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Neptune's Lair
Dorothy McFalls
Mystical Sign Series

Dorothy McFalls

**Mystical Signs: Pisces
NEPTUNE'S LAIR**

BY

DOROTHY McFALLS

Venus Press LLC

MYSTICAL SIGNS, PISCES: NEPTUNE'S LAIR

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NEPTUNE'S LAIR

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Dorothy McFalls

Dedication:

For Jim

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Prologue

The old gypsy woman ran her gnarled, wrinkled finger over Dallas St. John's hand and then glanced up with a look of surprise.

"You're one of them," the old woman's voice crackled.

"We want to know about love," Janice, Dallas's closest and dearest friend in the world, said. "Is she going to find a guy...soon?"

The old woman's gaze narrowed. "Love?" she grumbled. "Not looking to cause trouble?"

"Trouble?" Dallas flashed Janice a grimace and rolled her eyes. "This is silly. I don't know why I let you talk me into these things." The heavy incense and cramped room was starting to make her head hurt. She closed her hand and tried to pull away from the old woman's claw. "Here's my future; I'll find a lover when I find one. Let's get out of here."

The old woman moved with amazing speed and strength as she uncurled Dallas's fingers. "There." She thumped her pointy finger against Dallas's palm. "That's your love line and it's about to bisect with--" She threw up her hands and gripped her throat. Dallas had to give her points for theatrics. "The Fish."

"A fish?" Janice scoffed. "You're right, Dallas. This is a waste of money."

"Money I don't have," Dallas pointed out.

"Not a fish. *My* Fish." The old woman's voice, though soft, made the knickknacks cluttering the room's shelves shudder. "You're strong. That's what will draw him to you. Take care, young one. Loving a Pisces will be the most dangerous thing you've ever done."

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Chapter One

Brendan Cromerty didn't need a good opportunity to slap him in the face to convince him to take advantage of it. And this was definitely one of those once-in-a-lifetime-opportunities. The impossible kind that prompted guys to write to the dirty magazines, "I never believed this would happen to me..."

He balanced himself over the slim, gracefully nude woman who'd all but begged him to take her back to his apartment. She was buxom, blonde and horny as hell. With her tongue playing games in his mouth, she'd wiggled her shapely ass on his lap the whole cab ride home.

Damn, he was one lucky bastard. Horace wasn't going to believe a word. If he weren't such an honorable guy, he'd consider taking pictures. She looked like the type who wouldn't mind.

He worked his way down her body, placing a line of kisses down her elegant neck, which led to her full, luscious breasts. He swirled his tongue around a taut nipple. She gripped the sheets and moaned. His cock jumped in anticipation.

"You have the world's most perfect bellybutton," he whispered to her. Everything about her was perfect. An image straight out of his wettest, hottest dream.

With a wicked look of promise darkening her eyes, she licked her fingers and wrapped them, still warm and moist, around his cock. She stroked him. Once. Twice.

"What have I done to deserve this?" he wondered aloud to the universe.

The woman murmured an answer as she pulled his mouth back up to hers. Her hand still working his cock, she nipped his lower lip and whispered how she wanted him to take her.

"Baby, if I don't do that to you soon and often, I think I might explode."

He'd barely uttered that desperate plea when a blinding pain stabbed him right behind the eyes.

"No," he groaned and rolled off his gift from the heavens and flopped onto his

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back. He covered his face with his hands, fighting back the pain. Trying his damned best to will it away.

Flashes of light.

Disturbing images.

A raven-haired woman, petite and fragile, flitted through his thoughts. He'd never seen her before, but she felt familiar.

"No," he groaned. "Not fucking now."

She was running down a damp alleyway. She kept glancing over her shoulder as if someone or something was chasing her. Her stuttering fear beat through his heart. And he knew what she was running from.

The darkness.

"Baby," he said, his hands still covering his aching head, "I need to go do something."

"Now?"

It nearly killed him to do it, but he nodded.

She grabbed his arm as he eased himself out of the bed. "Can't it wait? I'm on fire for you."

"I know, baby, I know." He felt warm enough to send the entire apartment building up in flames. "This is important, though."

He dragged his T-shirt on over his head and tugged on his jeans. The fit was tight and the zipper gave him a hard time. He gave her a quick, hard kiss on the lips and then grabbed his shoes and his jacket.

"I wouldn't mind if you stayed," he said on his way out, though he knew she'd be gone before he returned. Once-in-a lifetime-opportunities never waited around for anybody.

* * *

Why? Why did this have to happen to her today of all days? Was she cursed? That must be it, Dallas decided. She was cursed.

She hopped on one foot and then the other as she pulled off her brand new \$400 dollar hand-tooled leather pumps. The two-inch heel on her right shoe had gotten stuck in a storm grate and, before she knew what was happening, the damned heel had ripped off.

It wouldn't have happened if she hadn't been hurrying. But the bus had been late and that had made her miss her connection with the train. What luck--what rotten,

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stinking luck. She'd made this trip into downtown Chicago hundreds of times. Never, ever had she run into any trouble. None at all.

And she needed this job. Her bank account needed this job. Perhaps the sticklers over at Hamlet, Hamlet, and Golf would overlook that she was--she glanced at her watch--twenty minutes late for her interview. And shoeless!

If only she could snap her fingers, turn back time, and start over. Just in case she'd suddenly discovered a set of powers she didn't know about, Dallas closed her eyes and gave her fingers a snap. She peeled open one eye. She was still on the sidewalk three blocks from the HH&G Tower.

"I am *so* not going to be Hamlet, Hamlet, and Golf's newest rising star attorney."

Getting in with HH&G could make a young attorney's career. Unlike her current internship with a small personal injury firm that barely covered her expenses and where she served mainly as the office copy girl, this was a position to which Dallas had aspired every grueling day of law school. A real chance to make a difference. She'd gambled with her rent money in order to buy the \$1,500 fitted suit and matching \$400 dollar shoes, because this position was hers. All hers...until twenty minutes ago when she didn't show up for her golden opportunity.

There had to be a way to salvage this. Her mind was reeling. She wanted the position so badly her soul ached. It was her chance to prove to the others that, despite her rotten childhood, she could make something of herself. That the scholarships and grants that had been given to her--the poor orphan girl--weren't wasted. Her life had meaning. She was going to be important.

"There has to be a way to--"

Snap!

Dallas yawned and rolled over in her bed.

"--get a second chance."

The red numbers on her bedside digital clock read five-fifty-nine. A few seconds passed and the clock clicked over to six o'clock. The alarm started wailing.

Dallas pushed herself up in the bed. It had been a dream...just a horrible, horrible dream. She shouldn't have let Janice talk her into ordering the large gyro plate with extra onions for dinner last night.

Nothing to worry about, she assured herself and sank back into the cocoon of her soft bedding, hitting the snooze button on her way down.

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* * *

"I expected to find you here," Frank Stone said, and handed Brendan a piping hot cup of coffee. They continued down the sidewalk, turned a corner and entered a narrow alleyway. It was the same alleyway Brendan had seen in his vision.

"It's hard to imagine that thirty-four years ago today we found you right over there." Stone pointed toward a dumpster.

Brendan nodded. He didn't remember any of that since he'd been a newborn at the time. It wasn't until his mid-twenties before he learned the date he was "found" and the circumstances of his first years of life.

"March third," Brendan said. "Damien once told me Lady Czarina insisted she name me Fish since I was born a Pisces."

Stone snarled at the mention of Czarina's name. "We would have never given you to her to raise, if we'd known what she was going to do."

The faded sign, 'Lady Czarina's Mystical Curios' was still hanging in the alleyway, though the windows and door of the shop had long ago been boarded up.

"It took us twenty years to track you down again," Stone said. "But we never gave up. Never would have, either. We protect our own."

Brendan knew. But it still didn't make him happy. He'd much rather be enjoying the morning with the sex kitten who had picked him up at the bar last night. He groaned, his body was still humming with anticipation.

"Has someone been shifting the dimensions in this area? It took me nearly all night to get here, and you know I only live five blocks away."

"That would be our target," Stone said. He sounded grumpy as hell about it.

"Our target?" That didn't make any sense. "I thought she was a New One and doesn't know anything about us."

"She doesn't."

"Then how in the hell is she pulling off trans-dimensional shifts?" It took Brendan four years to master the skill, and he was considered gifted.

"I don't know. But her life's at risk. *The darkness* senses her and is intrigued."

Brendan rubbed the back of his neck. His head ached, an aftereffect from the vision. "That's why I'm here, I suppose."

* * *

"I'm late. Oh, oh, shit. I'm sooo late. I can't believe I'm *this* late." She sounded

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like a warped version of the white rabbit out of *Alice in Wonderland*.

Brendan crossed his arms. His patience was wearing thin. He'd been waiting for her in this darkened corner of the alleyway for the past several hours. She was damned right about one thing--she *was* running late.

The quick clap-clap of her high heels against the pavement shouldn't have sounded the least bit sensual to his ears. Unfortunately, Brendan was still slightly aroused and everything this morning was making him think about sex. He couldn't help but imagine how her tight, round breasts moved in concert with her frantic stride. And if she happened to be wearing the tailored suit from his vision, she'd be showing just enough of her cleavage to tempt his already overactive imagination. It was only too easy to picture putting his mouth to her breast and teasing her nipple through the silk of her blouse into a hard, visible nub.

Vastly inappropriate, Brendan. Inappropriate or not, he couldn't seem to shake the image or chase away the building heat his sex-deprived body craved. When she rounded the corner, not watching where she was going, Brendan stepped out from the shadows and made sure she ran straight into his solid chest.

He wrapped his arms around her slender waist to keep her from bouncing off him and falling on her ass.

"Ex-excuse me," she huffed, wiggling against him. It was her effort to pry herself free from his chest, Brendan supposed. Unfortunately, it only made him hornier.

Easy there, tender one, you're not dealing with a human with human appetites.

"You shouldn't be in such a hurry," he said, enjoying her warmth on this frosty morning and the feel of her shapely body against his front way too much. "Accidents happen when you rush."

She glanced up at him. Her green eyes grew wide and darkened several shades. For a moment she looked as if she might scold him. But she licked her lips instead.

Her hair was dark, but not exactly black. The color was more vibrant and alive than simple black. Sable-colored, perhaps. Shiny. Luminescent, even in the dim light of the alleyway. With a nervous shake of her head, she mumbled something about not being able to believe her rotten luck. As a result, her long hair tumbled out of the combs that had been holding it up off her neck. The silky strands brushed the back of his hand. He knew he shouldn't, but he let his gaze travel from her hair and down her gently arching back.

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Yep, he shouldn't have done that. Not with her pressed so neatly against him and with his state of mind so focused on sex this morning. Just as he'd seen in the vision, she was wearing the suit with those tantalizing peeks of her cleavage.

He tried again to shake away the attraction he was feeling toward her. New Ones were skittish. He needed to focus on keeping her safe and not on how his cock was growing just from feeling her wren-like movements as he held her within the circle of his arms.

"Excuse me," she said, again. This time she didn't sound the least bit sorry. "Do I know you? Oh, never mind. It doesn't matter. I have an appointment to get to and I'm already late for it." She dragged in a deep breath. "Unhand me."

He was about to release her when he felt it...*the darkness*. It was close. And searching.

"Damn my luck," she bit off. Her glossy lips were full. Very pretty. Kissable. "This morning has been an absolute disaster. I wish I could just start the day again."

Brendan suddenly felt the familiar pull of the dimensions being stretched.

"Oh, no you don't." He tightened his grip around her. "I'm not waiting around for you to play out this day again."

The dimensions continued to stretch. *The darkness* vibrated with excitement. Her bending the natural forces was drawing *the darkness* closer.

"How many times do you have to repeat today to figure out that there might be a reason you don't make that appointment?" he demanded.

The dimensions stretched even further.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said. There was no fear in her voice or in her grassy-green eyes. She didn't seem to mind that he was holding her so closely. Or that she was in a deserted alleyway with a stranger. Too brave for her own good. It was a common trait among their kind.

They called themselves *the Protectors*, but no one, not even themselves knew exactly what they were or their true purpose for being in the world.

"I have a job interview. I can't be late for it. You have to understand, my future is on the line."

If she kept this up, the dimensions would soon snap back into place, sending them all tumbling backwards in time several hours. Again.

Hell. He had to take her mind off that job interview. And he had to do it fast.

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Reasoning with her would take too long. And knocking her senseless simply wasn't his style. So he did what came naturally to him.

He kissed her.

His lips glided across hers. She was as warm and soft as he imagined. With a little urging she parted her lips.

She tasted like a spring morning, all cool and moist. Yet at the same time there was a surprising amount of heat spiraling between them. His hands traveled down her back until he was cupping her perfectly rounded ass. He lifted her so her mound pressed against his now fully aroused cock.

She groaned in his mouth. His body instinctively responded. He fought an almost uncontrollable need to peel off her clothes and taste every inch of her.

It was insane, he knew. They barely knew each other. And *the darkness*--it was hovering out there in the brisk morning air, waiting for an opening. Any opening.

He had to take control. But then she swirled her tongue against his and his sense of self-preservation seemed to take flight. What was one stolen moment?

She was one of them. Hell, she belonged with them in every sense of the word.

He unhooked one button and then another. Soon, her blouse parted and he got a good look at her lacey bra and the breasts they were straining to contain.

All that power she'd harnessed in order to throw back time was now being focused on him. The fire between them flared.

He couldn't think. Hell, he could barely breathe. The world narrowed until there were only their two bodies. It didn't matter that they were in a very public, very chilly alleyway. All that mattered was his need to touch her. Taste her.

Her entire body trembled underneath his touch. And her kisses grew more demanding. She wanted him. He could taste her need as strongly as he could taste his own.

Her hand skimmed down his chest and went lower. She caressed the front of his jeans, tracing the length of his arousal.

She suddenly broke the kiss and glanced up at him. Fire flashed in her lust-darkened eyes as she licked her well-loved lips. He almost expected her to drag him into the nearest alcove and have her wicked way with him. But like that damned white rabbit, she twisted from his arms.

"Look at the time," she said. Her voice quivered. "I-I don't know what I'm

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thinking.”

She held up her hands as if trying to push him away. “I’m not usually like this,” she said and darted toward the busy street beyond the alley, her heels clicking as she ran. “I can’t believe I’m going to be late.”

* * *

“I don’t understand why I didn’t slap him. Or scream. Yes, I think I should have screamed.” Dallas buried her face in her hands and groaned. Thinking about what she’d done with that stranger--how he’d touched her and how he’d made her body ache, especially her lower parts. She didn’t want to let him make her feel all hot and bothered. And she didn’t want to keep thinking about what should have been the most embarrassing moment in her life.

Yet she couldn’t seem to help herself from remembering the insistent feel of his mouth on hers. Or how much she’d liked it.

“I’ve really got to meet this one,” Janice said with a laugh. “By your description, he sounds like he was hot enough to melt through stone.”

Lord help her, he was *that* hot. She could still clearly picture him. And worse, she could still feel his sandalwood scented heat clinging to her body. It felt familiar.

As did his broad shoulders and the dark, brooding look that gave an air of danger to his brown eyes. It was that familiarity, she supposed, that had tricked her into returning his kiss with an urgency that surprised her.

“Don’t groan so,” Janice said. “You met your dream guy. It’s not a bad thing.”

“Not a bad thing?” Dallas choked out.

She’d touched him...*down there!* He was a stranger that had accosted her in a shadowy alleyway. She was lucky to have escaped. *But from whom? That sex god? Or herself?*

Part of her wanted to relive the frenzied touching. The kisses that had melted through her tension and had settled so deeply into her thoughts, she couldn’t seem to shake it. Certainly, if she had it all to do over she’d do a few things differently. She wasn’t some sex-crazed nymphomaniac. She didn’t even know any sex-crazed nymphomaniacs.

It was *him*. He must have done something to her. His body had tempted her beyond reason and had made her lose control.

And that frightened her. *He* frightened her.

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"I missed my big interview. And it's all his fault, you know. I didn't even get beyond the front desk secretary at HH&G. She sent me away without giving me the chance to reschedule or even explain. She said the jerk I was supposed to meet wasn't even in the office."

Dallas peeked at her friend from between her fingers. Janice was smiling at her.

"What?" Dallas demanded.

"You, silly. Didn't you already say you were fifteen minutes late for your interview? That's why you took the shortcut down the alleyway in the first place?"

She had said that.

"And so you can't really blame him, can you?"

"But I would have never--"

"Perhaps that's your problem. You have never let your walls down...not even for a man."

"It's not as if I've never--"

"As long as he follows your rules. No kissing until the third date. No touching until the sixth date. And *pulh-lease*, you won't let a man sample your goods until you've dated him for at least two months. Your rules. Your walls."

There was nothing wrong with taking things slow or with being cautious. Janice was being unfair.

"He was a stranger." Sheesh, Janice was making her sound down right frigid. "Even you don't go around kissing strangers."

"Perhaps I should start." Janice fumbled around in her purse until she pulled out a cosmetic mirror. "Look."

Dallas leaned forward and blinked in concert with the flushed face staring back at her. Her hair hung in loose curls around her temples. Her cheeks were bright, nearly as bright as her eyes. And her lips--her cheeks burned with embarrassment--her lips were deep red and swollen.

"You've never looked so well-loved," Janice said. "Not one of your tame and oh-so-patient boyfriends ever made you look so...um...relaxed...and all he did was kiss you, right?"

Dallas touched her fingers to her lips. Hours had passed since he'd claimed them for his own and yet they still tingled.

"And here I was thinking you'd spend my whole lunch hour complaining about

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how you're not going to be able to pay your rent."

"My rent!" Dallas didn't need to be reminded. Her landlord was going to want his money in a few days. And she couldn't pay him. And if she couldn't pay him, he'd kick her out. That was a promise he'd made last month when she talked him into letting her pay two weeks late and only half the full amount.

In less than a week's time she was going to be homeless and living on the mercy of others. That was something she vowed never to let happen again.

Dallas suddenly felt woozy. She buried her head in her hands for a second time. "What am I going to do?"

"You really want my opinion?" Janice asked. "If I were you, I'd go hang out in deserted alleyways hoping to bump into that mystery man of yours again."

* * *

She needed his help. Just because they'd skirted *the darkness* one time, didn't mean it wasn't still out there. Searching. Wanting.

Brendan may have been raised in a world very different from the one he was living in now, but he'd learned over the past few years the meaning of loyalty. There were reasons--beyond the material--for scarifying a little in order to help another in need. And that spitfire belonged to them. She needed to be protected until she could be brought into the fold and educated.

This was a dangerous time for her. She was vulnerable to all sorts of attacks right now and not just from the devouring darkness.

That evening Brendan lit several dozen lavender-scented candles in his spacious master bathroom. He stripped off his clothes and lowered himself into the large, round tub. Hot water swirled around him. With his face barely above the surface, he drew in a deep breath and quieted his mind. Slowly, his eyes slipped closed.

His breathing slowed as he slipped deeper within himself and at the same time reached out into the universe. Like *the darkness*, he was searching.

She was nearby.

His mind stilled.

She'd changed her clothes. A teasing leather skirt hugged her shapely bottom. A matching pair of black leather boots outlined her slender thighs. And a loose, crocheted silvery sweater gave a peek-a-boo show with the white tank top she was wearing underneath. His cock stirred, which didn't surprise him. She'd teased his poor neglected

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body to the point of flames and cruelly left him wanting.

He almost cried out when she covered all that lovely flesh with a long wool coat.

Her ruby lips were moving. He strained his ears, trying and failing to hear what she was saying. In order to find out anything about her, he'd have to get closer.

Slowly, the image around him came into sharper focus.

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," she was saying. She pulled her coat tightly closed. "And do I really have to dress like a hooker?"

"You don't look like a hooker. Well, not exactly. Besides, if you want a second chance at getting that associate position, I think you'd better wear whatever Tony wants. Though he's only been with the firm for a few years, he says he has an in with the principals. You make him happy and he'll get your missed interview rescheduled." The woman accompanying Brendan's spitfire gave her a shove. "Come on, we'll be late."

* * *

Directed visions were tricky devils, but not impossible. Frank Stone had made Brendan practice slowing his mind and directing his focus time and again until forcing a vision almost came naturally to him. The problem with them though was that they rarely gave him the freedom to do simple things like read the number on her apartment door or peek at the mail on the small table beside the door and get her full address.

He'd get snatches of conversations and images. And not much more. With the New Ones he had watched over the years, he never needed to do much more than that. He would periodically check in and see how the New One was doing.

But with her, they knew next to nothing about her and her situation. Which meant that if they were going to learn anything, he would have to break a few rules and actually put himself inside her head.

Ignoring the dull throb in his temples, he drew himself even deeper into the universe and drew on the powers swirling around him. Feeling his way through the haze, he moved closer to his elusive target.

At the periphery of her thoughts, he banged up against a thick barrier, an impenetrable wall that must have taken years to build around herself.

I suppose this is how you were able to throw us all for a loop this morning, my lovely headache.

But he wasn't one to be so easily deterred. He drew in another deep breath and tried a different tactic. Following the faint connection he'd created between them by

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kissing her, he could work his way around her barriers. He hoped.

Moving through time and space this way, was like pulling himself along a lightly spun thread that could be easily broken. He took his time. If the strand connecting them snapped, he'd have one hell of a time finding his way home.

Anticipation thudded in his heart when he sensed he was pushing his way into her core. The sweet scent of honey and jasmine flooded his senses.

The passion that had sparked between them while they were together in the alleyway flared to life and he was with her. Inside her.

Joining with another this way, was a skill not many possessed. And those who did were discouraged from using it. Despite the pleasant way his body hummed with excitement to be with her so intimately, he wouldn't have reached out to her like this if there was any other way.

There wasn't.

Even though she was one of them, she was a complete unknown. Before yesterday, no one--not even Frank Stone--knew she existed. Which was impossible.

Stone, and others like him, were experts at detecting the emergence of New Ones. And once one was identified, Stone would send someone out to watch over that person until he or she was ready to hear the truth.

Stone had been utterly baffled that this spitfire--a force more powerful than anything they'd encountered in a long time--could have escaped their notice for so many years. Given the strong vision that had interrupted Brendan's sensual Thursday night, they needed to quickly find her and bring her into the fold before *the darkness* devoured her.

That was going to be a difficult task considering how Brendan didn't know her name, her address, or anything about her other than the nearly painful attraction he was feeling toward her at the moment.

Her mind stirred. Her thoughts tentatively touched him as he settled deep inside her.

"*Shhh,*" he whispered. "*I won't hurt you.*"

A flurry of thoughts followed. She battered him, trying to push him out. He was an unknown. A danger.

"*I won't hurt you,*" he repeated calmly. "*You know me. We are the same. Listen. And remember.*"

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It didn't matter. This was too intimate for her. He could feel her panic rising.

He rifled through her thoughts, searching for a glimmer of blind trust to grab onto. Sadly, there was none to be found. She'd been left alone in the world for too many years.

And in the shadowy corners of her mind, Brendan sensed threads of *the darkness* that had already found a way to touch her. She drew on its sticky, corrosive powers.

Damn, this was worst than he'd imagined.

A sharp pain struck him as she directed *the darkness* to attack him. It bore into his thoughts. Violent urges, mostly sexual, filled him.

He growled and blindly struck back.

"No! Stop," he commanded. He couldn't let her block him like this. If she pushed him out, the thread between them would snap, *the darkness* inside her would grow stronger, and she would remain lost.

The darkness struck out again and he could feel himself losing her.

Without considering the consequences, he grabbed onto her spirit and whisked it out of her body and off into his world.

Time and space swirled, pulling them both to a place he had created years ago when he'd been too young and too inexperienced to cope with the pains and disappointments life seemed to constantly dump on him. Once the maelstrom stopped, he found himself standing in a shimmering blue world. The sable-haired spitfire was at his side. Her hand securely clasped in his own. Her lips parted slightly as her wide, grassy-green eyes took in the view of his watery world.

"What is this place?" she asked. There was a hushed sense of awe in her voice.

"My heaven," he answered.

She shuddered. "I-I don't belong here."

He fought her attempt to pull away. "No, tender one. Stay. There's nothing to fear. No one can harm you in this place. As long as you are with me, you're safe."

And under his power.

A wholly unexpected sense of satisfaction rushed through him. As long as she stayed in his domain, this woman--a New One with powers rivaling the ancients--was his and his alone to control.

Fuck, what was he thinking? She was a New One, an innocent. It wasn't as if she understood the powers available to her. Without her knowledge or permission, he'd blasted his way through all the rules governing this sort of thing and dragged her into a

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realm of his making. He spiked his hand through his hair. He absolutely, positively shouldn't be considering what he was considering doing.

He held his breath as she sucked on her lower lip and gazed around the simmering landscape. A waterfall dropped from the azure sky to fill an indigo-tinted reflecting pool. The sky's baby blue glow glinted off the still waters and made it look as if diamonds were floating on its surface. Nearby, a Caribbean blue sea lapped at a sandy shore. And beyond the sea, sapphire glaciers formed a mountainous backdrop.

She tore her gaze from the beauty surrounding them and propping her hands on her hips, blinked up at him. "You're the one from the alleyway. The one who..."

A blush brightened her cheeks.

"The one who...what?" he pressed.

No, don't play this game. Ask her name, find out her address, and get out, his irritatingly noble conscience urged. But he wasn't ready to let such a powerful woman go so quickly.

He wanted to think it was the aftereffects of being tainted by *the darkness* that had him acting so recklessly. But he knew that wasn't right. These hungers eating at him were deeper. Darker.

"The one who...what?" he repeated and used his thoughts to give her barriers a push.

Her powers surged in response. She huffed a quick breath, "You frustrate me," she said.

"The feeling's mutual."

That made her smile. "My friend says I should...um...thank you for that kiss you gave me in the alley."

"She does?" That made him raise a brow. "And, do you?"

"Do I, *what?*" Her power swirled around them, all warm and inviting. And strong.

His cock elongated and pressed against the front of the jeans he'd donned in this magical world of his, solely for her sake. He swallowed the lusty lump that formed in his throat.

"Do you thank me?" he asked.

"It depends." The crooked smile she gave him seemed to brighten everything.

"Let me decide after I see where this incredible dream takes me."

He took her hand and drew her toward the shelter of the waterfall. "Anywhere

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you want to go, tender one. Anywhere you want.”

As they passed the reflecting pool, Brendan crouched down and dipped his hand in the silent water and swirled, sending a ripple of pleasure spiraling through his eager companion.

“Oh...” She gripped his shoulder and held on as he played with the water, knowing that she felt the warm ripples lapping at her as intimately as if he were touching her. Stroking her. “Oh...oh, my.”

Her pupils grew large as she panted softly. “You weren’t kidding me,” she managed before letting out another soft moan.

“Come here.” He leaned back on the soft bed of bluegrass beside the gurgling waterfall and guided her to her knees so she was straddling his waist. “Kiss me.”

Like an obedient servant, she did as he bid and pressed her warm lips to his mouth.

Her velvety soft lips caressed his as tenderly as a warm breeze. The feel of them only made him want more. He deepened the kiss, making love to her mouth. Suckling. Savoring. Growing wild with desire. When they finally parted, she was panting.

“This isn’t a dream,” he told her.

“Hmm...hummm....not a dream...riight...” she murmured and tried to kiss him again. “And in the waking world, men are always taking me to their secret worlds to make mad passionate love to me.”

“It’s not a dream, tender one.” His voice deepened. “Trust me.”

He wasn’t sure why he needed her to understand that what they were doing--though not happening within the realm of reality--was real. Perhaps even more real than what could happen in the flesh.

He had taken a peek inside her mind and had felt the pain she’d been gathering over the years. He’d seen firsthand the heartbreaks she’d suffered. Love didn’t have to be that way...at least that was what Frank Stone had spent the past six years trying to beat into Brendan’s thick head.

Just this last year Brendan was beginning to come around to Stone’s way of thinking. If he could keep his emotions out of the picture, he found he could be with a woman without risking anything.

Sex could simply be sex. No losers. No heartache.

So, given that line of reason, there couldn’t possibly be anything wrong with what

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he was doing to her. As long as she understood the situation, she would be no different from the blonde who'd practically begged he bring her home with him last Thursday night.

You're wrong, his conscience chided. What you're doing is not much different from tossing her on the ground and raping her.

But she was strong. If she didn't crave him as much as he was craving her, she'd push him away.

You know it doesn't work that way...not while she's in your world, under your control, and playing by your rules.

Then he just had to make sure she didn't get hurt, because stopping now would be too damned difficult...for the both of them.

He wasn't absolutely sure about how everything worked because he'd never done this before. But he suspected that since she was in his world, she was probably feeling what he was feeling. And frankly, he was horny as hell and done with this light stuff.

He wrapped his arms around her slim waist and rolled her over onto her back.

* * *

Dallas tried for a calm breath. This was a dream, she reminded herself. A wonderfully, uninhibited erotic dream.

He was wearing those battered old jeans that were growing tighter by the moment. With no shirt. His muscles rippled from his arms down to his finely sculpted chest. He was a golden tan. It reminded her of honey.

Her stomach was still dancing from the sensation of him flipping her over onto her back. Not only did she suddenly find herself under her dream lover, a happy slave to his advances as he nudged her legs apart, the leather clothes she had been wearing had disappeared. They'd been replaced with a shimmering white, sinfully sheer negligee.

Her breathing seemed uncontrollable. And the short, halting panting only heightened the throbbing between her legs. Never, ever had she felt so desperate for a man. Before this moment, she doubted she could have even explained the feeling of desperation.

Don't you dare pinch yourself. Nope, no pinching was going to be allowed. Now, as for biting...

She sank her teeth in the soft flesh around his broad flat nipple and thrilled at the low rumble of his groan. His single-minded attraction gave her a rush of power.

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Power. Hmmm...She enjoyed the taste...the strong power. She couldn't seem to get enough. She lapped at his chest while he rocked his body against her. With sharp, quick kisses, he started to work his way down her body.

When he reached her swollen, needy breasts, he returned the favor and scraped his teeth against her nipple. She arched up off the ground with a force that made her eyes roll back in her head. He suckled her, urging her nipples to pucker. An electric tingle followed his hand across her belly and down between her legs.

"Touch me," she whispered.

She spread her legs wider and helped him pull up the long, gauzy material of the white negligee. With a mischievous grin, he sat up and draped the material over her so it was spread over her face like a wedding veil.

Slowly--achingly so--he ran his hands over her thighs. Teasing her by avoiding the moist, swollen lips begging for his attention. A frustrated scream escaped her lips when he finally touched her with the tip of his finger. And then he ran that same finger down the length of her opening.

At first his touch was light. But then he pressed deeper. Harder. He dipped one finger into her and then another. She raised her hips off the ground as he fucked her with his hand.

She was at his complete mercy while at the same time in complete control.

Still pumping her, he buried his head between her legs and swirled his tongue over her swollen clit. She was hot and wet and felt like liquid fire. She thrashed against him, not at all worried what he might be thinking of her wanton behavior. Free from the worries that came with a genuine encounter, she let herself sink into the sensation of his hot tongue raking against her soft flesh.

He started devouring her. He suckled her nether lips with the same intensity he had used on her nipples. Until her heart seemed to be beating, pounding through her clit.

"Tell me you want me," he demanded. His hot breath whispered against her sensitive flesh. He lifted his head slightly and his gaze met hers. "Tell me I'm not forcing you."

She read a glimmer of worry in his dark eyes. He wanted her to want him...to need him. But that didn't make sense. Couldn't he taste how much she was aching? For a dream, the pain was too real and too demanding.

"*I want you.*" She blew out a shuddering breath as she dug her fingers into to his

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hair, afraid that if she let go he might vanish. *“Please, I want you.”*

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Chapter Two

“*Your name...*” her dream lover whispered. His beautiful blue world dissolved like chalk on a sidewalk. “*I need your name.*”

“Dallas. I’m Dallas.”

A faint beep, beep, beep tugged at her awareness. She could barely breathe. Exhaustion weighed heavily on her chest. It took all her strength to draw a steady breath. Lord, she had sex dreams before but nothing had ever come close to what had happened last night.

She drew another breath, this one not quite as even as the first, and tried to stretch. Everything ached, especially her inner thigh muscles--exactly as expected after a night of vigorous fucking. It wasn’t a bad ache. Her muscles felt stretched and relaxed and, well, sated.

He had stretched her and done things to her that were beyond her widest imagination. First with his tongue and fingers, and then with his tireless cock. Simply thinking about it made her body grow tight, eager for more.

Which was nonsense. It had only been a dream. A pleasant, wet, highly erotic dream sparked by a stranger’s stolen kiss. Perhaps Janice was right. If this sexual explosion was any indication, perhaps her love life had become too regimented.

She shuddered to imagine what would have happened if she hadn’t been in a hurry when she’d bumped into that sinfully sexy man in the alleyway. Would she have lived out those obviously repressed fantasies for real? *With a stranger?*

Lord, she hoped not.

Though amazing, mind-blowing and violently erotic, it had simply been a dream. One, that had made her whole body feel as if it had been real.

That insistent beep, beep, beep started to annoy her. It was Saturday. She didn’t have any appointments this morning and had planned on sleeping late. What was it with that cursed alarm clock?

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Her muscles screamed their protests as she swatted her arm out, trying to find the snooze button. Her fingers hit plenty of tubes and wires, but no buttons.

"Come on, I just want to sleep," she grumbled.

"You're awake!" Janice cried.

"You set the alarm clock?" Of all the under-handed, sneaky things to do to a person.

Dallas peeled open an eye, which wasn't as easy as it sounded. Even her eyelids felt heavy and sore.

Janice started sniffing. "They told me you were going to...to..." She was sniffing again.

Dallas peeled open her other eye and blinked several times to clear her foggy vision. What she saw made her want to shut them and return to her sensual dream world.

Janice never cried. Ever. But there they were, big salty tears running down Janice's pink cheeks.

"What's going on?" By that time she had gathered enough wits about her to figure out she was in a hospital bed and hooked up to enough wires to make an electrical panel proud. But why? "What's wrong with me?"

Janice shook her head and cried some more. "Don't you remember anything?"

Dallas remembered quite a lot. But it wasn't something she felt comfortable talking about, not even to Janice. And a dream encounter didn't explain the hospital.

"We were heading out?" Janice prompted. She wiped her eyes with one of those ultra thin tissues hospitals provide. "To meet Tony and Cayce?"

Dallas shook her head, unable to remember.

"We made it to the hallway outside your apartment when you got this blank look on your face," Janice was saying. "I asked you if you were okay, but you wouldn't answer me. You pushed my hand away when I tried to touch you. And then--" She sniffed. "--Then, you collapsed."

"Collapsed," Dallas repeated, as if saying it out loud could make it feel real. But it didn't.

"No," she said, shaking her head. She didn't collapse. She'd soared. She clearly remembered soaring.

However, the insistent beep, beep, beep of the heart monitor was telling a vastly different story.

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“What’s wrong with me?” Dallas asked again.

Tears flooded Janice’s eyes. “I don’t know. The doctors don’t know.”

It had been a fantasy. A sex dream. Not something that would threaten her life or land her in the hospital.

“You’ve not had any measurable brain activity all night, Dallas. You were in a coma and they said you were going to die.”

“*Die?* No.” The room spun and Dallas fell back against her pillow. No, she couldn’t believe it. This couldn’t be happening.

She had sensed her brooding stranger with those singeing kisses was dangerous. But the danger would be to her heart. Not to her life.

And dammit, it *had* simply been a dream. Sparked by a near-death experience? She found that difficult to believe. All she knew was that, despite the danger, her body was aching to be with him again. And soon.

* * *

“Hey!” someone shouted in Brendan’s ear.

What the hell?

Before he could push whoever was shouting at him away, he found himself trapped within a pair of powerful arms. He sucked in a breath and ended up with a lungful of water.

What the hell? Coughing and spitting up water while struggling against his attacker, he tried to piece together what was happening to him.

Then he caught the scent of lavender. His candles. He only used them to help send himself into the universe--a form of astral projection where his spirit actually left his body.

Returning was always a bitch. His head felt packed with cotton. And he couldn’t seem to think fast enough to figure out why someone was trying to drown him like an unwanted puppy.

“What the hell are you trying to do?” Horace asked. He pounded on the center of his back. Brendan coughed up more water. “Kill yourself?”

“I was searching for her.” His voice felt like razors against the back of his throat. At least his face was now above the water. His lungs burned from inhaling so much of it. He coughed again.

“Did you think she was hiding at the bottom of your tub?” Horace with his great

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strength helped Brendan get up on his knees and then one foot at a time, get his legs under him.

"You know what I was doing."

Horace grimaced. "Stone's not going to like this," he warned.

Brendan drew a deep breath that burned all the way down and willed himself to calm down. "Then we don't tell him."

"What won't you tell me?" Stone asked as he rushed into the bathroom. He sounded furious.

Ignoring his aching body, Brendan climbed out of the tub and grabbed a towel to wrap around his waist. "It's nothing."

"I found him sunk to the bottom of that damned tub," Horace said. *Traitor*. "By the look of these lumps of wax that used to be candles, it appears he's been there all night. Damn near drowning himself."

"I wasn't drowning myself."

Brendan grabbed a second towel and used it to dry off his hair. There was a chill in his apartment that seemed to be seeping into his bones. He padded into the other room with his focus on the coffee maker in the kitchen.

Stone followed. "What were you doing?"

"Tracking down our target."

"And?"

The lid to his coffee tin wouldn't budge. Brendan shook the damned thing and then banged it against the kitchen's onyx countertop until Stone took it from him.

"And?" he asked again as he held Brendan's coffee beans hostage.

"Her name is Dallas."

Stone nodded. "Sit down." He opened the tin and started to make a pot of coffee. "You look like hell, by the way."

"He was on the bottom of the tub. Under the water." Horace said as he came into the room. He'd been in the bedroom. He tossed a robe in Brendan's direction.

"*The darkness* has already found her," Brendan told both men. "And she has some strong barriers of her own."

"So you went deeper?" Stone asked.

Brendan nodded.

"That's all well and good," Horace said. "I may not be able to pop in and out of

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people's heads like Brendan, but I understand enough about it to know that finding a woman's name shouldn't take all night." He crossed his arms over his chest. "What else were you doing, Brendan?"

"There were complications." There was no way in hell he was going to tell either Stone or Horace that he'd brought Dallas to his secret world, seduced her, and had spent several mind-blowing hours between her legs

"Okay." Stone curiously didn't press him for details. That wasn't like him, but Brendan wasn't one to knock a good thing. Stone put a mug of coffee on the table in front of Brendan. "Get some rest before going after her. I'll expect you to bring her to the café this evening?"

"If all goes well, I should."

"Call me if you run into any more...um...complications," Stone said on his way out.

Brendan waited until he heard his front door close before laying into Horace for calling in Stone.

"What was I going to do, let you die?" Horace said, not sounding the least bit sorry. He sat down at the kitchen table across from Brendan. "At least you won't have to do that again. The next time you meet her it will be in the flesh, right?"

Brendan sipped his coffee. "I don't know how to find her."

"*What?* You spent the night with her and you didn't..." Horace closed his eyes and groaned. "I take it she's pretty."

An understatement. But the amazing way her body glistened as she writhed with pleasure under him wasn't something Brendan wanted to talk about.

When Horace spoke again, it was in a harsh whisper. "We're talking about your life. If Stone finds out, he'll be forced to haul your ass in front of the council. And you know the council isn't civilized like a human court of law."

Brendan knew. Hell, he knew that what he had done--taking a spirit out of a body--carried the death penalty. Somehow it hadn't mattered. He wanted Dallas. His soul craved her sensual energy like it craved food.

It was irrational and wrong. Still, it didn't matter. He wasn't going to give her up.

"She's mine," he said in a warning growl. Nothing was going to keep him away from her.

"I wonder what your poor target is thinking this morning. I wonder if she is as

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certain about everything as you are," Horace snarled back.

* * *

Dallas felt drawn to him. She knew it was crazy. She didn't even know how to find him. Not his name. Not an inkling of an address. And he'd accosted her in an alleyway. What did she want with him other than to point him out to the police?

His body. That's what.

His sumptuous body.

Oh, and his expressive brown eyes that reminded her of creamy, dark chocolate.

"What are you doing?" Janice pushed Dallas back into the hospital bed.

It took some effort to feed her stiff arms enough strength to bat Janice away. "I'm trying to get dressed."

She unhooked the IV, the heart monitor, and a bunch of other wires that didn't make any sense to her. A series of alarms blared. It sounded as if she was trying to break into a bank, not crawl out of a hospital bed.

"I'm fine." She hoped. "Just stiff." *And horny.*

She needed to find him in the flesh. Flesh with flesh. That should cure the throbbing ache between her legs.

"You're not fine." Janice started fighting her again. "Hell, your lips are blue."

"I'm fine." Dallas pushed back. In this condition, she wasn't much of a match for her petite friend. And Janice was getting backup.

A team of nurses rushed into the room. One was pushing a crash cart, and another had a tray piled with what looked more like medieval torture implements than medical equipment. They hovered around her like vultures, swooping down whenever there was an opening. Pinching. Prodding. The conversation hovered around scary topics like brain tumors, lesions and seizures. All this was happening while Janice went on and on about Dallas trying to leave the hospital. She sounded like a tattling child.

"I thought you were my friend," Dallas whispered.

"I am," she shot back.

A few minutes later a doctor ambled into the room. His gaze met Dallas's as he surveyed the chaos surrounding her. He returned her pleading look with a wry smile.

A murmured request had the nurses and orderlies backing away and clearing a path for him. Like a royal visitor, he approached the bed.

"I want to go home."

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Dr. Halverson--Dallas read on the nametag he wore--hummed a response. He took her wrist in his hand and pressed his fingers to her pulse. Feeling as horny as she was, she held her breath, afraid she might pounce on him, a doctor. A young, athletic, blond doctor with crystal clear blue eyes.

Nothing. Despite her throbbing arousal and her tingling breasts, she felt no desire to let this man--also a stranger--touch her in an intimate way.

She released her breath, grateful to know that her trip into vivid sexual fantasies hadn't turned her into a stark-raving nymphomaniac.

"Pulse is normal," he said.

His voice sounded like velvet. But Dallas didn't care. Yesterday, she would have. She'd be blushing and stammering all sorts of nonsense. And making a complete fool of herself.

This morning, she didn't care. Dr. Halverson wasn't *him*. She needed to get to *him*.

She pushed the doctor's hand away as he tried to press it to her forehead.

"I have to go." She felt an odd power surge in her voice.

Dr. Halverson looked faintly stunned. He opened and closed his mouth and then took a step back.

"I'd like to run some tests," he said after a long moment. "Find out what happened to you."

"I have to go," she repeated, feeling her power expand.

Despite Janice's howled protests, Dr. Halverson gave a nod. "There's some paperwork you'll need to fill out. I'll go get it."

He quickly returned with an AMA discharge form. Dallas's throbbing, sex-hungry body didn't care that she was leaving the hospital AMA--against medical advice. She wasn't even the slightest bit worried that there might be something seriously wrong with her. In fact, by the time she stumbled out of that hospital and into the chilly morning air, she only had one thought on her mind.

She had to go find him.

Now.

* * *

It was dangerous for him to go searching for Dallas again so soon. Even so, Brendan pulled out his stash of lavender candles and started spreading them across his

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bathroom floor. Despite the trouble he was causing for himself, he felt compelled to do this.

She might need him. To hell with the risk and *the darkness* infecting her, he had to find her and fast.

He had to see her. Touch her. See that she was okay.

She's strong, he told himself. But how strong? Strong enough to weather what had virtually been a psychic attack without coming away with scars?

He didn't know. And it scared the hell out of him.

That wasn't the only thing scaring him this morning. By taking her spirit from her body last night, he'd crossed a line very few like him have ever crossed. Those who had done it in the past had been devoured and were merely following the destructive thoughts *the darkness* had planted in their minds.

Stealing souls. That's what the council called what he'd done. A body without its spirit died. When he left his body last night, he'd held onto a cord--a lifeline--that would help him find his way home. It was that lifeline that kept his heart beating and his vital organs working.

When a spirit is snatched from a body, like he did with Dallas last night, there is no lifeline and no real hope for the spirit to find its way home. Not without help, anyway.

He'd planned on doing no harm and wouldn't have if he'd whisked her away to his world, questioned her, and gotten her back to her body before more than a few seconds had passed.

But instead of doing any of that, he'd held on to her. Simply feeling her powerful spirit moving through him had been a heady experience. It tempted his desires more than he was comfortable admitting. Even to himself.

He shook the thought away. It had been his damned starved libido acting last night. Not some power game.

He lit the first candle. Today, he wouldn't snatch her into his world. After last night, the connection between them was strong. He could feel it tugging at him even now. That connection should give him sufficient power over her and her attempts to block him.

He lit another candle. The flame sputtered and hissed as if it had been splashed by water. Not a heartbeat later, the phone rang.

"Mr. Hamlet asked me to check in with you," his secretary, Trina said. Unlike Franz Hamlet, she was human and wouldn't understand why Franz was suddenly

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concerned about Brendan's welfare. Rumors moved among *the Protectors* at a frenetic pace.

"Tell him I'm fine," Brendan said. Although neither Stone nor Horace would have said a word about this morning, there were several who were adept at reading minds and anxious to share the secrets they learned. He wondered what exactly those busybodies among them were saying. "Oh, and Trina."

"Yes, sir?"

"I won't be coming in the office for the next couple of days. But please don't hesitate to call me if something important comes up with any of the cases I'm working on."

He needed uninterrupted time with Dallas--preferably with her in his bed. He pictured her with her wrists tied to the bedposts so she couldn't dash away from him.

"Of course, sir." Trina knew well enough to not ask why. "You missed a job interview yesterday with a Dallas St. John. But I should tell you that she was nearly a half-hour late. You might want to forget it and move on to the next candidate."

"Dallas St. John?" His heart started beating in his throat. He'd been swamped with work and had completely ignored the stack of applicants for the vacant associate position personnel had sent to him over a week ago. Personnel and Trina had scheduled the appointments. All he had to do was look at the files and show up for the interview.

"*Dallas St. John?*"

"Yes, sir. That's what the file says."

Fate or the universe or whoever was pulling the strings up there had screwed him over good this time. If not for that damned vision, he would have met Dallas under normal circumstances and recognized that she was a New One all on his own.

Stone would probably want to hear about this new complication right away.

"Give me her address and phone number. I'll contact her."

Trina gave him the information without questioning why he would bother calling a potential employee. After talking to Stone, he tried to call Dallas. There was no answer.

A sense of dread filled him. He pictured her lifeless body sprawled out in the middle of her apartment. But that wasn't a vision, he reminded himself. Those were his fears speaking to him.

God help him, he needed to find her.

* * *

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A light snow twirled through the soggy, cold Chicago streets. The dreary weather must have convinced the sun to stay away. In the grim light of late afternoon, Dallas plodded forward, searching aimlessly.

She dabbed a tissue to her nose. It had started bleeding again.

That morning, she'd taken a cab to her apartment to shower and change into some warm clothes before setting out on this insane search of hers. She felt pulled by a force outside herself.

"I've got to find him," she grumbled and dabbed at her nose again.

A horn honked behind her.

"Dallas."

The horn honked again.

"Dallas!"

A flashy, red Toyota sports coupe pulled up along side her. It slowed to match her pace.

"DALLAS!"

"Leave me alone, Janice."

The car jerked to a stop. Dallas kept going forward. She wished whatever force was pulling her would do her a favor and look at a map. She'd already been down this street. Twice.

She was about a yard down the block when she heard Janice slam her car door shut. Her heels beat a quick tattoo against the pavement, as she grew closer.

Dallas figured there was nothing to do but wait for the inevitable. Annoying as Janice could be, she couldn't deny that she really was a good friend to be looking out for her like this. Her mind was still tripping over that warm, fuzzy thought when Janice grabbed Dallas by her tender shoulders and spun her around until they were standing face-to-face and toe-to-toe. She gave Dallas a nasty shake that made her brain knock around in her head.

"What the hell are you doing?" Janice shouted. She didn't need to shout since she was close enough that even the barest whisper would have been heard.

"Not so loud," Dallas breathed. "You're hurting me."

A frigid wind swept through her, chilling her to the core. She pushed away from Janice and hugged her arms against herself, trying to fight the intrusion of all this cold. A shiver tiptoed like icy fingers down her back.

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She blinked.

This was her third time down this street, yet not until Janice had spun her around had she noticed a storefront that wasn't much wider than its full glass door. A faded, old wooden sign announced that the place was The Oblique Café.

A long-forgotten and neglected voice from her childhood whispered that she had finally found what she'd been searching for. She twisted out of Janice's grasp and darted toward the door.

Halfway there, her attention jumped from the door to a large figure approaching from her right. It was *him*.

He looked harried, exhausted, worried...and absolutely wonderful.

Dallas pounced. She swung her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his. To call it a kiss would be too simple. She was tasting him and, liking the heat in her mouth, pulled him deeper. With a wanton's eagerness, her tongue pushed past his lips and plunged into his mouth as if they had been lovers forever.

He groaned.

A very solid, very real cock pressed against her belly. He wrapped his arms tightly around her.

This isn't a dream, she told herself.

"Neither was last night," he murmured.

* * *

"What's going on here?" Janice demanded.

"It's him," Dallas happily declared and pressed herself against the length of his body. They were both wearing far too many clothes. He was dressed all in black. Black pants. Black shirt. Black sweater. Black wool coat. Though it suited him, he would have been even more attractive without any of it.

"Him who?" Janice asked.

"My dream guy."

"The Fish?"

He flinched.

"No, no. Not that one. The *other* one." She didn't want to say it out loud. It embarrassed her to even remember that she'd gotten herself all worked up over a stranger. She turned toward Janice and waggled her brows, hoping Janice would catch her meaning.

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Dallas wasn't sure what was going on in her friend's head. But whatever it was, it couldn't be good. The frown Janice was wearing deepened. "And what are you planning on doing?" she demanded.

The delicious thoughts that skittered through Dallas's mind brought a rush of heat to her cheeks, which was a good thing because that biting cold was seeping back into her blood. She hugged herself and shivered.

"Well?" Janice pressed. "What are you planning on doing?"

"That's a good question," her delicious dream guy answered just as Dallas was thinking it. Okay, perhaps she wasn't thinking that. But it had sounded like such a reasonable thing to be thinking that she wanted to claim it for her own. It was better than admitting--even to herself--that she was wading in visions of having hot and heavy sex. With him.

"There's nothing wrong with admitting your desires," he said to her as if he could read her thoughts. "But we do need to make some decisions since we can't do anything out here on the street."

He glanced at the café door. "No, it's too soon," he said. "Let me take you to my apartment."

"Now wait a minute." Janice edged her way between them and used sheer strength to push them an arm's length apart. "I'm not letting you--a stranger--take her anywhere."

"Y-you s-s-said y-y-yourself t-t-that I s-s-should f-find him." Dallas couldn't seem to chase that cursed cold away. Over the last several seconds the shivers had grown stronger. Her hands started to visibly shake.

Janice didn't seem to be listening to a word Dallas was saying. By the looks of it, her friend had given up on trying to convince Dallas to go back to the hospital. Instead, she'd turned a speculative eye toward Dallas's dream lover.

Dallas had a bad feeling that her friend was going to try and win herself an ally.

"Look at her. She's sick. She should be in the hospital, not wandering the streets looking for you."

A dark brow shot up. "Looking for me?" He sounded surprised.

"A-all d-day," Dallas admitted through chattering teeth.

"She spent the night in the hospital critical care unit."

"She's okay," He started to say something else but hesitated.

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Dallas blushed as his gaze pressed against her. Even if she only looked half as bad as she felt, it would mean things crawling out of swamp bogs would look more appealing than her.

“I’ll take care of her.” He took the stained tissue from her hand and gently pressed it to her bleeding nose. “I know how to fix this. Given time, she should be okay.”

He opened his wool coat and pulled Dallas close. Before she realized what was happening, she found herself snuggled up against his chest and soaking up his heat as he enfolded her in the warmth of his wool coat’s thick, soft fabric. It wasn’t enough to chase away the biting chill, but it was a start.

“She needs to go back to the hospital.”

“No. They wouldn’t know how to help her. I do.” A dark force emerged from behind his voice. Dallas felt it pressing against her chest, compelling her to listen to him and believe what he was saying. “Go home. I will care for Dallas.”

Janice didn’t seem to notice the warm, soothing sensations his voice carried with his words. “I don’t even know who you are!” she screeched.

“You don’t know me,” he agreed. “And you are a good friend to be so concerned.”

“Dallas, you don’t know anything about him. Don’t do this. I beg you, don’t go with him.”

He reached in his pocket, pulled out a small golden case, and produced a business card printed on a slick, nearly transparent paper. He handed the card to Janice.

She read it. Her eyes widened. She glanced at him and then read the card again. “Brendan Cromerty, Vice President of HH&G?”

He gave a sharp nod.

“Dallas had a job interview with you yesterday,” she said. Confusion glittered brightly in her eyes.

“I know. She was late.”

“She didn’t show.”

That seductive eyebrow of his rose again. “But I saw her anyhow. The universe works like that sometimes. It’s best not to think too hard about it. I know when I do, I always end up with a pounding headache.”

His arms tightened around Dallas. He seemed to be doing everything he could to lend her his heat. “I’m taking her home.” That dark force in his voice had returned. It

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swirled around them like a building wave. “Like it or not, she belongs with me.”

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Chapter Three

She belongs with me.

Nothing had ever sounded so wonderful or so comforting to Dallas's ears. She'd never belonged with anyone. Not really. While her friends all had families and parents, she'd been raised within the sanitized halls of St. John's Children's Home and had learned at an early age to depend on no one.

She belongs with me.

If only...

Brendan unlocked the door to his apartment and pushed it open. He stepped aside, silently inviting her to go in first.

They hadn't spoken a word on the way to his home. She'd huddled, shivering in the passenger seat of his sleek, black Audi TT, unable to get rid of the cold. He'd wrapped her in his coat, but it didn't seem to help her feel any warmer. She needed his body. Flesh to flesh.

But by time they had reached his car, he had distanced himself. That curious look of indecision had remained on his lips and had crinkled the skin around his piercing brown eyes. She had watched him as he drove and could almost hear the thoughts churning in his head.

He was conflicted.

But about what? She wondered.

Hugging his coat tightly to her chest, she wandered into the middle of his living room. Off to one side was a kitchen that would make a gourmet drool. The black stone countertop and the stainless steel appliances sparkled under the kitchen's task lighting.

Even more impressive was his living room. It was twice the size of her entire apartment--the one from which she was soon going to be evicted. Unlike her cramped living room where the furniture was used, worn and uncomfortable, a plush, dark brown overstuffed sofa near the brick fireplace in Brendan's living room called to her.

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She'd been plowing through the cold and the snow for hours, with an arousal that wouldn't go away. The soft, excited flesh between her legs had turned tender and uncomfortable hours ago. And it wasn't as if she had been feeling all that healthy when she left the hospital. Thinking about her various aches now only made her more conscience of her pain-ridden body.

"I would offer you a painkiller if I thought it would help," he said, just as her legs started to give out under her. He caught her elbow and helped her make it to the sofa without falling on her face. She appreciated that.

"Stay there." He tucked a blanket over her legs. "I think I can do something about the cold. I'll be right back."

She watched him move around in the kitchen with the confidence of a well-honed cook. When he returned, he handed her a piping hot cup of tea and wrapped a second blanket over her shoulders.

"It's a special recipe," he said. "The herbs should help warm you up and renew your strength."

She sniffed the steam. The tea smelled sweet. She picked out the distinctive scents of honey and orange. But there were other aromas there as well. Too many. They overwhelmed her senses.

"Go on." He hadn't moved. He was hovering over her much like the nurses had at the hospital that morning. "Personally, I think it has a pleasant taste."

She took a tentative sip. The overwhelming flavors mixed in her mouth, blending like the individual notes and sounds at a symphony to produce something wonderful.

She took another sip. The drink's heat did help push away the cold. Her toes started to prickle as they thawed.

"Hmmm..." she sighed. "That's nice."

That made him smile. "Good. Now, I suppose we should get down to business."

Business? Her body snapped to attention. "You mean sex, right?"

"No!" He backed away from her as if afraid she might attack him. Talk about crushing rejections.

"Oh, I see," she murmured. Lord, she *had* attacked him in the street this afternoon. She'd nearly climbed into his arms. And had been kissing him without his permission. That was so not like her. Her cheeks stung she was blushing so hard.

"It-it's not that I don't...I-I mean, yes, lets," he stammered.

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He dragged his hand through his hair. "No. I mean, no."

On his retreat he stumbled over the corner of his coffee table, tipping it over and sending a pile of magazines flying.

"Damn."

He planted his feet and held his ground.

"I want to take you to my bed." The words flew out of his mouth as if he was arguing a tough case. "Of course I want to. But you're not strong enough. Not yet." He bent down and started gathering up the magazines. "Drink the tea."

"Oh." Dallas stared into her cup and pretended to be reading the leaves.

He righted the coffee table and dropped the magazines on top. "I'm attracted to you. Don't forget about what happened between us last night."

As impossible as it seemed, her blush turned even hotter. She waved the thought away. "How do you know about last night? It was a dream. A wonderful dream, yes. But still..." She sipped some more tea. She liked how it made her feel relaxed and slightly giddy. "It was probably triggered by a near-death experience. I was in a coma."

The brown of his eyes darkened. "We've been over this already. Last night happened. It was real."

"I was in a coma." Perhaps repeating it would help her believe it too. "They told me it could have been triggered by a brain tumor or any number of terrible ailments."

"You weren't in a coma. And there is nothing wrong with you." He dragged his hand through his hair for a second time and started pacing. "This is why we need to talk."

"About business?"

He nodded.

Oh dear, he meant business business, as in law firm business. The same law firm she desperately wanted to work for.

"Please don't ask me about my qualifications for the associate position right now. I don't feel up to it."

Both his brows shot up. "But you think you could handle sex?"

She smiled shyly at that, and then returned her attention to her tea.

He cleared his throat. "When you're feeling stronger I'm not going to let you get away with those teasing glances so easily."

She bit her lower lip and planned on holding him to that promise.

He started pacing again. "Our meeting in the alleyway wasn't an accident," he

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said. His gaze locked on the floor. His hands were clasped behind his back. "I knew you would be taking that shortcut and I was waiting for you."

"That doesn't make sense. If I was heading to your office, why didn't you wait for me there?"

"I don't think you were ever going to make it to the office. That's why I got the vision."

"The vision?"

He nodded. His pacing was unnerving. "In my vision I saw you in that alleyway. And you were in danger."

She took a nervous sip of her tea. "From you, you mean?"

That stopped him. He shook his head and chuckled. "I can understand why you'd think that."

"But the danger was from someone else?" she asked.

"Something else," he corrected. "And it's not gone away."

The chill she had felt earlier started to return. Or was that fear? She wasn't sure.

He placed his hand on the back of the sofa and leaned in so close she could smell his clean sandalwood scent. "I know you feel the connection between us, Dallas. The reason it's so strong is that we are the same, you and I. You belong with me."

You belong with me. His words sparked a new glow.

"I know this will be difficult to accept, but I promise you it's true. And you're not alone. I'm here for you. And there are others. You will meet them and they'll love you. You'll charm the socks off them. I promise you that."

He drew a deep breath.

"Dallas, you aren't human."

"Hmph."

Not human. She supposed she should have been surprised. She wasn't. After all, what he was saying made a whole lot of sense.

"Okay." She shrugged. "Not human. So, what am I?"

He jerked back with a look of surprise. "Um...um...there's no quick and easy answer for that one."

"You can't tell me I'm not human and leave it at that."

"No, I don't mean to do that." He sighed. "I expected the not-human part to dominate the conversation. It usually does, you know."

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“You’ve done this before?” Her voice rose. This was becoming all too fantastic to believe. And not fantastic like winning the lottery was fantastic...but fantastic like a low-budget futuristic movie.

“Yes, I’ve done this before.” He plopped down next to her on the plush sofa and cradled his head in his hands.

“Could have fooled me,” she scoffed. “You should at least have a handbook ready or a lecture prepared. Visuals would be nice, too.”

He rolled his eyes. “No one has ever reacted to this with a shrug. Aren’t you the least bit skeptical? Shouldn’t you argue with me that I’m wrong?”

“Are you?”

“No. I’m telling you the truth.” He looked quite adorably put out. A lock of dark, brown hair slipped over his brow. If she weren’t still feeling so weak, she would have hugged him.

“I’m being pragmatic.” She inched closer to him because he was warm and she craved his heat, and his other parts, but she didn’t want to think about that. Acting like a wanton still felt new and frightening. “I’ve always known I was different. Why should I argue with you if what you’re telling me is something I know in my heart is true?”

“Because...because...most people feel some sort of emotion!”

He was wrong. She was feeling an emotion. A strange sense of calm had filled her, and she was starting to regret it. “What’s the acceptable reaction, then?”

“They usually cry.”

“Why?” She didn’t feel the least bit like crying, not when this not being human business explained so much.

“I don’t know.”

“Did you cry?”

He grew very still.

“My situation was different than most,” he said. His cool voice made her shiver. “And I don’t want to talk about it.”

They sat in silence for several moments. The only sound in the room was the tap, tap of her fingernail against the side of her ceramic mug. He reached over and took it from her. Their hands touched. A spark of heat jumped between them.

“You asked what we were,” he said. His voice was soft, subdued. “There is no easy answer for that because none of us really know. The best I can do is a description.

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All of us are foundlings.”

“No,” she whispered. Her childhood wasn’t one she’d wish on anyone.

“No parents at all,” he continued. “Each of us appeared out of nothing and were raised by humans. But no one truly accepted us or treated us as their own because we are different and the humans sense it.”

That sounded only too painfully familiar.

“Our unusual beginning isn’t the only thing that marks us as different. As adulthood approaches, we start developing powers.”

“Powers?”

“Each of us has our own unique abilities. I can’t tell you what yours are. You’ll have to discover them for yourself.”

“Do I have any now?” She snapped her fingers. “Like make fire shoot out from my fingertips?” She snapped them again.

He caught her hand and held it as if worried flames might actually spring from her fingertips and singe his smooth plaster ceiling.

“That probably wouldn’t be a good thing to try inside,” he said. “There is energy all around us in the air and traveling through the dimensions of the universe. We all have an ability to tap into this energy, to direct it and sometimes change it into something tangible...like fire. Learning how to use and control the energy is what takes time and practice.”

“So I have to wait and see what I can do? *If* I can do anything?” That didn’t seem fair. She wanted to prove to herself and to Brendan that she was different. Special.

“You do have at least one power that I know about. You can turn back time. It’s a form of trans-dimensional shift. For most, it takes years of practice. You. You’re an anomaly. A strong one at that.”

“I can’t turn back time,” she protested.

“No? Yesterday morning when you were trying to get to my office, you threw back the clock at least three times. Don’t you remember?”

No, he had to be mistaken. Trans-dimensional – what did he call it? Whatever it was, it was something way beyond her comprehension. And if she didn’t understand it, how in the hell could she have possibly pulled off something like that?

“Think about it.” His voice had deepened. It brushed her body like an intimate caress.

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She closed her eyes and remembered the frantic dreams where she tried over and over to get to her interview, but always failed. "I had nightmare," she admitted.

"Last night wasn't a dream and those weren't nightmares. We're different, Dallas."

"Not human, right?" She gave him a wry smile. "So what are we? Demons? Fairies? No, don't tell me...we're aliens from Mars." She giggled at the thought. It must have been the tea making her lightheaded and giddy.

He shrugged. "We could be any or all of those. I don't know. None of us do."

"You really need to work on your presentation," she grumbled. "Visuals. And definitive answers."

"I'm sorry, but there isn't a handbook. What we've learned has been taught to us by those who came before us. Over the ages, we've picked up new things here and there through happenstance. We are all the same--foundlings with no one to guide or train us. Much like the humans, we each have to search to find our purpose in the world."

Dallas didn't like the vagaries of all this. Not being human was all well and good, but she'd rather be able to attach a name to her new state of existence.

"And the danger stalking me?" she asked, hoping to turn the subject back to the tangible.

"*The darkness.*"

Another empty answer. Darkness. That didn't mean anything to her. No...wait...

A long-faded and distant memory returned from the orphanage. It had haunted her throughout the long winter nights, staying just on the periphery of her life and had scared her like the boogiemer hiding in the closet. There had been no one to run to for comfort. No one had wanted to listen to her tears. She closed her eyes and shivered.

"It devours our spirit and leaves behind a being of hate and a force of destruction," he was saying.

"Anger and loneliness," she added. "I know this darkness. Like an old friend, it has always been with me."

* * *

Damn. He had hoped her infection with *the darkness* had been a new condition, one that could be easily extinguished. No one had ever told tales of a child--a being of light and air--who'd been taken by *the darkness*. Could her tender years truly have been that terrible?

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It staggered him to try and imagine a situation bad enough to attract *the darkness* to an innocent. Nothing could have been worse than what he'd survived. His rocky childhood had made him believe hell was someplace the unlucky ones like him went for vacation, and yet *the darkness* hadn't come for him.

He reached out and stroked her warm, silky-soft cheek.

"It doesn't have to be that way," he whispered. "You're strong and can defeat this. I will help you."

She gave him a brave smile, but he recognized the doubt lingering on her lips. He'd once held onto doubt like a babe with a security blanket, believing that there was less pain in keeping the status quo than in taking a risk on the unknown.

He supposed that that was why fate had thrown them together. She needed him to show her that life didn't have to be wrapped around anger and loneliness.

He moved closer to her and put his arm around her shoulder. "Let me in, tender one. Let me help you."

Even with her shivering like a frightened, soggy wren, he felt a kick of desire for her. It took nearly all his self-control not to pull her into his arms and kiss her until the shadows of doubt darkening her grassy-green eyes disappeared.

He'd tasted her power last night. In the light of day, it called to him like a strong drug. He craved her complete and total surrender. In return he would give her the world.

She craved him, too. When he'd mentioned that they needed to get started with business, her thoughts had gone straight to sex. It was nearly more temptation than he could handle.

But no, he had made himself suffer even though he could smell the scent of her desire clinging to her clothes like a musky perfume. He'd suffered because it had been his duty to explain to her what she was and what it meant.

Her calm acceptance of everything he was telling proved how detached she had let herself become from her longings and passions. But he knew firsthand her passions hadn't gone away. On some level, she was doubtlessly feeling every pinprick of fear and uncertainty...that, along with the ugliness *the darkness* brought with it.

If left unchecked, she would eventually explode into a jumble of destructive emotions. In order to help her, he needed to bond with her. He needed to win her trust.

"How are you feeling?" His voice nearly cracked under the strain of anticipation. He wanted her under him. Now. Besides, what better way to strengthen a bond than sex?

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She blinked up at him. Mischief danced in her bright gaze.

“I...don’t...know,” she said, slowly. Teasingly. “I’m still cold. If you’re willing...” She batted her lovely dark eyelashes. “...I wouldn’t mind if you could help warm me up.”

“Tender one, I’m willing to do more than just get you warm. I’m ready to make you hot enough to steam up the bedroom windows.”

As he pulled her onto his lap, his cock lengthened and hardened from the feel of her snuggling closer. Her bottom wiggled and pressed against the length of him.

This was for her...not himself. But, Heaven help him, he was going to enjoy exploring every beautiful inch of her.

The blankets had to go. And then his coat. With her help, they dropped to the carpeted floor. His fevered gaze raked over her. She was still wearing far too many clothes.

He growled his frustrations before lifting her into his arms and carrying her into the bedroom. The door swung closed behind him and the lock turned as if they had minds of their own.

She wasn’t going to play her white-rabbit game with him this evening. He dropped her onto his bed. She bounced on the down-stuffed mattress. A surge of power filled him. She was in his bed and would stay there until he was done with her.

Thankfully, it didn’t look like she was going to give him any arguments. While he stripped off his shirt, she removed her heavy purple sweater and the black turtleneck she was wearing underneath.

She moved like a lazy cat as she stretched out on his bed. The jeans she wore hugged her like a second skin and her black lace bra, which covered very little, teased him. She wiggled her shoulders.

“I think I’ll leave the rest on,” she taunted, her honey-smooth voice deepening several degrees.

“You think so, do you?”

He jumped onto the bed and unhooked the front snap of her bra. With a tug on the straps, the black lace slipped easily away. Holding his breath, he reached out and cupped her tight breasts in the palms of his hands.

“Hmmm...I need a plan of action. Of course your jeans, though doing a lovely job of shaping your ass, will have to go.” He couldn’t decide what part of her he liked best. Usually, with a woman, he’d find a favorite part--like her breasts or her pussy. He ran a

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finger down her well-defined abs, enjoying the warm glow that followed in his wake.

"And--" He dipped his head and sucked vigorously on one breast and then the other. She arched her back and moaned as her nipples turned to hard nubs in his mouth. "--you'll scream for me."

She nodded eagerly. "Oh yes, I'll scream."

"Yesss..." she whispered as he flicked his tongue over her dark, swollen nipple. Her sable-black hair cascaded down her back.

He lifted her hips off the bed, peeled off her jeans and her silky black panties. Like a monk settling in for a long prayer, he went down on his knees between her legs and placed a gentle kiss on the soft skin of her inner thigh.

"There's no way around it," he said, knowing his voice and hot breath were teasing the dark curls guarding her pussy. Her breath grew quicker, shorter. "I'm going to have to take you with my mouth. I'll suck on you and let my tongue do all sorts of delicious things, like swirl deep inside you."

"Ohhh..." Her eyes rolled heavenward as she fell back on to the nest of pillows he'd made at her head.

He lifted his gaze. "I expect you'll have at least a dozen orgasms. You will soon discover that even in the real world, I'm simply that good."

She froze.

Instead of purring or squirming with pleasure, she froze so tightly she'd stopped breathing.

Dammit. What had he said? He traced back the last couple of things to have crossed his lips. He had mentioned how he wanted to take her in his mouth. She'd practically licked her lips at that. And then--he mentally slapped himself on the forehead--he'd said how he expected her to have a dozen or more orgasms before they were done.

What a boatload of pressure to perform he'd put on her with that carelessly worded vow.

"I mean..." He paused, uncertain of the right words to say in order to paint a picture of safety and promised bliss. "I will be doing all the work. All you have to do is enjoy yourself and the feel of me in you."

* * *

"I-I've never..." It cost her dearly to admit the truth.

He waited for her to finish. She couldn't say *it* out loud, not and hold on to her

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dignity. Their gazes met. She tried to read what he was thinking. Surely, he was disappointed. Perhaps he was having second thoughts. She was deficient.

He deserved a woman who could appreciate his many talents, not one who couldn't...well...just, couldn't enjoy him.

While his eyes were filled with warmth, his chin had grown more determined. "You will tonight," he promised.

She doubted that. What they'd done in her dream world was all well and good, but that couldn't change her from freezing up when it came to performing for a man. *Any man*. Not even her dream lover could change that. But, she wasn't going to argue. Over the years she had become very good at faking it.

"I mean it, tender one." His velvety, deep voice caressed that sensitive spot between her legs. "You will come for me."

She swallowed deeply. Every part of her being wanted to believe him.

Don't open yourself up to disappointment, a slippery voice inside her head warned. The chill from that afternoon crept inside her belly and cooled her courage.

"No," she whispered. A fat tear rolled down her cheek. "I can't. I'm sorry...I can't."

"Can't?"

She so didn't want to do this. She mumbled an apology and, after swiping at her unruly tears, started gathering up her clothes.

He caught her hands. "I understand," he said. "We know from last night that your mind can perform beautifully. What I'm worried about is your body." He gave her a quick kiss. "Have you ever experienced an orgasm when you were awake and a man wasn't around?"

Good God, did he really expect her to answer *that*? She pulled away from him and buried herself under the bed covers.

He crawled under after her and propped his chin on his folded hands. They stared at each other in the darkness. He held his silence, waiting for her.

Not willing to trust her voice to do the deed, she nodded once. Slowly. Yes, she had brought herself to orgasm.

A broad cat-ate-the-canary smile spread across his lips.

"I glad," he said.

She wanted to feel embarrassed, but he seemed so pleased that she couldn't help

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but share in his pleasure. He kissed the back of her hand and then traced the length of her finger with his tongue.

"Has a man ever forced you to have sex with him?" he whispered.

The question shocked her. She didn't know how to answer him. It wasn't that she enjoyed lying, but when it came to intimate encounters with men, she was careful to say whatever her partner wanted to hear. If he wanted her to play the part of a wounded dove, she would.

But what if that wasn't what he wanted?

He rescued her with his explanation, "What I want to do with you won't work if anyone has ever forced himself on you."

She shook her head. "I've always been in control."

"Then perhaps that is the problem, tender one. You haven't given yourself the freedom to simply enjoy." He paused and she could hear her heart thudding against her chest. "Give yourself over to me. Let me be your master and I'll give you the world."

Though it terrified her to give herself over to a man so completely, she found herself nodding. Her body craved him and was willing to do anything...including forfeiting her control...to feel the length of him swell inside her.

"Your power is strong," he said between feather-light kisses that both tickled and excited. "But I have more experience. You will not be disappointed."

He pulled her out from under the covers and made her hold her hands above her head. With her help, he tied a velvet cord around her wrists. Not tight, but secure enough that no matter how much she twisted or turned she wouldn't be able to slip free. He gave the soft rope a tug.

"I need you to come higher on the bed," he said.

She arched her back and turned her head so she could see why. A lump formed in her throat as she watched him tie the rope to the center iron post on the headboard.

"I-I'm not..."

He pressed his lips to hers. Liquid heat swirled around them. It licked at the moist place between her legs. She liked that and instinctive spreading her legs.

"You're not what?" he asked.

She was descending deeper and deeper into the dark world of his control. But if he could kiss her with such fierceness, certainly the pleasure he could give her was going to be worth the price.

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He kissed her again, sending her thoughts skittering into the background. She pulled at the ropes holding her hands, wanting to touch him and feel the broad muscles tightening his chest.

“One more thing.” A black satin sash appeared like magic in his hand. Her breath caught in her throat.

“Trust me,” he whispered and lowered the blindfold over her eyes. He tied it snug enough that it blocked all light. A vast sense of nothingness engulfed her world.

“Breathe,” he whispered. “I will never hurt you.”

She nodded into the nothingness. Her eyes strained in her new, bleak black world. They were desperate to see his expression and even more desperate to try and guess what he was thinking...about her. And her performance.

“You are alone with only my voice and what you feel as your guides,” he whispered against her ear. “There are no boundaries in my bed. No right or wrong. Only pleasure.” He curled his fingers around one ankle and nudged until her legs were set wide apart.

“Your pleasure.” His hot breath stirred the soft curls between her legs. “Not so much different than the dream we shared last night?”

She found herself nodding in agreement, mostly because she was afraid that if she didn’t he would leave her to languish like this, unfulfilled and aching.

He demanded that she take several deep breaths. She hadn’t realized how close she’d come to hyperventilating. While he nibbled on her lips, her ear, her neck, gentle thoughts whispered promises in her head. While her body tightened with anticipation, her mind started to relax.

In the nothingness surrounding her, she felt adrift as if floating in a tub of water. He caressed her in the same way he would a cherished pet. Feelings of affection grew hot and damp between her legs. She pulled at the ropes binding her, desperate to guide his movements, but he stopped her.

His hot kisses clung to her breasts. He slipped his middle finger into her mouth and told her to suckle him. While she was licking and nipping his wiggly finger, he twisted and pinched her nipples until they each became as hard as pebbles. The sensation only added to the zinging electricity sending ripples spreading out in the sea of warmth gathering around her.

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She was his for the taking. And he took advantage of her willingness, directing her every thought and movement. Dallas mindlessly obeyed.

Her head spun in the heat, but she followed his directions carefully. Moving her tongue slowly down the length of the finger he had put in her mouth while imagining that she was taking his cock.

Slowly, he eased his finger from her lips and following her contours, trailed a path until it reached the supple spot between her legs. She breathed deeply as his hot, damp finger kneaded and stroked her soft folds.

New territory for her, she was surprised how easily her body responded to his commands. Her body tensed and tingled under his touch. He slid a finger into her. Her legs weakened. Her body involuntarily responded. His pushed a second finger in, and then a third, gently pumping. She pushed against his hand. Her breathing shortened...again she began to pant in anticipation.

The rasp of his zipper seemed to echo through the room. Her ears strained in the silence as she listened to the rustle of material as he removed his pants.

"You can stop at any time. Right now, for instance," he said.

She swallowed down a lump and shook her head. She wanted this. If he could give her even a whisper of what she had felt last night, she wanted it. This was why she'd searched the streets all day. She needed his flesh as desperately as she needed to breathe. It didn't make any sense. He was a stranger. A handsome, skilled stranger who held her power in the palm of his magical hands. If he stopped now, she'd be crushed.

"Please...do it." She barely heard herself say over the loud whoosh of blood pushing through her veins.

"That's my brave girl." He feathered a kiss over her lips.

His cock brushed up against her opening. It was hot, searing, like flesh on fire. Though scorching, it didn't burn her tender places. Instead, the feel of his cock made her ache for him and beg for completion. She whimpered.

He rubbed himself against her wetness until he slid easily against her slit. Slowly he pushed into her. His moist tip was thick and full. And so was his shaft.

Inch by inch, she took more and more of him. He filled her and pushed deeper. Just when she thought he'd sunk himself to his hilt, he pushed himself even deeper, stretching her.

Slowly, he moved. She heard the hitch of his breath. He muttered a curse and

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increased his pace. She matched his movements, raising her hips to greet his entry. Faster. Deeper. Fuller. His cock became her whole world.

It pounded into her slick, warm body.

“Come for me,” he commanded and she felt compelled to obey.

Her clit pulsed with every brush his cock made against it as he pulled in and out of her body. The building pressure inside her begged for relief.

Never with a man. Never like this. She was giving too much of herself, which wasn't safe. She couldn't do it.

But he was relentless.

Her body grew tighter.

No.

He reached down. The pad of his thumb rubbed against her clit. With her hands tied above her head she couldn't stop him. She couldn't get away. Her hips betrayed her and pressed up, while a long-silent piece of her was screaming to take him deeper. And she felt him moving inside her. On the outside she was hot, wet and ready. But her fears still lurked deep in the shadows of her mind.

No!

Please! She stared into the darkness and felt...simply felt. It came all at once. Her entire body shuddered. Wave after wave of energy washed over her as the orgasm she'd fought from coming forced its way through her entire body. Her breathing was heavier and so was her body. She drifted smoothly through the nothingness surrounding her.

Her clit was still pulsing when he pulled out of her. She heard the rustle of sheets. While struggling for a calm breath, she couldn't help but wonder when he might suggest they try that again.

Without warning, a rough tongue raked over her sensitive clit. Her hips shot off the bed.

“Shhh...” His hot breath against her sex calmed her. “That was simply your first one. We have at least eleven more to go before I'm good and done with you tonight.”

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Chapter Four

"I'm worried about Brendan." Horace had taken time off from the nightclub to visit Frank Stone at The Oblique Café. "He hasn't returned any of my phone calls."

Stone, who looked older than his thirty-eight years, gave the woman who was sharing his table a pat on the hand. She smiled and, after gathering up her things, quietly left.

There were few secrets among *the Protectors*, but there were a few instances when Stone decided to keep matters private. It appeared that this was going to be one of those times.

"Sit down," he said to Horace. He then gave a nod to Jake, the café owner. Within a minute, a cup of fresh coffee was placed in front of both men. "Tell me what exactly has you worried."

Stone was calmly sipping on his coffee. Horace couldn't fathom how Stone could act as if there was nothing wrong when one of their best and brightest was in mortal danger. He sure as hell couldn't.

"He's obsessed, Stone. All you have to do is see how he nearly drowned himself trying to find her."

"But he found her in the flesh after all," Stone pointed out. "He called me the other day and told me that he was giving her time to get accustomed to the idea of being...um...different."

"No, I don't buy it." Horace slashed his hand through the air. "He's obsessed. There's something else going on here. I can feel it like an ache in my bones."

"He's a Pisces and she's powerful and beautiful," Stone said as if that was enough to explain Brendan's long absence. It wasn't. Stone must have read Horace's blank look, for he added, "Pisces are unaccountably attracted to powerful women. As a being strongly controlled by the stars, I'm sure he's wanting to control and keep all that power and beauty for himself."

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“You mean he’s holed up in his apartment fucking her brains out?”

Stone shrugged. “Probably.”

“He’s likely to get lost in the fantasy he has weaving around this new piece of ass who also happens to have a direct connection to the powers of the universe. He wears his heart on his sleeve, you know. Damn, and he’s ultra-sensitive to the emotions of others.”

“That’s the Pisces in him.”

“Damn right, Stone. Pisces are drawn to their fantasies. And what will happen if he gets caught up in this fantasy and inadvertently hurts her?”

“She’s strong enough to hold her own,” Stone said, though he didn’t sound too convinced of that himself. He furrowed his brows, but seemed to wave whatever was bothering him away. “I’m sure Brendan can handle whatever fate throws at him. After all, he lived through hell growing up and is still in one piece.”

“We all had horrible childhoods,” Horace grumbled.

“Brendan’s was worse,” Stone said. “Damien had tried to trick fate and give him something better. Unlike the rest of us, he found Brendan as a newborn. What luck, right? We could train one of our own from infancy. And even more importantly, Damien had planned to give him the kind of childhood all of us wished we’d had. He planned to raise Brendan like a son.”

Stone closed his eyes. A rare show of raw emotion tightened his brows. “Damien would have taken the baby into his home, but there was an upheaval with the council at the time. He was worried that the opposing forces might try and take Brendan and use him as a pawn in their battle for power. With only a few moments to decide, he left Brendan with Lady Czarina, a mystic who knew about us and had vowed her friendship and cooperation.

“She promised to take good care of the baby. Several years passed before Damien could safely come back for the boy. By that time, Brendan was gone.

“She had sold him. He couldn’t have been much more than three years old at the time, but Brendan remembered. Everything changed that day. His name. His home. His life. He went from sleeping on a cot above Lady Czarina’s shop to shivering in a pile of straw out in a barn three states away.

“It wasn’t until twenty years later that Damien finally tracked him down and rescued him. He found Brendan living with the working dogs in a barn. He was half-starved, naked and horribly abused. The owners of the farm had cruelly worked Brendan

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like a beast in the fields all day and then when he returned to the barn, exhausted and starving--well, you don't want to know what tortures and humiliations they made him endure at night in order to earn a few morsels of dog food."

"God." Horace had no idea. "None of us like to talk about the past, so I didn't even think twice when Brendan shied away from any mention of his childhood."

"I'm not telling you this so you can pity him," Stone said sharply. "Be his friend, Horace. Support him, but don't push. Like fate, he will only push back and make everything worse."

"Okay, I get what you're saying. But...but...I don't think you see what I'm seeing. He's heading straight toward destruction. You and I both know that he's vulnerable when he gets obsessive. What will happen to his sanity if he loses control of the situation, or worse, loses her to *the darkness*? There's a good chance of that happening, you know. For his own good, Stone, you need to get him away from her."

"Fate wants Brendan and Dallas to be together. I'm sure as hell not going to tamper with fate...not when Brendan's involved."

"Even if it destroys him?"

Stone's strange silver eyes turned hard and cold. "I will not interfere with what fate has set in motion."

* * *

Brendan brushed his fingers over Dallas's exposed nipple. She sighed in her sleep. Her wrists were tied with that lovely red velvet cording and bound to the bedpost above her head.

Not that he always made love with her helpless underneath him. He'd taken her against the tile wall in the shower as the steaming water poured over them. And then in the kitchen, he had hoisted her so she was leaning naked over the cool countertop with legs dangling, her toes not quite able to reach the ground and her perfect ass exposed to him. He'd enjoyed watching her shiver from the chill of the smooth stone and then from delight as he rammed into her. She came almost instantly, bucking and wiggling against him like a madwoman. Afterwards, she'd blushed from head to toe. Even her ass cheeks had turned rosy.

He couldn't think of one place in his apartment that hadn't seen some action. His kitchen chairs. The sofa. The table. The recliner. And, heaven help him, the coat closet where she had locked the door and gone down on her knees and taken him in her mouth

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and violently sucked until he was screaming with pleasure. And even then she didn't let up. She'd wrapped her legs around him and impaled herself on his still rock-hard cock and rode him as if she needed his seed in order to survive.

No, he didn't always take her with her hands tied above her head.

But he liked her that way, bound and vulnerable. Even in her sleep, he could feel her incredible power surging through her veins and tingling across her glistening tan skin. She had to be the strongest one among them. And she belonged to him.

His for the taking.

He couldn't imagine ever letting her go.

* * *

"You're not going anywhere," Brendan said. He grabbed Dallas's arm and gave her a tug back toward his apartment door.

"Excuse me?" Dallas couldn't understand what had gotten into him. Up until now everything had been perfect.

Something had changed that morning. But what?

Brendan was being unreasonable, and it made her itch to shout at him. A dangerous gleam in his eyes kept her from telling him exactly how unreasonable she thought he was acting.

"Explain it to me. Why don't you want me to go to my apartment?" she asked. "I simply want to pick up a few things. Like clothes."

The air in the apartment hallway grew almost too heavy to breathe as he pressed his will against hers.

"No." His voice was barely above a whisper. And cold. Frighteningly cold. "Everything you need, I can provide." He motioned toward his apartment door. "Come back inside."

"And if I refuse?"

His grip tightened on her arm.

"I'm not your prisoner, Brendan."

"No, not a prisoner, but you belong--" He ground to a halt and growled before sputtering, "You belong *with* me, dammit."

You belong to me, she suspected was what he'd barely stopped himself from spouting. What utter nonsense. She didn't need or want a jealous, possessive lover.

A door a few apartments down opened and an elderly lady stepped out. She

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stopped cold when her gaze landed on Dallas and Brendan. Though Dallas was fully dressed, Brendan had rushed out the door wearing merely a pair of navy blue silk boxers.

The lady's gaze latched onto the heavy package between his legs nicely outlined by his silk boxers. Her eyes widened.

His voice grew softer and more guarded. And more demanding. "You will do as I say, Dallas. Come back inside."

"Why should I? I don't think I want to be around you right now." That was a lie.

She had thought sleeping with Brendan would cure her of the feverish lust she felt for him. It hadn't worked. Being with him, touching him, making love to him, had only made her ache for him all the more wildly. Even now, despite being so angry with him she wanted to scream, her clit was tightening and her panties had suddenly turned damp.

While *she* might not crave a possessive relationship, it seemed her body did.

"Do you need some help, dear?" the lady asked. She took a step toward them.

"Help?" Dallas rolled her eyes to the ceiling and swallowed down a nervous giggle.

Though she had spent the past several days in his bed, Brendan was still very much a stranger. What was she doing getting her emotions and desires all tangled up with a stranger? And who was he to dictate to her? She'd depended on herself all her life. She had no plans to change that now.

"What do you think, Brendan? Do I need outside help, or do you think that perhaps I might be strong enough to take care of myself?"

Another door down the hall opened.

His fingers released her arm and his hand fell limp at his side. Pain flashed across his face. "Please don't do this here, in front of everyone." He closed his eyes. His voice dropped to a whisper. "*I beg you.*"

His raw plea touched her in places that hadn't seen the light of day in over a decade. It broke through a dam that had held back years of disappointments, regrets and frustrations. Tears filled her eyes.

"I'm okay, ma'am," Dallas said. She blinked away the flood of feelings she wasn't ready to face and flashed Brendan's neighbor a bright smile. "We were just having a...um...discussion. Nothing to worry about, I assure you."

"Well, don't give in to him. Not one inch." The lady shook her head and then wagged her finger in Brendan's direction. "If he's anything like my Chester, he'll use

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whatever weapons he has available to get his way. I'm off to buy some eggs, because Chester wants an omelet." She clucked her tongue. "It never ends, dear. Ah, but I love him and like him to think he's got control every once and a while. So, if he wants an omelet, every now and again I'll break down and make him one."

"That's sweet of you, Mrs.--"

"Thanes," Brendan supplied. His voice was low, tight.

"Mrs. Thanes," Dallas said, her smile blazing, though inside she was a tangle of confusion over Brendan's odd mood. "I'll be sure to remember your advice."

* * *

Brendan slumped on the sofa and stared straight ahead. Dallas had followed him back inside. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it, her hand still on the knob.

"I have trouble with public scenes," he said. He sounded defeated. Beaten down. Everything about him felt so very different from the strong, confident Brendan who had taught her the fine art of the multiple orgasm.

"The people who raised me took pleasure in humiliating me in front of others." His muscles were taut and he was hunching in on himself as if trying to guard against a blow. "The more strangers they could get to watch--" He swallowed hard. "--and participate, the more they enjoyed my mortification, suffering and shame."

She fought the urge to say something to fill the silence. His anguish weighed down the air in the room. It hurt her chest to breathe. More than anything else, she wanted to make things better for him. But he was remembering the past, and there was nothing she could do to help him.

"I was their pet." His voice was flat. Hollow. "A thing. My emotions weren't important. My pain irrelevant."

He blinked up at her. "I've never told anyone." His cheeks darkened and he quickly looked away. "I had promised myself I'd never speak a word about what they did to me, how they tormented me to the brink of madness."

She crossed the room and went down on her knees in front of him. Thinking only of him and his needs, she took his hands in hers and after uncurling his fingers from the tight fists they'd formed, kissed his scarred and beautiful knuckles, each one in turn.

"I'm honored that you trusted this story with me," she said. He tried to pull away. But she held on to his hands with all her strength. "No, please don't shut me out."

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Though she could fight him physically and keep hold of his hands, she felt him slipping back behind his sarcastic, slightly crooked grin and self-deprecating shrug.

"You have one sick puppy on your hands, Dallas," he said with a laugh. "Damaged goods. A cracked--"

She kissed him. This was one argument she didn't plan to lose. She planned to kiss away his pain, to use her hands to soothe away his hurts.

He jerked back, fighting her until she lightly flicked her pink tongue over his sealed mouth. He growled and loosened his lips just enough for her to deepen her kiss.

At first it seemed as if he was surrendering to her and the passion she was offering. Soon, his movements turned more demanding. He wasn't surrendering at all. With a frantic edge to his movements, he ripped off her sweater, tearing a seam.

He reached down the back of her jeans with one hand while stroking her through the front of her jeans with the other. Her body ignited for him. She whimpered and tossed her head back. His lips closed over her suddenly tight breast.

Her world spun. She eased his boxers down his hips and then tore off her own clothes as she fought to get closer to him. More than physical need drove her. She ached to soothe the injured soul who had suffered those unspeakable indignities. She wanted him to know that he mattered. *To her, he mattered.*

Without asking her permission, he tied a velvet cord around her wrists, and tossing her to the floor he took the long dangling end of the cord and tethered her to the coffee table leg. The velvet tightly bound her hands together. It made her fingers tingle. She didn't complain. The pain etched in his expression was reason enough to let him have this moment. To take, without having to worry about what it might cost him.

In that, she realized, they were the same. While she hadn't been able to enjoy a man's body because she'd been too afraid of being hurt, Brendan had kept himself from enjoying a woman's love for the very same reason. Even when they were making love, he was giving everything and accepting very little.

They were a pair of broken hearts. Neither of them had been willing to take the risk.

This afternoon would be different. For him, she would risk everything. She was going to give herself and her heart to him unconditionally. She prayed it would be enough.

He spread her legs and pushed his long, thick cock into her until he was buried

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deep inside. No man had ever filled her so completely. Every time he entered her, his size surprised and thrilled her.

For several stuttering heartbeats, he remained absolutely still, staring into her eyes. His deep brown gaze touched her in ways she had never been touched before. His eyes spoke to her in a way she knew he would never be able to bring himself to say in words. It was as if he was still pleading with her. Begging her to listen to him...to value him.

“Yes, baby,” she whispered. “I desperately need you, too.”

His cock stirred inside her. She moaned with pleasure and angled her hips so she could take more of him.

His movements grew more frantic. He pumped into her. His hunger for her was overwhelming. She could taste his need as he made love to her not only with his cock but also with his tongue thrusting into her mouth. She was being filled on both ends. His hands roamed her body. His questing fingers knew the landscape. He lingered on spots that made her stomach quiver and teased her by avoiding her swollen clit until she was close to sobbing for release.

Only then did he touch her. She nearly shot off the floor, her cunt throbbing from the first of many orgasms. Over and over, he teased her. Keeping her aroused lips between her thighs hard, thick, and slick. It was almost as if he was using some sort of spell to keep her hovering at the edge of bliss, throbbing, screaming, and never letting her fully take the plunge. He wasn't exactly human. And neither was she.

They hadn't discussed that part of their existence beyond his short explanation her first day at his apartment. She wasn't sure what powers he possessed. The ability to torture her sexually was certainly a possibility.

She screamed as her soft nether lips pulsed and her womb throbbed as another orgasm filled her body and spilled out over the both of them. In that exhausted state of hanging on to the edge, unable to achieve bliss, she saw into his fractured soul. And she knew with crystal clarity that they belonged together. Though he was broken and scarred, there was nothing in him she needed to fear. They were two halves that would create a beautiful whole. He had the strength she lacked and she had the power to give him what they both desperately needed.

Their bodies glistened with sweat. Still, he pounded into her. She wanted him. Needed him. She hooked her legs over his shoulders to give him full access as her body

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continued to demand more and more. She nearly shouted for him to stop. This total lack of control was terrifying.

She was about to explode from the building excitement and pressure between her legs.

When she closed her eyes, she caught glimpses of the blue-tinted watery dream world where they had first made love. With every quivering breath, she could smell the clean, aqua scent of that magical place. From his expression of rapt contentment, Dallas suspected Brendan was experiencing the same vision.

With a shout, he finally let down his walls. His throbbing release shuddered through her. Searing liquid heat filled her womb. The fiery sensation triggered an orgasm of her own. When it started it felt like the floodgates had broken. Every stale emotion gushed out. He rolled her over onto her belly and, entering her from behind, he pressed his wet cock in her, milking her orgasm for every shivering, jolting movement. Her body felt as if it no longer belonged to her. Every breath, every movement was for him. Only him.

I love him.

Tears spilled down her cheeks as his taut muscles eased. He relaxed, pressing himself against the whole length of her and for one glimmering moment she felt as if they had truly become one. Whole. Sane.

She wanted that wonderful feeling of oneness to last forever. But while she struggled to slow her breath, he carefully pulled out of her. Confusion clouded his eyes. He pressed a quick, awkward kiss to her lips and then collapsed on the floor next to her.

Lord help me, she thought, her heart aching in her chest. *I love him.*

* * *

Brendan stirred. His body was stiff and sore and not at all satisfied. It hadn't been sex or love that afternoon. He'd fucked Dallas with every ounce of strength he had in his body. She'd cried out and he'd fucked her some more.

It had been amazing. She'd denied him nothing. But it hadn't been lovemaking. It had simply been a one-way fuck. No, that wasn't quite right, either. Something had happened between them. Something he didn't understand.

His stomach churned. He'd probably just ruined the best thing to ever happen in his life.

"Forgive me," he said, drowsily, "for everything. If you'd like, I'll drive you to

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your apartment.”

Silence answered his peace offering.

She had every right in the world to be pouting.

“You want to go alone.” He understood that. “You don’t need me hovering over you every moment of the day. You’ve done a fine job of taking care of yourself. You’re strong. That’s what I like about you, you know. I’ll call a cab. You go alone. Come back when you want. Okay?”

More silence.

Brendan inhaled slowly.

“Dallas?”

Nothing.

Damn.

He pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes. There was no need to look. The velvet cords would be empty. And the hastily strewn clothes would no longer be marking a path from the sofa to the floor.

She was gone. She’d left him because he hadn’t given her reason enough to stay. Damn. He was every inch a bastard.

* * *

The darkness flared to life. The one who had been shielded from it for so many starving years was vulnerable. Black tentacles reached out, drawn to his swirling emotions. It instinctively knew it was time to act. Their powers were now inexorably linked. To take one, the other would fall.

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Chapter Five

The glass door to The Oblique Café swung open and a tall, broad-shouldered man with brilliant blond hair emerged. He did a double take and then smiled at Dallas. "Good evening, New One," he said.

There was no time to return the greeting. Guilt was eating at Dallas. She owed Brendan an explanation and he wasn't at his apartment or answering his cell phone. She pushed the gentleman blocking the door aside. He stumbled and nearly fell. "I need to find him," she said, in place of an apology.

"He's not with you?" The man sounded shocked, which didn't make sense. There was no way he could know who she was talking about. He didn't even know her.

"He's not in there," the man said. An edge of panic sharpened his voice. "Has something happened to him?"

"No." Brendan appeared as if stepping out of a storm and blocked her from entering the café. A thunderous expression darkened his features. "Nothing has happened to me."

He glared accusations at her, which only fed her guilt.

"I-I wasn't running away." But she was.

He'd scared her. And not just his body or the explosive, out-of-control way a simple touch made her feel. He made her feel loved and vulnerable and that terrified her. Those feelings had terrified her even more after what had happened between them this afternoon. As impossible as it seemed, she loved him.

He crossed his arms over his chest.

"Okay, I ran away," she admitted.

"What's going on?" the blond man asked. His gaze bounced between Dallas and Brendan. "I thought you said you had won her trust and were devoting your energies on isolating *the darkness* in her."

"I...um...I..."

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“He kept me tied up in his bedroom for the past two days.”

“With your permission, tender one,” Brendan said softly. She was beginning to realize his fury made him turn inward and quiet. He had explained why he didn’t like scenes. And this encounter on the street was collecting quite a crowd.

She touched his hand.

Her light caress appeared to break his spell. He huffed a quick breath and flashed her a devastating smile. Then, without seeming to care what the world thought, he ran his fingertips across her jaw. His caresses were whispered promises that set her body on fire. It took all her concentration not to throw herself into his arms. She wanted to wrap her legs around his waist and press her throbbing sex against the rock-hard length of his cock.

“I seem to remember you begging me more than once to keep you tied up in my bed,” he said for all to hear.

A deep blush burned her cheeks and she was suddenly the one to stammer, “I...um...I...”

* * *

Brendan loved how responsive Dallas was to his touch. With her cheeks flushed and her pupils large and round, she couldn’t have hidden her desires from him even if she’d tried. And she wasn’t trying. Her nervous gaze latched on his mouth and she flicked her lovely pink tongue over her lips.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered in her ear. “It takes more than a little kinky bed play to shock Stone.”

“That’s right.” Stone thrust out his hand. “And I’m pleased to finally meet you, Dallas. We have all been anxious to learn more about these amazing powers of yours.”

Like a skittish wren, Dallas crowded herself against Brendan as if trying to burrow within the folds of his wool coat and hide. Though he suspected it was embarrassment, not fear that had her retreating from Stone, her complete trust that he would protect her warmed his heart.

“I assure you, Stone doesn’t bite.” Even so, he wrapped his arm around Dallas’s torso, enfolding her within the cocoon of his embrace. “Frank Stone is our local leader...sort of. I like to think of him as a coach or a mentor.”

“The leader of this non-human clan?” Dallas drew a quick breath. “Then you’re the one I need to complain to.”

Stone’s brows shot up. “Indeed?” Very few ever complained to Stone about

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anything. The New Ones generally stammered or simply kept their mouths shut around him.

"This not-human business is most confusing, you know." Her voice was too loud. People were beginning to look their way. It made Brendan jumpy. "You need to put together a handbook that explains precisely what being non-human means in terms of lifestyle and whatnot."

"Is that all?" Stone asked. There was an odd lilt in his voice that Brendan couldn't read.

"Illustrations would be nice, too."

Stone's brows shot up an inch higher. His gaze shifted from Dallas to Brendan. "Illustrations," he said.

Brendan caught the unspoken message. He herded Dallas toward the café. "This isn't a topic for the street, tender one."

"No, I suppose not." A fresh blush stained her cheeks. It made him want to kiss her, but that would only draw more undue attention their way.

Once they were inside the warm, safe walls of the café, Brendan helped Dallas remove her coat. He took his off too, and hung them both on a peg next to the door.

This was his home and the people sipping coffee, reading the paper and playing various card games were his family. A strange glimmer of pride swelled in his chest at the thought of introducing Dallas to them.

"Welcome to The Oblique Café, where the coffee is strong and the patrons are mostly odd," he said.

"Not just odd. We're not human," Kara, who was seated toward the back of the long, narrow café, shouted. "That makes us damned odd." The group sitting at her table roared with laughter, which only sparked more comments about their non-human abilities and a few off-color jokes.

Dallas flitted a nervous glance toward the door. "Shouldn't they be more careful? This isn't a private club. What if someone wandered in off the street and overheard their somewhat...um...weird conversation."

"No, it's not a private club," Stone answered. He tossed his coat onto a peg as he walked past. "But we are the only ones who can find that door. Humans and the New Ones who aren't yet ready to listen to the truth see a blank wall instead of a door. So don't worry. We're safe in here."

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“It’s a pity, too,” Jake, the café, owner who was standing behind the counter, complained. He was wearing his regular worn sweatshirt that had the café name, The Oblique, printed across the chest. “These deadbeats hang out for hours on end and hardly ever order anything. It’s enough to drive an honest businessman bankrupt.”

“Then it’s a good thing you’re not honest, Jake,” Horace said. He flashed Dallas a toothy grin. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, dove. I’m Horace, by the way. I’m sure Brendan hasn’t mentioned me, even though he should have. I watch over his reckless hide like I would a brother.”

Before Brendan realized Horace’s intentions, his friend had swept Dallas from his side and twirled her until she stopped in the middle of the café. She blinked her large, green eyes. Everyone was watching her and it was obviously making her uncomfortable. She shivered like a delicate songbird on display at the market.

“We’re all thrilled to meet you,” Jake said and handed her a piping cup of hot chocolate, the drink he served to all the New Ones. “It’s rare for anyone, even the most seasoned of us--” He stroked his gray goatee “--to surprise Stone. But he didn’t know you existed. You simply popped up out of nowhere, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know about that,” Dallas argued in what must have been her well-practiced courtroom voice. “I’ve been in the city since--”

“He’s teasing me, not you,” Stone grumbled. “Come, sit down. We have a lot to talk about.”

Stone took her arm, but Dallas hesitated. She glanced back at Brendan. Though he wanted to keep her by his side, he gave her a nod and followed a few steps behind.

The beautiful Kara, a slender brunette with short bouncy hair, appeared at his side. She wrapped her arm around his. This clingy behavior of hers had started several weeks ago. He didn’t understand what she was trying to accomplish. They’d always been friends. Nothing more.

“Welcome back to the living,” she purred and pressed herself against him. “We missed you, Fish.”

He flinched at her use of that name.

“You’re looking healthy,” she said, her hot breath teasing his ear.

“Thank you,” he answered, somewhat absently.

His gaze was locked on Dallas. She needed his support. He didn’t have time for sex games or chitchat with anyone. Not even with Kara.

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"Come now." Kara wrinkled her nose. "You can't be interested in that skinny bitch."

"Excuse me?"

"I mean, look at her. Don't you think she looks rather...dim-witted?"

Brendan drew his arm from hers. "No, I don't. And she's not."

He joined Stone and Dallas at the back of the café. They were sitting around one of the metal café tables. Horace had joined them, too, and Jake was hovering in the background like a nervous bee.

Kara followed on Brendan's heels.

"Now that she's part of the team, you won't be responsible for her anymore," she said. "That should be a relief."

Dallas's head shot up with a look of dismay.

"Shut up, Kara," Brendan snapped.

"We need to focus," Stone said.

A queer expression darkened Dallas's features as she watched everyone. She started to chew her bottom lip. It was impossible not to imagine kissing those lips of hers until they were bright red and swollen with desire.

"Sit down, Brendan," Stone said. "The council wants to meet with Dallas. We're discussing how we can make sure she's ready for them. I'm thinking Horace should start training her to--"

"Now see here." Dallas shot out from her chair and planted her slender fists on her hips. It was a glorious sight. "I'm not going to let anyone dictate my future. I've been doing just fine on my own up until now. Why should I change?"

"I'm not dictating anything," Stone said. His tone as hard as the brick café walls. "These are your options. Going back to your old life isn't one of them."

"Bullshit," Dallas said. "Despite your friendly smiles and so-called options, you are demanding I do what you want or suffer the consequences."

The café fell silent.

"She still infected with *the darkness*?" Horace asked Brendan quietly.

Brendan nodded. The air was suddenly laced with tension.

Stone clasped his hands in his lap and sighed. "The consequences you would suffer aren't of my making," he said.

Brendan's innocent little songbird snarled. He felt an electric buzz on his skin as

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her power surged. “Don’t threaten me, Mr. Stone. I don’t need you--” her gaze landed on Brendan for a heartbeat “or anyone to watch over me. I’m not a child. I don’t need to be coddled, protected, or told what to do.”

“We need to stop letting the New Ones go to law school. It makes them too argumentative,” Kara said with a laugh.

“Stop talking about me as if I were too stupid to understand what you’re saying!” Dallas roared. She backed herself toward the door. Her skittish gaze kept darting toward the shrinking space between her and the door. “I’m not stupid. And I understand you only too well. All of you, you’re no different from the rest of the world. I don’t need you! I don’t need anybody!”

Brendan eased toward her, prepared to chase after her.

Stone cleared his throat. “Dallas.” Brendan nearly choked on the overwhelming power Stone had pressed into her name. “You are tired, aren’t you? You would like to take a nap in the bed upstairs, wouldn’t you?”

Though Brendan shouldn’t have been alarmed, Stone would cut off his own hand before see any one of them come to harm, he rushed to Dallas’s side when the fire in her eyes dimmed. Her shoulders dropped in defeat.

“Yes,” she said, with no expression and no inflection. “I’m tired. I would be glad to be able to lie down for a while.”

Those thoughts weren’t hers. They were Stone’s. If left under her own power, she would have run. Perhaps it would have been better if she had escaped. He’d go with her. They would find a place where the world would simply leave them both alone and he could spend his days feasting on her incredible body and amazing powers.

“We don’t have time to waste,” Stone said. “Jake, please show Dallas to the upstairs loft so she can get some rest. Brendan, sit down. You are the closest to her, and you know better than the rest of us that I’m right. Now that she’s coming into her powers, we need to get *the darkness* infecting her under control before it consumes her.”

Brendan’s jaw grew tighter and tighter as he watched Jake lead Dallas away. This wasn’t right. He should have never brought her to Stone. The council was notorious for craving after the powerful New Ones. If he wasn’t careful, Dallas could be ripped from his life forever.

For the moment, he couldn’t do anything. Stone was in charge, and he respected him too much to openly disobey him. Tamping down the gut instinct to toss Dallas over

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his shoulder and carry her off to his lair, he sank into a chair at Stone's table and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Now, what do we do first?" Stone asked those sitting at the table with him.

"You stop playing with her free-will," Brendan grumbled. "And we make sure she stays with me and under my control."

* * *

Dallas watched them from the stairs. They were arguing about something. Her future, she supposed. A lump of dread formed in her throat. What if what Kara had said was true and that Brendan's duty to her was over? And Frank Stone had mentioned something about this council of theirs being interested in her powers.

She didn't have useful powers, at least none that she knew how to control. Even if she did, how did she know if she wanted to share them with this motley group? They were strangers to her. Brendan included. Though she had gotten to know him quite intimately these past three days, she didn't really know enough about him to start making the kind of long-term plans they seemed to be expecting from her.

Flames flared in her chest. That Kara woman was touching Brendan's arm. The bitch had maneuvered herself until her chair pressed against his. He hadn't objected to either her touching or her closeness.

Kara and Brendan were probably lovers. He had admitted that he'd done what was required to win Dallas's trust. Playing besotted lover may have simply fallen under the umbrella of doing-what-was-required.

This was precisely why she should have never let her emotions get away from her. Dallas ground her teeth and, when no one was looking, slipped out the back way.

She didn't need this. She didn't need *them*. Hell, she didn't need anybody.

* * *

"What am I doing here?" Brendan glanced around, confusion clouding his head. A moment ago he was in The Oblique Café, trying to figure out a way to keep Dallas with him...permanently. How in the hell did he land in his world, naked and vulnerable?

"I wanted to see you." Dallas stepped out from behind the waterfall. A wicked gleam sparked in her green eyes.

He stumbled backwards and nearly fell into the reflecting pool. "You-you can't be here. This is my realm. My world."

"Our world," she corrected. Fire flashed all around her. "And this time, I'm taking

control.”

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Chapter Six

"Hey!" Brendan had zoned out again. Horace waved his hand in front of his friend's blank face. "You in there?"

He had a hunch Brendan's thoughts were straying to that vixen, Dallas. If they were going to have any hope of figuring out how to help her, Brendan needed to stay focused.

"Come on, Fish. Snap out of it." He gave Brendan a punch in the arm.

Nothing.

Shit.

"Stone!" he called.

The light in Brendan's eyes flickered out like a dying candle. Horace caught his shoulders just as Brendan's legs collapsed underneath him. He carefully lowered his friend to the floor.

"Is he breathing?" Stone, who'd rushed over from the other side of the café asked.

"Barely," Horace said after searching and finding only the faintest signs of life. He placed his hand on Brendan's chest and could feel the cold fingers of death creeping into his friend's body. Shit. Shit. Double shit.

"He's dying." He prayed Stone knew a way to stop it.

Stone shook his head. "He's not in there."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Someone has taken his soul." A collective gasp rose in the café. This was their most heinous and feared crime. Whispers rose around them. Several were saying that this was impossible. Stealing souls was more of a myth than reality. It simply didn't happen--at least not to anyone they knew.

"Dallas." There was no doubt in Horace's mind. She was powerful and unpredictable...and drawn to Brendan as strongly as Brendan was drawn to her. Whether she meant to cause harm or not, Horace was convinced that she'd taken him.

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He stared in horror at his best friend's soulless body. Stone barked orders. Brendan needed to be put on life support. Dallas had to be found. Activity buzzed all around.

It didn't matter, Horace thought glumly. Stealing a soul wielded an automatic death sentence. Once they found Dallas, she would be punished. Killed. Which meant that whether they saved Brendan or not, he'd be lost to them.

Losing Dallas would destroy Brendan. Like others before him, he would withdraw from the world and eventually fade away to nothingness.

* * *

Dressed in a black leather cat suit with spiked boots that reach up to her thighs, Dallas crawled on her hands and knees toward him. There was nothing submissive about her feline posture. It was all about sex and power.

Like she'd said, she was taking control. Brendan could feel her power surging all around him. His heart started pounding against his chest. She crawled closer. Her pursed red, glossy lips led the way.

He could almost hear her unspoken intentions. She meant to take him in her mouth. The minx, he could already feel her raspy tongue running along the length of his cock. His cock sprang to life and was standing at attention like a damned eager puppy.

"No. Stay away from me," he said, though it pained him to deny himself the pleasures he knew she could give him. "What you're doing is wrong. Bringing me here like this is against the rules."

"But..." She bit her lovely, plump bottom lip. It made Brendan's head spin. "Didn't you...?"

"That was different." He shook his head, trying to break away from the web of lust she was weaving around him, which was impossible since she was rubbing herself against his legs like a succulent pussycat. "I...I...was...trying to...damn."

She cupped his balls and took his cock in her mouth. And swallowed him down to the hilt. His legs nearly collapsed under him.

"Please." He grabbed her long, dark hair with both hands and peeled her lips from his body. They both groaned. "I need to think."

"I need to suck." Her seductive purr almost did him in. His cock was throbbing. His body was aching. And she was ready and in control. Why not let her have this moment?

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Because... Hell, he didn't know what he was supposed to do anymore. He rolled his eyes to the azure sky and tried to clear his mind. Only, the sky wasn't azure anymore.

"What have you done?" Brendan wanted to weep from the sight of it. She had brought *the darkness* with her into *his* world. *His* sanctuary. It was spreading out and infecting everything he had spent years creating.

The beautiful waterfalls were already dripping with heavy sludge. The crystal blue pool was growing cloudy and already ceased reflecting the world's ethereal blue glow. And a yellow tinge was creeping across the sky.

It had taken him years to create the perfect serene environment. When the monsters who'd kept him at the farm were tormenting him, Brendan had learned to escape to this world. It was the only place where he truly felt safe. Comfortable. But no more. She had brought *the darkness* to *his* world along with the fierce hate and rage that accompanied it.

"Get out," he forced through clenched teeth.

"But--"

Anger, hot and dangerous, bubbled up through the lusty fog she'd draped over him. "This is my world, Dallas. You've no right to be here. No right to ruin it."

He raised his hands and--summoning all the powers available to him in his beautiful world--despite how much it pained him, he pushed them both out.

* * *

Brendan returned to his body with a gasp. Three men in white coats were hovering inches above his face. One was taking his blood pressure. Another was standing by, ready to give him an injection. He knocked a plastic oxygen mask from his nose and mouth, pushed the men away, and shot up from where he had been sprawled out on the floor in the middle of The Oblique Café.

He stumbled. Dozens of hands were immediately on him, supporting him. He batted them away.

"I'm okay, dammit."

It was a lie. His head was pounding. His lungs burned as if they'd been raked through hell. And every damned muscle in his body felt bruised and stiff.

"What the hell happened just now?" Stone demanded.

"She took you, didn't she?" Horace said. His friend's expression was drawn with worry. "How did you manage to escape?"

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Brendan denied Dallas's involvement, claiming that he'd simply passed out from the strain of the past few days. Murmurs rose in the café.

No one believed him.

"The council is on their way," Stone said, quietly. "Unfortunately, a representative was here and saw you collapse. The little pencil neck geek went running to the phone."

Brendan closed his eyes and tried to tamp down his raging emotions. "Nothing happened," he growled.

"Right." Stone reached out to help Brendan make his way to the nearest table. Brendan shot him a quelling glance that had Stone pulling back, as if he feared for his life. "Regardless, the council has been called. They'll demand a hearing."

"Where is Dallas?" Brendan asked as he eased himself into a chair. An old arthritic man would have pulled off the task of sitting in a chair with more grace.

Stone shrugged. "She's gone. No one saw her leave."

"Damn."

Horace handed Brendan a mug of the special herbal restorative tea. Brendan breathed in the tea's spicy steam. Dallas had sighed with delight after tasting this tea.

The memory stabbed him in the chest.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Horace asked as he waved a medical technician over.

"Yes, and keep those damned vultures away from me."

"Touchy, touchy." Horace shook his head.

"You need to find Dallas," Stone snapped them both back to the important problem at hand. "She needs to be brought back here before the council arrives."

"No." What Dallas had done was punishable with an automatic death penalty. No matter how angry she had made him by destroying his slice of sanity, he wouldn't bring her back so those power-hungry bastards could kill her. "She didn't understand the repercussions."

Stone lowered his voice. "We need to find her and find out what's going on before the council questions her. I told you this already, if *the darkness* has been living inside her all these years, we have no way of knowing how it's affecting her. Is *the darkness* tugging at her? Why else would she leave when we offered her sanctuary?"

Brendan winced at the mention of being offered a sanctuary. His was lost forever.

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He had torn it apart in order to gather enough power to throw his spirit and Dallas's back into their bodies.

"It's *the darkness* that I'm worried about," Stone continued. "Can't you feel it? Its power is growing. Expanding. We need to act or else we'll lose her."

Bullshit. They were on a witch-hunt.

"So we'll lose her." Actually, given his options, losing Dallas to *the darkness* didn't seem like such a horrible thing anymore. Good riddance, anyhow. What did he need with a woman in his life? Especially one who wanted to turn the tables on him and play the role of scheming little dominatrix?

Why in the hell did she intrude into his world in the first place? She had no business there. He'd made their roles clear and she had agreed. He was the master. He was the one in control.

"I don't understand what's gotten into you," Stone said.

Brendan didn't either. He felt hot and uncomfortable and had an urge to punch something. But not Stone. He knew he'd get himself into more trouble than he'd know what to do with if he fell off the deep end and actually punched Frank Stone.

Even so, he curled his hands into a pair of tight fists. "You said it yourself. Some of us are beyond help. That despite all our best efforts, some of us are doomed to be consumed by *the darkness*," he ground out.

"Yes, yes, I said all that. And it's true. Some will be lost." Stone slammed his coffee mug on the counter. "But. Not. Her."

Brendan growled again. "She's nothing but trouble, Stone. She's not worth the effort it would take."

"Horace?" Horace was easing out of his chair. He looked ready to bolt. Stone snagged his arm. "Can you knock some sense into his bony head?"

"I doubt it, sir. He's gotten himself all twisted up in her net that I doubt he knows which end is up anymore."

"Is that so?" A curious light flickered in Stone's eyes.

"No," Brendan protested, afraid he knew only too well what the two men were thinking about him. "You're wrong."

"Am I?" Stone asked.

"Dead wrong."

"Then prove it. Do your damned job and help her."

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* * *

He didn't love her. They were wrong about that. Love meant having feelings of understanding and forgiveness.

All he felt was anger, dammit.

She'd betrayed him and had put herself in danger with the council in the process. Why in the hell did Stone want her saved? If he found her and was somehow able to separate her from *the darkness* that was slowly taking her over, he'd be forced to bring her in front of the council. And they would snuff out her life.

Either way, she was damned.

Why bother? Why take the risk of becoming infected himself?

He wasn't going to do it. Stone could go fuck himself and his unreasonable demands for all he cared. He was done. Finished. He hadn't really fit in with the rest of them, anyhow.

Brendan jammed his hands into the pockets of his wool coat and braced himself against the sharp winter wind as he plodded aimlessly through the city streets.

"I've been waiting for you, Fish."

Decades had passed since he'd heard that voice--a voice he had hoped never to have to hear again--yet there was no hesitation. He recognized her right away. Drawing a steadying breath, he turned to face the demon of his worst nightmares. Through the gloom, he saw her huddled next to a dumpster.

Lady Czarina, the gypsy woman who had sold him to a pair of heartless monsters before he was old enough to protect himself.

Dressed in a ragged, worn flowered smock and a threadbare wool coat, she was a tiny wisp of a thing, who appeared even smaller by the way her curved back hunched. Though she couldn't have been even five feet tall, Brendan stumbled away from her as if she were a giant, fierce beast. His heart was thudding against his ribs.

He held his hands out in front of him, trying to hold her back. "What do you want with me, old woman?"

She cackled. The crackling sound broke off into a series of harsh coughs. "Don't you recognize where you are, Fish?"

"I don't have to play your games." He backed further away from her. The broken little boy inside him cried out. "You hold no power over me anymore."

Her beady, black eyes pierced him. "Look where you are, Fish," she demanded.

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Though she was human, like Stone she had the power to control others with her voice. It was a power Brendan remembered from his short-lived childhood. It had made him feel helpless.

Nothing had changed.

Instead of running or fighting her like he wanted to do, he blinked and looked around the dark, narrow alleyway. At one end, a faded wooden sign waved in the wind. "Lady Czarina's Mystical Curios," he mouthed the words as he read them.

This was where he was found as a baby and had spent the first three years of his life. It was also the same alleyway where he'd met Dallas.

"Everything leads back to here." Her voice scratched against his ears. "Have you taken the time to wonder why?"

He hadn't.

"Well?" she pressed.

"I began life here," he guessed.

"You haven't changed since you were three, Fish. You still don't stop to think things through!" Leaning heavily on a wooden cane, she hobbled toward him. The wood clomped against the broken asphalt at a slow, steady beat. "Don't you see? You started here because everything ends here."

She grabbed his hand. Her fingers dug into his skin like sharp talons. He tried to pull away, but she sunk her nails in deeper.

"I'm a seer. Damien had thought me a joke since I was merely a human, but he was wrong. I have the sight, Fish. And I saw your future."

"Let go of me." He didn't want to hear anything she might say. He didn't want anything to do with this witch. "You have done enough harm to last a lifetime."

She refused to release him. "I did it for you. Oh, I knew Damien would destroy me for it. But I couldn't let you stay. Don't you understand? I thought sending you half-way across the country would be far enough to save you."

"Do you know where you sent me?" His voice strained from the raw pain that would never fade. "Do you know what they did to me?"

She looked away. "Yes."

She knew and she'd sent him anyway?

"Damn you, old woman." He ripped away from her. Her long nails slashed the skin across the back of his hand.

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“*The darkness* hungers for you, Fish. There aren’t many of your kind born under the same star sign. It makes you more sensitive than most. Among other interesting traits, you possess a strong sense of empathy.” She paused and gave him a meaningful look. “Perhaps, too strong. If you don’t leave now, *the darkness* will get what it’s been craving all along. You are fated to be devoured by it. Tonight.”

“*You lie.*”

“Then why am I here? Why are you here?” She shook her head, sending her shaggy head of hair scattering from its haphazard styling. The silvery strands looked as if they’d taken a life of their own as she gave Brendan a piercing glare and pointed her craggy finger down the deserted alleyway.

“Why is *she* here?”

* * *

Something was chasing her. Something enormous.

Good God, it was getting closer. Dallas darted down the darkened alleyway, praying she would find a place to hide. Whatever was coming after her, she had felt its hot breath tickling her neck just before she’d started running.

Tears had stained her cheeks. They’d dried all sticky and cold. She would still be curled up in a tight ball, crying her eyes out over Brendan’s rejection if not for the heavy footsteps she’d heard coming toward her bedroom.

In a moment of panic, she had darted out her apartment building and into the street. The footsteps had remained right on her heels.

She had run for what felt like hours. Her body was aching and her lungs were on fire. And there was nowhere else to go. She had to hide. She prayed there would be a dumpster or perhaps a discarded box she could crawl into. The thought of sharing a space with mice or rats didn’t bother her. Not at all. She would take vermin over whatever horror was coming after her.

She needed to find someplace, anyplace to hide. It was her only hope for surviving whatever was coming after her. She ran blindly into the shadowy alley.

“Brendan...”

The sight of him waiting for her at the end of the alleyway...glaring at her...stopped her dead in her tracks.

* * *

Despite the rage inside him, his cock grew tight at the sight of her. It felt as if she

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brightened this corner of Chicago like a crisp, spring morning. And for a fleeting moment, he grabbed onto a morsel of hope.

Her curvy hips called to him. Unlike any woman he'd ever known, she had crawled into his heart. He didn't just want to protect her--he wanted to have a future with her.

Which was impossible. He had learned time and again that life wasn't like that. Whenever anything good came to him, he simply needed to hold onto it for as long as it lasted. And not hope for a lifetime.

Dallas wasn't any different. She wasn't his to keep...or to love. She'd shown him that only too painfully well this afternoon. Keeping her close would lead to not only his destruction, but hers as well.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he growled.

She remained in the middle of the alleyway. She was probably too frightened to come closer and too damned stubborn to run away. It was that stubborn streak that made him want to scream at her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't realize the trouble I'd cause. I was trying to...trying to..." A delicate blush kissed her cheeks. She sighed. "I was trying to get your attention."

"You got it." He crossed his arms over his chest. "What do you plan to do with it?"

"Your voice is as hard as a wall," she sobbed.

"Leave her to suffer her fate, Fish," Lady Czarina urged. "She's just another bitch in heat."

"Fish?" Dallas choked. Her gaze bounced from Lady Czarina's deeply lined, slightly gray face to Brendan. "You're *the fish*?"

"It's not a name I gladly answer to." His chest ached from the anger he was wrapping against his heart. "I'll thank you not to use it."

"You!" She pointed at the old crone. "You're the gypsy witch who took my money. What's going on here? You told me to not fall in love with the fish. Why?"

"That's not what I said," Lady Czarina's voice cracked. "Get out of here, Fish. There's still time."

"Time for what?" Dallas asked.

"For me to not get involved with you," he bit off. "You're a disaster. A fucking

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walking disaster.”

A thundering boom-boom, sounding like a giant’s steady footsteps shook the ground. Terror flashed in Dallas’s eyes. “It’s coming,” she breathed.

“What’s coming?” he couldn’t help himself from asking.

“I don’t know.”

The darkness was growing by leaps and bounds. Brendan could feel it swirling all around them. Whenever her fear spiked, its strength flared.

“Fight it, Dallas. Don’t let *the darkness* push through you like this,” Brendan warned. “It’s playing with your fears.”

“How do I stop it?”

“Leave her,” Lady Czarina shouted. “She’s doomed.”

No, he wouldn’t leave Dallas, not when she needed him. Not when he...

Dallas pressed her fists to her ears and screamed. *The darkness* leapt with joy. It was winning and taking Dallas into its own personal hell.

“Stop it,” Brendan said, putting the full force of his power in his words. He hoped he could use his force of will to chase *the darkness* away. Nothing happened. His power wasn’t nearly strong enough to battle the all-consuming invisible monster.

It licked at Brendan, teasing him and whispering promises in his ear, vowing to take him next.

“No!” he shouted as Dallas crumbled to the ground. Her chest was pressing in on itself. Her breaths were short and erratic. *The darkness* was tearing her apart from the inside out.

Brendan rushed forward to help her. Lady Czarina’s nails dug into his hands. “Save yourself. She’s not worth your life.”

Maybe not, but dammit, he couldn’t let Dallas die like this. He wouldn’t. He loved her.

He pushed the old crone away and went down on one knee. Opening his arms, his heart overflowed with the emotions he’d fought so hard to keep at bay. Dallas deserved to live. Even if it meant sacrificing himself, at least he would die knowing that she’d finally be safe from the suffering she live with nearly all her life.

Drawing in a deep breath, he lowered all his mental and physic shields, opening himself wide open. *The darkness* whooshed into him, slamming through his chest with the force of a leaden fist.

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What he had done was going to kill him, but it wasn't enough to stop *the darkness* from devouring the woman he loved. He reached out with his mind and pulled the full power of *the darkness* into his soul, sacrificing himself for Dallas's benefit.

His past roared to life. He toppled over and huddled in on himself. All the ugly games and pain he had endured rushed back to him. The past tortured him with fresh anguish until he couldn't make out the difference between the present and memories.

"Do something," he heard Dallas cry.

"There's nothing to be done," Stone said.

Brendan shook his head with fury. Frank Stone wasn't supposed to find Dallas. He'd take her back to the council and she would be destroyed.

"Get her away from here," Brendan managed to grind out before the pain and rage consumed him. *The darkness* infected every corner of his being. He swelled with hatred. Murderous impulses screamed through his thoughts.

It was done.

Destroy.

The lonely thought pushed to the forefront. Destruction was a task *the darkness* relished. And if Brendan wanted to destroy himself, he felt confident *the darkness* would help him do the deed. Soon, the all-consuming rage and loathing was chewing at his soul. Devouring him.

With his last ounce of strength, he raised all his mental and physic shields that he'd once used to keep *the darkness* at bay. *The darkness* immediately sensed the trap. It bucked against the barriers that were now holding it inside a doomed body.

Brendan knew at that moment he'd won. Though his soul was going to be obliterated into nothingness, *the darkness* was good and trapped and would be snuffed out along with him.

* * *

Blood trickled from the corner of Brendan's mouth. Dallas stuffed her fist in her mouth to hold back a scream. She had to get to him. She had to do whatever she could to help him, but Frank Stone had wrapped his arms around her waist and was pulling her away.

"It's too late," Stone was saying. She shook her head, not wanting to listen.

In her heart though, she feared Stone spoke the truth. Brendan's eyes had turned as dark as the midnight sky. His face twisted with pain, he stared sightlessly at the

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ground. He'd curled himself into a fetal position, hugging his legs to his chest as if struggling to hold in all that pain and suffering.

He'd taken *the darkness* from her. She felt lighter.

"I didn't want this," she whispered. "The cost is too high."

She wanted Brendan, not this. Her heart was being torn to pieces as she lost the only man she'd ever let herself love.

"I love you, dammit! Don't you dare let yourself die!"

"It's too late," Stone said again. His arms slipped away from her waist and she flung herself to Brendan's side.

She brushed her hand over his cheek. The skin under her fingers felt cold. He wasn't struggling anymore. It was over.

"No, dammit. No!" she cried.

He didn't respond. She closed her eyes and reached out into the universe, hoping to find some remnant of his spirit, but there was nothing to be found. The bond between them had been severed. Like Stone had said--it was too late. Brendan was gone.

Forever.

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Chapter Seven

Dallas curled up on Brendan's bed and sobbed. Two days had passed since his death. She had coolly faced down the council, who'd scolded her for breaking their laws. Thanks to Stone's arguments on her behalf, they'd ultimately blamed her actions on *the darkness* that had infected her. Since she was no longer tainted, they overruled the mandatory death penalty. For Brendan's sake, she was pleased. He had given up his life to save hers.

No one had ever loved her so thoroughly. For him, Dallas vowed to move on with her life. She would live, even if every hour that passed without him felt like a lifetime in hell. She owed Brendan that much.

Tears ran down her cheeks like a flowing river. Or perhaps it was more like a waterfall, a luscious, sapphire blue waterfall that dropped from an azure sky.

Dallas heaved a deep breath and caught a whiff of the sweet aqua aroma she'd only experienced in one place...a place that no longer existed.

Rubbing the tears from her eyes, she gasped when she saw the indigo-tinted reflecting pool not ten feet away from where she had been curled into a tight ball. The cool spray from the waterfall tickled her face.

His world. His sanctuary. How had it managed to survive?

She pushed herself up to her knees. Her gaze tripped over the landscape, searching. Hoping. Praying.

Then she spotted him. Wearing an old pair of cut-offs and nothing else, he was walking across the sandy beach at the shore of the Caribbean blue sea.

Dallas sprang to her feet and ran to him. He folded her into his embrace and kissed her forehead. She snuggled into his heat.

He nibbled her lips, kissing and licking, while his hands explored her body. Her heart turned a flip when he touched her breast. She found herself getting lost in the sensations filling her. It was easier to forget all about her grief and pretend that they

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could be together forever. In his world.

But this wasn't her reality. In order to move on with her life, she needed to find out the truth and learn to accept it.

"What are you doing here?" she asked him.

He furrowed his brows and considered the question for a long moment. "I don't know," he said, finally sounding completely baffled.

"Are-are you..." She gathered all her courage. "Are you *dead*?"

He glanced down at his arms and then wiggled his toes, half-burying them in the sand. "I don't think so," he said, carefully. "You didn't let me go, remember?"

"But your body...it's--it's dead."

A playful smile brightened his expression. He placed a quick kiss on her nose. "You keep forgetting something important, love. We're not human."

"And I keep telling you, I could really use a handbook."

"Did the humans give you one?"

"Of course not. But, your body. What are we going to do?"

"Don't worry, love," he said with such confidence, she couldn't help but believe him. "I've left my body for days at a time before. As long as I have a body to return to, I should be okay."

She bit her lip.

"I do have a body to return to, don't I?"

She closed her eyes, trying to remember what Stone had told her. It had something to do with the county coroner's office.

He grabbed her shoulders. "This is important, Dallas. What did they do with my body?"

"The coroner has it. There was some question about cause of death and--" She swallowed down a sob. "They're going to perform an autopsy today."

"Okay," he said. "This isn't a problem. I'd be in cold storage. That's good. The cold will preserve the organs. I simply have to get back into my body before some technician starts pulling the important parts out."

He went very still. His smile faded.

"What? What is it?" Dallas asked.

"I don't know how to get back. In fact, I don't know where I am right now." Pain darkened his expression. "I'm lost."

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Dallas kissed him. Heat swirled between them like a living breeze. "Let me be your guide."

* * *

Dallas had never driven more recklessly in her life. After sending Brendan's spirit back to his body--condition unknown--she took Brendan's fast and sporty Audi TT and wasted no time getting herself down to the city morgue. On the way, she'd called Stone to let him know what was happening.

The guards at the door were no match for her determination. She blasted past the front counter and darted down the halls. A piece of her heart, the piece that was connected to Brendan again, knew exactly where to go.

There was a small, cold room at the end of the hall where two rows of naked bodies were lying out on metal tables. She darted past the pasty bodies until she found Brendan.

He wasn't moving. His lips were blue and silent.

"I dreamed it." Her heart sank to her toes.

His skin felt like marble.

She slipped her hand into his and gave it a squeeze. "Oh, my love," she choked out, "goodbye."

"*Don't go.*" His marble-hard hand closed over hers.

"Brendan?" Her blood was pounding through her veins. She held her breath, too afraid to hope, and watched as his stiff eyelids opened. Ice crystals covered his once beautiful chocolate brown eyes.

"*Get me out of here.*" The words were spoken not from his lips, but in her head. This wasn't good. Stress and grief had made her lose her mind. She was hearing voices while holding a dead man's hand. When they found her, they'd have no choice but to lock her up.

Ah well, Brendan had taught her not to fight her impulses. And she had a strong desire to get him off that damned metal table. Her hands trembled as she reached under his shoulders and used all her strength to lift his upper body.

"It hurts like hell," he groaned as she helped him sit up.

She kissed his icy, blue lips. "I'm glad it hurts, baby. It means you're alive and I'm not crazy."

The door swung open. Frank Stone rushed into the room and tossed a heavy

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blanket over Brendan's legs. "We'll take over from here." Stone nudged her out of the way so the doctors who had followed him into the room could examine and take care of Brendan.

"She's not going anywhere, Stone." Brendan looped his frigid arm over her shoulder and pulled her back to his side. "We're in this together for the long-haul."

She stroked his bare chest, unable to keep herself from touching him. She had to assure herself that this was real. He was alive. And hers.

"Does this mean I get the associate position at Hamlet, Hamlet, and Golf?" she teased.

"Hmmm...That depends." The teasing spark in his eyes warmed Dallas's heart. He loved her. He really loved her. "You won't have any trouble working for your husband, will you?"

"My husband?" she breathed.

She had expected he might want to date. Or, if she was lucky, for her to move in with him.

"I mean..." His courage seemed to falter. "That is, if you're willing to put up with a somewhat crusty, overly possessive lover."

She was speechless. Utterly speechless. Perhaps she *was* the one who'd died. And she was now in heaven.

"Oh, this is too much. I don't mean to pressure you," he was saying. "We can talk about it later."

"Oh, shut up already, Brendan," Stone said. He was grinning from ear-to-ear like a proud father. "Dallas? What are you thinking?"

She gave Brendan one of her best calculating glares, "Fish, you'd better grab onto something. You marry me, I'll make sure you get one hell of a ride."

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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.