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Marked

Dorothy McFalls

Mystical Sign Series

Dorothy McFalls

**Mystical Signs, Leo:
MARKED**

BY

DOROTHY McFALLS

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Mystical Signs, Leo: MARKED
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Dedication:

For Jim.

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Prologue

Lady Czarina was feeling older than dirt on that hot July afternoon. It had been slow and muggy all day. And she still needed to make a few more readings before she'd have enough money to pay her overdue rent.

Which was why, she was glad when a tall, finely dressed, and dark-haired man ducked his head and stepped into her gypsy tent. He looked as if he could afford some of her extras.

"Welcome wanderer," she said, and gave a grand gesture that set the bangles on her arms jangling. She might be the real deal, a palm reader with *the gift*, but it was the show that kept her clients coming back.

The man drew closer. She shivered despite the heat. Deep shadows surrounded him. They danced over his soul like demons around an unholy fire. A damp, flat, darkness pulled on his dim aura with the same oppressive silence that followed the grieving. His presence made the air heavy and her chest ache.

She drew a careful breath. She'd long ago lost the freedom to choose her own clients. Anyone with thirty-five dollars was allowed into the tattered tent she'd set up on a vacant lot in one of the forgotten suburbs of Chicago.

The police rarely ventured down this narrow alleyway. And when they did, they weren't looking for business license violators.

"Please, sit—tell me what it is that you seek," she said, her accent was thick and very real. Chicago hadn't always been her home. Some days, like today, she wished she'd stayed in the old country—in Liechtenstein. Her mother had always warned her to stay away from the dark ones, the haunted ones. Back home, surrounded by a large family, she could be choosy. But not here. She had to eat and pay her rent. And haunted or not, his was the first new face she'd seen all day.

He sat in the empty chair, a red velvet upholstered wreck she'd scavenged from a garbage dumpster. Without saying a word, he dropped the cash on the silk-draped table that separated them.

She rubbed her temples before taking his hand.

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“Tell me what you seek,” she repeated. His palm was smooth, as if he’d never worked a day in his life. Not a day.

She glanced up. He was staring at her. His eyes, a pair of deep voids, were unreadable, which was disturbing.

“Is it love you seek?” she asked, hoping beyond hope she was reading everything about this mysterious man wrong.

“*The Lion.*” The man’s lips didn’t move, yet she’d clearly heard the words. *The Lion.*

She dropped his hand. It landed like a dead weight on the table. “I do not know how to find him.”

The Lion was part of the group who called themselves *the Protectors*. They looked like men, lived like men, but they were creatures. From where? Even they didn’t seem to know. Lady Czarina had helped cared for one once. An infant found in a neighborhood very much like this one. Discarded, perhaps. Or maybe he never had parents in the first place.

Some, like the one she’d help raise, were begrudgingly cared after by humans. All of *the Protectors* gave off discordant auras. People couldn’t help but be uncomfortable around these creatures who were so similar and yet so different. As these not quite human children matured into adults and their powers emerged, they eventually found each other, learned from each other. That was their way. Had always been their way. The stories of them stored in the gypsy’s collective memory called them an ancient race. A race to be respected...and feared.

“I cannot help you,” she said, her voice turned cold. Hard. She didn’t want anything to do with what this man sought. Not anymore. They might look like humans but they didn’t have a drop of humanity in them. She’d once tried to lend a helping hand to one of them, the Lion’s friend—the one she called Fish. He and the others had thanked her efforts by stripping her of everything, her shop, her life, her dignity. No more. Never again.

“You must help me.” Before she could react, he grabbed her with his lifeless, icy hands. Fingers that felt like bands of steel encircled her neck.

“Tell me.” Again the voice didn’t come from his lips but the demand growled in her ears all the same. He shook her like a feral dog would a small rabbit. “Where is the Lion?”

A vision slapped her in the face. Bright. Blinding. Unbending. A life flashing before her dimming eyes. It wasn’t her future...but the Lion’s.

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Despite years of self-imposed celibacy, the Lion's heart was about to be ripped open. He'd tried to escape the life he was fated to live, and now he was going to pay for his arrogance. There was no escaping a course that had been forged at the dawning of time.

Poor Horace. He didn't want a woman. But there she was—a central figure in Lady Czarina's vision—a feisty beauty who would heat up Horace's bed and give his destiny a hard shove in the pants.

"Horace West," the lipless voice said, pulling Czarina back to the here and now. A wide smile drew across the stranger's face as his hold on her neck began to crush bone.

"No," she gurgled. She didn't want this. Never this. They were all pains in the ass, but they didn't deserve to—

"She's going to be his death—" With no one of use to hear, Lady Czarina used her last breath to make one final prediction—one only Horace could change. "And he'll be her destruction."

Chapter One

The house band at the popular nightspot Club West thumped a sensual Latin beat, an arousing, sultry sound. Horace leaned against the door to his office while keeping an eye on the dance floor. His dance floor. He shifted uncomfortably.

Flexible, beautiful young women moved sinfully close to their partners as if the beat of the music carried them mindlessly into a ritual that men and women had played out since the beginning of time. All those luscious feminine bodies were dressed in outfits designed to tease. The array of slinky fabrics was doing one hell of a job displaying a banquet of tight delectable curves.

A perky breast nearly peeked out of a beaded top. A beautifully rounded ass perfect for fucking swayed not three feet away.

Damn. He pulled his hand over his face. He'd kept his hungers at bay for far too long. His thoughts were straying to the sexual more and more often lately. He suddenly realized he was thinking of these women as objects first and humans second.

Not good. Not good at all.

Not that he'd dare act on these cravings.

He couldn't. All he planned to do tonight or any other night in his club was watch. And make sure no one did anything stupid.

A high shriek over near the bar jarred him to attention. It was followed by another shriek. And another.

What the hell?

He was halfway across the dance floor when he realized the shrieks were laced with giggles. *Down boy*, he told himself, *don't go making an ass of yourself.*

His newest bartender, Faith Summers, was at the center of what looked like a cheerleader's convention. Four perky women had surrounded her. They were all jumping up and down and laughing their pretty heads off. It was Faith's night off, but it wasn't unusual for his employees to spend their free time at the club. They had the pull to get their friends to the head of the line. The wait outside could last for nearly half the night otherwise.

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“I can’t believe you actually went and did it!” one of Faith’s groupies shouted above the music.

Faith smiled. Even from halfway across the room, Horace could see the wicked spark that lit her light blue eyes. She shook back her shoulder-length brown hair. Her lips parted. And slowly, seductively, her pink tongue licked her plump bottom lip and then arched up.

Good God, she’d pierced her tongue! Horace’s eyes nearly rolled out of his head. Did she know what that smooth metal stud was used for? He closed his shocked eyes and fought away a startlingly realistic image of her running that newly pierced tongue over his tightening cock. The cool steel mixed with her hot flesh...

Down boy, I’m serious this time.

The women surrounding Faith shouted with laughter again.

He let out a long frustrated sigh and returned to his spot at his office door. He grimaced and crossed his arms over his chest. Faith and her friends had moved out to the dance floor. He tried to ignore her, to put her out of his over-heated thoughts.

Her zest for life, her explosive happiness only reminded him of how lonely his life had become over the past few months. No, that wasn’t quite right. He’d always been detached from the world, apart and yet unable to completely break free. His friend’s recent marriage had only emphasized the loneliness he’d ignored for as long as he could remember.

Sure, he could smile kindly at probably any one of these beauties losing themselves to the primal drumming of the music. It wouldn’t take much more than a few charming words to lure a woman to his bed. He could also mention how he was the owner of Club West—an exclusive club with an entrance line that often wrapped around the block in the River North neighborhood of Chicago. Its popularity was making him filthy rich.

Funny, he’d never cared much about money. Success had been the goal. Tackling a steep challenge had been the only goal he’d ever known. It had never taken him much effort to be the center of attention. And with his recent success, and money, it was becoming more and more difficult to find some alone time. Yet, even in the middle of a crowd, his loneliness yawned wide and empty.

His slow gaze drifted back toward Faith. She was dancing with the four other women, not caring that all the men in the room were watching them, and she was laughing. God, maybe he should pick one of them to fill his bed for the night. He’d get a good fuck and forget all about his black mood for a while.

“So why don’t you?” Brendan’s voice cut through his thoughts.

“Stop that,” Horace growled over the loud music as he turned and watched his friend walk toward him. He hated how Brendan could pop in and out of his head like that and read his thoughts. Being married only seemed to sharpen his best friend’s abilities. Wasn’t it supposed to do the opposite?

“Not when it’s with the right person,” Brendan leaned forward and said with a wily grin. “And it has some other pleasing benefits, too.” He looked too damned satisfied with himself.

“Will you stay the hell out of my head?” Horace grumbled with less heat than before. “If wedded bliss is so...um...blissful, why are you here and not home enjoying your bride?”

Ever since Brendan had met the mysterious Dallas St. John, Horace hadn’t seen much of his friend at all. He suspected Brendan was still spending most of his time, and his energies, in the bedroom.

“I could say sexual exhaustion has brought me crawling out of my lair so I could catch my breath.” Brendan gave a dramatic sigh and pressed his arm against his forehead.

“I don’t need to be able to read minds to know you’re lying. What’s up?”

“Two things. First—” He pushed a silver bag tied closed with an elaborate satin bow into Horace’s hand. “Happy birthday.”

Horace absently fingered the silky bow. “Is that today? I’d forgotten.”

“Of course you had. And so had I, but Dallas hadn’t. She cares about you as much as I do. She’s the one who insisted I come over here even before—” He drew a halting breath and got that tense look on his face that Horace knew from years of friendship to be worried about.

“What? What’s going on?”

Brendan didn’t answer him. Instead, he pushed open the office door and herded Horace inside. Although Horace was bigger and stronger than Brendan, he let himself be led. Something was up. Brendan wouldn’t look so damned serious otherwise. He gave a last wistful glance toward Faith and her friends, and then closed the door behind him.

* * * *

He was gone.

Faith stopped dancing and stared at the empty space where he’d been standing. Leaning, really. With his arms crossed over his broad chest. She felt certain he’d been watching her. The press of his intense gaze had made her feel sort of light-headed and tingly.

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She'd liked it, and realized right away when it was gone—when he was gone.

"Come on." Her friend Kimmi tugged on her arm and started to gyrate her hips in time with the music. "Let's dance."

Faith forced a smile and followed Kimmi's movements, while trying to push thoughts of Horace West and his sexy-as-sin body from her mind. She had no business lusting after the club's owner. Hell, she'd never even met him.

Tim, the head bartender with spiked blond hair, had hired her a little over a month ago. She kept expecting to be introduced to Horace, but on the nights she served, he conveniently kept his distance. She'd thought he'd treated all his employees that way. However, last week she'd stopped by after her last class for the day at the University of Chicago to pick up her paycheck, and there was Horace, leaning against the bar and laughing with the bartenders. It was enough to give a girl a complex.

So tonight, when her friends asked where she wanted to go for her birthday, she picked Club West. It had seemed like a perfect opportunity to get a closer look at the club's young, sexy owner.

* * * *

"You can't be serious," Horace said. This had to be a joke. A bad one. "Come on, Brendan. I know you want me to hook up with a woman tonight, but threats? That's going too far, even for you."

Brendan drew in a long, deep breath. He had dropped into one of the leather chairs while Horace leaned against the corner of the maple desk.

"It was a vision. My head is still splitting from its impact," Brendan said. He sure as hell didn't sound as if he was joking around. "You died. Tonight."

"Unless I get myself laid?"

"It was just a suggestion. I could make a few calls. Get you someone you'll like."

Horace shook his head. He didn't get involved like that with the humans. He wouldn't.

"How about Kara?" Brendan asked. "She's one of us."

One of us. Lately though, he didn't feel comfortable around anyone. Not even the foundlings.

"No," he said. "I don't do casual sex." Not anymore. Not for a long time now.

He felt Brendan probing his thoughts. But it didn't matter. The reason for his celibacy had been deeply buried away. It wasn't something he thought about. He doubted he could even if he wanted to.

"Then come home with me. Or go to an all-night bowling alley. Anything. Just

don't stay here." Brendan sounded seriously worried.

Horace shrugged. He didn't know why, but his black mood turned a shade darker. "Perhaps it's my time."

That sent Brendan launching out of his chair. "Dammit, I wouldn't have gotten a vision if that were true!" He grabbed Horace's shoulders and shook him. "You saved me once, and I'm sure as hell going to return the favor! I got this vision for a reason, you know. You're not supposed to die tonight." He shook him again. "Get that through your thick head!"

"Okay. I won't let myself be murdered. You happy?" He peeled Brendan's fingers from his shoulders. He probably would have decked anyone else for trying to bully him like that. Luckily for Brendan, he loved the scoundrel like he would a brother.

"Let me call Cheryl," Brendan said. "You'll like her. She's got legs up to—"

"I'm not leaving." He crossed his arms and scowled. "You tell me that a gunman is going to come into my club and start shooting, and you expect me to run away?"

Brendan started to protest. That wasn't exactly what he'd said, but it was close enough.

"You know I can't leave. Every last human here is my responsibility. How can I abandon them, knowing someone is going to get shot—perhaps even killed—tonight?"

Brendan raised his finger and opened his mouth but quickly closed it again. Horace didn't need to be able to read minds to know that Brendan agreed. There was no arguing with the truth. Though no one really knew what they were or why they were on Earth, they considered themselves *the Protectors*. While they looked human, each one of them had unique, inexplicable powers.

And they had one more thing in common—they were all foundlings. No parents. No family. It was as if they'd dropped from the sky as infants.

When his powers were newly emerging, Horace had thought of himself as a god, all-powerful and infallible.

They weren't gods. They were merely different, too different to safely involve themselves intimately with the humans.

"Go home to your wife," he told Brendan. He held his palm out flat over his desk and, focusing his powers, made the stapler float up into the air. It crumpled as easily as foil. "I can take care of myself."

* * * *

Faith wasn't one to be easily discouraged. The steeper the challenge, the sharper her interest. But even the terminally optimistic had their limits.

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She'd tried all night to get close enough to Horace to start a conversation. Or to dance. Though she'd never seen him dance with anyone, she could tell by the way he moved that he would sweep any woman off her feet.

No matter what she did to get close to him though, an employee either stepped in the way or Horace was busy with one of the three strangers who had started hovering around him like gnats a few hours ago. *No problem*, she'd thought, *she could handle this*.

But things were starting to look bleak when she failed to even sneak up on him. He'd slipped into his office just as she'd opened her mouth to introduce herself. It was like they were opposing magnetic forces. No matter how hard she pushed, he always moved further away.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and huffed. "I'm beginning to get the feeling he's purposefully avoiding me."

"What?" her friend Kimmi shouted as she shimmied by, half her body wrapped around a virile hunk of manly flesh.

"Him." She pointed. At that very moment Horace turned his head and glared at her.

"Who?" Kimmi shouted, obviously missing the sizzling heat he was currently sending in Faith's direction with that glare. She felt pressed into place.

All night she'd been trying to catch his notice. All night she'd been angling for a way to cozy up to him...her employer. And now that she'd gotten what she'd come for, her fickle courage fled.

With that fluid motion that had made her think he'd make a fascinating dance partner, he came to her.

"Go home." His voice was low. A warning.

"It's my birthday," she said. She had no idea why she'd say that but it was already out of her mouth.

The tension around his lips eased a little. "Mine too."

"We're both Leos?"

Idiot, a voice in her head scolded. *Could you get any more cliché? Think. Quick. Say something intelligent.*

Her mouth turned dry, which was unusual. And her mind blank. She was never nervous around men. All her life, men tended to flock to her. To praise her confidence. To try their best to get into her pants. Men like that often tried too hard. They bored her. And as a result, she'd started to avoid serious relationships.

It was a novel—and somewhat frightening—experience having that darned shoe

on the other foot. *She* was the one trying to get into *his* pants. And what nice pants they were. He was wearing dark, finely pressed khakis with a cream silk shirt that hung loosely over his broad chest, emphasizing the barely concealed cords of muscles. A dusty blond lock drooped over his brow.

“Umm...umm...” she stuttered.

“Go home.” He gently cupped her shoulder and turned her toward the door. “It’s late, and you have an early class in the morning.”

“Wait!” Her determination returned and she swung around to poke her finger against his chest. “How would you know when I have to be at the university?”

“I talked with Tim. He and I came up with the work schedules.”

“Oh.” That sounded reasonable enough. And didn’t she feel just a little foolish with her finger still pressed against his warm chest?

He didn’t seem to mind. “I also happen to know that you’re working on your Ph.D. in anthropology.”

“And what’s my favorite color?” she asked.

He glowered. The palm of her hand was now completely pressed against his chest. When had that happened? Had he stepped closer to her, or had she leaned in closer to him?

The air between them sizzled and sparked.

“Well?” she pressed. “My favorite color?”

He huffed, obviously frustrated by her unwillingness to be intimidated. “I assure you I wouldn’t know.”

“I’d be glad to tell you, if you’d take the time to talk to me. What’s been going on tonight? Every time I’ve tried to introduce myself, I’ve—”

“Horace, I need to have a word with you,” a man dressed in a black suit, and with shockingly pale blond hair said.

“Been cut off, interrupted.” Like speaking to the air.

“It’s been a busy night.” Horace gave her an apologetic smile. “You’re working tomorrow night, right? I’ll make some time for you to discuss whatever’s bothering you then.” He lifted her hand from his chest and lightly caressed it. “Go home. Get a good night’s sleep.”

Without knowing why, she found herself nodding in agreement. It was late. She should go home. Tomorrow would be a long day.

“Good,” he said as he turned and walked away with the other man. She was about to go looking for Kimmi when she overheard Horace say “thanks for that” to his blond-

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haired friend.

“No problem. You looked like you needed rescuing,” the other man said.

“Probably.” That, she read off Horace’s lips as he glanced back at her.

He thought he’d needed rescuing from her, did he? And what was with that tone of his? Did he think she was a child? Someone who didn’t know enough to make her own decisions?

She crossed her arms over her chest and simmered.

“That was humiliating.”

“*What?*” Kimmi shouted as she danced by. There was a new man in her arms, the minx.

“The air sizzled.”

Kimmi whirled around, pushing her dance partner away. She grabbed both of Faith’s hands and started dancing with her. “You mean the air sizzled when you were with that guy?”

“Yeah.”

“I felt it.”

“You also saw afterwards, didn’t you? He nearly ran away from me.”

“So?”

“It was embarrassing.” A fresh wave of heat crept up her neck.

“The air sizzled when the two of you touched,” Kimmi reminded her. “He wants you.”

“You think?”

Kimmi nodded and got a goofy smile on her pretty face. “It’s your birthday, sweetie. Don’t waste it dancing with me.”

* * * *

“You need to stay focused,” Frank Stone, more or less the leader of their motley non-human group, told Horace. “No distractions. None at all. Don’t forget, what you do tonight will determine whether you live to see another day.”

Horace dragged his hand through his wavy, dark blond hair. “No kidding.”

Brendan had taken Horace’s advice and had gone home. He hadn’t been happy about it, but short of kidnapping, there was no way Horace was going to leave his club—not with the threat of danger hanging over his and everyone else’s head.

Not twenty minutes later, Frank Stone showed up with Derrick and Ricker in tow. Stone was elegantly dressed and blended with the trendy look of the club just fine. Black suit. Black shirt. Black tie. Gleaming shoes. His pale blond hair and silvery eyes made a

stunning contrast to his perfectly pressed dark clothes.

Horace was feeling faintly insulted that Stone had taken over...and had brought backup with him. It wasn't Stone's place to be making these decisions. This was Horace's club, his responsibility. He would have probably been burnt up over it if Faith hadn't set him ablaze already.

He couldn't seem to get her out of his mind.

There was something about her. She wasn't a stunning beauty. But she had an earthy quality that drew him to her. Her skin was lightly tanned. Blond highlights streaked through her hair. They looked natural, like she'd spent too many hours in the sun.

According to Tim—his head bartender—she had. Both her parents were well-respected anthropologists, professors, and researchers who traveled to the far corners of the world studying primitive societies. Growing up, Faith had traveled with them and had spent many of her formative years in desolate, remote regions that must have been unsuitable for a young child. Hell, she'd been in the Andes weaving woolen clothes and chewing on roots instead of worrying about what she would wear to the prom, like a normal teenager. Not that he had much experience with normal. His childhood had been spent living in dumpsters and abandoned buildings. But still, the thought of Faith spending most of her life in such exotic locales had intrigued him.

It wasn't as if he'd been prying into her background. He'd dropped a word here, made a comment there, and then had sat back and listened to Tim and the other bartenders. It appeared Faith impressed everyone who knew her, which was reason enough to keep her at arm's length.

Every time she was in the club, he couldn't seem to keep his mind on business. No matter how hard he tried to ignore her, his body wouldn't let him.

It was wrong. He knew that. She was his employee. He was her employer. There could never be anything between them even if he was looking for a relationship, which he wasn't.

Lavender.

She'd asked him if he knew her favorite color. It had to be lavender. Though there was nothing ever demure about the way she dressed, she almost always wore a light lavender shade somewhere on her body.

The color suited her. It gave her blue eyes an extra glow.

Tonight she was wearing a short black skirt. Not so short that it was indecent, but just short enough to tantalize. To hint at what a man might find if he was lucky enough to

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pin her against a wall and slide the silky material up her shapely thighs. The soft lavender tank top was untucked. And molded perfectly to her breasts.

She must have used one of those glittering moisturizers tonight. She literally sparkled under the glare of the twirling lights that hung over the dance floor.

“Uh...hello?” Stone snapped his fingers in front of Horace’s face. “Have you noticed anything unusual?”

“She was nearly stalking me,” he answered. His gaze traveled back to Faith. She was dancing with one of her girlfriends. They were touching each other’s arms. It was a surprisingly seductive sight. “All night. She’s been following me around. I can’t figure out why.”

Stone frowned at that. “The girl? You think she’s the shooter?”

“What?”

“The shooter,” Stone said with an edge of impatience. “You know, the shadowy figure Brendan saw kill you in his vision?”

That jolted Horace back to the problem at hand.

“No, no. She’s just an employee.” His gaze traveled across the expanse of his club and saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Well, nothing much. The two men Stone had brought with him stood out. They would have never gotten past the security at the door without their rather unique credentials.

“I don’t mind Derrick coming along, but why did you have to bring him?” He hooked his thumb in Ricker’s direction. The man was a disaster. He looked like a killer with his hard expression and deep scar running down the left side of his face. His jeans were old and tattered. And he was wearing a bright carrot-colored T-shirt with a fading picture of a smiling Florida orange on the front.

“He can stop time,” Stone said. “If someone comes in here with a gun, we might need that.”

“Couldn’t he have at least put on something appropriate?”

Stone chuckled. “Perhaps he’ll start a new trend.”

“Heaven forbid!”

Out the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Faith. She was still dancing with her friend. A trio of men was approaching her. Jealousy stabbed through him. It was unreasonable, he knew, but he wanted all the damn men in the bar to keep their filthy hands off his assistant bartender.

Derrick, with his kind brown eyes and easy smile, edged his way toward Faith as

well.

“Keep your bodyguards on a tighter leash, Stone.” He gestured toward Derrick. “I don’t want them interacting with—with--the humans.”

Stone’s expression turned hard. Horace knew he was treading on dangerous ground. Stone wasn’t a man to be taken lightly. But he couldn’t seem to keep his prickly feelings at bay...not with Faith around.

He’d given her mind a considerable push when he’d told her to go home. She should have mindlessly obeyed and left. Yet she’d stayed. Her attentions, he noticed, were as focused on him as his were on her.

He wanted her gone. Out of harm’s way. It was bad enough that he had to watch out for everyone else in the bar. But there was something about Faith that made him pay extra attention. He didn’t get visions, and had never been adept at seeing the future, so he knew what he was feeling was irrational. But for some reason, he couldn’t shake the worry that Faith’s life was in as much danger as his.

* * * *

“Sometimes foreknowledge can be enough to change the future,” Stone said as he headed toward the door. Horace nodded. It was in the small hours of the morning. The last of the club patrons had left about a half hour earlier. His employees were busy cleaning up.

It had been a relatively quiet night. He’d stopped a college student from overdosing on prescription drugs, broken up a fight, and had handed over two drug dealers to the local authorities.

Horace rubbed the back of his neck. The tension bound up there had turned into dull thud at the base of his skull about an hour ago. He was tired and ready to go home.

“Hey Horace,” Tim called from the bar. “I was wondering if you had a minute?”

He gave a nod in his bartender’s direction. “Go on home,” he told Stone. “I’ll be leaving after wrapping up here.”

Stone hesitated before releasing a long breath. “It is late. Call me if you need anything,” he said on his way toward the door.

Tim had found a glitch in the new computerized cash register system. “It’s not recording who entered the transaction, which means we won’t know who gets the tips from the credit cards.”

“I’ll call the tech guys tomorrow,” Horace assured. “Go home. Get a good night’s sleep.”

“Did you see—?”

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“We’ll talk more tomorrow.” He simply wanted to go home and bury himself in the darkness of his covers. Not that he’d get any sleep. His mind was too tuned into Faith and how she made him feel. Those feelings were dangerous, considering...he couldn’t think about that. And he shouldn’t be thinking about Faith. Hell, he wasn’t going to find any rest tonight.

He was about to head out to his car when he spotted her. She had a garbage bag slung over her shoulder and a determined stride as she headed out the back door.

“What the hell?”

He was tired and prickly and—thanks to her—horny as hell. Besides, there was a limit to the amount of teasing he could take. Something inside him snapped, and he forgot about all the reasons he should stay away from her.

He strode after her. If she insisted they play games, he would stop running. Instead, he’d play.

And play to win.

Chapter Two

“What are you doing out here?”

Faith recognized his voice immediately. His sharp no-nonsense tone made her legs watery. She tossed the trash bag into the dumpster before turning around.

“Since I was still around at closing,” she said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible. “I thought I might as well help out.”

“You shouldn’t be in the alleyway at this time of night. It’s not safe.” He took a step toward her. “You’re not safe.”

It took considerable willpower to stand her ground and keep a sarcastic tug on her lips. She didn’t want him to know that she’d stayed and helped Tim clean up with the hopes of catching a moment alone with him. A moment exactly like this one where anything could happen.

“I’m not safe...from you?” Her voice cracked.

“From me.” He took another step closer.

What had she been thinking? She knew nothing about the illusive Horace West. No one did. Not really. She’d heard he didn’t date, but that couldn’t be right.

“Perhaps I enjoy living on the edge.” She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, tilted her head, and reminded herself that he was just a man—a man who set off sparks when she touched him. Heck, she could taste the sparks on her tongue right now, and he was still several feet away.

Oh boy, she was in over her head.

“You don’t have to scare me,” she said. “It’s my birthday and I was simply looking for someone to enjoy it with. I had thought that you might—”

He touched her hand. His fingers felt hot, searing so. They should have burned. And in a way they did. She glanced down and watched as he traced the soft skin covering her knuckles.

“I’m not trying to scare you,” he said softly. “But I do hope you take my warning seriously.”

“You are warning me...of what?”

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"I haven't been with a woman in years."

"*Years?*" she gasped.

"My choice. I have my reasons." His tender caress trailed up her bare arm.

The sparks between them heated the already scorching summer air. She had to swallow several times before she felt she could talk without her voice wavering. "I see."

"Women have hit on me before." He gave a rueful grin. "Happens pretty much every night."

She nodded and swallowed again. Should she be embarrassed? He was telling her that she was simply another one of his groupies. Poor guy, he'd wanted to be left alone, and she'd made a nuisance of herself all night.

Only, she didn't feel embarrassed. The way he was caressing her, lightly rubbing his fingers up and down her arm, made her feel sexy. Aroused. And more than a little needy.

"Never," he said, his voice pressed on her chest and vibrated low in her belly. "Never have I been so...tempted."

He took another step closer. His leg pressed up against hers, nudging her. The club's rough brick wall bit into her back. She didn't realize until that moment that he'd been directing her, herding her until she was trapped between the club and his body.

"I don't know what it is about you, Faith." He brushed his lips over her plump bottom lip. It was a teasing gesture that made her hungry for his kiss. "I feel drawn to you. Like a moth is drawn to fire, you know?"

Only she was the one getting burned.

Perhaps she should have listened to his warning. He was good, too good. It was hard to think with him this close to her. She could only feel the ache her body was feeling. It made him dangerous.

"I—I—perhaps—we—shouldn't—"

He slanted his mouth over her lips. Tasting, savoring, demanding she respond honestly. With a push, his tongue plunged into her mouth and swirled into her depths. All the while, he was careful around her newly pierced tongue.

"Hmmm...We shouldn't be doing any of this," he agreed. But his body was saying that it was too late for her. That he was going to do with her what he wanted—what she'd been wanting him to do all night.

He eased her legs apart with his knee and lifted her hips until the tips of her toes barely touched the ground.

"*Do you want me to stop?*" he asked.

Although every rational part of her was shouting at her, telling her that she was going to regret what they were about to do, she didn't feel very rational at the moment. Instead of pushing him away, she nuzzled his neck.

"No," she breathed.

His hands were traveling over her body. He'd already eased up the material of her tank top, touching her as if his hand belonged there. As if he owned her. He seemed to know what she liked. Or was it the excitement of this crazy moment making her extra sensitive to the pressure against her breasts? Her nipples beaded and ached for more. She'd read about such a delightful ache in romances. But no one had ever teased her breasts until they seemed to be connected to the soft flesh between her legs with a zinging cord of electricity until now.

"Don't you dare stop," she said.

Pleasure danced in his eyes. "Wouldn't dream of it."

His questing hands traveled down her flat belly and lower until his fingers caressed between her legs. She was wearing black lace panties, a last minute decision she was now glad she'd made. She could feel the heat of him through the barely-there fabric.

With a sharp pull, he ripped her lace panties off her body and dropped the ruined bit of fabric on the ground.

"Hey!" she cried. But she didn't have much time to think about how much those panties had cost. He parted her soft curls and thrust his forefinger deep into her, taking most of her breath away. The rest of the air in her lungs was lost when he kissed her with an urgency that made her toes curl.

He wanted her. She could taste his desire on her lips and feel the heat of it in the way he was using his hand and his mouth, mimicking what he planned to do with his cock. She found herself panting with anticipation.

The snig of his pant's zipper warned her that this was actually going to happen. Sex against the brick wall...in a smelly alleyway next to a dumpster. Her panties torn and discarded on the ground. This was so, so not like her.

But then again, neither was following a man around a nightclub like some besotted groupie. With Horace, she was a different woman. Her hungers made her vulnerable in a way she'd never been vulnerable before. Every part of her was throbbing with desire for him. And only for him. Even the tips of her fingers felt dizzy and tingly.

When he eased her skirt up higher on her thighs, she wrapped her legs around his waist. The tip of his wide cock caressed her moist opening. She pressed against him, letting his cock stretch her. He grabbed hold of her hips and held her before she could

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lower herself completely onto him. He appeared determined to control this moment. With one quick movement he buried himself inside her, all the way to the hilt.

She'd been impaled. This was a position she generally avoided because it made her too vulnerable. Around men, she was used to being in control. Calling all the shots. But with Horace's strong hands on her hips, he guided her, and she rode him. He was the one setting the rhythm. He was dictating the pace. And at the moment, it was too slow. Excruciatingly, frustratingly, wonderfully slow.

She could feel every inch of him move inside her as he unhurriedly raised and lowered her. Her own juices had made him hot and slick. And he made sure that slick cock rubbed against her aroused clit, teasing her.

But he held her release at bay. The calculating glint in his eyes told her that he knew what he was doing to her. That he was torturing her, taking her to the brink but not letting her fall over the edge on purpose. She cried out in frustration and wiggled against him.

He lifted her, holding her so that her pussy barely touched the tip of his shaft. "You wanted to play games," he said. His voice caressed her, making her tremble. She wiggled, trying to wrench control of the situation, but his hold on her was like iron.

He kissed her, plunging his tongue into her mouth. Mercilessly taking his time. He must have known that he was making her crazy. And it was that chilling knowledge that he was doing this to her on purpose that must have clouded her judgment. Her mind and body throbbed as one—an inescapable need that demanded be answered.

"Please," she whimpered into his mouth, "don't make me beg."

"Why not?" he asked. A wicked smile teased his lips.

"Because...because...I'm going to die..." She was barely able to get out between her short, halting breaths. "I--I'll do anything...anything...you...want..."

One corner of his mouth kicked up a little higher. His right brow rose too. "Anything?" He lowered her slightly so his cock pressed into her. "*Anything?*"

She nodded. He'd done this to her. He'd made her lose her mind. The Faith Summers she knew up until a heartbeat ago, would have never pledged herself so completely to a man without a wedding ring waiting for her finger.

"Let me mark you." There was a tremor in his voice as he quietly made that request. His gaze grew dark and intense.

She didn't know how he'd meant to mark her. But it didn't matter. In the heat of her need, she didn't even pause to wonder. She simply nodded. "Yes. Please. Yes."

With a look of satisfaction, he impaled her on his cock. And gave her what she

wanted, what she desperately needed. He moved her hips faster and faster, pumping her. And as he'd promised, he lowered his head and sucked on her left breast.

The pressure grew stronger. He licked her nipple. And then scraped the tight nub with his teeth. Nipping her. Biting her. The pain was so intense, so real, it left her struggling for a smooth breath. But at the same time it heightened the pleasure she was feeling between her legs.

Her body grew tighter and tighter, begging for release. His blunt teeth tore through the sensitive skin above her nipple just as she threw her head back and cried out. He didn't let up. He was suckling her blood and pumping into her, riding her orgasm. She felt his cock grow thicker, fuller, pulsing inside her. Stretching her. Filling her completely.

It was too much, too much. She struggled against him. This had to stop. She wasn't used to feeling so completely—so fully. He released her breast and kissed her. But he wouldn't let her escape as she rode on the wave of a second orgasm, one that he shared with her. The heat of his seed scorched her womb. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on to him...*forever*.

* * * *

Afterwards, he gently lowered her onto her wobbly legs. She wasn't in danger of falling, though. He wrapped his arms around her waist and swung himself around so he could lean against the wall, and she could continue to press her head against his warm, safe chest.

He feathered kisses over her temples and down her cheek. Then, with a deep sigh, he gently caressed the angry red mark he'd put on her breast. The sore skin underneath his fingertips tingled. He'd marked her. She now belonged to him. She'd never felt so cherished, so honored.

This was what she'd been looking for when she came to the club tonight. He was the one. The one who came to her in her dreams and whispered promises in her ear. He was the dream lover who had told her to wait, even after her first lover had proposed marriage and had sorely tempted her to follow the budding stockbroker into domestic bliss.

It was all so incredible. But at the same time it felt right—Natural. She ran her hand down the side of his rough, stubbly chin.

Horace West was *the one*.

Even his slow, steady breathing matched hers. He reverently kissed her neck before murmuring against her ear, "You do know that there can never...? That we can

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never...?”

“*What?*” He had to be kidding. And even if this was a joke, he was about to get an earful. She poked her finger on his chest. “You just can’t—!”

“Shhh...” Horace pressed a finger to Faith’s well-loved lips. He’d spotted a shadow in the darkness. It could be his imagination. Or one of the stray dogs he fed. Or even a large rat. But the shadow moved. It was unquestionably the shape of a man.

Horace’s impromptu breakup speech would have to wait. Whatever the man was holding caught in the light above the club’s back door. Metal glinted as he edged closer to the two of them.

The shooter.

Horace lifted his hand to stop what was coming—to crumple the barrel of the pistol—but his focus was still too fuzzy. He couldn’t control his powers. Never could after a heavy fuck.

He heard the explosion, saw the flash of the gun firing as the sound echoed through the alleyway. A sputtering wind tried to hold back the bullet. But it was too late. He shoved Faith out of the way a heartbeat before what felt like a lead fist slammed into his chest.

“So much for changing the future,” he grumbled as he sank to his knees.

He must have passed out because the next thing he knew, he was flat on the ground and Faith was hovering over him. She had pulled off her lavender shirt and was pressing it to the wound. Blood had already soaked through to her hands.

Damn, it hurt like hell. He tried to bat her hands away, but she was an immovable force. Stubborn. But he’d already figured that out.

“You need to get out of here.” His voice sounded harsh, raspy. “The shooter could still be out there.”

“I’m not leaving you.” She flicked her tongue over her lips. It was a frantic gesture. And if he hadn’t been in so much pain he would have tried to kiss her. She glanced around nervously. “Besides, I don’t see anyone.”

“And we didn’t see him the first time, either.”

She ignored that reasonable bit of information. From somewhere on her body, he couldn’t figure out where, she produced a small pearl-colored cell phone. “I’m calling 911.”

Oh no, she wasn’t. It took considerable effort to wrench the clamshell phone from her hands and close it.

“No police. No ambulance.” The first would only complicate matters, and the second might seriously screw him up...if he managed to survive.

“But--but—”

“I need to get in touch with Stone.” His head was humming. Thoughts seemed to be drifting around in his head without his control. It took all his concentration to recite Stone’s cell number while his eyesight blurred in and out of focus.

Faith’s hands were trembling so badly that she could barely hold her cell phone, but somehow she managed to dial. Her voice sounded calm, neutral, and very inappropriate for the situation as she introduced herself to Stone.

“Horace has been shot,” she said slowly, which made Horace wince. Hearing it said out loud somehow made the bullet wound hurt worse. “You need to come to the club. Horace wants you here.” She listened. He wished he could hear what Stone was saying to her. She nodded. “We’re out in the alleyway. He won’t let me call an ambulance.”

She didn’t seem to like Stone’s reaction to that. She actually sneered into the phone.

“But—but—”

Another pause.

“Okay, I’ll try,” she said, and then turned off the tiny cell phone. Tears were swimming in her eyes.

“Baby,” Horace said. She was breaking his heart. “I’m dying. I’m sorry...” *that you had to be here.* “I’m sorry...” *that it had to be like this.* “But—” He coughed on his own blood. “I--I’m not sorry that we—”

“Oh, shut up,” Faith snapped.

“*What?*” He was trying to do the right thing, to be sensitive to her feelings and to understand what his dying in her arms like this might mean to her. Didn’t she understand the mountains of effort it took for him to even talk?

“I said, shut up.” Flames flashed in her baby blue eyes. “Listen...Horace.” Rage deepened her voice. A force behind her words, one that was very similar to the mental push he had used when he’d told her to go home earlier that evening, pressed against him. “*You are not going to die.*”

“I don’t think I have a choice in the matter.” He could feel himself slipping away. He doubted he’d be able to hold on long enough for Stone to get there.

“I won’t let you die. So you better stop scaring me with this talk about death.” The fire in her eyes grew hotter. Her pupils widened, swallowing her light blue irises,

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making her eyes appear solid black.

And her hands felt like hot coals against his chest.

He tried to wiggle away from her touch, but she wouldn't let him.

"You are not going to die," she repeated. He felt the words shudder through his body. The fire in her hands grew hotter. A faint glow illuminated her skin and lit up her face. "You are not going to die."

She was wrong. There was nothing anyone could do for him. Perhaps if a healer had been on hand, or a doctor who understood the complexities of their kind...but that wasn't how it had happened. His eyesight darkened. The life-giving air in his lungs drifted away, leaving him empty.

At least he wasn't dying alone...

You are not going to die!

A slug of solid air slammed into his lungs, filling him. He shot up from the ground like a bullet. And suddenly he was standing. His legs were wobbly, but he was standing nonetheless. Faith blinked those beautiful blue eyes of hers. They were still glowing. She was still glowing. But it didn't matter, because he was alive.

It was incredible. He'd been dying one moment, and was alive and well the next. Incredible. Nearly as incredible as the woman kneeling at his feet. He pulled Faith into his arms and kissed her.

"What—what--what happened?" she stammered.

He felt about as stunned as she looked. The pain in his chest was gone. Completely gone. He carefully peeled back his shirt. There was nothing there but bloodstained skin. Not even a nick.

He touched his chest. Automatically wincing, expecting the slightest touch to hurt like the devil. It didn't.

He hadn't felt this healthy in years.

Faith, on the other hand, look as if she'd been dragged through hell.

"Are you okay?" he asked. He vigorously rubbed her icy hands between his own. Hadn't they been burning hot before? Her skin was pasty white and her lips blue.

"What did you do?" he demanded.

Faith swallowed deeply and shook her head. Something was seriously wrong. He wrapped his arms around her, catching her as she fainted.

* * * *

"What happened?" Stone demanded after fingering Horace's blood-soaked shirt, complete with bullet hole. There wasn't a mark left on Horace's chest. Not even a bruise.

None of *the Protectors* could have done a better job healing him.

“Hell if I know.” He motioned toward Faith. She was sitting at his desk in his office. The door was open and they could see that she had her head cradled in her hands. He’d given her a white workout T-shirt to put on since she’d sacrificed her own shirt to staunch his blood flow. He kept several spare T-shirts in his office in case he wanted to go directly to the gym from the club. Right now he was glad he did. Glad that he had something to offer her.

He didn’t know how she’d done it, but it appeared she’d saved his life.

She was staring at the unopened gift bag Brendan had brought over earlier that night. She looked quite shaken.

“*She* did this?” Stone’s tone crept up into the incredulous range.

“I can’t imagine how. She’s human.”

Stone nodded. “What were you doing before you got shot?”

“Ummm...”

“I see.”

“Do you? Because I sure as hell don’t.”

“You must have transferred your energy somehow. I remember you had once mentioned that you didn’t think you could safely have sex with a human. Maybe it’s time you talk about what you meant by that.”

“No!” Horace nearly shouted. He glanced toward his office and saw that Faith was watching him. *Great...great.* He’d screwed up both their lives. He lowered his voice. “I’m sorry, Stone.” He couldn’t talk about it. He couldn’t even think about that time in his life. About... “I...I can’t.”

“I don’t need specifics. But can you tell me if a transfer of powers has ever—?”

“I can’t talk about it.”

“Is this something that happened when you were away from us? When you were missing? Where did you go?” Almost six years earlier Horace had disappeared for two solid years. Stone had never pressed him to talk about that time before. Horace had been grateful.

“I can’t talk about it.”

That piqued Stone’s interest. “Can’t? Won’t?”

“Both.”

Stone shrugged, and appeared to be willing to let the matter drop, for now. “She must have soaked up your energy. I’m sure it’s only a temporary thing. Nothing to worry about.”

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Only, Stone looked worried. He started watching Faith. His frown deepened.

“We’ll need to deal with her.”

“Deal...with...?” Horace asked. *The Protectors* rarely harmed the humans. It was their purpose to watch over them, or at least that was their best guess. No one had ever given them a mission, or even told them what they were or where they came from. But it seemed simple enough. They had powers and abilities far beyond anything the humans would believe. And yet, they were all born to humble beginnings, made to suffer as children. It only stood to reason that their purpose was to ease suffering. To help. Not harm.

But, then again, the humans weren’t allowed to know about the powers they controlled either. And *the Protectors* had the Council, a formalized justice system. Unlike the human court of law, their justice was swift and brutal. Had Faith unwittingly broken any of their laws by borrowing his powers?

Horace rubbed his tired eyes. “I don’t have any healing abilities. I’m not convinced she used my power.”

Stone nodded again. It was a noncommittal gesture. Meaningless. Unreadable. But there was one thing Horace knew for a certainty—Stone protected his own. He would walk through fire before letting anything bad happen any of them. Even if that meant keeping secrets from the Council.

“Ms. Summers, may I speak with you for a moment?” Stone called.

Faith pushed up from the office chair and walked cautiously over to them. Horace put his arm around her shoulder, not because he felt a need to touch her, to connect with her, but because she looked like she could use the support. He’d repressed those tender yearnings to connect with others in that manner years ago...hadn’t he?

“Who are you people?” she demanded. She looked and sounded fearless. But she was shivering in Horace’s arms. “*What* are you?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Stone focused all his attention on Faith. Horace, standing so close, could feel the waves of power rolling over him. He tried not to imagine what such intense power must have been doing to Faith.

She blinked up at Stone. Her expression relaxed, and then went blank.

“Nothing out of the ordinary happened tonight,” Stone told her.

She nodded.

“You had fun with your friends and then went home at closing.”

She nodded again.

“You had a good night’s sleep. And you will wake up in the morning feeling

happy and rested.”

“Yes,” she said, her voice was flat, lifeless. Stone rifled through her purse and handed her a set of car keys.

“Will she be okay to drive like that?” Horace asked. She seemed so out of it. Like a part of her had been pushed away.

“Should be.”

And just like that, it was all over.

Brendan had been furious with Stone when he’d roiled his girlfriend’s mind. *Funny*, Horace thought, *he felt faintly relieved that Stone was handling matters*. Of course there was one major difference between the two situations. Brendan loved his Dallas St. John. He’d ended up marrying her.

Horace merely lusted after Faith. She wasn’t his girlfriend, and he’d made a huge mistake by acting on those primal urges. If Stone could fix things by blurring her memory, so much the better.

He pulled her to his chest and wrapped his arms around her, kissing the top of her head. “Thank you,” he whispered. And, because he knew she wouldn’t remember any of this, he added, “If not for what I am, I could easily see myself falling for you.”

It was too bad, really. Because of what had happened to him all those years ago, and what he had become, there could never be anything between them.

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Chapter Three

Faith's bedside alarm clock beeped incessantly until she slapped the snooze button. She had an early class. It wasn't one she could skip since, as a graduate teaching assistant, it was her class to teach. Even knowing that, she didn't want to move.

She felt stiff and drowsy. Muscles not use to action ached from the alleyway encounter. Had that really been her? She'd thrown herself at Horace. Though there'd been a connection between the two of them, he'd done his best to discourage her. To keep...*that*...from happening.

And he'd marked her breast. It ached as well this morning. Not an altogether uncomfortable sensation. Despite the dull throb of bruised skin, the mark on her breast left her feeling slightly aroused and anxious.

No, I need to put him and what he did to me out of my mind, a calm, soothing voice inside her urged. And then she remembered why. Afterwards, but before all the weird stuff—or had that been a foggy dream? —He had started to tell her that what they'd done had been a one-time thing. That there could never be anything between them.

The jerk.

She didn't do one-night-stands. She didn't give sex to men in order to make herself feel special or sexy. She made connections. She cultivated relationships. Sure, sex might come into the equation pretty quickly. But that didn't mean that she hadn't already started calculating the likelihood of a happily-ever-after.

But Horace didn't want any of that. And after what she saw last night, she wasn't sure she did either. At least, not with him. A man had shot him in cold blood. *Cold blood*. The memory made her shiver. Though she didn't know anything about these things, it sure as hell hadn't been a crime of passion, but a chillingly pre-planned murder attempt.

Any normal person would have been scared shitless and knocking people over to call the police. But not Horace. She'd gotten the feeling he'd been expecting something like that to happen. And when she tried to call 911, he'd snatched the phone away. Bleeding and nearly dying, he'd wrenched the phone from her? There was something fishy going on. Most likely illegal.

She should have never had sex with him...a stranger. What had gotten into her? Could getting her tongue pierced have so thoroughly gone to her head? How was she going to face him tonight? Or any night? With *that* between them?

Despite the summer heat, she burrowed deep into her covers. And planned on staying under there forever.

"Damn girl," Kimmi's voice sounded muffled, "what happened in your bedroom last night?"

"Go away."

"I brought coffee." Kimmi said with great care. "I thought that after our late night you might need help getting to your eight-fifteen class. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm not going to the class. I'm not leaving this bed."

"Now you're really scaring me, Faith. What happened at the club after I left you?"

There was the shush-shush sound of furniture being pushed around. And then the bed dipped. Kimmi slipped her arm under the covers and put her hand on Faith's.

"Talk to me. You were there for me all through the Jasper affair, and you know nothing could get worst than that."

"Jasper was cheating on his wife, and he got his jollies beating you up."

"See." An edge crept into Kimmi's cheery voice. "Nothing can be worst than that. What happened?"

Faith swallowed hard. She did need to talk about it. Hiding under her covers would only work for so long. She would eventually get hungry.

"I had sex with him," she admitted.

"With the hunk who set off sparks?"

Faith nodded glumly.

"Well, happy birthday to you after all!"

"He told me it was a one-time thing."

"So? At least you had last night. Aren't you the one who is usually telling me to live a little?"

"Afterwards..." She still couldn't believe it. It wasn't as if she was against one-night-stands. Not exactly. But she liked to set the terms of the relationship. She was the one who told the man if she wanted to see him again, or not. "He told me that it was a one-time thing after we had sex...against a wall...in the club alleyway."

"Shit."

Exactly.

"So, what did you tell him?" Kimmi asked. "I can't imagine you took the news

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quietly.”

“I didn’t get the chance to say anything.” She closed her eyes, remembering. “Someone shot him.”

Kimmi gasped.

“It gets worse.”

“How? I can’t imagine anything worse.” Then she said with a rush, “Are you hurt? Raped? Shot?”

“No, thank goodness. I’m okay. Sort of.”

“Then what happened? He didn’t die, did he?”

“No, he didn’t die.” He should have. That was the thing. She still didn’t understand how he could be bleeding so heavily one moment and completely healed the next. She’d done something to him. But what? And how?

“What? What? Tell me!” Kimmi demanded.

Faith opened her mouth to say, *I healed him*. The words were there. She heard the thoughts clearly enough. But then...not a sound. Not a whimper. Nothing.

“I—” she finally forced out of her mouth. But before she could say another word a blinding pain gripped her. “I’m going to be sick.”

She pushed her way out of the bed and tripped over a pile of clothes that shouldn’t have been in the middle of the room, and stubbed her toe on a dresser that shouldn’t have been there, either. Hopping the rest of the way, she made it to the bathroom in the nick of time. Afterwards, she gurgled with mouthwash. Twice. It made her feel a little better. Her head still throbbed though. She didn’t dare wonder why. She wasn’t in the mood for a repeat performance.

Besides, what she saw when she returned to her bedroom so shocked her she could only think one thought over and over. “What the hell happened in here?”

“That’s what I was asking you,” Kimmi shot back.

Every piece of clothing that had been hanging in the closet or neatly folded in her dresser drawers was now scattered across the bedroom floor. The dressers—including a heavy six-foot-tall wardrobe that she’d inherited from her grandmother—were pushed away from the walls. One had tipped over. The wood on the back was cracked. The full-length mirror had been shattered.

“It wasn’t like this when I got home,” Faith said as she rubbed her hands over her eyes. Perhaps if she rubbed hard enough everything would all go back to normal.

“You mean you slept through someone doing this to your room?” Kimmi frowned at that. “How much did you drink last night?”

“You know I can’t stomach much more than a glass of wine.”

“Drugs?” Kimmi pressed.

Faith refused to acknowledge such an insulting question. She may have been slightly reckless in her life, but never—ever—had she abused drugs. Or even considered it. She’d seen firsthand the ravages of drugs while traveling with her parents into some of the poorest regions of the world.

“Then how could you sleep through something like this happening?”

Faith could only shake her head. A sickening thought roiled through her stomach. It couldn’t be true. No, there had to be some other explanation.

Why? A voice inside her head demanded.

She’d already fallen down the rabbit hole...saved a man by wishing hard enough. Why not believe this, too? Why not believe that her anger and frustration over Horace’s rejection could manifest itself physically?

She rubbed her temples. It hurt like the devil to think about it.

“I think I might be losing my mind,” she whispered.

She needed to talk with Horace.

But he didn’t want to see her again. Well, he hadn’t actually said that. What he’d said had made *her* not want to see *him* again, though. He’d rejected her right after they had sex. Perhaps she’d done something wrong. What if she was a terrible lover? Come to think of it, no man had ever before praised her skills. How could she face him...and *that*?

There was something else she needed to remember, something that would make everything else easier to handle. He’d told her something. She foggily remembered him kissing her forehead. Supporting her. Rubbing her back and making her feel safe. What had he said right before she left the club to go home?

She started gathering up clothes from the floor, hoping the end results would make an outfit. She had two shirts. She dropped one and picked up a pair of jeans. Underwear. Where in the hell had her underwear gone?

She peered under the bed and found a lump of panties.

“What’s going on?” Kimmi asked as she wrung her hands together and did a great job at looking seriously concerned. “What are you planning on doing?”

She was going to do what any good researcher would do—follow the only lead she had—Horace.

“Call Professor Newitt and tell him I won’t be able to make my morning class,” she said as she slipped off her oversized sleep shirt and pulled on a loose-fitting green tunic that had once been hanging in the back of her closet. “I need to go to the club and

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talk to him.”

She knew this was crazy. She stuffed her legs in a pair of tight jeans and eyed the piping hot coffee Kimmi had brought with her. It was sitting on her bedside table that was now all the way across the room and at a crooked angle to the door. She recognized the logo on the side of the cup. Kimmi had gotten the coffee from the local shop down the street. It was one of those tall, gourmet coffees, the kind with the rich flavors. She’d picked one hell of a week to give up caffeine.

Hopping on one leg and then the next as she pulled on a pair of sandals, she explained to Kimmi that she wasn’t crazy—she hoped. She simply needed to clear the air with Horace—which she did need to do.

“Considering last night, I would suppose so. You want your chance to have your say after what he pulled last night. I suppose he wasn’t seriously hurt by the gunshot wound?”

“No,” Faith said as she grabbed her purse and rushed toward the door, “I don’t suppose he was.”

Perhaps the bullet only grazed his chest and had momentarily stunned him. That would explain the quick recovery.

And if that were the case, wouldn’t she feel foolish bursting into his office this early in the morning?

No, there was no talking herself out of this now. She had no choice. She had to get some answers, no matter how embarrassing.

Besides, Horace had to be expecting some repercussion after all that...um...weirdness last night. Odd, it didn’t seem to hurt her head as much if didn’t think about it directly.

Perhaps he would be able to explain *that* as well.

* * * *

Horace rolled over in his bed. It was late. He was usually up by now. But after a sleepless night and a morning of fitful dreams that were crowded with sensual images of Faith doing deliciously naughty things to his body, he couldn’t seem to get his legs to move.

But he was uncomfortable. That was what had finally woken him up. His arm ached like he’d been burned. It was a terrifyingly familiar sensation, one that hurt his head to remember.

With his eyes still half-closed, he carefully eased into a sitting position in his bed. Unless it was several degrees below freezing outside, he slept in the nude. It was summer.

Dorothy McFalls

He was nude, which made it easy to see what was causing that pain in his arm.

There was a primitive black outline of a lion on his right bicep. Like it had been burned there.

It had been. But that had been years ago.

He'd had it removed, hadn't he?

None of that mattered though, because there it was. The mark of the lion seared into his skin. There was no running away from what it meant.

He rubbed his hand over the lion-shaped burn. And then scrubbed at the raw skin, but the mark seemed to be stuck there.

"Damn."

It was back. It was beginning—*Again.*

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Chapter Four

Horace found Faith waiting at the door when he arrived at Club West. From the looks of things, she'd been waiting for him for quite a while. She was sitting on the shaded top step to his club with her head cradled in her hands.

He usually came in before noon, but after sleeping in late and the shock of the mysterious reappearing tattoo, he wasn't getting much of anything done in a timely manner that morning.

And he didn't have the energy to deal with his out-of-control feelings toward her. Not today. Not after last night. He still needed to talk to Stone. Hopefully Stone would have some idea what the mark on his arm meant.

Horace had snatches of memories, some involving the tattoo. But the thoughts just seemed to be burning holes straight through his skull. And there were too many holes in his memories already, too many questions about the two years he'd gone missing that begged to be answered.

"I thought you had morning classes today," he said to Faith, making an effort to sound cheery. He'd do well to remember that Stone had blasted through her memories, wiping away last night. Including the sex. For her, nothing had changed.

She glanced up at him. Dark shadows circled her eyes. And the worry clouding her blue irises looked anything but normal.

"We need to talk," she said in a low voice that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

"Of course," he said with an easy smile. He reached out his hand and helped her to her feet.

After unlocking the door and swinging it open, he gestured for Faith to precede him inside. He couldn't help but notice the way her jeans hugged her body, or the graceful way her hips swayed as she walked. He fought a sudden urge to kick the door closed, press her up against the closest wall, and tear off those painted-on jeans. He'd put her legs over his shoulders and lap at the honey between her thighs. He could already taste her sweet scent and feel how she would squirm against his raspy tongue. He'd give

her no mercy. He'd...he'd...

Whoa there. He shook his head. As impossible as it might seem, thanks to Stone, that amazing fuck in the alleyway would be no more real to her than a fleeting dream. She wouldn't understand why he'd be attacking her right now.

He switched on the interior lights and forced another smile. "What brings you out to the club so early in the afternoon, Ms. Summers? Tim doesn't usually show up until sometime after five."

Her eyes widened slightly and she bit her plump bottom lip. It made his mouth water. She regarded him for several heart-stopping seconds. "You're kidding me, right?"

"I don't believe we know each other well enough to..." he started to say. What a lie. He knew her inside and out. Had felt her pulse with pleasure against his cock as he came inside her.

"Even after what happened last night?" Her voice grew strained. But it was the knowing way she'd said *last night* that had him tripping over his feet.

"What about last night?" he asked carefully.

She tossed her hands in the air. They had crossed the room and were standing in the middle of the empty dance floor. "That's what I came to talk about! Something...odd...happened. And I'm not talking about the sex. That was great, mind-blowing. But afterwards," she rubbed her temples, "it's foggy. I can't figure out why. But I clearly remember someone shot you."

She reached out and carefully pressed her hand against his chest. "You don't seem harmed. Why?"

"Are you sure what you're remembering wasn't a dream?"

The question didn't go over well. She gave a frustrated growl. "You and I both know it wasn't a dream."

"You, you *remember* last night?"

She nodded slowly.

"All of it?"

"As I said before, parts are foggy. It hurts my head to think too hard about what happened after we—" she smiled shyly, and a bright blush stained her cheeks, "*you know*."

He put his hand on her lower back. Without realizing what he was doing or why, he pulled her a little closer and then closer still. Before he could stop himself his lips were on hers.

It was a slow, careful exploration of her mouth. She tasted of fresh flowers and

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happiness. His hands brushed up and down her back, wanting to do more.

“I know,” he whispered as he peeled his lips away and leaned his forehead against hers. He wasn’t ready to break the contact between them. This closeness, this comfortable intimacy was what he’d hungered after, yet kept himself from enjoying for far too many years. Now that he had it again, he wasn’t about to let it go that easily. He wasn’t going to let her go. “The question is—what do we do now?”

* * * *

He needed to ask?

Faith was on fire for him. She couldn’t seem to remember why she needed to talk to him so desperately. Feelings of desperation were bouncing around in her mind, but they had nothing to do with talking and everything to do with action. It was her body that was feeling needy. She needed Horace. She needed him to touch her. To fill her. Forever.

Keeping her gaze connected with his, she slipped the green tunic off over her head. Since she’d dressed in a hurry, she was bare underneath. Her nipples tightened in the cool air of the club.

“The mark is still there,” she said.

He looked uncommonly pleased with himself as he looked over his handiwork from last night. She took his hand and pressed his open palm against the mark.

“I’d like to make another one.” He teased her nipple, and then gave it a pinch. “But not on your breast this time.”

She squeezed her legs together guessing where he might want to sink his teeth. Her panties grew damp from anticipation.

“Will you get naked for me?” he asked. He sounded serious, too serious. He made her feel like a virgin being led to a sacrifice.

She swallowed over a lump in her throat. “Yes,” she managed.

He grabbed the waistband of her jeans and tugged her close to him. His aroused cock pressed against her belly through his khaki pants. He kissed her while his nimble fingers unbuttoned her jeans. Together they stripped her.

He reverently kissed the bite mark he’d made on her left breast, and then suckled her right one with more force.

She reached for his belt and started to unhook his buckle, but he pushed her hands away. “No,” he murmured. “Only you.”

He guided her to lie down on the glassy, smooth dance floor. He took hold of her ankles and pushed her legs apart until they were spread widely. As she held her breath, waiting and wondering what he was going to do next, he knelt between her spread legs

and sighed with pleasure.

“You have to be the most beautiful woman in the world,” he whispered. The awe in his voice made her believe it. No matter what she’d thought about her body before, at that moment, she became the most beautiful woman in the world. She glowed and felt uncommonly sexy because of the loving way he was looking at her.

He trailed kisses down her thigh, and then gently licked her pussy. His tongue felt warm and rough against her petal soft folds. Her legs quivered with delight.

“Hmmm...” His voice vibrated against her flesh, pushing a wave of pleasure through her entire body. She arched her back and groaned. He seemed pleased by her response. As a reward, he flicked his tongue in and out of her, making the motions of lovemaking. Heating her until she was afraid she might be singed to a crisp. She grabbed his hair and groaned again. His fingers dug into her hips, holding her as firmly as she was gripping his hair. He sucked on her swollen nub until she was panting and wild with need.

He scraped her soft flesh with his teeth.

He wouldn’t.

She squirmed against his mouth when he sucked on her throbbing clit again. Ah, hell. If it feels this good, why should she care what he was doing to her body?

While she panted and moaned, he rained kisses over her upper thighs, teasing her. Driving her senses into overload. She cried out with pleasure when he nipped the tender skin between her leg and crotch. He then licked the sting he’d left. All the while his hands roamed between her legs, caressing her. Just like last night, his touch had the ability to wipe away any coherent thoughts. She became a bundle of pleasure. Feeling. Experiencing.

He slipped one finger into her. And then another. She rode his hand, pushing against him. He pressed deeper and deeper into her. A third finger joined the other two. With it came another bite. This one was harder than the first, but the sting got all mixed up with the pulsing pressure building between her legs.

“Ohhh,” she cried with a start of surprise. She didn’t get a chance to recover from the sensations swirling inside her. His teeth scraped against her sensitive flesh and then dug into her skin, sending her thoughts spiraling back into the erotic. The forbidden. His mouth was oh so close to where his fingers were fucking her, she couldn’t help but wonder what it would feel like if he sank his teeth into her throbbing clit.

She wanted him inside her. She bucked against his pulsing fingers while wishing for his cock. Begging for his cock. He smiled at her enthusiasm, and pushed a fourth

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finger into her. She was tight, and his fingers moving in and out of her made her feel vividly alive. She let her head drop back onto the floor and gave herself over to the sensation of him plucking her body like he would a stringed instrument.

The feel of his teeth against her flesh became a rhythm that matched the movement of his fingers pumping into her. Bite. Lick. Bite. Lick. Her body grew tauter and tauter. She wanted this to last forever. But at the same time, she felt herself reaching a pinnacle that promised to bring her a bliss she'd never experienced before.

She cried out and arched her back off the floor as he ripped into her tender skin beside her pussy with his teeth, marking her body for a second time. Making sure she knew that she belonged to him.

A rainbow of colors swirled around them as she felt herself slipping off the edge of that lovely abyss. She had never felt so connected to another. She had never—

A flash. A memory slammed into her. She couldn't quite hold onto the images bombarding her mind. There were too many. And were of lands and people that didn't make any sense to her.

Horace roared and pushed her away.

"We can't." He was breathing hard. She could feel his heart thudding an uneven beat. "We can't," he said again as if trying to convince himself.

It took considerable effort to push herself up onto her elbow. "Why?" she asked, sounding as confused as he looked. "What's going on?"

He was rubbing his temples and squinting—all telling signs of one whooper of a headache.

"I can't," he amended.

"Because your head hurts?" She tried to be understanding. She truly did. But his timing couldn't have been worse. And why wouldn't he look at her?

Feeling naked and uncomfortable, she hugged her legs to her chest and tried to ignore the throbbing between her legs. "Have you tried aspirin?"

He rubbed his hand over his eyes. "I don't know what the hell I'm doing. Don't you understand? This is wrong. We were wrong to play this dangerous game. You and I can never be together. Never. I can't be with anyone. Not without—without—"

What? What? She wanted to shout at him. Wasn't the woman the one who was supposed to be fickle? Didn't a man pounce at the chance for sex like a dog would tear into a steak?

She dropped her head to her knees to hide the tears that were swimming in her eyes.

Why did she even bother?

"I don't want you to get hurt," he said finally.

"Oh." She hugged her legs tighter and stared at a point on the floor. Not looking at him seemed to make it easier to accept his rejection. "This is about what happened last night? And why you didn't want to call the police? You're in trouble. That's why I came to talk to you this morning. I came to get answers."

"I'm afraid I don't have any I can give you."

"I see." She reached for her pile of clothes. But there was one question that needed to be asked. "What about the bullet wound? That man shot you in the chest last night. There had been so much blood, too much blood. But today you're okay. Why?"

"You saved me."

She shook her head. The pain in her temples flared. "That's impossible."

He looked up at her. She could feel the press of his gaze.

"Isn't it?" she asked.

"You remember what happened last night, Faith. You know the truth."

Now it was her turn to rub her throbbing temples. "But it hurts to remember."

"Then don't. Go," he said. There was a power in his voice. She'd heard him use that power before. "Go back to your university. Go back to your life before you ever met me. Live the life you were meant to live. Forget about me. Forget about last night."

Though she was automatically nodding that she would forget—that it was the only logical thing to do—she knew she could never forget him. Deep down she knew that this was the path her life was meant to take.

He needed her.

She reached out and closed her hand over his. It took considerable courage for her to risk yet another rejection. But she wasn't ready to give up. She couldn't give up on Horace. What they were doing was meant to happen.

She climbed onto his lap and straddled his hips. There was no mistaking the press of his aroused cock against her crotch. It wasn't about whether he wanted her or not. She already knew he wanted her.

Without saying a word—words were too risky right now—she pressed herself against the length of his hard chest. And swirled her tongue, flicking the nub of her piercing against the velvety skin of his ear.

"Don't to that," he groaned, but he didn't push her away.

Encouraged, she sucked on his earlobe. His skin tasted salty and warm. It was a flavor she didn't think she could ever get enough of. It made her want him. She tried to

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unbutton his blue cotton shirt, but he caught her wrists with an unbreakable grip and held them over her head.

When she tried to tease his earlobe with her pierced tongue again, he pulled away.

His gaze pressed down on her until the air felt too heavy to breath. He was looking at her. Taking in every piece of her. Making her feel delicate and vulnerable.

"This is wrong," he said.

But she could tell his defenses were breaking. She wiggled against the bulge in his pants. She'd done it to tease him, but she ended up teasing herself.

"This is what you want." She bit his shoulder. His cock jumped. She bit him again.

"Oh, hell..." He took her into his arms and crushed his lips against hers. This time when she reached for his belt, he let her unhook the buckle.

"My, my, my," a voice from the door startled them both. "You, my stubborn foundling, are supposed to be dead." A dark-haired man, who Faith would later have one hell of a time describing, walked toward them. He was holding a huge gun with the aim trained on Horace's back. And when he spoke, his lips didn't move. "Never mind, I'll simply kill you again."

Horace started to protest, but the man clucked his tongue and shook his head. "I do need to say something first. I'm disappointed at how carelessly you treat your woman. She's not a whore, but your mate. She should be honored. Celebrated."

"Who are you?" Horace asked. He tightened his arms around Faith, shielding her with his body from the madman with the gun.

"They call me Ballou." His gaze narrowed. "I'm your death."

"Why? What have I done to you?"

"You exist."

"Okay...okay." Faith could feel the tension tightening in Horace's shoulders. "Your quarrel is with me. Let the girl go."

Ballou shook his head from side to side. The movement looked mechanical. "It became a package deal this morning. Perhaps this is for the best." The anger in his voice vibrated throughout the room. "*You don't deserve her.*"

The gun fired with a deafening blast.

Faith felt as if she'd been hit by a train. At first, she thought she'd been shot. But later, she realized that Horace, moving with preternatural speed, had rolled her and himself out of the bullet's path.

Ballou adjusted his aim and fired again. This time Faith felt the bullet wiz by her

head before Horace sent her skidding across the dance floor and out of harm's way for a second time.

She curled into a tight ball and started praying. This was the something fishy that she'd wanted to avoid. The reason she should have kept away from Horace's sexy-as-hell body. What had she been thinking crawling back into his lap? He'd warned her and warned her, and now she was going to die.

The front doors of the club crashed open, and there was a shout. It was enough to jolt Faith out of her turtle-pose. She peered through one half-opened eye and saw a giant shadow of a man rushing toward her. She yelped and scooted out of his way.

Not too brave, but she wasn't used to these life-and-death situations. She didn't quite know how to act. Staying out of the way seemed reasonable.

It took some doing, but she finally convinced herself to open her eyes. It would probably be better to see what was happening in order to avoid letting it happen to her. She realized right away that what she'd seen hadn't been a giant. It was a man. Frank Stone. She foggily remembered meeting him the night before. He was unarmed and foolishly unafraid.

He was standing directly behind the gunman who was shooting at Horace. He raised his arms like some cinema-grade sorcerer and shouted, "Be gone!"

Ballou whirled around, his aim shifting from Horace to Stone. Faith fought an urge to bury her head in her hands. Someone was about to be killed. Perhaps all of them.

Her heart was thudding so hard that she couldn't seem to breathe right. She scooted across the floor, retrieving her cell phone from the pocket of her discarded jeans as she quietly edged toward Horace's office. No matter what Horace might think, she needed to involve the police. It was too dangerous not to.

Before she dialed, she slipped on her green tunic. If she'd thought there had been time, she would have pulled on her jeans too. Though she'd spent most of her childhood with primitive tribes with no qualms against nakedness, her parents had done a good job of instilling a healthy dose of modesty into her upbringing. She wasn't comfortable with public nudity. Especially when someone was threatening to kill her.

"Be gone!" Stone said again, not moving out of harm's way. His voice echoed through the empty club. "Be gone!"

Her phone sang a little tune as she switched it on. No one seemed to notice. Letting Stone serve as a diversion, she quickly dialed 911.

"You're not on the list, Frank Stone," Ballou said. The gun clicked as he cocked it.

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“Hello? Police?” she whispered into her clamshell phone. Could the operator hear her over the thundering of her heart? “I’m calling from Club West. There’s a gunman—”

Ballou suddenly swung his arm to his side and, without even turning his head, aimed the gun so that Faith was staring clear down the dark barrel. He pulled the trigger.

Time seemed to move at a snail’s pace after the explosive flash. She watched the golden bullet swirling toward her forehead, heard Horace give a shout, and felt a great power leap out from Stone’s upraised arms sending Ballou tumbling into oblivion. Though the gunman was gone, the bullet was still coming straight toward her.

“Stop!” she shouted. She closed her eyes and held out her hands, as if that would do any good. It was too late for her. She’d never see her parents again. Never get the chance to make them proud by earning a Ph.D. of her own. Not to mention the whole marriage deal. Dead at age twenty-three. A spinster before her time. No husband to mourn her. No children. She’d always pictured having at least one child. Perhaps two. They’d both be scamps.

But now that wouldn’t happen. None of that would happen, because she was dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. She covered her face with her hands and cried. Since it didn’t matter anymore, she let go and wept loud, messy sobs.

“Shhh..shhh...” A familiar, welcome hand rubbed up and down her back. “It’s okay. It’s over, sweetie.”

“Nooo,” she sobbed. “You-you don’t un-understand. I’ll never have a husband to love me, or children to pester me. It’s all over for me.”

Loving hands pulled her into a tight embrace. “Nothing is over for you. You can still have a brood of children if you want. I promise. Please, just stop crying.”

She sniffed and blinked up at Horace. He looked close to tears himself. He brushed the pad of his thumb against her cheek, wiping away her crystalline tears. “That’s my brave girl,” he said with a sigh of relief.

She carefully touched her forehead, expecting to find a gaping hole. Of course there wasn’t one.

“How?” she asked.

His gaze traveled to the floor where a perfectly shaped bullet had apparently fallen right next to her feet. “Looks like he missed.”

“No,” she said. Her heart started to pound out of control. The bullet may have fallen short of its target, but it wouldn’t have dropped from the air intact like that. Not unless something unnatural had stopped it. “I did that.”

“If you say so.” Horace dismissed her rather frightening revelation. In fact, it

seemed his attention had already turned elsewhere. His gaze was glued to her pearly pink cell phone. The lights on it were still blinking. He picked it up and held it to his ear.

"Yes. We're okay," he said. Faith remembered then that she'd never finished that rather frantic conversation with the police operator. "Yes. Yes." He listened for what felt like several minutes. Though, thinking back, the conversation couldn't have lasted for more than a few seconds. "I understand," he said finally, and then snapped the phone closed.

"The police are on the way," he told Stone.

He didn't sound happy about it. In fact, he gave Faith such a disgusted look, she was sure he was furious with her. Why didn't he want the police involved with...with...mysteriously disappearing gunmen?

Ah. Even she could understand how that might be difficult to explain.

"I'll get Hadrian over here," Stone said, pulling a cell phone from his own from his suit coat pocket. "He's got connections with the police department. He can answer all of their questions for us."

Horace nodded, but he didn't look satisfied. "You had to go and call the police, didn't you?" he grumbled.

"There was a man shooting at us," Faith shot back.

"We had it under control."

"Did you?" She motioned toward the spent bullet on the floor next to her toe.

His lips tightened. "This isn't the time to argue."

"Oh?" But she felt like arguing. It was either do that or start crying again. Her hands started trembling. She quickly sat on them. "When will it be a good time? After you try and break up with me again. Or--or should we wait for another man to start shooting at us?"

He rolled his eyes.

"What was that thing?" Horace asked Stone. He helped Faith to her feet and pushed her pair of panties and jeans into her arms.

"I don't know, but it sure as hell wasn't human."

"No kidding," Faith said. Whatever had attacked them had disappeared into thin air before her eyes. No ordinary man could do that. Neither man seemed interested in her opinion.

"It wasn't anything I've ever seen or heard of." Stone was saying.

"You mean it's new?" Horace asked.

"Or that ancient." Stone shrugged. "Judging by its power, I'm betting on ancient."

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Chapter Five

Horace was impressed. After a few well-deserved tears, Faith managed to pull herself together and had, though not happily, accepted what must have appeared to her as an unfortunate trip into insanity. She blushed furiously while she dressed. He found her sudden bout of modesty charming.

When she finished buttoning up her jeans, she turned around and introduced herself to Frank Stone. Thrusting her hand out to him, she said, “I know we’ve already met, but everything about last night seems hazy. You’re Stone, right?”

Stone raised a brow as he turned his gaze toward her proffered her hand. “You remember meeting me?”

“It would be impossible to forget you,” she said, “seeing how you’re the only person Horace would let me call after he was shot.”

“Indeed.” Stone’s silvery eyes widened. It wasn’t an easy feat to surprise a man as talented as Frank Stone. Horace’s pride swelled. Faith was an uncommon woman. “It would be difficult to forget something as important as that, wouldn’t it?”

She frowned and rubbed her temples.

“But perhaps,” Stone continued. His voice filled with a power that pressed down on the club like a giant hand. “Perhaps, it is easier to forget me and Horace and what you witnessed last night and today.”

The spark in her pale blue eyes dimmed as she nodded slowly. “It would be easier to forget.”

“You don’t need the pressure of things that seem fantastic, things that are impossible. Life is complicated enough. Don’t you agree?”

She nodded again. “Life is complicated.”

Stone flicked a glance in Horace’s direction. “You came to the club this afternoon to talk to Horace, did you not?”

“Yes, yes I did!” A flicker of life returned to her expression. “I wanted to—”

“You wanted to resign your position as bartender.” Stone’s voice was powerful enough to overwhelm Faith’s excitement.

“Now see here!” Horace protested. He didn’t want to lose a competent employee. He didn’t want to lose her.

Stone lifted his hand and shook his head, but he kept his gaze on Faith. “Life is complicated enough. You don’t need this job when you can get another one at the university.”

“Yes,” she said, her expression neutral again. “That would make my parents happy. They worry.”

“And you wouldn’t want to worry them.”

“No,” she said. The spark was dimming in her eyes. She was slipping away. Only today, Horace wasn’t feeling so relieved about it.

“Wait,” he said. He wedged himself between Stone and Faith. “Wait.”

“I know you have feelings for her, but think this through. You can’t keep her.” He put his hand on Horace’s shoulder. “We both saw it. She’s still able to control your power. We need to lock that knowledge away forever. Otherwise, she might attract the attention of the Council.”

And that would be a disaster. Some members on the Council were power-hungry. There was no telling how much trouble they might make if they found out about Faith.

“Okay.” He started to step away and let Stone wash away her thoughts for a second time. “How do you know it will work this time?”

“I’m pushing harder, deeper.” Stone’s expression darkened. “She’ll forget.”

Horace believed him. This time, the process would surely stick. Stone’s mind push was so strong that it was fogging even Horace’s thoughts. He shook his head trying to hold onto the important thing he needed to say, the thought that kept nagging at him. But because of Stone’s magic he couldn’t seem to form the words that he needed to put into his mouth.

“You’re not going to harm her, are you?” he asked after a while.

“I’ll try not to.” Was the best Stone would promise. Somehow, it didn’t seem good enough.

And there was still the gunman. Stone may have vanquished him from the club, but that force hadn’t been destroyed. It was still out there. The gunman’s warning haunted him. *You’re now a package deal*, he’d said. Which meant Faith’s life was in as much danger as his. She’d be as good as dead if Stone succeeded in wiping her memories clean. *That was it.*

But it wasn’t the only thing. Horace had marked her twice. He couldn’t quite remember. It made his head buzz to try, but he knew that marking her meant something.

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Something important.

He couldn't let her go. At least, not until they untangled the mystery of why someone would want to kill them.

"She's part of this," Horace said. He put his arm around Faith's shoulder and pulled her to his side. "Until we figure out why, we need to keep her memories intact."

Stone didn't look convinced.

"That monster tried to kill her. It could have shot you, but it clearly said you weren't on its hit list," Horace pointed out with a rush. Faith's expression was still vacant. It was up to Stone to release her and let her have her own thoughts again. "You were the one working to vanquish it from the club, and yet it pointed the gun at Faith and pulled the trigger. Don't you think we need to find out why?"

Stone chewed on his lower lip and frowned. It wasn't a promising sign. "I've already pushed several of her memories away," he said after a long span of silence. "It might be dangerous to stop now."

"What do you mean?"

"Her memories are fractured. Look at her." Stone waved his hand in front of her face. "She's not able to process any of this because there are too many holes. I've never tried to reverse someone's memories. For all I know, I might end up entangling her in this haze forever."

"No." Horace knew he was being stubborn, but he didn't care. "I won't let you take her away from me. Not like this. Not yet."

Impulsively, he slanted his lips over hers, and claimed her.

* * * *

She felt like a fairytale princess. The dashing hero's kiss broke through the wretched spell. Faith blinked several times as her thoughts pushed through the thick haze that had been clouding her mind. She liked that image of Horace. A dashing hero prepared to fight for his lady. A prince riding on a glorious white steed.

Slowly, her mind cleared—the fog and fairytales floated away—and she didn't need the power of Horace's kiss anymore. But her arms tightened around his neck all the same. She was enjoying the feel of his lips against hers, and wasn't ready to have him stop.

He'd probably try to break up with her again. He seemed to do that every time they stopped kissing. Didn't they have to be dating to break up? She decided she'd use that argument the next time. And there would be a next time. She felt quite confident that he would try to wiggle out of this odd relationship of theirs again.

But like all beautiful things, this kiss couldn't last forever. Feeling slightly breathless and unbalanced, she peeled herself away from him.

"You okay?" he asked as he gently caressed her cheek.

Not willing to trust her voice to be steady, she nodded, slowly.

That made him frown. "Are you sure?"

"If I say no, will you kiss me again?"

Stone shouted a laugh. "She's okay," he said with a lingering chuckle. "And I think we should get out of here before the police arrive and start asking endless questions."

"Where should we go?" Horace asked.

"The café?" Stone suggested.

* * * *

It still bothered Faith that Horace and Stone were reluctant to talk to the police. It wasn't like this was one of the third-world countries where she'd spent her childhood. There, she could understand the reluctance. In those developing countries there was often good reason to fear the local authorities. But the Chicago's police force was made up of professionals. They could help them. They'd investigate the crime scene, come up with clues, solve the case, and put that madman behind bars. That was how those things worked, wasn't it?

Horace and Stone seemed to think otherwise, and they were unwilling to listen to her thoughts on the matter. So she brooded—for all the good that it did. Horace didn't appear to notice he was getting the cold shoulder as she rode with him in his obscenely large and luxurious SUV. He was taking her to some café. Stone followed in his own car.

By the time Horace pulled into a parking space in a part of town Faith knew nothing about, she'd worked herself into an impressive temper. When he stepped out of the SUV, she refused to move. Instead, she crossed her arms over her chest and stared forward.

He came around to her side and opened the passenger door. She bit her lip to keep herself from saying something nasty. She shouldn't put the blame completely on his shoulders. They didn't know each other well enough yet. At least, he didn't know her well enough to understand that her opinion shouldn't be ignored. She wasn't a fluff-brain with a pretty smile, but how would he know that? It wasn't as if she'd given him any stimulating conversations. Still, he should have at least listened to her. Dismissing her outright had been a blow to her ego.

"I know you're upset with me," he said quietly.

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How kind of him to have noticed. Even so, she refused to budge from the soft leather passenger seat of his SUV.

"You don't understand the situation," he said.

"And do you plan on ever explaining it to me?" She didn't like the bitchy tone of her voice. She blamed him for it. He was the one who had reduced her to this.

"I'm taking you to the heart of things," he said. "I'm bringing you somewhere no human has ever been allowed to go before."

She couldn't have heard that correctly. She turned toward him. "*No human?*"

"That's what I said."

"So, this place you're taking me, this café?" she asked with great care. "You've never been there either?"

His gaze touched hers. His eyes were dark blue like a midnight sky. It was a struggle not to lose herself in eyes like that.

"Faith..." he started to say. He sighed deeply. "The Oblique Café is like a second home for me."

No, that couldn't be right. "But you said...?"

"Yes, I did say that."

She swallowed deeply, but her voice still wavered when she whispered, "Not human?"

"Come on," Stone said as he walked up behind Horace. He sounded entirely too cheery for the situation. She leaned forward to take a good look at him. Was he human? "They're waiting for us."

"*They?*" Stone looked human. And Horace looked even more human! All the parts had been in the right places. And yet he'd made her feel things that she'd never felt with another man. Could that be because he wasn't...he wasn't...? She couldn't bring herself to even think it.

"You better give us a minute," Horace said.

Stone's gaze bounced between Faith and Horace. "Is she going to be okay with this?"

Horace dragged a hand through his hair. "I don't know."

"You know my objections," Stone said. It sounded like a threat to Faith's ears. "I'll do what I can to help, but she's your responsibility."

"I know," Horace grumbled.

Nice. She felt so welcomed, so wanted. And about as desirable as a big, fat credit card bill.

"Take me home," she said once they were alone. "In all my life, I have never been a burden. Even when my parents were neck-deep in research and too busy to spend much time with me, do you think I whined and insisted they stopped their important work to play with me? No, I didn't. I helped them out by organizing their books, or by interviewing the tribal children, or by simply staying out of their way."

Horace didn't say a word, but she could feel the tension humming between them.

"Take me home," she said, more forcefully this time. Her neck was beginning to ache from stiffly staring forward when what she really wanted to do was to turn her head and look at him.

"No," came his flat refusal.

She waited for him to explain why. She should have figured he wasn't going to be so accommodating.

"Then I will walk home." That was a bluff. A petulantly made one at that. She'd slipped on a pair of sandals that she rarely ever wore because the heels were a little too high and the straps a little too tight. Her feet would be ripped to shreds before she managed to make it a block. There was no possible way she'd be able to walk clear across the city to get home. Luckily, he wasn't willing to let her try.

"Like it or not, your life is in danger," he said, his tone growing sharp. "Even if I wanted to send you away, I couldn't. Not anymore. There is a reason that gunman wants the both of us dead. And the people waiting for us inside the café are the only ones who can help us figure out why."

Finally, she turned her head toward him. "People? You mean the non-human people?"

He held out his hand to help her step down. "Think of this like a research project," he suggested. "What would your parents do if they discovered a new civilization living in the midst of the crowded streets of Chicago?"

"They'd investigate, of course."

"And what will you do?"

He was letting the decision be hers. If she wanted to stay in the car, to pretend that none of this ever happened, he was going to let her do it.

"But I get the feeling that I will never be able to tell anyone about this so-called discovery. No lectures. No scholarly papers."

"No, you won't. Does that matter?"

It wouldn't to her parents. Their love was the research, the quest for knowledge for knowledge's sake. They'd witnessed deeply sacred ceremonies that they'd never

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share with the outside world. Her mother and father had never had a problem with that. They had promised several times to guard secrets. They felt it was just as important to protect these fragile societies from the outside world, as it was to learn about them. And Faith had never disagreed with them on that point.

She took Horace's hand and slipped from the SUV. Her heart raced at the thought of stepping into a world filled with beings who weren't human. What were they? Would she be safe with them?

Images of werewolves and vampires bombarded her mind.

"I'm not throwing you to the wolves, sweet," he assured her as he guided her down the sidewalk. "I'll be by your side the entire time."

"And if I want to leave?" she asked, entertaining second thoughts with every step.

"You will leave with me," he said.

"You promise?"

He smiled at that, showing off his sexy white teeth. "We're not monsters, you know. They're not going to bite."

"*You* bite," she reminded him.

Color tinted his cheeks. It was the first time she'd seen him blush. "Umm..." he said.

"Well?" She wasn't ready to let him off the hook.

"I bite," he admitted. "But I don't remember hearing you complain about it."

There was a power in his voice when he said the last. It reached out and caressed her. The mark on her breast and the one between her legs tingled. And her body suddenly ached for his touch. She didn't care that they were in the middle of a busy sidewalk. She needed him to touch her. To fill her. Her mind clouded with thoughts of pure lust, and her legs turned to water. She stumbled, and nearly fell flat on her face. Horace caught her before her head hit the pavement.

"Sorry," he said. "I got a little carried away."

"A little?" Faith dreaded finding out what would have happened if he'd really put his heart into that seductive mental push. "And the others? They can do this to me as well?"

"No one will hurt you." It sounded like a promise he was determined to keep.

He put his hands on her shoulders and steered her toward a blank brick wall between two storefronts.

"Do you see it?" he asked.

"The wall, you mean? The wall I'm about to walk into?"

His grip on her shoulders tightened. “Look again.”

Before her eyes, the brick faded away. A battered old sign with a scrolling script that read “The Oblique Café” hung over a glass door that hadn’t been there a moment before. This was really happening, she felt a need to tell herself. She drew a deep breath and put on a brave face as she reached for the door handle.

Surprisingly, her hand connected with cool steel. The door felt real. The café looked real. She glanced back at Horace. Even though he might not be human—an idea that she wasn’t quite ready to accept—he appeared to be sticking by her.

It was all too much to take in. She still hadn’t gotten over the fact that she’d stared down the barrel of that madman’s pistol. And the madman had pulled the trigger. She should be dead!

Perhaps this was her afterlife. She’d always expected to see angels and pearly gates, not a grimy, slightly run-down part of Chicago. She swallowed hard, and remembered that she had been lapse in attending Sunday services lately.

Be brave, she told herself, and then yanked open the café door. She stepped inside, half expecting to bump her nose on a brick wall. Silence greeted her. Hadn’t Stone said that they were all waiting? Where was everyone? What would *they* look like, anyhow? Funny green men with tentacles for arms?

Horace’s hands remained steady on her shoulders, feeding her courage. Why was it so dark? She drew in a deep breath and remembered she’d closed her eyes. She peeled them open to find nearly two-dozen very human-looking eyes staring back at her.

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Chapter Six

“Sip it slowly.” Jake, the owner of The Oblique Café pushed a cup of piping hot chocolate into Faith’s hands. If Horace hadn’t been holding her shoulders, she probably would have bolted out the door. Horace was glad he was holding onto her.

No matter how brave Faith appeared, he could understand why she’d be skittish around Jake. With his gray goatee and long face, he looked rather goat-like. The battered old T-shirt, with “The Oblique Café” printed across the chest didn’t make the best impression.

But Faith wasn’t looking at Jake or the rest of *the Protectors* crowded in the rather narrow brick walled café. She was gazing wide-eyed into the cup of hot chocolate.

Hot chocolate, it was the drink Jake served all the New Ones—the foundlings who are just coming into their powers. But Faith wasn’t a New One, which probably made the shock of discovering The Oblique Café all the more sharp. She was clutching the white ceramic cup as if it was her lifeline.

“Go ahead and take a sip,” Horace said gently. “Jake uses the best chocolates, imported from the far corners of the world. I guarantee you’ve never tasted anything this rich before.”

She slowly raised the cup to her lips. And after breathing in the rich aromas that were making his mouth water, she took a tentative sip. And then another.

“Hmmm...” Her voice wavered. “This is good. Thank you.”

Jake gave her a toothy grin. “Glad to hear it. You’re the first human to ever taste it. I wasn’t sure if it would suit your palate or not.”

“What is she doing here?” Kara was the one who had shouted that question. Her short brown hair bounced with agitation.

She had once set her sights on Brendan, but that had been before Dallas had come into the picture. Ever since the wedding, she’d been dropping not-so-subtle hints that she was interested in hooking up with Horace. Even if he’d been tempted, his pride would have never accepted being someone’s second choice.

“Meet *the Protectors*,” Horace said, figuring it would be best to ignore Kara.

“We’re--we’re...”

How should he explain what he didn’t understand himself?

Faith glanced uneasily up at him. “V--vampires?”

That made him chuckle. “No, sweet. Not vampires.”

“I--I just thought...You’ve been biting me!”

Brendan, with a devilish sparkle in his eyes, snuggled up to her. “I bet he has been.” He pried her hand from the mug and caressed it. “I’m Brendan Cromerty. Horace’s best friend.”

“And married,” Horace quickly added, snatching Faith’s hand from Brendan’s caressing fingers.

“So...” Faith drew out the word. She took another sip of hot chocolate. Horace had to give Jake credit for giving her the hot chocolate. The soothing flavors did seem to bolster her courage. “If not vampires, what are you? *The Protectors*? That makes you sound like you should be gathering at the Hall of Justice with the other superheroes.”

“I like her spunk,” Brendan said with a bright grin.

Faith smiled back, sending a spurt of jealousy roiling through Horace’s chest, which was silly. She wasn’t his to be jealous over.

All the same, Brendan was married. He shouldn’t be flirting with anyone. Horace glanced around, searching for Dallas. She wasn’t standing too far away. And she didn’t look concerned at all.

“I’ve been telling them all along that they need to make a handbook for moments like this. With lots of visuals. Stone won’t listen to me,” Dallas said with a huff. “We’re not quite human. We have special powers. I’m sure you’ve already figured that out, though.”

Faith nodded, and then took another sip of her hot chocolate. She wasn’t clutching the cup so tightly anymore.

“There’s no good explanation of what we are.” Dallas slid a dirty look in Stone’s direction as if the difficulty was his fault. “None of us have families, so there really was no one to teach us about who or what we are. We all have our own specific powers. And we help the humans.”

“I’m not sure we should be telling her any of this,” Kara grumbled.

“She has a right to know,” Dallas shot back. Her expression then softened. “How are you holding up, Horace?”

“I’m okay,” he lied. “Just the routine human saving and all.”

Dallas didn’t look convinced. Neither did Brendan or Stone.

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“*The Protectors*,” Faith whispered, as her gaze swept over the crowded café. “Nothing simple like fairies, bogeymen or a sexy vampire. I feel sort of disappointed. Are you sure you’re not from outer space?”

“Your guess is as good as ours.” Horace felt his shoulders relax. He hadn’t realized how nervous he’d been for her. But her teasing tone chased all his concerns away. She was strong enough to handle this, he was glad to know.

“Perhaps we should all sit down and discuss what has been happening,” Stone said.

“I’d like to finish my hot chocolate, if you don’t mind.” She took another long sip. A smile spread across her adorable lips. “I know what you are all telling me is very important, and probably vital to figuring out why that creature was shooting at us. But this is really very tasty.”

Once she finished the hot chocolate and had handed the empty cup back to Jake, Stone directed Faith to sit with him at a small table in the middle of the café. Horace insisted on sitting beside her. Brendan took the seat on the other side of her. And Dallas pulled up a chair and sat next to Brendan.

Kara tried to squeeze in between Stone and Horace, but there just wasn’t enough room. She ended up sitting directly behind Horace. The others in the café pulled up chairs next to hers, until there were two complete rows encircled the five sitting at the small, round table.

Jake squeezed by and slid a plate with a fat, chocolate croissant hanging off the edges in front of Faith.

“Do I get one?” There was an edge of panic in Dallas’s voice. She had grown to love the café’s decadent treat.

“Of course, dove,” Jake said, producing a second croissant out of thin air.

“Oh!” Faith breathed. “That could be useful.”

“And dangerous,” Dallas said right before she bit into the flaky croissant. “I’m thankful I don’t have the ability to do that. I’d weigh a ton if I did. No self-control.”

“Not when it comes to enjoying the sensual pleasures.” Brendan took the croissant from Dallas’s hand and brought her chocolate-covered fingers to his lips. He took his time sucking each slender finger clean. Dallas’s eyes rolled heavenward and she blew out a trembling sigh.

Faith watched with what looked like a sense of awe. Horace often felt that way, too. There were only a handful of foundlings who had ever been successful in love. But this year, there had been two marriages. Hadrian and Holly, the other married couple,

were at Club West dealing with the police Faith had called. Hadrian had started bringing Holly along with him when he went to work with the police. They seemed to make a good team. Almost as good a team as Brendan and Dallas.

Horace rubbed his hands over his eyes. Seeing how happy Brendan had been lately, had made him want that kind of relationship for himself. But it wasn't something he could ever hope to have. Not even if he could safely pursue Faith, it wouldn't be the same. She was human. He wasn't.

He would have to let her lick her own chocolate-covered fingers clean. It would be better that way.

While Faith nibbled on her chocolate croissant, Horace and Stone described to the others what had happened at the club both last night and this afternoon. Oddly, neither of them could give a good description of the gunman.

"He was clearly magical," Stone explained.

"But he was using a gun?" Brendan asked. "Why?"

That was a question no one could answer. But that didn't mean the others were silent. Everyone seemed to be talking at once, speculating about what could be happening. And why.

Was this an attack against Horace in particular? Or was the creature going to eventually come after all of them? It must have been preternaturally strong to have withstood Stone's banishment spell for so long. And what about the human? How is she involved? *Was she human?* How could a mere human convince Stone to reveal the location of their secret café?

Horace grimaced as he overheard the nervous whispers. They were suspicious of Faith. He was now glad Brendan had openly shown his support by readily accepting her at the door and then sitting next to her.

"None of this helps us," Horace said.

"Or explains why you need to bring a *human* to the café," Kara added with a sneer.

"She's one of us now." Dallas's softly uttered statement stunned the café into silence. She had some amazing powers, and just about everyone respected and feared her intuition.

"Impossible." Kara was the first one to break the silence. "Horace claims she has a family."

But what if she was a New One? What if her parents had adopted her?

"Your parents?" he asked her, trying to put it gently. "They are your natural

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parents?”

Her mouth was full with the chocolate croissant, so she merely nodded.

“How was her childhood?” Jake asked. “All of ours were horrible.”

She quickly swallowed. “I didn’t have a normal childhood, but it was wonderful.”

There was no doubting the pleasure in her eyes, as she appeared to be remembering her past. Bitterness stabbed Horace squarely in the chest. His childhood had been anything but happy. His ability to trust had been beaten out of him time and again.

“She could be adopted,” Brendan offered.

“If you saw my parents you’d believe me. I’m their child.”

“She’s one of us.” Dallas refused to change her mind on that point.

“What do you mean?” Stone asked.

“She shares his power.” No one had told her that, but still, she knew. The skin on Horace’s arm prickled.

“They are mated,” she said as if it meant more than just sex.

“Mated?” Faith asked before Horace had a chance.

Dallas smiled that enigmatic smile of hers and shrugged. “The two of you are sharing an aura. I have no idea what it might mean.”

“It means she’s a potential danger,” Derrick said, from the back of the room. At Horace’s glare, he quickly added, “She doesn’t have the training or capacity to control your power. She’s not one of us.”

But Dallas was shaking her head.

Thinking of Faith as one of them, as not-quite-human, thanks to their having mated, whatever the hell that meant, turned his mood black. This was exactly why he shouldn’t have had sex with her. He managed to fuck up her life.

Before yesterday, she was an innocent. And now...

Fuck.

“I know you don’t want to hear this,” Stone said. “But I can only conclude that what is happening now is linked back to when you disappeared, Horace.” He paused. “It’s time for you to remember.”

Horace shook his head. “I can’t.”

“It’s time for you to remember,” Stone repeated, his voice deeper, heavier. But the mental push didn’t work. His memories were too well protected. The wall that had been built around that difficult time couldn’t simply be pushed away.

“I don’t mean to be stubborn about this. I truly can’t remember anything that happened during those two years when I disappeared. I’ve tried. Beyond getting vague

visions and dire warnings—like not to have sex with feisty women—nothing.”

“Let me try,” Brendan said. He had the ability to rifle around in Horace’s thoughts, and perhaps even knock down that wall hiding his secrets.

Horace wanted to say no. The thought of finding out what had happened scared the hell out of him. There had to be a reason he didn’t remember. And the snatches that he did get were always laced with pain.

But it wasn’t just his life that was in jeopardy now. Ballou had said Faith’s and his life were a package deal. Could that be because they were sharing an aura? There was another reason...

He rubbed his suddenly throbbing temples. That repressed part of his past was one hell of a Pandora’s box. He did not want it opened.

Perhaps there could be another way. He unbuttoned his cotton shirt and pulled it off, revealing the still stinging tattoo.

“This showed up this morning. It looks familiar, but I don’t know why.”

Faith lightly traced her fingers over the raw tattoo. His skin tingled and sang in response to her touch. The black lines turned golden and glowed for a flickering moment.

Stone shook his head. “I have never seen anything like that before.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.” Horace shrugged back into his shirt and turned toward Brendan. “Do it.”

Brendan had Faith move out of the way, and he set up their chairs so that Horace was sitting facing him. They were so close, his knees banged up against Brendan’s.

Though Brendan didn’t have to touch someone in order to read minds, touching did help if he wanted to probe deeply.

“Be careful,” Dallas warned, which only made Horace more wary.

“Take a deep breath,” Brendan said. “I’ll try to make this as quick as possible.” He touched the tips of his fingers to the sides of Horace’s face.

Horace felt Brendan tiptoe into his thoughts. It wasn’t bad at first, though it did feel a little crowded. Brendan chuckled as he pushed past the memories of last night and this afternoon.

“Ahhh, nice,” Brendan said, and slid a glance in Faith’s direction. There was a heat in his eyes. Lust.

She’s mine. Horace tried to push Brendan out of his thoughts.

“She’s mine,” Brendan echoed.

“Their minds are linking.” Horace vaguely heard Dallas say. She put her hand on Brendan’s shoulder. Her touch seemed to help Brendan’s focus. He brushed away

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Horace's hunger for Faith, and skimmed Horace's rotten childhood, the endless string of days living hungry and homeless. The lonely days. The frightened child shivering and cold. But that wasn't what they were looking for. Brendan went further to the place buried so deeply that it was beyond Horace's faintest recollections of infancy.

"I'm close," Brendan said. "The protections in this area are incredible. Tougher than what Dallas had built around herself to guard against *the darkness*."

But don't worry Brendan's voice was now in Horace's head *I think I see an opening*.

A blinding pain sliced through Horace. It felt as if an electrical storm was erupting inside his mind. Flashes—burning pain—jolting shocks. He couldn't control or make sense of anything that was coming at him. There was too much pain. Electric barbs tainted every thought. Every memory threatened to tear him to pieces.

He tried to tell Brendan to stop, but his mouth was paralyzed. In fact, he couldn't seem to move at all.

* * * *

They were hurting him.

"Stop!" Faith shouted. Trusting her instincts without pausing to question why, she pushed Brendan with all her strength, trying to break the connection between Horace and Brendan. But he didn't budge. She started beating on his shoulders until several of *the Protectors* grabbed her arms.

"Stop! You're hurting him!" she shouted as they forcibly pulled her away. "Stop it!"

She could feel the pain rippling through her head and searing through her body.

"Please," Faith whimpered. "Please, don't do this to him."

"We better listen to her," Dallas said. "Horace?"

He didn't answer. He couldn't. They were killing him. Why couldn't they feel that? His pain was filling the air. Faith couldn't believe she was the only one picking up on it.

"Brendan?" Dallas sounded worried now. "Brendan? I need you to pull back."

"I agree," Stone said.

It took the both of them to pry Brendan's fingertips from Horace's temples. As soon as the contact was broken, Horace sucked in a deep breath of air. Brendan crumpled to the floor.

Dallas caressed Brendan's ashen face and murmured softly in her husband's ear. Faith struggled against the arms holding her. She wanted to get to Horace. To touch him.

Caress him. Comfort him in much the same way.

“What happened?” Stone crouched down beside Horace’s chair, and asked. Horace swallowed hard several times and shook his head.

“He’s in pain.” Faith could still feel the sharp throbbing behind her eyes. Somehow she knew it was only a taste of what Horace was experiencing. “Can’t you do your magic and help him?”

Jake was quick to react. He handed Horace a steaming cup of what looked like tea. After watching Horace take several sips, Jake turned to Faith. A second cup appeared in his hands. “It looks like you could use some, too.”

The men holding her released her arms, and she gratefully accepted the cup. The lemony tea tickled her taste buds and, after swallowing, spread a soothing balm through her body. The pain behind her eyes slipped away.

“I know where I’ll be coming next allergy season,” she told Jake, who had been watching her with apt curiosity. She took another sip. “This is good.”

“I aim to please.” He smiled, but it was forced. Everyone looked tense.

“What happened?” Stone asked Horace again.

And again, Horace appeared unable to answer.

“Those memories are in what felt like a no-man’s land, a war zone, littered with explosives waiting to blow Horace apart.” Brendan was sitting up now. The color had returned to his cheeks. With Dallas’s help he stood. “Dammit Horace, did you do that to yourself? Or did someone do that to you?”

Horace shook his head.

“He doesn’t know. It’s like what you did to me, Stone,” Faith said. She didn’t understand it, but glimmering bits and pieces of knowledge had dropped into her head when Brendan and Horace had been pulled apart. “When he tries to remember, he hits the barriers and they cause his head to ache. Push too hard, and he’ll end up permanently brain damaged. Perhaps even dead.”

“And what suddenly makes you an expert on how these things work?” Kara demanded. She had attached herself to Horace, rubbing his head and running her hands through his hair. He didn’t appear to mind.

“Faith is right,” Brendan said. “We can’t force him to remember. It’s too dangerous.”

“Very well,” Stone said. “Did you learn anything in the short time you were in there?”

Brendan chewed on the question for a while. “The marks you gave Faith,” he

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said, slowly, “they have connected her to you.”

“Marks!” Kara said with a laugh. “How primal, Horace.”

Horace shot Faith an accusing glare, like this was completely her fault. “Connected?” he asked with a deep and dangerous edge in his voice.

“I’m afraid so,” Brendan said. “It appears you’ve bound her to your soul and made her your servant.”

“*His servant?*” Faith didn’t like how that sounded. No, that couldn’t be right.

“How did you know how to do that?” Stone asked.

Horace only shook his head.

Kara draped her arms over Horace’s shoulders, letting her fingers trail down his chest. He didn’t stop her. “Looks like you’ve got yourself a pretty pet,” she said, loud enough for Faith to hear as well.

Horace’s gaze met Faith’s. There was no reading his closed expression. “A pretty pet,” he said slowly. His voice caressed her breasts, and her body turned weak. What she wouldn’t do to have him caress her all over with his raspy tongue. Perhaps she should go find another chocolate croissant. She could drizzle...

“No,” Faith whispered, backing away from him. Backing away from all of them. “No, this can’t be happening.”

Horace pushed Kara away and stood. He came toward her. She held up her hands, hoping to keep him away.

“I want to leave.” They were playing with her mind. This was too much to take. “You told me I could leave if I wanted.”

“I told you I would come with you,” Horace corrected.

“What if I need to be alone for a while?”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“And it’s not dangerous for me here?”

“I’ll protect you.”

“And who will protect me from you?” she demanded. “No thank you. I’d rather take my chances on my own.” She dashed toward the door. No one made a move to stop her.

“*Come here.*” His command vibrated through her body.

Though she didn’t want to be anywhere near him, she turned. Her feet mindlessly obeyed him.

“I don’t want this either.” He sounded tired.

“Then let me go, Horace. Don’t make me do things against my will.”

"I will do what is necessary to keep you safe," he tossed back at her.

"So that's it?" She couldn't seem to keep her voice steady. "Whether I like it or not, I'm your sex slave now? You whisper my name and I'm quivering with desire for you?"

"Faith..." There was pain in his eyes, but that was probably just an aftereffect from the blinding headache. He reached for her hand, but she sidestepped him. She didn't want him to touch her. "Damn it, Faith, do you think I wanted this?"

"I don't know." She didn't know anything anymore. "It seems like a pretty good deal for you."

His expression tightened, and he started rubbing his temples again. "It's not that simple," he said. "I can't—I don't know."

She felt a pang of compassion for him. Was that her own emotion, or just an echo of what he wanted her to feel for him? She couldn't tell. "Go to hell," she ground out. "Go to hell, and stay the fuck away from me!"

"Faith..." He tried to touch her again but she was having none of that. "Ballou—whatever the hell he is—isn't going to give up. You need to stay here where you are safe."

She laughed at that. Where she was safe? Where she was safe as a sex slave? Tears sprang to her eyes and she laughed again. Great. Great. Now, she was getting hysterical. He was bringing out all her best traits.

Horace started to say something else. She covered her ears and backed toward the door. "Don't you dare use your powers against me," she warned, and flashed a glare in Stone's direction. "You either!"

She'd been patient and reasonable long enough. Did they realize how frightening this was to her? They were talking about taking over her life. Oh no, not her life. She had plans. And none of them included becoming a sex slave.

True, Horace was sexy. He made her mind go numb with desire, but that wasn't a good enough reason to let him turn her into a mindless slave.

She backed toward the café door. It wasn't far. But before reaching it, she hit a wall that was dressed in jeans and a lightweight polo shirt. She glanced up and saw Brendan. He didn't have a smile for her this time. When she tried to skirt around him, he wrapped his arms around her chest, trapping her. She fought like a wildcat to break free. But he was stronger. Unnaturally so. His arms tightened like bands of steel around her.

He picked her up and started to carry her back toward Horace, who was shaking his head with distress. "Don't hurt her."

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All of the sudden sparks leaped from her skin like a Roman candle exploding. The impact knocked Brendan to the ground. She jumped over him and blasted through the glass door. Oddly enough, the broken shards didn't cut her.

And she was free. Kicking off her uncomfortable sandals, she ran and ran and ran. The bottoms of her feet were worn raw by the rough sidewalk. She didn't care. She didn't care about the pain or where she was going, as long as it was far away from The Oblique Café and its gathering of mind-controlling weirdoes.

Leaving had been her only option. She swiped at an errant tear. She would not let herself cry. No matter how her heart hurt, she would not cry.

The feelings she'd felt for him were an illusion. Just like that brick wall that had turned into the café door. An illusion. They weren't meant to be together. She hadn't been waiting for Horace all her life. That, too, had been an illusion. A sweet fairytale she'd painted for herself to keep from falling in love—from trusting.

There were no fairytales in this world. No princes waiting to sweep her off her feet. Only predators. Shadows. Strange men with seductive powers. It was time to wake up and accept the truth. She wasn't a fairytale princess with a happy ending just waiting to happen.

Now that was something worth crying over.

* * * *

"You frightened her away!" Horace couldn't stop himself from shouting at Brendan, who was still sprawled out flat on his back near the door. "What the hell were you trying to do?"

"Keep her from running," Brendan grumbled. He rubbed the back of his head. Dallas knelt down beside him and put her hand on his chest. "I didn't expect she'd try to fry my brains like that."

"She's terrified, of course she would want to run," Dallas said.

"She can't be out there alone. I need to find her."

"Let me go after her," Dallas said. She jumped to her feet and blocked the shattered door. "The last thing she needs is to see you right now. I'll watch over her and make sure she's safe."

Horace gave a nod and sank into the nearest chair. What Brendan had done to him had been nothing short of a psychic attack. And it had sapped nearly all his strength.

"Thanks for the concern," Brendan growled in Horace's direction while Stone helped him to his feet. "By the way, plowing through your memories wasn't a pleasure trip for me, either." He rubbed the back of his head and scowled, but spared a smile for

Dallas as she disappeared in a blur of speed. Horace had never seen her do that. It must have been another one of the side-benefits of her marriage to Brendan. Their powers seemed to be growing stronger every day.

Before Horace could defend his cranky mood, Kara sneaked up from behind and draped her arms around his neck again. It was a purely possessive move, but he didn't have the energy to push her away. "Why would you want to waste your time with her?" she purred in his ear.

"Why do you ask it like that?"

"She's a pampered pet, that's why. Been coddled and spoiled all her life by her loving family. Personally, I've got no use for such things."

"I don't know," he said. A slow smile spread across his lips as he pictured a jeweled collar around Faith's neck, and her luxuriating on a velvet pillow. Preferably the pillow would be on his bed. "A man could enjoy having someone like her as a pet—pampered and happy."

Trouble was, he couldn't have her. He was supposed to be alone. Forever. It was the only way he could keep...*what?* He was beginning to wish those memories he'd spent the last four years running from would return.

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Chapter Seven

“It’s too late,” Ballou said, though his lips didn’t move. Like the rest of his kind—a race of telepathic warriors commonly known on earth as the Men in Black—he lived too much of his life in his thoughts. The ability to speak was quickly becoming lost to their race. “He’s found his mate. Coupled with her again. His seed is surely growing in her as we speak.”

“The royal seed,” Prince Manelin felt a need to add. He drummed his fingers on the arm of the white leather chair. The penthouse apartment with a wall of windows that overlooked the Chicago skyline and Lake Michigan had been rented for the month. He didn’t expect he’d need to stay in the mortal realm for much longer than that. The Men in Black were efficient killers.

It wasn’t exactly regicide, Manelin reminded himself. The Lion had been created...transformed from one creature to another to suit the laws of the royal sages.

“What happened this time?” he asked, growing tired of the whole affair. “Why isn’t he dead? I thought you’d told me that you’d killed him.” The Lion didn’t want the throne. He’d run away from his destiny. Run back to earth.

The crown and throne should belong to Manelin by now. King Manelin, ruler of the mystical realm. The title had a predestined ring to it. At least it did to his ears. The laws regarding these things were impossible. As long as the Lion or his progeny lived, Manelin was blocked from taking the throne, the crown, or the title.

The Protectors were foolish creatures. They knew so little about themselves. About their destinies. How could one of *them* be chosen as supreme ruler in the first place?

“It was the girl. Joining with her must have bolstered his powers. I shot him last night in the alleyway behind his bar.” Ballou was saying. His face grew flushed with emotion. “He was fucking her next to the dumpster. Like she was a whore. Today he had her naked in the middle of the nightclub’s dance floor.” He drew a long, slow breath. And then—amazingly—spoke out loud, “How could he treat her like that?”

“He is the king. Everyone is below him...even her.” The sages had warned that the

king would find his mate and return, stronger and more powerful than ever. This had to stop, or else he would never win the throne. And being chosen as second in line had never sat well with Manelin. He was a faerie. And the fey were second to none, especially not to a *Protector*.

"I didn't like it. She is his queen," Ballou said, his lips moving quickly now. "I shot him. Used one of those primitive human weapons, just as you instructed," he said with a sneer. "It caused a great deal of damage. The Lion was dying. Bleeding to death when I left him. But today he is alive. And today he had a powerful friend banish me to the netherworld."

"So, you will try again?"

Ballou nodded. "I could crush him right now if you'd let me use my powers."

"No!" Manelin couldn't allow that. "Their deaths can't lead back to me. It has to look human-caused."

"The child—if there is one—will never know of its importance," Ballou pointed out. "If the king doesn't remember his coronation, there is no reason to kill the girl."

"I would feel better if his mate was gone, too." Manelin didn't understand his assassin's reluctance. Ballou had carried out the execution of entire civilizations before. What was one more life?

After a long pause, Ballou nodded again. "Very well. Consider them both dead."

* * * *

"Kimmi, Kimmi, Kimmi, it's a disaster." Faith buried her head in her hands. "This was the first and last time I will ever throw myself at a man."

Faith had called Kimmi. Her friend had immediately left her office at the university and had driven across town to rescue Faith. Not only that, she'd treated Faith to a late lunch at their favorite restaurant, a little family-run French bistro.

"Do you need more time before ordering?" she heard the waitress whisper.

"Yes, please just bring us some more coffee," Kimmi said in the hushed voice she used only when they went to the library or the ballet. And then after a pause she petted Faith's head. "He looked so *normal*. I can't believe it. I mean, I do believe it, because you're telling it to me and all...but I can't believe it."

"It's true." She'd told Kimmi the basics. Nothing about Horace not being human, but the rest, about the marks and his attempt to control her. "All of it is true."

"How kinky," Kimmi purred. "Are you sure, you're not tempted to—?"

"This isn't a game. They mean to make me their—" She glanced around to make sure no one was listening and lowered her voice. "They mean to make me a sex slave."

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“Well, the solution is simple. You’ll have to stay away from him.”

Faith raised her head and pleaded with Kimmi. “But what if I can’t?”

What if he had the power to summon her from a distance? What if she couldn’t untangle her own desires from his? What if she didn’t want to stay away?

“It’s the losing myself that worries me the most,” she admitted.

Kimmi took Faith’s hand in her own and held on tightly. “Don’t worry. We’ll work this out together.”

They both ordered salads. Kimmi talked Faith into getting a glass of wine. It hadn’t taken too much arm-twisting.

The food tasted good. Faith hadn’t realized how hungry she was until she took her first bite of the crisp greens piled on her plate. She’d skipped both breakfast and lunch. For her, that was terribly out of character. She never skipped meals.

Before long, her plate had been wiped clean and there was only a little bit of red wine left in her glass.

“You might as well finish it,” Kimmi said. “Hell, you look like you could use something stronger.”

“Today I’m almost inclined to agree with you,” Faith said with a weak laugh. She reached for the glass. It shattered. She hadn’t even touched it. But still, it shattered.

“What the hell?” Kimmi asked, looking around. “Did you see something hit the glass? All I saw was a flash.” She turned her gaze up. “Did something fall from the ceiling?”

Faith curled her fingers into a tight fist. “It was nothing. An accident.”

“But you didn’t even...” Kimmi’s eyes grew wide and she pushed back from the table. “*Faith...you’re glowing.*”

“What?” She looked at herself in the reflection of the white ceramic plate. There was a slight golden glow that looked like a halo ringing her head. “Great. Great. That’s just what I didn’t need. This is his fault. He’s doing this to me.”

“Horace? How? I don’t understand.”

“I bet this is his way of getting me back.” And she didn’t like how Kimmi was looking at her, like she was afraid. She jumped up from her chair, knocking it over. “I’ve gotta get out of here. Sorry about the lunch.”

“Wait!” Kimmi tried to chase after Faith, but the waitress stepped in the way. “What’s going on?” Kimmi shouted as she tried, unsuccessfully, to sidestep the waitress. “What are you going to do?”

What was she going to do?

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Good question.

Stay away from Horace, she supposed. Though the thought of never seeing him again crushed against her heart. Love wasn't supposed to hurt like this. Her parents were in love, and their relationship was nearly perfect. They were comfortable with each other. Happy.

Perhaps they could help her figure this all out.

* * * *

Unfortunately, her parents could only shake their heads.

They both happened to be at home when Faith showed up on the doorstep of their lavish Frank Lloyd Wright inspired prairie-style home on the edge of Oak Park. Growing up, Faith had spent very little time here. But seeing the wide overhangs and aging redwood and stone siding still made her feel warm inside. The cedar-laden air outside the house smelled like Christmas to Faith. Her parents tried to always get back to the states for the holidays.

Faith steered her old Honda into the driveway just as her mom had been pulling out. Her mother was on the way to the grocery store, but Judy Summers took one look at her daughter and decided the shopping could wait. She took Faith by the arm and led her into the leather appointed study where James Summers was working on his latest textbook. Boxes of loose papers and moldy old tomes were stacked up all around his desk.

"Daddy," Faith said, tears filling her eyes. "I'm in a little bit of trouble." She started to tell them what had happened on the night of her birthday.

Judy pulled out a magnifying glass and studied the odd glow encircling her daughter's head, while Faith tried to tell them everything.

And she tried. Oh, she was able to tell them the embarrassing parts about her getting intimate with Horace and the marks he'd made on her body. But whenever she got to the weird parts—the parts about the otherworldly gunman and the sometimes-there-sometimes-not café, her head started to pound. The harder she tried to make her tongue work, the sharper the pain attacking her.

She gave up after she almost threw up.

"It's a mystery, sweetie," her dad said, he'd pushed his glasses off his nose and set them on the top of his head. The wire rims were getting tangled with his brown curls. "I wish you could tell us more about this new boyfriend who did this do you. Why would he want to control you?"

"Because—because—" *he's not human!* But her tongue refused to work right. It

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was useless. She sank into her father's leather armchair and rubbed her temples. "I'm afraid they're controlling me. Even now, my thoughts are bound up because of them. Because of what *he* did to me."

That made her parents frown.

"I'm calling the police." Her mom picked up the phone and started to dial. "I suspect they've drugged you. Perhaps I should call Dr. Banks, too."

Faith tried to tell them that it was magic, not drugs, but those words wouldn't come to her lips either. And the glow around her head grew brighter.

"Horace," she breathed, wondering if he could hear her. "Don't do this to me."

* * * *

Horace held out his hand and tried to will the newly refilled teacup sitting on the café table to come to him. It refused to budge.

Most of *the Protectors* had left The Oblique Café. Some had returned to their daily routine. Being magical didn't pay the bills. Nearly all of them led normal lives with normal jobs that couldn't be neglected. Stone had sent those with flexible schedules out into the streets of Chicago to see if there had been any reports of odd occurrences.

Most mystical creatures were terrible at blending in with the humans. Perhaps *the Protectors* succeeded where the others failed because, unlike the immortals flitting in and out of this world, they'd been raised alongside human children and had learned early on the nuisances of society's rules. Whatever the reason, mystical creatures, at least the ones who were trying to blend, often ended up sticking out like sore thumbs. Not that the humans would notice. There were some pretty odd creatures out there living with the humans. Most of them were masquerading as celebrities, where outlandish behaviors were the norm.

But *the Protectors* knew the truth. And the consensus among them was that it would be better to track down Ballou and confront him before he found them again.

For the past several hours, Stone had been getting regular updates from the street-by-street search. So far, no one had found anything more notable than an errant garden gnome.

Horace had wanted to join the search, but Stone had stopped him. "You'd just go looking for Faith," he'd said. Which had been the truth.

While Horace was glad for the distance from her—he didn't need her in his life and he certainly didn't need her sapping his powers—he couldn't seem to stop thinking about her and what he would do with her when he got his hands on her again. It was her fault that their souls had been bound together. She'd teased him mercilessly. What was a

guy to do?

He'd grab her wrists and hold them above her head. She'd struggle against him. Maybe be a little frightened. Good. He wanted her to use some caution around him in the future.

He held out his hand and focused on that damned teacup again.

She'd fight him. Curse him. Bite his lip. He'd bite her back. And that would only serve to enflame her. Their lips would battle and she'd press her body against his. Through the layers of her clothes, he'd take her breast into his mouth. Her nipple would be hot and aching for him. He'd lick, suck, and tease until she moaned his name.

The teacup didn't even wobble.

But she'd eventually surrender. Her tight, compact body would meld with his. Her curves fit so deliciously well with his, especially when she wrapped her legs around his waist. She'd bite her lower lip and smile. She had a crooked smile that made his chest ache. Seeing it would make him want to kiss her again. She'd make a little grunting sound in the back of her throat as he ravished her mouth. He liked it when she did that.

And her light blue eyes would grow smoky with lust.

He narrowed his gaze and gritted his teeth, hoping that would help move the cup.

With a wave of his hand, her cloths would be torn from her body. There was no need to hide his powers from her anymore. So why not use them to his benefit? And hers. After he put that third mark on her body she would belong to him. Forever. There would be nothing to stop him from taking her. Their desires and hungers would be merged.

The cup shuddered, but remained exactly where Jake had set it. Horace drew in a deep breath and tried again to visualize the cup moving toward his outstretched hand.

He'd worship her. He'd feast from her honey-scented body, taking pains to make sure she'd be lost in the bliss of their lovemaking. He'd make love to her with his tongue and bring her to the brink of madness. She'd be shouting his name before he was done. He'd make sure she'd never regret loving him.

Horace leaned across the table, picked up the cup, and took a sip of the tea Jake had fixed for him.

"I've never lost control like this before," he admitted to Brendan, who was slouching in a nearby chair with his arms crossed over his chest and watching Horace through heavy-lidded eyes.

"The power is still there," Brendan said. "You're just too caught up with other...um...thoughts, to be able to focus."

"Other thoughts?" Brendan wouldn't have been eavesdropping, would he?

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His friend raised a brow and had the decency to blush.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd stay out of my head. My feelings toward Faith are private."

"I wish I couldn't hear them." Brendan stretched and crossed his legs at the ankles. "It's worse than watching pornography. I'd appreciate it if you could tone it down. Dallas isn't around to help me out, you know."

"Try harder. I'm sure you have something better to do than to be sitting in my head. Perhaps you could go help look for Ballou."

"This isn't her fault, you know," Brendan said. "You shouldn't blame her."

"I don't want to hear this."

Brendan didn't seem to care. "She didn't take your powers. You still have them."

"Then why couldn't I even tip over that damned teacup?"

Brendan shook his head. "The silvery thread that connects you to the universe, the source of your powers, is still there. And it's shining pretty brightly right now. I think you're inadvertently funneling that power to Faith."

It was a commonly held belief among *the Protectors* that they didn't have any innate powers. They were merely able to tap into the universe and focus the energy that was everywhere at all times. It generally took years of training to learn new ways to direct that energy.

"But she healed me." Which was one of the most difficult skills to learn. Only a few among them were naturally inclined to learn how to save a life. Horace wasn't one of them.

"The bond I have with Dallas enhances my natural abilities and I enhance hers. Perhaps it is the same with you and Faith."

It couldn't be the same. Faith was human. Horace closed his eyes and shook his head. "I just want it to all stop."

"What's happening to you doesn't have to be bad," Brendan said. "Two halves of the same whole coming together...it's a beautiful thing. There's nothing wrong with finding your mate."

But there was. The answer was locked behind that wall in his memories. He could feel it pulsing against the barriers, trying to get out, trying to warn him. Loving Faith would bring him nothing but danger.

There had to be a way to stop this. To stop his heart from wanting her like this.

* * * *

Sparks lit up the room.

“Honey, are you okay?” The voice sounded strange, like it was tumbling down a long tunnel. “Honey?”

Faith blinked up at her dad. She could see his lips moving and hear the words, but she couldn’t seem to put the two together. Something was happening to her. She was changing.

She looked down at her hands. They were glowing now, too.

“You better not touch me,” she warned, remembering how she’d knocked Horace’s friend to the ground when he’d tried to keep her from leaving the café, and then she’d broken the wine glass. “I don’t know how to control this. I don’t know how to stop it.”

Her heart ached. She wanted Horace. He was the only one who could help her. And yet he was responsible for her losing control. She couldn’t trust him.

“Why can’t I have a relationship that is as easy as the one you have with Mom?” she cried.

“Easy?” James tossed a loving glance over his shoulder to his wife. “We’re talking about your mother, right? The queen of having her own way?”

“Hey!” Judy protested, but she was smiling. “You aren’t so perfect yourself, professor.”

“Love is never easy,” James warned. “But why would you want it to be? It’s the challenges that make life interesting.”

She wanted to believe that, but her heart was hurting too much to be happy about it. What she wouldn’t do to trade this pain for a nice, easy relationship. Compared to glowing and inadvertently breaking things, dull looked pretty darn good.

Judy twined her fingers with her husband’s. “Sometimes we hurt each other without even realizing it.”

“But—but—” Faith sputtered. Her parents’ relationship worked. They were equals. They honored each other. Trusted each other.

“I’m not saying you should trust Horace,” Judy said.

“But perhaps you should trust your heart,” James finished.

“But I don’t know if what I’m feeling is real. What if it’s all a lie?”

“Look deep,” James said. “You’ve always been good at sorting difficult things out, like my files. You’ll know the truth.”

She did. And her father was right. She knew what she needed to do. And it scared the hell out of her.

“I should go to him.”

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“No!” Judy shouted. “Have him come here. You should confront him on your terms, not his.”

The doorbell rang. “I bet that’s the police,” her dad said as he started for the front door.

“I’m beginning to understand why he wanted to avoid the police,” she murmured as she touched her glowing fingers together. A spark danced in the air.

Her father frowned at that. “I’ve seen some strange things—” he started to say but then stopped himself and forced a gentle smile. “I’ll send them away, if that’s what you want.”

Faith turned toward Judy, who quickly gave her daughter an encouraging nod.

“Yes, please send them away,” she said just as the bell chimed again. There was nothing she could tell them anyhow. Her stubborn tongue wouldn’t let her tell anybody anything useful.

When her dad returned to the study after a few minutes, an unremarkable man dressed in a dark suit followed closely behind. At first she thought that this man had to be one of her father’s colleagues. He had dark hair, a regular face, and a pleasant smile. Then she saw the gun in his hand.

And remembered.

“Please, where is he?” Ballou asked politely before pressing the barrel of the pistol to her dad’s head.

* * * *

“Faith is in danger!” Horace dropped the empty teacup he’d been turning around in his hand and shot up from his chair. “I have to find her!”

“Dallas is watching her,” Brendan said in an irritatingly calm voice. “She would have called if...”

Horace didn’t wait to hear the rest. He nearly knocked Stone over in his rush to get to the door. Car keys in hand, he made a dash for his SUV. A force outside himself was pulling him. She needed him. The hell with his mixed-up emotions and fears for his heart. She needed him.

No one was going to stop him from protecting her.

“At least let me ride shotgun,” Brendan said with a broad smile from the passenger seat. “Especially with your powers on the fritz.”

There wasn’t time to argue. Horace threw the car into gear and punched the gas pedal with his foot.

“She might be a stubborn little thing, but she doesn’t deserve to die.” He’d miss

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her quirky smile.

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Chapter Eight

“Let’s not make any hasty moves,” Judy said.

James had stiffened in response to having a gun pressed to his temple, but he didn’t look upset. Of course this wasn’t the first time he’d been threatened with a gun. He’d exposed more than a few government sanctioned crimes and murders in Africa, South Asia, and South America, and had upset several military regimes.

He merely sighed deeply, and then asked, “Is this Horace, honey?”

“No,” she answered with great care. “I tried to tell you earlier, but I couldn’t seem to find the words. This is the man who is trying to kill Horace.”

Nothing was holding back her tongue now.

“My daughter will be happy to cooperate with you,” James said. “This boyfriend of hers has bullied and frightened her.”

“And made her glow...and not in a good way,” Judy added with a sweeping gesture in Faith’s direction. Though the situation was terrible, Faith’s love for her parents swelled. They’d rushed to defend her like a pride of lions protecting their cub despite the danger to themselves.

The halo glowing around her head appeared to intrigue Ballou. His black eyes widened and his jaw dropped. He took a step toward where she’d been slumped in her dad’s leather armchair.

“What has he done to you?” He took another step toward her. His arms fell limp at his side. At least her dad was no longer in danger. But James didn’t keep himself out of harm’s way for long. He followed closely behind Ballou, preparing to pounce.

“You shouldn’t be glowing like that. The power, it must have been unleashed. It shouldn’t be unleashed like that.” He shook the barrel of the gun at her, giving her dad reason to back up a step. “He botched it up. I can’t believe he could botch something as simple as a mating.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. Wasn’t there a saying: Enemy of her enemy was her friend? Not that she liked to think of Horace as her enemy. But perhaps Ballou could shed some light on what was happening to her. She slowly rose from her dad’s leather

chair. Ballou followed her movement, aiming the gun at her chest.

“What did he do to me?” she demanded.

“You know what he did.” His gaze deepened to a midnight black color. “He mated with you. Treated you like trash, mindlessly fucking you in the alleyway and in the middle of the dance floor. But you let him. And he made you his whore.”

A blush stung her cheeks. She’d told her parents about what had happened with Horace, but in not such rough detail. The color in her mother’s face had drained away. Her parents had always taught her to be an independent woman, to never let a man dominate her. She hated to think how disappointed they must be in her right now.

“Where is he? They’re hiding him from me. But you they treat so carelessly.” His lips didn’t move, but she heard his words clearly enough. “Why do you let them dishonor you? You’re his queen.”

“Queen, servant, sex slave...” *Whatever.* Right now she needed to get that gun away from Ballou. At least, he was pointing the wretched thing at her instead of her dad.

“If she tells you where you can find this Horace fellow, will you leave?” Judy demanded with a quiver of anger in her voice.

“Help me and I won’t harm your parents,” Ballou said. “If you protect the Lion, I might be forced to shoot your parents before I shoot you.”

“He’s at The Oblique Café,” she said, afraid he might carry out that threat before giving her a chance to cooperate. “It’s...it’s on the other side of town. I could show you.”

Judy protested the last with a sharp cry. “What she means is that she could draw you a map!”

“Never mind.” Ballou’s gaze narrowed, and he looked every inch a killer. “He is here.”

Horace. His name got stuck in her throat. She wasn’t sure which danger she feared most, a madman with the power to take her life—or a lover with the power to take her soul.

She might be saved from one wolf only to be thrown to another. The thought of falling under Horace’s power again made her shiver.

James, who was still hovering behind Ballou, didn’t seem to notice. He gave Faith a wink, and scooped up a copy of the 1938 classic *Defining Culture* that had to be at least three inches thick from his desk.

“Your death has to look man-made,” Ballou was explaining casually. His easy tone was more appropriate for reciting a cake recipe, not planning a murder. “And Manelin wouldn’t want interference.”

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“Manelin? Who the heck is he? And what did I ever do to upset him?” she asked quickly, hoping to hold his attention while her dad made his move. He raised the classic anthropological treatise until it was in line with Ballou’s head.

“Manelin?” Ballou asked with a start of confusion. “The prince? He wants Horace’s power. He’s a bastard, really. But he was very clear on this. You and Horace have to die. A shame...”

James swung the heavy volume just as Ballou held up his free hand. A bright flash pulsed through the room, blinding her.

“Dad?” She rubbed her stinging eyes. “Mom?”

When neither of them answered, she panicked. “Mom! Dad! Answer me!”

Gradually her eyesight returned, blurry at first. Something was wrong. The room was too silent. She had to blink several times before the book-lined walls came into focus. And then she saw what had to have been her worst nightmare.

Her parents were lying motionless on the ground.

* * * *

A storm was brewing. A cool wind whipped around Horace’s face as he dashed across the cedar-lined street and toward the house his instincts were telling him he’d find Faith.

“Wait.” Brendan grabbed Horace’s shoulder and nearly ripped it out of its socket. “There’s Dallas. She can tell us what’s going on.”

Dallas wasn’t much for talking though. She was focused intently on a point above the house.

“Trouble?” Brendan asked.

“In spades,” she said, her voice strained. “I’ve been busy keeping the universe from ripping open.” They followed Dallas’s gaze. An ominous willowy light was spiraling into a point high in the sky where dark clouds were gathering. Lightning rippled through the air.

“*She’s doing this?*” Horace demanded, hoping beyond hope that it wasn’t true.

Dallas nodded. “And your gunman is in there with her.”

* * * *

“No!” she screamed. “Nooooo!”

“I do apologize, my queen.”

Her parents! The bastard! “What did you do to them?” Tears spilled over onto her cheeks. Heedless of his gun, she rushed him and beat her fists against his chest.

She’d brought a killer to their doorstep. She should have never come here. This

was her fault. All her fault.

"I have to kill you now." He pressed the gun to her forehead. "But perhaps it's for the best. Perhaps I'm doing you a favor."

"Go to hell," she growled. Pure anger leapt out of her skin like an exploding bomb.

* * * *

"No! Stop!" Horace broke through the heavy oak door and charged into the room in time to watch Ballou burst into a cloud of black smoke. A bit of smoldering black cloth floated across the toe of Horace's expensive loafers to land on the richly hued orange and red Oriental carpet.

Fury swirled in the light blue eyes that turned toward him. The hard orbs reminded him of a hurricane raging in a tropical sea. Faith had encased herself in a golden wall. Sparks sizzled in the air around her. Her expression was raw and overflowing with power. It was both a terrifying and beautiful sight.

"You need to stop," he said with greater care this time.

"*He killed them.*" Her voice crackled with electricity.

He quickly glanced at the two humans lying unconscious on the floor. Though shallow, they were breathing and looked as if they'd both survive.

"I know you're upset, sweetie, but you need to calm down."

"He killed my parents." A sudden crack of thunder shook the house. "He *killed* them."

"They aren't dead," Horace said, holding his hands in front of him as he crossed the room toward her.

Brendan and Dallas charged into the room.

"Horace, I can't contain what's happening any longer. We have to stop it," Dallas said with a rush. "The universe is being torn to pieces."

Faith turned her intense glowing blue gaze toward them. Fury sparkled like rubies around her head.

"No!" Horace shouted, but it was too late. Fields of lightning shot out from her fingertips, striking both Brendan and Dallas. They crumpled like a pair of paper dolls.

"Forgive me, love." He punched Faith in the jaw with enough force to knock her unconscious, catching her as she fell. He gathered her into his arms and held her tightly against his chest. She looked so fragile. Her silky skin too easily torn. Her delicate bones too easily broken. She was like a beautiful bird with a golden plumage. A priceless treasure that needed to be coddled and protected.

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He'd never owned anything so precious. And now that she was his, he was afraid he'd ruined her.

Everything had spun out of control, and all this was his fault. A disaster he wasn't going to be able to fix. No matter what he did, things were not going end well for Faith.

"Forgive me," he whispered.

* * * *

"I've tied her to the bed upstairs and bolted the door," Horace announced as he descended the narrow staircase.

No one gathered at the café said a word. They simply watched him.

"She told me a man named Manelin had sent Ballou to kill the both of us. She called him a prince."

The silence hung heavy in the room. It made him uneasy.

"Though the power is not contained, as soon as I assured her that her parents were safe and healthy, she stopped glowing so brightly."

He couldn't read minds, but he knew what they had to be thinking. Hell, he was thinking it himself.

A low rumble of thunder had followed them as they'd driven across town and the sky was now dark above the café.

"She's still in quite a temper," he admitted.

Dallas bit her quivering lower lip. Her eyes were rimmed-red and she blinked several times as if desperate to hold back a flood of tears. Brendan pulled her into his arms and shook his head. "The damned universe was ripping apart," he murmured. "What else can he do?"

And it was the truth.

"I've created a monster." Horace wanted to bare his chest and suffer in Faith's place. That nagging ache didn't worry his head anymore when he wondered why he shouldn't have sex with a human. He now knew the answer. "I have no choice. I'll have to kill her."

There was a ceremonial knife the Council used whenever there was a need to sever the line between the source of all power and a rogue *Protector*. One cut and it would be done. Her power. Her life. Her soul. Gone. Forever.

He had no choice. It was his duty to protect the humans. And right now, her very existence threatened every living creature on earth. She had to go.

"There is another way," Stone said.

Horace had a sinking feeling he knew exactly what Stone was about to say.

Dorothy McFalls

“No,” he said automatically, shaking his head. “Don’t even suggest it.”

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Chapter Nine

“If you’re not willing to take her to your bed, I’d be more than—” There must have been something in Horace’s expression that told Stone not to finish that thought. Stone sucked in a sharp breath. “She’ll die if we turn away from her,” he said. “She might even take the whole world down with her.”

“We don’t even know that this will work!”

“So you’ll let her die?”

“No.”

“Then you’ll—?”

“No!” Horace slashed his hand through the air. “I can’t. I won’t.”

“Keep your emotions out of it. Think of it as just a fuck. She’s sexy as hell. Certainly you can force yourself to do the deed with her without getting all tangled up with emotional shit.”

That was the problem. He already cared for her and wanted her. She already had the power to hurt him. He wasn’t about to do something that would make him that more vulnerable.

How in the hell could he have sex with her while knowing that he might still have to kill her?

“We don’t know what will happen. She could be playing us. You know, trying to get under my skin. Or she could’ve made me part of her research project. Discover a new species of sentient creature. That would sure look good to her anthropologist parents. Or she could be working with this *Prince* Manelin to destroy me.”

“And which one of those do you believe?” Stone asked.

None of them. That was the problem. He believed her, the wench. She’d played her part too well and made him care for her. For that, he couldn’t forgive her.

* * * *

“I don’t like you right now,” Faith said, and turned her head away from him when he came back through the door. He’d tied her wrists and ankles to a silk-covered bed in an exotically decorated room, with golden drapes covering the windows. And had left her

uncomfortably bound and contemplating her fate for what felt like hours.

“Good. I’m not feeling particularly friendly toward you, either,” he bit back.

“Then don’t do this.” She tugged on the ropes binding her. “Let me go.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

She turned back toward him. “Why?”

“You know the reason.”

She did. In her heart she could feel the frightening power welling. Soon, ropes wouldn’t be strong enough to hold the evil boiling inside her at bay.

“It’s not evil. It’s power. Power in its purest form,” he said. “Power you’re not equipped to control.”

“Because I’m human?”

He shrugged. “Perhaps.”

“Not really helpful.”

“No,” he agreed.

She watched, her heart thudding against her chest as he unsheathed a long, slightly curved knife. Though the construction was ancient—Phoenician perhaps—it had been well cared for. A ceremonial weapon.

“Don’t make me beg for my life.”

The knife stood between them. And tied up, she was helpless to defend herself.

“I wouldn’t think of it.” There was anger in his voice.

The knife still in his hand, he crawled onto the bed. He swung his leg over her and straddled her hips.

A few days ago—and without the knife—this would have been a fantasy come true. Well, she might not have been the one tied up. The ropes chaffed. Silk scarves would have been a better choice. Not that she enjoyed being tied up. But still, sex with Horace—in his bed—had been a fantasy that had kept her up late at night. There was something about him. She’d been drawn to him even before he’d made those wretched marks that had bound her to him.

“Damn you,” he said, and pressed his lips to hers.

The kiss was bruising and demanding.

Despite every bitter feeling prickling down her spine, her lips softened. She surged up, straining against the ropes and drank in the passion that flared like liquid fire between them.

“The third mark is the final mark,” he ground the words against her mouth. “There will be no turning back from this once it’s made. You’ll be mine.”

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And he'd belong to her. She nipped his neck. "It goes both ways, doesn't it?"

"You've been using that scientific mind of yours." He sounded pleased.

"Not nearly enough, lately. But I had some quiet time alone with my thoughts,"—she tugged on the ropes—"thanks to you."

He used the knife to slice the ropes binding her wrists and ankles. "It'll be easier without them," he explained.

Just glad to be free, she sat up and rubbed her sore wrists. He helped out by rubbing her feet and her ankles. "Ballou called me your queen, you should know," she said. "Said you should treat me better."

His hands stilled and he met her gaze. The beautiful dark blue eyes watching her, clouded with lust. "In this bed, with me, you are a queen."

"He also said that you botched our mating. What do you think he meant?"

Horace drew a slow breath. "He's a madman. It would be a waste of our time to try and figure out what his ravings could mean." His tone was light, teasing almost. But his brows sank. He knew something, and it troubled him.

"Don't ask," he said before she could question him. She squirmed uneasily as he stripped off her clothes, the words on her tongue frozen by his unnatural command over her.

Whether she wanted him or not, he had the ability to make her open her body to him. With just a glance, she was parting her thighs. Had he demanded that of her, or was she acting on her own desires?

She didn't know.

And not knowing, both terrified and thrilled her. Her heart was beating wildly while her thoughts spun out of control. He was going to fuck her and then kill her.

Why shouldn't he get one last joy ride, mark her for all time, before he did the deed? He was a monster, a non-human, mind-controlling monster. With a shout of frustration she tore her teeth into his forearm, drawing blood.

Her act of rebellion only fed his lust. His eyes glittered. He grabbed her wrists and pressed her to the bed.

"You are my queen," he forced the words on her. She had no choice but to believe him. "You are mine."

He entered her fast and hard, pinning her to the bed. His cock felt hot against her slick opening. The glow encasing her body flared each time he pressed into her. She was just getting used to his fast rhythm when he pulled out of her and stopped.

"I will give you the third mark, unless you want me to stop. Do you want me to

stop?” Although she might be a slave to his desires, it appeared he wasn’t going to force her to bind her soul more tightly to his. He was giving her the choice. To her, it mattered.

Unable to trust her voice, she nodded. Her heart ached for him. They needed each other. Even before he’d started playing those mind games on her, she knew that they were meant to be together.

The palm of his hand glowed red. “This will sting,” he warned. But he started moving in and out of her body again, making her body ache with the orgasm that was building. In a way, she looked forward to the pain. Her body was his for the taking. And he was using it roughly enough that she knew his power over her was complete. She belonged with him...*to him*.

His midnight blue eyes trapped her gaze. “You will come for me.” His voice vibrated with power. She was his servant and it was her duty to obey.

“Yesss...” she moaned as her entire body pulsed around his cock. Her nerves danced and sang. Even the tips of her fingers felt tingly and happy as she throbbed at his command.

He grabbed hold of her upper arms, his glowing right hand searing her skin. The pain mingled with the pleasure, getting Faith all mixed up. She couldn’t tell where one sensation started and the other one stopped.

“Come for me again,” he whispered.

She wasn’t finished riding the first one when the second orgasm hit her with the force of a speeding train. Her hips rose off the bed to drive his cock deep into her body. The room seemed to be spinning end over end. Overwhelmed, she cried out. Tears sprang to her eyes.

And still, the orgasm rocked her.

Sparks lit up the room and bounced against her skin with stinging electric barbs. Until this moment, she’d never felt so alive—So full.

Horace’s eyes grew dark, nearly pitch black as he continued to pound into her pussy. Then, on shuddering breath he shouted her name and spilled his hot seed into her womb.

* * * *

She couldn’t move. Horace had collapsed on top of her. His weight should have felt crushing. Oddly, the warm pressure of him lying on top of her was comforting. It was rather like being tucked under a favorite blanket.

“My God,” she managed to say once she caught her breath.

“*No kidding*.” His hoarse voice tickled her ear. This was the guy she could almost

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like. Love—if he'd be willing to give their relationship time to grow.

As the pleasure subsided and her heart rate slowed, the throbbing pain where he'd marked her became more prominent. She rolled Horace aside and sat up, hugging herself.

"Did you burn my arm off?" she asked.

He peeled her fingers from where she was squeezing the stinging flesh. His lips parted slightly when he saw what he'd done.

"What?" she asked and peered at the mark.

A lioness, very similar in form to the primitive lion tattoo on Horace's arm had been blazed into her arm. Around the blackened outline of a lioness, the skin was red and puckered.

"We're joined," he said. There was a sense of awe in his voice. "Are you sorry?"

She didn't know how to answer him. He'd left the ceremonial knife on the bed, and the power he'd unleashed was still vividly alive inside her. "It hurts," she said.

He feathered his lips across the burn and it cooled almost instantly.

She let out the breath she was holding. "I'm marked with the lioness and you're marked with the lion. You're the one always running from me. Do you regret it?"

The dark look he gave her shivered through her body. "I've never owned anything so precious in my life, love."

"If I'm your queen, that would make you my—"

"No," he said before she could finish that thought. "No, that doesn't make me anything."

She ran her finger along the razor-sharp edge of the knife lying in the bed with them. She couldn't take her mind off it, or why he'd brought it into the bedroom with him in the first place. A lingering spark shimmered in the air like a dying star, reminding her of the danger she posed.

"How do you plan to stop this power that's boiling inside of me? How will you stop me from letting it tear apart the world?"

Instead of answering, he twined his fingers with hers and told her to close her eyes.

She wouldn't. She couldn't. Why should she?

This was it. Even after what they'd shared together, he was still going to kill her. She should have seen it coming, but still, it had blindsided her. "There are less final ways to sever our relationship, you know."

"Shhh..." He pressed a heavy kiss against her mouth. The rough pads of his fingers gently drew her eyelids closed. "Listen."

She could hear the roar of blood in her ears. She held her breath, waiting...expecting to feel the sting of his blade at any moment. Would it be a quick death? Would he know how to do that? Or would she linger for an hour or more, suffering?

"Your pulse is jumping faster than a nervous rabbit's." He caressed the length of her neck. "Relax."

"Why?" She opened her eyes. "Will it make it easier for you to kill me?"

"Kill you?"

Her gaze fell to the knife still inches from her head, and even closer to his hand.

"I needed something to cut the ropes," he explained.

She suspected it was only partly a lie. "But what about my out of control power?"

"That's why I want you to listen."

Faith huffed a frustrated breath. But did as he'd said. She drew several deep breaths and closed her eyes, listening.

The power. It was still there, but it was no longer clawing at her insides, no longer trying to rip its way out. Something had soothed it.

"I'm acting as your anchor," he said.

"Wow," she mouthed. She sat up and looked into his dresser mirror. She was no longer glowing. "Talk about an ego boost. You're that good. Not only did you—did you—you *know*—but you silenced the storm that had threatened to tear apart the threads of the universe."

A quick smile jerked up the corners of his mouth. He leaned over and tasted her lips, sending her mind spinning again.

"Contact," he said. "Intimate contact seems to be important."

She eased back on her elbows. "I have this feverish power living inside me and you're my bottle of aspirin, huh?"

"Something like that."

"And how many times a day do we...?" A blush crept up her neck.

"I don't know. But until we figure out the details about keeping your power...um...my power in check, you'll need to stick close to me." He trailed his finger down her chest and over a nipple. A tingly golden glow just under her skin followed. He eased himself over her, planting himself between her slightly sore legs. "We'll be doing a lot of this," he warned between kisses.

"Hmm..." She couldn't seem to think straight when he was doing that. There was something, though, that she needed to tell him. If only—

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“I still don’t like you.” The thought emerged from her mouth just as he slipped a finger between her legs.

“Uh...huh...” He sounded as foggy as she felt. “You don’t need to like *me*. But I promise, you’re going to love *this*.”

Chapter Ten

The next few days flew by. Or perhaps Faith's memory of them had simply been clouded in a haze of seduction. Horace appeared determined to keep her tied to the bed, not with chaffing ropes, but by tempting her growing sexual hungers.

The bedroom above the café, which was where she had later discovered she'd been taken, had all the comforts she could ever ask for—a luxurious bathroom with a shower large enough for two, a comfortable bed with luxurious red silk sheets, and enough pillows to make a sultan envious. Yet she found even ultimate bliss could be exhausting after a time, especially considering she was putting her heart and soul into their frequent and often creative encounters.

And when he wasn't making love to her, he was kissing her, spooning with her, caressing her, or slipping delicacies from Jake's kitchen into her mouth. It was wonderful.

But she wanted more. Besides talking briefly about what the marks on her body might mean—a discussion that had led nowhere—they had not discussed anything. For all she knew, Horace was still planning to try and wiggle out of this relationship. What that would do to her physically and emotionally, she didn't dare speculate. While she was with him, she hadn't sparked, or glowed or threatened the stability of the universe. Not even once.

But on the other hand, she was completely under his spell. All he had to do was crook his finger, and she was panting and ready for him. One heated glance and she was wet and swollen between her legs. Her body was his for the taking.

It terrified her to imagine what might happen if she tried to thwart his power over her. Even more frightening was the realization that not once during their past few days together had she even considered disagreeing with him. How very unlike her to be so easy-going.

It had to be because he could control her thoughts. And if this relationship was going to work, they needed to proceed on an equal footing. She would not be his mindless, naked sex slave, salivating for his touch with every throbbing beat of her

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overheated heart. At least, not forever. Even if the hard planes of his chest were so well formed and delectable.

She climbed on top of him, straddling his hips and nibbled on his neck, teasing him with the metal stud piercing her tongue. He moaned lightly.

“You can’t be ready again,” he murmured. But she was. And soon, he was too.

This was how it went for a few more days, until the important thought she’d been trying to grasp onto finally worked its way through the sex-induced haze.

They needed to have a serious discussion.

She slid her hand to her belly. “We’ve not been using protection,” she said, wondering if his child was growing inside her already. Wondering how it could not be. “If we’re going to continue like this, we probably should start thinking about the future.”

She swallowed deeply. Given his propensity for trying to push her away at every turn, she was certain he would reject what she was about to say. All the same, she had to speak her mind. She wasn’t one to let life come at her as it may. She swallowed again. It was time she took back some control. “We really should talk about marriage.”

“Hmmm...” He nuzzled her neck. That wasn’t quite the response she’d expected.

“What? You’re not trying to weasel your way out of it? You’re not going to give me a hundred or so reasons why we shouldn’t be together?” She propped herself up on her elbow. With feather-light kisses he worked his way down her neck to her left breast. He licked the mark he’d made there. Her skin tingled and sent a ripple of desire through her body.

Hmmm...

The way he touched her, made her wonder why she didn’t light up in a burst of flames. She was close to panting by the time he swirled his tongue over her pebbled nipple. Maybe she could put off this discussion for a little while longer. “Ah...um...” She pushed his head away. “Stop that, I need to think.”

“Hmmm...” He was kissing her thigh now.

She tried to roll away, but he grabbed her hip. “Thinking is overrated,” he grumbled.

“Speak for yourself.” He pushed her legs apart and buried his head between her thighs. “You’re--you’re--you’re...hmmm...”

No, no, no. She couldn’t give into him. This was important. Now, what was she going to talk to him about?

“M--m--marriage,” she said on a shuddering breath.

He muttered a reply. The sound of his voice vibrated against her tender opening.

She gripped the sheets and arched her back. A few minutes later, and at his insistence, a vibrant orgasm shuddered through her body. Her head fell back on the silk pillow as her limp body sank heavily into the thick feather mattress.

He lifted his head and smiled at her. As lithely as a serpent, he eased his body up along her side until he was stretched out against her length. Still grinning, he brushed aside a strand of her hair that was curling across her nose.

“Marriage?” he asked.

She nodded. He’d stripped her ability to speak with that magical tongue of his.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. That’s what your parents and friends would all be expecting.”

He sounded so reasonable, so accommodating. His out-of-character behavior naturally piqued her suspicious mind.

He chuckled lightly. “Don’t glare at me so. You’ll hurt your eyes.”

“You’re being too nice. It makes me nervous,” she said, which made him laugh in earnest.

“We’re already bound together for all eternity. So why should I object to making it official in the eyes of the law?”

She touched her flat belly. Perhaps they could be married before she started to show.

“About that,” he said, suddenly serious again. “I’m sterile.”

“No, that can’t be right.” Not that she believed in a sixth sense or anything. But she felt fairly certain that his seed was more than potent enough to fill her womb with life.

“All *the Protectors* are sterile.”

She was still shaking her head. “But—but—what about Dallas?”

“She’s sterile, too. Not that she was pleased to learn about it. Brendan had forgotten to tell her until after their marriage. She still insists that there has to be a way around it. But I doubt she’s going to succeed where centuries of *Protectors* have failed.”

“But I’m human.” Faith knew she was grasping at straws. But dammit, he was wrong. What she felt in her heart had to be true. They were going to have children together. And soon.

“I’m not human. I’m sorry. I couldn’t get you pregnant even if I wanted to.”

“I was hoping for children,” she said while fighting off a dizzying wave of confusion. What he was saying couldn’t be true. “You’d told me that I could have a whole brood if I wanted.”

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He faintly remembered telling her that. And it hadn't been a lie. Not precisely. At the time, he hadn't expected they'd have a relationship. But now they were in one. And it was tied up with a bond more permanent than the vows of matrimony.

She stroked the primitive mark of the lion on his arm. It shimmered and glowed. Only she could make it light up like that. It made him smile.

"I suppose we could always adopt," she said with a wistful sigh. He could picture it now. She'd be wearing an apron and have a couple of tots underfoot. And they'd move into a tidy cottage with a white picket fence and a large friendly dog to lick them when they returned home. If it made Faith happy, he supposed he could suffer through such a domestic lifestyle.

Unfortunately, their nice, normal life would have to wait until after he tracked down Manelin, and discovered why the bastard wanted the both of them dead.

* * * *

Horace dragged himself from the bed early the next morning, and slipped on nothing more than a pair of khakis. Faith was sleeping heavily after an active night of sex. His muscles ached. He could only imagine how sore she'd be when she woke up. Since she was human, she had to work harder to match his stamina. He needed to be more careful with her.

She rolled over and wrapped her legs around a long silk pillow. It was one hell of a seductive sight. He dragged in a deep breath and fought an urge to crawl back into the bed. He couldn't, though. He'd put off investigating what was happening to him for long enough. And he'd probably kill them both if he fucked her so soon after that last time. His head was still spinning from the impact.

Leaving her to sleep in peace, he stumbled down the long staircase. The café was quiet this early in the morning. He heard pans clattering around from the direction of the kitchen. The heavenly smell of fresh pastries perfumed the air.

Stone was the only patron at this twilight hour. He glanced up from the newspaper he was reading.

"Have you found anything?" Horace asked. Stone had an uncanny knack of knowing when to be in the right place at the right time. It used to bother Horace, but this morning he was glad to find Stone waiting for him.

"Sorry, no leads. No one asking around for you. Nothing," Stone said. He handed Horace a fresh cup of coffee. "And we haven't found anyone in the city going by Manelin or any derivation of that name. There are several Manny's, but they don't match our description of a murderous prince. They are ordinary men leading ordinary lives."

How's the honeymoon going? It's been what, a week and a half now? Her family has filed a missing person's report, you know."

Horace felt his face heat. He hadn't realized he'd kept her locked up in the guest bedroom above the café for so long. She'd complained that he was using his powers to keep her in a constant state of arousal. He wasn't doing anything of the sort. If anything, she was the one turning *his life* upside down.

"I'll make sure she visits her parents today. It should be safe enough."

"Don't let her go alone."

He wouldn't. He wasn't ready to let her too far out of his sight. Just thinking about spending time away from her made him feel fevered and a little out of control.

"I do need to spend some time investigating on my own today, though." His fingers curled into a pair of tight fists as he remembered how close he'd come to losing Faith. "Manelin, whoever the hell he is, won't get away with threatening her life."

Brendan and Dallas, both dressed for the office, entered the café on the heels of that hotly made vow. "Does this mean you have your powers back?" Brendan asked. "Or do you plan to take on this unknown entity using nothing more than brute force?"

"I'll do what it takes," Horace said, an empty boast. Brendan was right. While he had some ability to control Faith, he couldn't count on being able to call upon his powers.

Brendan's relationship with Dallas had enhanced his friend's abilities. Unfortunately, Faith seemed to be doing the opposite to his. It worried him.

He set his coffee cup on the table. He hadn't gotten much more than a sip. A shame really, he could use the caffeine, and a cold shower. Drawing in a deep breath, he took a step back and held out his hand. Levitation had always come easily for him.

He focused on the plain white cup.

It refused to budge.

He drew another breath and tried again.

Almost immediately, the cup flew into the air and smacked against his hand, sloshing half of the steaming coffee onto his bare toes.

"Good to see I'm wrong," Brendan said with a laugh. "Not executed with your normal finesse, but damn, there was a great deal of power behind it."

Unfortunately, it wasn't something he'd done at all. He slowly turned his head toward the back stairs.

Faith leaned against the wall and gave him a wry smile. She was wearing nothing more than a pink satin robe that she must have found in the closet. Her lips were still swollen and red from their pre-morning tumble in the sheets. A pink glow brightened her

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cheeks. And when she pushed away from the wall, her movements were stiff, like she'd been spending too much time on the back of a horse. There was no denying what they'd been doing for the past week and a half. She had the unmistakable glow of a well-loved woman.

"I didn't mean to spill your coffee," she said sweetly.

"You shouldn't be down here. You know I don't want you leaving the bedroom without my permission," he scolded, for all the good it did him. She was stubborn to the core.

"You're not going anywhere without me," she said, her voice was thick and sultry. She was using his powers to push on his mind, to try and turn his will.

"Stop that." He shook his head, willing away the compulsion to give into her. "I won't put you in danger."

"Horace, did I tell you that I like her?" Brendan said, laughing again.

"I like her, too." Dallas crossed the room to the back stairs and put her arm around Faith's shoulders. "Look at what he's done to you, you lucky girl. I bet you could probably sleep for a week."

"I won't let Horace lock me away while he goes after Manelin," she said with the ferocity of a lioness, though she let herself be led to the closest table. She winced as she sat on the hard chair. "He won't tell me anything, but I know that's what he's planning. He wouldn't have...*you know*...with such determination, and then sneaked out the moment I fell asleep otherwise. I'll not let him do it."

"Of course not. We can't let the men bully us. Horace, he's a Leo, which makes him prone to taking the reins."

"I'm a Leo, too. Our birthdays are on the same day."

"Oh, dear." Dallas flashed Horace a look filled with pity. "That must make for some pretty interesting...um..."

"Fireworks," Horace supplied. And it wasn't all a bad thing.

Okay, so maybe things weren't perfect between him and Faith. She sapped his powers and made him cross barriers that he'd once thought unbreachable. But the world hadn't come crashing to an end. And he liked challenges. Life wouldn't be worth living if it came at him too easily.

"I don't remember seeing you look so happy," Brendan said. "She's good for you."

"I agree. That's why I need to keep her safe. Will you help me?" Short of tying her to the bed again, he doubted he'd be able to keep her from following along with him.

“Don’t you dare try it,” Faith said. She was halfway across the café from him, and still she’d seemed able to hear his whispered words. Or had she read his thoughts? He was about to ask, but stopped himself. He really didn’t want to know.

“I think we all agree,” Stone said before Horace had a chance to really piss off Faith by telling her he’d not only tie her to the bed, but also put guards at the door, if she refused to obey him. He was thankful for Stone’s intervening. “We need to find and confront Manelin. We can’t risk letting him strike again.”

No one argued with that.

“I won’t let you go looking for Manelin without me,” Faith said. “You need me.”

“I don’t need *anyone*,” he grumbled under his breath. He’d never needed anyone. Very few helped him while he was growing up, and he’d done just fine. No matter how sexy, how alluring, he wasn’t about to let her start changing his life.

Why couldn’t she simply follow his orders?

“You’re my servant,” he said, using all of his powers to push against the mental barriers she’d been trying to build against him. “You have no choice but to do as I command.”

The fire dimmed from her beautiful summer blue eyes. She slowly rose and turned to face him. The movement was mechanical—Tense. Good. She was under his control. He preferred her submissive. It was safer that way.

“You will go back upstairs and wait for me there. You will not leave that bedroom until I come for you.”

“Your servant?” she whispered through clenched teeth. “That’s all I am to you?”

Horace put his hand on her shoulder. “*You will obey me*,” he pressed the command into her thoughts. “*You have no choice. I am your master in this and in all things.*”

Tears sprang to her eyes. “Bastard!” she spat. But her feet moved her toward the stairs. He could tell she was fighting every step.

This was the only way to keep her safe, he told himself. *The only way to keep your heart safe*, a familiar voice, tiptoeing through his thoughts, scolded.

“Brendan...don’t,” he warned.

“What?” The startled expression on his friend’s face couldn’t have been faked. Not a good sign. If not Brendan, who was in his head with him? And what in the hell would that person know about keeping his heart safe?

Faith had reached the stairs. She put one foot on the bottom tread then stopped. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. She curled her hands into a pair of fists and

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strained against the compulsion to obey him.

"I wish I never met you, Horace West," she choked out. And then with an amazing burst of power, she broke free of his spell and darted toward the glass door.

She ran like a doe in a field, swift and graceful. He almost didn't catch her before she'd managed to blast her way out onto the street. He spun her into his arms just as the glass in the door shattered.

"Not again!" Jake cried.

Horace ignored the commotion behind him. His only concern was Faith, and what he planned to do to her. She beat her fists against his chest. He hugged her tightly, trapping her arms.

"What are you thinking?" he shouted at her. "You're not dressed! You don't even have shoes on!"

She squirmed and kicked him several times in the shin. Though his leg hurt like the devil, he wasn't about to turn her loose.

"You can't leave me," he said. It wasn't quite a shout. "I won't let you leave me."

"If you won't let me help you, I'll find this Prince Manelin myself. You don't need me? Well, buster, I don't need you, either. I was doing just fine without you!" She kicked him again.

"Dammit, that hurt!" He tossed her over his shoulder and clamped one arm over her legs. He wasn't about to let her kick him or hurt him like that. And she was lying about not needing him...he hoped. "You're a danger to yourself. I'm going to lock you up. And if you hit me again, I just might stuff you into a dark closet."

"You try it and I'll singe your eyebrows off," Faith growled. She'd started to glow again. Not a good sign. "I can do it, you know. Thanks to your dumping all your mystical powers on my head. I can strike you down with a bolt of lightning if I wanted." Everyone in the café took a step away from Horace and Faith. "Whether you like it or not, I'm going to track down Manelin and find out what he has against us."

"You fight me and I'll bare your lovely ass in front of everyone and spank it until it's red as a cherry."

"Neither of you will be doing anything of the sort," Stone said. He didn't shout. He didn't need to. No one disobeyed Stone. He'd honed his ability to command into a formable art form. "Horace, you will take Faith to see her parents. They don't deserve to be left worrying."

"My parents?" Faith immediately stopped struggling.

"Yes," Horace bit back, refusing to loosen his hold on her. "They've filed a

missing person's report."

"Oh," her tone softened. "Oh! How careless of us, Horace! I need to call them. They worry. I'm their only child, you know. I hate to imagine how frantic they must be right now, thinking I'm missing. And Kimmi, I'll have to call her. She'll be worried, too. And for no reason. I'm not missing, I'm right here."

He didn't look forward to facing her parents, or explaining what he'd been doing to their daughter. The dynamics of families were a mystery to him. From the outside, the strings that held a family together appeared so precious, so fragile. He didn't want to be responsible for breaking them. He'd much rather face down a killer than confront her parents.

But unfortunately, Stone was right. Taking Faith to see her parents was probably the only way to keep her from playing superhero. Which left him with no other option.

So they'd be going her to see her parents...after he carried her upstairs and dealt with the little problem of her glowing again.

* * * *

"I've never seen Horace violent like that," Dallas said as she sank into the nearest chair. Her hands were shaking. "I was scared he'd hurt Faith. He's usually so calm and easygoing. What do you think has gotten into him?"

Brendan massaged her tight shoulders. "He's in love. And it scares the hell out of him."

"Why? Falling in love isn't a bad thing." Her voice grew clipped, like she was getting ready for the courtroom. "Besides, with us as his friends, he has the best role models for a blissful union right under his nose. How can he be worried that his relationship with Faith will be any different?"

"It's all about control," Stone offered. "They're both Leos, which doesn't help matters. He needs to be in control. And so does she. Besides, look at his life. He's the owner of his own business. He went deep into debt to buy a condo so he wouldn't have to rent. And he swore he would never have a relationship with a woman."

"Now he has one." Dallas was beginning to understand.

"Right. His ego is getting in the way, also a fault common among Leos. He can't admit that he was wrong about not wanting to get involved with anyone. And at the same time, his life is spinning out of control. I'm sure he blames that on Faith."

"Don't forget that his powers aren't his own anymore," Brendan added. "That has to be a blow to him, too."

"Exactly," Stone said.

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“Then what do we do?” Dallas asked. She wasn’t about to let Horace ruin the best thing to ever happen to him. Anyone with any sense could see that they were meant to be together.

“There’s not much we can do, love. Horace wouldn’t appreciate our interference.”

Stone nodded in agreement. “But we do need to keep an eye on them, making sure they don’t kill each other before they come to their senses and accept the inevitable.”

“I still don’t like it,” Dallas said, she dropped her head into her hands. “They’re bound together. I wish they just weren’t so--so--damned stubborn. It’s only making everything harder for them.”

Chapter Eleven

The late afternoon sunlight slanted through the windows of the Summers' expansive kitchen. Horace leaned against the red tile countertop and watched dust motes dance in the golden light while Faith's parents gushed over their errant daughter. Every now and again, her mother or father would slide Horace a slow, calculating glance. He was beginning to worry that they were plotting to murder him and dump his body into a shallow grave in the backyard.

It didn't help that Faith was dressed like a damned schoolgirl. Seeing her smile innocently at her parents and offer demure apologies for not contacting them sooner, made him feel like the very devil.

What parent would be happy handing their young, bright daughter—dressed in a short lavender and blue plaid skirt, matching white twin-set sweaters, patent leather shoes, and her hair pulled back into a ponytail—over to an uneducated brute who'd lived nearly half his life on the street? Their lives were too different for this relationship to work out. Yet it was too late for second thoughts, wasn't it? They were going to be together forever.

Judy and James both hugged their daughter tightly. He wasn't surprised that they cherished her. As much as he wanted to keep himself from liking her, he was finding it more and more difficult to keep his feelings for her at bay. She'd embraced his friends. Gave freely of herself in the bedroom. And promised to never give him a dull moment. Faith Summers was special.

And his.

"We're going to be married," he announced.

"What?" Judy cried. She grabbed her daughter's hands. There was no diamond on her finger. Damn. He'd forgotten all about getting her a ring. "Tell me this isn't true, Faith."

"I don't understand what you've done to her." James wasn't a large man, but he looked prepared to defend Faith against Horace nonetheless. "If you think you can brainwash my daughter and steal her away from us, you better think again."

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“She’s not brainwashed,” he said, flatly.

“And you’re not human, are you?” James’s candor surprised him. Even after seeing what they’d seen, most humans—especially the scientific types—would instinctively explain away the truth by exchanging what they’d seen with a plausible lie. Freak ball lightning, organized crime, and mass hypnosis would just about cover what Faith’s parents had witnessed and survived.

“No, I’m not human.” He saw no reason to deny it. “I’m also not a danger to your daughter.”

James peered closely at Horace. “What are you? And what in the hell could you want with her?”

“The marriage was my idea,” Faith pointed out. “I thought, considering the circumstances, that it would be best if we went ahead and started planning for our future.”

“The circumstances?” Judy jumped in. “And what about your education? You’ve missed nearly two weeks of classes, not to mention skipping the class that you were supposed to be teaching. Your advisor, Dr. Newitt, is furious with you.”

“My Ph.D. will have to wait.” Faith cringed as she said it. “There is too much happening right now. I need to be able to concentrate on the dangers at hand.”

“Like that madman who wanted to shoot you?”

“Exactly.” Faith got a fiery spark in her eye. She was too innocent to know that she shouldn’t take on forces like this mysterious Manelin alone. She was only a human. What could she do? Much to his chagrin, she announced, “Horace needs me. We’re a team now. Something had sent that gunman to this house. I’m going to help him fight it.”

“No, she’s not.” Horace knew he was treading on dangerous ground. They hadn’t finished the argument she’d started in the café, only postponed it. He didn’t want to lose his temper in front of her parents. And it could be dangerous if Faith lost hers. Besides, he wasn’t used to sharing his plans with anyone, especially not with the humans. “Perhaps this is too much information.”

“They have a right to understand what’s happening...what’s already happened to them.”

“They weren’t harmed,” he reminded her. She was being stubborn again. What was the use of having the power to control her mind, if not to make things easier for himself? “You are safe. They are safe.” He pushed his will against hers. “We will focus on the wedding plans and not talk about anything else.”

She must have recognized what he was doing to her right away. Her blue eyes

grew large and a bright flush tinted her cheeks. “Don’t you dare...” She started to cover her ears.

He’d been too soft on her. For her safety and his, he was going to have to stop playing mister-nice-guy. Without speaking a word, he made certain his command to obey overwhelmed her stubborn spirit.

“We should discuss the wedding,” she said, the anger draining away, being replaced with a blank stare.

“I don’t see how there could be a wedding,” Judy said.

“You came to us the other day terrified and admitted that this creature”—James made an agitated gesture in Horace’s direction—“was trying to turn you into his slave. To take over your life. To control you. Knowing that, honey, how can you expect us to support your decision to marry him?”

“You’re right, Dad. It doesn’t make sense. Something happened between us. We’re linked in a way I don’t fully understand.” Her voice still sounded empty. Horace hated seeing her like this. He released his iron grip, freeing her thoughts.

“Then how do you truly know that this is what you want? How do you know you aren’t being controlled?”

“I am being controlled!” Faith snarled at Horace. “But that’s a different issue altogether. If he’d trust me a little, he’d understand that.”

“I do admit that I hold some power over her,” Horace said.

James looked ready to deck him.

“Let’s all sit down and have some tea,” Judy said in a rush. “I’m sure if we have a calm, rational discussion, we can sort this all out.”

“Thank you, Mom.” Faith pushed Horace into the adjoining living room. He’d intended to stand. Faith’s insistent tugging on his arm changed his mind. He sat next to her on a long, white sofa that looked out a bank of windows into the sloping backyard. A flock of small birds landed in an elm tree. Faith clasped his hand between hers and held it on her lap.

No one spoke while Judy fixed the tea. The tension was tight. Uncomfortable. And, Horace supposed, partly his fault. He had no business getting involved with a human. He knew having sex with Faith would result in some dangerous consequences. He just had not realized that they’d be permanent.

After several tense minutes, Judy came into the living room carrying a silver tray with a tea set that looked as if it had been in the family for centuries. With a gentle grace that was very similar to her daughter’s, she poured the tea. The cup she handed Horace

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was chipped. He carefully sipped the hot drink, half expecting it to be poisoned. It was a watery, off-the-shelf kind of tea, but harmless.

After everyone had been served, Judy settled into a chair across from Horace and slid on a pair of glasses.

"I suppose there is really only one important question that needs to be asked." She leaned forward slightly. "Do you love my daughter?"

Faith appeared to be holding her breath as she watched him keenly.

"Love really isn't an issue." At least it wasn't one he was willing to discuss. He briefly explained how they'd been linked and how Faith shared his powers. "Circumstances have bound our souls together. There is no undoing what has been done...unintentionally," he quickly added.

"I do promise I'll take good care of her. I own Club West in the River North neighborhood, which is wildly popular. So, you have no need to worry about her ever going without. And I'll protect her. I have the means."

James looked unconvinced. "I don't understand what's happening. And I'm not at all happy that you're mixed up with this creature, honey. We know several researchers in the field of parapsychology who might be able to help you. Are you from outer space?" He directed the last at Horace, who shrugged.

"I don't know."

"They call themselves *the Protectors*. Even they don't know what they are doing on earth, though."

"Interesting." Judy started fidgeting. She got up and quickly returned with a notebook and pen. "And what about your parents? How did they raise you?"

Not having parents to love and protect him had never really been a sore spot for him. That is, until he saw the fierce love Judy and James had for their daughter. Their close relationship dug like salt into a long ignored childhood wound.

"This isn't something I like to talk about," he said.

"They don't have parents," Faith supplied. "They're all orphans who had to struggle alone in the world until they found each other."

"Really?" Judy turned her attention back on Horace. "You had no one? No one at all?"

He shook his head. It hurt his pride to admit it, but it was true. He'd missed not having what all the other kids had.

"You poor dear."

"Now see here," James said. "I don't want you falling under his spell, too."

“He needs us,” Judy said. “Look at him. You can see it in his eyes. He’s lost. Faith was right. He needs us.”

James grunted into his teacup.

“No one knows the cultures of this world better than my parents. What they haven’t experienced first-hand, they have read and studied in the reports of others,” Faith said with great pride. “They can help us.”

She started to peel off her sweater to show her parents the lioness tattoo he’d given her.

“Please...don’t...” He didn’t want to give them another reason to hate him.

“This is important,” she said, and gave him a quick smile.

He didn’t know what that smile had been for, and he felt like a starving beggar scooping up crumbs. He got all caught up wondering how he might get her to smile at him again like that, and completely missed that she’d slipped off her sweater.

The skin around the black outline of the lioness was still red and puffy. He vaguely remembered that his own mark—seared into his skin sometime during his two missing years—had taken weeks to heal.

“This mark appeared a few days ago while we...um...” She had the decency to blush. “Well, I was wondering if you’d seen anything like it. We have no idea what it might mean.”

Judy gasped while James closed his eyes and shook his head.

“What?” Faith demanded. “Do you recognize it?”

“The *Sinchi-cuna*,” James said. “Well, it’s something that looks very much like it.”

“*Sinchi-cuna*?” Horace asked.

Faith furrowed her brows. “It means ‘valiant now’. It’s a phrase that was used in the time of the Incas. The *Sinchi* was a warrior. A champion, of sorts.”

“A *protector*?” he asked, his heart in his throat.

She nodded. And so did her mother. “And the *Sinchi-cuna* was a name they used for the temporary leader of these warriors. Isn’t that not right, Dad?”

“That’s essentially correct,” James said.

“He’s writing a book on the Incas,” she explained. “I’ve never heard of there being a mark depicting the *Sinchi-cuna*, though. Is there one?”

“Not really,” James said. “At least, not one that has been verified. *However*, we recently stumbled across a remote tribe that believes themselves to be descendants of the original Incas of Cuzco. Their holy man showed us a cave high in the mountains. Inside

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this cave were several petroglyphs—including one that looked very much like that. He called it the *Sinchi-cuna*.”

“Do you remember the legend of how the Incas were formed?” Judy asked.

Faith, her cheeks bright from the excitement of the discovery, nodded vigorously. “Their god, Ticci Viracocha, sent four men and four women, called The Brethren, through a window into our world. They were to be lords over the land.”

Judy fixed her gaze on Horace with such intensity it made him shiver. “These eight men and women knew no father, nor mother.”

“Just like you, it seems,” James said to Horace, stiffly.

“No,” Faith protested. “No, Horace isn’t like them. He couldn’t be.”

“Why not?” Horace asked. Something about this story sounded eerily familiar.

“Because they were vicious conquerors. Cruel to everyone they encountered. They murdered, and those they didn’t kill, they forced from their lands. As they traveled across South America, four of them came to bad ends. Karma at work, I suppose. The remaining four fought a bloody battle to win a fertile piece of land between two rivers. There, they erected the *Yrti-cancha*, the House of the Sun.”

“There were other petroglyphs in the cave,” James said. “The holy man had insisted that one in particular represented a man he’d met.”

“And what was that?” Faith whispered the question.

“It was a sun symbol, but the holy man called it the *Ccapac-tocco*, the chief lord. A king.”

“No.” Horace rose from the sofa. He didn’t want to hear any more. It had nothing to do with what was happening to him...or to Faith. “No. I’m not a king.”

“No one said you were,” James said. But the three of them were looking at him differently already. “This tribe’s beliefs are unique. I suppose being cut off from the outside world, their culture and legends diverged from the rest of the Aymaran people. New tales arose from the old ones.”

“Or perhaps their legends are closer to those handed down by the original Incas,” Judy said.

“Either way, it’s interesting. I’m hoping Judy and I will get to spend more time with them next summer.”

“Where?” Horace demanded.

James shook his head. “They don’t welcome visitors. I promised to not share that knowledge with anyone.”

“Where? Where did you see this?” He tore off his own shirt to show James the

Dorothy McFalls

mark on his arm, a mark that could cost him and Faith their lives. “If you love your daughter, you will tell me.”

“In Bolivia,” James said. “Last summer.”

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Chapter Twelve

“Bolivia?” Stone demanded. “There aren’t lions in Bolivia. Well, mountain lions, but that’s different, right?”

“I know it sounds crazy.” Horace slung the small bag he’d packed over his shoulder and tucked the last minute plane ticket to La Paz—which had cost an extravagant amount of money—into his shirt pocket. “It is crazy. I don’t know how to explain it. Those missing years in my past, I think I was there. I think I was with this lost tribe in Bolivia. I have to go. I have to find out what’s happening to me.”

Faith planted her hands on her hips and blocked the café door. “Not without me.”

“It’s too dangerous to take you.”

“It’ll be even more dangerous for you if you try and leave me behind.”

Fear and rage clouded his thoughts. Faith was pushing his buttons and he didn’t know how to stop her. He didn’t want to leave her, and yet it would be too dangerous to bring her along. “Don’t you dare threaten me,” he warned.

* * * *

She hadn’t been worried. Well, not too much. He had struck a rather menacing pose when she’d tried to stop him from leaving the café without her. And the way he’d tried to grab her made her wonder, albeit briefly, whether he was going to wring her neck.

He didn’t. When he finally caught her, he’d slanted his mouth over hers and kissed her until she didn’t know up from down.

“Seduction isn’t going to change my mind,” she’d told him somewhat breathlessly. And then stumbled a couple of steps. “I’m an anthropologist.”

He didn’t look impressed.

She clutched the back of a chair since he’d turned her legs into noodles with that kiss of his. Besides, if he came at her, she could use it against him like a lion tamer at the circus. “I can help you. And, don’t forget I have full use of *your* powers. It would be dangerous to leave me alone for long periods of time.” She paused just long enough to make him scowl. “You wouldn’t want me to have to find another anchor, would you?”

And that had settled that.

The crisp mountain air filled her with energy. Lush green leaves sprinkle with dew brushed her face as she marched along a slightly overgrown trail that wound through the Andes Mountains. She didn't realize how much she missed going on expeditions. Anticipation hummed through her veins as she wondered about the forgotten tribe her parents had stumbled across.

Her old travel gear and hiking outfit hugged her body like a trusted friend. She wore heavy khaki pants with pockets filled with useful tools, a lavender tank top with a white long-sleeved cotton shirt, and a pair of well-used thigh-high hiking boots.

Horace bit off a curse as he slipped on the hard-packed clay, again. And slammed into her back, again.

She'd tried to talk him into buying a pair of boots, but he said that they'd only raise blisters. Which was right. They'd hurt like hell until they were broken in. But at least he wouldn't be sliding all over the trail.

It had never occurred to her that he'd be uncomfortable out of the city. She loved getting away from the so-called civilized world. She didn't want or need a Starbucks around every corner. By the way he was scowling, it looked as if he did.

He might not be willing to admit that he needed her. And she hated the insecurity she felt when she thought about what he might do to her heart. Did he see her as his servant? His possession? It rankled her to think he could be that blind. But she wasn't going to let that stop her from helping him. Whether he chose to admit it or not, they were a team.

Sooner or later he'd figure that out, she hoped. They were meant to be together. Even if she had to give up everything and move into a tidy home surrounded by a white picket fence to make him happy—if it kept him happy—she'd be willing to make the sacrifice.

"We can take a break in an hour or so," she said as she jumped over a large rock. "I packed you a candy bar."

That brought a smile to his lips.

Yes, she thought, *it was good thing he'd brought her*. She had the experience with expeditions like this one. He'd probably be wandering around in circles if she hadn't been here to take control of the map.

"There's the trail to the cave," she said, pointing toward the south.

Horace squinted at an overgrown section of the forest crowded with weeds and vines. "Where?"

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In the tropics, vines grew with such speed that she sometimes felt as if they were reaching out for her. She pushed aside the recent growth. The ground below the vines was packed from centuries of use. "Here," she said.

"Doesn't look like a trail," he grumbled as he followed her up the steep incline.

* * * *

It took a full three days to reach the village Faith's parents had marked on the map. Horace had been glad for the company and for Faith's unerring sense of direction. He'd been even happier to have her around at night. To have her under the stars.

Only once did they have to stop in the middle of the day to cool his swirling powers that were now living in Faith's body. She'd woken up with that strange glow encircling her head and she was acting suspiciously quiet. She'd been brooding for the past few days. Perhaps whatever had been eating at her had finally taken its toll. When he asked her about it, she'd assured him that she was okay. He knew she was lying. By the time they'd stopped hiking for lunch, sparks were sizzling in the air. Still, she insisted that she could handle it. It wasn't until she'd accidentally set a nearby tree on fire did she break down.

"I can't," she whispered. Silent tears washed her face.

He'd stripped off her clothes and dipped her in a nearly mountain stream. A small waterfall created a natural whirlpool. The cool swirling water teased their bodies. She was ready for him. And he hadn't needed any encouragement. He took her hard and fast. She climaxed almost immediately and clung onto him, raking her nails down his back while he brought her to her peak for a second time.

Afterwards, he wrapped her in a blanket, and simply held her. Stroking his fingers through her damp hair. "Are you ready to talk about what's bothering you yet?"

She shook her head as if she was trying to push away her emotions. Tears floated in her eyes.

"This is the life I want," she said, her voice husky and rough. "I'm not trying to prove myself to my parents. Not anymore. I love getting out into the world. I love learning about new civilizations. And learning from them." She pushed him away and swept her arm in an expansive arch. "If I married you, I'd miss this. I don't want to have to give up my dream in order to be with you. But, I suppose I've already given it up. I can't be apart from you ever...not without risking blowing up like a Roman candle on steroids."

"There's no reason to worry about your future. I promise I won't let you down. I'll take care of you. Make you happy. You know how I feel about you."

Hugging the blanket tightly around her slender shoulders, she paced the small clearing. “That’s the problem. I *don’t* know where I stand with you! Am I your servant? Your plaything? Or will you let me be more? Are you willing to let me into that tight shell you’ve built around your world? Are you willing to treat me like your mate, your partner?”

Before he could find an answer, she plowed on, “I had no choice in this. You didn’t either,” she conceded. “And I’m trying to deal the best way I know how. But it’s hard. I feel as if I’m being asked to give up everything.”

What she was saying was making him uncomfortable. She was delving into areas that he didn’t talk about. Didn’t know how to talk about. “I’m not asking you to give up anything. I wouldn’t want you to.”

“But you’re obviously unhappy out here, out where I need to be in order to follow my dreams.” She glanced at her hands. They’d started to glow. “I don’t know what I expected out of life. Not this, though.” She sighed deeply and her golden aura dimmed. “And you don’t want to be traipsing through the forests of the world. Look at you, you’re miserable.”

“Give me a chance to prove myself.” He’d learn to love what she loved if that was what it took. “Stop fighting me at every turn. Let me show you that you can be happy with me.”

She shook her head and turned away from him. He thought he heard her say, “It won’t be enough.” Before he had a chance to demand she tell him what she wanted from him—confounding woman—the leaves beside them rustled. Horace glanced up. A slender, brown-skinned man stepped into the emerald-hued clearing.

“Welcome back,” the man said. And Horace remembered.

* * * *

“You remember everything?” Faith asked while looking around for her discarded clothes.

Horace shook his head. “Not everything. Only this place and the people who live here. I’ve been here before.”

The slender man, who Horace introduced as Muk, bowed his head. “You look very much like your parents, Faith Summers,” he said. He grabbed her hand and shook it vigorously. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Thank you,” Faith said, still trying to rein in her turbulent emotions. She had to pry her hand from Muk’s sturdy grasp. Part of her wanted to run all the way back to Chicago, or even further. And cry. What had made her think she could make her

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relationship with Horace work? She was a fool. Fortunately, the scientist in her demanded she stay and learn what needed to be learned.

After she'd dressed and combed her hair, Muk led them along a narrow trail that climbed up along the side of a steep cliff. The late afternoon sun beat down on her shoulders, soothing her.

"It certainly is a coincidence my parents met you. We wouldn't have been able to find you otherwise."

Muk slowed his step and glanced over his shoulder at her. "There are no coincidences."

"What do you mean?" Most South American cultures believed in the influence of fate in some form or another. But the knowing look in his eye when he answered her made her wonder if he wasn't suggesting that this meeting had been somehow engineered.

"That is exactly what I mean," Muk said.

"You read minds?" Horace asked.

Muk had started to answer Horace, but halted mid-sentence. "How much does she know?" he asked.

"As much as I do."

"I wasn't certain since she's not..." Muk flashed her a wide smile. "Good."

"I'm not what?" Faith asked after Muk helped her climb up onto a ledge with Horace lending a guiding hand from below. The trail had turned steeper than she could manage on her own. "And what do you mean there are no coincidences?"

"She's filled with questions, is she not?" Muk said as he helped Horace climb up onto the ledge. "Not at all like you were."

"I think she deserves an answer," Horace said absently as he brushed the dust and leaves off his jeans. A waste of time, in Faith's opinion. They'd only get dirty again. He definitely wasn't cut out for the wilderness.

While the two of them lit up the night in the bedroom, they had a long way to go to be compatible under the glare of the sun. The more time she spent with Horace, the wider their differences seemed to grow.

"Don't worry, little cub," Muk said, softly. "That impetuous act you're trying to convince yourself to regret was meant to happen. There are no coincidences."

His assurances didn't soothe her worries. Even fate made horrible matches from time to time.

"About your parents, we knew Horace would need help finding us again. His

memories of us are blocked, you see.”

“I know,” Faith said.

“We chose your parents knowing they’d be in a position to guide him. We showed them what they needed to see.”

“But that was a nearly a year ago. I hadn’t started working at Club West. I hadn’t even met...”

Muk nodded. She was beginning to resent that knowing look of his. It reminded her of the mysterious Frank Stone.

“You’re one of *them*?”

He helped her scramble up one last ledge. They’d reached the top of the cliff, a plateau where there was a typical indigenous village with about a dozen thatched roofed huts made from mud and stone ringing the opening of a cave. A herd of wooly alpacas roamed freely, munching on the sparse grasses.

“Welcome wanderer to the Lost Tribe of the Incas,” Muk shouted and gave a theatrical bow that had his knuckle scraping the ground. Dozens of men and women, dressed in beautifully dyed fabrics woven from alpaca wool and bearing the stunning facial features of their Incan ancestors, emerged from the small huts and started to crowd around Faith and Muk. A small, dark-haired woman touched Faith’s hair and cooed.

The settlement was as wonderful as her parents had described. It was the kind of discovery that left her anthropologist mind reeling. Faith truly looked forward to meeting everyone and learning from them. This was an opportunity of a lifetime. The stuff that turned doctorate theses into best-selling books.

She smiled and nodded at the kindly faces that were crowding closer and closer around her.

“None of them are human,” Horace warned as he walked up from behind her.

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Chapter Thirteen

Faith struggled to accept that these wondrously friendly people weren't human. She couldn't imagine anyone looking more human or more tied to this earthly realm. They lived in the most primitive conditions, much like Faith would have found had she traveled back in time several thousand years. And they appeared to be very similar to the Aymaran people living in this region.

Yet there was one marked difference between this tribe and any of the others. Besides a complete lack of modern conveniences, there were no children. The people living high on this cliff were all over the age of twenty. A few looked to be closer to one hundred years old.

Within the circle of their friendly greetings, she especially felt drawn to Muk, who described himself as the local sorcerer, which was surprisingly enough; a lowly position in Incan society. Muk had a ready smile and, unlike Horace, no compulsion against being completely honest with her.

Shortly after their arrival to the village, Horace was rushed away to speak with the village leader, a man who looked old enough to have remembered the ancient ones. Sun baked wrinkles were set deeply in his leathery skin that had started to gray in spots.

Muk had remained with Faith to show her around the village, answering her endless litany of questions. It wasn't until her stomach growled loudly that he suggested they take a break.

"I'm confused by your relationship with Horace. Though you've obviously mated with him, there is something missing," Muk said as Faith filled a wooden bowl with a potato stew that smelled both savory and sweet.

No kidding, Faith thought. They were missing the most important elements of a relationship—love, trust, and honesty.

"Do you care to explain?" he asked.

She didn't see any reason not to talk to someone about the one thing tying her normally logical heart into knots. "The man who tried to kill us told me that Horace had somehow messed up. That he'd mated with me all wrong. The man was most upset."

“Someone is trying to kill you?” Muk dropped his bowl. The hot sticky stew splattered all over Faith’s pants. “Why didn’t you tell us this right away?”

He snatched her bowl away from her—she tried to get it back, the stew had only reminded her that she’d skipped lunch. He tossed the food on the ground, which nearly made her cry, and dragged her to the small hut where Horace had been taken.

In the dim light, she saw Horace sitting on a woven mat with the village leader hovering over him. The man lightly touched Horace’s temples, which made Horace flinch with pain.

Using an unfamiliar and formal version of the Aymara language, Muk apologized to the elderly man for intruding. “There is a matter of great importance that must be attended,” he finished in a breathless rush.

Horace turned toward Faith. Fear and confusion laced through his expression.

The village leader gave a nod and indicated that Faith should take a seat on the red and black woven mat next to her lover.

“She is his queen. It is only right that she would be here,” the elderly man said. “Welcome to our humble land, Faith Summers. We are honored by your presence.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly, and then grabbed her stomach when it growled again.

“You let her go hungry?” Sapa asked Muk in a sharp tone.

“There wasn’t time...” Muk started to protest but then stopped himself. “I am humbly sorry.”

With a wave of Sapa’s hand, two women rose and rushed from the hut.

“Are you okay?” Faith whispered the question. Horace looked anything *but* okay. She knelt down on the mat next to him. This was the first time she’d seen him with his defenses completely torn away.

“No,” he whispered back. “This is too much. I don’t want to remember what had happened to me. I don’t want to know the truth.”

“But you must, and you do,” Sapa said. “It is your fate.”

“No,” Horace protested, shaking his head. “I don’t want this. And it’s not fair to Faith, either.”

“What isn’t?”

Sapa drew his thin lips into a long line and refused to answer. “First, we must hear what Muk has to say.”

“Thank you,” Muk said, his voice soft. “Faith Summers has told me that a man tried to kill them.”

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“What man?” Sapa demanded.

“We took care of him,” Horace said.

The women Sapa had sent away returned with two bowls of stew. Horace refused the one offered to him. Faith didn’t have his willpower. Though she was worried, she knew she couldn’t help him if she was feeling faint from hunger.

“What man?” Sapa asked Faith.

She had to swallow the food she’d stuffed into her mouth before she could answer. Horace wasn’t any help. He watched her with what appeared to be a mixture of amusement and dread.

Once she was able to talk, she described Ballou and explained how he’d been shooting at both her and Horace.

“A Man in Black,” Sapa said.

“A what?” Faith asked.

“I don’t exactly know,” Sapa admitted sadly. “They come here sometimes, because of what is in our cave. I get the feeling that they are the foot soldiers of a more powerful force. They brought Horace here six years ago.”

“But why?”

“Because of what is in the cave,” Sapa answered as if it were as simple as that, which was infuriating.

With Sapa’s veiled answers and Horace’s lack of interest in what was happening, Faith was finding herself quickly losing her patience. With an angry huff, she slammed her bowl of stew on the ground.

“What the hell is in the cave? Gold? Treasure?”

“A window to another world,” Horace answered.

“You remember?”

He nodded slowly. “It’s fuzzy, but ever since we saw Muk, my memories have been returning.”

“The protective walls are dissolving,” Sapa said, approvingly. “You have found your mate. It is time you return. That was the promise you’d said you’d made with them.”

“But they aren’t joined properly,” Muk said, much to Faith’s relief. That was something that she wanted to talk about. But Sapa and Horace were both shaking their heads.

“Why did you tell him that?” Horace grumbled in her ear.

“Because he might be able to help us put the leash back on your powers.”

Sapa paced the small hut. His movements were stiff and his skin hung like thin

sheets over his bones. “This makes your need to remember all the more important. I should have never let you talk me into blocking your memories or hiding your mark in the first place.”

“No,” Horace said with less heat this time.

“Let’s go back to talking about how to fix our bound. There seems to be a problem with his powers...”

But Sapa only shook his head again. “It isn’t our place to interfere in the relationship of the king.”

“I’m not a king.”

* * * *

“My sentiments exactly.” The disembodied shimmering voice sent shivers down Horace’s spine. He rubbed his temples, trying to remember why the sound of that voice made him feel ill.

The air shuddered. Sapa cried out in pain as his features stretched and pulled and snapped until he changed from a small, wrinkled man into a tall, dark-skinned youth with glowing green eyes.

“Manelin,” Horace said with a start of surprise. Though some parts of his past were still fuzzy, he remembered enough to recognize the power-hungry prince and to know that Manelin would use any sign of confusion or weakness against him.

“Though you smiled and fawned pleasure at being second best, it never did sit well with you, did it?” Horace said, choosing his words with care. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back slightly.

“This is Manelin?” Faith scrambled to her feet.

“That’s *Prince* Manelin to you, *human bitch*,” the faerie lord spat.

“That’s *queen* human bitch to you,” Faith was quick to reply, which made Manelin’s complexion turn slightly pink.

“You’re no queen. He hasn’t mated with you, he’s fucked your brains out and turned you into a weapon by unleashing his power in you, *slut*.”

“Stop,” Horace said, barely raising his hand.

Muk and several other healthy young *Protectors* froze where they were standing. They were on the verge of attacking Manelin. Horace didn’t blame them. Their leader had just been transmuted into the faerie’s form. They would naturally want to fight, not realizing that attacking Manelin would only do harm to Sapa’s body.

The upstart prince licked his lips. “You do have a nice shape. I can see why Horace would enjoy burying himself between your legs.”

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Golden sparks danced above Faith's head. "I defeated your henchman, so don't be thinking that I'm afraid of you."

"Not afraid?" Manelin chuckled. It was a chilling sound.

Horace pushed himself up to his feet.

"You are incredibly stupid, then." With a flick of Manelin's fingers, Faith was knocked off her feet. Her legs flew up into the air, and she dangled as if an invisible cord had been wrapped around her ankles.

Manelin mumbled an incantation that started Faith spinning.

"Put her down," Horace demanded, but it was too late. She and Manelin were already gone.

* * * *

Horace darted out of the hut, and found Faith dangling unconscious and upside-down over the edge of the high cliff.

"Don't distract me," Manelin warned, his voice tickling Horace's ear. "I might drop her."

"What do you want from me?"

"The throne."

"Fine. You can have it. I never asked for it in the first place."

"It's not that easy, and you know it. You're the king. Until the day you die, you will be the king."

"And you'd like that day be today?" Horace guessed.

"By your own hands," Manelin said. "I can't kill you. It's against the rules."

"But you could send Ballou to do the deed?"

Manelin shrugged. "As long as your death wasn't by magic..." A bright light blazed like a hot fire in the late afternoon sky. Flames leapt from the eerie light, licking Horace's skin.

While the flames scorched the ground and sent the alpacas running for cover, Horace barely felt their heat.

"The royal sages were overly cautious when you left. You're protected from my powers," Manelin said.

"But Faith isn't?" Horace guessed.

"It would be a shame for her and her unborn child to drop from so great a height. I can't imagine anyone surviving the fall."

"*Child?*" Horace suddenly had trouble breathing. "That's impossible."

"Not after the sages were through with you." A sickly smile spread across

Manelin's lips. "I enjoyed how your screams filled the palace while they changed your body into what they believed would befit a king's needs, including fertility."

Horace closed his eyes, remembering. How could he not remember the horror and torment he'd felt as a trio of bearded men tore at his body, making him feel like an unlucky version of Frankenstein? Manelin had enjoyed that? He would, the bastard.

Horace had prayed for death more than once during that time. When he'd finally convinced them to let him return to the mortal realm to go in search of a mate, his only goal had been escape. He'd begged Sapa to wipe his memories clean...to cleanse him of the nearly debilitating fears those monsters had instilled in him. They had ruthlessly seared his body with fire, burning their way into his spirit, transforming him into the ruler they wanted. On those days, death had played the role of welcomed friend in his torture-induced fantasies.

"Go with that thought," Manelin purred.

"No! Don't you dare!" Faith's eyes fluttered open.

"Faith? Are you okay?" Horace darted to the edge of the cliff.

Sparks danced around her head. "Be careful!"

He should be careful? He wasn't the one dangling more than five hundred feet above the ground. He extended his hand, desperate for his powers to come back to him, desperate to pull Faith to safety.

"There is only one way to save her," Manelin said as he pressed a curved knife into Horace's outstretched hand. It was the same ceremonial knife Horace had brought with him into the apartment above the café when he wasn't sure if he was going to be able to save Faith or not. "There is only one to end this."

No, a voice in his head shouted. He'd never easily accepted defeat. He was a fighter. On the streets. At his club. And especially in defense of Faith.

"I would hate for her to fall." As the words left Manelin's lips, Faith started to plunge toward the ground. Horace gave a shout and put the knife to his own throat to show that he'd cooperate.

"No!" she screamed. Her freefall came to a sudden stop.

Manelin smiled broadly. "Do it," he said, and pressed on Horace's hand, making the blade bite into his skin.

She was glowing so brightly by this time that it hurt to look at her. Shielding his eyes he called out to her, "Are you still okay, sweetie?"

She wiggled her toes and floated up just a little. There wasn't a trace of fear in her expression. Only concern. For him.

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As backwards as the idea seemed, she appeared to actually have the situation under control. She could float to safety if she wanted. His power was protecting her. But if he didn't act soon, that same power was going to spin out of control and explode in their faces. He wished he had taken the time to teach her how to perform a banishment spell. They weren't that difficult, and she could use it to get rid of Manelin, and give them a chance to regroup.

He lowered the knife and studied it.

"You can't harm me," Manelin said. "If you strike me down, you will only be killing your Incan friend and letting your whore drop to the ground."

"She's not a whore. She means much more than what her body can give me," Horace said, his voice low and steady. "And she'll be furious if I did anything stupid, like kill myself. Are you willing to risk the universe with her fury?"

Manelin refused to back down. So did Horace. Their pride had them at a dangerous stalemate.

He realized then that, more often than not, this was exactly the position he was in with Faith. Their pride and—he hated to admit—his fear had created a wall between them. This was what had gone wrong when they'd mated. He'd kept a wall between them, one that probably blocked his powers from flowing freely. Though he was joined with Faith, he hadn't let her into his heart. Stone had always told him that there were some things in the world worth risking everything for. This was the first time Horace understood that.

"I will not lose her," he said, and tossed the knife over the cliff. "I will not give you my life."

"Then she will die," Manelin said with a shrug, and she started to plunge toward the ground again.

A bright beam of light spiraled from her falling form, encasing Manelin. He screamed in pain as the light pierced him in hundreds of laser-sharp points. The faerie that had taken over Sapa's body released it. Sapa sank to the soft grasses, dazed but unharmed, while the mystical light continued to pierce and tear at Manelin's spirit.

"Save yourself!" Horace shouted. Faith hadn't stopped herself from the free-fall. And the ground was coming up on her far too quickly. "Dammit, don't sacrifice yourself for my sake!"

"As long as you promise to never do the same for me," she said, suddenly standing next to him. Her body was still vibrating with the golden energy, and sparks danced in the air between them. How she'd managed to transport herself through time

and space baffled him. None of *the Protectors* could pull off such a trick. At least, he didn't think they could.

"What should we do with him?" Horace hooked his thumb toward the nearly transparent faerie being tormented by the same glow that was illuminating Faith.

"What do you think?" Faith asked darkly. "He would have happily killed you."

"But he's the prince of..."

"Of what?"

"The mystical realm."

Her eyes glittered with excitement. "The prince of the faeries, nymphs, mermaids, and goblins?"

"And *Protectors*, among others." It was a burden he couldn't ask her to share with him. "I'm the king."

"I know." But she didn't seem to understand what that meant. If she had, she wouldn't have been accepting it so readily.

"I don't think you do—"

"It is a crime to bring harm to the royal family that not even the king can break," a trio of voices boomed. Prince Manelin disappeared. In his place stood three tiny bearded men. The tallest among them couldn't have been more than three feet. Horace recognized them right away. Even if Sapa hadn't unlocked his memories he would have recognized them.

They were the royal sages.

"You have found your mate. It is time to come home," the sages said, speaking in unison.

"What about Manelin?" Faith demanded. "What have you done with him?"

"He has been put in a safe place. Whether he accepts it or not, he is the Prince of Arawyn, Prince of the Otherworld."

One of the royal sages, the tallest among them, quirked a brow and, stretching, he reached up to touch the sparks dancing around Faith.

"What is this?" the sage asked, speaking without the echo of the other two. All of the sudden the glow vanished and the out-of-control sparks calmed.

"She is his mate," said the second sage.

"His power is unleashed and dangerous," said the third.

Their gazes, acting as one, latched onto Horace. "Why have you done this?" they asked.

"It was a mistake." One that had ruined both his and Faith's lives. As long as he'd

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remained without a mate, the sages were going to allow him to live with his friends in the mortal realm. He'd been given the freedom to search for the perfect woman. To take as long as he needed.

Faith wrapped her arms around Horace's waist. "We have the power under control...mostly," she said with great determination.

Horace now knew he could fix things. He could make their bond complete by opening up his heart to Faith. But he held back. She deserved a better life. A life without him.

"It doesn't matter," the sages said. "It is done. It is time for them to come with us."

Shaking his head, Horace tried to back away from them.

"I didn't ask for any of this." Nearly all his memories had returned. The shock of seeing Manelin had brought back the last stubborn ones. His hands and feet had been bound, and yet he'd fought them—those men dressed in black suits. They'd taken him to the cave and had dragged him through a swirling portal against his will. And the sages had changed him. Made him into a creature that couldn't exist without a mate. "I didn't ask to be king of a world that never wanted me in the first place. How can I go back?"

"It is your duty," the sages said. "You are our king."

Muk ran up to Horace while the other *Protectors* watched from a safe distance. "Sapa has sent me to accompany you to the cave." He lowered his voice. "He says that you mustn't do what you are planning to do."

"Let's at least look at what's in the cave," Faith said with such eagerness that it would have been cruel to send her away without letting her see the wonders her parents had described to her. But despite Sapa's warning, he had no intention of letting Faith go with him to the Otherworld.

The sages led the way, with Muk close on their heels. Horace took one last look at the beautiful blue sky, felt the heat of the sun on his face and the tickle of the breeze. Though he'd never cared much for the outdoors, he'd miss these things.

The opening of the cave was nearly two stories high, a great hole in the side of the mountain. The passage descended sharply, winding down into the cool depths of the earth. Crystals and emeralds glowed as they passed. A steady drip, drip, drip of a hidden water source could be faintly heard.

After what felt like a hundred forevers, they finally reached the end of the cave. The passageway stopped abruptly at a flat wall.

Horace gave Faith time to take out her flashlight and explore the decorations

covering the walls, before clearing his throat.

“This is where we part,” he said, fiercely pressing his will on her. He’d promised her parents that he’d protect her. And he saw now that the best way he could keep her safe was to let her go. No matter how much it would hurt him. “Stay here, on earth. Live your life. Become the woman you are meant to become.”

Her eyes went blank but then she blinked several times and shook her head. “Oh no, you don’t. I won’t let you wiggle out of our relationship after everything we’ve been through.”

“Don’t fight me,” he said, his voice vibrating with what little control of his power he still possessed. “Go with Muk. Let him take you back home.”

She sighed deeply and twined her fingers with his. “I know it’s difficult for you to trust me, to trust our relationship.”

He didn’t want her to touch him. He didn’t want any of this. But the warmth of her hand kept him from pulling away. Though earlier in the jungle he’d asked her to give him a chance to prove himself, he was no longer convinced he could be the man she needed.

She deserved someone who could give her the moon and the stars, not a coward who didn’t know how to love her properly and who was destined to spend the rest of his life in a dangerous, mystical world.

“I’ve been listening to everything, you know. I’ve been paying attention,” she said. “I understand that you didn’t have parents or a family to love and protect you when you were growing up. So this must feel unnatural. Frightening, even.”

What could he say to that? He tried to come up with something that would show her that she was wrong. No one respected weakness. He’d learned that lesson well enough on the streets.

“I also know you’re a born leader. It’s in your blood to be in control,” she blazed on before he had a chance to explain away her doubts about him. “I know you want to control me. To protect me.”

She gave his hand a squeeze. “I’m learning that it’s your way of showing that you care for me. But you don’t have to prove yourself, Horace. I care for you, too. And as your queen, I’m going to be by your side. Whether you like it or not, I’m not going to let you face what waits for you on the other side of that rock alone.”

“But the danger—”

She pressed a finger to his lips. “We’re in this together. Like it or not, we’re a team. And no matter what you do, you won’t get rid of me.”

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He felt a sudden urge to argue with her. To rage. To push her away. She was getting under his skin again, and it was making him itchy as hell.

"I never wanted you!" he shouted, more frustrated at his own inadequacies than with her. "I never wanted any of this!"

Faith opened her mouth then pinched her lips together. A halo of golden light flared around her head. The power he'd unleashed by improperly binding her to him lashed at the sloping walls, sending loose stones clattering to the ground.

Muk backed out of the cave—smart man.

"You can't go without me." Her voice was as hard as stone. She pointed to the petroglyph carved into the cave wall. It was of a man and a woman holding hands. The woman's arm was raised. Jagged lines representing lightning replaced the woman's fingers. "You need me to open the portal."

He traced the deep grooves cut into the stone, causing the petroglyph to glow a ruby red.

"The sages can open the portal," he said.

"We can," they agreed.

He swung toward them. "I want to release Faith. She deserves more than I can offer her. She deserves to follow her dream."

"You have mated with her," the sages reminded him. "The two of you are bonded."

"Horace, I don't—" He pressed a finger to her lips.

"Shush, this is my gift to you." He turned back to the sages. "You can untie us? You can remove the marks?"

They nodded gravely. "We can."

"Don't—" Faith tried to protest.

Not willing to hear her reasons for him to change his mind, he kissed her. It would be better this way, he told himself. He would be better off. The lie contracted in his chest. Just the thought of losing Faith threatened to shred apart his heart.

He deepened the kiss. This was his gift to her. She went limp in her arms. Her tongue touched his, and his power flowed back and forth between them.

Their passion was too hot, too turbulent for their relationship to survive unless he was willing to open up his heart. Because she would always have a place in his heart, he couldn't let her stay. He had to let her go.

In time she would understand why.

* * * *

How could he do this to her? The jerk. A loveable, sexy jerk. She couldn't think of anyone else she would want to spend her life with. But she didn't know how to prove her love for him. Perhaps he would never trust her. Never open his heart. And if that were the truth, following him into this new world would be a mistake.

"Tell us. Is this your wish?" the sages asked her.

Was it? To leave her life in Chicago, her dreams, her family, her friends, in exchange for a man who held back his love? Was that the life she wanted for herself? Horace was offering her freedom, her last chance to hold onto her own identity.

Why was the cost of love so high? Her parents were happy, but even they'd admitted that it took compromise and sacrifice to make their relationship work. And they were both loving and willing.

Her situation wasn't the same. Horace didn't love her. Perhaps he couldn't love her. Ever.

"Yes," she said, tears burning in the back of her eyes. "I'd rather continue my studies in Chicago than to follow Horace into the unknown." And if that meant she wouldn't be in his life, so be it. She'd survive the heartbreak, she hoped.

"Very well," the sages said, sounding somewhat uncertain and out of sync with each other. "The heart...has spoken."

A low humming filled her ears. The words of a droning language that sounded both ancient and strangely familiar called to her soul. Soothed her. Soon, the world turned gray, then black. There was no pain, only a dull knowledge of what was happening. There was only one way to break the ties that bound their souls together...The sages were killing her.

And while she didn't want to die, it wasn't her death that bothered her the most but the words that had been left unsaid.

"No!" She tried to say but her mouth wouldn't move. She should have told Horace how she felt about him after he'd made that third mark. She should have trusted him with her heart. "*Horace, I love you. Please, I love you. Don't let me go.*"

She vaguely heard someone shout. It was impossible to make out what was happening. The droning was too loud.

Someone grabbed her hand. In a blinding flash, she vaguely saw sparks fly from the tips of her fingers, and the wall at the end of the cave open up into a swirling blue portal. A blast of wind pushed the three sages through the gaping hole.

And then a force more powerful than anything she had ever known knocked the breath out of her lungs. Hands were rubbing up and down her back, peeling off her

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clothes. Lips were raining feather-light kisses over her face. A loving mouth was breathing the air back into her body as a long cock thrust into her.

“Faith, I love you, too.” Horace squeezed her so hard she was afraid her ribs were going to crack. “You can have your life in Chicago. I’ll do whatever it takes to give it to you. Just--just don’t die. And don’t ever let me push you away from me again.”

He loved her. Hearing him admit his love and seeing the passion and fear in his midnight blues eyes made her believe she was witnessing a miracle.

He kissed her, sending her heart reeling. The world dissolved and there was only the two of them. Two lovers being naked and honest with each other.

Unfortunately, kisses never last forever. The unearthly blue light swirling at the back of the cave was still there waiting for them. Horace drew a shuddering breath and with a wave of his hand, their clothes returned.

“This will be a new adventure,” she said, trying to be brave. But her voice squeaked, betraying the terror beating in the back of her throat.

She heard Horace breathe a shuddering breath. “It’ll be a new start for the both of us. Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

Swallowing hard, she nodded. This wasn’t the path she’d expected to take with her life, but it was an adventure nonetheless. She was prepared. Her parents had taught her to listen to her heart. Right now, it was singing. Everything was going to work out. Their love would lend them the courage to conquer the steepest obstacles. The unknown that waited for them on the other side of that portal couldn’t defeat them.

Horace closed his hand over hers and they walked toward the swirling abyss. They would face their destiny, together.

Epilogue

Five months later.

The door of The Oblique Café flew open. It slammed against the outside brick wall and nearly shattered.

“Not again!” Jake dropped the dishcloth he’d been using on the counter and looked ready to faint. All of his patrons were on their feet. A few moved toward the back, fearful of an attack.

But Frank Stone, who’d been expecting this, sat back and smiled as a mystically charged gust of wind sent snow swirling into the café. The pair entered as if they hadn’t missed a day in the past five months.

Horace was dressed all in black. His overcoat hung nearly to the floor and was covered with snow. The melting crystals dripped on the floor as he dutifully helped his queen with her wrap, revealing her very pregnant belly.

Dallas squealed with delight and rushed to hug Faith while Brendan squared off with the man he loved like a brother. After a long silence he grumbled, “I was wondering when you’d remember to visit your friends.”

“I’ve been emailing,” Horace protested.

“It’s not the same.”

“Time moves at a different pace in the other realm, and there was much that needed to be done. I’d been an absent king for nearly seven years.”

“That’s no excuse.”

Horace looked different, more confident with his place in the world. It had to be Faith’s doing. In response to Brendan’s disapproval, he simply shrugged and gave a self-deprecating smile. “I was also on my honeymoon.”

Which made Brendan laugh. “Well, that’s an excuse I can understand. Welcome back, Horace.”

While the two men embraced, Frank greeted Faith. “You’re glowing,” he said, and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Am I?” She frowned and glanced down at her hands. “I haven’t done that in

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ages.”

“He means because of the baby,” Horace said softly. Her belly had swelled quite beautifully. And a diamond and ruby-studded wedding band adorned her finger.

“Does this mean Horace’s power is no longer unleashed?” Dallas asked.

Faith nodded. Her cheeks were rosy in color. “Once we accepted that we loved each other, his power stopped fighting us.”

“Took the two of you long enough to come to your senses.”

Faith shared a smile with Horace. Neither of them needed to say anything. Their relationship had finally evolved into what it had meant to be all along.

“But what’s with the ring?” Dallas asked. She was frowning but she didn’t sound upset, well not too seriously. “Here I was hoping I could be matron of honor or something.”

“The royal sages of the Otherworld are a pushy bunch. They insisted we get married right away with some ceremony they devised. But we’re planning a spring ceremony.” Faith patted her round belly and added, “After the baby is born.”

“Your parents must be thrilled,” Dallas said.

“They’re even more thrilled to know that we’re moving back to Chicago, and that I’m resuming my work at the university after the winter break.”

That seemed to surprise everyone. “You can do that?” Brendan asked.

“I’m king,” Horace said proudly. “I can do whatever I want.”

“Does that mean you’ll be—?” Derrick started to ask, his shoulders bunching. He’d been helping Brendan run Club West in Horace’s absence.

“No,” Horace answered without hesitation. “I won’t have the time to be a hands-on owner at the club anymore. And I hear you’re doing a fine job acting as manager in my absence.”

Derrick’s shoulders relaxed, and the two men started talking business until Faith interrupted. “Don’t forget the other reason we needed to come to the café today.”

“Oh, right.” Horace reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a silver baby’s rattle. “Brendan, the present you gave me for my birthday this summer, I just got around to opening it.” He dropped the rattle into his friend’s hand. “How did you know?”

Brendan turned to Dallas, his mouth gaping. “Dallas had bought it and wrapped it. I never even looked in the bag.”

“You’re not the only one who can have a vision or two, husband of mine,” Dallas said with a laugh and patted her own belly. “Perhaps one day we’ll be shopping for a rattle of our own.”

Brendan nearly fell on the floor. Everyone laughed. Even Frank found pleasure in the moment, which had become rare lately. Holding his small group together seemed to be growing all the more difficult. All the more tiring. At least some of his friends had found happiness and love.

Seeing the pleasure in Horace's expression when he'd touched Faith's growing belly made the sacrifices he'd made for them seem worth the effort.

"There's something else that needs to be said," Faith said, her tone growing dark.

"You found out what we are?" Dallas asked hopefully.

"I did," Horace said, and then grabbed his head. His complexion turned pasty. Frank could feel some of the roiling pain that was slicing through Horace's temples.

"They won't let him tell you," Faith explained as she rubbed her husband's shoulders. "They won't even let him think about it without giving him a pounding migraine. Sorry."

"We're definitely part of the mystical realm, though," Horace managed to grind out.

"I suppose that means we can cross aliens off our list of possibilities." Derrick sounded disappointed.

"Nope, no aliens," Horace said. Some of his color was beginning to return. "And Faith is right. There is something I need to tell you."

Frank had suspected as much. He'd felt a dark ripple in the air for a few years now. Lately, it had been growing. "It's about the future."

Horace nodded gravely. "All of the turmoil in the mortal realm, the killing and hatred, is stirring up the mystical world. The dark forces are awakening. The sages warn that a war is brewing. Many lives may be lost. Civilizations may fall. And *the Protectors* will be called on to balance the scales of justice."

"I don't like how that sounds," Frank said.

"You shouldn't." Frank had a feeling Horace was speaking directly to him, which was confirmed when he added, "It's not going to be easy for you." Horace sucked in a sharp breath. He must have said too much, been too specific. "It won't be easy for any of you."

"I suspected as much," Frank said.

The café fell silent.

"I'll be around, and I'll do whatever I can to lend a helping hand," Horace said.

Faith hugged her husband's arm. "We both will." Her smile lit up the café. "So let's not waste our time drowning ourselves in worry about what may or may not happen

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sometime in the foggy future. We have a wedding to plan!”

Dorothy McFalls

About the Author

For Regency and suspense author, Dorothy McFalls happily-ever-after is more than just a fictional ending, having enjoyed every day of marriage to her sexy sculptor husband. Formerly an environmental urban planner, she now writes full time.

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