d left? He’d really left?

Holy fucking shit.

I threw both deadbolts, locked the doorknob, and slid the chain in place, just in case he’d been bluffing about coming in uninvited. I leaned against the door for a long time, listening for footsteps on the walkway outside, listening for him to come back.

He didn’t.

It was unbelievable. What was that demonstration at the mall about if not to prove he could seduce me whether I wanted him to or not? Had he really been bothered by my fear? I couldn’t believe it, but then again, why else would he have left like that? If he’d been telling the truth, I was his personal buffet until he drained me dry. If it had been two days since his last “meal,” surely he was hungry.

It was too much to hope that he meant what he’d said about finding someone new. If I was certain of nothing else, I could at least rest assured that he was well and truly fixated on me.

I finally left the door and went into the living room, suddenly exhausted -- and starving. When it came right down to it, I didn’t really care why he’d gone away, just that he had.

And when I picked up the bag I’d knocked out of his hand, I found he’d taken my sandwich with him. I made a mental note to give him hell for his childishness, and fell asleep right there on the couch.

I was walking down the beach, a gauzy, multi-colored skirt blowing around my bare legs as surf washed over my feet. Overhead, gulls circled and cried, occasionally diving to pluck something from the beach or the water.

I've never been to the ocean in my life, which was my first clue that I was dreaming.

As dreams went, so far it got an A in my book. The sun was warm on my back, the light not harsh enough to hurt my eyes, but bright enough to make the water sparkle. The sand was soft beneath my feet, squishing between my toes. I turned and walked backwards to watch my footprints disappear as the waves rolled in. It was soothing, a much-needed respite from my fear, a safe haven filled with the sound of the water and the cries of the birds.

And as I turned to walk forward again, I saw Rowan swimming toward me.

I stopped dead at the sight of him, the long arms golden in the light, that dragon tattoo just visible at one shoulder as he stood in the waist-high water. I felt his gaze warm my skin and took a shuddering breath. "Rowan, what are you doing here?"

He walked toward me, magnificent as he left the water. Adonis rising from the surf, instead of Venus. I was disappointed to see the black swimsuit he wore. Foolishly, I'd hoped he'd be naked again.

"Why did you panic when I brought you home?" he asked as he neared, stopping a few feet away from me. The water lapped his calves. "You didn't fear me at the mall, not for long. You damn sure weren't afraid of me in the car. What changed?"

I shrugged. My subconscious was always doing shit like this, making me relive things in my dreams. I guess it was just my way of working things out. "You couldn't reasonably kill me at the mall," I told him. "At least, I didn't think you would, not in front of so many people. And in the car, you had to drive. I figured that killing me would take some concentration, and I guess I just assumed you couldn't do that and drive, too."

He just stared at me for a moment, and I could tell none of this had occurred to him. Well, there went my theories. Apparently he could kill me anywhere.

"You really thought I was going to kill you today, just like that?"

He sounded completely floored. It occurred to me that I should shut up and let him explain, but I couldn't control my mouth any better in my dreams than I could in my real

life. “Well, yeah,” I said. “In my apartment, there wouldn’t be any witnesses. Just one quick fuck, you do whatever you do, and poof. A nice meal for you, and no more Tera.”

He ran a hand through his hair with a harsh sigh, but I couldn’t seem to shut up. “Will you tell someone when you do it, please?” I asked, blessing the serenity of dreams. Here, I could tell him anything. “At least make an anonymous call to 911 or something. Don’t just leave me there until someone notices I haven’t paid the rent in two months or something. Will you do that for me?”

Rowan’s face darkened and he swore, long and with remarkable creativity. I waited for him to finish, still calm, just watching his face. He really was pissed off, I noted with clinical detachment. Good thing this wasn’t real. I might bait him a little, but there was no way in hell I’d purposefully piss him off this bad in the real world.

Finally he closed the distance between us and reached for me. I expected him to grab my arms and shake me like a leaf, but instead he cupped my face in his hands and stroked my cheeks with his thumbs. “I wasn’t going to kill you like that,” he murmured. “Didn’t I tell you that I’m not like Troian? I’m going to savor you, not use you up all at once. And I’d make sure your body was found, Tera. I’m not completely heartless.”

I laughed. I actually laughed right in his face. “Do you hear what you’re saying?” I asked, my sides aching with laughter. “Oh, you’re a real Prince Charming, all right. Every girl’s dream. Goddamn it, Rowan, I don’t want to die!”

Suddenly the tears weren’t from laughter anymore. I slapped his hands away and ran down the beach, ignoring him when he called my name.

I woke up with a blinding headache and my cheeks wet with tears. My neck was stiff from sleeping on the couch, and one glance at my watch told me I was late for work. “Damn it, damn it, damn it!” I muttered, leaping off the couch and stripping on my way to the shower, leaving bits of clothing wherever they fell.

Damn Rowan, taking my time off and turning it into this nightmare.

I expected Wren to be beside herself with worry when I arrived more than an hour later than usual, but she wasn't. When I walked in, she hit me with a smile that could've lit up half the city. "There you are!" she cried happily. "Coffee's in the back. Grab a cup -- and by the way, you look like hell!"

That pronouncement in her ultra-cheerful voice made me laugh, a real laugh this time. "Coming from someone with green hair, I'll take that with a grain of salt," I said, walking past her to the storeroom. Damn, but coffee sounded like ambrosia right now.

As I filled the biggest mug we had with the rich, black brew, I stared down at the circle she'd drawn on the floor. It felt like a year had passed since then, not just a few days. Could I live inside that circle, I wondered? Could Wren somehow do the same thing to my apartment? Surely there had to be some kind of way to keep Rowan away.

After all, what proof did I have that there was another incubus in Austin? Nothing more than the word of a demon. I wasn't exactly going to bet the bank on that.

Wren pushed open the door just as I put the coffeepot back down, catching me staring at that circle. "Oh, I was just about to clean that up," she said, grabbing a rag and a spray bottle of cleaner from atop a pile of boxes. "Sorry about that. I just forgot about it, or I'd have wiped it up sooner."

I moved so fast, half my coffee sloshed out over my hand and down the leg of my jeans. "No, leave it!" I cried, blocking the circle with my body.

Wren's eyebrows disappeared into her bangs. "Whoa, boss lady. Let's not have a coronary. What's up?"

I was saved by the bell, literally, as a customer entered the shop. I sagged against the little table in relief. My circle was safe. Wren gave me her patented *we'll-discuss-this-later* look and reversed course, heading back to the register.

But, to my amazement, "later" didn't come.

I stood by the circle and guzzled down a cup of coffee strong enough to melt my stomach lining, and she didn't come back into the storeroom. I found the stashed box of double-fudge cookies and finished them off, and no sign of Wren. I hid the bottle of cleaner way back behind a stack of old boxes, poured a third cup of coffee, and finally forced myself to leave the storeroom.

Much as I hated to admit it, I knew I was in way over my head. Wren was the only person I knew who might be able to help me sort things out.

As soon as I walked into the shop, I knew why she hadn't returned to the storeroom. There was no sign of her anywhere.

"Wren?" I called, checking all the dressing rooms and pushing aside the curtain to the video alcove just in case the camera had somehow missed her. "Wren!"

It was useless. I knew it was when I did it. Wren, my responsible, overbearing, concerned, free-spirited friend and only employee, had walked straight out and left the shop unmanned while I cowered in the back room, afraid to explain the very things I was now dying to discuss.

Anger boiled through me, forcing out the confusion I'd woken with. It was a welcome change, but it only lasted a moment. I'd known Wren for years. This was so unlike her, I couldn't maintain my fury for long. I hadn't heard any sort of commotion. Hell, I hadn't even heard the bells ring over the door when she'd left. Had I been that preoccupied?

The bells rang again, and I spun around, expecting Wren or even Rowan. The sight of a pair of giggling college students actually threw me for a loop. I was so used to the weird and freaky at this point that anything *normal* was the last thing I'd expected. "Can I help you?" I said, my voice forced, sounding more like a croak than anything.

They shook their heads, linked hands, and started browsing.

I ignored them and tried to suppress my growing worry. Wren wouldn't leave before her shift was done. She was a college student, too, and while I couldn't pay her much, she

needed every single penny she earned. She'd probably ducked outside to have a smoke or gone down the block to get a snack --

Except that her purse was still behind the counter.

Dropped behind the counter, in plain view of anyone, lay the big leather bag Wren carried everywhere. This carelessness just wasn't like her, not at all. I bent to pick it up and saw that it lay atop a little pile of ... things. Things I'd never seen before.

Braided cords of multicolored thread that could've been bracelets. A blue velvet bag that gave off the faint scent of herbs when I touched it. A tiny bronze pendant shaped like a hand cradling an eye in its palm. A dime with a hole bored through the center. A small, fuzzy feather. And then something I did recognize -- Wren's strangely patterned earrings, all three pairs of them.

I let my panic have free rein then. Wren wore her earrings all the time -- to the lake, to bed, every moment of the day. She'd worn them when I'd taken her to the airport last year, despite the fact that security had given her hell for them -- they weren't sterling, but some other metal that set off their alarm. She'd refused to remove them then, too, and had told me later that they were for protection.

Wherever Wren had gone, she'd left all her wards behind, and there were a lot of them here. Apparently she had an idea what was going on even though I hadn't gotten around to telling her about Rowan, and she'd tried to protect herself.

What force could make a real witch abandon her own protections?

"Excuse me, but can you unlock the dressing room so I can try this on?"

My customer's voice broke me out of my shock, but not from my worry. "No," I said, and I don't care that I was rude. "Both of you need to leave, right now." I locked the door in their faces after all but shoving them out.

Then I did something I'd sworn I would never do. I picked up the phone and called the police.

Chapter Seven

It sucks to be right. Oh, sometimes it sucks so bad.

This was one of those times.

If I had to listen to this idiot cop repeating my words back to me one more time, I was going to grab a dildo and beat him over his self-righteous, pompous head with it. His partner, too, just for good measure.

“So, Miss ... is it Kenner? You want to file a missing persons report because your friend forgot her purse?”

“She left behind these ... these ... what did you call them? Wards? Riiiiight.”

“You two had a little disagreement in the back, did you say? And then she took off? Are you sure she didn’t quit?”

Why did these guys have to turn everything into a question?

“Look,” I said for the tenth time, trying to keep the growl from my voice as my head pounded. “Wren and I did not argue. She was going to clean something in the storeroom and was interrupted by a customer coming in. By the time I came out here, she was gone, and her purse was right in plain sight with all her charms under it. I don’t care what you think of her

religion, but believe me when I tell you Wren would rather walk around naked than take these earrings off. Okay?"

The taller cop, one who could actually have been highly fuckable if not for his horrendous attitude, nodded and made a note. "Any ideas how someone could have forced her to remove her earrings without any sign of a struggle or any noise you'd notice?"

It went on like that for a while longer, never crossing the line into outright mocking, but coming close enough to let me know just what they thought of me. Surely an ex-con who owned an X-rated toy store couldn't be telling the truth. And a Wiccan lesbian, barely into her twenties? Obviously a flighty sort -- probably ran off with one of the customers. My headache built until all I wanted from life was some aspirin and the ability to banish these people from my shop.

Could it get worse? Why, of course it could. Just as the cops were starting to show indications of wrapping things up, Rowan pushed open the storeroom door and walked in as if he owned the place.

Only this was Rowan as I'd never seen him before. Gone was the sexy, suave, Walking-God-of-the-Almighty-Orgasm persona he'd always possessed. Gone, too, were his shirt, jacket, shoes, and every last indication that he'd ever been a civilized being. I gaped at him, and he shook his head warningly before I could say a word.

"They don't see or hear me," Rowan said, leaning against the railing, right next to Big John the Love Doll's furry red handcuffs. "So unless you want them to think you're crazier than they already do, I'd suggest you wipe that look off your pretty face and get rid of these assholes."

Easier said than done. I'd never had to ignore a growling, bleeding man with claws on his hands, horns on his head, and enormous leathery wings sprouting from his back before.

Somehow -- don't ask me how -- I managed it. The fuckable blond cop raised an eyebrow at me. "Something you want to tell us?" he asked. "Remember something?"

I started to shake my head before realizing that Officer Fuck-Me had given me a good out. With only a slight hesitation, I took it. "I think I did," I said, looking down at my hands and thinking fast. "Wren was fighting with her girlfriend. She wasn't into anything like Wicca. If she came in and offered to take Wren back if she gave up the witch stuff ..."

... Wren would've cold-cocked her and cursed her unconscious body into a smoldering little pile of dung, actually, but when lying, bigger is better, right?

"... she might've gone for it," I concluded.

This fit in nicely with their assumptions and gave me a way to get rid of my unwanted guests. When would I learn that calling the cops never helped? The officers wanted a name, and I gave them one. After all, I hadn't made the *whole* thing up. The argument between Wren and her girlfriend was real, even if it was weeks old. I have to admit, I got a vicious little rush of satisfaction at siccing the cops on that bitch. She really had treated Wren like shit.

Finally, the cops left. I locked the door behind them and did something I very, very rarely did -- pulled the blinds over the door and all the windows, hiding my shop from any curious eyes. It hid my merchandise, but it would also keep anyone from seeing me talk to myself, if Rowan was still doing his invisible trick.

I hoped he was, and that he'd include me this time. Call me crazy, but I really wasn't looking forward to confronting him in this particular form.

No such luck. He was still leaning against the rail when I turned around, his glowing, golden eyes on my face. There wasn't a trace of blue in them now. I forced my feet forward, telling myself that those wings couldn't possibly be real, that the blood on his body and the claws on his fingers were from the costume shop down the street.

"What kicked your ass, Rowan?"

Damn mouth. It had no sense of self-preservation at all.

Rowan glared at me. In his current state, that glare made my heart skip a beat. "I know this is asking a lot of you," he growled, "but could you lay off for a minute? It's not every day I have to defend my property, and it's been centuries since I was last injured. I'm not in the mood for your attitude right now."

"Your property -- what, me?"

He nodded. Before my temper could take off, I realized exactly what he was saying. Since nothing had happened to me, he'd apparently been the victor in whatever battle he'd fought for me, and judging from his injuries, whatever he'd fought hadn't been cute and cuddly. Suddenly those same claws that had freaked me out so bad looked very, very good, and up close, those wings barely looked real. In fact, I could convince myself they weren't, with hardly an effort.

The horns didn't even bear thinking about.

His wounds, though, were distressingly realistic. By now I'd crossed the length of the shop and stopped before him. He really was torn up -- deep gash on his cheek, four parallel slashes across his abs, and something that looked disturbingly like a bite-mark on his arm. Before I could stop myself, I reached out and took his hand, lifting his arm so I could see the bite better. "Are you all right?"

Rowan didn't answer at once. I turned his hand over to examine another scrape along his inner wrist, but when it became obvious that he wasn't planning on answering, I looked up again.

He was staring at me like I'd grown a second head. "What?" I asked, dropping his hand. That look was a bit much, coming from a man with horns. "Didn't you come here hoping I'd play nurse?"

He blinked, and any clue I might've had to his thoughts was gone when he met my eyes again. "Yes, actually, but all this --" He gestured at the cuts on his face and stomach. "-- doesn't matter. Tell me, Tera, can you sew?"

I nodded, some wild notion of fixing his missing shirt or jacket flying through my mind, which just goes to show you how muddled my thoughts were.

“Good.” Rowan stepped away from the rail and away from me, stopping in the middle of the store. He bowed his head, and those fake wings gave a leathery rustle as they opened, spreading into an incredible span over my shelves.

The tip of his left wing knocked a jar of condom-lollypops over, scattering them all across the floor. His right wing trembled slightly before me, less than a foot from my face, and as my knees gave out and I sat down hard on the floor, I saw the ragged tears in it.

He expected me to sew *that*?

“You need a hospital, Rowan,” I said, trying not to hyperventilate.

He snorted, and I realized how dumb that was. What would he do, walk in and calmly ask them to suture his wing? “Okay, a vet, then. Someone who -- someone that -- isn’t me!”

Rowan let his wings drop back down, and this time I watched his face as they moved. His wince was minute, but it was there. Who knew an incubus could feel pain? “My wing got fucked up while I was fighting Troian,” he growled. “Fighting him, I might add, to save your ungrateful little ass. Now suck it up and fix it, Tera. If the edges aren’t put together, it won’t heal right. I’m not going to have a crippled wing for you.”

I stared at him for a moment. He glared right back. Finally the truth of his words penetrated my shock, and I nodded stiffly. His manner might leave a lot to be desired, but he was right. I’d been willing to play nurse for the rest of it. Why not this? I opened my mouth to tell him I’d help him.

“What will you give me if I do this for you?”

I’m not sure which one of us was more surprised. Rowan, probably. I was more used to having unpredictable things come out of my mouth than he was to hearing them. His wings shook slightly as he settled them against his back, and only when they were still again did he speak.

“What do you want, then?” he snapped. “Another free ride? I can’t give it to you. You’ve made me wait past the point of pain. Shall I pay you? Money means nothing to me. Power, then? Want to rule me? I’ll let you live out those fantasies. So what will it be?”

This time, my reply was easy. “I want a promise, Rowan,” I said. “I don’t care what you swear by, as long as it’s something that you’ll honor. Promise not to kill me.”

His face tightened. I could practically see the wheels turning in his mind as he tried to find a way out of it. I certainly didn’t see one. He couldn’t give himself stitches, not where the biggest tear was located, unless he had the flexibility of a circus freak. His face darkened, and I knew he was thinking the same thing. For once, I had a tiny bit of power over him, and he didn’t like it.

Tough shit. As far as I was concerned, it was about damn time that particular table was turned.

Finally he clenched his fist and growled. “Fine. In return for your aid, I swear by all the damned souls in hell, on pain of sharing their torment, that I will not willingly cause you harm. Are you happy now?”

I didn’t like that “willingly” bit, but I sensed that was the most I was going to get out of him. “Ecstatic,” I said dryly. He crossed his arms over his chest and narrowed his eyes at me, and I decided to stop baiting the pissed-off demon. I got to my feet and gestured to the storeroom. “After you,” I said. “I’ve got a little sewing kit back there somewhere. It won’t be sterile, though.”

“Infection isn’t exactly high on my list of worries.”

I got a good chance to examine those wings as he walked by me, and I wasn’t surprised to see that they met his skin right where the dragon tattoo crossed his spine. For something freakishly weird, it was a pretty cool effect. The wings swayed gently as he walked, held slightly out from his body instead of folding tightly to him, and they were absolutely the most fascinating things I’d ever seen.

Still, when he stretched them out again so I could clean the blood from the ragged wounds, the fascination wasn't enough to keep me from shuddering. They felt like his fine leather duster beneath my fingers, soft and supple, but unlike the coat, they were alive. I felt his pulse throbbing through them. They twitched.

They freaked the hell out of me, to tell the truth.

Somehow I managed to thread the sewing needle despite my shaking hands. Rowan didn't say a word, just watched me as I cut the thread and reached for his wing again. *Leather coat*, I thought as I brought the needle up. If I kept that image in my mind, I just might get through this without puking.

A shiver went down the wing when I finally made myself push the needle through on one side of the cut. I shot a glance up at Rowan and found him staring fixedly at the wall behind me, jaw tight. "Sorry," I whispered.

"Just get it done," he said through his teeth.

Half an hour later, I finally tied off the thread and sat back. I'd finished the biggest tear and patched two smaller ones. "Anywhere else?" I asked, closing my eyes against the headache that had now reached migraine proportions.

I heard that leathery rustling again and opened my eyes to see Rowan standing there, wings open to full span again. I didn't see any other tears as he gave them each an experimental stretch and put them through a slow-motion beat like a bat. A breeze washed over me, part soap from the cleaning I'd done, part sweat, and part pure, male sexiness.

I took a deep breath before I could help myself. If Rowan could bottle that, he'd make millions.

Suddenly he grabbed me around the waist and yanked me out of my chair, his wings closing around me as he hauled me against his chest. "I need something else from you now," he whispered, and his mouth covered mine before I could even think of protesting.

His tongue licked into my mouth, catching my gasp of surprise and turning it into a moan. By damn, he could kiss! My arms went around his neck, my thighs parted for his knee to insinuate itself between them, and my pussy wept with need. I rubbed against him, eager to feel his hands on my breasts, that magical mouth on my nipples. My body responded to him like a match to gunpowder, all my fears vanishing in a blinding tidal wave of hot lust.

He broke the kiss and released me so abruptly I stumbled, and he opened his wings just enough to put a little space between us. Luckily I was able to catch my balance before I fell into his injured wing, but his sexy grin made my knees go weak again. "Stand still, pretty Tera," he said, his hands sliding up my arms to rest on my shoulders.

His claws touched my bare throat, feeling every bit as razor-sharp as they looked. How had I forgotten those? I froze, hardly daring to breathe.

His smile widened. "That's it," he murmured. "Don't move a muscle, and all will be well."

How very un reassuring.

Rowan shredded my blouse with three fast swipes, flicked a single claw between my breasts to demolish my bra, and sliced my jeans from waist to ankle before returning to my hips to cut my panties away, never once touching my skin. The transition from dressed to nude was so fast, I hardly had time to realize what was happening. When my clothes were reduced to a scattered mess of rags, Rowan dragged me back against him. "Rub on me again, Tera," he breathed in my ear. "Rub your nipples on my chest and let me feel the pleasure it brings you."

I moved against him and moaned at the glorious friction of my hypersensitive nipples rasping against his chest hair. He sucked in a breath and pulled my hips forward, pressing his hard cock against my belly. "Mmm, yes," he whispered. "You like that, don't you? Tell me what else you like."

I arched my neck, and he rained hot kisses down my throat. His claws traced little patterns on my hips, as alarming as they were arousing. He bit my throat, just hard enough to send visions of vampires through my head, and I wondered what I'd unleashed here. "I don't like pain," I said, my voice breathless as those claws pressed against my ass and his teeth played with my throat.

"Then I won't hurt you." Rowan's words were a deep vibration against my collarbone. His hands slid down my thighs and pressed between them, spreading me wide. "You're so wet," he murmured as his mouth slid along the curve of my breast. "Tell me what you want, mistress. Command me."

I opened my eyes, stared down at him as he traced a circle around my nipple with his tongue, seeing him for the dangerous creature he was. A fresh surge of liquid desire soaked my pussy at the mere thought of dominating him, forcing this powerful man to do my bidding. His mouth kept moving, that hot tongue flicking over my skin, and I knew just where I wanted it. "Get down on your knees," I whispered, "and lick my pussy."

He made a sound that could have been a purr or a growl and dropped to his knees before me. His hands grasped my hips, claws pressing into my skin enough to remind me of their presence but not enough to hurt, and his wings cradled me from back to ass. "As you wish, mistress," he said and buried his face between my thighs.

His tongue parted my labia and dove deep inside. I cried out and tangled my fingers in his hair, pressing my pussy against his face. His tongue teased, thrust, writhed inside me, before licking out to my clit and subjecting it to the same glorious torment. "Teeth," I gasped, and he sucked my clit between his teeth and flicked his tongue over it.

I came so hard I would've fallen if he hadn't held me up. Fragile as his wings looked, they were incredibly strong, pressing against me and keeping me from collapsing. "More," I gasped, moaning when he left my clit to thrust his tongue deep inside my pussy until I came again.

Just before the pleasure became too much, I pushed his head away from my pussy. He looked up at me, golden eyes flashing, but he said nothing. "Let go," I said, and when he released me, I turned and braced my hands on the wall, ass to him. "Fuck me, Rowan. I want your cock, and I want it now."

"Yes, mistress," he murmured, and the rips that followed told me he was giving his jeans the same treatment he'd given mine.

An instant later he slammed into me, his thick cock spearing deep into my pussy. I leaned back into his next thrust, moaning as he fucked me hard, holding on to the wall for dear life as he pounded pleasure deep inside me. "Is this how you want it?" he growled, his hips slapping my ass.

"Yes, God, don't stop," I moaned, bracing one forearm against the wall so my free hand could slide down to rub my clit. My nipples ached as each hard thrust sent my breasts swaying. Without being told, Rowan released his hold on my hips so he could wrap an arm around my waist. His other hand rose to my breasts, alternately pinching and rubbing my nipples, and as I watched his fingers move, those sharp claws just brushing my sensitive flesh, I came hard again.

"More," he demanded, surging into me, licking the back of my neck. "I need more, Tera, give me more!"

I felt it then, the drain on my energy, the current running from my body into his. I gasped and pressed both hands to the wall again, locking my knees as his big cock slid in and out, hard and fast, just like I liked it. He grasped my hips again and pulled me back into each thrust. I closed my eyes and threw my head back, drowning in pleasure and loving it, not caring about the consequences as I felt his strength growing with every surge of his thick erection inside me.

Something soft touched my nipples, and my eyes flew open to find his wings wrapped around me again, the tips rubbing my breasts. "Do you like that, mistress?" he whispered in

my ear, and as I came again, I tightened my pussy around him. He groaned, and his thrusts became shorter, faster. He bit my shoulder to muffle his growl as his cock swelled and spilled inside me.

That draining sense of energy flowing out of me evaporated, but I still would've fallen if he hadn't held me up. "I need more," he whispered, breathing just as hard as I was. "Tera, I need more."

My legs felt like wrung-out dishrags. I hardly had the energy to hold my head up. Rowan lowered me to the floor, and I sagged against him, not even shying away when he wrapped his wings around both of us. "Tera?" he murmured, brushing my hair back from my forehead as my eyes drifted closed.

I had nothing left. I couldn't even answer him before I slipped into the comforting darkness.

Chapter Eight

I woke to heat and a pounding headache, and a cranky voice making it all worse.

“Hellfire, Tera, wake the fuck up already! I’m not a damned nursemaid, woman, and I don’t have time for this shit.”

Ah, Rowan, you romantic fool.

I managed to open my eyes to see him standing at the foot of my bed, glaring at me. I stared stupidly at him for a moment, trying to figure out how the hell I’d gotten here. My head was so hot it felt like my brain was stewing, and if I’d thought I had a headache before, it was nothing compared to the agony currently shattering my skull. I tried to raise my hands to cradle my aching head, but the quilts were wrapped so tight around me I might have been a mummy. In fact, I think every single blanket I owned was piled atop me, which explained why I felt like I was about to burst into flame.

“Hot,” I croaked, struggling under the blankets. God, I was weak as a kitten. Claustrophobia tickled my spine, and I knew its good friend Panic wasn’t close behind. “Rowan -- help --”

He frowned, but I was finally able to make him understand what the problem was, and he pulled all but one of the blankets off me. I got my arms out at last and sighed with

pleasure as cool air bathed my overheated skin. “Why’d you wrap me up like that?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

He glared again, but I was certain I saw a trace of color flood his cheeks. “Well, how the hell do I know what a sick human needs?” he finally said, irritation lacing every word. “You collapsed. What was I supposed to do? You made me promise not to harm you, damn it, and then you fucking collapsed on me.” His tone made it an accusation.

Well, color me shocked. Rowan was actually trying to nurse me back to health? And from the look on his face, he wasn’t enjoying the experience much. Well, too damn bad, seeing how it was his fault I was in this shape. “Water?” I asked hopefully, licking my cracked lips. “And this sick human could do with some aspirin, too.”

He stomped out of the bedroom, wings rustling behind him, and I almost laughed as I heard him muttering on his way to the kitchen. Mostly profanity, his grumbled monologue told me exactly what he thought of having to take care of me. The refrigerator door slammed, and I heard him stomping to the bathroom for the aspirin. I winced when something hit the wall, probably the door to the medicine chest, and prayed that he hadn’t broken the thing.

Rowan, immortal incubus and sex god extraordinaire, had the temper of a three-year-old when he had to do something he didn’t want to. It was almost cute.

Except that when he came back into the bedroom, a bottle of water in one hand and the bottle of aspirin in the other, his scowl could’ve sunk a battleship. He twisted open the water, but the childproof cap of the aspirin defeated him. Just before I gave in to the need to laugh my ass off, he snarled at it and simply sliced the thing in half with his claws.

Yow. Any urge to laugh died.

And before I could say a word to stop him, he poured about a dozen aspirin right into the water bottle, put his thumb over the top, and shook it vigorously. “Here,” he said, thrusting the cloudy water into my hands.

My first thought was to shove it right back at him and tell him that water and aspirin were much better alone than mixed.

But then I saw his face, really saw it, and kept my mouth shut for once.

Rowan was glaring, but his eyes, all blue without a hint of gold, were concerned. He was growling and cussing like a sailor, but he'd still tried to get me what I needed. Even the mummification in blankets had been a sincere attempt to take care of me.

Yes, Rowan didn't have a clue what he was doing, but he was honestly trying to help me, a mere human, to recover.

So instead of refusing the water, making fun of his incompetence, or pretending to change my mind, I let him help me to sit up and forced down a couple sips of the nasty, bitter water. Just a couple, mind you. I didn't fancy disintegrating my stomach lining with an aspirin overdose. And, looking on the bright side, maybe liquefied aspirin would hit my throbbing brain faster. Hell, it was worth a try.

Rowan took the bottle from my fingers as I lay back against the pillows, and I glanced at him again as he set it on my bedside table, within easy reach. I could've sworn he looked relieved. When he met my eyes again, the glare was gone, and with it some of the worry I thought I'd seen before.

I was just starting to congratulate myself for reassuring him that he'd done something right, and wondering if an incubus could actually care for me, when he sat on the bed beside me and blew that notion away. "I still need to feed, Tera," he said. "When do you think you'll be ready to fuck again?"

I gaped at him, just lay there and gaped. Of all the tactless, egotistical, insensitive comments -- "Get off my bed!" I croaked, outraged. "You practically killed me today, and you really expect me to invite you to do it again?"

The glare returned, and Rowan made no effort to move. “We have a deal; don’t you remember?” he said, lounging there like he owned the place. “I protect you; you feed me. I’ve done my part, and I need you to do yours.”

I pulled the covers up over my head. Yeah, so I’m childish. “Go away,” I said again. “I’m not talking to you.”

He snorted. Like a horse. “Bullshit. You can’t shut up to save your life.”

Damn him for being right. I opened my mouth to tell him that I damn well could shut up when I wanted to, but suddenly an idea popped into my head. If he wouldn’t feed from anyone else, and right now I couldn’t possibly give him any more than I already had, what did that leave us? I turned my idea over in my mind, thinking through the angles. Yes, it just might work.

“Rowan,” I said, pushing back the covers and looking up at him, “you’re not shy about having sex in public, are you?”

Night had fallen in earnest while I lay unconscious, and it was past midnight by the time I managed to get out of bed and stumble into the shower. I fully expected Rowan to follow me, but apparently he’d done all the nursing he could stand for one evening. I used the opportunity to drink a glass of un-aspirined water and scrubbed myself clean of the sweat that had drenched me under all those blankets.

The warm water made me sleepy, so I cranked it all the way to cold. If this worked, I’d sleep a week when we were done. I knew I wouldn’t get a wink with a hungry incubus stomping around my apartment. Finally I turned it off, dried myself, and pulled on one of the new arrivals from Pandora’s -- red leather bustier with black flames outlining the stays, black leather mini with a split up the front, accented with red flames. My thigh-high boots matched.

It was an outfit that screamed *Fuck me!* and I dearly hoped someone would take the message to heart.

Half an hour later, Rowan drove us to 6th Street. I dozed against the door as we went. Damn, I didn't know how much energy he'd taken from me in the shop, but it was too much. I hoped this crazy plan of mine worked.

Rowan found a parking space and helped me out of the passenger seat, just like a true gentleman. Ha. Just went to show me how deceiving actions could be. "Are you sure you're up for this?" he murmured, slipping an arm around my waist when I stumbled.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Do you want to stay hungry until I feel better?"

He tightened his hold on me and drew me down the street. It was answer enough.

He ignored the first three bars we passed, disregarding the tattoo parlors and street vendors. Finally, just when my legs really were about to give out again, he pulled me into a dark, smoky club, glaring at the bouncer by the door until he stepped aside to let us enter without paying the cover charge.

Hmm. Having Rowan around was definitely useful at times.

Inside, a death-metal band screamed out lyrics at ear-splitting volume. My headache, which had been heading toward remission, awakened and protested this abuse with new bolts of pain. I clung to Rowan and let him maneuver us through the club, hardly noticing when he snagged a drink from a passing waitress's tray and pressed it into my hand. "Drink before you fall over," he growled, his voice somehow carrying over the noise. "And for hell's sake, don't pass out again!"

I sipped the too-sweet margarita and made a face. What kind of moron put sugar on the rim of a 'rita instead of salt? Still, it was cold and wet, and I gulped the rest of it down in one go. Rowan dropped the empty glass on another table, found a spot between the tables by the wall, and grabbed a barstool for me. The fact that it had been occupied didn't faze him a bit.

He simply dumped the unsuspecting woman on the floor, dragged the barstool against the wall, and put me atop it.

“Damn, Rowan,” I said, leaning against him. “You really do know how to do the Austin bar scene, don’t you?”

He ignored that. Actually, I sort of liked this take-no-prisoners approach he had going on. “Do you see what you’re looking for?” he asked, his breath teasing my ear.

Exhausted as I was, that was all it took to turn me on. “What I’m looking for will come to us,” I replied, trailing my fingers down the back of his neck. “All we need to do is start the show.”

He pulled back and grinned at me. “My pleasure.”

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against the wall as Rowan licked my earlobe. Shivers chased down my spine with every flick of his tongue. I ran the toe of my boot up his leg, drawing him between my thighs. His hand slid up to cup my breast, and I didn’t have to fake a moan. When he kissed me, I almost forgot the whole reason we were there.

Hell, the way Rowan kissed, I almost forgot my own name.

When he pulled away, though, I found what I’d been hoping for. A man sat at the table beside ours, staring at us in fascination.

I smiled at him as Rowan kissed his way back down my throat. I’d never particularly been turned on by the idea of being watched, but I licked my lips and prayed that he wouldn’t look away. “We’ve got an audience,” I murmured to Rowan, hiding the words by biting his earlobe.

He didn’t reply, but then again, his tongue was busy delving into the cleft between my breasts. I arched my back, my pussy clenching with desire despite my fatigue. “You should be illegal,” I moaned, threading my fingers in his hair. His deep laugh brought my nipples to full attention.

Our watcher inched a little closer. I met his eyes again, just to show him I knew he was getting off on watching us. His hand slipped under the table as he held my eyes. I winked at him and kissed Rowan again, playing my exhibitionist role to the hilt.

And damned if I wasn't genuinely getting turned on by this. Knowing that Rowan wanted me was sexy enough, but seeing a stranger getting so hot for me? That was a new thrill. I knew his cock was hard and aching, his mouth itching for a taste of me, his hands jealous of every place Rowan's roamed. Both his hands were under the table now, and I wondered if he had his zipper down yet, if he was stroking his cock while he watched Rowan's hands sliding beneath my skirt. Wondered if he was cupping his balls and imagining himself between my thighs.

Rowan pressed against me, the thick ridge of his cock rubbing me through his jeans, pushing my skirt up higher. I hadn't worn any panties, and I saw our watcher's eyes widen as he caught a glimpse of the red curls over my pussy. I smiled at him again and rubbed against Rowan's cock, letting my hands dive into his back pockets to squeeze his ass.

I thought I heard our watcher groan in the brief quiet between songs, and it sent a new flood of heat pooling between my thighs.

I reached down and unbuttoned Rowan's fly, slipping his cock free and rubbing his head against my clit. Had I thought I was too exhausted to come again? The electric thrill thrumming through my clit and pussy proved me wrong. He pulled one cup of the corset aside, and the breast nearer the watcher came free. Rowan tongued my stiff nipple as I guided his cock into my wet pussy.

The watcher's eyes widened as Rowan slid in and out, fucking me slow and deep. I pressed his head to my breast, aching for him to suck my nipple instead of just flicking his tongue over it, but he refused to appease me. Pleasure was building with each thrust of his cock, and before I could chicken out, I reached out and traced a fingertip over our watcher's shoulder, drawing him more deeply into our kinky game.

And, through the connection my touch provided, into the circle of Rowan's power.

I felt everything, every last emotion flooding the stranger as he watched us fuck. Lust overtook me, sexual frustration and need so strong it sent me straight over the edge into orgasm. I tightened my grip on both Rowan and the stranger, trying not to scream with pleasure, but unable to stop my ecstatic moans.

But Rowan didn't drain me, not this time. I felt his hunger and need even though he didn't partake. I managed to look over at our watcher and only then saw that his hands were busy under the table, his cock so hard it was almost purple as he jacked off to the show we provided.

His pleasure would feed Rowan tonight, not mine.

This was what I wanted, exactly what I'd hoped for when I'd suggested this, and as Rowan fucked me straight to another toe-curling orgasm, I heard our watcher groan as he came beneath the table.

Then I felt the drain as Rowan fed. All that sexual pleasure flowed through me, a river of it, and I understood why he'd said it was like drinking -- the watcher's pleasure was hot, spicy, but bitter. Guilty. Rowan sucked it up through the connection I held, his own thrusts becoming erratic as he shuddered and came inside me.

When it was over, I slumped against Rowan, too spent to even put myself back together. His hands eased my breast back into the corset, surprising me with their gentleness. He blocked me with his body while I pulled my skirt back down, and helped me to walk out of the club without a word. When I stumbled again, he swept me up in his arms and carried me, ignoring the glances and catcalls that came our way.

Only when we were back in my car and he'd fastened my seatbelt around me did either of us break the silence. "Was it enough?" I asked, praying it was.

“It’s enough,” he murmured. He sat in the dark car for a moment, not starting it. “Thank you, Tera,” he finally said. “I won’t ask it of you again. You should never have experienced that.”

So he knew I’d felt him feeding. I shrugged, my eyes still closed, as I leaned against the window again. Yes, it had been disconcerting as hell, but I’d have been lying if I said the entire experience hadn’t been incredible. “Anything that keeps me alive and you well fed,” I said, my words already slurring with sleep.

The last thing I remembered was Rowan drawing me away from the cold window and easing my head onto his lap as we drove away.

Chapter Nine

There's nothing in the world as bad as a phone call at three a.m.

It's never anything good, or even something as benign as a telemarketer or a wrong number. Any phone call between the hours of midnight and six a.m. must be bad news. I think it's a law of the universe or something.

This phone call was no exception.

"Hello? Tera, are you there?"

"Wren!" I sat bolt upright in bed, a death grip on the phone, my terrible weariness forgotten in an instant. "Where are you? I've been worried sick!"

"I'm at the shop," Wren said. She sounded out of breath and frightened. "Can you come? I need to tell you something, girl -- it's important. Will you come?"

"I'm on my way," I said, pulling on my sweatpants and not bothering to change out of the oversized tee I slept in. "Lock all the doors and turn on the alarm; do you hear me? Don't move a muscle until I get there. I'm coming, okay?"

"Tera, I can't --"

"Don't argue with me," I cut her off. "I'll be right there. Don't leave!"

I've never broken so many traffic laws at a time in my life as I did that night. At least Rowan wasn't with me -- right then, I was much too worried to be a passenger, and he always insisted on driving. I made the twenty-minute drive to Pandora's in less than ten, and I was out the car door before the engine died.

"Wren?" I called as I slammed the back door behind me and punched my code into the alarm system. "Wren, where are you?"

The silence pressed in on me, more terrifying than it had any right to be. Flashes of horror movies ran through my head -- all those moments when the too-stupid-to-live heroine blundered into the abandoned house, shouting her head off for someone who was already dead, conveniently making herself a perfect target for the killer. Killers, naturally, never left the scene of the crime. They hung around for that damn stupid heroine to come in, calling for her friend ...

Oh, God, why did I have to think of shit like that now? This was real life, not a movie. Killers didn't hang around in closed stores, lingering in hopes of someone coming inside. Not in real life.

Right?

Still, I couldn't make myself call out again. Incubi weren't supposed to show up in real life, either, and I had one of those following me around. Two, if Rowan was to be believed.

I felt my way through the storeroom as silently as I could, still too chicken to turn on the lights and getting more scared with each second. Where the hell was she? She wasn't in the bathroom, wasn't anywhere in the shop, wasn't hiding in the dressing rooms or in the video alcove -- and if you think it was easy for me to check all those places while visions of bogeymen danced in my head, you're a fool. "Damn it, Wren," I growled under my breath. "Where *are* you?"

And then I realized that she'd left her purse behind when she'd gone wherever she'd run off to. She wouldn't have a key to get inside. I ran to the front door and threw the blinds

aside, ready to drag Wren inside and alternate beatings and strangling hugs for scaring me like this.

Wren was there, all right, huddled on the front stoop. She didn't answer when I unlocked the door and shoved it open, or when I called her name again. When I touched her, I knew why.

Wren's answering days were over. My best friend was dead outside my door.

I don't know how I managed to dial 911. I can't remember anything I said to the dispatcher. All I know is that the officers who responded looked nothing like Officer Fuck-Me and his homely partner, and I was shaking to pieces by the time they got there.

They took my statement, they took pictures, they took whatever evidence they could find, and they prepared to take my friend away in a black bag. I watched it all as dawn crawled over the sky, unable to leave Wren in the company of strangers. I wanted to hold her hand and tell her goodbye, but they wouldn't let me touch her. My friend's body was part of the crime scene now.

She wasn't a person, not the bright, funny witch who hated Harry Potter, not the brave, powerful woman who'd cast a spell to keep me safe and hadn't been able to save herself, not the terrified girl who'd called me and begged for help. She wasn't a sister, a daughter, a friend, a lover. She was The Victim to these people, or just The Body.

"Miss Kenner, can we call someone for you?"

I snapped out of my shock at the officer's gentle question. I couldn't leave. I had to take care of Wren, didn't I? She didn't know any of these people. I shook my head, too numb to form a reply.

"I'll take her home."

Warm hands closed over my shoulders, offering strength and support. One touch was all it took for me to recognize him. Rowan didn't say anything else as the cop walked away, but it was enough. There was nothing more I wanted him to say.

"Not yet," I whispered when he tried to draw me away. I couldn't stop watching them as they carefully eased Wren into the body bag. "I can't leave her yet, Rowan. She needs me."

He wrapped his arms around my waist and drew me close, whether I wanted it or not. I couldn't make up my mind if I should lean into him or push him away, so I just stood there, stiff in his embrace.

"You can stay, if it brings you peace," he murmured in my ear. "But it's not peace that I sense from you now. Must you stay and torment yourself?"

"She asked me for help." The words came out before I could stop them. "She called and asked me for help, and I didn't get here in time. She wanted to tell me something important, and I let her down, Rowan. She helped me, and I didn't do a damn thing for her. I can't leave her now."

He turned me in his arms and let me hide against his chest, shielding me from those morbid souls who'd gathered to look. Knowing how much he hated caring for me, his attempt at comfort made me ridiculously grateful. I needed a shoulder to cry on, and his was there for the wetting.

I couldn't do it. God knows I had more than enough cause, and something deep inside me demanded the flood, but I couldn't shed a single drop. I wanted to scream, to rage, to cry until I had no tears left, but my eyes remained stubbornly dry. I stood there in the circle of Rowan's arms, shaking and shocked. I kept praying I'd wake up from this horrible nightmare, until I heard the doors of the coroner's van slam and the engine start.

That sound shattered my numbness. Instead of sorrow, doubt and guilt tortured me. What if I hadn't gotten rid of the cops yesterday? *Why* hadn't I argued until they'd taken me seriously? They might've found Wren before this happened. They might've stopped it.

Damn it, I should've *done* something!

"Shh," Rowan murmured in my ear, his hand rubbing a soothing circle between my shoulders. "Stop blaming yourself, Tera. Troian did this. Nothing could have stopped it."

I wanted to rage at his certainty, but I was still too damn exhausted. “Are you reading my mind?”

“I don’t need to, pretty one. Your guilt shines in your aura. You’re drowning in it.” He urged me back inside the shop and locked the door behind us, dropping the blinds again to shut out the onlookers. I leaned against him again when he turned back to me, sensing his hesitation before his arms came around me again. I chose to ignore it. I needed to be held, and he was the only one offering.

And then he opened his mouth and proved that he knew exactly jack shit about comforting someone. “At least you can find peace in the knowledge that her death was pleasurable,” he said, murmuring the words to me like they were a gift. “She was given a good reward for what she gave.”

The worst part was, he really believed that. I could tell he did.

It was the final trigger my rioting emotions needed to erupt.

Rage exploded through me, a fury I hadn’t felt in all the years since I’d gotten out of jail, and I swung so fast that my fist actually connected with his jaw in a perfect right hook before he could duck. “You bastard!” I shrieked, swinging again, missing his shocked face this time and just nicking his shoulder. “Her death was *pleasurable*?” Another punch, and this time he ducked it entirely. “You goddamn fucking *asshole*!”

He was avoiding my punches too neatly now, so this time I grabbed a jar of warmable body butter and hurled it at him with all my strength. It slammed into his chest and shattered on the floor. “I hate you!” I screamed, dimly aware that I was finally crying now, and my next projectile missed him entirely. I heard something crash as it hit the far wall. Blinded by tears, my target out of reach, I sank down to the ground and sobbed. “I hate you, Rowan. I hate every goddamned, selfish bone in your body.”

There was a long silence, broken only by the sounds of my grief. The pain was so great, I wasn’t sure I’d survive it. Rowan didn’t leave as I screamed and wept, but he didn’t come

any closer, either. I wished he would so I could pound on him some more. Anger was far better than this crushing sadness.

Finally, just as I cried myself out, he moved. He lifted me from the floor like I was a baby and carried me into the storeroom, maneuvering around the circle and putting me down on one of the chairs by the break table. "Tera," he said, wiping my tears away with hands that didn't seem to know how to be gentle about it. "I didn't intend to hurt you, just now."

That damned promise! He didn't give a damn about my pain, just that I might say he'd broken his word and send him back to hell. "You hurt everyone you touch," I said, too weary to scream at him. I hoped my words hurt anyway. "You hurt me when you use me like I'm nothing more than a stupid animal, your fucking meal ticket. You hurt me by wrecking the last days I could've shared with my friend, by sapping my energy so I could barely work my shifts or even talk to her. You hurt the friends and families of every single person you've ever taken, Rowan. Do you honestly think a fleeting moment of pleasure makes it a fair trade?"

He didn't say a word as he knelt there in front of me. I didn't care. "Go away," I said, pushing past him to find the circle Wren had drawn for me. I closed my eyes and sat down inside it, legs crossed, just as she'd positioned me an eternity ago when she'd created it. "Don't pretend you care whether or not you hurt me. Just get the hell out."

When I opened my eyes a moment later, Rowan hadn't moved a muscle. I stared at him, willing him to go. He stared back, and the silence thickened into a wall.

Finally, he sighed and sat back, imitating my position on the floor. "I don't understand," he said at last, rubbing a hand over his face. The movement made me notice for the first time that the cuts on his face were gone, healed by the strength I'd given him. The bruise from my punch, however, was just blossoming. "If this is such a bad trade, why did you agree to it?"

I closed my eyes again, fighting an array of emotions so complex, it would've taken a therapist a year to figure them out. "I didn't," I said wearily. "Not like you mean, anyway. You weren't leaving, so I bargained for the best I could get. Negotiation at gunpoint isn't exactly consent."

I felt him staring at me, willing me to meet his eyes, to talk to him. Not fucking likely. Finally I sighed angrily. "Why are you here, Rowan? I've never felt less like sex in my life, so if that's what you're after, you can forget it. Can't you just go away and leave me alone?"

"No." His voice wasn't hesitant this time. "I won't pretend I know what you need, Tera, but I know what you don't. You shouldn't be alone right now."

He was right, the bastard. All the fight left me. "Damn you, Rowan."

"Already done, sweetheart."

The minutes passed in silence. My mind was blank, whether from exhaustion or the effects of Wren's circle, I couldn't say. I really didn't care. I wanted that mental numbness, wanted it enough not to move even when my ass started to ache from sitting on the concrete floor, when that ache progressed past discomfort and into cramping pain. It was something else to feel besides grief.

"Come out from there, will you?"

I opened my eyes and found that Rowan hadn't moved, either. "Why?" I wasn't really curious, but it was something to say.

"I --" He stopped, hesitant again, and ran a hand through his hair. I watched all this in detached fascination. An unsure incubus wasn't something I saw every day. Finally he met my eyes again, and his were totally blue. "I don't know, okay? I just don't like you locking yourself away from me."

I stared at him. His bruised jaw tightened, but he didn't say another word. Finally I shrugged and scooted outside the boundary; I didn't trust my legs to support me, not with the way they were cramping. "Happy now, O demon mine?"

Rowan didn't rise to the bait. He did, however, scoop me up off the floor again and carry me back to the plastic chair. Instead of putting me down on it, though, this time he sat with me in his lap and cradled me to his chest.

I broke down again. I couldn't help it. Rowan stroked my hair and held me -- he was getting better at it -- and I felt the tension in his body. "Tera," he murmured after I'd all but soaked his shirt. "Tera, I know you don't trust me. You shouldn't. But ... will you, now?"

"Why?" My cheek stuck to his neck, wet with my tears.

"I want to try to make it better," he said, his hand massaging my neck. "I don't know if I can, but I want to try to help."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but at least he was distracting me. "I don't trust you," I said, hardly aware what was coming out of my mouth. "Do it."

Rowan cupped my face in his hands and brought his lips to mine. It was nothing like the kisses he'd given me before. There was no passion, no brain-searing desire, no overpowering lust from this kiss. He didn't even use his tongue. His lips merely brushed mine, soft as a feather, then settled against them.

He breathed in against my mouth. I felt that same draw I'd experienced at the club, and I was so desperate for any kind of relief that I opened my mind wide to him, silently inviting him to take everything.

And this time, what he took wasn't pleasure. It was my pain.

The draining sensation lasted only a moment before Rowan cried out and tore his mouth from mine. He surged to his feet, dumping me on the floor and staggering blindly away, knocking over the table before he crashed into the wall, all the while howling like he'd been burned.

"Rowan!" I struggled to my feet and reached for him. He snarled and backed away from my voice, his eyes wild. "Rowan, for God's sake, what's wrong with you?"

He tripped over a box, fell into another one, and landed hard on the concrete, growling and moaning like a wounded animal. I ran to him and fell to my knees beside him, ignoring the knowledge that wounded animals often attack. "Rowan?" I said, only then noticing that his claws were out. There was no trace of wings or horns, but the claws were enough to stop me from reaching for him.

And it was a good thing, too. He slashed out blindly, missing me by inches, but he'd have taken my head off if I'd been any closer. I flinched back so fast I fell right on my ass as he crawled away to huddle by the wall. I kept murmuring his name, hoping he'd come out of whatever the hell this was before he wrecked my shop or turned on me.

My heart hammered when he raised his head moments later. His eyes glowed golden, but it wasn't the magic in them that made me pause. Those inhuman eyes were filled with so much pain it made me want to weep for him. "It hurts," he whispered, pressing his hands to his chest. "What the hell did you do to me?"

He blinked, and I realized he was crying.

Forget caution. I crawled to him and pulled him into my arms, feeling his body shaking. "Is this the same guy who didn't even wince when I stitched up his wing?" I said, trying to coax him out of it.

"Not the same." He pressed his face against my neck. I held him, giving comfort now instead of receiving it, the tables so abruptly reversed that I was reeling.

Finally he raised his head. I was relieved to see the gold was gone from his eyes now. "Are you all right now?" I asked.

He nodded, but he didn't look certain. "That's what grief feels like?"

"You've never felt grief before?"

He shook his head. "Emotions are forbidden to my kind, Tera. I've only ever felt lust." He ran a hand over his face, wiping the moisture away. He stared at his palm like he'd never seen it before. "I never knew," he whispered, as though to himself.

"Never knew what?" I prompted when he didn't finish.

He ignored that and pushed me away, gently but firmly. I released him and watched him get slowly to his feet, moving as if every inch of him hurt. He stepped past me, and I knew he was about to leave me there. "Rowan?"

He stopped, but didn't look at me. "What?"

"Will you take me home?" I hated having to ask him for anything, but I knew better than to try to drive like this. "I -- you were right. I don't want to be alone." When he hesitated, I forced myself to say the hardest thing of all. "Please."

He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Oh, all right," he snarled. "Get up. I'll drive."

I hurried after him as fast as my cramped legs would carry me, wondering too late if the company of a pissed-off demon was really preferable to solitude, but by that time he was starting my car, and I got in before he could leave me. I barely got the door closed before he backed out so fast the tires squealed.

I almost protested. One look at his face made me reconsider.

The silence wore on my raw nerves. Finally I couldn't stand it. "Rowan, how old are you?"

He didn't glance away from the road. "A little over nine hundred. You?"

The bottom fell out of my stomach. "Nine ... hundred?" I repeated weakly. "Nine hundred *years* old?"

He snorted. "Is there another measurement you'd prefer me to use?"

Heaven save me from smart-ass men. I gave myself a moment to digest this before I had to fill the silence again. "What was Stonehenge like when it was new?"

"It was already old when I was created, Tera. What's up with the cross-examination?"

I shrugged, though he wasn't looking at me to see it. "You know everything about me. I just wanted to know a little about you."

“Why?”

“What, haven’t your other fuck-buddies wanted to know something about you?”

He snorted. “My other fuck-buddies, as you so delicately put it, were more interested in the other things my mouth could do besides talking.” He shot a quick glance at me.

“You’re the only human who has ever bothered to talk to me at all. Why?”

I was just about sick of him asking me *why*. “Would it kill you to just have a normal conversation for once?”

“Is that what this is? A normal conversation?”

This time he sounded genuinely curious instead of mocking. I watched the cars merging into traffic ahead of us and shrugged again. “As normal as we’re likely to get, considering what you are,” I said. “You must’ve seen some cool things in nine hundred years, Rowan. Tell me some of them. Distract me.”

Chapter Ten

Rowan drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and took the next exit. "I've fucked my way through history, pretty one. I don't think you want to hear about that right now."

Wren's lifeless face flashed in my memory, and I closed my eyes against the fresh stab of pain. "No," I whispered. "Not that."

He caressed my knee briefly, his hand gone before I could open my eyes in shock. That had been a genuinely comforting touch. I guess you could teach an old incubus new tricks after all. "The tattoo," I said, blurting out the first thing that came to mind. "Tell me about that."

He raised an eyebrow and shot another look at me before turning his attention back to his driving. I thought he'd ask me why I wanted to know about it, but I was pleasantly surprised when he simply answered. "I got it in Japan, about two hundred years ago," he said. "An old man offered me a barter. If I left his wife and daughter alone, he swore to give me a great work of art."

I remembered my glimpse of the tattoo, the incredible detail, the colors that blended so skillfully it was difficult to see the boundaries between them. "He kept his part of the deal," I murmured.

“I’ll save you the trouble of asking.” His voice was hard, and the glance he gave me this time was decidedly angry. “I kept my part, too.”

“I know you did,” I said and was almost as surprised as he was to realize I meant it. Trusting an incubus couldn’t be a good thing. “So how long did it take him to do it?” I had to get this conversation back on a safer track.

“It took a series of sessions.” Rowan shrugged. “Two years or so.”

My jaw dropped. “Two *years*?”

He smiled at me, and I could’ve sworn he’d shocked me on purpose. The demon was teasing me now? “Just a little longer than the pretty little fairy on your ankle, hmm?”

Yeah, he was definitely teasing. “I guess I don’t have the same pain tolerance you have,” I said, feeling a little faint at the thought of two years of the same kind of pain I’d endured a for scant twenty minutes. “No wonder you didn’t flinch when I sewed up your wing.”

His smile faded. “Your pain tolerance is much higher than mine,” he replied softly. “I couldn’t live with what you feel. Everything’s so ... intense. How do you bear it?”

I wasn’t certain I couldn’t answer that without crying again. “How do you stand having no emotions?” I countered instead. “An eternity of sex without caring sounds pretty hellish to me.”

He pulled into a parking space in front of my apartment building and killed the engine. “What other kind of life could a demon have?”

As I floundered for any kind of reply to that, he tossed me the keys. I caught them by reflex and just stared when he smiled at me. “Are you going to make it up the steps, Tera?” he asked. “You look like shit warmed over.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

"I'll make it," I growled, throwing open the door and slamming it hard enough to show him just how strong I still was. He shut his door with exaggerated caution and followed me up to my apartment. "Are you staying?" I asked before I could stop myself.

He hesitated. "Do you want me to?"

I shrugged, though I felt far from casual. "If you're not freaked out by seeing a woman cry, you're welcome to come in," I told him. "But most guys would rather get a two-year tattoo than see that. It's up to you."

I was surprised when he followed me inside. He locked the door as I flopped down on the couch, and when he sat beside me and let me lean on his shoulder, I knew I had to keep talking. If I didn't, I'd start crying. "Tell me about Japan," I said, desperate to fill the silence.

If he heard the catch in my voice, for once he didn't comment on it.

And to my further surprise, he answered me.

Rowan sat with me for hours that day, telling me the places he'd been, the wonders he'd seen. It took some persuading on my part, but I finally got him to talk about Stonehenge -- and Robin Hood, the Druids, and Europe's reaction to Christopher Columbus's discovery of the Americas. Of course, I never knew when he was answering me truthfully and when he was feeding me a load of bullshit, but it was fascinating.

And he never once mentioned any of his lovers.

When my stomach protested loudly that it was past time to eat, Rowan followed me into the kitchen and watched me with apparent fascination as I cooked a pair of pork chops. "Haven't you ever cooked anything?" I asked as he prodded the sizzling chops with the wrong end of the spatula.

"Haven't you ever ridden a dragon?"

I took the spatula, turned it around, and handed it back. "What?"

He bent to examine the glowing heating element. "What's normal for you isn't necessarily normal for me, Tera. I know how to ride a dragon. You know how to cook."

I shook my head at him, certain, at least this time, that this was bullshit. “Your skill set sounds a little cooler than mine.”

“Not necessarily,” he said, trying to poke the element with the spatula. I stopped him just in time. I really wasn’t wild about the smell of burning plastic. “If you’re hungry, a dragon’s flat useless.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. But suddenly the memory of Wren’s face rose in my mind again, not pale and lifeless, but vibrant and smiling as she’d been the last time I’d seen her alive. Wren wouldn’t have laughed at Rowan’s dragons. She’d have asked him to call one up for her and teach her to ride.

Rowan didn’t say a word, not even when my tears sizzled in the pan. He just tore off a paper towel and handed it to me, then dug in the fridge for a couple of sodas while I got myself back under control. How he knew that more sympathy would just provoke a total breakdown, I have no idea, but his ignoring me was exactly what I needed in that moment. We ate in silence, and this time I didn’t feel compelled to fill it with chatter.

Almost as soon as I took my last bite, he whisked both plates off the table and dropped them in the sink. “Up,” he said, pulling my chair back.

I could either stand or be dumped on the floor. I decided I’d spent enough time on the floor for one day and chose the more graceful option. He took me by the shoulders and steered me out of the kitchen. “Mind if I ask where I’m going?”

“Shower.” He drove me down the hall and into my little bathroom, marching me like a doll. He followed me inside and gave me a gentle nudge out of the way so he could reach the faucet of my Jacuzzi tub. “Strip,” he added over his shoulder.

“What is this, your Neanderthal mode?” I asked, amused in spite of myself. “Me demon, you Jane?”

He glanced back and raised an eyebrow. “If you’d rather I took your clothes off for you ...”

I grabbed the hem of my shirt and yanked it over my head. He nodded and turned back to adjusting the knobs. Remembering how he'd reacted to watching me cook, I couldn't help asking, "You know what you're doing there?"

He nodded. "I've drawn many a bath for a lady in my day," he said. "This, I can assure you, I know how to do."

The flash of jealousy took me completely by surprise. I froze, my sweats halfway down my hips, and shook my head hard. I was just rattled by everything that had happened today, that was all. Rowan's sudden change from dangerous demon to comforting confidant had confused me. That had to be it. No way was I jealous that other women had seen that dragon on his back, caressed his rock-hard abs, tasted his kisses.

I didn't care if a thousand others had ridden that glorious cock.

No, I wasn't jealous. As far as I was concerned, the sooner Rowan picked another lover, the happier I'd be -- well, if I wasn't dead, that is.

Now who's spouting bullshit, Tera?

I told that inner voice to shut the hell up and kicked off my panties. When Rowan switched on the shower nozzle and turned back around, I faced him with nothing between us but my long red hair covering my breasts.

He stared. I glared. "Mind if I get in now?" I asked, and damned if my voice wasn't catty. Shit. Even my tone was jealous.

He didn't move. He took his time looking at me, his gaze caressing every curve, appreciation written so clearly on his face that I had to fight the urge to cover myself with my hands. When he reached out and brushed my hair aside, baring all of me to his view, my knees quivered and threatened to fail me.

"You are a beautiful creature, Tera Kenner," Rowan whispered. "Now, get in that shower and close the curtain before I remember what I am."

A shiver chased down my spine. I moved toward the bathtub. His gaze followed the sway of my breasts as I walked, bringing my nipples to full attention. He didn't move to let me by. I eased past him, and I swear I saw his jaw clench and his nostrils flare when my shoulder brushed his.

The knowledge that he wanted me was a powerful aphrodisiac. That little green monster inside me roared, and I only knew one way to make it shut up. To hell with his other lovers. For now, he was mine. I stepped into the shower and didn't close the curtain. "Join me," I whispered. "To hell with the rest of it. You can be noble later."

He didn't wait for me to ask him twice. His jacket hit the floor an instant before his shirt fell on top of it. I licked my lips when he kicked off his boots and reached for his jeans.

His cock all but leapt out when he unzipped them. He was already hard as a rock. "Commando," I said, not trying to hide my grin. "Why am I not surprised?"

He winked at me. "Need to be ready at a moment's notice, don't I?"

I laughed, and then he was beside me, yanking the curtain closed and pulling me against his hard body as hot water pounded over us both. "How do you want it, pretty one?" he whispered in my ear. "Tell me how to pleasure you."

I licked a droplet of water from his neck. "I don't care," I said against his skin. "I just don't want to think anymore. Can you drive the thoughts from my mind?"

"Yes, sweetheart. I can do that."

He cupped my face in his hands, and I raised my lips eagerly, anticipating his kiss with every cell of my body. When it didn't come, I opened my eyes and found him frowning at me. "What?"

"I -- this might be a bad idea," he said, hesitant again. "Maybe we shouldn't."

I stared at him. This was the last thing I'd expected. "Damn it, Rowan, you're supposed to be a sure thing," I said, incredulous. "If an incubus won't do me when I want done --"

He pressed his fingers to my lips, cutting me off. "Tera," he murmured, "if I'm touching you when you come, I will feed from you. There's nothing I can do about that. Are you sure you want this?"

"But --" My mind was spinning. "But in the bar, you didn't take anything from me. I would've felt it."

"No," he countered. "I took something from you, just not much. If the man watching us had come first, I would've been able to break away from you before you came, but he didn't. All I could do was try to minimize what I took from you." When I just stared at him, he rested his forehead against mine. "You didn't feel it because I hid it, Tera. I can control whether or not I do this now, sweetheart, but if I take you, I will feed from you, and right now you're pretty weak."

Damn, damn, and double damn. Why did he have to tell me this now? I felt like crying. I was so damn tired, and I wanted the oblivion so bad, but I wasn't ready for the final oblivion. "Answer me honestly, Rowan," I said, closing my eyes so I wouldn't see the lie if he told me one. "If I say yes and we do this, you won't --"

"I won't kill you," he said, cutting me off again. "Not now, not any time soon. I'll do everything I can to keep you as long as possible." Then, as though compelled to tell me the truth, he added, "You'll feel like hell afterward, though."

"Then do it," I said and gave myself up to him as his mouth finally covered mine.

His kiss was just what I wanted -- hot, hungry, and all-consuming. I moaned into his mouth and pressed closer as his hands slid down my spine. He cupped my ass and pulled my hips against his, pressing the hard length of his cock to my belly.

My mind refused to shut up, even when I ran my palms over his perfect chest and let my fingertips trace circles around his nipples. Since I couldn't turn my brain off, I gave it something new to think about. I pretended Rowan wasn't there because he'd fixated on me, not because I was the sheep to his wolf. I pretended he was there because he cared for me.

It was stupid, I know. He'd told me himself he wasn't capable of that -- he had no emotions to give me. But when he trailed kisses down my throat, murmuring sweet, hot words that told me exactly what he was going to do to me, I let myself have the fantasy.

He wasn't gentle. I didn't want him to be. He pinned me to the wall and sucked my nipples until I wanted to howl, his hands tight on my ass as he held me prisoner between the cold tile and his hot body. His stone-hard cock nudged my clit, but he held me immobile when I tried to rub against him. I cried his name in frustration. He just laughed and bit the curve of my breast before resuming his sensual torture.

An endless time later, he released me and spun me away from him. I caught my balance with my hands on the back wall, my ass thrust toward him, and I cried out again when he bit my hip. It wasn't hard enough to really hurt, but it was certainly wild enough to send heat melting deep between my thighs. His hot tongue swirled over the bite, soothing the pain, making my pussy drip with arousal in anticipation of feeling his tongue on my aching clit. "Rowan, please," I moaned. "I want your cock so bad, baby."

His hands slid down my back, slick with soap. "I'll fuck you when I'm ready," he growled. "Not before."

My nipples were so hypersensitive that the first stroke of his soapy hands almost sent me to my knees. He rolled my breasts in his palms, tweaking my nipples, plucking them and swirling his thumbs over them. God, it felt so damn good that I was about to come just from that.

And at that moment, his hands slid away.

I opened my mouth to protest, but it died in my throat when he roughly parted my thighs with his knee. "Yes," I breathed, arching my back, my pussy aching for his invasion.

"No," he countered, and his slick hands slid down my belly to cup my mons. "You get my cock when I say, remember?"

His fingers played with me, stroking down my thighs and never once touching my clit. I opened my eyes and watched him playing with me. The sight of his strong, dark hands caressing my pale skin, lathering my thighs and tracing the red curls over my pussy, was incredibly erotic. When his cock nudged my ass, I couldn't help myself. I rubbed against him like a cat in heat.

He laughed, the bastard, teasing me to the point of madness and enjoying it. "Maybe you can have a little," he breathed in my ear.

His tongue dove into my ear just as his slick, soapy cock pressed against my ass. I realized what he intended to do and whimpered. Having a phantom cock fuck my ass had been erotic as hell, but the real thing? I wasn't sure I was ready for it.

"Relax," he murmured, his hands returning to my breasts. "I'll make it good, my pretty one."

And then he was inside, thick and hard and long, and I was stunned at how incredible he felt. I pressed back to take him to the last inch and almost screamed with pleasure when his fingers finally traced my clit.

He did me slow at first, until I lost the last of my tension, only quickening his thrusts when he was sure I could take it. His fingers played with me, sometimes diving into my pussy, sometimes plucking my clit, keeping me on the edge while never doing enough of either to make me come. His other hand was busy with my nipples, soap-slick fingers teasing both to rigid points of almost painful pleasure.

My knees trembled so hard, I was certain I couldn't hold myself up much longer, and he still wouldn't let me come. "Rowan, damn you, please!" I cried, mindless with pleasure and aching with need.

He pulled out of me and spun me around, ignoring my outraged shout and kissing me until I nearly passed out from lack of oxygen. "Lie down," he whispered against my lips when he finally pulled away to let me breathe.

When I was on my back in the tub, he smiled down at me. It wasn't a reassuring smile -- *feral* is the word that comes to mind -- and wrapped both hands around his cock. "Tell me what you want, my hot little Tera," he murmured as he stroked himself, suds glistening along his throbbing length. One hand slid down to caress his balls. I stared, my own hands itching with jealousy for every lingering stroke. "What shall I do to make you scream now, hmm?"

I wanted to suck that thick cock so bad, I could almost taste it. More than that, I wanted to make him lose control for once, to hear him begging me for release. "You can stop teasing me before I rip that gorgeous cock right off," I said, imitating his growl as best I could.

Rowan laughed. I slid my foot up his thigh and let my toes nudge his sac. "Is it wise to laugh at me when I'm in this position?"

He caught my foot and guided my sole to his cock, rubbing his length against me. "I'm going to make you come until you pass out," he said, golden sparks swirling in his eyes. "Will that make you forgive me?"

I pulled my foot away and spread my legs, blessing the fact that my apartment had a Jacuzzi tub that gave me so much room. "I'll forgive you," I murmured, "when you follow through on that promise. Now, get down here and get started."

He smiled and leaned back to let the hot water rinse the suds from his cock before kneeling between my thighs. He ran a finger through my curls and flicked it over my clit, then brought his finger to his lips and licked it. "I love the way you taste," he murmured. "I think I need a little appetizer before I fuck you."

"Rowan!"

My protest turned into a moan when his tongue slid deep inside my pussy. Both hands slid up to cup my breasts, thumbs rubbing my nipples as his tongue laved my clit. God, his

mouth was magic, and when he sucked my clit between his teeth and moaned, the deep vibration made me arch like a bow.

And he *still* didn't let me come.

I was sobbing with pleasure and frustration, every nerve in my body burning, when he finally raised his head. He licked his way up my body, dipping his tongue into my navel, nibbling my nipples, before finally biting my lower lip. "I want to come," I whispered against his mouth, begging now. "Please, Rowan, please let me come."

He didn't reply, and I was about to beg again when he thrust deep, pushing his huge cock inside me all the way to the balls in one hard surge. I screamed with the pleasure of it and wrapped my legs around his hips to keep him there. He growled and kissed me, fucking me hard, our bodies slick with water and sweat.

When I came, I swear I saw gold stars.

Chapter Eleven

I awoke naked in bed, and I was alone there.

As usual.

I sat up, pushed off the quilts, and ran a hand through my hair. Well, more like *tried* to run a hand through it. Sleeping with wet hair was a certain recipe for looking like Medusa when I woke up.

I wondered if Rowan would help me comb out the snarls if I asked him nicely.

Where the hell did that thought come from? I frowned and got out of bed. Rowan was an incubus, the ultimate no-emotions-involved fuck-buddy. He didn't go in for things like holding hands, snuggling, or hair-combing. Hell, he didn't even sleep beside me so I could help him take care of his morning hard-on.

And damn, right now, I really wanted to do that. I hadn't gotten to suck that cock last night, and the urge was only growing stronger.

I pulled on my robe and padded barefoot to the kitchen for coffee. The clock said seven, which could have been a.m. or p.m. -- the light leaking through my mini-blinds was weak, but I couldn't tell if it was from the sunrise or the sunset. I didn't really care. The

aroma of brewing coffee held me in its thrall, and I waited, helpless to move, for my first taste.

And that was just way too similar to how I felt around Rowan.

What had he said to me that day when he'd told me what he was? *"Your need drew me, Tera. Your pleasure feeds me. And now that you've tasted me, you need me as much as I need you."* And damned if he wasn't right. I craved him.

The realization, when I finally let myself see it, wasn't pretty.

I was fucking addicted.

Fury washed away every last trace of my fatigue. How had I been so blind? This wasn't new territory for me. I'd been here before, gone through hell to rid myself of addiction, and I was never, never going to go through that again. Not for Rowan, not for anyone.

Why was it always a man who did this to me? The first time, I was young, naïve, and in love. I dated Ray for a year before moving in with him and discovering that all the fancy dates and beautiful gifts had been bought with little bags of poison. I was so blind with love for him that I let him convince me that a taste of it wouldn't hurt, would only enhance what I felt when he fucked me. Soon it wasn't a little; it was a lot. And it wasn't a hobby; it was a full-blown business.

It didn't take long before I started to hate Ray, but I hated myself more for falling for his line of bullshit. I might've been naïve, but I wised up fast. I knew where it was headed; saw it when Ray's "friends" brought their girlfriends over and shared them around the room to pay for a fix. Finally, I managed to find the strength to pack up and move out, to end the lies and drugs and all the stupid things I put up with to keep my habit, before I let the drugs turn me into a whore.

The day I drove away from Ray, I got stopped by the cops for going seventy-five in a sixty zone. I opened the glove box to pull out my registration and found Ray's parting gift.

That little baggie cost me a year of my life.

Jail makes you grow up quick. The trial was a farce, Ray actually taking the stand to testify against me, and I'd gotten the maximum sentence that little bag could buy despite the fact that my fingerprints were nowhere on it. I went through an eternity of withdrawal pains on a hard cot, puked on the concrete floor or, if I was lucky, in the industrial steel toilet in the corner. I shuddered, I ached, and by God, I raged.

My anger made me strong, though. It made me fight, and fight I did -- for my freedom, earning an early release for good behavior. For my liberation from the drugs, fighting with blood, sweat, and tears. I fought for every damn thing I had now -- my own place, my own business, my own life.

No way was I losing any of that for Rowan, not even if he fucked like a dream.

I drank my coffee fast enough to scald my throat, imagining that the heat could sear his taste from my mouth. I was hardly aware what clothes I pulled on. All I wanted was to get out of there, away from the shower, from the memory of lying beneath him and begging for his cock.

Begging for a fix.

I went to the shop. I didn't want to, but it was the only refuge I had, and I knew I'd have to face it sometime. Best to get it over with before the memories had a chance to grow and strangle me.

It was almost strange to drive my own car. I was getting far too used to Rowan taking over, taking the wheel and driving me around. This analogy applied to several things, and I didn't like any of them. He'd started out as a fuck, and now he was ... what? Certainly not my boyfriend, and I wasn't even sure I could call him a lover -- we fucked. That was it. When had he become so important to me?

The when of it didn't matter. It was stopping, right now.

Pandora's was silent when I unlocked the back door. Tears burned in my throat as I imagined turning the light on and seeing that circle again. Memories of Wren filled the

space -- the laughter we'd shared, the arguments we'd had, every time we sat down at that rickety table for a heart-to-heart. What I wouldn't give for just one more of those. "I'm gonna miss you, girl," I whispered to the darkness.

"Don't cry, Tera. It just makes you look like shit."

I froze. I knew that voice, and it was utterly impossible that I was hearing it now. "Who's there?" I challenged, but the tremble in my voice betrayed my bravado. "Come out where I can see you!"

A glowing mist swirled from nowhere, coalescing inside the magic-marker circle. My jaw ached, making me aware for the first time that my mouth was hanging open. I couldn't seem to close it. All I could do was watch that freaky mist swirl inside the circle, thickening until it formed the shape of a woman, a petite young girl with spiked hair.

A misty, glowing girl who smiled at me.

I finally regained enough of my wits to hit the lights. The fluorescents buzzed as they warmed up, their industrial white light flooding the room to dispel the illusion.

Except that the illusion sighed and rolled her eyes.

"What the fuck?" I whispered, holding on to the closest box to keep my suddenly watery knees from giving out.

"The fuck is exactly the problem," the persistent illusion said. "I came back to warn you, Tera. There's an incubus in Austin, and he wants you."

That was it. My legs crumpled and I fell on my ass. "This isn't happening," I told the thing that couldn't possibly be Wren's ghost. "You're not there. I'm not hearing you. This isn't happening."

"I am, you are, and it is," she said, and this time there was a trace of impatience in her voice. "Look, will you turn off the damn light? It's hard to stay this bright. You'll see me better in the dark, and I'll be able to stay longer."

“Not for a billion dollars and a harem of boy toys.” No way was I turning off the light to stand in the dark with a ghost, even one that was a figment of my overactive imagination.

“Why don’t you vanish like a good little illusion and leave me to go nuts in peace?”

Wren -- no, the thing that looked like Wren -- sighed again. “Your disbelief is getting old, Tera,” she said in her scolding-schoolteacher voice. She’d said the same thing to me in the same tone a hundred times. “Leave the light on, then, if it makes you feel better, but listen to me. Didn’t you hear what I said? The man who killed me --”

“Was an incubus named Troian,” I said, surprising both of us by interrupting.

She blinked. “Yes,” she said. “How’d you know?”

First Rowan, and now this. I was talking to an illusion brought on by grief. This was just getting better and better. Why not go all the way? “Another incubus named Rowan told me.” I sighed. “Just before he fucked the living daylights out of me.”

“Oh, goddess, Tera,” Wren said, sinking to the ground and leaving a glowing vapor trail behind with the movement. “I’d hoped to save you from him. He and Troian probably moved in at the same time, but you were lucky enough to survive, and I wasn’t.”

I couldn’t help it; I moved closer. “He’s been with me longer than that,” I said. “Since the day you cast that circle, actually.”

Her eyes widened. “That long?” I nodded. “And he hasn’t killed you yet?”

I found myself filling Wren in on all the things I should’ve told her before she died. If this was a hallucination, it was a good one -- she reacted just as she had in life, down to each mannerism and gasp of shock. I told her about the vow I’d forced Rowan to make before mending his torn wing, about the way I’d enticed that man in the bar so Rowan could feed from him instead of me, about the way he’d been almost compassionate after I’d found her body. I told her all of it, everything from the moment he’d stolen my car to last night’s shower.

When I was done, I felt wrung out, exhausted. Wren looked like she felt the same. "Are you okay?" I asked before realizing what a stupid question that was. She was dead. Of course she wasn't okay.

And she was fading out.

"Tera, be careful," she said. "I'll try to help you all I can, but I can't do much in this world any longer. If you need sanctuary, go to my sister Phoebe. Tell her I sent you, and give her my wards if she doesn't already have them."

"Phoebe hates me," I said. I could see through Wren now. "Don't go."

Wren smiled at me. "Phoebe doesn't hate you," she said. "She just hates interacting with normal people. She's a stronger witch than I ever was, and she couldn't turn down someone in need if her own life depended on it. Go to her, and tell her to have faith, that I did it to protect her."

She was nearly invisible now. "Wren!" I cried, forgetting my fear and scrambling toward the circle. She tried to say something else, tried urgently, but I didn't hear what it was. All I could make out was one last frantic gesture before she faded out altogether.

I stayed there on the floor, waiting for her to come back, half hoping she would so I'd know I wasn't crazy, then hoping she wouldn't so I could pretend it hadn't happened. Finally I made myself get up and walk into the storefront. I'd spent too much time in the last days sitting on floors, feeling miserable. I really needed to stop it. Moving around, doing something constructive, would surely make me feel better.

Except that when I walked into the shop, someone was already there.

A man was leaning against the counter, lounging with his ankles crossed, looking for all the world as though he had a right to be there. His elbows rested on the counter, pulling his tee-shirt tight over hard pecs and the ripples of his abs. Those legs were also powerfully muscled and long -- he was tall, six foot five if he was an inch. My startled gaze rose, daring to touch his face this time. Thick blond hair just brushed his collar, a gold so pure it was

almost impossible not to reach out and touch it. He was movie-star gorgeous without being the slightest bit pretty -- square jaw, high cheekbones, strong, aquiline nose -- the face of a stunt man, a daredevil, a Viking warrior of old.

And eyes just like Rowan's, complete with dancing flecks of gold.

The door jerked out of my hand and slammed behind me before I could even think of running. He smiled at me, and I covered my eyes with both hands, blocking it out. His smile had the same erotic impact as Rowan's, only stronger. I didn't want to feel this lust for anyone else. I knew I should be afraid, but I just couldn't manage it. "Troian," I whispered, my voice already dead.

"The same," he said in a voice like melted chocolate. Heat curled between my thighs, wicked images of a blond head licking me, sucking and biting, filling my thoughts. I moaned and reached behind me, searching for the door. I had to get out of there. "Leaving so soon, Tera?"

Keeping my eyes closed wasn't helping to stop the lust from taking me, so I opened them again. Troian hadn't moved a muscle, but the smile was gone. "Leave me alone," I said, appalled that it came out as a plea, not a command. "Get thee behind me, or whatever. Just go away."

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm not here to hurt you, Tera," he said in that sultry voice. "I'm here to set you free."

"Set me free from what?" Finally, here was an emotion. I glared at him, ridiculously grateful for the rage that banished that dead emptiness inside me. "I'm not interested in being set free from this mortal coil, thanks. Go find another meal ticket. This buffet is closed. I intend to live a lot longer."

He laughed at my anger. My nipples peaked as my fury built. I hated this eroticism he forced on me. "Silly little girl," he murmured, straightening to his full height. "You're already dying. Wouldn't you rather it be quick?"

"Rowan's not going to kill me," I said, raising my chin and knowing I was lying.

Troian shook his head, looking more sympathetic than Rowan ever had, even when he'd been trying. "Rowan can't help himself," he said. "It's what we are, little girl."

"He promised," I whispered, and even to my own ears, it sounded pitiful.

His eyes were almost kind -- that is, if I ignored the dancing sparks that spelled my doom. "He promised not to kill you, did he?" he asked gently. "Did he use those exact words?"

"I --" No, he hadn't. He'd promised not to willingly harm me, but if he couldn't stop himself from feeding when I came, that was hardly *willingly* harming me, was it? "I don't remember," I snapped defiantly. "But I'll take him over you any day."

He shook his head again. "I can tell he's filled your head with tales about my cruelty, hasn't he?" As if he compelled an answer, I found myself nodding. He sighed. "Let me ask you a question, then. Is it kinder to kill fast and clean, or to draw it out for days? To play with your prey's emotions, pretend to be something you can never be, make someone believe you mean her no harm as you drain her life away?"

Put that way, Rowan's promise to keep me as long as he could didn't sound quite so chivalrous. I just shook my head, having no answer for him.

Troian took a step toward me. Just one, but it was enough to intensify the electricity dancing over my skin. "Rowan's young, but he's a master of the game," he said, still using that voice like the weapon it was. "I won't deny that he gets more sustenance from his prey than I do. By pretending to care what happens to you, Tera, he makes you open yourself to him. Give to him. Each feeding weakens you, but you grow strong again, and he takes more."

"And you?" My words came out hoarse, the merest whisper. "You're kinder? I talked with Wren before she died, and she was scared out of her mind! So what if I gave something to Rowan? You just take, and give nothing!"

He shook his head. "We made a deal, and we both benefited. She gave me the energy I need to survive. I gave her an end to pain and a more pleasant death than what awaited her." He must've seen that I had no idea what he was talking about because he frowned at me. "You were her friend, and you didn't know she was dying?"

"You're lying." I spat the words at him, furious that he'd lie about the woman he'd killed, about my best friend. "You're a goddamned liar!"

"No, sweet. Unlike Rowan, I never lie." He took another step and propped a hand on the door behind me, leaning over me. "I have outgrown the need to feed from the young and healthy. I offer a pleasant end to the dying, Tera. Your little friend had cancer. I took her pain, gave her pleasure, and eased her into death."

I couldn't breathe. He was too close, the things he said too painful. It couldn't be true. She would have told me! Wouldn't she have told me?

Before I could find a way through the confusion, Troian bent closer, his breath teasing my lips. "You're also dying, Tera," he whispered, making it sound like a seduction. "You're being murdered slowly. Let me ease your passing. Let me help you, and you will help me in return."

Then he kissed me, breathing in, and I felt the now-familiar explosion of pleasure and the drain on my life.

It pierced the fog he'd woven around me. He was taking my very life force, and I couldn't stop him, but I refused to go under without a fight. Drawing on instinct more than memory, I opened my mind and *pushed* all my tangled feelings at him, giving him emotion just as I'd given my grief to Rowan. But this time, I didn't stop with grief. I hit him with fury, with betrayal, with anguish and the need for a comforting touch, with memories of being held in tenderness, in passion. I shoved loneliness at him, and joy, fear and humor, the bone-deep weariness I carried with me everywhere now.

I pummeled him with every emotion I was capable of.

Troian recoiled with a strangled cry, and several things happened at once.

I collapsed as he stumbled blindly into the shelves, and the crash of them toppling mingled with the shattering of my front window and Rowan's enraged roar.

What followed stands out clearly in my memory, despite my incubus-induced exhaustion. Rowan was in full demon mode, wings and claws and horns, and his eyes glowed with fury as he leapt for my attacker. Troian's jacket ripped as his own wings burst from his back, surging out and lifting him from the floor with one powerful beat before Rowan could tackle him.

Claws slashed and blood flew, and I got my first and hopefully last look at how demons fight.

I watched in horror, not sure who to root for, knowing they fought for the right to kill me. Troian still hadn't recovered from my "attack," and was coming off worse, but his strength was clearly greater than Rowan's. They bit and punched and thrashed, hitting with their wings as often as with their clawed hands, utterly wrecking my shop in moments. Their roars of fury were terrible to hear. Rowan managed to grab hold of Troian and threw him straight through my front door, setting off the jingling bells hanging above it, and I wrenched open the door behind me and fled for my life.

I have no idea how I got to Phoebe's place.

She must have been insane to let me in, but when she opened the door and I babbled some hysterical nonsense about incubi and her sister's ghost, she grabbed me by the shoulder and dragged me inside. Phoebe has never been on my list of favorite people, but in that moment, I could have wept with gratitude.

Minutes later, having put a cup of steaming tea in my hands and a blanket around my still-shaking shoulders, Wren's little sister sat down across from me and started the

interrogation. “Where did you see Wren?” she asked, barely giving me time to take a sip of the tea.

I almost choked on it. God, it was awful stuff. “In the circle,” I said, then backtracked to explain about that. Phoebe nodded, waving a hand to hurry me along, and I tried to describe the glowing mist that had formed the shape of her sister. I recounted every word she’d said, only now starting to wonder if Phoebe would call the men in white coats on me.

She didn’t. She bowed her head for a moment, just sat there with her head down, and I was about to apologize for bothering her and reigniting her grief when she met my eyes again. “Drink that,” she said, gesturing at the cup, her own eyes dry. “It’s a restorative. Your aura is fucked, Tera. You should’ve come to me sooner.”

I gulped down more of the tea with a shudder. It truly was vile stuff. “Troian said he spared Wren pain,” I said, the words coming out before I knew I intended to speak them. “He said he only took the dying, that she had cancer.”

“She did.”

Those two words sucked the bottom out of my world. “Why didn’t she tell me?” I whispered, my chest tight. “Why didn’t you? I would’ve helped her!”

Phoebe shrugged. “It was for her to tell or not,” she said. “Why didn’t you tell her about Rowan?”

I opened my mouth to reply, found no words, closed it again. Why hadn’t I told her, especially after I’d seen her circle work on Rowan? The answers were complicated, tangled. What if she hadn’t believed me? What if she’d gotten hurt trying to help?

What if she’d made him go away?

That last question burned in my mind, and try as I might, I couldn’t unthink it. The truth was there, waiting to be acknowledged. I drank the last of the horrid tea to put it off, but it wouldn’t be denied.

My choices had led me here. Yes, Rowan had approached me first, but I'd chosen to stay with him. I'd chosen to leave the circle after I knew what he was; I'd chosen to feel that phantom fuck at the mall; I'd chosen to help him in the bar and to go home with him after Wren died. More than that, I'd *relied* on him after finding Wren's body, let him care for me, talked with him, used him to make me forget just as he used me for sustenance.

I hadn't told Wren because I hadn't wanted to face the truth of what Rowan was, even though I'd thought I'd acknowledged it. If anyone else knew, they might make it all stop, and I wanted to keep him.

"I'm a fool," I groaned, burying my face in my hands.

"You're a fool," Phoebe agreed, reminding me why I didn't like her much. "You should have at least warned Wren, knowing what you are. Didn't she warn you that you'd attract things like this?"

"Knowing what I am?" I echoed stupidly. Wren had used similar words many times and never once explained what it meant. "What am I, then?"

"Why, you're an empath, of course," Phoebe said, surprised. "You really didn't know that?"

"I'm a what?"

"An empath," she repeated, speaking slowly and clearly as if I were addled. "How else could you use your emotions as a weapon? How do you think Rowan fed through you? You feel the emotions of others and can send them yours. All manner of paranormal entities can feed off you. If you hadn't attracted zombies and incubi, you would've attracted a vampire or a poltergeist. Wren really never told you?"

I shook my head, momentarily struck dumb.

Phoebe ran a hand over her face. "Wren told me she'd been shielding you ever since she started working for you," she said. "I can't believe she didn't tell you." Then she paused,

thinking. “No, I can believe it. She didn’t tell me until she got sick and thought her protections were starting to fail.”

“She told you and not me?” Call me crazy, but that pissed me off a little. “Why does everyone seem to know about this but me?”

“If you see her ghost again, ask her about it,” Phoebe said, less than helpfully. “What matters now is what we do about it.”

I clutched the empty cup and tried to stop the certainty that I was losing my mind. Had it been only two weeks ago that everything had been normal, utterly peachy? “What can we do?” I asked.

“Well, it’s too late for me to pull a major hoo-doo and make him vanish,” she said, sitting back and absently braiding a piece of her hair. “You’d have to really want it for that to work, and you don’t.”

I gaped at her, taken totally aback. “I most certainly --”

“Are not the only empath in the room,” Phoebe cut me off, sending me a hard glare. “You don’t want Rowan to go away. Stupid, maybe, but there it is. I can’t help you if you don’t accept what’s in your heart. Nothing wrecks a spell faster than a falsehood, and I’m not wasting the effort on you if you’re not going to be honest with me.”

I closed my eyes, taking slow breaths to calm my indignation. I tried to be honest with myself, to accept what she said I felt, but it was hard. Rowan’s enraged roar was too fresh in my mind. Okay, did I want him gone? My mind responded with a resounding *hell, yeah*. Yes, he was the very devil in bed, or against the wall, or in the tub -- a literal devil who was devouring me with every fuck. Why would I want him?

But I did.

“I’m addicted,” I whispered, admitting it aloud.

Phoebe snorted, which was not the reaction I was hoping for. "That's one word for it," she said, pushing back from the table. "Look, Tera, go home. Think it out. Come back when you know what you want."

I raised my eyes to hers and said the only thing I was sure of. "I want to live."

She paused, searching my face, and slowly sat back down. "That," she said, her voice considerably gentler now, "I might be able to help you with."

Chapter Twelve

Hours later, I parked in front of my apartment building and killed the engine, momentarily too exhausted to make the trip up the stairs to go inside. It was sunset again, though I couldn't have told you what day it was to save my life. I wasn't sure if it had been one day or two since I'd found Wren. If not for the sunset, I couldn't have guessed the time of day. Never in my life had I been so utterly weary, so tired that my entire body hurt.

I finally made myself get out of the car and somehow made it to my door. I hung the little charm Phoebe had given me on the doorknob, wondering if it could really keep Rowan out. Once I would've scoffed, but after everything I'd been through, I figured my scoffing days were over. If I could accept that I was an empath, the perfect demon food, that my best friend's ghost had now appeared to me and her sister had cast a spell over me that would keep me alive, well, I suppose I could accept anything.

"Damn you, Rowan," I whispered, leaning my forehead against the door. "This is all your fault."

"Damn you right back."

I whirled, adrenaline surging as I came face to face with the very thing I was trying to avoid. Rowan stood in the darkening room, scowling, his wings gone but his body still

marked by numerous scratches and bites from his battle. Even without the demon trappings, he still looked dangerous, lethal.

Sexy as homemade sin.

My fist tightened on the charm I'd just hung on the door. "This is a piece of shit!"

"You can't keep out what's already in, now can you." His tone was mocking, more cruel than I'd ever heard from him.

How dare he stand there and mock me? Finally I had something to focus my rioting emotions on, an outlet for my fury. I straightened, preparing to give him hell for what he'd done to me.

But the bastard beat me to it. "What the fuck have you done to me?" he snarled, striding across the room and pinning me against the door. I was too dumbfounded to do more than stare at him in shock. "What spell have you cast on me? I demand that you remove it, now!"

"I haven't cast anything on you," I said, meeting his enraged glare with one of my own. "Like I could! You're the paranormal being here, so if anyone's been casting, it's you."

He growled and paced away from me, every move a study in rage. If I hadn't been so exhausted, I might well have tried to run away again, but he whirled and stabbed an accusing finger at me. "You invade my thoughts," he growled. "I get no rest. It hurts to be near you, and it's agony to be away from you. I have no need to feed now, and I want to fuck your brains out. What have you done to me? I refuse to continue this way!"

My jaw dropped. This was insane. He couldn't possibly be saying what I thought he was saying, but there was only one way to find out. "Rowan," I said, holding out a hand to him. "Come here."

He bared his teeth at me in an expression that in no way resembled a smile. "I don't come at your command."

Ooh, was he ever pissed. Why did I find it so sexy? “Will you come at my request, then?” I asked, not lowering my hand. “You might be overreacting to this. You said you have no emotions, right? Come here and let me feel what you feel. Once I know what it is, maybe I can make it stop.”

What utter bullshit I was spouting. I have no idea why he bought it.

Rowan strode over to me, his scowl never lessening. I took his hand and tried to do what I’d done to Troian, only in reverse. I wanted to take emotion in, not strike out with it. I needed to feel what Rowan felt. I closed my eyes, tightened my fingers around his, and *pulled*-- not with my hand, but with my heart.

Rowan staggered, catching himself against the door, and I lost myself in the flood of sensation that suddenly surrounded me. His chest was tight, aching. His lungs burned for air no matter how deeply he breathed. Each breath brought the faint hint of my shampoo to him, triggering the memories of our shower, and worsened a longing so strong it was a physical pain. His stomach was knotted with butterflies, churning with desire, twisting with anxiety. I could feel his memories of finding Troian bending over me, experience the blinding rage and the gut-wrenching fear he’d felt at the sight of it. I felt his certainty that he’d been too late, the guilt, the panic, the overpowering urge to tear Troian limb from limb for daring to touch me.

God, it wasn’t possible, but I couldn’t deny it. I pulled back without completely letting go of the link with his feelings, only now realizing I was as out of breath as he was. I slid my free hand through his hair. His heart jumped with mingled need and anticipation and, yes, fear. I was stunned by the power of his reaction to my simple touch. “Oh, Rowan, it’s not a spell,” I whispered, releasing my draw on his emotions with terrible reluctance. “You’re in love with me.”

He jerked away, snarling at me as if I’d tried to cut his dick off. “That’s -- I’m not -- you’re --” He couldn’t get a sentence out and settled at last for a roar that made me cringe. “You lie!”

I shook my head, watching him stalk around my apartment. He grabbed a pillow off the couch and shredded it with his claws, his entire body shaking with anger. A dangerous excitement built in my chest no matter how hard I tried to squash it down. No way would he be acting this way if it weren't true.

"I don't lie," I said. "You love me."

"I do not fucking love you!" he shouted, loud enough to make my windows rattle.

"You do," I said, failing to keep the glee from my voice this time. "I felt it. You're head over heels in love with me."

He snarled and threw the brutalized remains of the pillow aside, clearly looking for something else to smash, and my glee died when his eyes fell on me.

"I am an incubus," he growled, every word a low rumble of menace as he stalked toward me. His black wings unfurled as his eyes blazed with light, and it was the demon who stopped in front of me, scowling so fiercely I should've been terrified. "I am a damned spirit, a demon created to prey on the sinful lusts of humans, to conquer and to kill at my whim. I have no emotions -- not pity, not tenderness, not *love*." He spat the word as though it tasted foul. "The only feelings I have ever possessed are those *you* gave me, Tera, so if I love you -- and I don't -- it is because *you* loved *me* first."

That wiped the smile off my face pretty damn effectively. "I'm not in love with you," I whispered, my heart pounding. "I'm addicted to incubus sex. That's all!"

"Really." The word dripped with derision.

I threw my keys at him, suddenly as furious as I'd been smug. "Yes, really!" I shouted. "You're a drug and you damn well know it! That's the only reason I --"

"Bullshit, Tera," Rowan snapped, cutting me off. "Explain to me why you were fighting Troian when I got there, then. Explain why his touch repulsed you. You're so addicted to the pleasures an incubus can provide, aren't you? You're pretty damn picky for an addict. Any demon dick should do. Shall I call Troian back so we can share you?"

The memory of Troian's kiss made me want to scour my mouth with a Brillo pad. Just the thought of him touching me, putting his hands on my body, was revolting. I glared at Rowan, hating him, and he glared right back. "You're disgusting," I said, pushing away from the door and trying to brush past him.

He caught me by the shoulders and pulled me hard against him, as I'd known he would. "If I'm so disgusting," he whispered into my hair, "why didn't you stay with the witch tonight? Surely she told you I couldn't reach you there."

Phoebe had, and I'd come home anyway. Damn him for being right! "You love me, Rowan," I said, throwing it at him like it was a heinous crime. "Fucking admit it. You love me."

He growled, a low rumble that brought my nipples to full attention. "Yes, damn you," he ground out. "But you loved me first."

I don't know which one of us moved, but suddenly I was in his arms, my mouth plastered to his and his tongue tangling with mine, my hands sliding down to squeeze his ass as he steered us toward my bedroom, and it was the man, not the demon, that I embraced. I heard cloth ripping as we stumbled through the apartment and only realized it was coming from my clothes when the cool air hit my overheated skin. "Rowan," I moaned, wrapping my legs around his waist, climbing him like a tree. "God, please --"

"Yes," he murmured against my throat as he ripped my panties away. "Everything you want, pretty one. Anything you want, oh, yes. Yes."

We tumbled back and landed on my bed, a writhing tangle of limbs and kisses, hands caressing, mouths tasting, legs twining in the most intimate of knots. He shuddered against me, and I kissed him again, slowing the mad pace, letting my tongue caress his instead of battling. He groaned into my mouth and held me close, just held me, while the kiss spun on and on, hot and wet and glorious.

I touched him again, not with my hands, but with my empathy, needing to feel what he felt. He groaned again as his emotions flowed over me, his wonder and joy, his awe at this kind of kiss -- giving and tender instead of commanding, savoring instead of ravishing. "Have you never kissed a woman like this?" I whispered, already knowing the answer.

"Never," he said hoarsely. "Do it again."

I did, rolling with him until I lay across him, my arms caught under his back and my legs trapped by his. He threaded his hands through my hair and shuddered with pleasure as I kissed him, taking my time tasting him, loving the flavor of him and the unexpected richness of his new emotions.

I was all but lost in it when I felt the weakness growing in him. I pulled back, alarmed as I finally realized what I was doing. I wasn't just feeling his emotions; I was *taking* them, draining him just as he had drained me. "Oh, God, Rowan, I'm sor--"

Rowan cut me off with a hard kiss, rolling me beneath him and trapping me there. "Don't stop," he whispered fiercely when I tried to release my hold on his emotions and stop the drain. "Don't let me go. You must take from me this time, my pretty one."

It took me a moment, a blank second of disbelief, to understand what he was saying. What he planned was like a splash of ice water on my desire. "No, I can't!" I cried, going cold all over. "I won't --"

He kissed me again, cutting off my protest, and I heard his determined reply as a growl in my mind. *Do it*, he said as his hand found my breast, toying with my aching nipple. *You must take everything from me this time, Tera. I will kill you if you don't. Troian wasn't lying about my promise. You know I can't control feeding from your pleasure when you come, and I won't stay away. I've already tried.*

I couldn't reply to him the same way -- I'm an empath, not a telepath -- so I tore my mouth from his and managed to gasp out the words before he could shut me up with another glorious kiss. "I'm not going to kill you!"

He rested his forehead against mine. "Please," he whispered, a word I'd never heard him use. "Let me go out with this feeling, this emotion you call love. Let me have that, and I'll go happy. If you don't, you damn us both. Let me have this one chance to give something for once in my eternity instead of only taking."

I only realized I was crying when he licked the tears from my cheeks. He was right. I knew he was. This was the ultimate star-crossed love affair, and there was no way in hell, pun intended, that it could work. Demons and humans did not live happily ever after. This was the only answer, but that didn't make me happy about it.

"I love you," I whispered, the only agreement I could force past my tight throat.

"I love you," he said and opened wide to let me in when I pulled on his emotions again. I wanted to cry, but somehow I forced the tears away. This was the last time I'd hold Rowan, all I'd ever have of him, and I wanted it to be perfect.

He bent to suck my nipples, making me moan and writhe from the combined intoxication of his flicking tongue and his own pleasure at tasting me. I reached down and wrapped my fingers around his cock, unable to stand not touching him a moment longer. "Roll over," I murmured, wondering if he could see the desire in my mind.

If he couldn't, he got the idea quickly enough when I straddled his chest and sucked that thick cock as deep as I could take it. He groaned with ecstasy, his hips thrusting up as he grabbed my ass and pulled my pussy down to his eager mouth.

I moaned around his cock as he fucked me with his tongue, cupping his balls as he licked my clit. His arousal was so vivid in my mind that I came almost at once, and came again with the rush of erotic satisfaction he felt as he eagerly lapped up my juices. Realizing I'd let his cock slide from my mouth when I came, I deep-throated him again, taking his cock all the way in, swallowing him whole.

His shout was muffled against my still-tingling pussy, and suddenly he pulled me off him. "I don't want to come yet," he growled, throwing me on my back and pinning my hands above my head. "I'm not done with that hot little pussy of yours yet."

His hands slid down my body and I tried to reach for him, but my wrists wouldn't leave the bed. He looked up, his mouth full of my nipple, and winked at me. *You've not seen all my tricks yet, pretty one*, he murmured in my mind. My ankles suddenly spread, drawn by invisible hands to the corners of the bed and held there.

He laughed when I pulled against the invisible restraints. "Mine for the taking," he whispered, pinching both nipples, rolling them between his fingers.

I moaned and gave myself up to him, losing myself in the thrill he felt at having me so completely at his mercy. One of his hands left me, but I only opened my eyes when I heard my bedside table's drawer slide open. Rowan pulled out my favorite toy, a rotating, vibrating dildo, and grinned at me when he pressed the button that turned it on. "What have we here?"

"Something that pales in comparison to your cock," I said, arching on the bed, needing him to fuck me so bad I could hardly stand it. "Please, baby --"

His eyes glittered. "I like it when you call me that," he whispered. "You get a reward."

An instant later, my pussy was full of the vibrating dildo and his mouth was sucking my clit, each pull coinciding with a thrust of the dildo. I couldn't stop the moans and helplessly ground my pussy against his face, wanting him so bad I thought I just might die of it and wondering if anything could possibly feel better than this.

I got my answer when the invisible army of mouths returned, converging on my breasts, nibbling and licking my nipples. I came again, screaming his name, lost in his pride and desire as much as my own ecstasy.

And the energy he took from my pleasure was nothing compared to what I took from him.

His weakness was growing. I could tell he was trying to hide it from me, but I sensed it all the same. He threw the toy aside, crawling up my body. An instant later he thrust deep, filling me with his hot cock instead of the cool latex. My hands and ankles were abruptly released, and I wrapped myself around him like a glove, angling my hips to take him to the last inch. “Oh, yes, baby, fuck me,” I moaned, loving the way his huge cock stretched my pussy, loving the feel of his thundering pulse against my breast and against my clit.

“No,” he growled, withdrawing and thrusting deeper. “This time I’m not fucking you.”

I buried my face against his shoulder and heard the truth he didn’t have to voice. This wasn’t fucking.

I would’ve sworn that it was physically impossible for me to come again. I would’ve underestimated Rowan. Incredibly, my pussy tightened around him as he rode me slowly, waves of shared pleasure bringing me to the verge of another orgasm within moments. His own ecstasy built in my mind, higher and higher, overwhelming me with a flood of hot pleasure, and when we came together, I couldn’t sort out who was feeling what. Rowan poured himself into me, his cock filling my pussy and his every emotion saturating my mind, and I was swept away by it.

When I came back to myself, Rowan was gone.

* * * * *

By the time I got to Wren’s funeral, I had no tears left.

Rowan’s parting gift had done one good thing -- my aura, according to Phoebe, was now whole. Whatever that meant. All I knew was that I no longer felt like hell, like I had the world’s worst hangover. When he’d given me everything, he’d pushed so much energy into me that it had more than replaced what he and Troian had taken.

I wished like hell I hadn’t done it.

I missed him. God, I missed him so damn bad. I'd even stopped trying to run the neighbor's cat off, welcoming her in and trying to pretend that she helped to chase away my loneliness, but it was useless. There was an ache in my chest, a gaping void where my heart had been, filled now with loathing and disgust for myself. What kind of woman killed the man she loved? So Rowan had been a demon -- no one's perfect. He'd become more than a mindless fucking machine with me. Maybe no one else would ever believe it, but he'd cared for me, comforted me, laughed and raged with me.

Loved me.

I'd never even gotten to sleep in his arms.

I stood by the grave as the ceremony dragged on, a fresh, wild bluebonnet in my hands -- damn hard to find in December, but I'd have happily moved heaven and earth if that's what it took to find Wren's favorite flower -- and ignored Phoebe's stare. She was an empath, too, so I'm sure she knew my grief wasn't only for her sister. I looked instead at Wren's mother, Robin, her brother, Jay, her other sister, Dove. I tried to amuse myself by contemplating their bird fetish, tried to imagine what they'd have named any other children.

I was shit at the game. Nothing could distract me from this grief.

Finally, the ceremony finished and the mourners rose from their seats, milling around the grave, hugging and murmuring empty words of comfort. I couldn't stand it. I forced myself to hug Robin and clasp hands with Jay and Dove, then exchanged a nod with Phoebe. This close, I felt her pity and her scorn. Pity that I'd lost two people I loved, and scorn that one was a demon. She didn't want to feel sorry for me, but she did.

As far as I was concerned, she could take her pity and shove it up her ass, and I hoped like hell that she felt that, too.

As soon as I could manage it without being rude, I placed the bluebonnet on Wren's coffin and hurried from the cemetery. Had I thought I was out of tears? The moisture on my cheeks called me a liar. Surely, if these last three days had taught me anything, it was that I

had an endless supply of those. I stumbled on the grassy verge at the edge of the cemetery, my eyes stinging and my vision blurred.

Strong hands steadied me before I could make my humiliation complete by falling flat on my face. I caught my balance, pulling away as soon as I could with a muttered, "Thanks," and trying not to make eye contact. Much as I hated to cry, I hated to be caught at it even more.

"Don't hide from me, pretty one. I've waited too long see that face again."

I gasped and jerked my head up. It wasn't possible. It just wasn't fucking *possible*. That voice was gone, killed along with everything else glorious about Rowan. I wasn't hearing him speak -- I was losing my mind.

But even as I rationalized like mad, I raised my head and looked at the man holding me.

At first my vision was blurred with tears, but I blinked furiously to clear them. A hand brushed them away as they slid down my cheeks, a bit awkward at the task, but gentle.

My heart stopped, skipped a beat, then pounded so hard I felt faint. I knew that touch. I'd dreamed of it for days. "Rowan?" I whispered, wanting to shout it, wanting so badly for it to be true and terrified to believe it.

He smiled at me, his jet black hair now showing a hint of brown in the sun, his eyes simply blue, not a gold spark to be seen. The changes were subtle, but they were there. Lust didn't blindsides me with his touch, nor did that smile send me to my knees with a wave of erotic promise.

But it was Rowan, standing before me, his hands on my face and his hair blowing in the cold breeze. Impossible or not, changed or not, my lover was here, his hands on my face and his gorgeous, sexy mouth curved in that smile I so loved. "Come with me," he whispered, seeing that I was too overwhelmed to speak. "Come, and I'll tell you everything."

And in case I had any lingering doubts that it was really him, he plucked my keys from my nerveless hands and slid behind the wheel of my car as though he owned it.

I didn't let him start the engine. As soon as he shut the door, I threw myself across the seat and into his arms. "I missed you. God, I missed you," I cried, covering his face with kisses and tears. "I don't care how you came back; I don't care what you have to take from me. Just don't go again!"

Rowan wrapped his arms around me and stopped my babbling with a kiss that curled my toes. *This* was the man I knew, the one I loved, this demanding lover who could sizzle my thoughts to ash with one touch. I melted into him, forgetting that we were making out at the entrance to the cemetery, not caring that anyone could see us. All that mattered were his arms around me and his mouth on mine.

Finally, an eternity later and still all too soon, he pulled away with a groan. "Let's do this someplace more private," he whispered against my lips. "I want you all to myself."

"Yes," I said, knowing I'd have said that to anything he suggested. Foolish or not, I loved him still, and having him back was a dream come true.

He broke all speed records as he drove to my apartment, dragging me up the stairs at a run when we got there and all but pushing me through the door. It had barely closed behind us before Rowan grabbed me again, lifting me completely off the ground and kissing me hard. I wrapped myself around him and devoured him right back.

Somehow we were on the couch, breaking apart only long enough to struggle out of our clothes. Rowan cursed my pantyhose with such vehemence that I couldn't help laughing at him. "If I'd known you were coming, I'd have worn stockings instead," I said, raising my hips to help him pull them off me.

"If I'd known I was coming, you would never have left the bed," he shot back, then put an end to conversation by burying his face between my thighs.

Hours later, in my bed now, I snuggled against Rowan and hugged him tight. He kissed my forehead and sighed, a sound of utter contentment. "You still haven't noticed, have you?" he murmured into my hair, sounding amused. "You're still not too observant, sweet Tera."

I wanted to raise my head to meet his gaze, but I was too comfortable and drowsy just as I was. I started tracing nonsense patterns on his chest. Damn, but he had such a gorgeous chest. How could I have forgotten just how very fine it was? "Noticed what?"

He laughed. "I just made you come five times, Tera," he said, unmistakable male pride lacing his tone. "Didn't you notice anything different?"

My fingers stilled. Yes, I'd noticed differences. "Your hair," I said slowly, thinking. "And your eyes. They're different."

He covered my hand with his, urging my fingers to move again. "What else?"

"Um ..." I was trying, really I was, but it was hard to hold a logical thought in my brain. I was besotted with pleasure and drowning in afterglow, and those weren't exactly conditions conducive to rational thought.

And that's when it hit me. The afterglow.

"You didn't feed from me!" I cried, sitting up, suddenly wide awake. "How -- you said you couldn't help it!"

He smiled and pulled me down for a kiss. "An incubus can't stop it," he whispered against my lips. "Don't you notice anything else about me? Don't use your eyes, lover. Feel the change."

Unable to resist this temptation, I slid my hand down and cupped his cock, soft now in the aftermath of our loving. "This is definitely the same," I teased.

He groaned. "Woman, this is serious!"

His cock swelled in my hand, amazing me. He had such incredible stamina, but even he should've been worn out by the marathon we'd just had. "It certainly is," I agreed, provoking a chuckle from him.

Still, I knew what he wanted, and I reluctantly released his cock and closed my eyes to do what he'd really intended. I reached out and touched his emotions for the first time. I hadn't dared to do it while we made love, remembering too vividly the horror of waking with him gone and knowing I'd killed him, remembering that emptiness and pain.

That emptiness was gone. What I felt from him now was brilliance, something so bright and pure that it made me gasp.

He pressed my hand to his heart. "I am a demon no longer," he said, those simply blue eyes holding mine. "That's my soul you feel, pretty one. I'm a man, as mortal as you are."

I could only stare, dumbfounded, as I felt the truth of his words with every sense I possessed. "How?" I finally choked.

He drew me down to rest on his chest, stroking my back. "My love for you," he said. "When I made love to you that last time, I held nothing back, and it destroyed my hold on this world. I went back to hell, just as all demons must.

"But there was a problem when I arrived." He must've felt my tension because he started kneading instead of rubbing. I clung to him, wishing he'd never mentioned going to hell, not even in that careless voice. The horror of it was vivid in my mind. "Demons aren't capable of love or sacrifice. They don't feel grief or need or fear. I did, and a higher authority interceded."

"You were given a second chance?" I whispered, hardly able to believe it.

"Not a second chance," Rowan said. "I was given one chance, one only. I was not emotionless. I was not cold and cruel. I loved, I mourned, and God, I needed you, Tera." My eyes widened when I heard him say the name he'd avoided so arduously before. "Only creatures with souls are capable of love, and no such creature can be condemned to hell without being given a mortal life."

I couldn't raise my head. I was shaking too hard. "So -- you were reincarnated? You just skipped childhood and plopped down into adulthood?"

He laughed again. "I was given the choice," he said. "I could have been born an innocent baby, not knowing any of this, or I could come back as a grown man and find you." He stroked my cheek again, bringing a fresh wave of tears spilling over. "I chose you, of course. It was no contest."

"And you can stay?" I hated the pleading note in my voice, but I couldn't go through losing him again. "You're not going to go away?"

"Not unless you tell me to go," he said, tightening his arms around me. "And probably not even then. You're mine, pretty Tera. Every inch of you, every cell, every single breath and moan and orgasm. All mine." The territorial possessiveness that swelled in him at this pronouncement was matched only by his joy in knowing it was true. He hesitated so briefly that it was almost unnoticeable, but I knew him well enough to catch it. "Do you still want me?"

I leaned up and kissed him, my heart overflowing with joy -- his and mine. "Only a fool would ask a woman that after what we just did," I said against his lips. "I think I told you once before, I'm not in the habit of shagging everything in pants that crosses my path."

He laughed. "All the better for me, then, because I intend to stay right beside you, and I don't like to share."

The thought of him staying, actually living here with me, made me giddy with joy. "I suppose that means you'll need a job," I teased. "I'm not your sugar mama."

He grinned. "I bet I can double sales at Pandora's in a month."

I had no doubt he could -- mortal, demon, it didn't matter. The man was a walking sex-bomb. Still, I had to make sure. What kind of a boss doesn't give a good interview to a new employee?

I reached over and opened the bedside drawer, pulling out a pair of fuzzy handcuffs, a feather tickler, and the rotating vibrator. "Let's see how much you know about giving a woman pleasure with these," I said, and grinned as he rose to the challenge.

 THE END 

Amelia Elias

There's nothing better at the end of a long, rough day than flopping down on the couch (or the computer desk chair) and disappearing into a romance.

If the romance is so hot it triggers the fire alarms, so much the better.

Amelia was introduced to romance at the tender age of 12 during a visit to her grandmother, who always packed a paperback for her to read while she played bingo. When bingo was over, Amie would stay up late and, armed with a notebook and pencil, try to fill in the scenes that happened behind the bedroom door. And yes, she still has those first clumsy attempts at writing the good stuff.

Hopefully she's learned a thing or two since then...

Amelia Elias is the nom de plume of a Central Texas home health nurse and mother of ten -- six cats, two dogs, and two monkeys... er, sons. She writes for Loose Id and Aphrodite Unlaced Publishing. You can visit Amelia on the Web at www.ameliaelias.com.

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Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Refuge: Fortress

by Flesa Black

Available Now from Loose Id

Refuge: Fortress

She wasn't usually a woman who felt the driving need to be coddled or put on a tall pedestal, but tonight her thoughts were causing a kind of wild yearning for both physical and emotional attention. Her mind and body fairly burned with the need for someone to talk with, someone to laugh with, and someone who would understand her desire for intimate companionship. There was something inside of her that was keening to be comforted, a part of her that wanted to feel need and be needed in return. She wanted human contact, but more than that, she needed the attention of a man. While it was true she'd had sex before, she'd never experienced truly being made love to, which left an empty feeling inside of her that she was afraid would never be filled.

Having gone to all-girls schools her entire life, Eve had been denied any kind of meaningful relationship with boys. When they'd first felt the stirrings of womanhood, the girls had experimented with their own bodies and then, as they'd gotten older, with the bodies of their friends. They'd learned how to touch each other, how to be caressed, how to raise the need inside of themselves. There were the dances, of course, when the young men were bused in from the neighboring all-boys academy. But those social gatherings left very little opportunity for anything other than quick, unsatisfying tumbles in convenient corners. Her summers here at Griffin Keep had definitely never produced anything other than a few sessions of heavy petting that had been stopped short because, unfortunately for her, everyone knew and respected her grandfather. Those forays into shaky sexual territory, however interesting and titillating, had left more questions than answers about what sex and relationships were really supposed to be about. And so she and her friends had continued their own discovery about the boundaries and desires of their bodies, sometimes with the other girls even going so far as to describe their very vivid dreams about handsome men and how the fantasies affected them.

Eve had never shared her dreams, instead keeping them quietly and securely tucked inside. She had always somehow felt that to tell anyone else about the man she dreamed of when she touched herself would somehow spoil the fantasy. She could still picture him as she always did, tall and strong, his body hard-muscled and lean. His lips would be shockingly tender, his hands broad and slightly rough, his hair thick and, because she liked the color, black as coal. He would give her everything she wanted before she could ask, his tongue, fingers, and teeth playing her body in a way she'd never known.

The idea of her mystery man made her blood warm and hum in hot currents, causing her nipples to harden and peak beneath the soft silk of her thin white nightgown. The feeling of her sensitive nubs rubbing against the material only heightened her sudden sexual need. Whenever she thought of the nameless man doing unspeakably erotic things to her, she became nothing more than a quivering tangle of nerves and lust. She was now, as she always had been, a slave to the desires that her fantasy man created. Since there was no one near who could or would satisfy the craving that her body was now filled with, she knew that she would have to rely on the skills she'd learned as a teenager and a young woman. With a soft groan, she fell back onto her bed, her legs drawing up as her knees fell apart, separating the curtains and allowing a cool breeze to tickle her flushed skin.

She licked her lips, already anticipating what she would do, was compelled to do, to herself. With a soft, determined hand, she gently palmed her own breast and began to knead it, squeezing the sensitive flesh as her hips wiggled seductively against the crisp, brushed-blue cotton of her sheets. In a practiced move, she lifted her fingers to her mouth and sucked on them for a moment, wetting them with a hot tongue. Lowering her hand, she carefully pushed the plunging neckline away from her left breast and brought her sopping fingers to the erect nipple, sucking in her breath as the pads brushed the straining flesh. With a soft sigh, she began to flick the hardened peaks, quickly, then slowly, hissing and gasping as her blood boiled and her thighs moistened from her own desire.

She tugged gently on her nipple, her voice hitching as her head fell back in growling, clawing lust. Her free hand skimmed down her side and over her hip sensually, finally descending down to the flimsy material of her silky white panties. Slowly, teasingly, she slid her hand inside the barrier, curling the tips of her fingers in the short, crisp curls. She let the warm, liquefying feeling linger, felt her clit vibrating and pulsing, almost painfully, as it waited impatiently for her skillful touch.

Finally, she flicked her nipple and glided her middle finger over the raised nub. She let out a low, thick growl as tiny explosions ripped through her tingling body. Biting her lower lip, she slid over her clit again, this time with more insistence, then again in a quicker, practiced motion. She writhed under her own arms, reaching for the orgasm she was building inside herself even as she forced her movements to slow.

Sliding her hand further down, she pushed a finger inside of herself, reveling in the slick, scalding feel of the flesh that surrounded her. Determined to bring herself more pleasure, she maneuvered another finger inside, wiggling them as she caressed her swollen inner flesh. Her body kinked and bowed, her skin beginning to sweat as her body climbed and scrambled for the release it knew would be shattering.

He watched her from the shadows, his eyes glowing bright as he took in the erotic show she was providing. Against his will, he felt himself grow unbearably hard against his black jeans, the zipper close to excruciating as it bit into his large erection. After so many years spent on earth, he had learned exquisite control over his baser instincts, and yet somehow the woman touching herself on the bed continued to rip that restraint into jagged pieces.

He'd seen her do this several times before; it was almost like clockwork for the beguiling Eve Griffin. It was as if her body could only stand no more than forty-eight hours before it demanded satisfaction. She'd always been behind those gauzy curtains before now, even though they were a poor excuse for covering. Each time she touched herself, he could

still see her outline through them, hear her purrs and gasps, smell her sex and her sweat; it was something he hadn't counted on when he'd promised Abram he'd protect her. Just as he hadn't expected this wrenching desire she so easily elicited, without even being aware she was doing it.

She was a gorgeous creature, all luscious curves and richly textured tresses ... and now he could see that even her mound was covered with that same silky hair. She was round in all the right places, unlike the tiny, too-frail women who graced the fashion magazines and runways. She wasn't large, by any stretch of the imagination, but she wasn't a twig, either. She was perfect ... and therein lay the problem.

She sucked in a quick breath, and he watched as she brought her attention back to her clit. He ground his teeth together, felt his body quake at the sight she presented, heard the thick, quick beating of her heart and the glutinous swishing of the blood rushing through her veins. He felt the hot push of his change bearing down on him and checked himself, dragging that animalistic part back under control with rigid will.

She had bewitched him with her activities, and she had no idea that she'd done it. If it had been a planned seduction, it couldn't have been more effective. But she had no idea she had a visitor, no idea at all ... and still that didn't stop his crotch from throbbing with denied release. With a quiet snarl he opened his jeans, letting his long, thick flesh spring free. He heard her moan again, saw her pluck at her nipple, and was helpless as he mindlessly took his sex into his hand.

He moved with her, rubbing his flesh as she rubbed hers, pushing himself up even as her thighs trembled and her fingers worked faster, plunging in and out of her soft, moist lips before returning to the point of her ecstasy. He worked harder, quicker, desperate to attain his own blistering orgasm as she found hers.

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What people are saying about

Refuge: Fortress

From the moment her phantom lover walks out of the shadows to seduce Eve, I was mesmerized by this steamy tale of witches, vampires and werewolves waging a battle for Eve and her powers. A fabulous fantasy read set in a mystical Irish landscape.

-- Saskia Walker, author of "The Strangeling" in *Rites of Passion* (Loose Id)

Once again I've had my sleep put off by a great book. *Fortress* is a steamy thrill of a read that will keep you turning the pages to find out what all the secrets are and how it will resolve. Flesa Black has created a complex world of witches, lycans, and vampires that is also sensual. I'm looking forward to the next in this series already.

-- Mechele Armstrong, author of *Blood Kiss* (Loose Id)

Flesa Black has woven an irresistible modern-day gothic romance, complete with lovers who defy destiny for passion, intrigue that'll keep you guessing, and sex that'll sizzle on your screen.

-- Raine Weaver, author of *Incubus* (Loose Id)