

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

SHERRI L. KING

FIRE

Sterling Files

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Fyre

ISBN # 1-4199-0391-8

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Cover art by Darrell King.

Electronic book Publication: December 2005

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STERLING FILES:

FYRE

Sherri L. King

For D.

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Prologue

Ryan Murdock watched as the woman he loved was hooked up to an EKG machine. This wasn't the first time she'd been at Sterling headquarters. She'd been coming here since she turned twelve years old. And Ryan had been with her every time, though she may not have known it.

Ryan had fallen in love with Mia upon first seeing her here on that long ago day. He'd been eighteen at the time, but he'd known that she was the one for him. Now she was a woman grown, twenty-six years old to his thirty-two, and she still had no idea of his feelings for her.

The scientists at Sterling had yet to understand exactly how Mia's powers worked, but they had catalogued and studied her case extensively and they had helped her to control her violent outbursts over the years.

Mia was a fire starter. A pyrokenetic. A very rare and very volatile breed indeed.

It had been many months since Mia's last visit to the Sterling compound, and Ryan felt that she had never looked more beautiful than she did now. Oh, how he coveted her. He wanted nothing more than to sink his face into her long blonde hair and breathe deeply of her unique scent. But now was not the time. It was never the right time.

Mia had had an accident. It was why she was here. She had been working at the aquarium when it happened—a burst of fiery energy that had shattered over a dozen tanks and sent onlookers running away in terror. It had been two years since her last accident. Mia was devastated that it had happened again. She'd thought—as had the scientists at Sterling—that her attacks were over for good. How wrong they had been.

After a few tests to prove her health was in good condition she would be free to go. Ryan had no idea when or if he'd see her again. It tore him apart inside every time she

left Sterling, but he watched her go rather than tell her his feelings. He couldn't bear the thought of her rejection, and he dared not chance it.

Mia wasn't too fond of him, he was certain. It was understandable. She associated him with her accidents, for she only saw him at Sterling and she usually only came to Sterling when there was a problem with her powers. Much as he might have wanted to, Ryan couldn't change that fact.

She looked so fragile there beneath the electrodes and among all the medical equipment. Ryan, standing behind a two-way mirror, watched as she bravely sat still under her doctors' ministrations and he couldn't help but admire her bravery.

He himself hated being poked and prodded by doctors, scientists or their like. He never had been able to sit still as Mia now did. It was a good thing his own powers were easily controlled or else he would have found himself a subject of study for the Sterling scientists more often.

Mia sat up on the table, affording Ryan a peek at her sleekly rounded shoulder beneath the paper dress she wore. She got down from the table carefully as those around her tidied up, and approached the mirror.

Ryan instinctively took a step back, even knowing that she couldn't possibly see him through the mirror. She put a hand up over her eyes and leaned in against the glass. Ryan felt the weight of her gaze as though she were standing there in the room with him.

Mia smiled and Ryan's heart beat a thunderous tattoo in his chest. Could she see him after all?

One of the doctors caught Mia's attention and she turned away from the mirror. Ryan breathed a heavy sigh of relief—then watched with renewed interest as she embraced a male doctor.

Jealousy, fast and hot, took him in a rush. He clenched his fists in rage as Mia pulled back to place a kiss on the man's cheek. Mark was the doctor's name. Ryan

remembered it now and vowed retribution swift and sure. He gritted his teeth until they hurt and watched as the two parted once more.

Mia gathered her clothes and went into the adjoining bathroom to change. Ryan turned to leave the secret observation room, determined to find out just what was between the doctor and his patient. He made his way around to the room Mia had vacated.

Mark Longbottom started when he saw Ryan enter the room.

Ryan wasted no time. "Are you and Mia seeing each other now?"

Mark frowned. "No, of course not. Why do you ask?"

Ryan pointed to the two-way mirror. "I saw you hugging. And kissing," he accused.

Mark shook his head. "Relax, Ryan. We're just friends."

Ryan felt his fists unclench by small degrees. "How is she?" he asked, changing the subject.

"She's fine. A little shaken, but that's to be expected."

"Do you have any idea what might have triggered this attack?"

Mark sighed. "Unfortunately, no. We've never been able to pinpoint exactly how or why her abilities manifest themselves. It might have been stress. It might have been something she changed in her diet. We just don't know."

Mia came out of the bathroom fully dressed. "Hello, Ryan," she said softly.

"Hello, Mia. Are you all right?"

Mia's dewy lips trembled and she pursed them. "I'm fine." Her perfectly violet gaze grew hooded and guarded.

"I've already spoken to the aquarium. Sterling paid for the damages and your employers have been apprised of your situation, though I doubt they believed it. However, they are willing to allow you back at work as soon as you're ready. You've a

good reputation there. And since the damages are paid for, they won't seek legal action against you."

Mia shook her head. "I can't go back there now. It might happen again. I can't chance that."

"What will you do?"

Mia sighed. "I'll look for another job I guess."

Ryan took a deep breath. "You could always stay here and work with us."

"And be one of your so-called vigilantes? No thanks, Ryan. I'd rather take my own chances out in the real world. I'd like *some* semblance of normalcy in my life."

"But Mia, you're not normal." He could have kicked himself the moment the words left his mouth. "Stay here with us, with other people like you. We understand you here. We can help you cope."

"No, Ryan. I tried living here for ten years and it didn't work. I'll always be an anomaly, even here at Sterling. Let it go."

Ryan pursed his lips and subsided. "Will you at least stay here tonight? So I can be sure you're safe."

Mia smiled and Ryan's heart tripped into double time. "Sure Ryan. I'd like that I think."

"Your apartment is just as you left it the last time you stayed with us."

"Thanks Ryan, you're sweet."

Ryan almost scowled. He didn't want her to think him *sweet*, damn it. "Thanks," he muttered.

Ryan resolved to prove to her, before her stay was over, that he was far, far from sweet.

Chapter One

Mia Fyre stepped into her Sterling apartment and closed the door quietly behind her. She rested against it heavily with a deeply felt sigh.

Ryan was more handsome now than ever. His hair, blond and shining, was getting long around his neck. It gave him a rakish air. All he needed to complete the look was a gold ring in his ear. His dark blue eyes had seemed to see right through her calm façade. Her heart had tripped upon seeing him there in the observation room with Mark.

She hadn't been prepared to see Ryan. She was never prepared to see him.

She'd been attracted to Ryan since she was fifteen years old. He'd been twenty-one at the time and training to fill his father's shoes. He'd seemed a knight in shining armor to her then. She'd relished every moment they had spent in each other's company. She knew he had no idea of her feelings—in fact she'd gone to great lengths to make sure that he didn't.

Mia didn't need this complication on top of her troubles. She would have preferred not to see Ryan at all, to simply get her tests over with and leave Sterling undetected, but he'd surprised her. He always seemed to be around when she came to Sterling. It was most unsettling.

An image of exploding aquarium tanks flooded her mind and she moaned. She'd thought she was free of these accidents forever. Now she knew that was far, far from the truth. This accident had been the worst yet. People had witnessed it, and even if they didn't quite understand what they had seen, they all knew she was the cause of it.

Pity. She had really liked her job at the aquarium.

Someone knocked on the door and she jumped with a tiny, surprised cry. She shook herself and opened the door.

Mia felt her eyes grow wide. "What are you doing here Ryan?" she asked, as he pushed his way into the apartment and glanced around.

"I wanted to know if you needed any food or supplies."

"I'm only going to be staying here tonight. I can forage in the cupboards just fine."

"It's been awhile since you were here last. Don't you want something fresh to eat?"

She blew a stray lock of hair out of her face. "Canned food doesn't go bad for a long time."

Ryan nodded and sat down on her sofa as if he planned on staying awhile. Mia steeled her nerves to handle his nearness, desperately hoping that he couldn't see how much she wanted him.

"We want you back at Sterling," he said softly.

Mia sat on a chair opposite the couch. His words made her heart skip a beat. "I know. But I just can't stay here. This place is...well, it's so far apart from a normal life. And all I've ever wanted is a normal life out there in the big world."

"You can lead a normal life here."

"And watch as patient after patient moves through these walls? No thank you. I've had enough of strange people to last me a lifetime."

"They aren't strange. Just gifted. Like you."

"I'm not gifted," she gritted out, "I'm cursed."

Ryan eyed her with those startling, intense blue eyes. "You didn't always feel cursed."

Mia shook her head. "That was so long ago. We were still just kids."

"You've never been a kid, Mia," Ryan pointed out.

And she hadn't. From the first accident she'd been more than a kid. She'd grown up in a short space of time, and it had been a complete change. Just as everything else in her life had gone up in flames, so too had her childhood.

Being watched so closely beneath that blue gaze made her palms sweat and she fidgeted in her seat. Ryan saw too much, knew too much, especially about her. He looked at her now as if he could see into the heart of her—know all her secrets, uncover all her shame.

“Ryan, I don’t want to go through this tonight. I just want to rest and try to forget the day.”

“You can’t just wipe the slate clean, you know. How many times have you had to start your life over out there in the real world? It hasn’t worked before, so why do you insist on trying again?”

Mia, frustrated, ran a hand through her hair. “I’ll try a million more times if I have to, until I get it right. And I *will* get it right, eventually. I must.”

“The outside world is no place for people like you and I. We need a safe place, a home. Here at Sterling you can have that. Stay here where it’s safe.”

“Ryan, I’ve never been safe. And by staying here I put your staff, your friends at risk. Don’t you remember what happened—”

“Don’t bring that up again. That was an accident, Mia, it could have happened anywhere, at any time.”

“I firebombed the lab where they were working with Steele. If it hadn’t been for Steele’s thick skin, I would have burned him pretty badly. Perhaps even killed him,” she pointed out.

“But his skin *is* thick and you didn’t hurt him at all.”

“I know, but what about the next time? Can you promise me that I won’t hurt anyone next time? I don’t think you can,” she sighed.

“I’ll put some of the new doctors on your team. They’ll help you find a cure,” Ryan persisted.

“There is no cure for what I am—only death can make this horrible power go away.”

"Don't you dare say such things!" he roared. "Don't even think them!" He sobered slightly. "Look, you've got nothing better to do, why not try it again here with us?"

"Why do you keep insisting that I stay here?" she asked.

"Because you belong here."

"I don't belong anywhere," she said flatly.

"You belong *here*."

Mia closed her eyes—it was the only way she could hide from that intense stare of his. "Maybe I'll try."

"Don't try. Just do it," he said.

She sighed heavily. "Oh all right. I'll stay here. But only," she held her hand up when Ryan would have spoken, "for a couple of days. Until I find a new job."

Ryan nodded. "That'll give me time to convince you to stay for good."

Mia laughed. "You're not making it easier for me to stay here at all."

"Life is never easy. You know that."

Mia sobered. "I know. But I sometimes like to pretend that it is."

"Don't we all?" Ryan stood up, came forward and pressed a soft, brotherly kiss on her forehead, making her heart skip a beat at his nearness. He tucked an errant lock of hair back behind her ear, winked down at her, then left her there in the room.

It was a long, long time before her pulse beat slowed back to normal and her erratic breathing slowed.

Chapter Two

Two days later

Ryan was having a helluva time staying away from Mia. He was afraid to spend too much time with her, afraid of what he might do. Afraid that she might see just how much he wanted her.

She seemed so fragile now, as if this latest accident had sapped her of all her strength and will. Her skin, already delicate and pale, was even more so now. Her beautiful violet eyes had dark circles beneath them and she hardly ate anything that Ryan sent to her room. More than once in the past two days he'd caught sight of her and had to keep himself under an iron control to avoid scaring her away.

Mia spent her days in the lab, letting the scientists study her as best they could in the hopes that this time, at last, they would discover the secret to unlocking her powers. Ryan often made it a point to stop by the lab, just to look in on her and secretly ask the technicians how she was progressing under their care.

At night, Mia never seemed to sleep. Ryan's home was only two doors down from hers and he often found himself walking by her apartment to see if there was any light shining through below the door. There always was. And from the muffled noises coming from inside the apartment, Ryan knew that Mia wasn't sleeping with the lights on. She was pacing.

Ryan wished there was something he could do to help her overcome this latest setback. But every time he got close to her, close enough to offer comfort, he found himself wanting to give her comfort of another sort entirely. He didn't want to push her anymore than he already had. But it was harder each time to turn away from her.

Mia was all he could think about anymore. He couldn't concentrate on his work, he couldn't eat or sleep or dream without thinking of her. Before, he'd been able to block

thoughts of her from his mind simply by immersing himself in work. But this time his fascination was so strong that he couldn't redirect his thoughts no matter how hard he tried.

Maybe it was because his two best men, Steele and Vicious, were married now. Ryan saw their happiness every day shining bright on their faces and on the faces of their wives. Love was in the air at Sterling. It was driving him daft, and all because he couldn't have the object of his own desire. Mia was her own person—she'd never let an overbearing, stubborn, arrogant brute like Ryan be a part of her life, and he well knew it. Wedded bliss, it seemed, was too far beyond his reach.

Ryan snapped a pencil in his hand and looked down at the broken fragments of wood lying in his palm. This was how his heart felt every time he saw Mia. Splintered. He wondered why he didn't just let her go back out into the world. After all, she didn't want to stay at Sterling. But no matter how rational it sounded, he simply couldn't seem to let her go. Not this time.

There had to be an opportune moment to tell Mia just how he felt about her. But if there had been so far, Ryan hadn't seen it. The only time he ever saw her anymore was when she was having a hard go of it. While she was weak, while she was so fragile she looked as if she might break, he couldn't open his heart to her.

But why? Mia was a big girl. Independent to a fault and stubborn as a mule besides, she could take care of herself. Why shouldn't he confront her, tell her what was on his mind and in his heart? More than once Mia had pointed out to him that she was no longer a child. Perhaps it was time he stopped treating her like one and appealed to the woman he knew was inside her.

Ryan rose from behind his desk. He grabbed a piece of peppermint from the candy dish on his desk and popped it into his mouth. Peppermints had always been his favorite candy. He was heading for the door when, unexpectedly, it opened.

"I need to speak with you, Ryan," Steele said.

Ryan motioned for the large, muscular man to sit in a seat opposite his. "What's on your mind, Steele?"

"I've just received information that, to save themselves from bankruptcy, Siren is about to go public with their cerebral enhancing chips."

"No one will believe them. And even if they did, do you think people will willingly allow chips to be glued to their heads? I think not."

"Siren isn't marketing them as a mind-control device. They're appealing to the techno geeks and computer nerds by calling it an 'electronic enhancement' device. They're going to claim that it's safe and that it boosts brain power."

"God, nothing could be further from the truth." Ryan swore colorfully.

"What should we do about it?" Steele asked.

"Well, we can't let them market this product to the public. It would go against every principle that Sterling stands for." Ryan rubbed a hand over his face in frustration. "What do they hope to gain by doing this? The public simply isn't ready for this kind of technology. I'm not sure anyone will ever be ready for it."

"My sentiments exactly. But how do we stop them?"

Ryan took a deep breath. "Call Vicious for a meeting. We'll try to figure this out together."

"Vicious and Enya went out for the night. It'll have to wait until morning."

Ryan started. "It's already night? I thought it was no later than afternoon."

Steele chuckled. "You work too hard, Ryan. You've been cooped up here all day. You need to take a break from all this."

"I don't have time to take a break. Especially not now that Siren is making a move on the public market."

"I hear that Mia is back," Steele said pointedly.

"She is," Ryan growled.

"I might swing by her apartment and visit with her for awhile," Steele said with a sly smile.

Ryan gritted his teeth hard. "You're a married man now, Steele. She's off limits to you."

Steele laughed outright at that. "You always were the jealous type. I only have to mention her name and you're on me like a rottweiler. Why don't you just tell her how you feel?"

"I'll tell her how I feel in due time. Stop trying to rile me."

Steele shrugged. "Well, don't wait forever Ryan, or you might lose her."

"I won't." Ryan rose once more and headed for the door. "I'll see you in the morning, Steele." He motioned for the giant man to leave.

Steele stepped through the door. "Bye boss." He saluted jauntily and strode off in the direction of the apartment he shared with Marla, deep within the Sterling compound. Ryan watched him go with something that felt like relief. Steele saw too much that Ryan wanted to keep hidden. Steele had always been like that, ever since Ryan's father, William Murdock, had taken the lonely, beaten boy under his wing.

Ryan felt his resolve harden. He would tell Mia how he felt. But he'd do it his own way. And hope that Mia didn't turn away from him in scorn.

* * * * *

Mia sank down low into the warm bubble bath. The extra large garden tub in her bathroom was probably the thing she missed most about living at Sterling. It was pure heaven to submerge herself in the hot water and let all of the day's worries wash down the drain.

She'd received the results of all her tests just before retiring for the night. And as she'd suspected they might, the tests had revealed nothing about why or how she'd had her accident. Technology, it seemed, just hadn't caught up to a pyrokenetic's abilities quite yet. Mia wondered if it ever would.

With a determined purse of her lips, Mia raised one hand from the water and held it up before her face. She gave a push with her mind and willed the fire that burned so brightly inside of her, even now, to spring forth.

Her hand jerked and then was consumed in a pure violet flame that licked its way up her arm. Mia felt its heat but did not feel any pain from it. She turned her hand this way and that, watching the flames as they grew bigger and bigger. The flames started licking around the ends of her hair and she squeezed her eyes shut at the brightness of them.

Before the flames could get out of control, she submerged her hand in the bubbly water. The flames sputtered but did not go out, even under the liquid. They did, however, heat her bath up rather quickly. Mia gave another push with her mind, imagining a brick wall slamming down on that part of her brain that controlled the fire. Or controlled it as much as possible.

The fire flickered then went out. Mia raised her hand before her face again, looking for injuries, redness, anything that would provide proof of what she'd just done. But there was nothing. There never was. The skin of this hand looked as clean and healthy as it did on the other hand. There were no burns, no blisters, nothing. Mia sighed heavily and leaned back in the tub once more.

She rubbed a sponge over her breasts and belly, soaping herself up until she was slippery and white with suds and bubbles. Her nipples stabbed into the cold air and her breasts floated on the surface of the water like two large melons. Mia looked down at her body, past her breasts to her belly and beyond, and frowned. She could stand to lose ten or twenty pounds, that much was for certain.

Not that it really mattered. She wasn't in the market for a lover. And even if she had been it shouldn't matter what she looked like. She was healthy. She was strong. That was enough for her to be happy. Any man interested in her should feel the same way.

But Mia wasn't stupid. She knew how the world worked. How men wanted nothing less than perfection in their women. Damn men, anyway. What did they know

about beauty? They were too busy starting wars and committing crimes to know what true beauty was.

Mia could have kicked herself for her negative thoughts. Not all men were war-hungry criminals. Just a large portion of them.

She laughed at that thought and dunked her head under the warm water. She held her breath as long as she could, turning her head this way and that to get every strand of her hair wet, then resurfaced.

She shrieked when she saw Ryan standing in the doorway.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she demanded, sloshing water over the rim of the tub.

Ryan's eyes roved over her and she was thankful that the suds covered most of her body. She sank lower to be sure her breasts were covered as well.

"I knocked several times and you didn't answer. I thought maybe you'd slipped out to go back home," he said.

Mia pursed her lips. "Well, now you know I'm here. Please leave, Ryan."

Ryan walked into the room.

"Ryan! Leave. I'm taking a bath here," she pointed out unnecessarily.

But Ryan did not turn to leave. Instead he came even farther into the bathroom, stalking forward like an overgrown jungle cat, until the tips of his shoes touched the side of the tub.

Mia crossed her arms over her breasts protectively. "What's wrong with you, Ryan?"

"What's wrong?" Ryan let out a long, slow breath. "I'll tell you what's wrong. That you're in that tub without me. That'll work for starters."

Mia shrieked again as he stepped into the tub, shoes and clothes and all, and bent down to straddle her legs, his knees on either side of her thighs in the water. "What are you doing?"

“Something I’ve wanted to do for years,” Ryan said, and bent his head to hers. He pressed his lips first to her forehead, then to her nose, then—oh then!—he laid his lips upon hers.

Mia’s eyes went wide as he moved his mouth over hers. She felt his tongue stroke over her bottom lip and gasped, allowing him full access to her. He ravaged her mouth, pressing harder until their teeth clicked together. His tongue slid past her lips and tangled with hers, delving deep. Mia’s eyes closed and the moment swept her up on a tidal wave of too-long-denied need.

Ryan put his warm, wet hands on either side of her face, trapping her in his kiss. The spicy, manly smell of him permeated her nostrils. The delicate, sweet flavor of him filled her mouth. He’d been eating peppermints—Mia remembered now that they were his favorite candy. Mia shivered as his hands lowered and came around to press in the small of her back.

He lifted her lightly, easily, bringing her body out of the water and into his arms. The scratchy linen of his shirt scraped her sensitive nipples. The rough corduroy of his pants pressed into her belly, against the mound of her sex, making her feel both vulnerable and powerful at the same time.

With easy strength he turned her in the tub until she lay gently back over the side of it, so that her breasts were high and exposed to him. His mouth burned a path down her jaw, to her throat and then her chest. His hands steadied her and his mouth slurped in one of her nipples, making her cry out and moan. His teeth came into play, scraping over her tender flesh lightly as he sucked her into his wet, hot mouth.

His hands roamed over her, petting her, teasing her. He ran his hand over her breast, plumping and squeezing it until she burned. His other hand stroked down over her midriff and stomach, teasing her as his touch wandered below the water.

The touch of his fingers in her slit sent a bolt of electricity shooting through her and she cried out her surprise. He held her fast when she would have pulled away and

cupped her fully in his palm, rubbing her erotically. Her nipple popped free and his mouth caught her cries as he found and stroked her swollen, needy clit.

Mia arched up beneath him, opening her mouth wider to his demanding kiss, sucking his tongue when he would let her, stroking hers inside his mouth when he wouldn't. She brought her legs up and around his waist, allowing him easier access to her aching, throbbing pussy.

His finger stroked her deep. His hand found her pleasure hole and he slipped two large, long fingers into the heart of her need. Mia moaned, feeling his questing fingers slip in her body's moisture, sensation sweeping her from head to toe.

Mia shivered. Ryan suckled her full lower lip into his mouth. His fingers curved inside her body – thrusting so deep she felt the touch reverberate inside her womb. His hair tickled her face like a thousand roaming, caressing fingers. His lips were the softest she'd ever kissed, his flavor and scent wildly intoxicating like nothing she'd ever before experienced...

Ryan pulled back with a gasp, his lips and hands leaving her suddenly bereft. He watched her from behind heavily lidded eyes. Mia fought the urge to cover herself again – it was a little too late for modesty. Even she knew that. His eyes roved over her from head to toe, lingering on her breasts and cunt. Mia felt her face blush and looked away.

"I'm sorry," Ryan said softly, shakily, realizing he must have scared her with his ardor – even if she seemed to be hiding it well. He rose from the bath, his clothes soaked and dripping on the floor. "I couldn't help myself."

"Don't apologize." Her voice sounded hoarse even to her own ears.

"I'm not sorry that I did it. Only that I shocked you," he clarified, blue gaze burning through her. "I should have gone slower."

Ryan turned and left her there, speechless. He disappeared in the blink of an eye, the loud popping noise of his teleportation echoing about the room. She put her hands to her lips and felt his touch there still. Tasted him. Smelled him. Her body remembered

the touch of his hands, her nipples hard and aching, her pussy wet and throbbing with desire.

What was she going to do now? Where did she go from here? She didn't know the answers to those questions and it frightened her.

All she did know was that she wanted Ryan to touch her, to kiss her again. She rose from the bath and went to get a robe, determined that before the evening was out, she would be in Ryan's arms again.

Chapter Three

Ryan cursed himself for being a thousand fools. He'd frightened her—of that much he was certain. Shocked and appalled her no doubt. Damn his wild need for her! Now Mia would probably never let him get close to her again.

He'd acted like a beast. Like a rogue. Taken advantage of her nudity, her vulnerability and her tender feelings. He hated himself for what he'd done in a moment of utter weakness. Why hadn't he simply turned away once he'd seen her in the bath and known she was all right, that she was still at Sterling, that she hadn't left him again?

He could have kicked himself. He wanted to. And yet a part of him was wickedly satisfied that he'd done what he'd done.

She'd been wet and slippery around his thrusting fingers. She'd wanted him, or at least her body had.

Pacing the floor of his apartment over and over, he racked his brain for a solution to this new problem. He had to find a way to make her forgive him for his trespass. He had to earn her trust once more, if it killed him. But how? It was plain for anyone to see that he wanted Mia. How could he convince her that such a thing wouldn't happen again when he wanted nothing *more* than to do it again and again and again?

There came a soft knock at his door. Ryan frowned, wondering who it could be, and opened the door. He was in no mood for visitors.

He felt his jaw drop open in surprise at seeing Mia standing there in her robe, waiting for him to answer her knock. She strode in without so much as an invitation, shouldering her way past him when he wouldn't move out of the way to let her pass.

Mia looked at him, letting her eyes drink in the sight of him from head to toe and back. He was still dressed in his soaking wet clothes, his hair disheveled from running his hand through it too many times.

"You ran away before I could speak to you," she said.

Ryan closed the door and leaned back heavily against it. "What is it?" He tried and failed not to sound gruff and abrupt.

"You left me in a state," she said.

Ryan ran a hand over his face. He smelled her scent on his fingers and moaned silently. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to go so far."

"Do you mean that?" she asked, tilting her head to one side so that her wet, long blonde hair spilled down to her elbows.

Ryan looked into her mysterious violet eyes and found he could not lie to her, not now. "No. I wanted it to go further," he admitted hoarsely. "But not without your permission."

Mia seemed to think his words over for a minute. Then her hands went to the belt of her robe and undid the knot. She let the robe fall uselessly to the floor, standing there before him in all her nude glory, shameless and unafraid. "Is this permission enough for you?"

Ryan could have choked on his ragged breathing, so surprised was he at this unexpected turn of events. He couldn't look away from her beautiful, sexy body. Her nipples, long and pink, sat high atop her pert breasts. The rounded swell of her stomach softened her look, and her long, long legs stood strong and straight and proud.

Where was the fragile woman he'd always thought her to be?

Mia stalked him, coming closer, until the tips of her toes touched the tips of his shoes. "I said, is this permission enough for you?" She leaned in close to him.

Ryan's hands shook so badly he didn't know if he could put them on her without scaring her. He gritted his teeth and steeled himself. He felt Mia take his hands and place them atop her breasts. He groaned and leaned into her.

Her nipples stabbed hard into his palms, like tiny pebbles. Mia took a deep breath, her chest rising high beneath his touch. She put her hands on the buttons of his shirt, making short work of undoing them, and pushed it back to reveal his broad, muscular shoulders.

Ryan took her in his arms and pressed her naked chest to his. He bent his head to hers, slowly, to give her time to pull away should she choose to, and laid his lips upon hers. His hands splayed wide over her back and buttocks, pressing her deeper into his embrace so that every evidence of his arousal was undeniable.

With a feral growl he swept her up into his arms, his lips never leaving hers. He carried her from the living room into his darkened bedroom. He flicked the light switch on and laid her down upon the tall, king-sized bed. There came a popping noise—the noise of his teleportation—and in a blink he was completely nude.

Mia drank in the sight of him. He was so tall, so long of limb, but muscular more than lean. He had a wide torso that dipped into a small waist. His legs were endlessly long and thick with roped muscle. His body was hairless but for a light trail of fur that led down to the blond thatch of hair surrounding his cock.

And his cock! It was enormous. Thick as her wrist and long—at least nine inches, probably more—it bobbed toward her like a dousing rod. Mia reached for it, cupping it lovingly in her palms. Ryan let out a harsh expulsion of air and grabbed her hands. He didn't immediately pull them away, and Mia was afforded the opportunity to pump him not once but three times before he finally broke free of her grasp.

"Slow down," he whispered, pressing wicked little kisses to her ears and throat.

But Mia had waited too long for this moment. "No. Go faster," she demanded. "I can't wait for this, you devil," she gasped.

Ryan's lips wandered down her throat to her collarbone and beyond to her breasts. He slurped one nipple into his mouth, using his teeth on her until her nipple poked long and hard into his kiss. He visited the same upon her other breast, his wet sucking sounds filling both their ears and increasing their ardor.

His hands roamed down her body with a masterful knowledge that sent her head to spinning. The tips of his fingers trailed down her body from her throat to her knees, missing nothing in between. He tugged at her nipples, stroked the swell of her stomach, and delved teasingly between her legs before petting her thighs and spreading them wider.

Mia gasped and put her hands in his hair. She held on tight as he kissed his way down her body, knowing what he meant to do. Fearing and anticipating it at the same time.

The first touch of his tongue on her slit made her cry out a harsh sound of surprise and ecstasy. When his fingers spread her wide for his mouth she bucked, bringing his face even closer against her. His lips found her clit and he suckled it much the same as he had suckled her breasts. He tongued her, flicking over her most sensitive flesh until she was mindlessly tugging on his hair in her overwhelming passion.

He kissed his way back up her body and settled himself between her legs. She wrapped them around him, locking her ankles behind his back, and rubbed her wet, aching pussy against the hard ridge of his cock.

Ryan gasped and positioned himself at her opening. He caught her gaze with his. "Watch me."

Mia looked down and watched as Ryan took his cock in his hand and rubbed it up and down her slit. He slipped into the valley where her pleasure hole waited, empty and bereft without him. He pressed up into her, deeply, the thick, round head of him popping her cherry with hardly any pain.

He slid home, going balls deep inside of her. Stretching her impossibly around the thick impalement of his cock. Mia felt two tears slide down her temples and held him

tight against her lest he see them. Ryan groaned long and loud, his weight settling heavier against her.

The muscles of his buttocks flexed and he began thrusting in and out of her, gently and then by degrees, harder and harder. Each impalement of his body within hers made her cry out, but in rising passion, not pain. She could feel him so deeply inside her body that it made her heart trip erratically. He reached her womb and beyond, she had no doubt.

He was so thick. So long. She'd never expected just how massive he would be.

Mia felt the first twinges of her orgasm with something like surprise. She'd never come without using a vibrator or her own fingers before. She hadn't believed it would be possible to come just from Ryan's thrusting dick inside of her, but it was.

Her body tensed then began to shake. Her hands fell to the bed and fisted there. She cried out and Ryan drank in the sound with his mouth over hers. He thrust harder into her, bringing her legs up higher around his waist so that he slid impossibly deeper into her body.

Ecstasy unimaginable flooded through her. Her head and fingers and toes felt as though light shone through from them. She was on fire.

She *was* on fire!

Mia gasped and tamped down on the flames that had already begun to lick up her arms. The flames disappeared, but not before she'd singed holes into the comforter beneath them.

Ryan seemed not to notice or care, increasing the pace of his thrusts. His hips pistoned between her legs like a jackhammer. His fingers found a nipple and her clit and he rubbed both at the same time. Mia arched up sharply and came again, the bright starlight of completion blinding her to all else.

She milked his cock with her muscles, and with a grunt Ryan jettisoned his own release deep within her. The hot, creamy splash of his cum filled her to overflowing,

making both their bodies wet with his essence. Ryan's head lay on the pillow beside hers, his lungs bellowing for air.

"Was I too rough?" he asked softly at her ear.

Mia once more wound her arms tightly around him and his cock slid deeper into her wetness. "No, you weren't too rough at all," she assured him.

He pulled back and looked down at her, his blue eyes bright and intent. He stroked his thumb across her lips and she darted her tongue out to taste him. He tasted like her.

"I've wanted to do that forever," he admitted.

"Me too." She smiled.

"I love you," he whispered, and her smile disappeared.

"No you don't. Don't say that," she said, pulling away from him, gasping when his cock popped out of her and gaining her feet by the bed.

"I do love you," he insisted, doing nothing to stop her as she began getting dressed in his damp, discarded clothing.

"Don't say that," she yelled, then immediately sobered. "I don't need you to love me in order to fuck me."

Ryan gritted his teeth. "That's not what I meant—"

"I know what you meant. Let it rest, all right? You don't love me. You're just...infatuated, that's all. It's hormones."

"This isn't hormones and you know it," he growled.

Mia left the room without saying anything further and Ryan teleported himself directly into her path as she made her way toward the door. "Don't leave like this," he warned.

"Don't pull this disappearing, reappearing shit with me, Ryan." She held up her hand and let a lick of violet flame sprout from her fingertips. "Or did you forget that we're unevenly matched here?"

"You wouldn't hurt me," he scoffed confidently, shoving her hand aside, paying no attention to the flame that spurted and went out. "Not like that."

Mia looked away from his all too knowing eyes.

"Why don't you want to hear that I'm in love with you?"

Mia put her hands up to her ears in a childish gesture even she knew would be ineffective. "You're not in love with me," she insisted.

Ryan's gaze burned hers. "I'll prove it to you."

Mia shook her head. "No. I don't want you to prove it to me. I don't want you to love me. If you say it one more time I'll never sleep with you again."

"You've never slept with me to begin with."

"You're right. I *fucked* you. There, are those bald enough words for you?" she demanded stubbornly, reaching around him for the door handle.

"You know that's not what I want to hear. Why can't you just accept the fact that I do care for you?"

"Oh I've no doubt that you care for me. But you don't love me."

Ryan's teeth gritted so hard she heard them. "Why are you being like this?"

"Because I have to be," she said softly and moved around him determinedly. "I'll see you later, Ryan." She opened the door and stepped through it. Ryan followed her, uncaring of his nudity.

"Don't be like this, Mia," he called out.

She broke into a run and made it to her apartment in record time, shutting the door as if that might keep him out. She leaned back against it and a broken, hopeless sob escaped her.

What had she just done?

Chapter Four

Mia refused to see Ryan for two days. He came by every half hour it seemed to bang on her door and demand that she let him come in. He could have simply teleported himself into her room, but he didn't seem inclined to, no matter how desperately he seemed to want to see her. He tirelessly visited her, never once giving up.

She would have gone home but something held her back. She didn't know what, but it was stronger than her will to leave Sterling and Ryan behind.

She just couldn't run from him. Not like this. She could hardly live with herself as it was, and she didn't think she could handle adding abandonment to her list of transgressions.

Why had she turned away from his declaration of love? She had some idea. It shamed her that she'd loved him since childhood and now, when afforded the opportunity, she had backed away from the face of that truth. But Mia just couldn't be close to anybody, no matter how desperately she might want to be.

She was a dangerous person to be around. There was always the risk that she might have another accident and kill whoever might be with her at the time. She just couldn't risk it.

But oh how she wanted to.

She couldn't gamble with Ryan's life like that. No matter how much she wanted him.

She'd almost had an attack in bed with him. It had taken a great act of will to dampen the flames that had licked up her arms toward Ryan. She couldn't—*wouldn't*—begin to imagine what would happen if she had an accident in her sleep while lying beside him.

It had been years since the last time she'd had an attack during sleep. But she knew how little that meant in the grand scheme of things. She'd thought her accidents were over. How wrong she'd been. And now she knew she had to turn away from the only man she'd ever loved, the only man she'd ever made love with, in order to keep him safe.

Mia wouldn't be able to live with herself if she hurt Ryan in any way. It would simply be too much for her to bear.

On her second day of silent seclusion there came a knock at her door, and it wasn't Ryan.

Mia opened the door to find Steele standing on the other side, waiting patiently. Steele was always patient. Normally it would have been soothing for her to see him, but today she merely wanted to get rid of him. She didn't want a lecture, and Steele was very good at giving them.

"We're having a meeting," he told her.

Mia frowned. "About what?"

"Siren. They're up to something. Something big. We'd all be grateful if you'd come and offer some input."

"Who's meeting with you?"

"Ryan, John Spada, his wife Enya and my wife Marla."

Feeling guilty, Mia winced. "I'm sorry. I haven't met your wife yet. She must think I'm the rudest person on earth."

"She understands. I've told her that we grew up together, and I explained about your talents. Marla has her own unique abilities. She understands that you need a little time for yourself."

Mia breathed a heavy sigh. "I guess I could come. I'm not doing anything else."

Steele smiled. "Don't be worried. Ryan won't cause a scene in front of everyone."

She grimaced. "Do you know everything that goes on here, Steele?"

He chuckled. "I make it a point to. It saves a lot of explanations, don't you think?"

Mia ignored him. "Give me five minutes to get ready, okay?"

Steele nodded and let her close the door. She heard him whistling as she went about getting properly dressed for a Sterling meeting.

* * * * *

Ryan saw Mia walk into the room and felt something like a swift blow in his midsection. He'd been trying for two days to see her, but she hadn't let him. Now she walked in with Steele, and if Ryan didn't know better he would have been jealous. The only thing keeping him from blowing up at his friend was that he knew Steele was very happily married and not in the market for a girlfriend.

Steele introduced her to his wife first thing as they all gathered around Ryan's desk. Mia smiled, looking lovelier to him than ever before, and shook Marla's hand. Next she was introduced to Johnny Vicious—or John Spada, as he was also called—and his wife Enya. This gave Ryan enough time to school his features into a blank mask. He didn't want anyone to know what was going on between him and Mia.

But it seemed that everyone already did—Sterling wasn't so big, after all. News traveled fast. Especially when it was about Ryan. And Ryan could see by the glances cast his way that his friends had already heard about their standoff and what had ultimately caused it.

Mia refused to look at him. She sat down in a chair offered to her by Vicious and waited for the meeting to begin.

Ryan cleared his throat. "Well, we'll get right down to it then. We've received information that Siren is going to market their cerebral enhancing chips to the public."

Mia started and finally looked at him. "What chips?"

Ryan caught her gaze with his and held it.

Steele, sensing a storm brewing in the wind, took over. "Siren has created microchips that can be attached to the scalp. The chip sends electron beacons through

the skull to the brain. They're supposed to improve motor skills and brain power. And I suppose in some ways they do. But what the chips also do is cause massive brain damage, even hemorrhaging in some cases."

"My God," Mia breathed. "How are they getting government approval to bring this thing to market?"

"We don't know. Maybe they haven't. But what we *do* know is that the public must absolutely be kept away from these chips. They're a disaster waiting to happen in more ways than one," Ryan offered.

"How do you expect to keep them from releasing the chips?" Marla asked.

Johnny Vicious, an extremely tall man in a black trench coat, spoke up. "We know where they're working on the chips. We can strike at their compound and destroy the technology."

Steele ran a hand over his shaved head. "How do you propose we do such a thing?"

"We wait until tonight. Have Marla use her gift to shut off the power at the compound. Then the rest of us can slip in with flame throwers and torch the place."

Mia, who knew about the vigilante work at Sterling, wasn't surprised by this suggestion. "I could help with that."

Ryan shook his head. "You're not going." His gaze rested on the other women present and it became clear he included them in his statement.

Mia surged up from her seat. "You can't stop me from going."

"Me either," Enya stepped beside her.

Marla joined them. "We're all going."

Vicious chuckled.

Steele scowled.

Ryan gritted his teeth and looked into Mia's eyes. "Fine. You can all go. And hey, why not invite everyone at Sterling? Let's just make a party out of it while we're at it."

"Shut up, Ryan," Vicious grinned devilishly. "Give in gracefully for once."

Ryan ran a hand through his already disheveled blond hair. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"Nor do I," Steele agreed.

"Let's take a vote on it," Enya suggested.

Ryan sighed. "We won't need a vote. Oh boy. All right. You win. We'll strike at them tonight, while there are fewer people about. But," he warned, "you'll follow my orders once we're in. I don't want to allow for any accidents to happen, is that clear?"

Mia knew he wasn't referring to her, but it still stung to hear those words. She could control her gifts to a point—beyond that it was all a luck of the draw. She couldn't guarantee that she'd be successful in this venture. But she could at least try. And she would.

"We'll need to destroy their entire lab to get rid of all the information they've researched about these chips. And that's no guarantee that they won't try this again in the future, once their scientists have engineered new chips," Steele said.

"I can do that," Mia said softly.

"Are you sure?" Steele searched her face for an answer.

"I'm sure," she replied firmly. "But after that...I can't really promise anything."

Steele nodded. He was more than familiar with how volatile and unpredictable her powers could be. "We'll try and stay out of your way."

"Well, this was an easy meeting," Vicious quipped with a wink in his wife's direction. "When do we get started?"

"We'll meet in the parking lot at eleven and make our move then. I expect to be in and out of there by midnight," Ryan said decisively.

"That's cutting it a little close, don't you think?" Steele frowned.

"We have to cut it close. I don't want any of us to dawdle. We can't be found before the chips are destroyed."

"He's right," Mia pointed out. "And the fewer who know it was us that struck at them, the better."

"Until tonight then." Johnny gave a jaunty wave and grabbed his wife's hand. He practically dragged her from the room.

Steele wasn't too far behind. He tucked his wife beneath his arm and walked through the door. "Tonight at eleven then," he nodded at Mia and Ryan. Then they were gone, closing the door softly behind them.

Mia stood frozen, wanting to stay but also wanting to leave.

Ryan watched her for a long moment. "Don't you dare leave," he growled at last.

"I need to go rest up if I'm going to be of any use to you tonight," she said weakly.

His eyes filled with an inner fire. "How about being of use to me now?"

"What do you mean?" She backed cautiously away from the desk.

His face grew hard. Impassive. "Take your clothes off," he commanded. "*Now.*"

Chapter Five

Mia backed toward the door, but there was no use in running. Ryan teleported to stand in her way, and barred what would have been her hasty retreat out of there and away from the smoldering passion evident in his eyes. Mia turned around and there he was before her again.

“Stop it right this instant, Ryan.”

“If you search inside yourself you’ll realize that you don’t want me to stop. *Ever*. Now...your clothes.”

Ryan grabbed the hem of her sweater and pulled it over her head before she could protest, leaving her lacy bra exposed to his hungry gaze. Mia grabbed at the sweater and tried to put it back on, so Ryan snatched it back from her and threw it across the room. “Take the rest of your clothes off now or I’ll do it for you,” he said roughly.

“Quit acting like a brute,” she growled.

Ryan’s eyes darkened ominously. “I’m not acting at all. I *am* a brute. You should always remember that.”

Mia felt liquid heat pool between her legs. “I’m not having sex with you in this office. Someone’s bound to come in—”

“No one will come in. And if they did...would you really mind that much, having an audience?”

Mia shivered. She put her hands behind her back and unhooked her bra. She watched as Ryan licked his lips, eying her every movement. She held the bra aloft between two fingers and let it drop to the floor. Ryan’s eyes followed its descent but swiftly turned back to gaze ravenously at her nude breasts.

"You have the prettiest nipples I've ever seen," he said. "And the sweetest. I could suck on them all day."

He came forward and put his hands beneath the hem of the skirt she wore. He lifted it up to reveal her prim, white cotton panties. "Your pussy is so juicy, so soft. So tight." He hooked his fingers inside the elastic of her panties and stroked her erotically. Teasingly.

The deep blue of his eyes had turned almost black. He bent his head and laid his forehead against hers. "I had blood on my cock when you left me the last time," he whispered. He lightly traced his lips across her brow. "Were you a virgin, Mia mine?"

Mia stiffened. "What kind of question is that?" she evaded.

One corner of Ryan's mouth lifted in a lopsided grin. "You know what kind of question it is. The truth now. Were you a virgin?"

"So what if I was," Mia said proudly. "I'm not anymore."

Ryan's eyes closed as if he was savoring her words. When he opened them a self-satisfied spark had entered his gaze. "Am I the only one who's ever touched your sweet breasts before? Am I the first person to touch your wet, hot pussy?"

Mia snorted. "Don't be so smug. So you're the first, what does it matter?" She felt her wicked juices boiling. "Besides, you won't be the last," she lied.

Ryan's eyes grew stormy, furious even. He pushed her roughly back against the wall and tore her panties from her with a sharp, tearing sound. He shoved her skirt up around her waist and pressed himself between her legs. He rubbed against her, pressing his arousal hard into her belly and cunt.

"Don't say things like that, Mia. Else I might believe them," he whispered, the softness of his words belying the ruthless, bruising grip he had on her upper arms.

His hand moved up to fist in her hair. He wrapped the long locks around his wrist and hand, holding her head still as he gazed down at her. "You're mine now, Mia. There's no going back."

Mia felt her heart skip a beat. "Who said I wanted to go back?" She watched his face for some emotion other than frustrated anger. "I like not being a virgin."

"You know what I meant. You're mine. No one else's. We'll get married as soon as possible."

"The hell you say!" she exploded, pushing back against him though he was as immovable as a mountain and he barely seemed to notice her struggles. "No way will I marry you."

"Why not?" he asked. "You like fucking me. I'm certain of that much." He leaned in closer to her ear. One of his fingers wandered into the slit of her pussy and sought out her clit. "You're wet and sticky for me already. You can't deny your attraction to me."

Mia undulated against his hand, helpless in a sea of pleasure that threatened to drown her. "I do like fucking you. And you like it too. So why don't you just shut up and dick me down?"

Ryan's eyes flashed. "That will be my pleasure," he growled. His hands went to the fastening of his jeans and he brought out the heavy, turgid length of his cock. "Look at it. It's weeping with need for you," he whispered.

It was true. A solitary tear had formed at the head of his penis and was dripping down the crown and onto the length of his shaft.

"Are you ready to learn how to suck me off?" he asked oh so softly.

Shaking with desire, she nodded, beyond words. Ryan put his hands back on her shoulders and pushed her down. She sank to her knees before him. His long, thick cock bobbed like a wand toward her mouth. He put his hands in her hair and gently but demandingly pulled her face closer to it.

"Open your mouth. Wide," he commanded, looking down at her from his great height.

Mia pressed a tiny kiss to the head of his cock and sipped at the tear that fell from it. He tasted wild, like summer rain and sweet honeysuckle nectar. She'd never expected him to taste so good.

His fingers pressed into the corners of her mouth and she opened it wide.

"Be careful of your teeth," he cautioned before slipping the mushroomed head past her lips and into her mouth. Mia opened wider and he slipped deeper into her mouth, touching the back of her throat.

She swirled her tongue around him, catching his full masculine flavor. She sucked him, gently at first, then harder. Ryan groaned and pushed her hair back away from her face to better see what she was doing. His cock had nearly disappeared inside her greedy mouth, and he moaned at the sight of her rooting there against him.

Mia cupped his testicles in her palm, gently massaging them. She learned the technique fast, pumping his cock with her hand and mouth while playing with his sac. Ryan shuddered against her.

"No, stop," he said, pushing her away.

But Mia would not be stopped. She latched onto his dick, slurping it deep into the back of her throat. Ryan shouted, pumped his hips fast three times against her face and shot his sweet load down her throat. He tasted magical. She drank every drop he had to give and sucked him clean for more.

Ryan lifted her up in his arms. She wrapped her legs around his waist. His cock, so amazingly thick, slid into her sharply. Mia caught her breath at the heavy, burning feel of him filling her. Her body, already damp with need, grew impossibly wetter, until their bodies were slippery with her juices.

The sounds their bodies made as he began thrusting inside of her swamped both their ears. Mia moaned and wrapped her arms and legs tighter around him. Ryan lifted her higher then slammed her down upon him. Mia keened wildly and hung on for dear life.

His hips jackhammered in and out of her body. He lifted her high and found her nipple with his mouth. He used his teeth against her, biting her gently, leaving his marks behind. Mia shuddered and rode him like a stallion, bouncing easily up and down his length, impaling herself over and over again.

Her clit brushed against the fur of his sex and soon it was tingling and swelling. With every thrust he made, her clit sang with ecstasy. Ryan began to thrust even harder into her. Mia felt her pussy clench—once, twice—and then she found the pinnacle of passion.

She screamed, bumping and grinding her pussy against him. He held her in his strong arms, never letting go, allowing her to find her pleasure.

Ryan groaned long and loud and came inside of her. His cum burned her and filled her full to overflowing. Mia cried out again and fell limply against him. Her body, covered in perspiration, shivered in the sudden coolness of the air. Ryan pumped himself into her over and over, emptying himself deep. Then he collapsed, sinking to his knees, still holding her and gasping for breath.

“You will marry me, Mia,” he said at length.

Mia pulled out of his arms and gathered her scattered clothing, dressing silently.

“You can’t ignore me forever,” he pointed out. “And I’m not going to change my mind.”

“Stop saying such things, Ryan. You can’t mean them. We’re too different, you and I.”

“Opposites attract, or hadn’t you heard?”

“We’re not even opposites. You’ve got your life wrapped up here in Sterling, as it should be. I don’t want any part of that.”

“You used to love it here.” He adjusted himself and fastened his pants, watching her.

Mia shrugged. "I did love it here. But after nearly hurting Steele I realized how dangerous it was for me to stay here among so many people that could get hurt or even killed if I lost control. You and I can never be together here."

"You don't know that."

Mia nodded. "Yes I do."

"I love you." He said it almost wearily.

"No you don't." She gritted her teeth.

"Stop being so stubborn." He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "Admit that you have feelings for me too."

Mia squeezed her eyes shut tightly and tried to slow the swift galloping of her heart. "No, Ryan."

"There's so much between us —"

"No there isn't. We've just had sex a couple of times, that's all."

Ryan growled. "It wasn't just sex and you know it."

She did know it. And it made it all the harder to stand firm with him now. But she had to. For his own safety as well as hers. "Let it go, Ryan."

"I'll let it go for now, but you'll have to admit it to me sooner or later, and when you do I'll find the nearest priest and marry you right on the spot."

Mia laughed and shook her head. "You always were a persistent one."

"Funny how some things never change."

He moved to let her pass and she made it to the door, not daring to look back. She paused before closing it behind her. "I'm sorry, Ryan. I just can't give you what you're looking for."

She closed the door and felt something inside her soul close off as well. Not that her feelings mattered. All that mattered was that Ryan and the others at Sterling remain safe. After their mission tonight, she was going to ensure that they stayed that way.

It was time for her to go home.

Chapter Six

That night the six of them gathered in the Sterling parking lot and loaded up into Steele's Expedition. They didn't bring many weapons. Gifted people like themselves rarely had a need for them. Johnny Vicious had two massive hand cannons and Ryan had a Beretta. That was about it. And that should have been all that was necessary. They weren't going to kill anybody, just destroy a little property.

Mia sat in the far backseat with Marla. Vicious and Enya sat in the next seat and Ryan and Steele had the front.

"I hear you're a pyrokenetic," Marla said.

"I am," Mia replied softly.

"That's pretty amazing."

"What gifts do you have?" Mia asked, curious.

"I interfere with electromagnetic waves. I can pretty much fry any piece of electrical equipment you could come up with. I had a hard time controlling it at first, bursting light bulbs in my home, turning the TV on and off with my mind...you know, things like that. But the scientists at Sterling made this bracelet for me, which keeps me grounded. Or something to that effect. Whatever, it helps me control my powers."

"No one's ever found anything to help me control my quirks."

Marla put her arm around Mia's shoulders gently. "That must be tough."

"It can be," Mia admitted.

"At least you've got like-minded people here at Sterling to relate to."

Ryan must have heard Marla's words because he turned around and locked his gaze with Mia's. Something dark and dangerous swam in the depths of his amazing blue eyes. Mia looked away and stared out the window, watching the dark road as they

drove toward Siren's headquarters in downtown Akron. When she looked back Ryan was facing forward once more.

It was only a twenty-five-minute drive to Siren's compound. They all spent the trip in relative silence, steeling themselves for what they must do. The trip was over too fast for Mia, who knew she had perhaps the biggest part to play in their mission.

The compound's parking lot was gated and Steele parked his vehicle just outside it. Everyone filed out of the enormous SUV and took stock of their situation.

"Do we know where we're headed?" Mia asked.

"I've studied the entire layout of this place," Ryan said. "I'm certain we'll find the right lab where the chips are being stored and catalogued. All evidence of the technology should be within the lab. If we're lucky."

Mia nodded. She watched as Vicious' hands went behind his back and toyed with the two guns there. She knew that Vicious was known for his incredible, preternatural speed. She'd seen evidence of it herself in the past twenty-four hours. Sometimes when he moved he seemed to blur and then he'd appear somewhere else. It was unnerving. She wondered if he was equally as fast with his guns.

They were all dressed in black, right down to the crocheted cap Mia had put over her too bright blonde hair. They approached the fence and Ryan produced a pair of wire cutters. He made short work of the fence, cutting a hole big enough that even Steele could fit through and tossed the cutters back into the SUV.

"I'll check for guards," Johnny whispered and took off, moving so fast none of them saw him as he darted deeper onto the compound's grounds. Several minutes passed in tense silence before he returned. "We're lucky. There were only two guards. I took care of them. They'll wake up with headaches but they'll be fine."

"Are we ready?" Ryan asked them.

They all agreed that they were. "It's now or never," Steele said.

They crept through the fence and made their way across the lot to the expansive building that was the Siren compound. There were few lights on within it, and it seemed to be deserted. It was a lucky break for them. They came upon a door. Ryan teleported into the building, reappearing behind the door and unlocking it for his comrades, letting them inside.

They were silent as the grave as they made their way deeper into the compound. They passed office after office, down one winding hallway and the next. Ryan seemed confident that he was leading them the right way. He never faltered or paused to get his bearings. Mia caught herself staring at his delectable rear as they walked, and looked away guiltily.

Now was not the time to get her hormones in an uproar.

The building was vast, nearly as big as Sterling, and by the time they'd reached the heart of it Mia was completely lost as to how to get back. She supposed it didn't matter. Ryan was the expert on the floor plans—he'd get them out without a problem. Still, it made Mia uneasy.

"I think this is the primary lab," Ryan said as they neared an enormous room with glass walls. Beyond it lay dozens of computers and various pieces of laboratory equipment. It was devoid of people. Mia gave a sigh of relief.

Ryan did his disappearing trick again and unlocked the doors. Mia stepped into the room first, looking around curiously. Since she'd first been brought to Sterling as a child, she'd known about Siren. They'd seemed so dark and mysterious to her in those years. Sterling's nemesis in all things, Siren had often had spies planted within Sterling. They'd vandalized Sterling more than once.

Now it was time to turn the tables on them.

Ryan sat before a computer and began inputting data. Mia looked around, assuring herself that what she was about to do was totally necessary. She found a large filing cabinet in one corner and opened one of its many drawers. There were hundreds of names on hundreds of folders, but she didn't recognize any of them.

She pulled one folder out at random and looked within. The file contained detailed medical descriptions and patient information. She looked at one particular piece of paper and was surprised to see that “cerebral” chips were mentioned more than once.

“Hey guys, listen to this,” she called out softly. “‘Patient experienced epileptic seizure and toxic shock. Cerebral chip has been rejected and removed. No further study necessary.’ So does that mean not everyone can wear the chips?”

“No, not all,” Steele replied. “But most. The first crop of chips actually caused trauma and even death in patients, which might be the case here. The newest chips are better suited for human wear but are still far too dangerous both to the patient and to the public around them.”

Mia put the folder back and closed the drawer.

“Ryan, are you getting anywhere?” Marla asked.

“Just a minute. These files are encrypted. It’s going to take a bit of troubleshooting.”

Mia moved to a cabinet and opened the heavy wooden doors. Inside was tray after tray of microchips. “Hey, is this what we’re looking for?”

Steele came up behind her. “Yeah, these are what we’re after.” He reached beyond her shoulder and took a chip between two fingers. He studied it closely for a minute then crumbled it in his fist. “I hope this is all they’ve produced so far.”

“How can we be sure?” Mia asked.

Steele sighed heavily. “We can’t. We can only pray that they haven’t already begun mass production for the open market.”

“I’m in,” Ryan said, breaking into their conversation. “Here’s everything, every little test done using the chips, every failure, every success. They’ve had no shortage of test subjects, or so it seems here. Hopefully they were willing subjects.”

“I wouldn’t count on it with Siren,” Marla drawled.

“Let me just print some of this stuff out and then we can get down to the real business here.” Ryan began transferring files to be printed.

Mia saw a movement out of the corner of her eye. "Hide," she hissed and immediately ducked as someone walked by in the darkness.

Everyone went to the floor at Mia's warning. But it was no use. The door to the lab opened and on came the lights.

Chapter Seven

"Hey, what's going on here?" A lab technician in a white coat stepped into the room.

Mia didn't need to be told what to do. She turned toward the cabinet which housed the chips and flung her hands out. Violet flames jettisoned from her fingertips, engulfing the wood in a blazing hot fire.

Another technician entered the room behind the first. He yelled at Mia to stop and rushed her. Ryan stepped into his path and punched him squarely on the jaw, knocking him unconscious. The first technician dove toward one of the desks and pressed a button.

Loud sirens screamed into the night.

"Shit," Mia said, and turned to lay a path of fire from one end of the lab to the other. "Get them out of here," she told Steele, referring to both her colleagues and the two lab technicians. "I've got this."

The technician who'd hit the alarm scampered back as Steele advanced upon him. "Get out," he said ominously, commandingly. The lab technician took one look at Mia, her arms engulfed in violet flame, and turned to run from the room.

The sounds of approaching people reached Mia's ears. "Get out of here," she yelled.

Ryan grabbed his printouts and came to her side. "Come on," he urged, grabbing her upper arm, careful of the flames that licked up her forearms.

"You said all evidence of these chips needs to be destroyed. Go. Get the others out of here. I won't be far behind you."

"I'm not leaving without you," Ryan protested, tugging on her harder.

Mia felt the fire within her burn hot. She felt her hair stand on end beneath her cap and she tore it from her head. Seconds later a halo of fire swept around her head. "Go!" she screamed at Ryan, breaking free. "Go now before someone gets hurt."

Ryan hesitated then turned to the others. "Let's get out of here."

Mia laid a carpet of fire along the room. The flames licked at her friends' feet as they fled but did not penetrate beyond the room. Mia gave a silent prayer of thanks that she hadn't totally lost control yet.

A gunshot startled her and she watched as two guards gave chase to her friends. She yelled for them to stop, but flames licked up and filled her mouth, cutting off her words. She saw Ryan disappear around a corner and tried to dispel the flames still shooting in bursts from her fingertips.

Nothing happened.

Mia felt her entire body engulf in heat. She was losing it. She'd never pushed herself so hard before. Never had to test her skills in a combat situation. She wasn't going to be able to hold it back much longer.

She made it to the center of the room before the glass walls exploded outward. Mia would have screamed if she could. Flames licked their way up the hallway, eating up the walls like slithering violet serpents. Mia fled from the room, but the flames followed her. She couldn't control them anymore.

Her body felt as if it were full to bursting. She let it go, knowing it would only hurt if she fought it. She hoped her friends were outside because it wasn't just the lab that was going to go up in flames. A flood of fire spilled out of her, filling the hallway. She tried to run from it but there was no escape.

The floor rumbled beneath her feet.

An earsplitting roar filled her ears.

The building exploded.

Shards of glass and wood joined the flames shooting high into the air before raining back down about her. She ran through the wreckage, sobbing for breath that didn't taste like fire. Fire was everywhere now, all around. Mia turned this way and that, searching for a way out. The flames consuming her stuttered then went out.

She saw a shaft of moonlight through a particularly thick pile of wreckage. Mia ran to it and began tossing pieces of wood and brick behind her. She dug her way through, exiting head first into the night air beyond. She ran down the side of the burning building, looking for a way to escape the grounds, looking for her friends.

She didn't see the parking lot—she was too far into the compound. But she saw a road several hundred yards out. She ran full tilt, arms and legs pumping. She was running from more than just the fire and the wreckage of the building.

She was running away from herself.

* * * * *

"I have to go back and get her," Ryan yelled, struggling in Steele's grip.

"She'll be fine. Mia can take care of herself. We have to get out of here now." Steele forcibly dragged Ryan into the Expedition.

"At least we don't have to worry about surveillance tapes now," Vicious said, looking back at the still-blazing wreckage.

"Get in," Steele commanded, cranking the engine and revving it high. Vicious hopped into the SUV and before he'd even closed the door, tires squealed and they were off.

They made it to the main road, Steele driving the vehicle over curbs and grass to reach it. They hadn't traveled more than a couple hundred yards when they saw Mia running down the expressway.

Steele slammed on the brakes and parked in the emergency lane. Ryan was out of the vehicle before it had even stopped. He ran to Mia, who didn't stop as she passed him at a full sprint. He ran to catch up with her. "Mia," he called out, "stop! It's me."

But Mia paid him no heed — she simply kept running as if she never meant to stop. Ryan ran at her side, trying to catch her in his arms. He grabbed her, swinging her around to face him.

Mia screamed and batted him away, turning and running once more.

“Mia, it’s all right,” he called out, but to no avail. He ran once more to catch up with her. Steele’s SUV crept behind them at a crawl.

“Fuck it,” he said, and teleported himself directly into her path. “Stop, Mia,” he said, grabbing her in an iron grip.

Mia sobbed and collapsed against him. He lifted her up into his arms and walked back to the SUV. He sat her in the middle seat and crawled in with her. “It’s going to be all right honey. I promise,” he cajoled soothingly.

“No it’s not,” she cried. “Did you see what just happened? What I just did? I’m a monster!”

“You’re not a monster,” both Steele and Ryan said in unison.

“Look, honey, you’re not a monster. Everything’s going to be fine, you’ll see.”

“I want to die,” she sobbed.

Ryan’s hands bit into her upper arms. “No. Don’t you dare say such a thing! I won’t stand for it, do you hear me?” He shook her lightly.

Mia’s tear-swamped eyes rose to meet his. “I’m never going to be normal, am I?”

“Mia, Mia,” he crooned, pulling her into the protection of his embrace. “You’re as normal as any of us in this vehicle now. Don’t do this to yourself. It’s killing me to see you so unhappy.”

“I just wanted to be of some help,” she whispered brokenly, putting her head in her hands.

“You were,” Vicious said from the seat behind them. “We won’t have to worry about Siren for a long time now.”

Ryan glared at him and Vicious subsided, looking out the window as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"Shh, baby, don't cry," Ryan said, using his sleeve to wipe away her tears. "It's all right."

"All I ever wanted was to be normal," she said softly.

"I know," Ryan held her tighter. "But it's just not in the cards. For either of us."

Mia gathered herself and pulled away from him. "Did anyone get hurt?"

"I don't think so. There were only a few people there and they all seemed to be filing out of the building as fast as we were."

Mia nodded. "Thank God."

"Do you think Siren will strike back?" Marla asked from the front passenger seat.

"Who knows?" Ryan said. "They may not even realize for a time that we were involved. We can at least hope for that. We all knew going into this that there was the possibility of retribution. Violence is all Siren is good at anyway, I think."

Mia fell into a deep silence, eyes vacant and unblinking. Ryan gathered her closer and held her, knowing it was what she needed most.

The rest of the drive was spent in a heavy silence that consumed them all.

Chapter Eight

Ryan was at her door again. It was a wonder to her that he hadn't simply teleported himself inside, but she supposed he was trying to be respectful of her privacy.

It had been three days since the disaster at Siren and she still couldn't bring herself to face the others. She would have long ago left for home if there wasn't the chance of seeing someone on her way out. As it was, she was trapped in her apartment, brooding and suffering from dark thoughts.

She'd almost killed them all.

Mia couldn't live with herself knowing this. She prayed that everyone had escaped from the fire at Siren. There hadn't been any reports of deaths in the newspaper article covering the fire. But the entire Siren compound was in ashes. The fire had burned long into the night, resistant to the water and fire extinguishers the firemen had used in their attempt to put it out. They'd had to let the blaze run its course. And it had, eating away all evidence of the once vast building.

No attempts yet had been made on Siren's part to seek revenge against Sterling. There wasn't even evidence that suggested they knew Sterling was behind the strike. But that didn't mean they wouldn't come calling, one day down the road. And it wouldn't be pretty.

"Mia, I know you're listening to me. Open this door right now," Ryan called, breaking into her reverie.

Mia leaned back against the couch and waited for him to leave.

He didn't.

"I'm coming in there," he warned, and a second later there he stood before her. "Why are you in here brooding?" he demanded, coming down on one knee beside her.

"I'm not brooding," she lied.

"You're a terrible liar," he pointed out, touching his finger to the dimple in her chin.

"I don't know what to do anymore, Ryan," she admitted. "I can't go on like this."

He didn't pretend to misunderstand her. "Then let our scientists continue to work with you. Eventually they'll find a way to help you control your powers."

Mia shook her head. "No more tests, they don't do any good."

"We helped Marla. We can help you. Just give us a chance. Give *me* a chance."

"I could've killed those people," she sobbed. "I could've killed you."

"But you didn't."

"Not this time. But what about the next time? And the next? Can you assure me that I won't accidentally kill anyone?"

"Mia, it won't do you any good to keep yourself secluded in here like a hermit. It won't do you any good to worry about what might or might not happen in the future. Hell, I might die of a brain aneurism at any moment, but I'm not worried about it. Neither should you be. Just live. Live and be happy with the time you're given."

"I can't be like that," she whispered brokenly.

"Yes you can."

Mia sniffed and wiped away her tears. "What about the others? Are they afraid of me now?"

"No one is afraid of you. You're not a monster," he patiently pointed out. "You're just different. There's nothing wrong with that."

"That's what your dad always used to tell me."

"Truer words were never spoken." He tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear. "Now, are you going to let this rule your life? Or are you going to come out with me and have a fabulous dinner at my place?"

Mia smiled. "Well, since you put it like that..."

"I love you, Mia."

She shied away from him. "Don't say that."

"But it's true."

Mia looked at him. Her heart felt broken in two. She couldn't look him in the eye and lie anymore, though she desperately wanted to. She was tired of lying. Tired of hiding. But she didn't know what else to do—she was so used to it at this point.

His gaze locked with hers. "I love you. I do. And I promise I'll do anything for you, anything to help you get over and through this. I can't stand to see you so torn up."

"Ryan, I can't love you," she whispered.

"Yes you can. You do. I can see it in your eyes, even if you're too afraid to say the words."

"We could never be. I can't go through life wondering when my next accident will happen and whether or not you'll be hurt by it."

"Life is about taking chances," he pointed out.

"I know." She looked down at her hands. Ryan reached up and took them in his.

"Look at me."

She did.

"No matter what happens, I'll always love you. I *have* always loved you. Nothing can change that."

Mia's lip trembled. "It's too dangerous."

Ryan pressed his lips to their clasped hands. "No it's not. Nothing is too dangerous when love is involved."

Mia felt torn. She loved him. She'd loved him for years. But she knew she couldn't tell him—he'd never let her forget it. She didn't want that, she wanted to know that he was safe, even if that meant she had to be apart from him.

"Make love to me," she whispered.

Ryan took a deep breath. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes." She held his hands tight.

Ryan leaned in and kissed her, his tongue stroking her bottom lip. He put his hands beneath her T-shirt and found her bare breasts with his palms. He leaned her back onto the couch and pushed her shirt up high.

He dipped down for a taste of her nipple. He slurped one into his mouth, suckling it before visiting the same upon the other. He shoved his hand into the waistband of her pants and cupped her cunt with his warm palm.

He tore his mouth away from her and tore at his clothes. She helped him as best she could, pushing his sweater up so that she could tease and taste his small brown nipples. In seconds he was nude and working on making her much the same.

He spread her legs wide and pressed his lips to her aching pussy. His lips found her clit and suckled on it as he had suckled her nipples. He shoved two fingers into her pleasure hole and slipped a third into her anus. Mia cried out and tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her, holding her fast.

He opened his mouth over her. He thrust his fingers in and out of her body until she was dripping with need. He lifted her hips and licked her anus, wetting it, then inserted two fingers into her.

Mia cried out as an orgasm shook her, making her pussy clench and milk his probing tongue as it stabbed into the heat of her.

"Oh Ryan, yes!" she cried.

"Tell me you love me," he demanded, his lips and words vibrating against her pussy.

Mia bucked wildly beneath him. "No," she choked out.

"Yes," he said, licking her from clit to anus. "Say it."

"Please fuck me, Ryan!"

"I'll fuck you. I'll fuck you until you don't know anything but my touch anymore."

He crawled up her body, tugging her legs around his hips. She locked her ankles behind his waist and screamed as he entered her in one long push of his hips.

He pumped himself into her, stretching and filling her until she was mindless to anything else. Her head thrashed back and forth on the cushions and she bucked and undulated in tune to his body's thrusts into hers.

Ryan pulled away with a savage curse. He turned her over and entered her from behind. Mia saw stars as he reached deeper inside of her than he ever had before. He rode her, balls slapping against her pussy and legs. She moved with him, seeking each new impalement as if it would be her last.

"Oh God, Ryan, you feel so good," she gasped.

"I love how tight and hot you are," he said, biting her shoulder. "How wet and silky you feel."

Her body shivered.

He slammed into her harder and harder. She cried out as she experienced the most explosive orgasm of her life. Ryan followed her seconds later, groaning and gasping as he pumped his cum deep into her welcoming body.

Ryan rose and lifted her up off the couch. He let her wrap her legs around him and entered her standing up. He walked them to her bedroom and laid them both down on the bed. He moved in her softly, soothingly, semi-hard and gentle within her still quivering body.

They lay there, damp bodies joined, and just before sleep consumed him he heard her soft, hesitant whisper.

"I love you, Ryan. I really, really do."

He fell asleep with a smile on his face.

When Ryan awoke she had gone. Gone from Sterling. Gone from him. He swore a blue streak and rose to get dressed for battle.

Chapter Nine

Ryan knocked on Mia's door demanding. "Open up or I'm opening it for you."

Mia opened the door. She must have been standing right behind it when he approached.

"What's this?" She frowned, squinting up in the glare of the morning sunlight at the frocked man standing behind Ryan. "Who's he?"

"He is Father Abaddan. And this is a wedding. Ours."

Mia's eyes went wide. "A w-wedding?"

"Yes. I'm going to have you if I have to leg shackle you to me," he smiled.

"But Ryan, I'm not dressed for a wedding," she said dazedly, stupidly.

Ryan laughed and entered her house, the priest following him in. "You look beautiful."

"I don't want to get married."

"Of course you do," Ryan countered. "You just don't realize it yet." He pulled a ring box out of his pocket and got down on one knee before her.

"Will you be my wife, Mia mine?"

Mia felt overwhelmed. She looked at the priest as if for guidance, and the old man smiled gently at her, offering no help. "I can't get married," she whispered.

"Sure you can. So long as I'm the groom."

He took her left hand and placed the diamond ring upon her finger. It was a perfect fit. "Will you marry me?" he asked again.

Mia felt her heart crack. She looked down at the ring on her finger, her hand still clasped in his. "You don't want to marry me."

"Yes I do."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say yes, silly," he laughed.

"Living with me will be dangerous," she pointed out.

"Living with any female is dangerous if you ask me. Why should you be so different? Marry me, Mia. Take the chance. I promise I'll make you very happy."

Mia felt the tears slip down her face. "I know you will."

"So say yes."

Mia felt something like joy flood through her. Could she really take the chance? She wanted to – oh how desperately she wanted to. But should she?

"Make me a happy man, Mia. Please say yes."

Mia smiled and felt her heart flood over with love. "Y-yes."

"I promise that – What did you say?"

"I said yes." She clutched his hands tight. "Yes. Yes. Yes. I'll marry you."

"Woo hoo!" He swung her up into his arms and twirled about. "I love you so much, Mia."

"I love you too, Ryan. I really do."

He embraced her then turned her so that they both faced Father Abaddan. "Let's get this wedding going. I'm ready for a wedding night."

Mia laughed, then wept with joy as they were united in holy matrimony.

The fire that always crept just below her skin seemed to dim and sputter out. How long this peace would last she didn't know. But then, no one knew what would happen in their future. It was the way things were.

So long as Ryan was with her, she could learn to live with that.

About the Author

Sherri L. King lives in the American Deep South with her husband, artist and illustrator Darrell King. Critically acclaimed author of *The Horde Wars* and *Moon Lust* series, her primary interests lie in the world of action packed paranormals, though she's been known to dabble in several other genres as time permits.

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