



A Matter of Choice

Natalie J. Damschroder

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DEDICATION

For Lainey, who inspires me to push the envelope.

A MATTER OF CHOICE

The night flight from London to New York was delayed by two hours. Devon Ruger missed his connection and ended up in Chicago six hours after Maggie had been expecting him.

In one of those books she read, she would have been sound asleep on the sofa in a sheer red teddy, with candles burned to nubs on the dining room table next to the congealed gourmet dinner she'd prepared. He'd have awakened her with kisses and they'd have made love all night.

If they were even a normal couple, she'd have at least been home.

But he could tell as soon as he walked in the door that she wasn't. The flat had that waiting feeling. He didn't bother calling for her. His keys echoed when they hit the table next to the door. A piece of paper fluttered to the floor. Groaning, he bent to pick it up. Bloody hell, he hated those round trips to London.

Dev—Op in Cali. Half a day or ten. Call you.

Devon dropped it and rubbed his eyes. His body swayed. He was too tired to think about this. He'd focus on the fact that she hadn't bothered to sign the damn thing, never mind make it personal, and by the time he got into bed, he'd be deep in a funk. He should forget he'd even seen it.

But it didn't work that way. He dumped his bag in the bedroom, his clothes in the hamper, his body in the shower, and tried to turn his mind away from Maggie. It was

impossible. He didn't know what more he could do. He commuted from fucking Chicago to his agency in London, hoping that moving in with her would help her accept him into her life. But his theory that the fewer changes she had to make, the easier she'd accept him as her soulmate had been seriously flawed. All it meant was that she added regular sex to her schedule. And he was bloody tired of being her stud and getting nothing in return.

The killer was, he didn't know that he had much choice. They'd bonded six months ago, accepting the magical identification of each other as soulmates. That same night, they'd reinforced the bond. Devon felt like he'd always known, somewhere, that Maggie was for him. And he thought Maggie had recognized her own feelings. But she'd grown more and more remote and wouldn't talk about why. He could leave, but what would happen then? The emptiness that accompanied him on every mission would just become permanent.

As he stepped out of the shower, water dripped into his eyes. He reached for a towel. A hand that he instantly recognized as not Maggie's closed over his wrist and yanked him forward. He was already off-balance, half out of the tub, and he staggered. He blinked frantically, but the bathroom was full of steam. Something hit him on the side of the head, and he crashed into the sink. His forehead bounced off the mirror or the towel rack or something, and he lost track of which way was up.

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He couldn't see his attacker, or how many there were. He tried to spin, but his foot skidded and he went down on one knee.

There was no fire energy in the room, and he couldn't seem to reach beyond to gather it. No earth energy, either, and barely any air energy, which he could use but not very effectively. The water energy was abundant, but it was acid to him. It didn't harm him if he didn't actively try to use it, or if someone didn't use it against him, but it worked against him anyway, repelling the energies he *could* use.

He felt hands on his bare skin, unable to get a grip because of the water from the shower. Despair washed over him. He couldn't let himself be beaten, not like this. Not with so much left unsaid and undone between him and Maggie.

With a roar, he surged to his feet. Something smashed into the back of his skull, and he crashed to the floor and into blackness.

* * * *

Maggie Gronick walked slowly along the museum wall, studying the paintings. To the few other people in the room, she hoped she looked just like they did—enjoying the artistry and beauty of the oils, reading the descriptions and histories. If she was doing her job right, no one would know her scrutiny went much deeper. She was looking for something much more vital to the national interest than a multimillion dollar picture.

A painting of a man and woman embracing caught her eye. Was Devon home yet? Had he gotten her note? And if he had, what had he thought?

The woman in the painting was bent backward, as if straining away from the man who held her. But the look on her face was rapture. Maggie knew that look. Knew the strain, too. Every time she and Devon had sex, something in her pulled back. Despite the pleasure they gave each other. Despite every fucking concession he made to her. She still rebelled with passive-aggressive notes treating him like a distant roommate.

Checking to make sure no one was close by, she scratched her ear and activated her com.

"It's not in the Impressionist room."

King's voice came back. "Try the Degas display. Two rooms to the left."

She strolled across the hall, glanced at the statuary inside, and backed out. "Not my thing," she told the guard near the door. Judging by the erotic nature of some of the pieces, he got that a lot. Likely not for the same reasons, though. He nodded as she continued down the wide corridor to the next room.

"Not Degas," she murmured to King. "Rising Talents."

"Whatever. Just move faster."

Something skittered up Maggie's spine, and she forced herself to keep moving, to maintain her bland interest and sedate stroll. If she were a regular agent, she might have attributed the feeling to the urgency in King's voice, or her awareness of the vitality of their mission.

But she was a mage, and the skitter signaled a disturbance in the building's magic. The fire energy she'd taken note of and ignored swirled one level below. Earth energy crawled lazily along the floor, drawn to a single moving point, then drifting, left behind. But the water energy vibrated, ready to be used. Coiled, and climbed the stairs.

"He's here," she warned King.

"Crap."

"Yeah." Abandoning pretense, she hurried into the Degas room and started inspecting the paintings on the wall. The coiled water energy drew closer, following her meandering path. Her energy trail.

She moved faster. It had to be in here. They'd run out of time. She practically ran across the room, to the sculpture of a dancer in the corner. A young girl jumped back, looking startled. Maggie didn't have time for apologies. He was only two rooms away.

And there it was. Liana's intelligence, tucked behind the frame of a portrait of another dancer. Maggie slowed. Touching it would set off the alarm. But she was prepared. She slipped a tendril of air energy behind the frame, under and around the glazed paper, and tugged. It popped free, right into her hand.

"Got it."

"Window."

She backed up to the wide, tall window and glanced around. No one was in the room now. A guard walked by but didn't turn his head. Maggie flicked the lock and slid up the

window—thank God for old buildings—and lowered the paper on a slow stream of energy into King's waiting hands.

There was no time to make sure she had it. She tilted her head back just as her enemy walked into the room.

* * * *

Devon came to in complete blackness, tied wrist and ankle to something hard that held him upright and slanted slightly backwards. He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again, but he still couldn't see. He hoped to hell it was just dark and the blow to the head hadn't made him blind.

First, he tested his bonds. They felt like some kind of fabric, like torn sheets. He could feel the frayed ends with his fingertips. The knots were very tight, but they didn't bind him enough to cut off his circulation. The ones wrapped around his ankles had a bit of slack and let him shift his legs slightly.

Next—and should have been first—he checked for magic. There was none. It was rare enough a phenomenon that he knew he'd been captured by an accomplished mage, someone who had the ability to clear not only the room, but a wide surrounding area. He had a pretty decent range of detection, and there was nothing nearby.

"Fuck." He tugged his wrists again, but that just made the loops of fabric tighten. He lifted his head but couldn't see anything, not a crack of light to show where the door was, not a shape to give him a hint of what type of room he was in. When he dropped his head back, the surface beneath him felt cool. Cool against his shoulders. His *bare* shoulders.

"Fuckaduck." He was naked. Now that he was paying attention, he realized he had not a stitch of clothing on. And he didn't need any more than that. He knew who had him.

"Serenity."

"At your service, my darling," came the immediate response. Someone moved behind him, and the purr confirmed his guess as much as her words did.

"I'm bonded." He cursed himself as soon as the words shot out of his mouth.

Serenity laughed. "I don't believe in soulmates, Devon. By the time I'm done, you'll be mine. Completely mine."

Devon dropped his head back again and closed his eyes. He was at the mercy of a woman he'd used, both magically and sexually, for the sake of the mission he'd been on. He was naked and restrained. No one knew where he was or expected him to be anywhere for several days. And he had no access to magic.

Fuckaduck.

* * * *

Kalen Price didn't look left or right when he entered the room. He knew Maggie had found the encoded message. She started to swallow against the fear, but that would show weakness. So she deliberately relaxed and smiled, her body fluid, her hair fluttering in the breeze from the window.

He came right to her and stood, looking over her shoulder to where King had been just a minute ago. That put his crotch at chin height, since she half-sat on the windowsill. She considered sucker-punching him, but even as the thought

passed through her mind, a wave of water energy cut between them. Not as effective a barrier as the earth energy she couldn't touch, but a demonstration of his awareness of her. The hair on her arms fluttered.

"So, you beat me to it." Kalen's voice was low and smooth, cultured but not slimy.

"Beat you to what?"

He smiled, his attention fully on her for the first time. "You know what. I shall tick a mark in your column, today. But do not get smug, young filly."

Maggie snorted. "I'm no filly, Kalen." She stood. Her mouth was now even with his collar bone, another intriguing spot.

Kalen tilted his head. "No. I think you are a full mare. But..." He studied her face, swept his gaze over her chest, lingered at her cocked hip, then rose back up to meet her eyes, his own looking confused but intense.

"I thought you bonded, Maggie. Last year."

Maggie clenched her teeth. Enough mages had been witness to her bonding with Devon—not the actual event, thank God, but the obvious compulsion—that it had been impossible to keep private. Her battle with the implications of the bonding, she'd kept to herself.

Until now.

"I did." She moved past him and started strolling around the edge of the room, pretending to admire the art on the walls and marble pedestals.

"Indeed." His tone was rife with speculation. When she paused to look at one particularly abstract painting that

looked like a jumble of mannequin parts—why it was in the Degas room, she had no idea—he joined her.

"It is quite erotic, is it not? The symbology of limbs and heads and cocks as barriers to the inner self."

Maggie hadn't even noticed that some of the lines formed definite phalluses, but now that he'd pointed them out, they were impossible to miss. A wave of longing swept over her, and she felt the air energy she'd collected start to drift away. Before she could snag it, something else caught and coiled it, then rested it at her hip.

She looked up at Kalen, who looked understanding. "I always thought, Maggie, that it might happen for us one day."

"Not me." She moved on to the next painting. "I don't get involved with mercenaries."

"I'm independent." The culture slipped a little.

"Sensitive about it, though. It amounts to the same thing."

"It is nothing close to the same." He slapped his hand against the wall in front of her so she had to stop. His ivory silk jacket formed half a cocoon with his body, shielding them from interested eyes. "I don't take money from whoever will pay. I take money from those who need to hire me, for jobs that suit my moral code. Unlike you 'affiliated' mages, who are required to do whatever your agencies request, no matter what it does to your soul."

"You don't have to worry about my soul, Kalen."

He stared into her eyes, his brilliant blue ones like diamonds. "I've always worried about your soul, Maggie."

Shocked at his intensity and hunger, she opened her mouth to remind him she was bonded, but stopped. A few

months ago, she would have taken Kalen up on the offer he was making. Missions were lonely things. An hour with someone who understood and didn't make demands helped preserve sanity.

But she was bonded to Devon now, and had lost the freedoms she'd had before. If she hadn't been a mage, she *might* have chosen to have Devon living with her. She *might* have chosen an exclusive relationship. But she was a mage, and she'd had all that choice taken from her.

Or had she? Kalen didn't touch her, but the water magic he'd carried with him began swirling lazily around her. And suddenly, she felt it *on* her skin. Caressing her breasts, stroking her nipples. Against her will, her eyes widened, letting him know she'd felt it. He smiled.

With a gasp, she yanked herself away and circled him, no longer pretending an interest in the art. She felt him following close behind her as she strode into the hall and toward the elevator. Trying to ignore him, she flipped open her cell phone and thumbed the speed dial for the loft apartment. Devon should be home from England by now. He'd be there waiting for her, like he always was, and his voice...

But he didn't answer. Maggie slapped the phone shut and shoved it into the holster on her belt. She knew it was irrational and unfair, but she felt like he'd let her down. She hit the down button for the elevator and stood, hip-shot, ignoring Kalen. He'd followed her all the way down the sunlit hall and now stood several feet away. Not near enough to touch her, but still she felt the cool slide of his energy on the back of her neck.

She pulled her phone out again and hit the button for Devon's cell phone. He could be stuck in JFK or something. The elevator door opened and she stepped in, too late realizing what a foolish, foolish move that was when Kalen, his intensity, and his magic, followed her.

The phone beeped. The signal had been lost.

"Maggie," Kalen whispered. "Are you sure you are with the right mage?"

Tears stung her eyes. How had he tapped into her heart like that? The bonding was supposed to recognize soulmates, but she hadn't been remotely attracted to Devon, physically or personally, before that mission. What if it was wrong? They'd been trying hard—okay, Devon had been trying hard—to mesh their lives. It wasn't working, and she knew that was all her fault. Maybe that was because the bonding was wrong.

"Perhaps you should find out."

Maggie didn't need to ask what he meant. The stroking was back. Across her shoulders, down, slowly, over the tops of her breasts, avoiding her nipples but winding around her waist and sliding across her abdomen. She was moist and craving a solid, human touch.

The elevator pinged and she threw herself out the doors almost before they were open. Her phone announced the acquired signal and she frantically beat out Devon's cell phone number by hand. It rang once.

"Devon? It's me."

No one answered.

"Devon?"

"Devon's not here." The sultry laughter made a lie of the assertion.

"Let me talk to him."

A voice called out in the background.

"I hear him. I know he's there."

"All right. Then he's not available." The woman paused, and the next thing she heard was Devon's moan. A moan she recognized very well. "He won't be available for a while, so don't bother calling back."

The connection ended.

Maggie stood frozen for long moments, feeling nothing. If she loved Devon, wouldn't this betrayal hurt? Wouldn't she be furious and heartbroken? She wasn't. She felt ... nothing.

She turned, and Kalen was waiting, watching her. "Come with me?" He held out his hand.

Stuffing her phone away again, she took it.

* * * *

Devon let out a yell that echoed against the walls and ceiling. He slammed his body forward, but the cloths around his ankles and wrists only grew unbearably tight and slammed him back against the slab. He let out curse after curse, every fucking thing he could think of, and wished he had magic to fling at Serenity.

"You bitch," he finally panted, hanging in his bonds. She'd been toying with him for an hour, or so he guessed, circling him and teasing his skin with the tails of a crop. It wasn't until his phone rang that he knew what she'd been waiting for. His cock had already been half hard, and she'd stroked

him without warning, getting him to moan at the worst possible time.

And now Maggie thought he was cheating on her.

What they had was tenuous enough as it was, without this.

But he didn't know how to stop it. He couldn't tell Serenity she didn't want to do this, when she so clearly did. She wasn't an agent, so he couldn't appeal to her awareness of how these things worked. He couldn't explain, because most of what he'd have to tell was classified. He could be tried for treason—and he was close enough to that, too, with his relationship with a mage from another country's agency.

Speaking of classified...

"How did you find me?" He turned his head, trying to track her in the dark. There was still no source of light allowing him any hint of shape or movement in the room. He kept his eyes closed and used his ears to tune in to the swish of a gown or robe against her legs and the floor as she walked. She didn't answer but was behind him, now on the right, now in front of him.

He drew in a sharp breath. She'd flicked his nipples with her fingernails. How did she do that without seeing? He rubbed his head against the board, trying to confirm there was nothing over his eyes. But he was able to blink with no problem, so the darkness had to be real.

She circled him three times, lightly scoring his chest on every pass. His skin goosebumped, sending shudders through him that he tried to suppress.

"Mages leave a signature," she finally said. Her voice was as husky and melodic as it had been two years ago, and

though he didn't want her, his cock didn't seem to care. It remembered what they'd done, and wanted some. He swallowed hard against a reflexive gag.

"So? How could you have found mine with no idea where to look?"

She stopped behind him. "It was merely a matter of narrowing it down. You may have been undercover, love, but once you'd left, I knew what you were doing." There was a click and the slab he was lying on tilted abruptly forward. He winced when the cloth cut into his wrists again. "You're British, so it had to be Kight Street. They headquarter in London, of course. If you were with me, you had to be after Jenks. You didn't get him. So I just stayed with him until another agent did." The slab started to lower hydraulically into the floor, leaving him standing spread-eagled. The bonds must have been attached to the ceiling or walls and floor, he realized. But the new angle had no effect on his ability to get loose.

"So what did that have to do with me?"

"I got your name."

Devon closed his eyes. Bones. He'd been selling information, but insisted he hadn't given up any of his fellow agents. They'd believed him.

"I never meant you harm, Serenity." He meant it, but didn't know how he'd convince her. "I was doing a job. Jenks killed six kids. He had—"

"To be stopped. I know." Her fingers traced the crack of his ass. His balls tightened, then released. His erection got harder. Then she wrapped her arms around him, her hands

flat on his chest, her head between his shoulder blades. "It wasn't that you used me to get to Jenks. I never had any illusions about that. It was after." Her hands slid lower, onto his abdomen. "You never gave me a chance, Devon. I could have made it work."

Christ, what was she talking about? He ground his teeth and tried not to react as her hands went lower and lower. It had been weeks, dammit, since he'd had sex. He and Maggie had hardly had time for a snog, the one time they'd been in the flat together. And he didn't like to jack off when she wasn't around. He saved it for her. Which meant Serenity was going to be fucking smug in a few minutes.

"Could have made what work?" he managed to grind out. "I thought I made it good for you. I tried."

"Oh, it was good." There it was. Her right hand wrapped around his shaft. Her left barely had enough reach to tickle his balls, but it was enough. Her breasts pressed tight against his back. His eyes squeezed shut, his whole body rigid, he tried to fight the pleasure.

"The sex was perfect. I came three times to every one of yours." One stroke, slow and tight. He jerked. "I wanted to return the favor. But you never let me go down on you." A harder, faster stroke. He gasped. "I wanted you to pump between my breasts and come all over me." Still faster. He was about to come. "We can be good together, Devon. *Really* together. I'll convince you." She released him an instant before he exploded. "But not yet."

His yell of anger and frustration drowned out the sound of a door closing somewhere out of sight.

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* * * *

Maggie followed Kalen to his car, expecting to see backup, at least a partner. But he was alone. She looked at him questioningly, and he shook his head.

"I worked this one alone." He crowded her next to the door of his PT Cruiser convertible, looking down at her face and making her the momentary focus of his intensity. It was different, so different from the bonding. That had been forced. This was choice. He *wanted* her. He whispered, "I was hoping to catch you here," reinforcing the feeling. He'd sought her. Given her options. And now, she'd chosen, too.

Apprehension fluttered faintly in her chest, the fear that maybe it wasn't the right choice. But just then Kalen backed off, opening the car door and handing her in. She settled onto the leather seat and sighed. Luxury had power. In this case, the power to soothe, to reassure, to lull her into thinking this was right. Part of her knew it wasn't. The part of her that might have chosen Devon, eventually, if she'd been given the opportunity.

But it was a small part compared to the rest. The parts that wondered, every time they had sex, if it was real feeling or the magic. If they could call it making love, or if it had really been a form of rape that first time, and now she was like a date rape victim who was trying to justify letting it happen by having voluntary sex with her rapist, pretending he cared for her, that they had a future.

Those parts questioned Devon's feelings, too. He'd been very accepting of the bonding, and the cynic in her thought it

was because it was sex. What man wouldn't accept it? But then she thought about his constant travels back to Chicago and how it exhausted him, and figured he was trying to make it work, trying not to crowd her or make demands.

And *that* was the worst part. Why did she get to set all the rules of their relationship? It wasn't fair. He asked nothing of her. Asked for no changes or accommodations. It felt temporary because of that, and temporary just didn't mesh with the whole soulmate concept. Apparently, Devon thought so, too. She remembered the sultry voice on his cell phone, his groan of pleasure, and everything in her hardened.

Maybe it was her fault. Maybe she should have talked to him about it, instead of leaving vague, punishing notes. Passive aggression had never been her style, until now.

Until now.

Her focus shifted and she became aware of their surroundings. Kalen drove confidently through the heavy traffic, one hand on the wheel, his left elbow balanced on the open window. His dark blond hair fluttered in the breeze, and he had light crinkles where he squinted against the sun. The glance he sent her way was full of promise, and something inside her fluttered.

This wasn't just about tit for tat, she thought. It was a test. She had to see if what she had with Devon was real. Was more than magical compulsion. Worth fighting for. If it was, she'd fight. If it wasn't, she'd set Devon free. Somehow.

With the decision came peace, and when King radioed her a moment later, she said, with confidence, "Everything's fine.

Go back to Chicago. I'll see you in a few days." This time, when Kalen looked at her, she smiled back.

* * * *

Despite his body's tension and the rage inside his head, Devon fell asleep. There wasn't much else to do, tied up in the dark, with no way to relieve the pressure in his cock or the desperation in his chest.

He dozed, his awareness of his position never going fully away. His head drooped. Colors drifted across his vision. Silver, red, brown, blue. Whirling strands of energy. He tried to grasp them, to call them, but they taunted him. Danced closer, then rushed away to swirl aimlessly, all around him, a solid wall of magic. It imprisoned him.

Then the air energy separated itself from the maelstrom. It coalesced in front of him, stroking his body. His cock, which had softened with no stimulation, jerked in response to the gentle touch. It took no time for him to become just as hard as before. A moment later, as he watched, the energy took form, resolved into a shape. Into Maggie's shape. She knelt before him, smiling her gentle smile, the one she wore at the rare times she allowed herself to just be with him.

"I love you," he tried to say, but his voice wouldn't work. He couldn't move. Maggie's hand was around him now, and she started to lower her head. God, he wanted her mouth on him. But there was something wrong. He moved his hips back, but all that did was pump her fist on him. Her grin didn't look so open and loving now. It looked hard and satisfied. And then it wasn't hers. It was someone else's.

Someone's he didn't want. Her hair changed color, grew longer, a sheet of black down her back. Her jeans and snug shirt turned into a shimmering black gown. Her mouth, rimmed in bright red lipstick, curved. Her tongue came out of her mouth, reaching, and touched him.

He came awake with a jerk and a yell, and the only thing that had changed was his ability to see. Serenity hadn't been just in his dream. She was there, in front of him, her hand on his cock and her mouth close enough he could feel the wetness of her lips, the heat of her breath.

"Just relax, baby," she cooed. "This will be soooo good." Slowly, she sucked him in, and she was right. It was incredible. And that was bad. It was horrible. He wasn't supposed to feel like this with anyone else. Only Maggie was supposed to generate this kind of response in him. He felt betrayed by his own body.

And then he couldn't feel or think about that or anything else. She surrounded him with her mouth and tongue and even her teeth felt incredible on his sensitized flesh. She squeezed the base of his cock with her hand, took him deep, so deep he touched the back of her throat, and sucked hard as she drew him out. Over and over again, so fucking slowly, and it was all he could do not to thrust himself faster. He couldn't pull away, but he wouldn't participate. Wouldn't ... oh, God.

He felt it. The tingling, the tightening. It was coming, and he didn't want it, but fuck, he needed it. Serenity sensed it and moved faster, sucking harder, and he came in a rush, an explosion so intense he thought the light would blind him.

And then, with a low laugh, she was gone, leaving him hanging limply in the ropes, hating himself.

* * * *

Maggie followed Kalen to his suite. The contradictory commentary in her head told her she shouldn't be following a man, any man, then argued that she didn't know where she was going. It told her that having sex with a stranger was stupid, but admitted they'd worked in the same field for ten years. That she was bonded to Devon and nothing could change that—but who the hell said the bonding was permanent? She'd tried to research it, but written information was surprisingly sparse. She supposed the bonding stories were an oral tradition, and nothing about magic was exactly precise, anyway.

Fuuuuuccckkkk! She hated this non-stop thinking. The second-guessing and the debating and the wondering and worrying. She hadn't stopped since Devon moved in, and her momentary acceptance morphed into sullen resentment. She wanted her brain to *stop*.

Kalen opened his suite door and stepped aside. She smiled at him and stepped into the subtly appointed room, barely getting a chance to notice the layout and décor before he took over.

Gone was the gentle seducer. As soon as the door clicked shut Kalen spun her around and slammed her against him, his mouth on hers. The kiss wasn't hard and demanding, though, but coaxing and carnal. He used his lips and tongue to assault her physically, while all around her swirled his captured water

energy. It glided along her skin more sensually than silk or velvet and aroused her body more quickly than anything but the bonding ever had.

Before she could feel truly assaulted, however, he let her go. Or let her mouth go, anyway. His hands remained firm on her back so her pelvis was tight against his. His erection wasn't as large as Devon's, but it rubbed in just the right place. The water energy ran more slowly but constantly across her breasts and between her legs, keeping her senses stirred.

"Don't worry, Maggie." Kalen's eyes glittered behind hooded lids. "You'll get exactly what you need."

She wondered how he knew what she needed, then banished such thoughts. This wasn't about a relationship. It was about choice.

"Go in the bedroom, get comfortable, and I'll join you in one moment." He nodded his encouragement and released her. She hesitated, then turned and opened the door he'd indicated.

She whistled. This must be the honeymoon suite or something. The bed was enormous, up on a dais, surrounded by white silk and lace hangings, piled with lush pillows, and bathed in a soft ivory glow from hidden lighting.

Maggie found a white silk robe in an antique wardrobe and changed into it. She'd barely had time to belt it before the door opened and Kalen walked in, wearing matching lounge pants and nothing else. Very definitely nothing else. His erection seemed to have grown larger in the loose fabric, freed from the confines of his snug trousers.

"You're beautiful, Maggie." He stopped a foot away from her and ran one hand through her hair. He did it over and over, smoothing it over her shoulders before tracing the vee of the bathrobe. Her nipples tightened and goosebumps erupted all over her body. Her mouth seemed glued shut, but her body felt like it was weeping in relief.

She *could* respond to another man. She wasn't forced to be only with Devon.

"I've wanted you for a very long time." With his free hand he stroked himself, rubbing the silky fabric slowly up and down. Surprised, Maggie couldn't take her eyes off him. Was she a tool or a woman?

But then he removed his hand and turned her away from him. "But this night isn't going to be about me. Not yet, anyway." His mouth came down on the spot between her neck and shoulder. His cock nestled against her ass. One arm wrapped around her waist to hold her in place, and his left hand slid down her arm and then wrapped around her wrist.

The water energy returned. All her muscles relaxed as it began stroking her. It covered her breasts and squeezed, jerking a gasp out of her. It wasn't like anything she'd ever felt before. Her nipples grew even tighter, craving a stronger touch, and the cold pinch that followed made her gasp again. It felt like real water swirling and stroking her, but with more force than real water had.

A tendril of energy started to make its way down her abdomen. Kalen didn't change position, just kept using his mouth for slow, hot kisses on her skin, while he commanded the energy between her legs.

She'd used a detachable shower head for masturbation. It was more effective and more intense, usually, than her hand. But this was different. Instead of a steady pressure, this was a constant moving stream that was unaffected by the position or condition of her body. It felt pointed as it stroked her clit, up and down, sideways, in circles. The heat and tension between her legs intensified. She couldn't believe she felt the orgasm approaching already. She started to move, to say something to Kalen, but he held her more tightly in place.

The water energy didn't stop, but the tendril gentled its strokes. Her orgasm receded for a moment, but then a thicker, more solid-feeling energy pressed against her. He was using earth energy, too. She jerked. Earth energy was dangerous to her. But she wasn't trying to wield it, and when it touched her, nothing happened except the responsive swelling and moistening of her body. It pressed harder, undeterred by the position of her legs, then slid deep and smooth. She had time to exhale, then inhale, and it expanded, stretching her. She could hear gasping cries, near begging, and couldn't believe it was her voice so husky and needful. She tilted her head back, arching as best she could, trying to increase the pressure.

The energy inside took up a thrusting rhythm as the water tendril outside picked up speed. The orgasm came on her, tightening into a painfully exquisite ball, then exploding through her body. She jerked against Kalen, who held her tighter and moaned next to her ear.

"Yes, baby. Yes. So good." He rocked against her ass, the double layer of silk rubbing against them both. "Have you made love with magic like that before?"

She shook her head, starting to come down from the sexual high. A few thoughts started to whisper into her brain. Somehow, Kalen sensed it. And knew how to stop it.

"Enough." He released her waist and threw her away from him without letting go of her wrist. She spun around. He yanked her against his chest, then shoved her so she fell on her back on the bed. "No thinking, my darling air mage. This is not about thought. This is about pleasure." He grabbed her by the waist and shifted her up the bed so she was fully on it, then crawled over her so she was surrounded by his body. "Let's compare magical orgasm to physical orgasm, shall we?" He bent and kissed her lips, softly. "Mouth or cock, Maggie?"

She couldn't think, couldn't articulate what she wanted. He was so hot, and his mouth was so soft. She touched it with her fingers.

"Mouth it is." He pressed it to her neck again, slowly devouring her, moaning against her skin. His hands dragged over her shoulders and up under her back so he could lift her chest. His teeth and tongue played with her nipples until she thought she would scream with need. The magical orgasm had been powerful, but it hadn't been enough because her body was heating up quickly again. She squirmed and lifted her hips. Kalen took the hint and slid down the bed. Maggie panted in anticipation. When his lips touched her, everything seemed to droop in relief. Then his tongue delved in to find her clit, rubbing it hard and bringing her immediately to the

brink. She cried out and pressed upward toward him. He closed his mouth over her and sucked gently, then harder the louder her cries became. Without warning he let her go and stroked her clit again, and she couldn't have stopped the orgasm if she'd tried.

Kalen kept his tongue on her while he pulled the drawstring of his pants loose, then rose up on his knees and began pumping himself. Maggie watched, stunned, as his face tightened and his eyes closed. A moment later he shouted and threw his head back, watching her through slitted eyes as he spilled across her belly.

When he was done, he climbed off the bed and left the room. Maggie lay there, not sure what to do. She was covered in slime that had turned cold very quickly. If she moved, it would get all over the bed, and that wasn't fair to the maids. So she lay there and waited. Nothing to do but think. About how empty this all was. About how much less satisfied she felt after this than she did just knowing Devon was in her bed.

What a mess.

Kalen came back a few minutes later with a warm washcloth, wearing a fresh pair of pants. He lay down beside her and started cleaning her off.

"I'm sorry." His voice was low and he didn't look at her. "I suppose it was too much for me. I didn't have time to get a condom."

"It's okay." Maggie touched his face, realizing when he turned to look at her that he'd washed, and brushed his

teeth. His thoughtfulness surprised her more than his coming all over her had. "I should go."

"No!" He responded quickly and sharply, sounding not annoyed but panicked. His eyes were wide and startled when they met hers.

"Kalen..."

"I would like to share a meal with you, Maggie, and more of this." He lowered his head and kissed her softly. But she felt a strong need to be alone, and the kiss didn't change her mind.

She rose and dressed silently. When she was done, she went out into the sitting room and waited for Kalen to follow. It took him a while, but when he emerged from the bedroom he was fully dressed. He stopped at the doorway and leaned against it, his arms folded.

"You won't be joining me for dinner."

"No."

"Or anything else."

"No."

He sighed and dropped his arms. "Why, Maggie? I thought it was good. I thought I—"

"It's not about you." She resisted the urge to comfort him. She could feel the magic starting to swirl around her and snagged some air energy, just in case. "I made a mistake, Kalen." She hadn't really, but she didn't know how to explain to him. "You're good in bed. You're attentive and unselfish and it felt great. But it wasn't ... it wasn't what I need."

The energy swirled faster, disturbing her clothing and hair. She built a shield with the air energy, and the breeze didn't touch her any more.

"What do you need?" Now Kalen looked disgusted. "That poncy? He's not your choice, Maggie."

"Yes, Kalen, he is." Her conviction was clear, and Kalen wasn't blind or stupid. He nodded.

"All right. If you believe it, it must be true." The magical disruption subsided with his emotions. "I had to try. You'll know how to find me if you change your mind. Or if ... anything else." He crossed the room to her and brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. "We work in a dangerous profession."

A shudder went down her spine, followed by a rush of shock and horror. Something flashed through her. She tried to pass it off as not liking the idea of something happening to Devon, but it was more than that. It was ... God, she hated to even think it ... premonition.

Kalen frowned. "What is it?"

"Nothing. I've got to go." She pecked him on the cheek and left, hurrying down the stairs instead of using the elevator. Something was wrong. Something more than her idiocy. She pulled out her phone as she ran and redialed Devon's number. He didn't answer this time. No one answered. How had she been so stupid? She dialed the apartment, but the answering machine came on. She jogged down the rest of the stairs and hit the outside door running, ignoring the alarm behind her.

She wasn't precognitive. No one in her family was, not even the "I knew it was you" when the phone rings kind of precognition. So why she was so determined to believe she'd just had a premonition, she didn't know. All she knew was that she had to get to Devon. Now.

Before it was too late.

* * * *

Devon had no idea how long he'd been here. How long he'd been unconscious. Or rather, drifting in and out, trying in vain to find magic, get free of his restraints, or see his surroundings. Serenity had left him alone long enough that he hoped she'd had enough of games.

He faded out again. This time, his brain went into complete shutdown. He lost all awareness and slept the sleep of pure exhaustion.

When he woke, at first he thought all of it had been a dream. He was lying flat, on something soft. His arms were at his sides. He had a pillow under his head, and there was light in the room. Diffuse and not enough to see much, but light nonetheless.

Then he tried to move. Sharp pain went through his shoulders. His arms wouldn't come off the bed. His ankles had something around them.

Fuck.

She'd moved him, somehow, and his eyes were so adjusted to the pitch dark he'd been in that the light in the room blinded him. But his forearms were tied down—for some reason, she'd spared his raw wrists—and he was still naked.

He tried to look around, get his bearings, but his eyes burned and watered. He knew it was futile, but he reached out, feeling for magic.

Something brushed over his body, starting at his feet and moving swiftly up his exposed legs, groin, abdomen, and chest, then whispering past his ears. He drew in a sharp breath. Magic. She was using magic on him. He tried to snag it, but he was a fire mage and had never used the other forms of energy to the same level of expertise. Serenity obviously had. He felt rather than heard her laughter. The magic spun above his body, stroking his skin, tweaking his nipples, then gathering at his groin where his fucking cock was responding. It started squeezing and stroking in rhythm. He tensed his whole body, fighting the new orgasm building in him, trying desperately not to succumb to it, but the harder he fought the better it felt. He gasped for air, clenching the sheet under him in both fists. His body arched, his hips following his cock as it grew and strained. Pleasure tightened, tightened, then burst through him, throbbing and gushing until he collapsed, panting and groaning. How the bloody hell long was he going to have to endure this?

"Why do you fight so hard?" Serenity's voice came from the corner. She'd been watching her efforts. Devon turned his head away and didn't answer. He heard the swish of her robe as she came closer. "Most men would give anything to be in your position, Devon. To be with me."

He finally understood. This felt like revenge to him, but to her, it was seduction. She was trying to win him over.

She was barking mad.

"Devon." She sat on the bed next to him. "Will you never give in?"

"No."

He could almost hear her shrug. "It's your choice." Then she left him alone again.

* * * *

Maggie didn't bother going back to her hotel. She caught the next commercial flight to Chicago. It was a direct flight that got her home in the late evening. She had no baggage and caught a quick cab that hit no traffic. So far, though, it was only her transportation that was going well. She'd called Kight Street, but they'd said Devon was between assignments and they assumed he'd gone to Chicago. She'd called his friends. Most hadn't answered. Shark had given one-word answers that told her he still blamed her for what had happened to his friend. But he hadn't talked to him since he left London, and he admitted it grudgingly enough that she believed him.

"Please be there, please be there, please be there." The mantra tripped through her head in time to her footsteps up the stairs to her apartment. She couldn't think of any *good* reason he'd be home and not answering the phone, but she prayed there was one. The locks took forever to disengage. She burst into the apartment, calling his name, but knew instantly that he wasn't there. She could always sense his presence, and she realized now how significant that was.

She was such an idiot.

"Devon?" she called again anyway, just to fill the quiet. Then she noticed the lights on in the bathroom and bedroom. Her heart rate immediately jumped to third gear. Where the hell was her brain? All her training had fled the instant she realized something was wrong.

There wasn't much magic in the apartment. She stockpiled it whenever she was home. She couldn't use earth energy, but laid in supplies of air, water, and fire energy. The water energy Devon couldn't use, and it was harmful to him, so she kept it anchored to one spot in her office. He kept a similar supply of earth energy, too. All of it was gone. Swept clean—which meant someone had been here.

Air energy traveled the most, and some had seeped into the apartment since the sweep. She collected it and prepared for an ambush. If anyone was still here, she'd alerted them well to her presence. She didn't think anyone was, but it would be foolish to make assumptions.

She checked the office and kitchen first, then the bedroom. Devon's travel bag, still full, sat on the bed. A shirt sleeve hung out of the hamper. She'd emptied it before her mission. So he'd returned home, at least. When had he been due? She couldn't remember, but she thought it was within a couple of days after she'd left. She'd taken the assignment gratefully. Cowardly.

The bathroom was empty of people, but it filled Maggie with fear. The shower curtain was half ripped down. The towel rack looked like someone had taken a sledgehammer to it and half knocked it out of the wall. The toilet seat had a big crack in the top, and towels littered the floor.

It was pretty clear there had been a fight. Had it been before or after she made that phone call? The one where she thought Devon was having sex. If she supposed he was attacked coming out of the shower, the fact that the floor was dry meant it hadn't happened recently. Which probably meant he'd been taken before her call. So what the hell was going on?

She flipped her phone open again and redialed Shark.

"Ey."

"Shark, I need your help."

"I olreddy told ya, love," he growled, "I don't know where he is. Now stop—"

"I know, Shark. Listen." She told him what she'd seen, and about the phone call. "Do you have any clue who might have done this?"

"Who would have the power to sweep your place clean, overcome my partner, drag him off to God-knows-where, and seduce him?" He laughed.

Maggie clenched her teeth. "In a nutshell."

"I know who might do somethin' like that, yeah. And she's one hot piece a tail, if you know whadd-I mean. She and Devon got it on right well a few years back, but he was undercover. I don't think she ever got over him."

"Who is she? And where would she go?"

"Name's Serenity. Don't know a last name. Considerin' she was already playin' with Ruger when you called, she couldn't be far. But it would have to be someplace she could secure. Your Guild should know. She's the kind of mage the agencies keep tabs on, ya know?"

"Thanks, Shark."

"You need help bringin' him home, Maggie?" For the first time, he sounded serious and sincere.

"Probably. But there's no time for you to get here."

"I'm here. I can be at your place in an hour."

Gratitude swept over her. She had no idea who she was dealing with, or how she'd get to Devon to rescue him. A second pair of hands—mage hands—would be a blessing.

"All right. Hopefully by then I'll know where we're going."

She hung up and dialed her agency, The Guild. Within half an hour she had more backup, and an address.

And a stone-cold determination to get her soulmate back.

* * * *

"Don't."

Devon knew it was pointless. Serenity had changed her tactics. She'd stopped trying to seduce him, and had spent the last several hours trying to convince him they belonged together. It was almost more torturous than the sex.

"Devon—"

A crash sounded somewhere in the building. Serenity whirled, then leapt to her feet as Maggie burst into the room, magic already flying. Serenity fell back, then fell back again, as Maggie tossed balls of air at her. She fell into the wall, pinned by earth energy. But Maggie couldn't use earth energy, so...

Mages poured into the room. Shark, and Maggie's partner King, and other mages he didn't recognize but who must be from The Guild. Devon's relief was short-lived when he

realized that all these people now knew what had happened. He wasn't sure which was more embarrassing: that he'd been captured, or made a sexual plaything.

Maggie crossed the room and bent to the restraints around his legs. She didn't look at him while she released his arms. He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, squeezing his eyes shut when the room spun.

"How are you?" Maggie asked quietly, leaning next to him.

"Brilliant," he muttered. He didn't want her to talk to him, or touch him. Mostly not touch him. He accepted the towel she offered and draped it over his lap. "How'd you find me?"

"When I saw what happened at the apartment, I called Shark. He figured it out."

"Oh, really?" He looked up at his old friend, who was watching him with no expression. It had been that easy to figure out, huh? Yet he hadn't seen fit to warn him. He'd always hated that Devon was with Maggie. Maybe he'd even helped Serenity find him.

So many betrayals. So much to resolve. He could admit it was easier to consider dealing with Shark than with Maggie. He'd start there. And he'd start by taking back his authority. He stood, wrapped the towel around his waist, crossed to his old friend, and decked him.

* * * *

Maggie both yearned for Devon to return, and dreaded it. She paced the apartment, trying hard not to call him. He'd gone back to London with Serenity bound by magical restraint and Shark choosing a different flight to avoid the

confrontation she knew was coming. Devon hadn't told her what had happened, and he hadn't given her a chance to confess her own sins. He'd said it would be a while before he returned to Chicago, but she didn't want to wait. She had to talk to him. Had to give him a chance to decide ... maybe not to come back at all.

She called when she knew it would be midnight in London and left a voice mail for him to call her when he could, when he had some time to talk, that it was important but not urgent. Then she waited. And longed for him.

Which pissed her off. Because she was not the moping, longing, despairing type. She needed to get herself together and figure out what she was going to say. No begging. No whining. Straight out, she'd tell him what she'd done and why. If he ever fucking called her!

It took days. She accepted a one-day, local assignment from The Guild, certain he'd have called while she was out. He hadn't. Kalen had, just restating what he'd said before she left. She barely heard the message.

Finally, nearly two weeks after he'd left, Devon called.

"I'm catching a flight tonight," he said.

Maggie sagged in relief, falling onto the sofa when her legs stopped holding her. "I'm glad."

"We'll talk tomorrow. It's an overnight flight, changing in New York. I'll be flat out."

He was warning her. "We can talk after you've slept. But I have to tell you something now."

The silence felt like cracked glass.

"What?"

Maggie inhaled deeply. "When I was in California ... after I called and that woman answered ... I ... slept with another man." He didn't say anything. "You know I've been conflicted about us, Devon. I've done just about every passive-aggressive trick to make you leave. To test us. I thought I'd accepted the bonding, the soulmate crap, but I hadn't. I hated it. I wondered constantly if I'd really chosen you, if I was really happy when you were here because I love you, or because of the magic. It was horrible, not knowing for sure."

"Well, the horrible part I remember," he cut in quietly. "I imagine Serenity's actions gave you tacit permission to branch out."

"That pretty much covers it."

"Who was it?"

Maggie had decided she'd never tell him. If they could get past this, any time Kalen's name came up, or if they ever had to work with him on a mission, it would come between them. It was bad enough that she knew. She couldn't tell Devon.

"Kalen Price."

"Wow." He paused. "I didn't expect you to tell me."

Maggie sighed. "I wasn't going to. I guess I thought the secrets were worse than the truth."

"I can see it."

"Devon—"

"No, I don't mean that. I mean, if we weren't together, I could see you with him. He's not a bad guy. And I think he's fancied you for years."

"Oh." She didn't know what to say next. The silence stretched. Finally, Maggie opened her mouth to say

something. She had no idea what, but so far her mouth had been doing fine without her.

"What does that mean for you, Maggie?" Devon asked.

"I guess it depends what it means for you."

"Are you breaking up with me?"

The pain that struck her chest stunned her. She gasped for breath, her vocal cords frozen.

"You should—" He cleared his throat. "You should probably tell me that before I fly over."

"No!" Her lungs inflated, but the pain didn't go away. "No, Devon. It's the opposite. However ... wrong it might have been, it showed me the truth."

"Stop." She could hear him draw in a deep breath. His voice was husky, despite the throat-clearing. "Wait until I get there. I need to see your face."

"Okay. Hurry," she whispered, but he was already gone.

She had hours to wait. She went to the market and bought his favorite foods. Well, his favorite American foods. Then she showered and spent half his flight time trying to decide what to wear. Then she hated herself for turning into something she'd never been, and grabbed her most comfortable jeans and favorite T-shirt.

Four hours earlier than she could expect him, she bounced from couch to kitchen to bathroom to bedroom. The apartment was immaculate, because what else did she have to do, with no assignments and no Devon to keep her occupied? She checked her stores of magic, much more plentiful than they'd been before Serenity had swept the apartment. She played with it, honing the finesse she'd

gained with the bonding. She even tried to use some earth energy, but the pain was still unbearable so she left it outside the building where it had gathered.

There was only one thing left to do. She fought it, but her brain and body won out eventually. After all those hours, all the anxiety, she was asleep when Devon came in the door.

She half heard it open and tried to wake, but she was in a good dream. She and Devon were on a yacht, assigned to retrieve ... something, and were posing as crew. There was the excitement of infiltration, the dread that hangs over every mission, and the joy of being together. An enemy came around the corner, and Devon gathered a ball of flame in one hand and a ball of water in the other, while she added wind and heavy earth. But that wasn't right. They couldn't command all four like that.

"Don't frown, love."

Someone was whispering to her. She turned, but couldn't see anyone but Devon and the bad guy in front of them. She looked back at Devon, and he was staring at her with the coldest eyes she'd ever seen on anyone. Despair blanketed her. It was over.

She whimpered. Someone smoothed her hair off her forehead, and that was foreign enough to pull her from her dream. Her eyes flew open, and there was Devon. Staring at her, but with warmth and ease, though tempered with wariness and fatigue.

"There you are," he said, easing back as she sat up. "I didn't think you'd ever wake up."

"You should know better than to approach a sleeping agent like that," she grumbled, hating that he'd found her that way. She swiped the back of her hand across her mouth, just in case, and straightened her clothes.

"You weren't exactly leaping into battle, were you?" He shifted from where he crouched on the floor to sit next to her on the sofa. "No worries, love. You look exhausted."

"Not as exhausted as you, I wager." She studied him. He looked more wiped out than she'd ever seen him, even after some of his quick-turnaround flights where he'd spent less than two days in London or here before flying back across the ocean. "Bed?"

He heaved himself up with a sighing groan, his hand laced tight with hers. "Absolutely."

They laid down on top of the covers without undressing, Maggie facing Devon and tucked into his chest, her right knee between his. He stroked her back a few times, slowly, but within moments they were both asleep.

Maggie woke first, this time having had no dreams. She laid without moving as long as she could, soaking in the feel of Devon surrounding her. His heat, his scent, his hardness, even the softness of his old T-shirt. All things she hadn't realized she loved. Craved, even. When he wasn't here she brooded, and thought—or tried to tell herself—that it was because she'd been forced into the relationship. But she hadn't wanted to admit that she brooded because she missed him.

Her bladder finally screamed at her to get up. She slowly unlocked her stiff joints and rolled off the bed. After taking

care of business and brushing her hair and washing her face so she didn't scare Devon, she quietly opened the bathroom door, figuring he'd need a few more hours of sleep.

"Got any coffee?"

She looked up, startled. He blinked slowly at her, his gaze groggy, and had only managed to prop himself against the headboard.

"I thought you'd sleep more."

He shook his head and yawned. "That was enough to start, or I'll be jetlagged for a week. Coffee would be good, though."

"I'll make some."

Running to the kitchen was delay and escape, and she didn't like the feeling. But he wanted coffee, and she was smart enough to know their conversation would go better if they were both alert. She wasn't being cowardly.

She used her home café system to brew them each a cup of dark roast. By the time it was ready, Devon had joined her in the kitchen. They sat across from each other at the kitchen table, like negotiating parties in a dispute. She hoped that wasn't what this amounted to.

"Maggie, I need to tell you what Serenity did before we discuss anything else."

She didn't think she needed to know this. "You don't, Devon. It wasn't your fault."

"It was, to a point." He leaned an arm on the table, looking wearier than ever. He told her about the mission where he'd met Serenity, about shacking up with her as part of his cover but trying to make it as good for her as he could.

"Apparently, not 'sharing myself,'" he made air quotes and a typically exasperated face, "was my big mistake. The sex was always about her, not us."

"You can't tell me you didn't get off, with a woman like that."

"No, I can't. Of course I got off. I'm noble, not a saint."

Despite herself, Maggie chuckled.

"But it was never with her, or because of her, it was incidental. So she did whatever she could to find me, so she could convince me it was better her way." Rueful grimace. "She cold-cocked me in the shower. Dragged me to her lair and had her way with me."

"Devon..."

"Maggie, she couldn't have picked a better hell. I never expected to be turned on by anyone but you, ever again. But she knew what she was doing. My body was totally disassociated from my heart and my brain, and she used a dozen different tricks to tease me into it. The pain when I came was worse than real torture."

She didn't know what he wanted from her. "Are you saying the bonding—"

"Fuck the bonding! It had nothing to do with the bonding. It has to do with the fact that I fucking love you, Maggie. She forced me to betray you. It just about killed me."

Her heart cracked. She leaned back in her chair, out of his reach. "Unlike me, who betrayed you all on my own."

"We're not talking about that yet." He looked a little desperate. "We need to deal with this, first."

"They're intertwined, Devon. While you were tied up, being fucked with, I was totally free, fucking someone else. If Serenity hadn't made me think you were just as free, I wouldn't have done it. But I still did it of my own free will, and..." She faltered, not sure if he'd agree with her on the next point. "If I hadn't done it, our relationship might have been doomed."

"So you think your infidelity saved us."

"I don't know. I can't decide for you. I can only decide for myself. And I know now, beyond a shadow of a doubt..." She blinked back unaccustomed tears. Her hatred of them made her voice more fierce when she said, "I love you more than life. I don't care what Serenity did to you. I'm fighting for us." She swallowed. "Back to you."

His lips quirked. He slid his hands across the table. She couldn't help herself. She lifted her own and let him cover them.

"You screwing Kalen makes me feel better about being screwed with by Serenity," he admitted. "Maybe it's fucked up, but maybe it's just balance."

A weighted band seemed to unwind from around her heart and lungs. She hadn't realized how heavy her chest had been until he said that. "You really think we can survive this?"

He shrugged. "I don't think we have a choice. I love you, and I want you."

"Me, too."

"Okay then." He let go of her and stood, circling the table and pulling her upright into his arms. His lips were tender,

careful on hers, but it had been so long since she'd tasted him that they lit her desire in an instant.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her body full-length against his. Her mouth opened for his, inviting his tongue in. He accepted, but went slowly, smoothly, kissing her with finesse and care.

She didn't want finesse. She wanted passion. Hard, driving, can't-get-enough passion, like they'd had that first time in the stairwell. Or in the cluttered abandoned office. Or on the floor of that same office, behind the boxes of junk.

This time, she wasn't going to hold back.

She let go of him long enough to strip off her shirt, then his. She raked her nails up his chest, then slammed against him again, reaching for his mouth. Their tongues dueled, their mouths open and demanding. Maggie held the back of his head with one hand, and grabbed his wrist with the other, pulling his arm up and pressing his hand firmly against her breast. He squeezed instinctively, then pinched her nipple. Hard.

He got it.

They didn't make it into the bedroom. Not the first time. Devon used magic to get rid of the rest of their clothes and propped Maggie on the kitchen table before he thrust into her. He was so hard, and so right on target, that Maggie flew to pieces on the first thrust.

But he didn't let her stop there. He held her hips in place and plunged harder and faster, sending her up to another, different peak. This one wasn't the sharp explosion of her first orgasm. This was deeper, more intense, and affected more of

her body in a constant throbbing wave. She clutched at him, unable to get enough. Wanting more. Screaming his name until her downstairs neighbor pounded on the ceiling.

Devon pulled her tight against his chest and buried his face in her neck, groaning his pleasure as he came. He held her like that as their breathing evened, but Maggie's heart continued to pound and she felt tears building behind her eyelids.

She started to pull back, but Devon wouldn't let her. "I'm not done with you." He lifted her and carried her to the bedroom, where this time they made love slowly, eyes locked, fingers tightly threaded, just like they had during reinforcement, the first time Maggie had thought she was ready for this. For them.

This time, she knew it for sure.

After they showered and climbed back into bed, they lay with legs and arms entwined, both silent for a long time. Finally, Devon broke the quiet.

"What are you thinking, Maggie?"

She fluttered her fingers across his chest, watching the goosebumps rise in their wake. "I'm trying to think of the words I need to make sure you understand that things are different. That I'm going to be different." She paused, feeling cheesy, but figured it was the best she could do. She looked up but not quite far enough to meet his eyes. "I choose you."

Devon's hand tightened on the back of her head. He tilted her until they were looking directly at each other, so she could see what that meant to him. They kissed, and the magic swirled around them, stirred by the power of their

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emotions. Then Devon pulled back just a bit, not loosening his hold on her. What he said eased all the pain and uncertainty she'd ever had about them.

"We choose each other."

About The Author

Natalie J. Damschroder became a writer the hard way—by avoiding it. Though she wrote her first book at age five (appropriately titled, *My Very First Book*) and received accolades for her academic writing (Ruth Davies Award for Excellence in Writing for a paper on deforestation her senior year in college), she hated doing it. Colonial food and the habits of the European Starling just weren't her thing.

Shortly after graduating from college, however, she found her niche—romantic fiction. After an internship with the National Geographic Society, customer service for a phone company just wasn't that exciting. So she began learning how to write the books she'd loved to read all her life. Four books and six years later, she finally sold. Now she struggles to balance her frenetic writing life (how else can she get all the stories in her head on paper?) with her family, the most supportive husband in the world and two beautiful, intelligent, stubborn, independent daughters (one of whom has already declared her desire to be a writer, too). She somehow also fits in a day job and various volunteer positions in and out of the writing industry.

More can be found at www.nataliedamschroder.com

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Don't miss *The TreeKeeper*, by Natalie J. Damschroder, available from Amber Quill Press, LLC

A Matter of Choice
by Natalie Damschroder

As The TreeKeeper, Kayana holds the highest office on Vios, a planet colonized hundreds of years ago but reliant on an archaic economic system. In return for money, the colonites bestow upon Kayana everything she might ever need—except the things she longs for most.

Chosen at age six for her office, Kayana never again left the Tree Hall. But her selectors did not see in her a restlessness, a yearning for adventure, that has grown stronger in adulthood. When the dashing star captain, Maddox, steals a kiss during a bestowment, he awakens in Kayana a passion she barely understands. But he also sets in motion a chain of events that will lead to his death—or the downfall of an entire planet.

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