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Sydney Somers

SPELLBOUND

Say You're Mine

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Spellbound: *Say You're Mine*

By Sydney Somers



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Dedication

To all the paranormal romance authors whose books have given me one spellbinding escape after another. Thank you.

My world would have been an emptier place without such wonderful stories.

Chapter One

Violet Calder needed a drink.

Days off were meant to be spent away from work. Her family didn't seem to understand the concept seeing as not one, but all four of her siblings had called about one case or another the firm was working on. Everyone except Finn. He'd called to see if she could pick up something from the dry cleaners for him since she had the day off and "nothing better to do". He was smart enough not to call back when she'd hung up on him.

Regardless of having a very rare Friday off, here she stood in her office going over details needed for an unexpected hearing Monday morning that involved a client from one of their cases. She was used to those last minute calls, had come to expect them working for her family's private investigative firm, but tonight she had plans. Fearing that her oldest, non-detail oriented sister might have missed something in the file, Violet had changed into her evening clothes before heading into the office. As soon as she wrapped this up she planned to meet up with her best friend, Leslie, for a few drinks and a late dinner.

Perched on the edge of her chair, Violet flipped through the file.

A body materialized on her desk.

Violet shoved back from the desk, her heart firmly lodged in her throat. "Jesus Christ, Tate." She glared at her cousin.

Dressed in pale blue lingerie with a see-through wrap, her long lithe body stretched out on Violet's desk, Tate Calder frowned. "What the hell?" Confusion dawned on her face as she glanced around. "This isn't Greg's place."

“No kidding.” Violet crossed her arms. “You’re still sick, aren’t you?”

Tate chewed thoughtfully on her bottom lip. “I thought I was fine.” On a sigh she pushed herself to a sitting position.

“You should know better.” It was common sense to any witch or warlock not to screw around with magic when they weren’t feeling one hundred percent. Things always had a tendency to go wrong.

Violet gestured to her desk. “You can get down anytime.”

“Right.” Tate gave her a half smile and slid off her desk. Taking note of Violet’s dress, her eyes widened. “Wow. Where are you headed?”

“Just for drinks.”

“Trolling for men with the man-eater?”

Violet laughed. “Yeah.” Her family had labeled Leslie “the man-eater” since she went through a new guy, sometimes two, a week.

Tate grinned. “Have fun.”

“Wait a second. You’re not going to try teleporting again, are you?”

“I’m not about to go out and catch a cab dressed like this. See you Monday.” In a blink Tate vanished, leaving Violet to marvel over her cousin’s ability to travel in such a way. Teleporting small objects often left Violet weakened. She didn’t know how Tate so easily transported herself around the city on a regular basis. Although that particular ability did make Tate very good at those jobs that entailed getting in and out of places quickly without drawing much attention.

Violet glanced at the clock on her desk. Still plenty of time. Snatching the file off her desk, she headed down the hall toward her sister’s office. She didn’t know how Darby handled sharing the CEO duties and being the figurehead for the firm their dad and uncle had founded. Representing the company was more than Violet could have managed. She was perfectly content with her job as client liaison. Given the rough-around-the-edges personalities of some of her siblings, she understood that clients sometimes needed a go-between.

"Ms. Calder?"

Violet paused and crossed the polished marble floor to the receptionist's desk.

Their temp, one Finn hopefully hadn't seduced yet, tipped her dark head to the side. "Everyone else is gone for the night or busy, and there is a really upset woman in the waiting area."

"Did she say anything?" Violet took a step back and peeked through the frosted glass doors, but couldn't see anyone inside.

"Something about a lost dog."

It wouldn't be the first time they'd been hired to track down a pet, but it was usually the eccentric wealthy types with money to burn. "I'll take care of it." Violet handed the temp the file she carried. "Make sure Darby gets this tonight. She's expecting it."

"Of course."

"Evening, Ms. Calder."

Violet tensed at the deep, unmistakable voice directly behind her. She slowly turned around, all too conscious of the thinning air in the room. "Good evening, Detective."

Short, dark brown hair, a five o'clock shadow that suited him entirely too much, and bottomless brown eyes that sucked you right in when they weren't slicing a person in two, all combined to make a package Leslie liked to refer to as "sex on a stick". There was only one problem with him.

He was a serious pain in the ass.

"Your brother around?"

Violet crossed her arms. It helped to fill up the space between them. Detective Reece Prescott had a habit of standing much too close. She figured it was an intimidation tactic. Having grown up with two overbearing older brothers, not to mention her three cousins, few men intimidated her. Unfortunately, Reece seemed to be in the minority. "Which one?"

“Dante.”

“Why do you need to speak with him? Or are you just planning on harassing him?”

Reece broke his usual stoic mask with a frown. “He hit me first.”

Biting the inside of her cheek, Violet shrugged. Why he always got his boxers in a bunch whenever she mentioned that, she’d never know. “Well, as much as I hate to disappoint you, Detective, he’s already gone for the night.”

He surveyed the lobby as though he didn’t believe her, and finally nodded. “Let him know I was looking for him.”

“Sure.”

He continued to stare at her.

“Was there something else?”

Instead of turning away, he took a step closer. His gaze tunneled into hers, warm and slow. “You don’t like me much, do you Ms. Calder?”

“I don’t dislike you, Detective.”

For a moment she could have sworn his eyes paused on her mouth.

“It’s Reece.” Without another word, he strode away.

But that didn’t stop her heart from continuing to thump against her ribs. She stared after him, wondering if she would’ve had enough guts to ask him out for a beer if he wasn’t a cop and she wasn’t a witch.



“You coming?”

Reece stared at the front of Calder Investigations, then turned toward the car parked at the curb.

His partner, Sloane, poked her head out of the sedan’s passenger side window. “You saw *her*, didn’t you?”

He ignored her comment. "You drive. I want to look over some things." Reece waited for her to get behind the wheel, and settled himself beside her. Sloane sighed as she maneuvered the car into the evening traffic. She tapped the inch thick file Reece held. "You already know everything in there."

"Never hurts to be thorough." Given his meeting tonight with Nicholas Strickland, the newest, sharpest Ecstasy dealer to move into his city, he needed every possible edge. It had taken weeks to get this first meeting lined up with Reece posing as a potential buyer.

Sloane checked her review mirror. "So why don't you ask her out already?"

Reece didn't even look up. "I have my reasons." Two very good reasons—Finn and Dante Calder. If either of them caught wind he was so much as looking too long in Violet's direction, they'd sure as hell come after him. They took protectiveness to a whole new level. He loved his own sister, but even he had to draw the line somewhere when it came to whom she chose to date. Reece doubted Violet's brothers, her very odd brothers, would accept him so much as breathing the same air as their baby sister.

He wasn't sure what it was about Violet he found so appealing. She was the average girl-next-door type, pretty brown hair, nice smile, sexy green eyes, incredible body. Okay, so maybe he did know why he found her so appealing. Wanting her and having her were two very different things. As attracted as he was, there was no way it would be worth the hassle of tangling with Finn and Dante Calder. Maybe if they weren't forever crossing each other's paths or they weren't constantly within an inch of breaking the law, yet always managing to get themselves out of every single sticky situation...

Reece closed the file and stared out the window. He could spin it a hundred ways and the result would always be the same. Violet Calder was off-limits. He wished he could make more than just his brain accept that fact. Reece couldn't get within five feet of her and not end up with an erection worthy of some horny junior high kid spying on the cheerleaders in their locker room.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he pushed aside the vision of how good she'd looked in her simple, backless, black dress, her hair down and framing her face, the deep v neckline that showed off her—

“Earth to Reece?”

He reached for the coffee he'd set on the middle console earlier. “Yeah?”

“Do I need to get you laid?”

Reece choked on the sip of coffee. “What?”

At a red light, Sloane turned to him. “Look, she's a girl, I'm a girl. We could...” Sloane shuddered. “...talk. I could talk to her, feel her out, you know, see if she's interested.”

“I'm not interested in seeing Violet Calder.”

“How come you're much more convincing when you lie during an interrogation?”

This time he didn't bother to respond and fixed his attention on the passing traffic out the window. Bad enough he had his mother and sister constantly trying to fix him up, he didn't need his damn partner getting in on it too. “Just drive.” They couldn't be more than a couple miles from the precinct, where he would change cars and go alone to his meeting in the upscale district of Mountain View Terrace. The less time he had to spend in the car with Sloane pushing the subject, the less he had to worry about actually considering her proposal.

Sloane accelerated through the green light. “Okay, but if you change your mind...”

“I won't.” Forgetting Violet and her brothers, Reece forced himself to concentrate on the task at hand. He couldn't afford any mistakes, not when he was going into this on his own. No wire, no back up, no guns.

The smallest mistake could make the difference between finally getting something on Strickland or taking a bullet in the back.

And he sure as hell wasn't ready to die tonight.



"Mrs. Bourne. I'm Violet Calder." The door quietly whooshed shut behind her as she crossed the room to sit across from the gray-haired woman with fat tears trailing down her wrinkled cheeks.

"You can call me Winifred, dear." Mrs. Bourne blew her nose then stuffed the tissue into her purse. Her hand trembled when she held out a picture of a red-gold colored Pomeranian.

Violet took the picture. "How is it we can help you, Winifred?"

"My Freddy is missing."

"He's your dog?"

She sniffled and bobbed her head. "He's all I've had since my husband, Jacob, died." Her shoulders shook and she pressed another tissue to her mouth, holding in her sob.

"I'm sorry for your loss." Violet squeezed the old woman's hand. "Tell me about Freddy. When did he go missing?"

"Oh, my." She shook her head so vigorously her chunky plastic earrings bounced off her neck. "Not missing, kidnapped."

Keeping her face carefully blank, Violet wondered if the nearly seventy-year-old woman in front of her could see very well. Her glasses were reminiscent of the bottom of old fashioned glass cola bottles. "Do you know who took him?"

"My next door neighbors."

"Your neighbors?" Violet wasn't sure she completely masked her skepticism, but she gave it her best shot. "Why did your neighbors take your dog?"

Mrs. Bourse smiled brightly. "I knew you would believe me. The police refused to even take my statement. I told them the people in the house next door are up to no good, and now they've taken Freddy. I'm sure he saw

something, something they didn't want him to see so they took him...and..." She broke off, another sob tearing loose of her mouth before she smothered it with her tissue.

Violet filled a paper cup at the water cooler and carried it back to the old woman. Unless Finn was still skulking around, there wouldn't be anything she could do for Mrs. Bourne until one of her siblings checked in tomorrow morning.

Graciously, Mrs. Bourne took the cup and gave her a watery smile. "I knew you would be able to help me."



Leslie's voice came over the speaker in her car. "You're where?"

"Just looking into something for a client. Won't take me long. Head on over so we don't lose our regular table. I'll meet you there in half an hour." It wouldn't take her any longer than that to have a look around Mrs. Bourne's house. That way she might know if there was anything worth investigating. As much as she sensed Mrs. Bourne's grief to be genuine, she wouldn't be the first older woman looking to hire them only to have it turn out she was just lonely.

"You sure you're not running off to some dance naked under the moon thing for some celebration or other. Because if Finn is going to be there, I want front row seats."

Violet laughed. "No. Just a little snooping and then we'll have drinks."

"Will you do that jerk spell?"

This was why one never confided the fact they're a witch to their best friend. Although magic and margaritas could prove an interesting mix at times, sometimes a girl just couldn't be trusted. And with Leslie goading her on every time some s.o.b. with a Friday-night-lay complex didn't take no for an answer, the evening could get unpredictable real fast.

After promising not to be late, Violet glanced at the directions Mrs. Bourne had jotted down. If not for an unbreakable bingo engagement she would have led Violet out there. Although Violet couldn't begin to fathom how Mrs. Bourne could have been high enough to see out the windshield of the Buick she drove without being propped up by a couple of phone books.

Mountain View Terrace was a nice area complete with thick, towering maple trees that dangled over the streets, and likely made autumn some people's least favorite time of year. Finding Mrs. Bourne's house, she parked in the driveway and stared up at the dark house. Even for eight o'clock on a Friday evening, the neighborhood was quiet.

Deciding to check out the backyard first, Violet climbed out of the car. Her heels clicked along the paved driveway, but considering she hadn't expected to do any poking around this evening, there wasn't much to be done about it. A high privacy fence blocked in the backyard. How Freddy could have witnessed anything next door through the peeling white—albeit rotting fence—Violet couldn't guess. Given the techno beat that pounded through the air came from the house on the right, Violet made a stab in the dark that these people were the ones Mrs. Bourne believed were up to no good.

Slinging her purse—which she really should have left in the car—more firmly over her shoulder, Violet touched the deep green amulet that dangled around her neck. The stone warmed in her hand as it had countless times since her birth. All members of her family wore one to help channel the magic that flowed through their veins.

“Luminarium.” A beam of light shone from the amulet, giving her enough light to avoid the small shrubs planted sporadically all over Mrs. Bourne's backyard. She picked her way to the edge of the leaning fence, careful not to rest against it since it didn't look like it would hold up against a stiff breeze, let alone her weight.

Voices from the driveway next door reached her ears, but she was too far away to make anything out. The pulsing music made it equally impossible to hear the exchange. Likely nothing. Footsteps crunched over gravel as the voices moved away from her. Deciding, she wouldn't find much in the dark, Violet turned to leave.

Her foot didn't budge.

Sighing, she quickly came to the conclusion her heel was stuck in the mud.

Just her luck, naturally.

The good news was it only took a few good tugs to work it loose. The bad news was she lost her balance, scrambled to stay upright, overcompensated and rocked backwards.

On a panicked yelp, she crashed through the brittle fence. Pain branched down her back while a slicing sting across her elbow guaranteed a battle scar of some kind.

Dazed, Violet stared up the darkening night sky. This was the absolute last time she took a Friday off. It just wasn't worth the hassle.

She raised her head and looked at the gap in the fence. The missing section supported her with all the comfort of a bed of nails. Pushing up on her uninjured elbow, she decided it could have been worse.

Violet turned and stared up at the two men who ran towards her. Even with the music they must have heard the commotion. Once the second man stepped forward, recognition was instantaneous. Her pulse kicked up.

Reece did not look very happy to see her.

Chapter Two

Reece stared at the woman sprawled across the busted fence boards at his feet. Who in the hell had he pissed off to deserve having to deal with the Calder family?

Violet gazed up at him like a deer caught in headlights.

Just fucking perfect.

Beside him, Strickland's younger brother, known for his trigger-happy ways, reached for his gun.

Moving quick, and with what he hoped passed for concern, Reece crouched down. "Honey, I thought I told you to wait in the car."

Violet blinked, those glossy lips of hers parted in confusion. Helping her to her feet, Reece kept his body strategically positioned between her and Strickland's younger brother.

"You know her?" David Strickland kept his hand behind him. Suspicion tightened his face.

"She's my girlfriend," Reece decided and hauled her to his side even as she squirmed to put distance between them. Before the objection he read in her eyes made it to her mouth, he leaned in and nuzzled her neck.

Her surprised exhale whispered along his cheek.

"Play along," he whispered. God, she smelled good. Like the scent of his grandparents' peach orchard right before the sunset.

One tawny eyebrow arched as he pulled back. The wheels were all but spinning in her head, and she looked ready to *out* him any second.

He swallowed a sigh. She was a Calder. Of course she would have to make this difficult for him. Before she could say something and get them both shot, he tipped her head back, and slid his mouth over hers. It took a second for her surprise to fade, then her eyes drifted shut and her lips parted. His intention of keeping the kiss for show only disintegrated the moment her warm tongue stroked his bottom lip. He'd been half expecting her to drive a knee between his legs for kissing her. He sure as hell hadn't actually believed she would respond to him. She could be just a really good actress, but his body didn't care. It enjoyed the slow hum thickening his blood just the same.

Reece tightened his hold on her, tugging her more firmly to him. Heat rushed through his veins and straight to his groin. Hell, if he'd known she tasted this good, he would have told her brothers where to go and kissed her a long time ago. Her fingers fisted in his shirt before she wrapped one arm around his neck, caging him to her.

He heard David shift uneasily behind him. Knowing it had to end, but promising himself to finish it at a later time, he kissed her fast and deep then set her away from him. She didn't let go of his hand, the desire fading from her eyes when she noticed the frown on David's face.

David did not look pleased. "What was she doing next door?"

"Cat." Violet motioned next door. "I saw a cat get hit by a car and he limped in the backyard next door. I wanted to make sure he was okay, but he didn't seem to appreciate my concern."

Nodding slowly, he jerked his head at Reece. "Let's go inside."

Reece pressed a chaste kiss to Violet's cheek. "Wait for me in the car this time."

"Bring her inside," David insisted.

Reece resisted the idea. "She'll just want to talk about your brother's taste in decorating, and frankly I could go without that headache right now."

Violet jabbed him the gut.

Muffling his grunt with a laugh, Reece rubbed his injured side. "She's a feisty one."

David shrugged. "As long as she's a good lay, who could complain?"

Before Violet could think to jab her elbow into David's side, Reece gave her hand a warning squeeze. "Besides she likes to crank the music up in the car when she's waiting for me."

"She can come in." The insistence was obvious. David likely wanted to keep an eye on her to use for leverage with Reece should anything come up.

With little choice but to follow, Reece kept a tight grip on Violet's hand and fixed his attention on David once more. "How much longer until your brother gets here?"

With a lift of his shoulder, David led them into the backdoor, through the kitchen and to the front living room. "Take a seat." The twenty-ish man, probably only a few years younger than Reece's twenty-nine, stalked to the bottom of the stairs in the hall. "Turn the fucking music down," he hollered.

Annoyed footsteps pounded the floor above their heads before the volume lowered.

David leaned a shoulder in the doorway and gave Violet another skeptical once over. He glanced at Reece. "Beer?"

Reece nodded. "Sure." He gazed down at Violet, not having realized she wasn't quite as tall as he thought until her body was tucked against his. The top of her head came to his chin. "Anything for you?"

"No thanks."

With David gone, Violet pinned him with a questioning stare. Reece shook his head.

A sexy smile curved her lips. His first clue something was coming.

Looping her arms around his neck, she pressed her face to his throat. "You want to tell me what's going on here, Detective." Her voice sounded softer than usual, a silky whisper that replaced the cool defensive tone she seemed to reserve for him, specifically during their brief conversations about her brothers.

He pushed her hair behind her ear, keeping his mouth close to her cheek. "Undercover operation. David's brother deals in Ecstasy. And the name is Reece. Calling me 'detective' right now could get us both killed."

Her lips skimmed the edge of his jaw. "And how long am I going to be expected to play this part?"

Reece closed his eyes at the teasing. He might have wondered at her lack of concern over her current situation, but the way she snuggled up against him prevented him from giving it much thought. "Shouldn't be too long."

Violet tipped her head back, her mossy green eyes raking down his face. "And exactly how far do you plan to take our charade?"

He studied her mouth. "As far as I need to."

"You two don't quit, do you?" David crossed the room and handed him a beer.

Keeping her smile intact, Violet looked around the room. "Nice place. Did he hire an interior designer or do it himself?"

David shrugged.

Above them, a door slammed, then someone yelled. "The damn dog needs to take a piss."

David shouted back. "You wanted to keep him, you let him the hell out."

Violet tensed in his arms as a small dog with a blue bow in its red hair ran downstairs. Noticing people in the living room, it padded straight into the room and sat in front of Violet, its paws in the air.

"Cute dog." She crouched down to pet him.

"He bites," David warned.

Violet ignored him and stroked the dog's back. "I'm good with animals." She rubbed behind the animal's ears. "Pretty little boy, aren't you. Yes, you are. Good boy, Freddy."

David straightened, his gaze accusing. "How did you know his name?"



Violet didn't miss a beat. "It's on his name tag."

She felt David's eyes on her, but didn't bother to look at him. If she did she might have been tempted to teleport the baseball bat in the corner to her hand and crack him over the head with it. What kind of people abducted an old woman's dog? At least Mrs. Bourne would be relieved to know her dog was safe and sound.

"You're the smart ass type aren't you?"

Violet stood up, arms crossed. "I'm sorry?"

David shoved away from the wall, jabbed his still unopened beer in her direction. "Or maybe you're the type that likes to make other people feel stupid."

Annoyed he'd even think that after spending a *whole two minutes* in the same room with her and that he would actually say it out loud, Violet cocked her head. "Do I make *you* feel stupid?"

The gun he wore tucked in the back of his pants didn't worry her. Although just as prone to being hurt by a gunshot wound as the next person, she could make it difficult for David to use it. Which made her far less intimidated by him than he wanted her to be. Given the firm's business of investigating the occasional criminal case, she saw her share of David's kind. The ones who used guns and loud exaggerated movements to get people to listen to them, to give them a sense of control. She doubted David would know "control" if it bit him in the ass.

Violet looked down at Freddy. Now there was an interesting thought.

Reece grabbed her upper arm, and jerked her back a step. "We're guests here. Do not embarrass me."

She knew Reece expected her to play the part and nodded demurely.

That didn't stop her from mumbling, "Imbibo Praemium," under her breath.

David twisted the cap off his beer, cursing when the fizzy contents exploded all over him.

Okay, so not a big show, but it made her smile nonetheless. She averted her gaze to hide her grin, but didn't miss the curious expression on Reece's face. His attention dipped to her chest.

Feeling the warmth of her amulet, Violet hoped this hadn't been one of the rare occasions it lit up. Not one to rely on magic to get her through the day, unlike a handful of other witches she knew, her amulet had a life of its own when she went too long without using it.

David was halfway up the stairs to change his soaked shirt when his cell phone rang. Reece's smile hitched, but he didn't tense until David looked at them and spoke into the phone, his voice too low for them to hear.

A moment later he closed the phone and leaned over the railing. "Nicholas got held up, he says he wants to see you later tonight. A rave in the warehouse district. He'll send a car to pick you up."

Reece shook his head. "That won't be necessary."

"Nicholas insists." He looked at Violet. "What's your address?"

She didn't hesitate. Later she could deal with the fact that a known drug dealer would know where she lived. For now, he wasn't a threat to her or her family. Violet rattled off her address, all too aware of the crushing grip Reece had on her hand. He wasn't thrilled with this turn of events.

When David nodded, Reece escorted her outside. "Not a word until you get in my car," he hissed.

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him what his problem was. She'd been working a case—sort of—and he dragged her into his investigation. It was partly her fault that her curiosity got the better of her and she fell through the fence. But her having to play the girlfriend bit, that was all him. He could have come up with something else. So where did he get off being annoyed with her?

With his hand at her elbow, he propelled her down the sidewalk.

“What about my car?”

“I'll have someone pick it up for you.”

Reece opened the passenger door and ushered her inside. Once he was behind the wheel she turned to him.

“Was it really necessary?” She had to know if that still-made-her-insides-flutter kiss had been just a ploy, or maybe something more.

He shoved the keys into the ignition. “What?”

“Kissing me.”

Reece frowned, his gaze fixed on the parked car in front of them. “I needed to make sure you didn't say anything.” He glanced her way, looked ready to add something, then changed his mind and started the car. “What were you doing in the next yard anyway?”

“Working a case.”

He scowled. “What is it with your family?”

Now that kind of comment really got her hackles up. “My family?” She folded her arms across her chest. “What exactly do you have against my family?”

“Not you so much, more your brothers.”

“And what have Finn and Dante ever done to you?” Besides give him a hard time every chance they got. It was now a contest between them they openly bragged about, who could piss off Detective Prescott more. But then, Reece didn't need to know about that. Although, her brothers would never have made a habit of deliberately irking Reece if he hadn't been so annoyed whenever their

paths crossed. Her family had a knack—or curse as Finn liked to call it—for choosing cases that often landed them in precarious situations. Case in point, her now being forced to play Reece’s woman or ruin his investigation, or worse.

“Your brothers always wind up in the wrong places and the wrong times.”

“Kind of like me tonight.”

Reece sighed. “Yeah.”

Before Violet could respond, her cell phone rang.

“Where are you?” Leslie demanded.

She shot Reece a sidelong glance. “I got caught up with something.”

“A case?”

At least she wouldn’t have to lie about that. “Yeah. Looks like I’ll be wrapped up for the rest of the night.”

Leslie sighed, the sound perfected from the years of pouting everything she wanted out of every man she’d ever known. Right before she dropped them on their ass. Most of the poor suckers never saw it coming. “Fine. You’re just lucky I met someone in the bathroom.”

“Bathroom?”

“I went into the men’s room by mistake.”

“This guy actually believed that?”

“Soaked it up. You should see him, tall, brown hair, dark eyes. He kind of reminds me of that cop you got the hots for.”

Violet pressed the phone closer to her ear, sneaking a look at Reece to see if Leslie’s loud voice carried. It wouldn’t be the first time. He stared obliviously out the windshield. “Well, have fun. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

She slipped the phone back into her purse. “So how long until this meeting?” She noticed the dashboard clock read almost nine o’clock.

“A couple hours maybe.”

The rest of the drive to her place was spent staring out the window as the light mist changed to a heavy downpour. When he pulled into her driveway,

she opened the door and made a dash for it. Even the short sprint didn't save her from getting halfway drenched. Made worse by the fact that her keys to the main door weren't in her purse.

Reece caught up to her. "What's the hold up?"

She dug into her bag, convinced she'd missed them. "I'm looking...for my keys." Where the hell were they? Had she lost them in her fall through the fence? She tried to remember whether or not her purse had been open or closed when she'd taken her little stroll around Mrs. Bourne's back yard.

Damn it. "Maybe I left them in your car."

Reece sighed, but turned and plunged back into the pouring rain.

Violet stared at the doorknob. "Patefacio." The handle turned easily in her hand. "I got it," she called over her shoulder.

Slipping off her shoes, Violet headed down the hall of her bungalow and straight for her bedroom. Her dress was plastered to her skin, and she wanted out of it before Reece saw her rather erect nipples poking through the wet material.

Or did she?

She paused in front of her open closet door. No. Getting involved with him beyond this would not work out. No point in torturing herself. Although it would be fun to torture him, just a little.

"Oh good, you're changing." Reece strolled into her room like he'd been there a hundred times before. This was one of the rare times she could actually appreciate her mother's neat freak ways rubbing off on her. There wasn't a bra or a pair of questionable underwear in sight.

Violet frowned as his words sank in. Keeping her front averted, she asked, "What is wrong with what I'm wearing?" She happened to know this dress earned her the occasional long, hot look, so he couldn't mean it wasn't sexy enough, could he?

"It's just not appropriate," he said vaguely.

“We’re going to a rave. I don’t think a pant suit will work.”

He flipped through the clothes hanging in her closet. “Don’t you have something less...revealing?”

She grabbed the turtleneck sweater he’d snagged from a hanger and replaced it. “Maybe you didn’t hear me. It’s a rave.”

He took a step towards her, his voice low and smooth. “And I can’t keep my eyes off you in that dress.”

Violet shivered, his proximity setting off a chain reaction of hot bursts that zipped along her nerve endings. She tipped her chin up. “I’m not changing.” She didn’t care that the dress was too wet to wear out at this point. He wasn’t going to tell her what to do.

“Take off the dress.”

“Make me.” As soon as the words left her mouth, she realized the challenge in them.

“We don’t have time for this.” Reece made no move to back away. Instead his gaze focused on her lips.

Her stomach clenched. The tightening between her thighs pulsed under his hungry stare. “I’d say we have a problem then.”

Reece took the last step separating them. He planted one hand against the closet door next to her head. “And what do you suggest we do about it?” His mouth hovered an inch above her jaw.

Violet closed her eyes. “You’re the cop. You tell me.”

He pushed the thin strap of her dress off her shoulder. “I thought I already had.”

“Well, now. I think this is where I tell you to back the fuck away from my sister, Prescott.”

Violet froze. Kicking herself for not locking the door after they came in, she gave her brother a faint smile. “Hi Finn.”

Chapter Three

Violet wasn't fooled by her brother's relaxed posture. Not when the glare he gave Reece confirmed this could get very ugly, very quickly if she didn't diffuse the situation.

"We're dating," she announced.

She wasn't sure who looked more stunned, Finn or Reece.

Finn pushed away from the door. "Come again?"

Only a year separated the two of them, which made him even more protective of her than Dante was. Telling him she'd been forced to play a part in Reece's investigation would have ended with a fist flying. No matter how she explained it, she knew Finn would blame Reece for getting her involved. Violet shuddered to think just how ticked he'd get if he thought Reece put her life at risk. This way she forced Finn to accept the fact that he'd just walked into her room and found her within a inch of begging Reece to take her dress off like it had already happened a dozen times.

And the one thing her older brother had always been good for was never depriving her of what made her happy. If he thought Reece was what she wanted, he'd back off. Hopefully.

"How long has this been going on?" Finn directed his question at Reece.

Reece still hadn't moved away from her. "It's pretty recent."

"Does Dante know?"

Violet rolled her eyes. "I'm a grown woman. I do not need to clear the men I date with you or Dante."

"Well maybe you should."

"And maybe you should try harder to remember the names of the women you go out with."

"Ouch," Reece mumbled.

Ignoring him, Violet stared at Finn. He glanced back and forth between the two of them as though something didn't add up. He finally aimed his I'll-take-it-out-on-you look at Reece. "Let's go to the kitchen and chat a bit, Prescott."

"Goody." Reece made a show of brushing his lips across hers with just enough possessiveness to make her insides liquefy before he followed Finn down the hall.

Left alone, she tried not to think of what Finn would say to Reece, or worse, what he would do to him when she was forced to say things didn't work out between them. She wasn't even seeing the guy, and yet the thought of not dating him made her chest tighten.

Pushing it out of her mind, she stared at her closet. So Reece couldn't keep his eyes off her? She dug a slinky red dress out of the back of her closet, one she wore for Halloween last year. Violet smiled and laid it on her bed. After quickly changing out of her wet dress, she yanked on a plain white tee shirt and jeans, and headed for the kitchen. The two minute head start was more than enough time for Finn to shoot his mouth off.

She found them in opposite corners, gazes deadlocked on each other in some childish battle of wills. Violet rolled her eyes. She was used to Finn's intimidation tactics, and Reece seemed to be holding up just fine. Wondering if this was a contest to see who spoke first, Violet positioned herself between them. "Coffee?"

"No thanks," they said in unison, then glowered at each other over that too. Men.

"So." She grabbed a mug for herself and turned the coffee maker on. She didn't feel like coffee at all, but it gave her something to do. "No hot date tonight?"

Finn didn't spare her a glance. "I forgot who I was seeing tonight."

Violet averted her face, keeping her smile aimed at the window, hearing the wounded pride in her brother's voice.

Reece was the first one to break his and Finn's, *I am man, watch me piss the farthest* staring contest. "Is it okay if I use the phone in your room to make a few calls?"

"Sure."

Finn waited until Reece left before he arched a brow. "Does he always ask for permission to use the phone when he's here?"

"He's just polite." Violet studied the countertop. "Don't give me a hard time about this, Finn."

"Now why would I give you a hard time about dating a cop? They deal in facts and evidence and have a proven track record of being the last type of people that ever understand us."

"I know." And it hurt to know Finn was right. But she wasn't with Reece, not really, so it would be stupid to let the reminder get to her.

"Did you tell him about us? Tell him you come for a long distinguished line of witches and warlocks?"

"What do you think?"

Finn squeezed her hand. "I think that I want to see my baby sister with someone who will accept her for what she is." He pulled her into his arms. "A total pain in the ass."

Violet would have jabbed him in the gut if he didn't have his arms wrapped protectively around her.

Finn laughed, the sound as familiar to her as her own. While she took after her mother, Finn inherited the dark looks in the family from their father's side like their oldest sister Riley.

His light blue eyes were playful now as he studied her. "But just because he's what you want, doesn't mean I have to like it, or him."



"The feeling is mutual." Reece, having finished updating Sloane about his late night meeting with Strickland, chose that moment to walk back into the kitchen.

Violet flashed him an apologetic look. Finn on the other hand looked amused. That smug smile was damn irritating at the best of times. Given the way the night had gone so far, the only upside being kissing Violet, Reece would have really enjoyed wiping it off Finn's face.

Violet must have read his thoughts, because she pushed away from the counter and set herself between them. "Do I need to remind you two that we're not on the playground anymore?"

Reece wrapped an arm around Violet's waist and tugged her back against him. "You're right." He nuzzled Violet's neck and watched Finn's expression darken. He'd let himself feel guilty about using Violet to annoy her brother later. Right now it felt damn good watching that Calder trademark cocky grin dissolve.

Violet's heel crushed his toes. He bit the inside of his cheek. Obviously she knew what he was doing and didn't appreciate it. "Sorry," he whispered in her ear, lingering there for a moment. Reece straightened and gave Finn his best shit-eating grin. Now the guy would wonder what he'd just said to Violet. If nothing else, when this was done, Reece would at least have this memory to recall the next time his path crossed with Finn's. And given their family's

exasperating tendency to wind up at the center of one fiasco or another, it wouldn't be long coming.

"I should go." Finn didn't move, but his gaze drifted above Reece.

His curiosity getting the better of him, Reece looked over his shoulder. Nothing of interest was behind him. A couple shelves, some plants and a few knickknacks. Maybe his first assumption was correct. Finn Calder, although smooth as they came, was still missing a few cards from the deck. Why else would he be staring at nothing? It certainly wasn't the first time Reece saw that look on his face. Then again, he remembered Violet having that same odd look right before David's beer erupted all over him.

When Reece brought his attention back to the siblings in front of him, he saw Violet shake her head at Finn.

"Don't," she warned.

Finn rolled his eyes. "I wasn't going to do anything."

Why did it feel like he was missing something here? He waited for one of them to say something.

"I'll see you at dinner on Sunday." Finn paused. "Do Mom and Dad know about him?"

"I haven't had the chance to talk to them about it."

Guilt poked at Reece's chest at the thought of how he'd not only dragged Violet into this, but now he had her lying to her family about it. The minute she'd told Finn they were seeing each other he knew it was because she was worried about Finn overreacting. Reece's male pride took a minor blow that she was concerned her big brother might hurt him. After he got past the shock of her announcement, he was bizarrely pleased that she thought enough of him to want to protect him.

The corner of Finn's mouth hitched up as he stared at Reece. "You should come to dinner. Meet the whole Calder clan."

“So you can grill me, you mean.” The comment came out with more of a bite than he intended. Then again, given the hard time Finn and Dante delighted in giving him, the thought of being surrounded by a whole pack of Calders left Reece feeling a little—okay a lot—intimidated. And he sure as hell wasn’t easily intimidated. Somehow he had a vibe that Violet’s calmer nature made her more a black sheep in the family. From what he’d seen of Finn and Dante—not to mention their sister, Riley, and cousin, Sawyer—he would do well to not subject himself to a full evening of their button pushing.

Finn frowned, his lips parting. But the words that came out of his mouth were too mumbled to understand.

Reece started to ask him what he’d said.

Something cracked him in the head. Grimacing at the sting, Reece reached up to rub his head and found it covered in soil. The pot that had moments ago been seated on the shelf above his head now lay on the floor at his feet, most of its contents now spread out across his shoulders and head.

Violet glared at Finn. “Go.”

Finn held up his hands.

“Save it,” Violet snapped.

Reece might have bothered to ask them what their problem was if he wasn’t looking at the window to see if a breeze hadn’t somehow toppled the plant. More than likely it had been perched too close to the edge, maybe from the last time she’d watered it.

With the three inches of soil now covering his head, he was definitely going to need a shower before he could meet with Strickland.

Despite Violet’s scowl, Finn beamed. “Have a good night.”

Violet followed Finn to the door, forcing Reece to stay put or make more of a mess in her kitchen. She wasn’t gone long, but the soil that worked down the inside of his collar made him itch.

Grabbing a mop bucket from a storage closet, she held it up to him. "Bend your head."

Reece shook out his hair, cursing Finn the entire time. Somehow this was his fault. At the very least it made Reece feel better to put the blame at his door.

"Here, take your shirt off. I'll get it cleaned up."

Hands on the top button, Reece paused. "Strickland could call anytime." Or not for another few hours, but he couldn't be sure.

Violet held out her hand. "Then why are you still wearing it?"

He started to work on the buttons.

She batted his hands away. "Let me." Violet nodded to his now soil covered hands. "You'll just make more of a mess."

While she started at the top and moved down, so did his gaze. He studied her striking green eyes, nose with the light sprinkle of freckles, cheeks that almost looked like they were getting pinker, and finally her full, sensual mouth. He didn't risk glancing any lower. He'd already spent enough time pretending not to notice the tantalizing cleavage that made him want to tug her dress down earlier and draw one firm nipple into his mouth.

His cock throbbed at the thought.

Violet pushed his shirt off his shoulders, her palms warm against his skin. She raised her head, and the longing in her gaze struck him like a match to a stream of gasoline.

Before he could haul her closer, she stepped back. "I'll see what I can do with this." She stopped in the doorway. "Use my bathroom. There isn't a shower in the half-bath out here."

"No problem." He headed back down to her room, telling himself with every step he needed to stop screwing around. Now was not the time to give in to the potent desire clawing at his insides. In her bathroom, he stripped down. Reece tried not to pay attention to the details in the room, the clues that told him

what kind of person Violet was. The more he knew about her, the more he'd want her. Right now he needed to stay focused, and thinking of her standing under the spray, water trailing down her naked body was not the best way to accomplish that.

Turning the dial more toward the cold side, Reece moved under the water. Biting back an oath, he quickly adjusted the setting to go easier on himself. He shoved his face and head under the steady stream and groped for the closest bottle of shampoo. Not having much choice, he set his skepticism over the fruity brand that promised extra shine aside, and tackled his still grimy head.

By the time he'd scoured his body and dried off, he was sufficiently in control of the lust still shimmering under his skin.

Or so he believed until he wrapped the towel around his waist and pulled open the bathroom door. Hoping to find a comb on her dresser, the last thing he expected to see was Violet standing in front of her bed, that same, *where did you come from* look on her gorgeous face. He shouldn't have been surprised to see her there since this was her house after all. He might have even made it back into the bathroom if she'd been wearing more than a lavender bra and matching thong.

All the promises he'd made to himself about not touching her and complicating an already complicated situation went right out the window.

Violet stood motionless as he crossed the room.

Reece didn't say anything, didn't ask for permission, didn't admit he had no clue what he was doing, or that nothing mattered right now but how much he wanted her.

Badly.

In one smooth, possessive motion, he hauled her to him, trapping her arms between them. He tilted her chin back and slanted his mouth across hers.



Violet moaned as his mouth slid over hers, his tongue stroking a hot path inside when she parted her lips. Her pulse skipped under the ravenous contact. Violet hadn't expected him to be finished in the bathroom so quickly, thought she had time to change before he emerged. Now with his hands sliding down her back, kneading her bottom, she could do nothing more than cling to him.

The hard press of his erection bumped against her lower belly. Her body clenched. Another whimper lodged in the back of her throat with every twist of the wicked sensations coiling tighter between her legs.

Reece kissed her fast and deep, the hunger she'd only glimpsed in his eyes evident in the low groan that rumbled in his chest. Hands on her waist, he traced the edge of her jaw and neck with his tongue. Each shivery scuff and nip made her grip his shoulders.

Hooking her bra strap, he pressed a soft kiss to her shoulder and tugged it down. Almost as though he was afraid she was going to stop him at any moment, he tentatively slid his palm under her breast. With the first graze of Reece's thumb across her nipple, she let out the breath she'd been holding.

Deep brown eyes searched her face. "If this can't go any farther, tell me now." His thumb continued to rub back and forth. "Please," he added, his voice strained.

Violet closed her hand over his. "Don't stop."

A look of pure, primal intent crossed Reece's face. She didn't have time to worry about what it would mean afterwards. His other hand traveled up the inside of her leg and settled between her thighs. Through her panties, his palm was hot and firm as he pressed it against her. Violet bit her lip when his fingers teased the flimsy waistband. Slipping beneath the lace edging, he raked through the curls and stroked damp flesh. The first slippery caress made the ache deep in her core intensify.

Reece pulled back, pressed a kiss to her stomach and sat on the edge of her bed. "Take off your bra."

Caught off guard, Violet blinked at him.

He grinned back, the intimate smile all she needed to feel bold enough to do as he requested.

She undid the front clasp and let it fall to the floor.

He ran his gaze down her body. "Come here."

Violet arched a brow. "I don't think you should be giving orders when you're not on duty, Detective."

"But I am." The reminder did nothing to stem the slow rush of heat chugging through her.

His eyes glittered. "And I'm about to make my girlfriend scream for me to fuck her over and over." Reece reached out and gripped her hips. Tugging her closer, his mouth skimmed across her belly.

Violet shuddered, sinking her fingers in his hair.

He licked a path around her nipple.

"Don't tease," she pleaded.

Eyes locked on her, Reece grasped her nipple between his lips and sucked hard. She rocked up on the balls of her feet, his name on her lips. He did the same to her other breast, his wet, greedy mouth nipping and tugging until she was ready to come from that alone. Almost as though he realized it, he drew back, and cupped her behind, his fingers following the seam of her thong between her cheeks to her sex.

Reece studied her face as he continued to explore, his teasing insistent as he circled her clit. She squeezed her legs together, grappling for the threads of release that whispered through her core.

His deep laugh rolled over her. He tugged her panties all the way down and turned her around so she faced the closet. Next, Reece tugged her into his lap, her back cuddling his chest.

Starting at her neck, he kissed his way to her collarbone, his hands once more occupied with her breasts. Gently, he pinched her nipples. Violet pressed her lips together, but the moan escaped anyway.

“Don’t hold out on me. How else will I know what feels good.” Slowly he trailed a finger down her belly, past her navel and between her parted legs.

Violet gripped his thighs, instinctively bowing back against him in delicious anticipation. The action brought his cock in full contact with her naked bottom. Only his towel separated them. That knowledge alone made her internal temperature jump a hundred degrees.

Reece outlined the path from her clit to where she most wanted to feel him with such a precise and agonizing slowness Violet wanted to yell at him. Instead she gave a light bounce against him.

He nipped her neck. “Play nice.”

“Oh, I am.” She rocked back, harder.

“It’s gonna be like that, huh?” He pinched her clit, rolling the hooded flesh back and forth between his fingers.

Violet whimpered. She tried to reach behind her, needing to touch him.

One strong arm caught her around the middle, flattening her arms to her sides. “You’re not moving an inch until I make you come,” he promised darkly.

One thick finger slid into her. The exquisite invasion made her rear up, eager for more, more than just his hand. She wanted his cock filling her, wanted him driving into her.

Wanted. Wanted. Wanted.

Another finger pumped into her. She moaned for more.

He shifted back up to her clit, swirled purposely around the sensitive knot, at the same time tugging on one quivering nipple. Between that and the carnal pressure of his cock pressing against her ass with only the terry cloth barrier separating them, Violet felt the first real hint of orgasm curl through her.

Arching her back, she clamped her legs as tight as she dared. His breath was hot against her neck as he alternately sank a finger into her and flicked the pad of his thumb over her clit.

Violet moaned at the rippling spasms that gripped her body with echo after echo of raw, scraping bliss.

Spent, she relaxed against him, the wild rhythm of her heart near deafening in her ears.

Reece tipped her head towards him and kissed her thoroughly. “Not a bad start.” He slid his arm under her legs and turned, laying her on her back. A slow, sexy smile curved his lips. One hand rested on the towel that looked ready to drop on its own any second.

Then his cell phone rang.

Chapter Four

Reece stared at the skimpy red dress that dripped off Violet's every curve. This one made the black dress damn near matronly. "I thought we covered the whole 'wear something less revealing thing'?"

Her sly smile wasn't the least bit apologetic. "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that." When he continued to frown at her, she added, "I'm not changing. The car is here."

"He'll wait." Reece had been surprised to see a limo waiting for them in Violet's driveway, but then Nicholas Strickland liked to make an entry wherever he went. Even so, the driver could wait for hours as far as Reece was concerned. Taking her to the rave dressed so provocatively might inspire a small riot. At least it would if any of the men that spotted her were a fraction as turned on as he still was.

Violet shook her head. "No."

"Violet." He wanted to wince at the desperation leaking into his voice.

She strolled past him. Reece could have sworn she gave her hips an extra sway just to drive him crazy. And damn it, it was working. With nothing better to look at, he admired the sweet curve of her behind, all too clearly remembering it grinding against him.

Following her outside, Reece closed the door, hating that Strickland knew where Violet lived. One more thing that was his fault. At the end of this he'd have a lot to make up for. He'd been working toward this initial meeting for

weeks. Even knowing that made him curse the timing of Strickland's call. Violet had been in his arms, naked and so damn hot...

If ever there was a sure sign he was letting his attraction to her become something that could easily interfere with his case, this was definitely it.

Reece held the limo door open for Violet, waving the driver back to his seat. She slipped inside, purposely hiking the dress up to show the enticing shadow between her legs if the wicked grin curving her lips was any indication.

He slid in beside her, noting the glass was down between the backseat and the driver. "Is the rave happening very far from here?"

"About ten minutes."

Violet winked at Reece. "I guess we have some time to kill."

Before he could interpret the look in her eyes, she straddled him, locking her arms around his neck. Settling herself against him, she rubbed against his rather obvious erection.

He cocked an eyebrow at her willingness to play the part. "You do realize we have an audience."

Violet shrugged, the playful expression in her eyes a new form of torture. "You know I like it when people watch."

And just when he thought he couldn't get any harder.

"Honey," he warned. *This* he couldn't take, not when he'd been so close to possessing her the way he'd been dreaming about for months.

She kneaded his shoulders. "You need to loosen up. You're too tense." Leaning forward, Violet traced the edge of his jaw with her mouth.

Reece gripped her hips to keep her still. He needed to talk. Talking would take his mind off the voice that insisted he work his zipper down and demand she ride him.

Okay, so that image wasn't helping.

He brushed her hair away from her face. "You know this isn't necessary, right?" he whispered. Normally he wouldn't complain about any seductions in the back of a limo, but she needed to know he didn't expect this.

She nodded. "But it's fun." Violet nibbled on his bottom lip and tugged it between hers.

Fun? Torture.

She readjusted herself on his lap. One more exquisite rub like that and he just might embarrass himself.

He tried once more for conversation. "So when business is looked after, how about we take a trip?"

Violet sighed. "Not another topless resort?"

He would have laughed at the pout in her voice, but the image of Violet stretched out by the poolside, her full breasts available to him at any time...

Reality reached in and crushed the hot daydream. He and Violet weren't really a couple and there wouldn't be a trip. That didn't stop him from being curious and wanting to get to know her better, playing or not. "Where would you prefer to go?"

She undid the first few buttons of his shirt and slipped her hand inside. He still didn't know how she managed to get the shirt so clean in the short amount of time. Feeling her fingers trail across his chest obliterated all thoughts of her laundering abilities.

"Well, I was thinking someplace cooler, a ski lodge maybe. Fireplace, definitely a hot tub. You...naked."

He bit his tongue to stop himself from asking the driver if they were there yet. Talking was getting him nowhere but more turned on, how that was even possible he couldn't begin to fathom.

"Baby," she purred.

Reece closed his eyes. "Yeah?"

"Tell me again what you thought the first time you met me."

Underneath the playful tone he registered an honest question. He opened his eyes and found her soft smile was curious.

Reece tucked her hair behind her ear. "I thought you were the most bewitching woman I'd laid eyes on since...ever." Though the answer felt ridiculously lame, it was the truth. No other woman had occupied a fraction of his thoughts in a long while the way she did.

She inhaled softly, her fingers tightening on his shoulders.

"And what about me?" he prompted. Now she had him wondering.

The siren act faded as she chewed thoughtfully on her bottom lip. "I thought for such a great looking guy, you were a real pain in the—"

He shot forward and captured her mouth, swallowing her laugh with a kiss that made his blood erupt like a solar flare.

Violet kissed him back with equal parts urgency and tenderness, both of which just made him hold her tighter.

Slowly, she pulled away. "You didn't let me finish. I was going to say that the first time we met, part of me hoped you would ask me out so I could find out if you kissed as well as I imagined."

"Guess you're just fortunate that I'm better than even your wildest dreams."

She rolled her eyes. "And twice as cocky."

"You had your chance to cut and run," he teased.

The gentle tilt of her lips gripped his heart. "I guess you're just too deep under my skin."

Before Reece could respond, the limo driver interrupted. "Here we are."

With all the subtleness of a semi crashing through a guardrail and over a bridge, the cop in him snapped to full awareness. They were about to walk straight into the lion's den and Reece wished he was better prepared for this. With no weapon, no wire and no backup save Sloane—if she'd managed to follow them—they were pretty much on their own. A risk he'd been willing to take before Violet's involvement. Now...things were different. Strickland hadn't

given him the exact location of the rave, other than it being in the general vicinity where any number of raves could be taking place on a Friday night. If not for that and the dealer's tendency to change the meeting place at the last minute, they could have had a few people already in place.

As the driver climbed out and moved around to the other side of the car, Reece caught Violet's arm to keep her from moving immediately off his lap. "When this is over—"

The door opened and David Strickland poked his head in the limo. David snickered seeing Violet still on his lap. "If I had known you were going to fuck her in the limo I'd have been along for the ride."

Violet tensed, and Reece didn't relax his grip in case she was tempted to reach out and grab the asshole's neck, like Reece wanted to.

David stood aside while Violet slid out with Reece on her heels. Even in the rundown part of the warehouse district, tonight's rave had attracted attention, as did most of Nicholas Strickland's last-minute parties. A long line wound down the sidewalk. A few murmured complaints when they skipped ahead and walked straight through the main doors.

Music thundered from the speakers positioned around the open area. Most of the couple hundred people jammed into the room already gyrated on the dance floor. The air was clogged with smoke from some hidden effects machine, along with the smell of pot and cigarettes.

David wove through the crowd, glaring and shoving at anyone who didn't move out of his way. Reece kept a firm grip on Violet so as not to lose her to the crowd. Instead of leading them to a private room, David stopped in front of a wide square table close to one of the makeshift bars. Looking more like a GQ cover model than a drug dealer, Nicholas Strickland smiled at them. With thick black hair, cold blue eyes and a crisp smile, he'd already earned a reputation for himself as someone not to screw with.

Nicholas gestured to the empty seats. "Join me."

Not relinquishing his hold on Violet, Reece sat down. Beside him, Violet smiled, seeming at ease under the circumstances but for the tension he felt in her tight grip.

“Good to finally meet you Mr. Dayton.”

Reece nodded. “Thanks for providing your limo.”

“My pleasure.” Strickland’s gaze passed over Violet with interest before returning to Reece. “I hear you enjoyed the ride.”

Reece wasn’t all that surprised Strickland had been in contact with his driver already. The forced grin came easy enough. “As I said, very nice of you.”

“Would your girlfriend prefer to wait by the bar while we talk?”

Given that Violet was already deep enough into this, Reece preferred keeping her close. “She’s fine.”

“Very well.” Frowning, Nicholas held up his cell phone. After glancing at the display, he pressed it to his ear. “Yes?”

Reece stared at Violet, but kept his ears on the conversation. He tunneled his fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck and tugged her closer.

Strickland’s voice raised a notch. “This is not what I’d been hoping to hear. Exactly when will...” Nicholas paused. He nodded at Reece and Violet. “Would you excuse me another few minutes? I imagine your girlfriend enjoys dancing.”

Left with little choice, Reece pushed to his feet and tugged Violet along behind him. With the loud beat, even standing only two feet away from the table prevented him from hearing any details of the call. A rumor had surfaced a couple days ago Strickland might be expecting a shipment soon, but so far no one had come through with a solid tip. He couldn’t help but wonder if that call could have to do with the rumors.

Keeping Strickland in sight, Reece found them a spot at the edge of the crowd.

Violet draped one arm around his neck, her other hand covered his heart. “How is it he doesn’t already know who you are?”

"He's still new to the area, and since the lead narcotic detectives are known, they needed someone fairly new to the area as well to play the part tonight."

"They put you in a dangerous position."

Reece grinned. "Worried about me?"

"Just thinking that a ski lodge might not be such a good vacation choice if you end up getting shot in the leg."

"No one is getting shot tonight," he promised.

Reece's gaze roamed past Violet's head and connected with a familiar face. He worked through his mind, tensing when he recognized the man watching him curiously. He'd had busted the low-end dealer eight months back, right after his transfer. Reece had pulled him over for drinking and driving after he saw the guy's car weave from one side of the road to the other, nearly taking out a group of teens crossing the street, and wound up busting him for possession.

Not good.

He needed to get Violet out of there now.



Violet tried to turn in Reece's arms to see what captured his attention so completely, but his firm grip prevented her from moving. "What's wrong?"

"We have a problem."

Reece shifted her around, his gaze locked on something beyond her left shoulder.

Awkwardly, she glanced behind her and watched a man with long red hair approach Nicholas's table.

"Let's go," Reece ordered.

He started to pull her through the crowd towards the main doors. Tension radiated through him as he did everything but throw the people between them and the closest exit across the room.

Three feet from the exit, David materialized in front of them. "I don't believe my brother finished his business with you."

Reece nodded in her direction. "My girlfriend needs some air."

"Later," David said, jerking his head for them to return to the table.

"We just need a minute."

David gave them a slick grin. "So does he." As expected David pulled his gun on them. "Let's go."

"Occumbo telum," Violet whispered.

David fumbled the weapon as though it were coated in butter.

Reece took the opening and delivered a sharp jab to his jaw. The younger man staggered back under the unexpected blow.

Two strong arms gripped Violet's upper arms and yanked her backwards. Knowing instinctively whoever held her wasn't the good guy, she tried to jerk free. When her efforts only made the man hold her tighter, she closed her eyes and reached inwards for the heat she sought. "Estus Sursum."

Yelping, the man released her, but not before another of Nicholas Strickland's men jabbed a gun into Reece's side. More men moved to the edge of the crowd to surround them.

Righting himself, David grinned and swiped at the blood on the corner of his mouth. He rolled his shoulders and turned away from them as though to lead them back to Nicholas's table. David took two steps, then whirled around, his clenched fist smashing into Reece's face. Violet didn't even see it coming, let alone have enough time to prevent it. That was the drawback of magic. It only worked as fast as the person at the wheel.

David prodded her towards his brother's table. "I do hope my brother lets me play with you for a while first."

She believed he meant it, but was determined not to let her fear show. Bastards like David got off on it.

He shoved her into the table, gripped her hair to keep her upright when she stumbled. "Take a seat, bitch," he snarled.

Reece was pushed into the seat next to her. She watched Reece's sharp gaze move to the man standing behind Strickland.

Nicholas's shrewd eyes narrowed on Reece. "This him?"

The man with the red hair bobbed his head.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah."

Without a doubt Reece had been made. The cold knot in the pit of her stomach wrenched tighter.

Strickland *tsked* and glanced at Violet. "Are you a cop, too?"

"No. Private investigator." There had been no point in admitting that, but for the one flash of nervousness that filtered into Nicholas's eyes, it was worth it.

Without looking at Reece, Nicholas verified, "Is she telling the truth, Detective?"

"Yes."

"I see. Take them next door. I have a couple things to take care of, and then I'll be along to conclude our meeting."

David yanked her up. Violet bit the inside of her cheek as sharp pain radiated down up her arm. He didn't seem to care that he nearly wrenched her arm from its socket before he propelled her along, his hand firmly planted between her shoulder blades. With the gun still pressed to Reece's side, she was worried any magic might result in him getting shot.

The music faded as they were led into the other half of the warehouse, this part damp-smelling and visibly run down. Strickland's thugs forced them through a side door and down a narrow hallway, into a small room.

David stopped in front of an old walk-in freezer. He opened the door and gestured for them to go in. "Sit tight."

With little choice, Violet preceded Reece into the unused refrigeration unit. The door slammed solidly behind them.

Violet surveyed the small space. "Isn't this a little clichéd?"

Reece frowned at her. Something on the other side of the door clicked into place.

Locked in.

Reece listened at the door.

"Are they still out there?"

Massaging his jaw where David had punched him, he scanned their new surroundings. "I don't think so. They likely think it's safe to assume we're not going anywhere."

"He'll kill us won't he?"

Reece didn't answer her. She found little comfort in his silence. The way she saw things, they had three options. One, wait for Strickland to come back, which would end with them dead. Two, try a mind cast to reach one of her brothers mentally, which could end with Reece dead when one of those overprotective fools got a hold of him. Or three, try something else.

Pacing like Reece, she stopped near the door. "Patefacio," she whispered.

"What?"

She turned around. "Are you sure it's locked?"

He gave her a you-couldn't-possibly-think-they'd-be-that-stupid look.

Violet shrugged. "The thing is old, maybe you just need to rattle the door a bit or something."

He arched a brow.

"Fine." She crossed her arms. "Let's just sit here and wait for him to come back."

Reece sighed. "Would it make you feel better if I tried the door again?"

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Before he hit the release handle, he paused. “I’m sorry I got you into this.”

“I’ll let you make it up to me over dinner.” And sex.

“We have to...” Reece tried the handle, “...get out of here first.” The door clicked open.

He shot her an incredulous look.

Violet contained her smile as Reece stared at the half open door skeptically. “Like I said, probably an old door.”

Reece still didn’t look convinced, but that didn’t stop him from grabbing her hand and pulling her along after him.

They nearly made it down the short hall.

“I think we still have a couple things to discuss, Detective.”

Violet froze at the sound of Nicholas Strickland’s voice.

Chapter Five

Reece hauled Violet to his side, his eyes trained on the gun in David's hand. Judging by David's calculated gaze, he didn't need much of an excuse to pull the trigger.

This time Nicholas also carried a gun. "I don't believe I gave you permission to leave yet, Detective."

Okay, that polite *Detective* thing was wearing on Reece's nerves. "I wasn't crazy about waiting for you in the meat locker. Drafty."

Nicholas smiled, a cold slash of white teeth. "I'm not sure how you got out of there—"

"Harry was probably in such a rush to go meet the shipment he didn't pay attention," David rambled.

Nicholas glared at him. "Shut up."

"What?" David used his weapon to motion towards Reece and Violet. "We're gonna shoot them. Who are they gonna tell?"

"I said...*shut up*."

"Nick," David began.

The tension between the two brothers stretched to a brittle edge, just shy of the breaking point. David scowled, but didn't press the issue.

Recognizing a weak spot, Reece focused on the younger Strickland brother. "Is he gonna tell you what to do in prison too?"

David all but waved his gun in Reece's face. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Reece shrugged. "This place is likely only a minute or so away from being raided."

Nicholas smirked. "I doubt you'd make a good poker player."

David on the other hand looked nervous. "Cops, Nick. We should go."

"He's lying."

Feigning a calm he didn't feel, Reece relaxed his grip on Violet's shoulder. "Believe what you want. Maybe if you tell me about this shipment you're expecting and who sent it, the DA might go easier on you."

"Jesus," David cursed, a thread of panic edging his voice. "Let's go, Nick."

"No." Nicholas didn't appear convinced. "We're not done here."

"I think Penitentiary Orange will look good on you." Reece directed the comment to David.

Rattled, David started to pace. "Let's just go get the shipment ourselves."

"No." Nicholas didn't even spare him a glance this time.

"We'll take her for leverage." David lunged for Violet. Reece jerked her behind him, snapping his hand across David's forearm in the process.

The gun clattered across the floor.

Stunned, David was slow to respond, allowing Reece an opening. He smashed his fist into David's face.

The younger man howled, his hands covering his nose. Blood dripped through his fingers.

"You broke my fuckin' nose." He took an awkward swing that Reece was ready for and easily sidestepped.

Reece, brought his elbow around, cracking it in the middle of David's upper back. The other man collapsed to the ground at his feet. Beside him, Reece heard Violet whimper, making him instantly aware he'd left her vulnerable. His insides went cold as he lifted his head.

Nicholas Strickland jabbed a gun into Violet's side. "Back off."

Violet's green eyes implored Reece to cooperate. Unprepared for the surge of protectiveness and the severe need to pound Strickland's face in, he didn't see David rear up.

The punch to Reece's stomach snatched his breath, but he forced himself to shake it off and straighten up.

Strickland shifted the gun from Violet to Reece. He didn't say anything, not even the clichéd "goodbye Detective" that Reece half expected. But the intent to kill flashed in Strickland's dark eyes all the same.

Violet said something, but Reece didn't register the words as adrenaline thundered through him. The gun fired and he automatically tried to jerk to the side.

It was the yelp of pain behind him that told Reece, Nicholas had missed.

David Strickland curled into a ball, his arms wrapped around his leg. He looked up at his brother with accusing eyes. "You son of a bitch!"

Nicholas looked the most surprised, taken aback just long enough for Violet to bury her heel in his shin. Strickland kept a hold of his gun, but Violet twisted away from him. A half second later he howled and dropped the gun, cradling his hand to his chest, his eyes wide.

Reece didn't waste a moment wondering why Strickland tossed his gun aside. Reece snatched it up

Violet stood pressed to the wall, an odd look of satisfaction curving her lips. Light bounced off the chunk of jade dangling around her neck, making it appear to glow.

Reece blinked, wondering if it had been just a trick of the light. Feeling him stare at her necklace, Violet shifted nervously and avoided meeting his gaze. An itch between his shoulder blades made him think he'd missed something important.

Sirens sounded outside less than three minutes after Reece used Strickland's cell phone and called in. In the back of his mind, he wasn't thinking about the case, but how they managed to get out of this situation when odds had been stacked against them from the beginning.



"She still here?"

Reece looked over his shoulder, his attention drawn from the gorgeous brunette asleep at his desk to his partner hovering in the doorway. "She wouldn't let anyone take her home."

Sloane cocked her head. "Do I still need to have that talk with her?"

"I got it covered."

She glanced back and forth between them and grinned. "Better go wake up sleeping beauty and get her tucked into bed. Better yet, tuck yourself in there with her, you look wrecked."

He felt it too. Thankfully David Strickland had caved pretty quick, not believing his brother had shot him by accident. With little convincing he offered up just enough details on contacts, tonight's shipments and bank account information that they could still manage to get a conviction even though things hadn't gone as planned.

Having done as much interrogating and paperwork as his brain could handle for the night, Reece walked towards Violet.

He gently nudged her shoulder.

"I had to," she mumbled.

Leaning over her, he shook her harder.

Her head snapped up so quick it caught him under the jaw. His teeth nipped the tip of his tongue. Reece bit back an oath. The pretty, sleepy eyes inches from his were the only thing that made the resulting sting tolerable.

Violet winced. "Sorry. "You okay?"

Reece pressed the tip of his injured tongue into his cheek and nodded.

Stretching her arms over her head in a movement that pushed her breast closer to the hand he rested on the edge of the desk, she asked, "What time is it?"

He should have been much too tired to even think about finishing what they'd started earlier that evening. "Just after two a.m." Guiding her to her feet, he ordered himself not to think about how warm her body felt when she bumped against him. "Let's get you home."

"You're all done?"

"For tonight anyway." He led her outside and down the sidewalk to where his car was parked. "So what were you dreaming about?"

Violet frowned.

"You were talking in your sleep," he added.

"What did I say?"

Reece frowned at the concern in her voice. "Something about, 'I had to'."

"I had to," she repeated vaguely, then lifted her shoulder in a shrug.

He could have told her that her car was parked in the nearby lot, but then he'd have to say goodnight now with no excuse to see her tomorrow. He wasn't willing to part ways just yet.

After he pulled up in front of her house, Reece walked her to the door. "So you think you might be up for an actual date sometime?"

She smiled. "I'd like that."

"Good." He took the last step separating them. Her lips parted eagerly under his, a soft whimper escaping her. He crushed her to him, his intention of a quick kiss shot to hell the second her tongue pushed past his lips. In the space of a few hours he'd gone from wanting her to *craving* her with an intensity that should have concerned him.

Reluctantly, he drew back. "You should go inside." Before he took her up against the door.

"Right," she said slowly. "Goodnight, Reece."

Somehow he made his legs work enough to get him back to his car. Sitting behind the wheel, he adjusted his pants to accommodate the almost painful erection. He leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes. Before the thought fully crossed his mind, he opened the door, climbed out and strode back to her front door.

She answered his impatient knock immediately.

He didn't wait for her to ask what he was doing. He hauled her to his chest, one hand splayed across her back, the other cupping her neck as he slanted his mouth across hers. He didn't stop kissing her until fire rushed through his bloodstream, and he knew without a doubt the only way to ease the hunger snapping through his veins would be to bury his cock deep within her.

Violet licked his bottom lip.

A groan expanded in his chest. "If you don't want me to spend the night..." If she said no, he didn't know how he'd make himself let go of her.

"You're not walking out that door until I'm done with you." Violet pushed his jacket off his shoulders.

He took his hands off her just long enough to close the door. "When will that be?"

Violet nipped his jaw. "I'll get back to you."

They were still in the hallway when her fingers went to the buttons on his shirt.

"You're not in a rush are you?" He pressed her into the wall.

"If I don't feel you in me soon...."

Her breathy confession made him want to yank her dress up and sink into her right there.

With his shirt open now, her palm slid up his chest, down his shoulder, sliding his shirt off. Violet took his hand and led him back to her bedroom. Just standing there, the bed still rumpled from last time, brought to mind the feel of her naked and writhing in his lap.

She dimmed the lights, then turned to face him.

Indecision warred within him as he debated watching her peel her dress off or doing it himself.

Impatience won out.

Lust shimmered in her eyes as he pushed one strap of her dress down her shoulder, then the other. The material pooled at her waist, revealing a black lace strapless bra that still hid her from him.

He skimmed his thumb over a puckered nipple and then bent and sucked it through the soft material.

Her breath hissed out. She pushed him back a step, reaching behind her back to release her bra. It fell to the floor.

“Try that again,” she begged.

More greedy this time, he latched onto a nipple and laved the tip with his tongue. Her lower half arched into him. His cock throbbed at the electrified contact, making it difficult not to just toss her down on the bed and fuck her until neither one of them could think straight.

Reece slipped a hand under her dress, found her panties were already damp. She parted her thighs to accommodate him. More than happy to give her what she sought, he palmed her sex, the pressure just enough to entice, but not enough to make her come. Not yet. He wanted to prolong that too.

Breath trembling past her lips, Violet ground herself against his hand, crying out when he slid past the lacy edge and sank a finger straight into her slick heat. Her fingers bit into his shoulder, her lips parting on a thready moan.

Withdrawing slowly, Reece circled her clit in a slow, lazy stroke before he pushed back in. Her hot walls tensed around him. If he didn't feel that tight fit wrapped around his cock soon...

Violet's head lolled back as he increased the tempo, pumping into her with short, fast digs that made her pant harder.

Abruptly, she stepped back and gave him a push towards the bed. "Sit," she ordered.

Grinning, he moved to comply. She stopped him with her hand at his waist. "No pants."

He wasted no time getting rid of them. "Fair enough."

Her green eyes scrolled the length of him before Violet perched on the edge of the bed, but made no move to touch him. He was just to the point of begging her to touch him when she bent and flicked her tongue across the head of his cock. In reaction, his hips lifted, damn near desperate to push his cock between her lips.

He expected more teasing, and cursed in pleasure when she gave one slow lick up his shaft then swallowed him deep. The heat of her mouth and tongue made him want to come right then. Only his determination to cling to the sheer pleasure of her mouth greedily taking him deeper, tugging and sucking, kept him together.

Rocking upwards he pumped into her mouth. Hot bursts zigzagged down his shaft. She shuttled one hand up and down, her tongue matching the mind-blowing rhythm.

Needing to touch her, Reece tugged at her waist until she was up on her hands and knees next to him, her tempting ass more than close enough to reach now. He reached between her thighs, sliding through her wet folds to stroke her clit. Her deep moan vibrated against his cock, shoving the ruthless sensation so far off the charts he knew no other woman had or ever would be

able make to make him feel like this. Like if he didn't lose himself in her now, didn't hear her scream his name right now, he never would.

He continued to strum the slick knot, her legs squeezing around his hand.

"Don't close me out now."

Obeying him, she widened her stance, allowing him to work deep inside her. The feverish pace of her mouth sliding and drawing on him increased as he thrust within her, then slowing when he eased off to trace a thumb around her clit.

Her hand tightened on his thigh. He knew she was close. Relentless now, he circled and plunged until she whimpered. Her inner muscles clamped down on him.

One more desperate pull of her mouth and his own orgasm ripped through in harsh, lashing waves.



Muscles nothing more than a watery rubber, Violet turned her face towards Reece and met the desire still raging in his eyes. The intensity of it made her shudder.

Reece gathered her into his arms and lifted her up, carrying her away from the bed. He muffled her surprised gasp with his mouth. Only a little less urgent and even more potent than before, Violet returned his kiss, desperate to communicate the bone deep longing that pitched through her middle.

Inside the bathroom, he turned on the shower and deposited her under the warm spray.

Violet sighed and closed her eyes as the warm water cascaded down her back.

Hands now lathered with soap slid down her belly. Another sigh, this one more in tune with the heat pooling once more deep in her core, Violet let her

head drop back. Reece's hands continued to soap her up. His fingers kneaded and stroked, massaging and teasing her body into full, demanding arousal.

She wanted to protest when he set her back under the spray, waiting as she rinsed off.

He shut off the shower and caught her around the waist before she could step out. "I want you beneath me."

The raw demand made her insides shake.

Dripping wet, she bent to retrieve a towel from the cupboard under the vanity. His hands on her hips surprised her.

"New plan," he groaned. "Do. Not. Move." He vanished into her bedroom returning only a few seconds later. She heard the tear of foil behind her before he placed his hands on either side of counter next to her.

Violet met his hungry gaze in the mirror over the vanity.

Reece cupped her breasts, his fingers lightly pinching the aching tips. Slow enough to drive her insane, his palm inched down past her navel and finally to her sex.

Instinctively, she tried to turn in his arms.

He flattened her hands on the counter top and gave her a sexier-than-hell grin as his fingers parted her cleft. His cock probed from behind and the dual contact made her moan echo in the steam-filled space.

In one smooth thrust he filled her, the fit so achingly hot and right, she cried out.

He immediately stilled.

She rocked back against him. "Don't stop."

Reassured, Reece held her gaze in the mirror and drove into her again. Each savage stroke made her feel like he was claiming her somehow. The possessive gleam in his eyes reached in and wrapped around her soul.

He tunneled through the damp curls and found her clit.

Violet pushed up on the balls of her feet. The electric threads twining through her sex snapped, and she shot over the edge.

He didn't let up, slamming into her over and over, her clenched muscles rippling as he worked deeper. Reece shuddered and groaned, then relaxed against her, his breath choppy and uneven as it rolled across the back of her neck.

She didn't want to move, not even when he grabbed a towel and dried what little moisture still clung to them.

The possessive arm he wrapped around her waist anchored her to him as he dragged her back to bed. Once she was tucked in next to him, he pulled the sheet over top of them.

His heart pounded strong and steady under her head.

His hand lazily trailed up and down her arm. "I never would have guessed we would have ended up here earlier today."

Violet smiled. "Me neither."

"How long you think until Finn corners me?"

"Tomorrow." She lifted her head in time to see him grimace.

"They're gonna kill me when they hear about you being involved in this."

"They know I can take care of myself." But they'd still be pissed.

Reece gave her an odd look before his attention fixed on her neck.

"What?"

He fingered her amulet. "Your necklace. I've never seen one like this before."

"Family heirloom."

A frown tugged at his brows.

"What's on your mind?" Not regret, she prayed.

"I was just thinking about how I thought it almost glowed earlier."

Violet stilled. She waited for him to add something more.

"Must have just been the light."

Violet heard the uncertainty in his tone. Not knowing what tomorrow would bring, she forced herself to lay her head back down and close her eyes.

She knew the cop in him didn't let inconsistencies or questions go. Given the curious look on his face as he toyed with her amulet moments ago, she knew something was brewing in the back of his mind. Part of her wished she had the courage to ask him about it now. The other part was too afraid that whatever time she might have with him would be snatched away if she told him the truth about herself too soon.

Praying that no odd details about their encounter with Nicholas Strickland would surface, Violet willed herself to sleep.

Her family's secret was still safe.

For now.

Chapter Six

“You slept with him?”

Violet held the phone away from her ear as Leslie squealed. “Are you done?”

“No,” Leslie laughed. “Is he still there?”

“Yes.” Violet couldn’t help the wide smile that tugged at her lips. Leslie’s call had distracted her from the fact that three times she’d started to make coffee only to get lost in her worry over the one thing Reece still didn’t know about her.

“So where is he now?”

Violet toyed with the empty coffee mug she held. “In bed.”

“So why aren’t you in there giving him the ride of his life?”

“Good question.” Reece murmured from directly behind her. Strong arms locked around her waist, his naked chest molding to her back. The thin cotton night shirt she’d slipped on after getting up did nothing to buffer the warmth burning into her skin.

Only Leslie’s laughter kept her from forgetting she held the phone to her ear. Later, she’d have to remember to adjust the volume on her phone.

“Call me later,” Leslie said before hanging up.

Reece didn’t wait for her to set the phone down before he turned her around. One hand cradled her jaw as he pulled her forward to meet his mouth. Violet’s eyes drifted shut, the kiss slow and soft and utterly devastating to her system.

Curling one hand around the back of his neck, she leaned into him, needing to find something in the kiss that would reassure her everything would work out. Already she suspected she'd made far too much room in her heart for him, and she didn't even know what he wanted beyond last night.

Grinning, Reece pulled back. "I could get used to starting my day like that."

"Oh yeah? Play your cards right and there might even be some breakfast in it for you."

He kissed her again, more thoroughly this time, leaving her knees just shy of trembling. The man had a mouth capable of melting titanium.

On a sigh, he rested his forehead against hers. "Could we make that dinner instead?"

"You have to go to work."

"Yeah."

The regret in his voice made her stomach flutter. "So dinner in or out?"

"Definitely in. Last night wasn't nearly enough time to find all your hot spots." Bending forward, he slid his mouth down her throat.

Violet shuddered.

Reece groaned, then took a step back. "As much as I'd like to take you back to bed, there are some details I need to get squared away to free up the rest of the weekend."

"You might want to put on a shirt before you run out the door."

"Smart ass." He brushed his lips across hers. "Pour me a cup of coffee while I get dressed?"

"Done."

Less than two minutes later Reece returned to the kitchen fully dressed. The dark shadow that clung to his jaw only added to the don't-piss-me-off cop attitude she'd witnessed a handful of times. Mostly whenever she got stuck refereeing a confrontation between him and her brothers. She expected to be doing it again when they got wind of her involvement in Reece's bust last night.

“Freddy,” Violet blurted, remembering Mrs. Bourne’s dog.

Reece sipped at the coffee she handed him. “Who’s Freddy?”

“The dog,” she reminded him. “The one at Nicholas Strickland’s place, he belongs to the woman next door.”

“They stole her dog?”

Violet shrugged. “That’s what she said.”

“And she lives right next door?”

She nodded.

“Didn’t they let him outside last night while we were there? Why didn’t he run home if it was only a few dozen feet away?”

“Stupid dog?” she ventured, equally puzzled. “Were you planning on going by there this morning?”

“Probably.”

“Can I tag along? I’d like to return him to her myself if that’s okay.”

“Sure.”



After quickly washing up and changing into a pair of jeans and a faded yellow T-shirt, Violet followed Reece out to his car. The drive over to Mountain View Terrace was spent in relative quiet as they both sipped on the coffees Violet made to go. From the corner of her eye, she watched Reece’s face grow more serious the closer they got to Nicholas Strickland’s house.

Once they parked in front of it, he didn’t make a move to get out, but stared up at the house, pensive now.

“Thinking about the case?”

“Sort of.” His gaze fell to her amulet.

Violet resisted the urge to slip it back under her shirt out of sight.

"Strickland said he dropped his gun last night because it burned his hands."

Violet said nothing. She knew he was thinking about how he saw it glow last night, knew he was wondering what that meant, how it all fit together.

"At first I thought maybe he'd been high and imagined it, but I don't think he was."

She forced herself to take a drink of her coffee before setting it in the holder between them. "High? Or imagining it?" she asked carefully.

"Neither." He studied the amulet again.

A rap on the window drew Reece's attention away from her. Violet recognized the redhead at the window as Reece's partner, Sloane.

Grinning at them, Sloane leaned down when Reece lowered the window. "You guys are up early."

"Can't let you have all the fun." Sounding distracted, Reece climbed out of the car. Violet joined the two of them on the sidewalk.

"Come on," Sloane complained. "You got to bust him."

"Anything new since last night?" Reece started up the driveway.

Sloane unlocked the front door. "Not really. Chatted with a few of Strickland's thugs this morning. I don't know what some of these guys were on. One of them," she glanced at Violet, "the guy who grabbed you, actually swears his hands were burned when he touched you."

Violet felt Reece's sharp gaze fasten onto her, but she couldn't make herself meet his eyes. He might have been curious about Strickland's comment but would have let it go, leaving her to tell him the truth in her own way if things went anywhere between them.

Now...

Right this minute was when she should speak up, yet she couldn't get her mouth to so much as open. Finn's warning about cops being the last type of people to ever understand them echoed in her head. If her brother was right,

she couldn't risk betraying her family's secret to a man who could never accept it.

She was saved from saying anything as Freddy ran into the room. The weight of Reece's stare pressed down on her shoulder blades as she bent and scooped the dog into her arms then headed for the door. "Let's get you home."

"I'll meet you in the car," Reece said. His tone clearly spelled out the questions now rolling through his mind.

Outside it had started to rain. She quickened her pace, not interested in getting soaked today too. Violet grimaced at the section of fence still on the ground. Those broken boards were to blame for the questions Reece would have for her. They were also responsible for Reece ending up in her bed last night.

Sighing, Violet carried the dog into Mrs. Bourne's backyard. Immediately the dog started to whimper and squirm in her arms. Afraid she might drop him, Violet set him down, watched him race towards a section of shrubbery a few feet away. Maybe he had to pee.

She blinked though the now pouring rain, scowling when the damn dog started to dig at the base of a half-dead rose bush.

"Come on, Freddy," she coaxed. As she neared the dog, her attention shifted from Freddy to something poking out of the ground.

Bending down, she reached a hand out. Stopped cold, recognizing what was in front of her.

A decomposing human foot. Or the toes anyway.

Her stomach constricted as she scrambled upright. A blur shot past her peripheral vision. Violet automatically jerked away from it. Something struck her. Pain branched down her head, graying the edges of her vision.

She heard the dog barking, but it sounded far away.

Then everything went black.



Where was she? Reece glanced at the dashboard clock in his car. Fifteen minutes to return a damn dog?

Cursing, he got out of the car and crossed to Mrs. Bourne's house. He hadn't been about to sound like he was a few bricks short of a load in front of his partner by questioning—asking, he mentally corrected—Violet about last night. Things just weren't adding up. He knew as much last night, but the certainty that Violet was smack in the middle of it, much like her brothers tended to be, was now too coincidental to ignore.

Reece heard the dog barking inside the house before he reached the back porch. He knocked on the door, listened for the sound of feet approaching.

Nothing.

He knocked again.

The dog continued to bark. Concerned now, he tried the door handle. It turned easily in his hand. Something stopped him from calling out for Violet. Instead, he followed the sound of the dog's barking to the front of the house.

In what Reece guessed passed for a den, he spotted Violet seated in a chair. In the space of a heartbeat he took in her groggy expression, blue gag stuck in her mouth, her arms tight to her sides.

Anger sliced through his gut. He reached her in five pulse pounding strides, untying the gag and then loosening the bonds.

"She killed her husband," Violet said.

"Who?"

"Mrs. Bourne." Violet stood and swayed on her feet.

Reece steadied her, following Violet's wide eyes as she focused on something behind him.

Swiveling around, he heard Violet's voice echo in the soundless room.

With a cast iron frying pan raised in the air, a woman with curly gray hair and glasses stood unmoving.

He automatically raised an arm to protect the head she looked ready to bash in.

Only the blow never came. The old woman didn't move.

Didn't even blink.

Reece stared, trying to absorb what the hell was going on. He shot a glance at Violet, then raised his hand and waved it in front of Mrs. Bourne's face.

Nothing.

Stroke? Aneurysm? Spontaneous Paralysis? Each possibility was rapidly discarded.

Violet grabbed his arm and yanked him back a few steps. Without looking at him she said something that sounded like another language.

Before his eyes, Mrs. Bourne carried through on her swing. Confusion sprang to her face when she met only empty air. Her gaze darted to where Reece stood, damn certain someone had laced his coffee with something.

He did not just see...Violet...No. He shook his head, half-expecting to hear something loose bounce around.

Mrs. Bourne's face crumpled and she sagged into the closest chair. Pitiful sobs that made Reece think of a mouse being strangled filled the air.

With no clue what to say or even what to think, he let the cop in him take over. Snatching up the phone on the small end table, he called Sloane, who was still next door.

"I can explain," Violet said quietly after a minute, but she didn't sound certain of that at all.

He didn't know whether to be thankful or annoyed when Sloane burst into the room moments later, armed and chest heaving.

Spotting his partner, the old woman cracked. The surreal experience took another turn as she started to babble about not really meaning to kill her

husband when they argued a few weeks ago over how much salt he was allowed to have.

Once the older woman was tucked into the back of a patrol car, he escorted Violet to Sloane's car.

Violet's hand on his arm stopped him from opening the door. He wanted her to just get in, needed a few minutes to convince the rational side of his brain he hadn't hallucinated a few minutes ago, or last night.

"You always wondered what was with my family."

If that was her explanation, it fell spectacularly short. He guessed the look on his face said as much since she continued.

She held up her necklace. "This was given to me the day I was born. Every member of my family has one."

"And."

"And," she said slowly. "We're...I'm..." She frowned. "Do you believe in magic?"

"What?" As if things weren't making sense as it was.

"Magic."

"You're telling me what happened in there was...magic?"

Violet nodded.

"And last night?" The words felt automatic, like some verbal autopilot has been switched on.

Her brows came together before she responded with another slow bob of her head. She took a breath. "I'm a witch," she admitted in a *there I finally said it* tone.

Somehow he managed to keep his mouth from gaping open. He reached past her and opened the door.

"Reece?"

"You need to get your head checked out."

"I'm not crazy."

He prodded her into the front seat. "I'm talking about your possible concussion."

"I'm fine."

He wasn't. "Sloane will take you to the ER."

"It can wait."

"No. It can't." The words came out far sharper than he intended, but he didn't apologize for it. A furious headache chipped away at the base of his skull.

"Just tell me you're not so freaked out you want to get as far away from me as possible?"

Ignoring the hurt in her eyes, he turned and headed back to his car.

Right now he just needed to think.



Reece stared at the shot of tequila on the scarred tabletop. Only a few people lingered in the small sports bar tonight. One man moped at the bar munching peanuts, which was why Reece chose to sit in the corner tonight. Woman troubles, the bartender, Sam, had explained when he motioned to the other guy swirling a straw in his beer.

Reece doubted the other man's woman troubles involved a witch.

A sound that fell somewhere between a laugh and a sigh escaped his mouth. Sam glanced in his direction, but didn't say a word.

A familiar ache dug under his shoulder blades and started to throb. For the last four days he had re-interviewed Strickland and his thugs, discreetly. Probing more for information about the unexplained details than anything to do with the actual case. When he wasn't following leads on a new stalker case, he was searching the net for any information he could find on witches.

Nothing he'd come across gave him one single clue what to do about Violet. The skeptic in him argued fiercely that people couldn't do what he witnessed Violet do. But he knew what he saw and had spent the last few days trying to wrap his mind around what he knew to be true.

He liked Violet. Really liked her. The *can't focus on anything for more than five minutes without her crossing his mind* kind of like. The kind that made him suspect he was finally at a place in his life where he didn't want to go home to an empty apartment.

But there was another staggering truth glaring at him.

Violet was a witch.

Finn and Dante...

Reece groaned. In some ways it finally explained a lot.

He wanted to kick himself for not talking to her that day at Mrs. Bourne's. He'd like to think it was the cop in him that balked at his instincts having failed him, at him not figuring it out sooner. Then again, never in a million years would he have thought the oddness that surrounded the Calder family would have anything to do with witches.

Reece shook his head. As far as he could tell he'd learned as much as he was likely to on his own, which wasn't saying a lot.

Tossing back the last shot, Reece immediately realized it was one shot too many since this one didn't even burn.

"You look like you could use another."

Setting the shot glass on the table, Reece studied the man opposite him with a less than enthusiastic eye. Dressed all in black, his expression dark, anger glittering in his sharp eyes, Dante Calder looked ready to lynch him.

And people thought Reece looked a little intense.

Reece had known it would be just a matter of time before Dante came looking for him. "Just the man I was looking to have a chat with." Kicking the

opposite chair out, Reece motioned for Dante to join him then waved at Sam for more shots.



“That’s a new look for you.”

Groaning, Violet tried to shut the door in Finn’s face, but he made it impossible by jamming his foot in the door.

“Please, go away.” She knew he wouldn’t, but she didn’t feel like entertaining either.

He ignored her and followed her into the living room where she’d chosen to camp out in her pjs after work and feel sorry for herself.

“Still haven’t heard from him, huh?”

She shook her head. “You don’t have a mark on you, so you haven’t found him either I see.”

“Not that I haven’t been looking,” Finn snapped.

Violet let it go. She’d already repeatedly explained the whole mess to her family after Dante showed up on her doorstep, demanding to know what she’d been doing at Strickland’s rave with Reece.

Violet picked up the piece of toast she’d been in the process of eating before Finn’s unexpected interruption.

He opened his mouth.

“Please don’t say, I told you so.”

Finn had warned her, and backed into a corner or not after the incident at Mrs. Bourne’s house, she’d hoped that Reece was different. Hoped he would accept what he’d witnessed, and *not* think she was a colossal freak.

Apparently she’d been wrong.

For the last few days she’d been able to put it out of her mind. At least until she came home at night and had to face her empty bed. For only sharing it

with him one night, it felt far too big without him there to sprawl across. Only once had she caved and called him. When his answering machine had picked up, she lost her nerve.

Sometime since then she'd come to the conclusion she wouldn't apologize or make excuses for what she was. She never had and she'd be damned if she'd let anyone, even Reece, make her think she had to now.

Finn eyed the cold toast on her plate. "Is that supposed to be a late supper?"

At her nod he stood up. "I feel like pancakes. You?"

"It's almost eleven."

"So."

Smiling at his efforts to make her feel better, Violet followed him into the kitchen. He started digging through her cupboards just as the doorbell rang.

He surveyed her faded pink pajamas. "I should get it."

Violet punched him in the arm as he strolled past her. "It's probably just Leslie."

From the drawer under the stove she dug out the frying pan, pausing when angry voices reached her ears.

"How do you know she even wants to see you?"

"Move out of the way, Calder."

Reece?

Leaving the pan, Violet padded barefoot down the short hall. Toe-to-toe, Reece and Finn stood glaring at each other just inside the doorway.

"Finn, it's fine."

Her brother didn't even acknowledge she said anything. He was too busy looking ready to deck Reece. "I should kick your ass for hurting her."

"But you won't," Violet put in. At least not until she heard what he'd come to say.

"Or maybe I'll just change him into one."

Reece didn't look concerned. "Get out of the way," Reece repeated.

"Damn it, Finn." Violet tugged him back. She nodded to Reece. "Come in."

Finn crossed his arms. "What about pancakes?"

Violet tried not to smile at the exaggerated disappointment. "Rain check?"

He nodded slowly, his gaze fastening onto Reece one last time. "If you hurt her—"

"You'll turn me into an ass. I heard you."

When the door closed, Reece arched a brow, slight concern edging into his voice now that they were alone. "Can he really do that?" He shook his head. "Actually, I think I'm better off not knowing."

Violet resisted the urge to cross her arms. Given the troubled lines around his deep brown eyes, she wouldn't let herself think he was okay with everything. She'd already gotten her hopes up once before. She wouldn't let him crush them twice.

"Here's the thing," Reece began. "You were right. I was a little freaked out the other day."

"Just a little?"

He rolled his eyes. "Fractionally more than a little. And if you ever repeat that to your brothers, I'll deny it."

Violet bit her bottom lip to keep from smiling. Boys will always be boys, she decided.

Reece shoved his hands in his pockets. "I don't really understand much about you or your family, or witches."

"And warlocks."

"Warlocks?"

"My brothers," she explained.

"It doesn't really matter."

Violet arched a brow.

Reece gave a conceding nod. "I think Dante mentioned—"

"You talked to Dante?" Why hadn't her brother said anything?

"Yeah." He reached out and touched her amulet. "He told me a bit about your family, and how this sort of channels your abilities. Then we got drunk."

"What?" She couldn't picture Reece and Dante sharing one drink, let alone the amount it would take to get the two of them hammered.

He shook his head. "The point is, I really would be an ass if I let anything stop me from being with a woman that I can't stop thinking about."

Violet didn't move. She didn't have to. Reece came to her. Caging her face in his hands, he kissed her, hunger straining beneath the tenderness as his mouth devoured hers. Her insides went pleasantly limp despite the fierce thundering of her heart.

Drawing back slowly, he rested his forehead against hers. "I was thinking we should consider making this girlfriend thing a more permanent arrangement."

"I guess that depends on whether or not you can handle all the baggage that comes with me." She searched his face, needing him to be certain about this.

"I'd be lying if I didn't say it'll likely take some time to get used to it, and I may never get used to your brothers, but I'm game if you are."

Locking her arms around his neck, she leaned up and teased her lips across his, letting that be answer enough.

"Just promise me that you'll never turn me into a toad whenever I piss you off," he joked.

Violet grinned. "Not even if you deserve it?"

"Especially then."

She pretended to mull it over, but couldn't bite back her smile. "So a toad is out. How do you feel about pigs?"

Reece growled and lunged for her.

Pinned between him and the wall at her back, his mouth sliding over hers, Violet was convinced she'd soon be too busy to think about anything but him.

The dark promise that flashed in his eyes said it all.

You're mine.

Sydney Somers

To learn more about Sydney Somers, please visit <http://www.sydney somers.com>. Send an email to Sydney at sydney@sydney somers.com or join her Yahoo! Newsletter to keep up to date on Sydney's upcoming releases, contest info and sneak peeks at what she's working on now. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/flirtingwithpassionnewsletter>

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