

Catalyst 2: Wild Magic

Belinda Richmond

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Chapter One

"Oh for Pete's sake, get a room!"

Talis chuckled and pulled back from Devin's embrace long enough to glance at Keria. Devin's sister's eyes were twinkling, and she grinned at the two of them; at least she wasn't that put out at catching them lip-locked once again.

"Great idea, Ker," Devin drawled. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"Cause all the blood has left your brain for other parts, Dev." Keria laughed and headed outside.

Talis watched her join Aaron on the patio, handing him a mug and sitting down to chat. Aaron didn't appear to be interested in keeping up his end of the conversation, but that didn't seem to bother Keria one bit. She talked enough for the both of them.

Talis wondered if he'd ever get used to having other people living here with him. Not that he was complaining. He wasn't. Not really. Yet there were times he missed how the house used to be so silent and still. But that had been when he was alone. Before the Magic returned to his life. Before Devin.

Turning his attention back to Devin, Talis pulled him closer and leaned in for another kiss. Slow and deliberate at first, deepening and growing more insistent as his need grew. Delving and tasting with his tongue, he thrilled at the tingle that blossomed in his mouth and flowed quickly through his entire body.

"Come on... let's go take her advice," he whispered.

Devin laughed and grabbed another quick kiss before dashing for the stairs. "Race you..."

Talis groaned good-naturedly and followed him at a slower pace. He knew from experience that he was never going to beat Devin in a race, and he preferred to save his energy for other far more pleasurable activities. Besides, it made Devin happy to win,

and he liked it when Devin was happy.

Entering their bedroom, he found Devin sprawled out across the bed. Shirt off, jeans undone and spread open, grinning like mad. "I won."

"Yes, you did." Talis looked at Devin's cock, peeping out from the opened fly, and began deliberately unbuttoning his own shirt.

"I should get some sort of prize, you know. For winning."

"Yes, you should." Talis shrugged out of the shirt and dropped it on the floor, then started undoing his belt. "And, by any chance, do you have any idea what sort of prize you might want? For winning the race?"

"Hmmm." Devin made a show of thinking, but his eyes gave him away. "Let's see... what do I want?"

Talis unzipped his trousers and pushed them and his boxers slowly down his hips, letting them fall to the floor. He stepped out of them and stood nude before Devin. "Tell me what you want."

Devin stared at him, swallowed hard and licked his lips. "I want you."

"Is that all?" Talis wrapped his hand around his own erection and gave it a slow stroke.

Devin pulled his gaze upwards and looked him in the eyes. "What do you mean, is that all?"

A wicked grin curved across Talis's mouth. "How do you want me? Do you want me to fuck you? Shall I bend you over the bed and take you from behind? Or maybe face to face with your legs pushed wide open? Or, perhaps, would you like to be the one doing the fucking this time?"

"Oh." Devin's eyes widened as the offer registered. "Oh!" He swallowed again and nodded emphatically. "Yes."

"Yes? Which one?" Talis waited, already guessing the answer.

"Me. Doing the fucking," Devin blurted. "If you mean it."

"I mean it." He moved closer to the bed and ran his fingertips across Devin's bare stomach, then stretched out next to him.

Devin searched his face and broke into a wild, eager grin. He stood up and peeled off his jeans. Pausing for a moment, he stared at the older man, then lay down on top of Talis. "I'm the boss?"

"Yes."

"Kiss me."

"I'd love to." Talis leaned up and kissed him. He opened his mouth and let Devin push his tongue in, gave him free rein to devour and explore. It felt good to be kissed that way, to feel hands exploring and teasing his body. Talis found himself moaning and trying to pull Devin closer.

Devin chuckled and drew away long enough to murmur, "I think I like being in charge."

"I noticed."

"You like it, too." Devin rocked his hips, drawing out a groan from Talis. "I can tell."

"Yes," Talis managed to say. "I like it. Very much."

Devin kissed him hard, then pulled back. "Turn over."

Talis nodded and rolled over onto his stomach. He turned his head slightly, waiting to see what Devin would do. He didn't have to wait long.

Devin's touch was light, almost hesitant to start with. Fingers lightly caressed down his spine, dipped briefly into the cleft of his ass, then skittered away. A series of kisses were feathered across his shoulder, and he felt Devin's erection nudge against his hip. Talis started to turn toward Devin but was stopped by a light press of a hand.

"No. Don't move. And close your eyes."

Talis closed his eyes and smiled as Devin rolled across his body, thrusting his cock playfully against him before shifting to the other side. He heard the muffled slide of the nightstand drawer, and a bit of clattering as Devin rummaged for a condom and the lube. The mattress shifted again and he was alone on the bed for a moment. Then he felt Devin move between his legs, nudging them apart as he drizzled the cold lube on his skin.

Talis arched in shock. "Shit, that's cold."

"Crap. Sorry," Devin apologized. He rubbed his hand into the lube and began to circle Talis's opening with his finger.

"You're fine. It's okay," Talis reassured him, shifting a bit, spreading himself wider, making it easy for the boy to prep him.

Devin slid one of his fingers into his passage while pressing the other hand on the small of his back. "You're supposed to be still."

Talis chuckled. "My turn to say sorry?"

"Yeah, something like that." Devin slowly pistoned the finger in and out. "How does that feel?"

"Wonderful."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Do it again."

"Right." Devin did it again, then laughed. "Wait a minute. I'm the boss. You need to stop giving the directions."

Talis smiled and opened his eyes to look over his shoulder at his lover.

Devin smiled back at him, blue eyes twinkling, and gave him a stern look. "Eyes closed, Mister."

Closing his eyes again, Talis relaxed as Devin continued to work him with his fingers and the lube, taking his time with his preparation. Talis felt the tingle begin to spread across his skin as the Magic slowly came to life.

Devin must have felt it, too, because he pulled his fingers out, ripped open the foil packet and rolled the condom on. He leaned up against Talis and positioned the head of his cock at Talis's opening. "Want you."

Talis murmured, but nothing coherent. "Dev..."

Devin pressed into him, sliding in inch by inch. "Oh..." He let out a long, shuddering breath and pressed another kiss on the back of Talis's neck. Neither moved for a long moment, each savoring the feel, the change of positions. At last Devin began to move, and Talis felt his body begin to hum with power.

Groaning with pleasure, Talis remained still while Devin found the right rhythm of long, slow thrusts, letting their mutual need for each other build and guide his movements. Talis was quite content to let Devin set the pace, enjoying the sensation of being filled, stretched more than he'd ever been, feeling more connected than he'd ever been with anyone.

But the Magic had other ideas. It surged, ripping through both of them, taking hold, taking control, leaving them both at its mercy. Unable to stop himself, Talis rocked back with sudden force, pushing onto Devin's cock. Devin screamed and surged forward, burying himself to the balls, fingers digging deeply into Talis's hips as he fucked him in earnest, riding him hard, pounding him into the mattress.

Shouting, Talis dug his hands into the sheets and thrust against the bed as Devin fucked his ass. He had no control. The searing heat of the Magic coursed through his body and wrapped itself around his rigid cock, squeezing and pulsing along the length of him. More of the Magic moved from Devin into him with every desperate thrust.

Realizing things weren't right, Talis tried to gather in his power, to gain control of the Magic racing through their joined bodies, but he couldn't get a grip. The harder he fought, the more elusive the Magic became. It was using him. Using both of them. Colors exploded around the bed, blues and greens, swirls and eddies. The air crackled with energy, and Talis came with a shout, arching backwards as his body was consumed with power.

Talis heard Devin's harsh scream as his body jerked, felt him come deep inside, then Devin's weight fell hard against him as the boy collapsed. Then the darkness came, pushing him deep into unconsciousness.

* * *

Pounding. Loud, insistent pounding. Talis blinked and tried to figure out where the noise was coming from. He turned his head and tried to shift, but the dead weight on his back stopped him. Jumbled memories rushed through his mind before shifting into place. Magic. Devin.

"Dev?" he mumbled and reached around trying to touch him.

"Talis? Devin?" Keria's frantic voice rang out. "Are you okay? What's going on?"

"Shit." Talis wiggled and managed to slip from underneath the dead weight on his back. Gripping the footboard, he stood up, legs shaky, head spinning from the effort. Devin was unconscious, and he was glowing. A pale greenish, sickly sort of glow. Talis hesitated, then reached out and laid his hand on Devin's back. The glowing skin was cold and clammy to the touch. He jerked his hand away and stood gaping at Devin's still form, stunned.

Rubbing his hand over his arm, Talis realized he was glowing also -- not as much as Devin was, but his body was still tinged with the same eerie sheen. The only difference was his skin was warm, too warm, fever hot. Talis tried to sort out what had happened, what needed to be done, but he couldn't seem to focus. Not with all the damned banging.

"Dammit!" Keria yelled. "If you don't open the fucking door now, I swear I'll kick it down!"

Dragging a blanket over Devin's body, Talis turned and slowly made his way to open the door for Keria.

"What in the hell is going on in here?" she said, pushing into the room and looking around. "The entire house shook."

"I don't..." Talis started.

Spying Devin unconscious on the bed, she made her way over to him. "What in the bloody hell did you do to him?" Keria perched on the edge of the mattress and began checking him over.

"I didn't do anything." Talis looked over at Aaron, who had entered the bedroom in Keria's wake.

"He's ice cold, barely breathing, and glowing. And you're telling me you didn't do anything?" Keria's voice had a dangerous edge to it.

Talis opened his mouth, then shut it. Before he could try to say something, anything, he felt a pair of jeans being pressed into his hand.

"Get dressed," Aaron said and walked over to the bed to look at Devin. "He

looks like he's been drained."

"Drained?" Talis stepped into the jeans and yanked them up. "Drained how?"

"Drained of his power, his life force." Aaron ran his hand over Devin's forehead and frowned. "I think he'll be okay, but you really shouldn't take that much from him at one time."

"For the last time, I didn't do anything..." Talis protested.

"I don't really give a flying fuck what you did or didn't do," Keria snapped. She stood up. "Right now, we need to take care of Devin. He's the priority."

Aaron nodded. "What happened?"

"We were..." Talis said softly. "Everything was fine, then the Magic sort of took over."

"The Magic did what?" Aaron gave him a stunned look.

"It took over. I tried to get ahold of it, but I couldn't."

Keria snorted and stepped past him, heading for the bathroom. "Let's put him in a warm bath, try to bring his temperature up. You two can hash out the details of what happened later."

Talis ran his hand through his hair and looked back at Devin. Keria was right. First things first. Take care of Devin now, worry about what had happened afterwards. Straightening his shoulders, he moved over to the bed and picked Devin up, and with Aaron's help, followed Keria to the bathroom.

* * *

Sitting at the kitchen table, Talis stared at the mug of tea clenched between his hands. It had taken the three of them quite some time to get Devin settled to Keria's satisfaction, but now he was sleeping upstairs. It seemed strange seeing him so still. Maybe it had to do with his youth; when Devin was awake, he was constantly moving. His energy seemed to fill the room. It was only when he was sleeping that he was still.

Talis looked up when Aaron sat down next to him. The other Mage had been quiet as they tended to Devin, but his eyes held a host of questions. Taking a long sip of the cooling tea, Talis turned his attention to Aaron.

"You have questions?"

"Yes." Aaron sat up and glanced across the table at Keria. "I mean, if you feel up to answering them, that is."

Talis sighed. "Not really, but I guess we need to know what happened."

"What did happen, Talis?" Keria asked softly.

"I'm not sure..."

"You said the Magic took over?" Aaron interrupted.

Nodding, he pushed his tea away. "Yeah. It always kicks in when we're together..." He glanced at Keria, trying to read her reaction, but her expression was closed.

"Were you doing something 'different'?" Aaron blurted.

Talis flushed. "No. Nothing like that. It was normal. Great."

"Go on." Keria got up to pour herself another mug of tea.

Gathering his thoughts, Talis continued. "It was like the Magic wasn't satisfied. Like it decided it wanted more. More of us, more power..." Talis ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "It started calling the shots; it took control of my actions, Devin's actions, our response. We didn't have a say in what happened."

"Interesting." Aaron nodded and began jotting down notes. "Not sure I remember ever hearing about anything like this. Any other details?"

"Lights. Colored lights seemed to be all around. Greens and blues. There was noise. Think it was in my head, though. Then darkness."

Keria shook her head. "The whole house shook. I thought there had been some kind of explosion in the neighborhood."

Talis fell silent, not sure what to say now. He played through the scene in his head one more time, wondering again if there was anything he could have done differently.

Aaron shuffled through his notes, then glanced over at Talis. "We should do some research. Stuff like this shouldn't happen." He leaned back in his chair and picked up his mug. "Gotta say, though, you do seem to have a knack for doing things that

other Mages can't."

"For the last fucking time, I didn't do anything!" Angry, Talis shoved back his chair and got up.

"Right, right. Sorry." Aaron held up a hand. "No need to be so touchy."

Talis gave him an icy look. "Touchy?"

Aaron winced. "Bad choice of words."

Keria walked over and rested her hand on Talis's shoulder. "You're tired. We're all tired. Why don't you go shower and try to get some rest? We can go over this again later."

Grateful for her offer of escape, Talis gave her a kiss on the cheek and headed back upstairs to shower, check on Devin and hopefully get some rest.

Chapter Two

Devin opened his eyes and wondered why he felt so damn sore. And not sore in that “I’ve just had the best damn fuck of my life” good way. No, he was stiff and exhausted and alone in the bed. So entirely not what he was expecting. And just where in the hell was Talis? He raised his head just enough to look around the room. Talis sat asleep in a chair next to the bed.

Devin shifted a bit, turning on his side to better watch the other man. Talis looked uncomfortable in the chair, his head tilted at an odd angle, face set with a worried frown. And he was snoring. Oddly enough, Devin found that particular noise quite reassuring. Something normal in the midst of -- well, he wasn’t exactly sure.

Closing his eyes, he tried to figure out what had happened. He remembered the dash up the stairs, remembered the way Talis had looked like an Adonis, standing naked in front of him while making his offer. Smiling to himself, he let his mind drift back to the feel of slowly sliding into Talis, the way his body reacted, how good it was. Then nothing. He moaned in frustration, then heard Talis stir.

“Devin?”

Opening his eyes, Devin met Talis’s worried gaze and gave him a small smile. “Hey.”

“How are you?” Talis moved quickly from the chair to the side of the bed, leaning in to press a quick kiss on his forehead.

“Confused and sore as hell.” Devin reached for Talis’s hand.

“About normal, then.” Talis’s attempt at a joke fell a little flat.

“What’s going on?”

“What do you remember?”

Devin sighed. “You know, that is not a comforting way to start a conversation.”

"Sorry." Talis winced. "Does 'You're not glowing anymore' work better?"

"Glowing? Not exactly." Devin tried to sit up.

Talis laid his hand on Devin's shoulder. "Don't. Not until Keria gives the okay. I'm already on her shit list, don't need to piss her off any more."

"That bad?"

Talis swallowed. "Yeah. That bad. Almost lost you."

"What happened?"

"You were drained."

"Drained?" Devin cocked his head. "What does that mean?"

"Your life force -- it was drained," Talis replied with a grim look.

"How?"

"We're not sure." Talis stood up. "I think... we think it was the Magic."

"Magic?" Devin shook his head. "Did you --"

"I didn't do anything," Talis interrupted.

"No. That's not what I meant." Devin shifted against the pillows and looked at him. "Are you okay? It didn't hurt you?"

"I'm fine." Talis shoved his hands in his pockets.

Devin nodded. "Can you tell me what you know? What you remember?" He inched himself to a more upright position. "I mean, I remember being with you... it was good. Right?"

"Yes. It was good," Talis said with a sigh. "Then it went bad."

"I don't remember that part," Devin said, his voice shaking. He sat there and watched Talis stare at him. The other man seemed distant, removed, which scared Devin more than anything else. The silence in the room stretched out longer than he expected before Talis settled down into the sofa against the opposite wall.

Clearing his throat, Devin tried again. "The Magic. It did this? That's what you said. Is that possible?"

"Evidently." Talis rubbed his eyes. "Not supposed to happen, though."

Devin closed his eyes. "My fault, then."

"No. Not your fault. Don't say that." Talis's voice was sharp and angry.

"Well, it was my first... you know... I mean... that's the only difference, right?" Devin opened his eyes and looked over at Talis. "Me being in charge. Never had that problem before, did we?"

"This is not your fault," Talis repeated.

"That doesn't mean..." Devin pressed on.

Talis stood up and began to pace. "It was wonderful. Normal. You didn't do anything wrong."

Devin fell silent again. He played with the edge of the blanket, rubbing the satin band between his thumb and fingers. "What happened to me?" he finally asked.

"You were glowing. Your skin, your hair, were this strange green color, and you were cold. When I touched you, you were so very cold." Talis's quiet voice shook. "I was scared."

"Scared?"

"Yes. Scared." Talis walked over to the bed and perched on the edge. "I thought I'd lost you. Can't lose you. Just found you."

Devin stared at Talis, then reached out, pulling him into a needy embrace. "Not going anywhere. Promise. I'm too stubborn."

He leaned in for a kiss, tentative at first, then with more assurance at the familiar feel of Talis's lips against his. Devin deepened the kiss, cupping the back of Talis's head, savoring the taste, the texture of his mouth, firm and soft, the small sounds of hunger and need that Talis couldn't keep inside. He sighed as the familiar tingle of Magic began to awaken.

Talis yanked back fast, falling off the bed in the process.

"Talis?" Devin peered over the edge.

"No," Talis said from the floor. He looked embarrassed -- no, frightened.

Devin frowned. "No?"

"Too soon. No Magic." Talis scrambled to his feet and moved back to the chair.

"It was just a kiss."

"No." Talis shook his head.

"Fine." Devin sat back against the pillows, irritated by this turn of events.

Talis held his ground. "Not until we know what happened and why."

He wanted to argue with that, but realized not only that it made sense, but that it wouldn't do any good. Sighing with frustration, Devin nodded his agreement. "Okay. And how long will that take?"

"I don't know. We're doing some research."

"Research is good." Devin swung his legs off the side of the bed.

"What are you doing?" Talis asked, straightening in alarm.

"Getting up."

"Like hell you are."

"Yes, I am. We've got work to do."

"You are staying put. I can handle the research," Talis said. "Aaron will help. You need to rest."

Devin gave Talis a stubborn look. "I have no intention of laying about waiting for you to figure things out. I'm going to help."

"Devin --"

"Don't 'Devin' me. Once you find out what caused this, we'll have to come up with some sort of plan, and we all know you suck at the planning, Talis." Devin smiled at Talis's open-mouthed stare. "Now call Keria and let her fuss over me."

"I have no say in this, do I?" Talis said.

"None whatsoever."

"Fine." Talis got up and headed for the door. "But I'm telling her this is your lame idea. I'm not going to take the heat."

Devin chuckled. "You do that. And get going. We've got work to do."

Chapter Three

Keria entered the library carrying a large tray of tea items. "How goes it?"

"We've got nothing," Aaron pronounced, shutting his book and pushing it out of the way.

Devin sighed and glanced at the pages of scrawled notes in front of him. "That's not exactly true. We know what we don't have. Answers."

"That's real helpful, Devin." Keria set the tray on the end table and handed him a mug of tea. She looked between him and Aaron. "Between the two of you, you have the gloom and doom market cornered."

Devin smiled a bit and looked over at Talis, who remained silent.

"So what's our next move?"

"We don't have a next move," Talis said. "We've exhausted our library. Our resources."

"Well. There are other sources," Aaron piped up.

Devin turned and looked at the other Mage. "What do you mean?"

"Garrick's library is more extensive than this one. We could go there and do more research. The Circle may have some knowledge..."

"No," Talis interrupted.

"No?" Devin looked at Talis. "If there is a way to figure this out..."

"I am not going back there. You have no idea what would happen. I do. I'm not going back."

"And would that be so bad?" asked Aaron. "I hardly think they'd be upset to see you return. I mean, you are one of their most powerful Mages. More than likely, they'd welcome someone with your power."

Talis rolled his eyes. "I never asked for that."

"Doesn't matter what you asked for. It's a matter of who you are," Aaron stated. "Whether you like it or not, you are one of the strongest Mages of your generation. Alex and Garrick certainly recognized that about you. Everyone at the Manse did. Why can't you?"

"I'm not that person. I left that group, that life, a long time ago."

"Not saying that you need to go back and live there. Just visit. Check out the library. It's worth a shot. I could call..." Aaron pressed.

Talis stood up. "I said I'm not going back there. That's final. Get it through your thick head." He turned and walked out of the library into the garden.

Aaron sat open-mouthed for a moment before he flushed dark red. Standing up, he ran his hand through his short hair, then began tidying up the tea things. "Right. Guess I'll help clean this up." He picked up the tray and headed into the kitchen.

Devin whistled and leaned back against the sofa. He met Keria's questioning gaze with a shrug. "Don't ask me. I have no idea what just happened."

"Yeah. Well, there's more than one way to find things out. You take one, I'll take the other."

"Ever practical." Devin smiled at her. "But who gets who?"

Keria looked out the patio doors. "You take Aaron, I'll go deal with Mr. Broody."

"Mr. Broody." Devin chuckled and stood up. "Good luck with that." He gave her a kiss and set off to help Aaron in the kitchen. "I think you'll need it."

* * *

"You've got a huge bug up your ass."

Talis winced. "Thanks for that observation."

Keria smiled and moved to stand beside him. "Want to tell me what's going on in that thick head of yours?"

"Not really."

Quirking an eyebrow at him, she walked over to a nearby bench and sat down. "I'm waiting for an answer."

"I gave you an answer," Talis said.

"It was a crap answer." She curled her legs under herself and continued to look at him. "You know, pushing him away isn't going to work."

"I'm not pushing him away." Talis shoved a hand through his hair.

"You are."

"I'm protecting him." His voice was quiet.

Keria smiled at him then sighed. "Believe me, I understand that urge. I've been doing it a hell of a lot longer than you have, and I can tell you it's not going to work."

Talis sat down next to her on the bench. "He almost died."

"Yeah. And he almost died when he was hit by that weird-assed magic fireball sent by your ex. You didn't freak out like this then. What's changed?"

"Nothing." He found himself squirming under her direct gaze. "Everything. I just think we need to be cautious."

"Bullshit. This is more than mere caution. This is blind panic. You're terrified of something."

Closing his eyes, Talis tipped his head back and let the sun shine down on his face. He let the silence hang between them, hoping she'd let the matter drop. Even with his eyes closed, he could tell her gaze was fixed on him. With a weary sigh, he straightened up. "And if I am?"

She reached out and took his hand in hers. Her grip was stronger than he expected, and more comforting too. "I can understand that all too well. But Devin is not going to back away from this. Not from you."

"Maybe he should."

Pulling her hand free, she smacked him on the back of the head. "Not even going to answer that. You should know better than to spout such stupidity."

"Ow." He rubbed his head.

"Oh, shut up. You're lucky I didn't hit you harder. Should have. Stupid brooding idiot. Can't see the simple truth when it's staring at you." She shook her head in clear annoyance. "Look, here's my advice. Wallow and whine if you must, but do it fast. Get it out of your system and get back on track. Get over yourself, Talis. If you want to help

Devin, that's what you need to do."

She leaned in and kissed his cheek, then stood up. As she headed back into the house, she called out to him, "And don't you dare fuck this up or I'll be seriously pissed off with you."

Talis rubbed his head once again and wondered which option, facing Keria's wrath or possibly hurting Devin again, was worse. Sighing to himself, he stood up and looked around the tiny garden. She was right -- sitting there brooding wasn't helping matters. He needed to think. Needed to work out a plan. Figure out a way around all of this. There had to be something they'd missed, and he was determined to find it.

* * *

Devin looked up from the book he was reading when Talis entered the bedroom. He glanced at the clock and smiled. "About time you came up. I thought I was going to have to come down and drag you upstairs."

"Sorry." Talis gave him a brief smile, then began to undress for bed. "Wanted to give that history one more read through."

"I see." Devin laid his own book across his lap and settled back against the pillows to watch Talis. "So. Did you and Keria have a nice chat?"

Talis tossed his shirt onto the chair and gave him a startled look. "It was okay. Didn't she fill you in?"

"My sister chose tonight to be unaccountably close-mouthed."

"Ah." Talis chuckled, then headed to the bathroom. "What about you and Aaron?"

"Aaron was a regular chatterbox. I had no idea you were quite the legend."

Talis came out from the bathroom wearing a pair of sweat pants and a frown. "I'm not."

"Well, if you're worried about my ability to fight off all your jealous admirers, I think I can say I'm up for it," Devin said, his smile fading as he watched Talis begin to straighten the makeshift bed on the sofa. "What are you doing?"

"Um. Making up my bed," Talis said, not quite meeting his eyes.

"Like hell you are. This is your bed."

"You need your rest."

"I need you."

"Devin. Don't."

"What is going on? I'm fine." Devin fixed Talis with a look. "Dammit, look at me. Please."

Talis continued to smooth out the blanket on the sofa. "We don't know how long it will take you to get back the life force you lost."

Devin snapped the book shut and slammed it on the nightstand. "Well, if you're so damned concerned about me, then I guess you'll be contacting this Circle in the morning."

"Devin..." Talis turned and looked at him.

"You are going to contact them, right? I mean, according to Aaron, they have more resources... more books, more histories. They might be able to help us figure out what happened."

"No point in contacting them." Talis sat down on the freshly made up sofa. "I'm not interested in returning to that world, that life."

"No one is asking or expecting you to do that, Talis."

Talis sighed. "You don't know them, Dev."

"That's right. I don't. I haven't been given a choice in the matter."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Talis asked.

"Nothing."

"Clearly more than a nothing. Aaron didn't take long to fill your head with a lot of shit today."

"Not Aaron's fault," Devin snapped. "At least he's talking to me, answering my questions, talking about the Magic, about its history, about the others, the Circle, which is a damned sight more than you are."

Talis clenched his teeth, frustrated at Devin's harping. "I haven't kept any of this from you."

"Maybe. You didn't hide what you were, but dammit, you haven't exactly offered up the info either."

"I answered your questions..."

"Yeah, but that's all. You never went past that. No elaboration. I've had to be the one asking, pushing for more."

"I didn't... I mean..." Talis stuttered. "It's just not an easy subject."

Devin sighed. "Yeah. I get that. But I still need to know what's going on. It affects me, too."

"We'll figure it out," Talis reassured him. "Just not with their help."

"And how long will that take?" Devin demanded. "How long do I have to wait for you to touch me again? To kiss me? To make love to me?"

"Devin..."

"I can read that look in your eyes, Talis."

"Devin, stop."

"I'm aching for you. For your touch. I need you to hold me. To be with me. But you're not going to have anything to do with me now, are you?"

"I want you to be safe."

"Oh, fuck." Devin closed his eyes.

"What?" Talis asked, confusion in his voice.

"Do you still want me?" Devin forced himself to ask the question.

"Of course I do," Talis said, aghast. "How can you..."

"How can I even ask?" Devin interrupted. "How can I not? Have you listened to yourself lately?"

Talis swallowed, his voice shaking. "I care about you. Want you more than anyone. More than I ever expected."

"But just not enough to pay the Circle a visit." Devin pulled the sheets up around himself. "Speaks volumes about how much you care."

"That's not true," Talis protested.

"Seems true to me." Devin rolled over and shut off the light. "I'm going to sleep."

Need my rest after all.”

“Devin...”

Talis’s voice was plaintive, almost desperate, but Devin ignored him. Instead he stared at the wall, at the shape of the curtains hanging limply against the window, and tried to keep his heart from pounding out of his chest.

Talis sat there in the dark, staring at the bed, listening to Devin’s ragged breathing. He could just see the outline of Devin’s body in the bed, the curve of his shoulder, the angle of the hip and leg under the sheet. It would be easy to ease the tension between them. All he had to do was get up and go over to the bed. Talis closed his eyes. He could slide his hand down Devin’s arm, knew just how Devin’s skin would feel beneath his fingers -- warm and vital. He knew Devin would turn and move closer, pressing his eager body against him, his breath quickening with anticipation. He could feel the tingle, the spark as the Magic awakened, how it fed off their desire...

Opening his eyes, he shook his head. No. He wouldn’t risk it. No matter how much he wanted to erase every last doubt from Devin’s mind about how he felt, how much he wanted him. Instead, he pulled back the blanket and lay down on the sofa, tucking his arm under his head.

“Good night, Dev,” Talis whispered.

He waited for a reply, but Devin didn’t answer. Closing his eyes, Talis sighed. It was a long time before he fell asleep.

* * *

Pale, early-morning light filtered through the curtains and woke Talis. He stifled a groan and rubbed the back of his neck, stiff and sore from his evening on the sofa. It had not been a restful sleep; he’d tossed and turned, troubled by fragmented dreams that kept him off balance. Dragging himself to a sitting position, he glanced at the bed. Devin was still asleep, sprawled out across the bed, making soft snoring sounds. Smiling at the noise, Talis stood up and padded over to the bed to watch him sleep. Talis never got tired of looking at him. So beautiful. So very relaxed. He wanted nothing more than to sink into bed with him, into his arms, into his body. The Magic wanted it,

too. Talis could feel its eagerness rise inside himself. The Magic craved Devin as much as Talis did, maybe more. And that was what had him terrified.

He'd never expected to find the peace and companionship the last few months had brought. After Alex, he had resigned himself to a solitary existence, and he'd been content with that. But not now. Devin was too important, too much a part of his life, one he wouldn't risk. Stepping back from the bed, Talis picked up his clothes, then headed for the door. Maybe a long walk would help him clear his head, get a different perspective. He paused in the doorway and looked back at the bed, then closed the door behind him.

* * *

Keria was not a happy camper. In fact, if anyone had asked her, she'd have told them she was mightily pissed off. But there was no one at the house this morning to ask her. Of all the blasted mornings to sleep in, she thought as she banged around the kitchen. She'd woken to a quiet house. Too silent for anything good to be happening. Walking into the kitchen, she'd found the note Devin had left. It was short and so carefully worded.

**Keria --
Gone to do some research with Aaron. A little road trip.
I'll call later. Don't worry.
Love, Dev**

She read the note twice, then sat down and read it again. She tried calling Devin's cell phone and got his voice mail instead of him. The blistering message she left on it did little to curb her foul mood. After searching the house and garden for Talis, she'd headed back to the kitchen, made coffee and proceeded to draw up plans for venting her wrath on the three of them.

First on the agenda was Aaron. She had no doubt in her mind that Aaron was the "brains" behind this little research trip. Keria wanted to throttle that weaselly, two-faced bastard. She'd nursed him back to health and he'd turned around and talked her

brother into this scheme. Research was one thing; he could have gone off on his own easily enough, if that was really his intent. But he hadn't. He'd roped Devin into this trip and that worried her. Aaron was up to something. He'd spent too much damn time with that bitch Alex and her crazy father to be completely trustworthy. Keria was positive her brother was going to end up smack dab in the middle of whatever that pasty-faced Mage had planned.

As for her idiot brother, Keria wasn't sure what she'd do to Devin once she got her hands on him. Box his ears... a thorough tongue lashing... maybe both at the same damn time. Frustrated, she stood up and began to pace the room. "Stupid young idiot," she muttered to herself. He might be a foot taller than her, but she could still kick his ass. And she would. No doubt about it.

Glancing at the clock, she wondered where Devin's Mage was. Talis was blowing this. Big time. She'd known he was going to. Knew it yesterday in the garden. He'd made up his mind. Planned something. And, dammit, she'd let him off the hook. Hadn't pressed. That was a mistake she wouldn't make again. Talis had some explaining to do. And this time, she'd make damn sure she found out what was really going on.

* * *

Returning from his walk, Talis opened the front door and found Keria waiting for him in the hall, hands planted on her hips, and a furious look in her eyes. Not a good thing, he thought. Hoping to avoid whatever had her in this high dudgeon of a mood, Talis nodded briefly and headed up the stairs to his bedroom.

"He's not there."

Talis paused, hand resting lightly on the banister. He glanced back over his shoulder at her. "What?"

"What do you mean, what?" Keria's voice rose an octave.

Realizing he wasn't going to be able to slink off by himself, he turned back to face her. "I get the feeling I've done something to piss you off."

"Good guess. Give yourself a gold star."

"What have I done?"

"He's gone."

"You said that --"

"Devin," she interrupted. "He's gone."

He walked back down the stairs to stand before her. "And when will he be back?"

"His note didn't say."

"Note?" Talis felt his stomach clench.

"Research. Road trip. I believe those were the words he used."

"I see..." He felt his throat tighten, barely getting the words out.

"You are such a stupid, obstinate gobblyfuck."

"Thanks for that assessment." He pushed past her and headed for the library.

Keria trailed after him. "Well, you are. I don't know what happened between the two of you, but whatever it is, you fucked up, Talis."

Her words ringing in his ears, he poured himself a whiskey and drank it down in one gulp. "Did he go alone?"

"No. And that's the worst part." She paced around the room. "He took off with that rat bastard, Aaron. I don't trust him."

"Devin?" Talis rubbed his eyes.

Keria rolled her eyes. "Not Devin. Aaron. He's dragged my idiot brother off to God only knows where..."

Turning around, Talis sighed. "I know where they're headed."

"Where?" Keria's voice had an edge to it.

"Garrick's estate. Aaron knows the library, the people there. That's the first place he'd start his research."

Keria headed for the door. "Well. Right. Let's go get them, then."

"No."

"No?" Keria whirled to face him again. "Did you just say no?"

"I'm not going back there." Talis sank down into the chair by the fireplace.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me."

"No, I'm not." He watched her stare at him, open-mouthed, eyes flashing, one petite package of furious confusion.

"What the fuck is your problem? Get over yourself, Talis. Whatever your 'issue' is, you've once again managed to get Devin in trouble."

"I haven't..."

"Oh, shut up!" She walked over and got in his face. "You know as well as I do that Aaron is up to no good. If you love Devin, you'll go bring him back home. Otherwise..."

"Otherwise what?"

She sighed. "You'll lose him."

"I've lost him already." Talis rubbed his eyes and leaned back in the chair.

"Bullshit. You haven't lost him. Granted, he's understandably confused, thanks to your asinine behavior, but he's crazy about you." Keria perched on the arm of his chair.

"That's not the point."

"Then what is the damn point?" she persisted.

He looked up at her. "I'm afraid I'm going to kill him."

She met his gaze unflinchingly. "You're not. Don't even think that."

"I nearly did already." He looked away. "How many times now?"

"Talis." Her hand gripped his shoulder. "You didn't try to kill him before. That was Alex, and if you remember, you were nearly killed as well."

"This is different."

"How is it different?"

Shrugging her hand away, he stood up and went to get another drink. "I don't know."

"Well, then get off your ass and find out," she snapped. "Do the research, track down new leads."

Talis poured his drink with shaking hands. "I've done that already. I've tried.

And I've come up short."

"You haven't done everything," she pressed on. "Follow them. Do the research there together. You said yourself they have more books, more resources..."

"I can't go back there."

"Why the bloody hell can't you?"

"It's hard to explain. I never expected to leave that place... that Circle alive. Wasn't supposed to. No one ever had..." He circled the room.

"But you did."

He nodded. "I did."

"Forget the past, Talis. Concentrate on what is going on now."

"Keria..."

"Look. I don't understand your objections." She threw her hands up in disgust. "All I know is Devin isn't here. He's gone off, and you didn't know he was leaving, or if and when he's coming back."

She stood up, walked over and poked him hard in the chest. "Is that easier to bear than whatever is in your past that has you tied up in knots?" Her gaze challenged him as she waited for an answer.

Talis couldn't answer that question. He wanted to. Wanted to have that easy answer. Wanted that sure knowledge of what he needed to do, to say, to make everything right once again. But it just wasn't there. Instead, he turned and set his glass on the end table and walked out into the garden, leaving her standing there waiting.

Chapter Four

Devin stared out the taxi window and cursed the rain-limited visibility as they pulled out of the train station. He shifted his bag on his lap and wondered, not for the first time today, if this whole trip had been some huge mistake on his part.

Last night, it had been easier. The moment Talis turned away, too scared to touch him, and instead had headed for the sofa, everything shifted. Waking up to an empty room had simply confirmed his fears. When Aaron had suggested a research trip at breakfast, he'd jumped at the chance. But with each mile separating him from Talis, Devin's doubts increased.

He glanced over at Aaron, who was also looking out the taxi window, an eager expression flitting across his plain features.

"You're smiling," Devin pointed out.

"Am I?" Aaron turned to face him.

"Yeah. How come?"

"Don't really know..." Aaron shifted a bit, then leaned forward to give the driver directions before finishing his answer. "Guess I'm glad to be back home."

"Home." Devin leaned back against the taxi seat and fell silent. He hadn't realized Aaron saw this place as home. A place that had also been Talis's home for many years. How many, he wondered. So many things he didn't know about the man. Probably would never know now.

The taxi turned a corner and slowed down in front of an imposing turreted and darkly gothic Victorian house. He understood why Aaron had persisted in calling it the Manse. The name suited it.

"We're here." Aaron paid the driver and grinned at Devin.

"So I noticed." He opened the taxi door and slid out, pausing a moment as his

stomach lurched nervously. Settling his bag on his shoulder, he waited for Aaron to gather his things, then followed him up the path to the house. No sense in backing out now. They'd do their research, ask a few questions and go home. Simple as that. After all, how bad could it be?

* * *

Moonlight was just beginning to filter through the clouds when Devin managed to slip away from Aaron. Grateful for the coolness of the night, he closed the door behind him and sat down on the front porch stairs. He sighed and rubbed his eyes, fighting back the urge to call Talis. He'd spent the evening surrounded by people, and he'd never felt so alone. Aaron had immediately fallen back into the swing of things, happily chatting with old friends. Devin, however, had been left to stand awkwardly around, like some sort of museum exhibit, as Aaron answered question after question.

Devin soon grew tired of the questions, both spoken and unspoken. He was tired of the looks the others had given him. Tired of the conversations that died the minute he got within earshot. Outside it was quiet. Peaceful. He felt like he could breathe once again.

"Not the easiest welcome, was it?" a sympathetic female voice said from behind him.

Devin looked over his shoulder and saw a tall, slender woman lounging against the doorjamb.

"Not exactly."

She smiled and walked over to him. "Sorry about that." She sat down on the stairs next to him. "We're not used to guests."

"I noticed. No problem, though." He watched her tuck her red hair behind her ear. "I'm Devin."

"Yeah. I know who you are."

"Well." Devin felt himself smiling. "Then you've got me at a gross disadvantage."

She laughed and screwed up her nose at him. "Sorry about that. I'm Cait." She

held out her hand, and he took it. Her handshake was surprisingly firm and direct.

"Nice to meet you, Cait."

She chuckled again. "No, it's not. You look worn out. Like you could use a good, stiff drink."

"Wouldn't say no to one."

"Good." Cait stood up. "I happen to know a great little dive of a bar, just around the corner."

Devin's smile widened. "Ah, a girl after my own heart..."

"Right." Her voice held a trace of irritation. "Come on, let's go before they decide to come looking for you."

"Good plan." Devin stood up and brushed off the seat of his jeans. "Lead the way."

Cait took off down the path, and Devin fell into step next to her, pleased to be doing something, anything, other than standing around.

"So, you live here?"

Cait nodded. "Yep."

"Lived here long?"

"Long enough."

"You're not into small talk, are you?"

She gave him a grin. "Not really."

"So maybe I should shut up and stop babbling?" He returned her grin.

"Oh, I don't know. You're kind of cute when you babble."

Devin stopped mid stride. "What?"

Cait ignored his question, rounded the corner and opened a door. "We're here. Are you coming in, or are you planning on standing there with your mouth hanging open all night?"

Devin watched as she disappeared through the door of the bar. Shaking his head, he shut his mouth and followed her.

Once inside, Cait headed for the bar to order drinks and motioned for him to find

them a table. Glancing around, he picked out a small table near the back of the room and headed over to snag it. The dim, smoky interior of the bar was quite reminiscent of the Blue Tuna, the dive where his sister worked, and where he'd met Talis. Devin found himself relaxing for the first time since he'd left Talis's house that morning. He leaned back in his chair and sized up the crowd. Lots of regular customers intent on drinking. He met a few curious glances, but it looked like most of the patrons were indifferent to his presence. It was a welcome relief.

Cait threaded her way through the crowd, carrying a couple pints of beer. "Here you go." She took a sip of hers as she sat down. "It's the local house brew."

"Thanks." Devin took a long drink and nodded approval. "Very nice."

"Are you always this polite?" Cait leaned forward.

"Dunno. You think I'm being polite?"

"Yes. Very. I would have slapped most of those nosey sourpusses back at the Manse."

"The thought crossed my mind." Devin laughed.

"Ah, but you rose above."

"Not really." He took another drink. "I just made a strategic retreat."

"Does this mean I get to see some ass-kicking later?"

Shaking his head and settling back into the chair, Devin smiled. "I'm not exactly the ass-kicking type. That would be more up my sister's alley."

"Ah." Cait gave him an evaluating once-over. "And just what type are you?"

"What type do you think I am?"

"Oh, no." She laughed out loud. "I'm not drunk enough to answer that question."

"What type are you, then?" He leaned forward, eager to hear her response.

She leaned forward to answer, whispering in his ear, her breath sending shivers down his spine.

"Me? I'm difficult."

* * *

Cait watched from the stairs as Devin closed his bedroom door before heading upstairs to the attic. She knew Jackson was expecting her to report in to him, but at the moment, she didn't feel up to a long, drawn out interrogation session. Instead, she retreated to her rooms, hoping a long soak would clear her mind.

Locking the bedroom door behind her, she stripped off her clothes, depositing them in the hamper, then heading to the bathroom. She turned on the taps of the old, claw foot monstrosity that was her tub, added a handful of bath salts and waited for the tub to fill.

She was tired, and the mirror on the back of the bathroom door reflected that stark fact back to her. Cait stepped closer to the mirror and sighed. The overhead light made it impossible to hide. She looked like hell, plain and simple.

Dark circles that concealer couldn't quite hide lurked under her eyes. Her once shiny and sleek auburn hair was limp and dull. She pulled her hair into a messy knot, then ran her hands over her pale skin, tracing the fading bruises that bloomed across her body. Her sensitive fingers traced the thin scars that ran across the tops and sides of her breasts, down the flat plane of her stomach, before she turned to peer over her shoulder at her back. The scars crossing her shoulders and back were thicker, not the thin silvery tracings from the front, but deep lines and raised welts, reminders of things she'd rather forget.

Only she couldn't.

Turning her attention back to the bath, she dimmed the overhead lights, shut off the taps and stepped into the steaming water. Hissing out loud, she eased herself into the tub, watching as her skin reddened inch by inch. Once settled, she leaned her head back against the back edge of the tub and closed her eyes. The hot bath felt good, warming her, easing some of the lingering pain.

As her body relaxed, her mind began to drift. She'd often wondered if she had spoken out, done something, if things would be different now. But she hadn't. It had just been easier for her to follow her mother's dying advice to lay low and stay out of trouble.

As plans went, it had worked well for years. Alex certainly didn't mind being the center of attention, and Cait was allowed to stay in the background. That was until Talis left Alex, and Garrick's master plan began to unravel. With Alex locked in her own cocoon of rage and pain, their father had felt compelled to look for other means to achieve his end.

Cait felt it deep in her bones that Jackson and Aaron were trouble the moment she laid eyes on them, but once again, she kept her opinion to herself. Her father was thrilled to have new Mage talent to utilize; he welcomed the pair of cousins -- they seemed too close to be cousins, more like brothers from Cait's perspective -- into life at the mansion, and soon they were ever-present.

The older Mage, Aaron, became Alex's new plaything, following her around, doing her bidding with all the zeal of an eager to please puppy. Jackson, on the other hand, with his own unerring nose for power, focused his pursuits on Garrick, offering up his skills -- intellectual, magical and sexual -- for the old man's pleasure and use. What the younger Mage lacked in talent, he made up for with a complete willingness to do whatever job Garrick required. No questions asked. But it was Jackson's discovery that Cait wasn't as useless as had been previously thought that sealed his place in Garrick's inner circle.

She shivered at the memory, noticing at last the cooling bath water. Pushing her wandering thoughts aside, she dipped her fingers into the jar of cleanser and worked the dollop into a lather. She scrubbed her body briskly, no longer lingering over the scars, intent instead on simply getting clean. She washed her hair in the same focused manner, pulled the plug and stepped out of the tub. Reaching for the towel, she made her decision. She would see Jackson tonight.

Her mind made up, she couldn't sit back and hide any longer. Cait dropped the towel into the hamper and headed to her bedroom to dress. No matter what, she was no longer going to be a part of his plans. She slipped on a shirt, buttoned her jeans and stepped into her sandals. Better to face him now. Get it over with. At least, that was what she repeated to herself as she left the sanctity of her room and headed downstairs

to give Jackson a report he would not be pleased to hear.

Chapter Five

Devin paced the perimeter of his room for the umpteenth time, feeling even more restless than he had earlier. The walk, the bar, the evening with Cait had distracted him. But now, alone once again, that unsettled feeling had returned with a vengeance.

He ran his hands through his hair and sat down on the bed next to his unpacked bag. The trip had been a colossal mistake. He'd suspected it would be from the moment he scrawled his hasty note to Keria and walked out. But despite his growing unease, he'd continued to hope he'd be able to find the solution to their problem. Because living without Talis was not an option. At least not as far as he was concerned.

With a frustrated groan, he shoved his bag off the bed and flopped back against the pillows. He picked up his cell phone from the nightstand and checked his voice mail. Nothing except Keria's expletive laden message. He wasn't surprised, but still found himself disappointed that Talis hadn't even tried to call.

Of course Talis wouldn't call. He hated phones. Still wasn't used to having one in the house. And Devin had never seen Talis actually use the cell phone Keria had bought him. Despite all this, he found himself hitting the speed dial for Talis's cell. The line rang and Devin waited. For what, he wasn't sure.

"Hello?" Talis's rich voice said.

Devin sat up, shocked. "Talis?"

"Devin?"

"Yeah. Hey."

"You called."

Devin stood up and began pacing around the room yet again. "Yeah, well. If you don't want to talk..."

"No. I mean... Yes... Don't... wait a minute."

He nodded to himself, listening to some muffled noise over the line, Talis saying something unintelligible and then a loud click.

"Talis?"

"Here. Sorry. I went upstairs. Keria was..."

Chuckling to himself, Devin moved back over to the bed and sat down again. "Let me guess -- she's pissed."

"A bit," Talis said.

"That bad?"

"Well, she's not just mad at you. I think all of us are in her dog house at the moment."

"Guess so. Maybe she's giving me some familial slack."

"Perhaps."

Devin leaned back, tucking his arm behind his head, and listened to the sound of Talis breathing. He closed his eyes and wished they weren't so far apart. All of this... was too much. The distance between them, both physical and emotional, was more painful than he'd imagined it could be.

"I think I messed things up," Devin found himself saying.

"No. You didn't."

"Yeah, I did. But thanks for saying otherwise."

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it."

Silence once again fell between them, broken only by the sound of their breathing. Devin wanted more than anything to touch Talis. To feel the texture of his skin, his hair. He reached out, then let his hand fall to the side. "I miss you."

"Devin..."

"Don't 'Devin' me, Talis. I know your reasons. I understand them, even. But the ache doesn't go away. Not with the distance. Not with time."

Talis's voice was soft, shaky. "I know, Devin."

"Do you?" he forced himself to ask.

"Yes."

Devin let go a long breath. "Then why aren't you doing something about it?"

* * *

The question was a good one, Talis thought. One that deserved an answer. Unfortunately, Talis didn't seem to have one. Not a decent one, anyway. Maybe in a way that was the answer. He paced across the length of the room and wondered what on earth he could say that would fix things.

"Because I'm an idiot?" he said at last.

"Well." Devin laughed quietly on the other end of the line. "Not gonna argue with you over that, but it doesn't really get us very far, now, does it?"

Talis smiled and rubbed his forehead. "Not really."

"Then what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't really know, Devin. I know you want answers. You want action, but I'm not sure I know what to do."

"You don't have to have all the answers, Talis. You just have to be willing to work on finding them. Work with me. We can figure this out. I know we can."

"Yes. I know. It's just hard."

"Why is that so hard?"

Talis walked across the room and sat down on their bed. Their bed. His breath caught in his throat. Such a simple change to the way he thought. He didn't remember when that had shifted, but it had. He took a deep breath before continuing. "I'm afraid of losing you."

"I'm not going anywhere." Devin paused. "Well, I did. But not like that. That's not what I meant..."

"Come home," Talis said.

Devin was quiet on the other end. "You mean that?"

"Yes. Just come home."

Devin pressed on. "I mean, I want that, but not if it is going to be like it was... where you're afraid to touch me."

"I am afraid to touch you," he said, wanting to be honest. "But I'm equally afraid to let you go. I don't know what the Magic will do. Why it changed on us like that. But you're right. I can't hide from it. I can't keep you at arm's length. Not any longer. It's not right."

"Thank you," Devin said.

"For what?" Talis asked.

"For, well, changing your mind."

"Well, between you and your sister, it's damn near impossible to remain obstinate and intractable all the time."

"I have no idea what in the hell that means, but can't say that I care. I'll come home on the first train I can get. I just need to tell Aaron where I'm going."

"Good." Talis felt his stomach unclench for the first time all day. "But do me a favor. Don't tell Aaron. Just leave."

"Don't tell Aaron? Why?" Devin sounded puzzled.

"Keria doesn't trust him."

"Oh." Devin paused. "Fine. But I'll tell Cait. She's been kind to me. Someone should know that I've left."

"Fine. But not Aaron. In fact, talk to as few people there as possible."

"Trust me, that's not a problem," Devin said. "Felt like I've been a fucking display, not a person, since we arrived."

"Who's in charge there now?" Talis asked.

"Not exactly sure who the big poobah is, to tell you the truth," Devin answered. "Aaron seemed to make a beeline for some dude named Jackson, but I didn't see anyone who seemed to be on the same level as Garrick."

"Right. Doesn't matter. Just get out of there and come on home."

"Don't have to tell me twice."

"Devin." Talis closed his eyes, emotions rising to the surface. "I missed you, too."

"Did you, now?" Devin's voice took on a slightly cocky air.

Talis laughed. "Yes, I did."

"Good. I'll be home as soon as I can."

"Okay." Talis listened as Devin clicked off the line, then murmured to himself, "And I'll be waiting here for you."

* * *

Eager to be on his way, Devin had headed up to Cait's room to say goodbye as soon as he hung up with Talis, but there had been no answer to his knock. He went back to his room, wrote a quick note and picked up his bag. He'd leave the note for her downstairs and try to catch a cab to the train station. Though, honestly, he didn't expect to find a taxi this early in the morning.

Devin skipped down the stairs and stopped in the main hall. The house was quiet, which seemed odd to him considering how many people had been packed in earlier. He laid the note on the hall table and turned to go, before noticing faint light streaming from a door standing ajar farther down the hall. Maybe Cait was in the study. He picked up the note and headed in that direction, still hoping to say goodbye in person. He knocked on the open door and poked his head in the room. "Cait?"

The room was lit by candles and firelight. At first glance Devin thought it was empty, but a small sound caught his attention. He pushed the door open and stepped into the study. "Hello?"

He looked around the room. It appeared the same as it had earlier. Bookcases lining the walls, heavy green velvet drapes pulled shut, polished oak on the floor, covered by a scattering of Oriental rugs. Pausing by the sofa, he cocked his head to listen, then followed the sound and walked over to look behind the large partner desk.

Cait was on the floor, face down. At least he thought it was Cait. The hair color was the same. Her t-shirt was ripped, and her back was shredded, blood running freely from the cuts crossing her skin, soaking into the waistband of her jeans.

"Cait?" He knelt beside her and, hesitant to touch her back, he moved the hair out of the way, peering at her face. "It's Devin. Can you hear me?"

Her eyes fluttered, and she tried to lift her head. "Go away."

"Not going anywhere, and stop trying to move." Devin examined her back,

wincing at the damage, then looked around to see if there was anything he could use to treat it. "What the hell happened?"

"I'm okay."

"Like hell you are." His voice was sharp, angry. "Where's the phone? I'll call an ambulance."

Her hand snaked out and grabbed his arm. "No!"

"Cait, you're bleeding, hurt..."

"No ambulance." She opened her eyes and looked at him.

Meeting her gaze, he saw pain and a stubborn, fierce determination. Recognizing the meaning of that look, he sighed and nodded once. "Fine. What can I do to help you?"

"Need to get to my room. Have what I need there..."

"Okay. I'll help you get upstairs, but then you're telling me what the hell is going on. Or I'm calling the ambulance, the police and anyone else I can think of, understand?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good. Can you stand?"

"Give me a minute." She moved slowly, crying out as she raised herself onto her hands and knees.

Taking care not to touch her back, Devin guided her first to a kneeling, then a standing position. "Doing okay?"

"Just dandy," she snapped.

"This is gonna take forever." He shifted his bag, then quickly hoisted her over his shoulder in a modified fireman's carry, ignoring her groans of pain. "Think you can keep from screaming?"

"Yeah." Her voice was ragged. "I can do it."

"Good girl." He headed out of the study and down the hall to the stairs. "I'll try not to bang you into a wall."

"Good plan."

Devin climbed the stairs, moving fast but being careful not to jostle her more than he had to. "Well, see, it's your lucky day. I happen to be great with the plans. Now, my friend --"

"Yeah," Cait interrupted him. "Talis sucks with the plans. He always did."

A cold fear hit the pit of his stomach. Mind racing, he climbed all the way to the attic floor where Cait's rooms were. Reaching her door, Devin lowered Cait to her feet, then turned her to face him, his fingers digging into her arms. "How did you know my friend's name was Talis?"

Cait met his gaze, her amber eyes shimmering with pain and the realization that she had let something important slip.

Devin shook her roughly. "Tell me!"

"Garrick was my father." She shook loose from his grip, then entered her room, leaving him standing in the hall.

Chapter Six

For the second time since he'd met her, Cait had left him standing with his mouth hanging open like a moron. He shook his head and followed her into her suite, closing the door behind him.

She was standing near the foot of the bed, holding onto the bedpost for support. Devin walked over to her. "What do you need me to do?"

She started. "Why are you still here?"

"You need help. I want answers." Devin gave her a steady look. "Not going to get any until you are in better shape."

"Pragmatic."

"Have a sister who drilled it into me." He hesitated, then laid a hand on top of hers. "I'm also really good at following directions."

Cait met his gaze, then nodded. "Fill the bath. Hot water. There's a number of jars on the shelf above the tub. Add one scoop of the green salts, and two of the blue."

"Right." Devin squeezed her hand, turned and headed to the bath to do her bidding.

It took him a moment of jiggering with the old fixtures to get the tub filling, a bit longer to find the salts Cait had told him to use. Satisfied he had done things correctly, he returned to the bedroom to find Cait struggling to undress.

Taking her arm, he steadied her and steered her back to the bed. "Sit down before you fall over."

"You're bossy."

Devin chuckled and helped her sit on the edge of the bed. "Trust me, I'm not bossy. My sister is bossy. But not me."

"Could have fooled me."

He gave her a tight smile, then knelt on one knee to help her slip off her shoes. "I think the shirt is a goner."

"Yeah. I think you're right."

He looked up at her, noted the tight lines around her mouth, her shallow breathing. "Let's get you ready for that bath."

Reaching out, he began to unbutton her shirt. Easing it off her shoulders, he noticed the scars across her breasts, then winced as she hissed. "Sorry."

"If you apologize every time I wince, we'll never get done."

"True." He laid the ripped and bloody shirt on the floor. "Stand up, I'll get the jeans off."

"Bet you say that to all the girls."

"Nope, just to the bleeding ones." He made sure she was steady, holding onto the bedpost again, then quickly stripped her jeans and panties off. "There."

"Thank you." Her hand moved, touching his cheek.

He stood up. "You're welcome." Devin paused for a moment, an awkward silence filling the space. He nodded toward the bathroom. "I think your bath is ready."

"Great."

Cait took a steadying breath before taking a shaky step toward the bathroom. "You sure you don't want me to call the ambulance? Or a doctor? You can hardly stand."

"I'll be fine. Just need to get in the water."

"I don't like it."

She gave him a tight smile. "That's abundantly clear."

He took her elbow and kept her from falling as she stepped into the steaming water. "Isn't this going to hurt? I mean, worse than it does now?"

Cait met his concerned look as she began to sink into the bath. "I'll probably scream. Oh, and if I pass out, don't let me drown."

"Pass out? Drown?" Devin gaped again and gripped her hand tighter. "Oh shit, don't even go there..."

His panicked muttering was drowned out by her scream, and he winced as her body shook and the bathwater turned bloody. "Oh, fuck. Stay with me, Cait. Hang in there." He knelt beside the tub, still holding onto her hand as she fought the pain, letting the salted water cleanse her wounds. With his free hand, he reached out to brush her hair out of the way, then wiped the tears from her cheeks.

When he realized he was babbling, murmuring nonsensical encouragements to her, he trailed off, feeling stupid.

"Don't stop," she said in a strained voice. "It helps."

"First time I've been told to keep talking. Usually told to shut the hell up." Devin smiled.

"I'm not your usual gal."

"That's for sure." He peered at her back, which had finally stopped bleeding, though it was still raw and painful looking. "It's actually working."

"I told you."

"Yeah well, cut me some slack, first time I've dealt with this kind of situation, okay?"

"Yeah." She took a deep breath and looked at him. "You're doing just fine."

"Thanks. Would rather not get good at this, if it's all the same to you." He met her gaze. "What now?"

"Towel. Then ointment and dressings. If you don't mind helping some more, that is."

"I'll help. Just tell me where everything is."

"Towels are under the sink, ointment is in the brown jar in the medicine chest and the dressings are in the drawer."

"Right. Towels, gunk and Band-Aids. I can handle that. Don't drown." He let go of her hand and stood up, moving to gather the items.

"No drowning. Promise."

Devin stood a moment watching her before turning to open the jar and ready the bandages. He kept an eye on her as she dried herself off.

"Just let me know when you're ready." He wrinkled his nose at the pungent aroma of the ointment. "How do you want me to put this on, anyway?"

Cait held the towel to her chest and turned her back to him. "Dab it on the marks. A thin coating should do."

"Okay." He scooped some ointment from the jar with his fingers and dabbed it across the still raw marks, being extra careful not to press too hard. As he worked, he found himself counting half under his breath the number of marks... one, two, three... growing angrier at each successive mark. When he reached the fourteenth mark, his anger burst forth. "Bloody hell!"

"Being literal or figurative?" Cait said.

Devin took a deep breath, trying to push his anger back down. "A bit of both. I just don't understand how you're still moving after taking something like this."

"Not my first experience with it," Cait whispered.

"That's obvious." He dabbed the last bit of ointment onto the marks, then went to wash his hands.

"Dressings?"

"Sure. Just tell me what to do."

"Lay the gauze on first, then tape the edges."

"Right." His finger traced along one of the old, healed scars on her shoulder, feeling her shiver at his touch. Gently, he placed the bandages as instructed. "There. I think that's it."

"Thanks."

"Sure." Realizing he was staring at her scars, he looked around the room instead. "Do you need help getting dressed?"

She shook her head. "I think I can manage."

"Okay. I'll clean up in here while you do that."

"Yeah. Sounds good."

Devin gathered the ointment jar and remaining bandages and put them away. He took his time tidying the bathroom, rinsing the tub, hanging up the wet towels,

trying to give her enough time to change in private. When he thought enough time had passed, he coughed, then quietly pushed the bedroom door open.

He found her sitting on the edge of the bed, braiding her hair. She had changed into blue sweat pants and a white button-down shirt. "Doing okay?"

"As well as I expected."

"Is this something you expect often?" Devin leaned up against the closet door.

"Often enough."

"You know, if this is a regular gig for you, I think I'd be making some changes."

She gave him a look. "That's a bit judgmental."

"Cait. You were nearly unconscious. Flayed. Fourteen marks. I counted."

"Fourteen?" She tilted her head. "Is that all?"

"Is that all?" His anger exploded. "Fuck! What's wrong with you? Is that all..." Devin threw up his hands in disgust. "What the hell is going on here?"

"Why were you downstairs?" she asked, ignoring his outburst.

"I was looking for you."

"Were you? Why?"

"I was leaving. Wanted to say goodbye."

"Ah. Leaving." She nodded. "Was or are?"

"Both. But I'm not going anywhere until I know what's going on."

"I'm fine. Everything is normal. Really no reason for you to stay."

Devin crossed his arms across his chest. "Nice try. But I'm not buying it."

"It really is no concern of yours."

"Well, guess what, it became my concern when I found you half dead and bloody on the damn floor." He stalked across the room and stopped directly in front of her. "Just tell me what is going on."

* * *

Cait sat on the edge of the bed, keeping herself upright by sheer force of will. Her back was on fire, and she wanted nothing more than to curl up on her bed and pass out. And take care of the ache in her cunt. That was bothering her more than the pain from

her back. She'd endured worse lashings, knew the pain, while intense now, would fade once the ointment had a chance to work. But she wasn't used to being left needing her release. Jackson usually took great pleasure in bringing her off after a beating, taunting her, mocking her body's reaction to the whip. Cait would go along for the ride, ignoring his taunts, begging when needed, as long as the ache was satisfied.

But this time he'd left her, eager to go fuck Aaron and whichever young Catalyst they had tucked up in his bed. She'd lain there after they left, crying in pain and frustration, desperate need flooding her body. She'd been fighting the urge to pass out, wondering how long it would take her to get upstairs, when Devin stumbled upon her.

She looked up at him, standing there in front of her, a mixture of confusion and fury. She suspected -- no, knew -- he'd not be pushed away easily. Not until he got his answers. Answers she wasn't sure she could give him.

She took a deep breath, keeping her gaze fixed on him. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

"That's a lot. Might want to start smaller."

She watched as he walked over to her desk and pulled the wooden chair out, turning it and sitting down, arms resting across the back. "Fine. Who did this to you?"

She winced. He was nothing if not direct. "Jackson. With some help from Aaron."

"Aaron?" His voice was taut with anger. "That bastard."

"Yes."

"He's done this before? They both have?"

"Yes."

Cait watched him struggle, his hands gripping the chair.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did they do it? Why did you let them?"

She turned to look away from him, from the intensity in his expression. "That's a

complex question. I'm not sure you'd understand."

Devin snorted in disgusted frustration. "You know, you folks say that a lot. 'You wouldn't understand.' Talis said that to me at first. Aaron did, too. Now you. It's bullshit. Simple bullshit."

Staring at her mother's painting, hanging on the wall over her desk, Cait knew he was right. She just didn't want to deal with it at the moment.

"Cait." His voice was soft, but demanding. "Look at me."

Turning back, she forced herself to meet his gaze.

"Why did they do this to you?"

"This time? Because I told them I wouldn't help them anymore."

"Help them do what?"

"Hurt you. Hurt Talis."

"What?" Devin's expression underwent a rapid change, from confusion to anger to a guarded defensive look. "How did you -- they -- hurt us? I never met you before tonight."

"I know. It's complicated." She reached out to hold onto the bedpost, steadying herself.

"Well, break it down for me."

She was silent for a moment, trying to sort out how much to tell him, how much would satisfy him so he would leave and get out of here. While he still could.

"Jackson is trying to consolidate his base, his power. He wants to be in charge of the Circle."

"Right. Go on."

"He and Aaron are cousins. And lovers. They've been working on this since they arrived."

She watched him nod, saw the questions bubbling up in his eyes. She went on before he could ask more. "He sees Talis as a threat."

"Talis has no interest in coming back here."

"Doesn't matter. Talis is a more powerful Mage. Especially with you as his

partner. That makes him a threat."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Maybe not. It's just the way it is. The way he is." She took another deep breath. "The important thing is I won't help him, and without me, he can't get to either you or Talis."

"Talis. You know him."

Nodding, she let go of the bedpost, resting her hand on her lap. "Yeah. I remember him. I was young when he lived here."

"So he can't hurt us without you." He ran his hand through his hair. "Why you?"

"Has to do with my talent, such as it is." She swayed a bit, tired of holding it together. "Look. I know you have more questions, but I'm really not up for anything more."

His expression became concerned. "What do you need?"

"I need to get some rest, and for you to go. I can handle things here." She hoped he'd take the hint and leave.

"Right." He nodded. "Only one problem with that."

"What's that?" She closed her eyes and waited for the shoe to drop.

"I'll leave. But you're going with me." She opened her eyes to find him giving her a stubborn look. "Because there's no way in hell I'm leaving you here."

Chapter Seven

Devin flipped on the lights in the dingy motel room and wondered if perhaps it would have been better just to leave them off. He took Cait by the arm and steered her into the room. "How are you doing?"

"How do you think I'm doing?" she snapped.

Choosing to ignore her retort, he stepped outside and picked up their bags. "Do you want anything? I could find a vending machine. Maybe some ice?"

"No. Just need to lie down for a bit."

"Right." He set the bags on a chair and turned to shut and lock the door. "Let's get you settled, then."

"Don't need your help for that."

He kept his mouth shut as he went over to the bed and pulled the covers back. The sheets appeared to be clean, if a bit worn. "Do you need the bandages changed?"

"No."

"Okay." He headed to the closet and retrieved the extra pillow and blanket and proceeded to make up a pallet on the floor at the foot of the bed.

"What are you doing?" Cait asked as she sat down on the edge of the bed to remove her shoes.

"Making up my bed. I thought I'd sleep on the floor."

"That's not necessary."

Devin smiled at her. "Maybe, but I figured your back is hurting and you don't need me jostling you around. Well, any more than I have already tonight."

He marveled at her strength. She had argued with him, but had been the one to produce the keys to the old Mustang as well as the directions out of town. She'd ridden along, enduring the drive, until he felt they were far enough away to rest.

He offered her a gentle smile. "Get some rest. We'll leave in a couple of hours."

Cait nodded and stripped off her pants before lying down on the bed. Devin rolled himself in the blanket and closed his eyes. Soon he'd be home, and this mess would get sorted out for good.

* * *

Cait lay on her side listening to Devin's even breathing. Apparently the boy could sleep anywhere and at the drop of a hat. She was not as fortunate. She was tired, aching to the bone, but sleep eluded her. The pain in her back had settled to a dull throb, but the need deep inside her hadn't abated one bit.

Shifting a bit, Cait tried to find a way to get off without causing her back any more pain. She eased a hand into her panties and pressed her fingers against her clit. Damn Jackson for leaving her this way. For discovering this talent of hers and this hunger. She circled her clit with her finger, but the movement was too light, too slow. She needed to be fucked hard. Needed her own fingers deep inside her cunt at the very least. How she was going to manage that when she couldn't lie on her back or shift her arm enough to do the job, she wasn't sure. Gritting her teeth in frustration, she tried again, bucking her hips against her fingers, trying to find enough friction and leverage to assuage the worst of the need. Enough to let her rest at least.

"Cait? You okay?" Devin's sleepy voice broke her concentration.

"Bloody hell," she muttered under her breath. "I'm fine."

"You moaned. Do you need some pain meds?" He sat up and peered at her from the end of the bed.

"No." She closed her eyes and willed him to lie back down. "I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine."

"I'm fine," she repeated for what felt like the millionth time. "Can't you just leave me alone?"

"Sorry." He ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up. "I heard a noise. Was worried."

Giving up on her efforts, she sat up. "Thanks. I know you're worried."

"What's wrong?"

A strangled laugh came out of her mouth. "Just don't ask me that. Not now."

"Cait..."

"Don't 'Cait' me, please. Just go back to sleep. Or if you can't, let's just pack up and get back on the road."

He gave her a stubborn look. "You're exhausted. You need some rest."

"Yeah, well, that isn't going to happen. Not at the moment."

"Does your back hurt that much? That bastard. I should have stayed and clocked him."

"He's a bastard. But it's not the back." Cait closed her eyes again.

"What is it, then?" His voice held a note of concern mixed with curiosity.

Cait was thankful the room's darkness hid the worst of her embarrassment. "I don't suppose if I asked you to just let it go that you would?"

Devin was silent for a moment. "Not sure I can. You're hurting. I don't know why, but I want to help. If you'll let me."

Cait opened her eyes and looked at him. "Usually after Jackson finishes with the whip, he fucks me."

His eyes widened and the anger flared in them once again. "That son of a bitch. He and I are going to have words one of these days. How in the hell could he use you like that after doing something like that to you?"

She cleared her throat and went on. "Don't get too worked up, Devin. I'm the one who asks for it."

"You what?" He couldn't hide the shock in his voice.

"I ask for it. The beatings, the pain... it arouses me. I need the release." Cait looked away from him. "Only this time, he didn't take care of it. And I can't. I can't move enough to take care of it myself."

"Oh."

"Yes. Oh." She lay back down on her side, tucking the sheet around her body. "Go back to sleep, Devin."

"Will you be able to sleep any?" he asked.

"I'll try."

"But you don't think you will be able to? Not without..."

"No. I doubt I'll be able to sleep." She focused on her breathing, trying to find an easy rhythm, trying to relax as much as she could.

"Would you be able to rest if you..." His voice trailed off. "I could help. If you wanted me to..."

"Devin."

"Let me help you, Cait." He moved around the end of the bed, kneeling in front of her.

Her face was on fire. She could feel her skin flush with embarrassment and hunger. Searching his face, she saw his determination, his concern, and she nodded. "Okay."

His smile was shy, and he reached out to brush her hair from her face. "Okay. It will be okay. Promise."

"Devin."

"Shhh..." His fingers traced her cheekbone.

Cait shivered as his fingers caressed her cheek, then her neck, before moving on to her shoulder. His touch was light, full of kindness. She met his gaze. "Don't make love to me, just fuck me."

His hand stilled on her arm, then he leaned in and kissed her. Her body reacted, returning the kiss, hungry, demanding more. When he started to pull back, she moved with him, catching his lip between her teeth, searching for a way to break him out of his careful explorations.

The bite worked; he pressed back in, his kiss becoming more insistent, more demanding, and she opened to it, encouraging him, wanting him to feel her urgent need.

Devin responded by yanking her to a seated position, a hand coming up to grab the back of her neck, his mouth covering her gasp of pain. His other hand palmed her

breast, pressing it, then squeezed it roughly. "Is this what you need?"

"Yes," she whispered against his mouth.

He pulled back, searching her face, and she spread her legs open. Releasing her breast, he grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head. Her nipples were hard, prominent, throbbing for his touch. He dipped his head and took one in his mouth, swirling his tongue over it, before sucking on it hard.

Cait gasped and gripped the sheets. She felt wetness soak her panties. "Harder."

"Harder?"

His teeth sank into her breast and she screamed. She felt his thumb brush across the other nipple, then moaned as he twisted it hard. "Yes. Like that."

He raked his nails across her stomach and ran a finger across the soaked fabric of her panties. "So wet." He gathered the fabric in his fist and ripped it from her body.

"Please."

Chuckling, he leaned in and kissed her hard once again. "Please what?" His fingers traced her wet, swollen sex.

"Fuck me."

He plunged his fingers into her wetness. "Like this?"

"Harder."

His thumb pressed into her clit. "Always harder."

She tried to rock her hips, tried to gain some leverage to draw his fingers deeper and growled in frustration when he withdrew his hand.

"Shhhh..." His head lowered, trailing a line of kisses and bites down her body. He rubbed his cheek against the tender flesh of her thigh then turned to bite her there.

Cait let go of the sheets, and slid her fingers into his hair, grabbing it tight. "Stop teasing."

His mouth moved, latching onto her swollen clit, swirling his tongue around it, sucking it gently. He inserted his fingers again and began to thrust as he sucked and teased her.

She was so damn close. Her body trembled and she held his head in place, trying

to direct him to just the right spot.

"Will you stop your wiggling?" He pulled back.

"Don't want to... and don't stop."

"Do it anyway." He dipped his head again, tongue flicking over the swollen nub.

"Not hard enough." She placed her hand on his shoulders and pushed, toppling him backwards. Landing on top of him, she grunted in pain, and fumbled with his boxers, trying to push them out of the way.

"Cait... God... hold on."

She finally got the boxers out of her way and straddled him. "Shut up." Sheathing herself on his erection, she moaned with pleasure and began to move.

"Oh, God..." Devin's fingers dug into her hips and he began to thrust into her.

"Yeah, like that..." She closed her eyes and tipped her head back, concentrating on the sensation building low in her belly. Magic. It began to build in her, swirling through her body, through her blood. She arched as it flowed from her to Devin, as its strands wrapped them in its grip. Cait forgot about the pain in her back, or the ache in her cunt. All she could feel was the sweet thrill of the Magic infusing her with its power.

She looked down at Devin, his eyes wide open in shock and pleasure, and leaned over to kiss him. Her lips tingled as they pressed against his, as their tongues darted and delved together. His grip on her tightened and his thrusts came harder and deeper. She found herself on the brink, body pulsing with arousal and the power. Throwing her head back she screamed and let go, allowing the Magic free rein over her, over them.

Devin bucked hard as she clenched around him, shouting as he came. Only the name he called wasn't hers.

* * *

Talis sat slumped at the kitchen table, clutching his mug of coffee. He took a sip, wincing as the hot liquid scalded his tongue. He'd been up just before dawn. Awakened by the Magic coursing through his body, by the orgasm that took him by surprise, by the echo of Devin's scream in his dream.

He'd lain there for some time, catching his breath, shaking from the intensity of

the dream. Until he realized it hadn't been a dream. It had happened.

Devin and the girl, Cait. Talis had stumbled from the bed and bolted for the bathroom, bile rising in his throat. He knelt on the cold tile floor until his stomach stopped rebelling. Shaking, he stood, turned on the shower and stepped into the hot spray. He pressed his forehead into the tiles and let the water flow over him, washing away the agony that gripped him.

When the water turned cold, he stepped out, toweled off and dressed. He padded downstairs, somewhat surprised that Keria hadn't been awakened. But she slept on, unaware of what had happened.

And what had happened was important. And strong enough to send its signal across the distance. The Magic had taken Devin. But it had been Cait who reawakened it, who had shared it with him, not Talis. It should have been him. But he had been too afraid. And now, he had to face the prospect of living without Devin. Keria had been right. He had lost the boy, and Talis had no one to blame but himself.

He sat there, trying to convince himself it was for the best. The girl was younger. Closer to Devin's age. They could have a life together. One far better than anything Talis could have offered him. And more importantly, Devin was alive. He hadn't been hurt by the Magic. It hadn't taken his life force the way it had the last time he'd been with Talis. Devin was safe with the girl. And that was all that mattered. At least, that was what Talis told himself.

Truth was, he was scared, terrified to the bone. Talis knew he had to be the one to let Devin go, but that didn't mean he was looking forward to it. He wanted to be selfish. To hold on for dear life. To make the Magic flow between them once again.

Draining the mug, he stood and placed the empty mug in the sink. Glancing up, he caught his reflection in the window. Talis turned away. He could do this. He could pull himself together and make this easy for Devin. For all of them. He could do this. He had done it before -- turned his back on the Magic. Lived without it. He could do it again.

All he had to do was come up with a plan.

He pushed himself away from the counter and squared his shoulders. Turning, he left the kitchen, flipping the light off, and headed to the study. A plan. Yes. He could do this. He *would* do this. He loved Devin too much to do anything less.

Chapter Eight

Gnawing on her thumbnail, Cait stared out the car window and tried not to look at her watch. The closer they got to Talis's home, the more nervous she became. That Devin had fallen so quiet didn't help matters, either.

Cait had drifted off for a couple hours of needed rest, waking to find Devin dressed, watching her sleep. She met his gaze, sensing his confusion and his amazement, surprised at how easy it was to read him. She couldn't help but wonder if she was as much an open book to him.

Devin disappeared when she got up to dress, returning a bit later with large coffees for the both of them. It was only after they had been on the road a while that she noticed he had fixed her coffee just the way she liked it.

More had passed between them than the quick fuck she had expected. Something unexpected had happened, and she wasn't sure what to make of it. How to explain it. Glancing over at Devin, she found him watching her again. Cait smiled. "Eyes on the road, buddy."

"Right." He turned his gaze back to the road. "Just wanted to check on you. How's the back feeling?"

"It's better." And it was. Had been since the Magic had possessed her. The pain was gone, the wounds nearly healed. "Thanks for asking."

"Sure. I mean good." He flushed. "We're not far from home. Forty minutes or so."

"Okay." She turned to look back out the window. Forty minutes. Taking a deep breath, she leaned back against the seat and tried her best to ignore the way her stomach knotted.

* * *

Devin shouldered his bag and checked again to make sure Cait was behind him. Half expecting her to bolt for the car if he looked away, he took her by the hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze while offering her his best encouraging smile.

"Don't worry. They're both nice." Twisting the doorknob, he found it unlocked. "I promise."

"I'm not worried."

"You are." He paused as he entered the hall and wondered how he knew she was, but he just did.

"Are you sure they're here? Seems awfully quiet."

He dropped his bag by the foot of the stairs, nodding for her to do the same with hers. "Yeah, I'm sure they're here somewhere. Maybe out back in the garden."

"Welcome home, Devin." Talis's rich voice floated from the doorway to the study, and Devin went still.

"Hey," he managed to croak out, eyes locked on Talis as he lounged against the doorframe. Halfway down the hall, he remembered he was still holding Cait's hand, dragging her along behind him. "Oh, yeah. Sorry. Talis, this is Cait."

"Cait." Talis nodded his head, voice quiet. A bit too quiet? Devin couldn't quite tell.

He felt Cait straighten next to him, felt the sudden dampness in her palm, and he glanced back to look at her. Her eyes were fixed on Talis. "Talis. Nice to see you again."

"Again?" Talis asked. "Have we met before? I don't recall..."

"I was a bit younger the last time you saw me. I tended to favor braids and overalls back then."

Devin turned back to Talis. "Talis?"

"Braids?"

Devin could hear the puzzlement in Talis's tone. He glanced back at Cait. "Cait?" Cait gave his hand a squeeze, then pulled free and moved down the hall toward Talis. She stopped in front of the Mage, tilted her head and gave him an icy smile. "Take a closer look. Do you know who I am now?"

Devin watched Talis's eyes narrow, then widen. "You look like Alex when you tilt your head like that."

"I'm taller. And my eyes are much nicer."

"They're more like your mother's."

"Not quite. But thanks for saying it, anyway."

Devin cleared his throat. "So. You do know each other." He found that unsettling, but he wasn't sure why he felt that way.

"Yes. Talis and I are old friends." Cait turned back and gave Devin an easy smile. "He used to bribe me to make myself scarce when he wanted to be alone with my sister."

"Does chocolate still work?" Talis asked, with a tight smile.

"Chocolate always works. But I can take a hint much better than I used to. Devin mentioned a garden. If you'll point me in the right direction, I'll leave you two to talk."

"That's not necessary..." Devin said at the same time Talis answered, "Through this doorway is the study. You'll find the French doors to the garden there."

"Thanks." Cait gave first Devin, then Talis a smile before slipping past the Mage on her way to the garden.

Devin leaned up against the wall and watched her slip away. He looked over at Talis and smiled. "Feels good to be home."

"Does it? I'm glad." Talis crossed his arms over his chest.

"One thing would make it feel better."

"And what's that?"

Devin smiled at Talis. "If you were over here, kissing me."

Talis seemed to freeze, eyes locked with his. Devin watched him take a long shuddering breath, then clear his throat. "You still want my kisses?"

"Of course I do." Devin frowned, confused by Talis's reaction. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you spent the night fucking someone else."

The tone in Talis's voice shocked Devin. He felt himself flush, then pale. "It

wasn't all night. It wasn't like that at all. And how the hell do you know about it?"

Talis walked toward him, placed his hands on either side of Devin. His voice was low and tight. "The Magic woke me up, Devin. I could feel her coming. Could feel you coming. I heard you scream my name."

Devin swallowed, heart thundering in his chest. "Oh."

"Was it good? Fucking her like that?"

"Talis, don't..."

"Don't what?"

Blinking against the intensity of Talis's gaze, Devin looked away. "Just don't. It wasn't like that."

Talis pushed away and began to pace the hall. "It wasn't like that. Then what was it like, Devin? Cause from my end it was pretty damn intense."

"I can't explain it." Devin swallowed, trying to figure out what to say to make things better, the way they had been. "It just happened. I was just trying to help."

"And fucking her hard enough to make me come from halfway across the damn state was your idea of helping?"

"Talis." Devin reached out and grabbed the Mage as he stalked by. "Why are you doing this? Acting this way?"

"Acting how? Maybe I'm just facing up to the way things are, Devin."

"And how are they?" Devin yelled. "Because from where I stand, things haven't changed. I still feel the same way about you as I did before I left."

"How do you feel about her?" Talis leaned in close.

Devin blinked. "What do you mean?"

"It's a simple question. How do you feel about her?"

It was a simple question. Devin opened his mouth, then shut it, realizing he had no way to answer that question. "I don't know."

Talis shook his arm free. "When you do know, be sure to tell me. You'd better unpack. I moved your things to the guest room. You and Cait can stay there."

"Talis, please." Devin reached out his hand as Talis turned to go up the stairs.

Talis paused on the stairs, looking down at him, his expression shuttered. "Keria walked to the market. She should be back soon. Better warn her about who Cait is before she meets her. She's likely to recognize the family resemblance faster than I did."

Devin let his hand fall and nodded. "Fine. Anything else?"

"No. I think that covers it for now." Talis headed up the stairs and entered his room, shutting and locking the door behind him.

The sound of the bolt going home cut Devin more than any of the harsh things Talis had said. Scrubbing his face with his hands, he took a deep breath. He glanced down the hall to the study door, wondering what in the hell he should do now. Deciding to do the easiest thing first, he picked up their bags and trudged up the stairs to the guest room.

* * *

Closing the guest room door behind her, Cait let out a long breath, releasing the tension she had been holding inside all day. It had been a long day. Not what she'd expected at all. From the garden, she had heard their argument, and hadn't been surprised when Devin emerged from the house alone. What had surprised her was just how much she hated that he was hurting.

Cait had watched him pace around the garden, given him space to get control of himself, until she couldn't stand it any longer. She'd then taken his hand and led him to one of the garden benches. Cait knew she didn't have the words to comfort him, so instead she'd simply sat there and held his hand, wishing all along that she could do more. Glancing up once, she thought she saw a figure in an upper window looking down at them, but Devin hadn't noticed. He'd just sat there and stared at the ground until Keria returned home and found them.

Keria had been just as she'd imagined: loud, opinionated and fiercely protective of her brother. Cait liked her and didn't take offense at Keria's guarded reaction to their introduction. She'd stepped back and let Keria take over. And take over she did.

Devin was fussed over, yelled at and prodded by his sister, who took to her task with great enthusiasm and love. Cait appreciated how Keria seemed to know just what

to do and say to Devin to draw him out of his shell, and how she wasn't at all fazed by Talis's absence.

After dinner, Cait offered to clean up the kitchen, but Keria seemed to have other plans, and Cait was smart enough to take the unspoken hint to get lost for a while. She'd made her excuses to them and fled upstairs to the guest room.

It was a nice room. Good sized. Comfortable furniture. A big bed. Cait picked up her bag and began to unpack. It didn't take long to put away her things. Glancing at Devin's bag, she wondered if she should unpack for him, then worried that might be a bit too intimate. Intimate. Cait shook her head and laughed at herself. How unpacking his bag was more intimate than what they had done last night, she wasn't exactly sure.

Cait also wasn't sure how long Talis planned to hide from them. When he didn't show up for dinner, Keria declared that Talis was being a horse's ass, and that he could either get over himself or waste away up there. Devin had said nothing during his sister's rant, but Cait noticed he'd been unable to keep his eyes from returning again and again to the empty dining room chair.

Deciding that doing something, anything, was better than sitting by herself, Cait turned around and headed for the door. She opened it and walked across the hall to Talis's room. Taking another deep breath, she knocked and waited for some sort of an answer.

And she waited. Cait knew he was ignoring the knock, hoping that whoever was there would just go away. Too bad. She wasn't going anywhere. She knocked on the door again. He would just have to deal with her whether he wanted to or not.

There was a mumbled curse, and the sound of some shuffling.

"What?" His voice was muffled by the door.

"I'd like to speak with you."

"Not interested."

"Talis." Her voice was steady. "I'm not leaving. Might as well get it over with."

"Fine." The lock turned, and the door swung open. Talis leaned against the doorframe, blocking her view into the room. He had a book in one hand, his finger

holding his place. "What do you want?"

She pushed past him into the room, fixing him with a glare. "If you want to be pissed at someone, be pissed at me, not at Devin."

"What makes you think I'm pissed?"

"Well, Keria thinks you're being a total ass. I was just giving you the benefit of the doubt." She took the book out of his hand and perched on the arm of his chair.

"Keria's a good judge of character." He snatched the book from her, then retreated over to his bed. He took a seat on the edge of it, watching her with a wary expression.

"So am I."

"Is that all you wanted? If so, we're done and you can show yourself out."

This wasn't going well. Cait tilted her head and decided on a different tactic. "Is that the bed?"

"What?" Talis blinked.

"Is that the bed you shared with him?" She stood up and walked around the foot of the bed. "Where whatever scared the shit out of you happened?"

"None of your business." He shifted a bit, leaning against the headboard to better watch her.

Cait smiled at him, hand trailing along the footboard. "I think you made it my business when you assumed Devin and I would be sharing a room."

"You're lovers. I just assumed..."

"You're jealous."

"Doesn't matter what I am." Talis crossed his hands behind his head and gave her a smile of his own. "Doesn't change the fact of what happened between the two of you."

"No. You're right about that. But what happened to us doesn't change what's between you and Devin, either."

"There's nothing between Devin and I." His voice was low, harsh.

"The way he acted this afternoon and at dinner says otherwise, Talis." She

moved around to the other side of the bed and sat down, leaning her back against the footboard, facing him. "And what happened between the two of you... what happened to him... it wasn't your fault."

The smile he gave her was full of self-loathing. "You know nothing about it, Cait."

"That's where you're wrong, Talis." She leaned over and reached under the bed, searching for something.

"What are you doing?"

Cait sat up and tossed him a large blue crystal. "That's the focal point of the spell that was used against you."

Talis caught the gem with one hand, eyes narrowing. "What spell?"

"The one Jackson and Aaron used to attack you."

Talis leaned forward and grabbed her by the ankle. "And how do you know so much about it?"

"It was my fault." Cait focused on his hand, the knuckles white with tension. His fingers dug hard into her leg, and it hurt. "Because I was with Jackson when it was cast." She looked up, locking her gaze with his. "They couldn't have done it without me."

* * *

Talis watched her sit there, calm and collected, so very reminiscent of her sister. She didn't look like her sister, but she had the same way of holding herself. The tilt of the head, the way she managed to remain unruffled. She didn't flinch, either, when his fingers dug into her leg. "Perhaps you'd care to elaborate?"

"Perhaps you'd care to get your hand off me first?"

"I don't think so." His grip tightened further. "Not until I get an explanation."

"Don't try to intimidate me, Talis."

"Not trying to intimidate you. But I may hurt you if you don't start talking."

Her laughter was rich, mocking, and Talis reacted to the sound of it. He jerked her leg, tumbled her flat onto the mattress, and straddled her. He wrapped his hands

around her throat. "Don't push me, Cait. I'm not above hurting women."

"She'd probably enjoy it." Devin's voice drifted from the doorway. "Trust me, Talis, she can more than handle a little pain."

Talis didn't look over at Devin, keeping his hands and gaze where they were, locked on Cait. "Runs in the family."

"Let her go, Talis."

Talis heard the door shut and the lock click, but still he didn't move. "Not a chance, Devin. Not until I know exactly what she's done."

"And how is she supposed to talk while you're choking her?"

"This isn't choking." He pressed his thumbs into her neck a bit harder, watching her reaction. "It's just a bit of friendly persuasion."

Cait smiled up at him, eyes challenging him. "Is that what you call it?" she said in a low whisper. "Thought it was foreplay."

He felt his body react to her challenge, her words, just like it had with Alex so many times in the past. His cock was hard, straining against his jeans. He pressed his hips against hers, fighting the sudden urge to lean in and claim her mouth. He wanted to hear her say his name, beg him to fuck her, to hurt her. Like her sister had.

And it wasn't just him -- he could feel her body respond, as well. He could feel her heart beating wildly, saw the way her eyes darkened. When her hips lifted to meet his, he lessened his grip on her throat, turning it into more of a caress. Talis leaned in, nuzzling against her cheek before whispering, "Baby, if this was foreplay, you'd know it."

"Both of you stop it." Devin's hand gripped his shoulder and yanked him back.

Talis sat back and watched Devin help Cait sit up. "That's very gallant of you."

"Oh shut up, Talis." Devin's voice was tight. He sat on the bed, interposing his body between the two of them. "Can we just figure out what is going on?"

"Nothing is going on, Devin," Cait said, rubbing her throat. "Talis and I were just having a chat."

"Yeah. Interesting sort of chat. You okay?"

As she nodded in answer, Talis leaned back against the headboard and waited while Devin satisfied himself that Cait was fine. She looked fine to him. Flushed, excited even. Familiar, yet different. It was hard to not look at her. And the fact Devin was being so solicitous to her kept him riveted. He fought down the urge to show them both just how much he could hurt her.

"Well?" he asked. "Are you going to tell us anything important? Or maybe I should leave the two of you alone. You seem so very cozy."

Devin shifted on the bed, glaring at Talis. "You're being an ass."

Talis shrugged, eyes locked on Cait once again. "Just want some answers from your girlfriend."

Cait met his gaze and swallowed. "I'm not his girlfriend."

"Lover, then."

"Talis."

Cait could hear the annoyance building in Devin's voice, and she leaned forward to touch his leg. "It's okay, Devin. I'll try to answer his questions."

Talis's eyes narrowed, and she forced herself not to flinch. "You'll do more than try."

"It's fairly simple," Cait began. She owed him an explanation; she'd disrupted his relationship with Devin, had nearly killed both of them. "Jackson and Aaron saw you as a threat. One they wanted out of their way. They used Aaron's access to you to plant the crystal, and Jackson did the spell."

"That's all well and good, but how exactly do you fit into this? You're not a Catalyst like Alex or your father."

"You're right. I'm not."

"You were tested, right?"

Cait nodded. She could do this. Simple question and answer. "Of course. I didn't register on either end of the spectrum."

"What does that mean?" Devin asked.

Talis broke in to answer the question. "She's neither a Catalyst nor a Mage."

"That doesn't make sense. There was Magic. When we were..." Devin flushed red, then cleared his throat before continuing. Cait fought her own reaction to Devin's mention of their lovemaking. "She has to be a Mage."

"I'd know if she were a Mage, Devin."

"Well, what is she, then?" Devin turned to look at Talis.

Talis met his regard and shook his head. "I have no idea, Devin." His gaze shifted from the younger man back to her, considering. "Never seen anything like her."

"Was that a compliment?" she found herself asking. His attitude toward her seemed to be shifting as they spoke, as if her willingness to answer his questions had taken the edge off his anger.

"An observation." His smile took her by surprise.

"Oh." Cait blinked and tried to ignore the rush of arousal that flowed through her body the minute he turned that smile on her.

"So, Cait." Talis's voice was smooth but insistent. "What exactly are you?"

"Well, that's a funny thing, Talis." She leaned back against the footboard. "I was sort of hoping you could answer that question for me."

He wasn't expecting that question. Cait could tell by the vague reaction that flashed across his face before his features returned to the neutral expression he favored. "How the hell should I know?"

"You're the best Mage of our era. By all rights, you should be head of the Circle now."

"Well, I'm not. I left that life a long time ago," he snapped. He'd gone prickly again. "I walked away from it before -- I can do it again if necessary."

"What if it's not necessary?" Cait's voice rose in response to his stubbornness. She could feel herself tensing up. "You can't leave it, Talis. Not once you've experienced it again. You know that as well as I do. You're a part of this community whether you like it or not."

"Don't presume to lecture me about what I can or can't do, Cait."

"Hey." Devin held up his hands to break up the budding confrontation. "Hey,

just back it on up. We are not doing that choking thing again. So both of you just calm the fuck down.”

Cait fought to regain her composure, but kept her eyes locked on Talis. She drew a shaky breath, then nodded. “Sorry.” Cait shifted her attention back to Devin.

“It’s okay.” Devin’s smile managed to be both reassuring and full of questions. “Can I ask a question?”

“Sure.”

“If Jackson and Aaron are both Mages, who did they use as a Catalyst for the spell directed at us?”

“They didn’t.”

“What?” Devin looked from her back to Talis. Cait could understand his confusion; Mages weren’t supposed to be able to function without Catalysts. Everyone knew that. Except, apparently, Cait’s own inborn Magic.

“Go on.” Talis leaned forward, watching her intently.

“I can, under certain circumstances, let two Mages make their own Magic.”

“Shit.” Talis leaned back. “When did you find this out?”

“Not long after you left. Jackson figured it out.” She felt her face flush at the memory of that time. Jackson had been insistent and not always considerate with his experimentation. It hadn’t taken him long to find and exploit the connection between sex and pain and her power. “Father was very pleased.”

“I bet he was.” Talis ran his hand through his hair. “Did it work between Catalysts? As well as for just Mages?”

Cait nodded. “I can help two Catalysts make Magic as well, though it’s not very strong. With the Mages, the stronger their gift, the stronger my response was.”

Talis nodded. “So. They used you to make Magic flow between them? And used that for the spell? And you did it across distance?”

“The crystal helped with the focus, but yeah, that sums it up pretty well.”

Devin looked from one to the other, confusion clear on his face. “I have no idea what you two are talking about. But it’s not good, is it?”

"Depends on whose side she's on."

"I'm on your side."

"Glad to hear that," Talis said, tension still thrumming in his voice. "But I'm sure you'll forgive me for being just a bit skeptical."

Cait let out a deep sigh. "Wasn't that long ago you were on the other side as well, Talis."

"Like I said, it was a lifetime ago."

"I have another question," Devin piped up.

"And what is that?" Cait asked.

"If they can't do the spell, they can't hurt us, Talis and me, right?"

Cait wondered where he was going with this. "Yes. As far as I know..."

"And they're not strong enough to pull it off on their own?"

"No, they're not. Why?"

Devin nodded, giving Talis a calculating look of his own. "Then his objections to being with me are moot. They can't trigger the Wild Magic, so he can't hurt me with it."

"Devin," Talis said, his voice soft, husky.

"That's right..." Cait stopped mid-sentence. "Oh. Right. I see. Right."

Talis and Devin were staring at each other. So lost in each other, she realized they had forgotten she was sitting there. Devin reached out and took Talis's hand, drawing it to his face, resting his cheek on the Mage's palm before turning his head to press a kiss on it.

Cait took a deep breath and wondered why she felt like she'd just been punched in the gut. "No reason at all." She glanced at Devin, then at Talis one more time and realized she needed to get out of the room. Now.

Swinging her legs off the bed, she stood up, not glancing at either of them. "I'll leave you two to... um... talk."

"Cait..." She ignored Devin's voice, fingers working to open the door while fumbling with its lock. As she stepped out into the hall, a hand grabbed her arm, pulling her back.

"Don't," Talis said. He spun her back into the room almost roughly and shut the door behind them.

"Don't what?"

"You don't really want to go. And I don't feel like chasing you down."

"Chasing?" Feeling another blush coming on, she looked down at the floor.

His fingers dug into her chin, forcing her to look up at him. "Yes. Quit playing games."

"I'm not playing. You two need time..."

She stopped as Devin stepped up behind her. "I think what Talis is trying to say is that we want you to stay."

"Stay?" She didn't look back at Devin. "You want me to stay? Stay and do what? Want me to watch?" Panic and fear left her, replaced by anger. "I don't know what you think I am, but whatever it is, I'm not."

"Cait." Talis's thumb pressed against her mouth. "Hush. Just listen. Something happened between you and Devin. Something important. Hell, I felt it all the way here."

She closed her eyes as he continued to talk. "And something sparked between us tonight." He slid his thumb across her lip, to her jaw, lightly stroking down her neck, using his touch to remind her. "And you were right."

"I was right?" she whispered.

"I'm afraid to be alone with him. I don't trust myself or the Magic."

"It wasn't you." She opened her eyes, meeting Talis's open gaze, wanting to reassure him, both of them. Glancing back at Devin, she took his hand. "It wasn't either of you."

"Prove it," Talis challenged.

"Prove it? How?"

Devin slid his arms around her waist and pressed his face into the curve of her neck. "Stay with us. They hurt you to make the Magic work." She saw Talis's sudden shift in expression as another layer of understanding came into his eyes. "Let us show

you something different.” Devin cupped her breast with one hand, gently. “Stay.”

Chapter Nine

Cait couldn't quite make sense of it all. It was intoxicating, standing between the two of them. The hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach had been replaced with an ache. A need. Her body wanted this, to be with them, to share in the Magic. But still she hesitated.

Devin nuzzled her neck, waiting as she stared at Talis. Looking into his eyes, she tried to read his intention, what his motives were in all of this. It took a long moment before she realized he wasn't going to force her to stay with them. It was her decision.

The trust and freedom he offered shocked her. She'd always been forced. Coerced into going along. First by her father, then by Jackson. Neither of them had cared much about what she wanted. What she needed.

But Devin and Talis were different. They were offering her more than just sex. More than the Magic, even. They were giving her control. Of her powers. Of herself. How could she say no?

"Yes," she said, hesitant no longer. "You're right. I want to stay."

Talis smiled at her, cupped her cheek and leaned in to kiss her. "Good. I like being right."

Her laughter was cut off by his kiss. Talis was gentle, taking his time. Cait had never been kissed like that. It felt like it would go on forever, but even that wasn't long enough. Not by a long shot. When he pulled back, she moaned in frustration, reaching for him.

"Greedy." Talis chuckled.

"Don't stop."

"Don't intend to. But someone else wants a turn." He spun her to face Devin.

"Oh." Cait blinked, staring into his blue eyes.

"I only rate an 'oh'?" Devin shook his head as he tucked her hair behind her ear. "Guess I have some work to do."

Cait found herself nodding. "Yeah. Wait. No. I didn't mean..."

"Shh..." His mouth found hers, silencing her stammering. Where Talis was gentle, Devin was enthusiastic. Passionate. He didn't bother hiding his hunger for her, and Cait responded. She wrapped her arms around his neck and returned the kiss, momentarily forgetting about Talis.

Coming up for air at last, Cait turned to look at Talis. "Your turn."

As he leaned in toward her again, she shook her head. "Not with me." She stepped back, guiding Devin into Talis's embrace. "I think he's waited long enough."

"Yes. He has. We both have." Talis reached out and cupped Devin's face, focusing on the young man, drawing him close before dipping his head for a kiss. Talis stroked Devin's back, urging him closer. Devin responded, pressing himself against the Mage, hands working to undo the buttons on Talis's shirt, his jeans.

Even though she'd been invited, Cait felt voyeuristic, out of place, watching them together. She tried to turn aside, to give them this moment, but she was unable to look away. Arousal flooded her body; she ached to touch them, to have her hands on their skin, in their hair. Her mouth on them. She wanted to taste them, devour them. And she wanted them to do that and more to her.

Just then, the air in the room seemed to change. Becoming charged, electric even. Cait's skin began to tingle, and she knew the Magic had returned.

Talis felt it, too, and pulled back from Devin. Panic flashed in his eyes. "It's okay." She reached out, touching Talis's back, wanting to offer comfort, but the Magic flared at her touch.

It was strong. Stronger than she expected. Previously it had built slowly in her, growing stronger until the pain and arousal overtook her. This time it felt different. She heard Devin gasp, and realized he felt it too. The Magic wasn't just in her; it was in all of them.

Talis reached out and pulled her in, kissing her hard, hungry. The Magic

exploded, sending tendrils of power surging through her body. She lost her balance and tumbled to the bed with Talis.

His weight pressed her into the bed, his mouth hot against her jaw, her neck. He ripped at her clothes, rending her shirt and bra. She tried to raise her hands to cover her breasts, suddenly self-conscious of the scars covering her body. Talis pushed her hand aside, traced the thin silver scars curving across her skin, then squeezed her breast tight, fingers digging in, making her cry out in both pain and need.

Devin stripped and lay down beside them, reaching for her, kissing her, as Talis trailed his mouth down her neck to her breast. Cait moaned into Devin's mouth as Talis sucked hard on the nipple, working it to a hard nub, then twisting it with his teeth.

"So warm," Talis murmured, as he pushed her jeans and panties out of the way, sliding a finger into her dripping cunt. "So wet. You want us. Say it. Want to hear you say it, Cait."

"Want you." Cait gripped Talis's shoulder as Devin plundered her mouth. The two strong bodies supported her, framed her, made her whole. "Both of you."

"Good girl." Talis slid another finger into her cunt and lowered his mouth to her clit.

"God..." She moaned, bucking her hips. "Don't stop."

Still kissing her, Devin chuckled and bit her lip. "Watch it, she's a wiggler."

"I'll keep that in mind." Talis's fingers dug into her hips, holding her still. He fucked her with his tongue, teasing her clit with his fingers. "You should taste her, Dev."

"I'd love to." Devin pulled back from the kiss, then trailed his mouth down her body, stopping to suck and tease the other nipple, before switching places with Talis.

Cait moaned as Devin's tongue slid into her. "Please."

"Please what?" Talis said as he stripped off his shirt and pants, then rummaged in the nightstand.

"More."

"How much more?" Talis stood up, stroking his erection.

"Everything." She watched his hand move up and down the shaft, mesmerized.

"Are you okay with that, Devin?"

"God, yes, what's taking so fucking long?"

"Impatient." Talis smiled at him. "On your back, Devin."

Devin nipped her thigh with his teeth, drawing a sharp yelp from her, before stretching out on his back as Talis instructed.

Talis tossed him a condom. "Suit up for the lady."

Cait took the foil packet from Devin. "Let me." She stroked Devin's cock as she tore open the packet, then rolled the rubber over his erection. He shivered as she touched him, his cock twitching, growing even harder from her attention. Her fingers pressed the latex down, stroked over the head, and he moaned. She heard Talis chuckle.

"Straddle him."

Cait froze, realizing he would see the full extent of her scarring. "Talis..." She didn't want him to see, didn't want him to understand what kind of woman she was, didn't want to see a look of revulsion in his eyes. Looking up at him, she swallowed, unable to control the look of desolation she knew had taken over her face.

"Go on," he encouraged. His voice was gentle.

"Come on, Cait. Want to feel you tight around me again." Devin took her by the hand, drawing her over him with a soft smile, as if he knew what she was thinking, and why she hesitated.

Giving in to the moment, unable to resist either of them or the acceptance they offered, Cait closed her eyes and guided Devin into her body. The Magic flared again, as it had done before, and she began to move, undulating to the beat of the power flowing through her veins.

"So beautiful. Both of you." Talis stroked his hands down her back, fingers pausing here and there, gently tracing the scars, then up to cup her breasts. "Love the way you feel."

With every touch of Talis's hand, new jolts of energy shot through her. Her nipples were hard, distended. Her skin tingled from her head to her toes. When he

twisted the sensitive flesh, she moaned.

"Oh, I do like the sound of that." Talis slid his hands up to her shoulders and pressed her forward. "Hold this position." He kept one hand on her shoulder, thumb lightly raking the thick scars, and trailed the other down her spine to her ass. "So beautiful."

His finger slid down her ass. "I'm going to fuck you, Cait." Talis rimmed her with his thumb. "Here."

Cait moaned, trying to hold still, wanting to move. "Yes." She felt a cold drizzle of lube that warmed as his fingers swirled it around her pucker.

"Hold her hips, Devin."

Devin slid his hands up her thighs to her hips, holding her steady.

Talis leaned over and kissed the back of her neck. "I don't think I can be gentle, Cait."

"Doesn't matter. Just hurry up."

"You'll thank me in the morning for taking my time now." Another drizzle of lube, and his finger pressed into her channel. He prepped her at his own pace. He took his time, adding more lube before inserting another finger. Talis fucked her with his fingers, using his free hand to alternately hold her still and to set her to moving on Devin.

Cait cried out when he withdrew his fingers. "Don't stop."

"Just changing gears."

"Concentrate on me." Devin pulled her head down and kissed her again.

Cait focused on him, on the way he felt inside her, the way he filled her up. The taste of him, how he seemed to know how she liked to be kissed. How hungry she was for that form of affection. Just to feel cared for...

Lost in Devin, it didn't quite register when Talis butted the head of his cock against her asshole. Devin, however, seemed to understand exactly what was going on. He stilled her, murmuring against her mouth, sliding his hand up her thighs to her ass, spreading her ass cheeks wide to give Talis better access.

Talis pressed his cock into her, allowing her body to set the pace. Slow and steady he pushed, until he was sheathed deep in her ass.

Cait was full, stretched to the limits. Her body felt taut, on the brink of breaking. The edge of pain was intoxicating to her. "Fuck me."

"Fantastic. It feels so good." Talis began to move, choosing a driving pace. Devin followed his lead and picked up the counterpoint. Each of them alternated their thrusts, using not only their bodies to claim her, but the Magic as well.

With each thrust, Cait could feel the Magic inside her growing stronger. Could feel it flow from Talis through her into Devin and back again. It was hot, cold, shivering, like electricity and water at the same time.

Her body felt like it was being torn in two directions. Heavy and light. She wanted to come, to let the Magic bring her release.

Devin moaned, his thighs shaking. He slid one hand between them, and pressed her clit. "Come for me."

"Talis?"

"Let go, Cait." He kissed the back of her neck as he drove into her again and again.

Closing her eyes, Cait let go. She cried out, screaming, seeming to fall through the air, before the Magic caught her, lifting her as her body tightened and shook with the force of her orgasm. Two more thrusts, and Devin came as well, screaming Talis's name once again. Talis bit her shoulder, making her scream again, as he pounded her ass hard. The Magic lanced through her, searing her, and she came again.

Talis cried out her name, then collapsed against her, shaking and moaning.

Bodies spent, they lay there in silence, but the Magic wasn't done. It continued to flow through all of them, tangling together, sending waves of power and pleasure through them over and over again. This was the way it was supposed to be.

Cait eventually opened her eyes. The two men lay heavy against and on her, surrounding her with warmth. She shifted, searching for an unobtrusive way to stretch her muscles. Devin groaned good-naturedly, then opened his eyes also. "Wiggle like

that again, and we'll start this all over."

"Yeah? Is that right?" Cait smiled and wiggled deliberately.

Talis slapped her ass with his hand and chuckled. "Wiggle like that again, and I'll tie you up and fuck you properly."

Cait laughed, but before she could reply, Talis rolled off of her and Devin. Murmuring to himself, Talis pulled her into his arms. "Get some sleep. We've still got a lot of stuff to figure out."

"But we're in it together. Right?" Devin asked, voice heavy with sleep.

"Right," Cait said, closing her eyes, draping an arm across Devin's waist.

She felt Talis's lips against her cheek, his voice in her ear as she drifted off to sleep. "That's right. We're together in this. All the way."

Epilogue

Talis stood looking out the window into the garden. Dawn was just breaking. He could hear the soft sounds Cait made as she slept, curled around Devin's sprawled figure.

It was a good sound. Comforting.

Talis pressed his head against the glass, letting the cool pane clear the last tendrils of Magic from his body and mind. None of this had turned out like he had planned.

First Devin, now Cait. Everything moved way too fast.

Cait was powerful in a way he'd never seen before. In a way that wasn't easily measured or controlled. The Magic was attracted to her, and her body responded to it, transforming it into a power that was frightening in its scope.

Jackson and Aaron had to be furious that both she and Devin had slipped from their control. And Talis was pretty damn sure they wanted her back as much as they wanted to destroy him and Devin, if not more. She was powerful, and she made them powerful -- they wouldn't let her go easily. Cait had been right about that, as well. Once you got a taste of that level of powerful Magic, you couldn't just walk away.

Talis turned from the window and looked at the two of them tangled together in the bed. Devin was responsible for re-awakening the Magic in him, but Cait was the one who had finally made him realize he couldn't flee his past. He was a part of this community, whether or not he wanted to be. No matter how far he tried to run from it, he couldn't escape it. And if he couldn't run, he'd just have to face it.

Talis knew he was fortunate, blessed even. To have Devin back home, and Cait as well. He could feel the Magic resting inside him, waiting for him to command. It was a part of him; they were a part of him. As unexpected as this turn of events had been, he

didn't think he could live without either of them now. Or without the Magic, truth be told.

Devin lifted his head and blinked, still half asleep. "Talis?"

"I'm here, love." Talis walked back over to the bed and stroked Devin's rumpled hair. "Go back to sleep."

"Come back to bed," Devin murmured. He laid his head back down, turning it toward Cait, pressing a soft kiss on her forehead.

"Just on my way." Talis slipped back into the bed on the other side of Cait. He wrapped his arm around her waist, settling her against him. In the morning they'd sort this out, make a plan. Figure out how to deal with Jackson, Aaron and the remaining Circle. He brushed a kiss on Cait's scarred shoulder and closed his eyes.

But first things first. They all needed some rest. And, more importantly, they were definitely going to need a bigger bed.

Belinda Richmond

A self-described voracious reader, foodie, trivia buff & Google Goddess, Belinda Richmond is thrilled to be part of the Changeling family. You'll usually find her camped out on her chaise lounge in the flat land of Illinois where she lives with her husband, two giggling daughters and one old grumpy mutt.