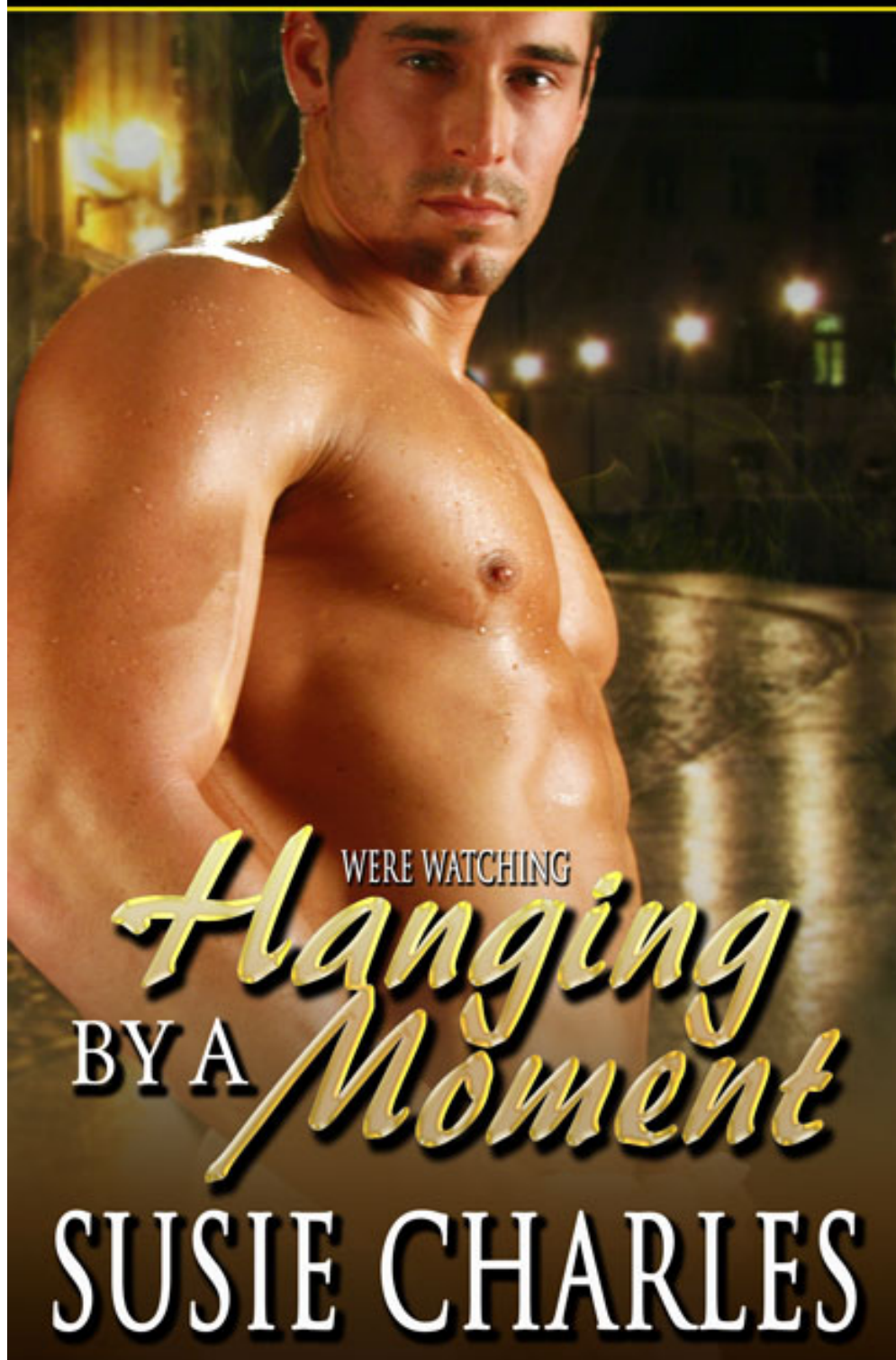


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



WERE WATCHING

Hanging
BY A *Moment*

SUSIE CHARLES

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Hanging By a Moment

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WERE WATCHING:

HANGING BY A MOMENT

Susie Charles

Dedication

To the guys of Lifehouse

Your song, "Hanging By A Moment", provided me with the inspiration I needed to tell Ziggy's story, and told it in a way with music that allowed me to dig deeper to find the words I needed when they seemed out of reach.

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Prologue

Oak Ridge, Tennessee

Thunder boomed and crashed, vibrating over the black umbrellas sheltering the insignificant huddle of graveside mourners. The pastor recited his final words in a rushed staccato over the freshly turned earth. And in fitting punctuation to the tragedy of the last week, the swollen clouds overhead burst with a mighty clap, spewing their contents earthward, turning the incessant, bleak drizzle that had begun two days earlier into a bone-chilling, torrential downpour.

Within seconds the black-garbed mourners had scurried to their cars since the funeral was, to all intents and purposes, over, and Ziggy stood alone. Back straight, body rigid, oblivious to the elements, the hurried departures around him.

Engines coughed to life, streams of exhaust from tailpipes swirling and blending with the oppressive gray mist. Wipers beat furiously in a repetitive *thump, thump*, back and forth across blurry windshields, and the cars moved away. Even the crunch of tires on gravel failed to penetrate the solitariness of Ziggy as he stood with his head down, eyes closed.

The sounds faded, and then even that one tenuous link with humanity was gone, and he was fully alone. The silence complete. Nothing but the splatter of fat drops of rain pounding on the earth, turning the sodden ground to slippery mud.

Water dripped off the ends of his short hair, seeping under the inadequate protection of the black suit he wore, until the clothes stuck to his skin. The icy coldness of the sodden fabric nipped at his flesh, sending a deeper chill through his body, a soul-numbing coldness that no amount of sunlight or warmth would ever thaw.

He was beyond asking why. In that direction lay madness. For there was no answer. Nothing that could explain the loss of two lives, ripped from existence with nothing to show for them except the hole in front of him rapidly filling with water, and the grief that tore at his chest.

He hadn't only lost his best friend. Link had been a brother, not by blood, but in the way of men who sense a kindred spirit in another. A twin of his soul, closer than a blood tie could ever be.

A sad smile overlaid the grief as he flashed back to their first meeting. Basic training. Fifteen years ago. A lifetime.

Barely a week after his arrival, he'd snuck out of camp, the full moon calling to him, forcing him to pad silently past the guards who were on the alert for men, not animals. His wolf form burned with restless energy that only a good hard run, pounding the musty, damp earth of the forest, would assuage. Miles from camp, deep in the wooded terrain that surrounded the facility on all sides, he'd become alert to the presence of

another and had paused, ears cocked, sniffing the air, curiosity overcoming natural caution.

Link Trainer, huge even by werewolf standards, had padded out of the shadows, morphing from wolf to human as a series of hard yips that soon turned to laughs left his lips and made his body shake.

“Well, I’ll be damned! And here I thought I was the only weirdo on base.”

Ziggy had quickly assumed his human form, a hearty chuckle breaking free. The last thing he’d expected to run into was another werewolf.

It was the start of a friendship that had survived wars and too many deaths, years and countless battles. From that day forward, they’d been inseparable. Through three tours of the war-torn Middle East, they’d stayed close. Link had saved his life on more than one occasion. And vice versa. Always there for each other. Always with a laugh and a slap on the back, Link’s natural gregariousness a perfect counterpoint to Ziggy’s laconic nature.

Through the years they’d shared everything, even, on more than one occasion, their women. Until Lucy. Sweet, shy little Lucy.

Link had met her when he’d gone home on leave, and true love had hit his cavalier friend harder than a baseball bat splitting a ripe melon. Within two months he’d romanced her, married her and knocked her up. And all he talked about from that moment forward was Lucy and the baby, and the life they were going to live. His big friend had been totally besotted with the petite brunette, his innocent little sweetheart who could reduce Ziggy’s battle-hardened friend into a pile of mush with one smile from that sweet face.

Link’s last tour was almost up, only a few months to go, and as soon as he got home for good, more kids would follow – hell, he had plans for his own football team. He had his eye on a little home renovation business that would allow him to put down roots with Lucy and the brood. His friend had never been happier. They say happiness is contagious, and seeing Link and Lucy together had made Ziggy yearn to find that sort of happiness, that contentment with a woman of his own.

Until the disturbing letters began to arrive. The frantic, confusing, but all-too-brief emails. And a disquieting sense of unease crept into Link’s mind. Something was wrong. Very, very wrong.

The happy disposition his friend was known for was replaced by a brooding restiveness. Whatever was going on, and Link had, for once, been remarkably unforthcoming, it was clear from what little Ziggy had been able to glean that Lucy was at the center of it.

The second their tour was up, Link was gone, dragging Ziggy along with him.

They’d both seen horror – as a medic in the Special Forces, Ziggy had seen his share of death and destruction, some sights that would haunt him for the rest of his life. But nothing could have prepared them for what awaited them.

Too late. They were too fucking, damned late! By an hour, maybe two at the most. But what did it matter then?

Lucy was dead. The baby was dead. Ripped out of her stomach by a sharp, bloodied knife. By her hand. By her own fucking hand!

It took a few days to uncover what had happened, Ziggy supporting his friend through the soul-wrenching pain and the unutterable, mindless grief. And then Link had wanted to kill. Kill the bastard who had put the idea in Lucy's head that she was carrying an "abomination". Who played with the mind of a woman who was, unknown to them, already delicately poised on the knife-edge of a fragile sanity.

She'd known Link was a werewolf, had seemingly embraced it, loved him and wanted him in spite of it. What Link hadn't been aware of was the battle with schizophrenia she'd been fighting for years. Or the fringe fundamentalist cult she joined. The whirlwind courtship hadn't allowed enough time to find out everything there was to know about her, other than the fact that he loved her. Wanted her. Needed her like he needed air to breathe.

The bastard, the head of her cult, a puffed-up, sanctimonious, self-righteous little prick, had come around the day after he and a grief-stricken Link had buried Lucy and the baby. Intoning that it was God's will. That he had only been God's instrument in removing the *atrocities* from the earth before it could infect others.

Link had lost it then. A murderous rage had filled him and if Ziggy hadn't been there he would have ripped the fucker's throat out. But even then it was too late. Too late for Link.

A sharp report during the night had jerked Ziggy from a fitful sleep on the couch where he'd crashed when he'd finally poured enough whisky into Link to force him into unconsciousness when sleep continued to elude him.

To his dying day, he would never forget. Ziggy closed his eyes, tipped his head up at the murky sky and howled, the sound wrenched from his throat and chest, tearing through him, as he tried to find a vent for his rage, his pain, his fury at finding his friend dead on his bed with his brains spattering the wall behind him...

And now, here he was. Standing beside two fresh graves. His body choked with grief and tense with pain as the rain pelted down on him.

And he couldn't ask why. No answer could ever satisfy, could even hope to explain the utter uselessness and sense of loss that pervaded him.

Chapter One

New Orleans, two years later

"Don't tell me you aren't getting the message she's putting out. That's the fifth time in as many minutes she's swished that ass past you."

"Hey, Ricardo," drawled Ziggy without even looking around. "Yeah, I got the message. Just not interested." With barely a glance at the derriere of the well-stacked lady in the red leather micro-mini as she sashayed out of sight around the curve in the bar, Ziggy looked out over the dance floor from their elevated position at the bar.

Ricardo snorted. "Your eyes must need checking, *amigo*. That is prime, man—Grade A. You sure you got a pulse?"

"Yeah. Unlike some people I know."

"Har, har. Cute. Very cute."

A half smile tipped up the corner of Ziggy's mouth, softening the bored expression that quickly became bemused when he swung around to look at the man who slung a brown leather-clad leg, complete with chaps, over the barstool next to him. A slight knotting of his eyebrows was the only indication that Ziggy noticed the matching leather vest, sans shirt, and the black cowboy hat tipped back on his head.

Ziggy looked pointedly at Ricardo Alvarez, the vampire owner of Dark Side of the Moon. "You got a good reason for looking like that cowboy from the Village People?"

Ricardo's lips turned down. "Christ, that bad?"

"The resemblance is kinda scary, man. Personally, I would have gone for the biker-dude. At least he looked a bit dangerous."

"I lost a Summer bet. A cowboy getup was the price I had to pay."

"A summer bet, huh? That any different from a bet any other time of the year?"

"No, I mean a Sum—"

His words—and the techno medley currently playing—were interrupted abruptly. The Village People's *Macho Man* boomed out of the many speakers, causing Ricardo to jump up, a furious frown on his face as he signaled to the laughing DJ with a repeated slashing motion across his throat. Not before many curious heads turned their way, expressions flicking from incredulous to amused to outright laughing in the space of a heartbeat.

Ziggy tried to keep a straight face, but a chuckle broke free. "Told you the resemblance—"

"All right. All right," bit out Ricardo. "I wish the damn woman would hurry up and arrive," he grumbled. "The sooner I get out of this crazy getup, the happier I'll be. Feel like a stupid Seventies reject."

The perky disco tune continued, much to Ricardo's obvious consternation.

"Well, you gotta admit," Ziggy offered, "the resemblance is kinda startling. The moustache, the hat..." He cast an assessing look at the glaring man. "The hairy chest though... Don't remember that being part of the dude's original ensemble."

"Yeah, well I ain't waxing for nobody," huffed Ricardo. "Besides, I didn't want to look like some pansy-assed cowboy-wannabe who probably never went near a horse in his life."

"Oh and you have?"

"I was born on a horse, my friend."

"Must have been mighty uncomfortable for your mama," deadpanned Ziggy.

"You're really a bundle of laughs tonight, aren't you? Keep it up, *amigo*, and you'll get to see my spurs up close and personal. All over your ass."

Ziggy smiled, amused to see his normally steady friend showing signs of being distinctly ruffled. He had already known Ricardo, or Rico as he was known around the scene, through their mutual friend, Marcus, but the two hadn't really become friends until Rico opened the discreet and very exclusive bondage club, converting a small, rundown, two-story hotel on the outer edge of the Quarter that had been marked for demolition. From the outside it looked just like a private house—nondescript, neat, bland, nothing to draw attention to it. Inside though, was another matter. Walking through the entrance was like stepping into another world, another era—decadent, lush, erotic, a sybaritic feast for the senses in every way.

"How's Randy and Crissy, by the way?" asked Rico.

Ziggy rolled his eyes as he thought about his newly mated brother. "Still wallowing in matrimonial bliss. We hardly see him when he's not working. If it weren't for little Amber, I doubt he'd leave the bedroom at all once he gets home."

"Ah yes, his little girl. She's gonna break a heart or two when she's older." He tossed Ziggy a slanted grin. "Who would have believed it." Rico shook his head. "Randy mated and married I was expecting, but a father? And so soon. Single women all over New Orleans are still crying into their drinks, you know."

Ziggy smirked. "Maybe so, but at least now we get some work done around the agency. God, between him and Chad, for a while there I thought I was running an escort agency instead of a security business."

"It's true that Randy is a man of many talents. And Chad..." Rico waggled his eyebrows. "Eh, I don't envy you keeping your cousin in line. Women will always be attracted to a werecat—it's the pheromones."

"Pity he isn't more like Uncle George." Chad's father, in total departure from normal werecat behavior, was mated to Ziggy's aunt. Now there was a man who had

met his match—George never looked at another woman. Aunt Isabel only had to twitch that ass and George was all over her like a rash. Plus they had the offspring to prove it—six sons and two daughters later, Aunt Izzy had told him—jokingly—to tie a knot in it.

“You would wish that fate on some poor female?”

Ziggy laughed. He tried to visualize Chad with that many kids. Oh man, if there was a God in heaven...

“So what’s your problem?” Rico asked. “It may have been months since you graced my humble establishment, but if you’ve just come to drink my free booze, then I might have to charge you rent on that seat you’ve been occupying for the past two hours.”

Things had been so hectic at Were Watching that scratching his sexual itch had repeatedly fallen into the category of “later”, but Ziggy was surprised, just the same, that his absence had been noted. He raised an eyebrow. “You keeping tabs on me?”

Rico sat back and folded his arms over his chest, his eyes doing another sweep of the room. “I keep tabs on all my clientele, as you well know. And thanks to the surveillance system your men set up—which is working extremely well, by the way—I don’t even need to leave the comfort of my office unless I want a breath of fresh air. That’s how I know you, my friend, haven’t moved since you arrived.”

“I’m looking.” Ziggy tipped up his glass and downed the contents, motioning to the barman for a refill.

“For what? Tell me. Maybe I can help.”

That was the \$64,000 question. One he’d asked himself more than once. He was restless, but figuring out the reason why eluded him. “Eh, who knows? Something...special. Different. I figure I’ll know it when I see it.”

Ziggy glanced around. It was still reasonably early, and there wasn’t much to “see”—after the brief disco-inspired flurry of the Village People, only five or six couples remained dancing, and less than half the tables surrounding the dance floor held an assortment of clientele. But then, considering a good proportion of the regulars were vamps, chances were the rest were out having “dinner”.

“Tired of the same old, same old?” Rico nodded in understanding. “It becomes hard when it’s the same faces night after night. What we need is some fresh blood.” He snapped a glance at Ziggy and favored him with a droll look and a chuckle as Ziggy opened his mouth to speak. “And save me the benefit of your masterful wit, Trudeau. You *know* what I mean. But I may be able to help—”

Rico cut off what he was about to say and straightened, his eyes fastened on something—or *someone*—Ziggy couldn’t see. “Well, it’s about damn time!” In spite of the outburst, Rico’s words lacked either anger or malice. Instead he smiled, his grin widening until he broke into a laugh. “Well, I’ll be damned!”

“Yes. You are. This is news to you?” Ziggy cocked an eyebrow at him.

Rico cast Ziggy a disparaging look. "You're really a barrel of laughs tonight. Is it any wonder you're sitting here all alone? No doubt you've wowed all the ladies with your great charm and scintillating wit." Then Rico's gaze swung back to what had snagged his attention previously and he laughed out loud.

"So what is it?" Ziggy was curious now and tried to determine what had so wholeheartedly snagged Rico's attention.

The laughter simmered to a chuckle, and then into an indulgent grin that looked decidedly odd on the vamp who more often of late took on the role of "enforcer" in the growing New Orleans vamp community—a role left vacant since his good friend, René, had left town. "Hmmm?"

"What the hell are you looking at?"

The fond smile remained on Rico's face, a soft look that Ziggy wasn't sure he'd seen too often on his friend's face. "Or should I say who?" Ziggy squinted through the half-light to the other side of the club where the entrance was flanked by two huge palms. Whoever had caught Rico's attention must be hiding behind a frond because he'd be damned if he could see what had sparked the reaction. Even with his acute vision, compliments of his wolf heritage, vamps still had it over shapeshifters. They could pick out a flea against the darkness of a moonless night. Just so long as it had a pulse, it was like a flashing neon light to them. "You know it's just wrong that you bloodsuckers have better eyesight than us."

Rico answered without taking his eye off whoever had caught his attention. "Yes, well I know one lady in particular who would just love to bring you over to our side if you gave her half a chance. She could fix up that inferior eyesight you furries have—no problem. Hell, she's been lusting after your neck—not to mention other body parts—ever since I opened up and you walked in the door the first time looking like a bad old Hell's Angel."

A shudder passed over Ziggy's body. "You mean Clarissa?" The blonde vampire was, so he'd been told, the perfect sub—willing to do *anything*. But she was into pain and blood in a big way, and there was just something about her that set off Ziggy's alarms. No way was he letting her anywhere near his neck—or any other body parts she apparently coveted, for that matter. "Thanks all the same, but I think I'll cope."

He followed Rico's line of sight again, curious to see what could make his usually cynical friend look so goddamn sappy. "So?"

"So, what?"

"Not what. Who. Who are we looking at?"

"Patience, my friend."

Ziggy's whole body tightened as he finally caught sight of the "who" Rico's eyes were latched onto. A lady in a deep ruby-red cheongsam with side slits from ankle to just short of indecent, showing a flash of thighs in black silk stockings and four-inch heels as she walked. Long, dead-straight, blue-black hair fell in a glossy rope from the

ponytail she wore high on her head, a dainty mask covering her eyes providing a hint of mystery.

Yeah baby, he thought as the vision headed their way. A steady throb set up in his groin, and it was no wonder. The dress she wore was neither flashy nor as overtly sexual as the clothing most of the females in the club wore. In fact it was simple and understated by comparison—a touch of feminine sophistication in a world dominated by leather and chains—and amplified her considerable charms to the extreme. But the effect was so overwhelmingly sexy, so...classy. Definitely very classy. “Who *is* she?”

Unbidden, a vision of her naked sprang to mind, her riding him, all that long hair falling around them in a shiny curtain as he gripped her waist and thrust up inside her. The image was so real his cock surged inside his pants, pinching against the studs on his fly. The throb became an uncomfortable pounding and he was glad for the industrial strength studs—making an introduction by having his cock bust out of his pants was not the way he preferred to impress ladies.

Ignoring the aching discomfort, Ziggy sniffed the air discreetly, trying to pinpoint her particular scent. And when he caught it—a soft orange blossom fragrance—every nerve ending in his body rioted, his cock going from hard to rock-solid stiff so fast he jolted, slipping a little off the barstool. Taking the hint, he stood, giving the steel-hard pike in his pants a bit more room.

Rico cast a curious eye over his shoulder at Ziggy and grinned. “Oh, you’ve *finally* seen something you like?”

“Give me a break, Rico. A man would have to be dead not to like that.”

“Even so,” chuckled Rico.

“Funny. Who’s the comedian now?” Ziggy rolled his eyes. “So?”

“She’s my hostess.”

“You have a hostess? Since when?”

“Only on the weekends.” Rico cast Ziggy a sideways glance. “It certainly has been a while, hasn’t it?”

Well that would explain why he hadn’t seen her—he’d made a few forays to Dark Side over the past months, but they’d been mostly midweek when things were a little quieter. “And she does what, exactly?”

“Keeps the customers happy.”

“Meaning?”

“Not what you’re thinking, my friend. Summer is off limits.”

Summer...summer... “This wouldn’t be the ‘summer’ of the ‘summer bet’, would it?” The name certainly fit. Sultry, even the scent of her reminded him of warm nights, sea breezes...naked bodies sliding over silky sheets... In particular his and hers.

“You got it. We had a small wager on a new lady member I’ve had my eye on. I lost...” Rico watched Summer, his eyebrow lifting as he scanned her from head to toe. “Or so I thought.”

"But has she...does she ever..." Ziggy coughed to cover the husky croak in his voice.

The deception didn't fool Rico and he let out a short bark of a laugh before turning serious. "No. Not that most of the Doms in here wouldn't grab her in a second if she gave them half a chance."

As they watched, Summer stopped at a table. Ziggy knew the three men she spoke to—by sight, at least. Although two of the men had their subs with them, he watched in growing aggravation as she was pulled, laughing, onto the lap of Miles Romansky, the owner of the largest trucking firm in the state. The man was well known as being partial to the more hardcore fetishes, and Ziggy's whole body stiffened and went on alert as the man pulled her closer, looking up at her with a determined expression on his face.

The feel of Rico's fingers gripping his arm made him aware that he'd actually taken a step toward them. "It will be fine. Just watch."

With some reluctance he took his seat again. Unable to relinquish the tension zinging through his body, Ziggy watched in amazement as Summer smiled at the overbearing Dom and whispered something in his ear. The hardened expression erased so that the man smiled and laughed, caressing her generous ass in an almost affectionate way before he kissed her palm briefly and released her so that she could stand.

"Damn!" Ziggy let out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"She does have a way about her, doesn't she?" said Rico, fondness, almost pride in his tone.

She had a way that Ziggy was dying to get to know all right. Preferably with his cock first and her mouth later. Except it seemed to be taking forever for her to reach them. Dammit!

He was distracted momentarily as his view of Summer was blocked by the lady in red. Since her subtle "messages" had failed to do the job, she was trying the more direct approach, and stood in front of him, not saying a word, her "message", though, quite blatant.

It was patently obvious now to Ziggy why she hadn't managed to snag his attention on any of her previous forays past him. Compared to the understated elegance of Summer, the "Lady in Red" barely rated a first glance, let alone a second. Brash, a surly curl to her highly glossed lips, even the outfit she wore was like a billboard advertising what she had to offer, rather than one to entice and seductively lure a discerning male. Irritated at having his observation of Summer interrupted, he faced the woman, his expression impassive.

"Your name?"

"Mindy, sir."

It was the slight slur on the title that made him stiffen.

"Well, Mindy, I'm not sure if you're new or not, but if you want to get a Dom's attention, this is not the way to do it. Now move away."

"But—"

He glowered at her. "Move. Away."

When she pouted and walked off in a huff, a breath of relief whistled through his lips, earning him a soft laugh from Rico.

He was annoyed, though, that during that small distraction, another male, one he wasn't familiar with, had swung Summer out onto the dance floor.

Every possessive, dominant bone in his body hardened as he watched the man hold Summer close, one hand sliding down her back to hold her at waist level while the other one caressed down over the womanly swell of her hip, then buttock, holding her firm against him as they did a slow bump and grind to the heavy sensual beat.

The thought of anyone else touching her like that made him choke on the irritation that surged through him, and when the man's head dipped down to whisper something in her ear, Ziggy rose from his barstool, hands clenching and unclenching, unable to sit still with the restless energy infecting him. A surge of biting hunger, so strong he could almost taste it, filled him. And he wasn't the only one—a continuous rumble vibrated through him from the wolf inside.

Ziggy turned to see Rico looking at him, rather than Summer, sappy smile gone. "So, what's the deal, Rico?" he said, trying to flush the tension from his body and force a casualness to his words in spite of the unreasonable, unfamiliar emotions afflicting him. "Is she yours? Is she taken?"

Rico wasn't fooled for a second and cast a knowing eye over him. "My, my. I do believe I detect a spark of interest. Will wonders never cease..."

"Smart-ass. Just answer the questions."

"I don't know...maybe I should make you sweat a bit..."

"You know, I'm sure that DJ must have a copy of YMCA there somewhere..."

"Oooh, nasty!" Rico's eyes flared and a mock-snarl tilted his upper lip. "Fine, she's a very, very dear friend...no, she's not mine, no, she's not taken, and..." he locked eyes with Ziggy, "she's under my personal protection. All my other regulars know it, and now you do too."

"Protection?"

Rico's eyes turned frosty, the ever-present humor absent for once, his expression deadly serious. "Anyone who hurts her dies. Simple."

Ziggy was taken aback by the chilling menace in Rico's tone. But he'd spent too many years reading the men he worked with, fought with through three tours of duty in the Special Forces, tuning in to undercurrents that often told more than words. So his ire of moments before abated slightly as incredulity swept through him at the change that had come over his friend—he'd bet his last dime that Rico was in love with the woman. It was the only explanation he could think of.

Rico looked away as their gazes settled once more on Summer.

"Hang on." Ziggy swung narrowed eyes at Rico. "Protected, how?"

"We are...linked."

"Sonofabitch! You've fucking bitten her?" He forced the words out through clenched teeth. "Why? And you'd better have a damn good reason."

Rico sat back, leaning his elbows on the padded armrest of the bar, and raised an eyebrow at Ziggy's outburst. "My, my. Aren't we the possessive one."

Ziggy turned back to Summer, who had left her dance partner—*about fucking time!*—feeling a crushing need to get closer, touch her, hold her, beat at him as she finally neared them. "She's mine," he whispered under his breath, and then wondered what the hell he was saying.

"Oh really?" Rico flashed him a quick grin then stood as Summer approached.

Damned vamps and their super-sharp hearing!

"Yes, well, you might want to run that by Summer first," Rico continued. "In here, what Summer wants, Summer gets." Rico turned to the lady in question, a big smile on his face. "Well, well, if it isn't little Suzie Wong..."

Suzie Wong? What the hell happened to "Summer"?

"Howdy, cowboy," a sultry voice purred. "In that getup, a gal...or a guy will be thinkin' you're lookin' for a ride tonight..."

"Wench!" laughed Rico, wrapping his arm around her waist. "I thought *I* lost the bet. So what's with your outfit?"

"I decided to take pity on you, old man. Now we can both look ridiculous. By the way, who's Suzie Wong?"

Ridiculous? thought Ziggy in disbelief. Rico, maybe—no, definitely—but Summer? Hell no! But yeah, the Suzie Wong bit had him beat, too.

"Old movie with William Holden and Nancy Kwan...The World of Suzie Wong..." Rico stopped when two blank faces greeted his words. "Never mind. I'm obviously showing my age..."

"And then some," mumbled Ziggy. Rico responded with a dour look in reply.

But Ziggy's attention was pulled back to Summer as she tugged at the dress, the movement of trying to smooth it down over her generous hips just drawing his eyes to the seductive curves his hands were itching to mold and caress. "These dresses are designed for tiny little Asian ladies who have two percent body fat, and the curves of a prepubescent teenager—do you have any idea how hard it was to pour my body into this thing? You need to stop Michel feeding me all that *Gateau de Sirop*. I feel like I'll bust a seam if I breathe out. God help me if I sneeze." She fingered the fringe on Rico's vest and chuckled.

Sexual hunger like he hadn't felt in years flooded through Ziggy as his eyes followed the full curve of her ass. When she lifted a leg to rest a foot delicately clad in a

strappy stiletto on the rung of Rico's stool, the split in her skirt widened, and Ziggy's mouth dried out at the generous expanse of thigh she revealed in sheer black stockings.

Rico pulled her close. "Well, it was worth every calorie. You look beautiful. Now come here and give me a kiss."

Ziggy had to grit his teeth as Summer, laughing, wound her arms around Rico's neck, the vamp wrapping her in a full body hug that set Ziggy's teeth on edge. It was hard to say what she really looked like, even close up, since the little mask covered the top half of her face. But that mouth alone was the stuff of fantasies. Small, tipping up at the corners, with a slightly fuller lower lip that just begged to be bitten and tugged on.

His groin clenched when she kissed Rico – and it was no "hello" peck like the other men received. If there was any tongue in there, he might just turn rabid. In fact, he wanted nothing more than to rip her out of the vamp's arms and drag her away. Run her to ground... Oh yeah, chase her until she submitted, on her hands and knees, offering her swollen, dripping cunt up to him and then cover her body with his, burying himself inside her over and over until... Until what?

A low, warning growl rumbled out of Ziggy's chest like a long roll of thunder, and he stopped. Shook himself. Sweat had broken out all over his body and he was so close to the change it shocked him. Just to be sure, he held up a trembling hand, relieved to see it looked normal. God, what the hell was wrong with him? The wolf never came out unless he set it free. And here he was about to go all furry and he hadn't even realized, hadn't even felt it coming. He'd never been like this with a woman before. Never. He came to the club, purged some demons with a willing sub, got some relief, and slipped back into his life again. No ties, no commitment, and definitely no mating. Just how he liked it.

But this... He had no fucking idea what was wrong with him, but he was sure as hell going to find out.

"Who's your intense friend?" Summer whispered in Rico's ear. The man was dressed like most of the other Doms – black leather pants, although this one sported a loose, white silk shirt as opposed to the standard black or white T-shirts most of the others favored – and this man could stop traffic. He was hot on so many levels she could work up a sweat just standing next to him.

Rico chuckled in her ear. "You like?"

Was he kidding? Saints preserve her, the man gave new definition to the word gorgeous! The dark honey-colored hair that curled at his nape, and eyes the color of light amber were just part of the package. From the moment she noticed him sitting with Rico, she'd barely been able to tear her eyes away. Big. Not just tall, but solid – chest, arms, legs. And tight, like a coiled spring waiting to be unleashed. She could only imagine what it would feel like to have all that intensity directed toward her. She bit down on her lip before she embarrassed herself by letting out a hungry whimper.

His eyes latched onto the small movement before lifting again to sear their way into hers—hungry, very, very hungry. A dark frown crossed his brow as his eyes drifted to where Rico's hand absently rubbed up and down her side.

A nervous giggle bubbled up. "In spite of the fact that he looks like he wants to kill you, he's kinda cute. What did you do—take away his lollipop?"

"Something like that..." Rico let rip a big belly laugh. "Cute, huh? Okay, sweet thing." Rico turned around until he was facing the tall man looming next to him, the arm he had around her waist pulling her in tight to his side. "Summer, I'd like you to meet a very good friend of mine, Ziggy Trudeau. Ziggy, this is Summer Grayson."

Summer watched Ziggy closely, her smile slipping slightly as her senses flared. Now that she met his amber eyes full on, she could sense the heavy darkness that tormented Rico's big friend. A deep hurt that went right to the core of the man, leaving a shadow over his soul.

A hint of that shadow passed over her as well, and a small shiver made her tremble at the instant connection, a reaction that wasn't lost on Rico, judging by the way he squeezed her waist in a comforting response.

Her psychic gift, her ability to "read" people, see into their inner self, was one she'd inherited from her grandmother. For so long she'd suppressed it, following ridicule as a child, not only from her friends but especially from her mother. It was a gift she often wished she didn't have, since there was no filter, and she picked up the bad as well as the good in people. It had taken her almost dying, though, for the gift to reemerge in full force, and now it pricked at her constantly.

With this man it was almost overwhelming. So clear, so powerful, as though she had a conduit into his soul. The effect was unnerving, unsettling.

"Hello, Ziggy. Pleased to meet you."

"Definitely my pleasure, Summer."

Husky. Deep. The sound was a gentle rumble, a bit rough around the edges, but sexy as hell. Holding her hands out to him, she leaned forward to offer her cheek. Until he turned his head at the last minute. She stiffened, caught unawares as his soft, warm lips brushed over hers in a slow, sensual slide. The touch, though gentle, taking control of her senses so that her head reeled.

Sex.

Hot, sweaty, steamy sex.

It was the only way to describe the man kissing her, and the thought barreled into her brain before she had time to prepare herself for the extreme sensory overload. Nerve endings all over her body charged as though hit with a bolt of electricity.

Shocked, she gasped, stepping back into Rico's arms and rupturing the deeper connection, but not severing it completely.

His eyes, though, wouldn't release her. She felt as if she were tumbling in a freefall into the twinkling amber depths. Transposed over that, the startling image of a golden

wolf shimmered in and out of focus, the eyes hungry, penetrating. But rather than scare her, a liquid, sensual heat coursed through her, warming her, the sudden clench of her womb shocking her. Only the questioning tilt of his head snapped her out of it. Not before a sharp shudder of arousal made her breath catch, and to her surprise she felt the unmistakable slide of moisture down her inner thigh.

His nostrils flared as he appeared to sniff, his jawline firming, his eyes darkening.

As he held her hands in both of his, something else shook her. Her eyes widened as a slideshow of visions, stronger, clearer than any she'd ever experienced before, hit her with the force of a solid punch that made her gasp.

The two of them, together. Naked.

His body blanketing hers as she writhed in orgasm beneath him.

A bite.

A roar of primal satisfaction.

Ziggy's arms locked around her from behind in a tight, possessive grip as her passage clenched and spasmed around him, milking him in long shuddering bursts, his cock filling and flooding her with his seed in a climax that seemed to go on and on...

Her body responded to the image, flushing warmth from her head to her toes, her heart racing at the intense explicitness of it.

Just as she felt unable to take any more, the vision shifted, faded.

A small window of happiness—simple, but soul deep. Relief coursed through her, but even that small respite was fleeting. Like a thunderhead lurking overhead, a dark shadow blotted out that ray of sunshine, and images of pain and hurt took over.

Her body stiffened at that and she wanted to run, escape what seemed destined to occur. She'd had enough pain to last her two lifetimes. But something, some force she was unable to fight, held her there, overlaying the confusing maelstrom of emotions that swirled inside her.

The inescapable, undeniable knowledge that she was exactly where she was meant to be.

A brief flicker of panic flared, snuffed out as a gentle tug on her hands pulled her thoughts back to the here and now...

"Dance with me."

Dance with him? After what she'd just seen? Every logical thought in her head pushed her to leave. Now! Her mouth and throat dry, she couldn't even speak.

When she didn't answer, he leaned closer. "I want to hold you, Summer. Need to." Dark amber eyes focused on her. Captured her. She didn't imagine the flicker of pain, the unbearable longing there for a second but gone as he blinked. "I think you want the same thing," he said softly.

He turned and paused. Watching her. Waiting.

It was a mere breath in the space of a thousand lifetimes, as though she were hanging by that moment on the edge of forever. Forces beyond either his or her understanding coalesced into a single heartbeat. Connected by nothing but their fingertips, their eyes, and on a deeper level, their souls. By the knowledge that destiny waited for her with the man in front of her. Ziggy was willing her to let go, to fall. With him. Into him. And nothing could have stopped her. Letting go of the horror of her past, the emotional limbo of her present, she took that first, unsteady step into her future.

"Come."

With a nod, she followed.

For a moment she'd forgotten where they were, but as though he could sense her need for darkness, an escape from curious eyes, he led her into the shadowy corner on the side of the room furthest from the tables and bar.

The minute they moved onto the dance floor, he lifted her hands until they draped around his neck then wrapped his strong arms around her so that she felt wrapped up. Sheltered. Protected. Safer than she'd ever felt. But this close to him, with not even a breath between them, it was impossible to ignore the effect he had on her. She started to tremble, her cunt began to pulse, her channel flushed with moisture.

Closing her eyes didn't help. The same images as before assaulted her. It was too much. All her senses were rioting. She knew she'd never had a connection like this with another man. As though he'd always been there—the memory, the knowledge of him lying dormant, waiting for this moment.

He moved against her, sliding, pelvises rubbing, the movement sinuous, following the seductive beat of the music. She gasped for breath. The touch of his body burned her, the sensations filtering deep so that it felt as though he were already inside her. Not just her mind, but the heated slide and thrust that filled her aching passage.

She bit her lip, whimpering against the sensory assault.

Too much. It was all too much. She tried to clutch at rational thought, seeking some branch of reasoning to latch onto to explain the swirling torrent of emotions, the sucking vortex of lust that pulled and tugged at her. No rationality, nothing logical. Just the words her grandmother uttered to her long ago, in response to a question full of the longing of a young teenage girl to be loved...

"Ah, child, there is no 'how will I know?' When you meet the match to your soul, your heart will know..."

Before she could grasp at it, examine the message it brought her, a large hand rubbing her back in gentle, caressing strokes distracted her, before it settled on her buttock, cupping the swell and easing her in a rhythmic pull up against the hardness of his groin, nudging against her mound with his hard cock until her clit felt as though it would explode. Unbidden, another whimper escaped her throat, and she looked up into eyes that were heavy lidded, that seemed to see right through her to every secret, every wish in her soul.

"Trust me, Summer. Hold me."

Trust him? Hold him?

"Nothing will happen you don't want to."

Small consolation. Her body had no sense—it was responding to his as though it wanted to climb inside.

A hint of stubble brushed against her neck as he leaned over her to nibble at her earlobe. "Kiss me," he whispered over her cheek.

A finger stroked under her chin, the touch soft, encouraging her to lift her head. Just a flash of dark gold eyes that seemed to glow, and then before she could think further his lips were on hers, caressing, rubbing. The scent of him, no cologne, just overwhelmingly male. The essence of heat and passion, filled her head so that she inhaled deeply, trying to draw it into her. Then a tongue licked along the soft flesh of her lips, nudging softly but insistently until her mouth parted under his.

Rough. Hot. His tongue slid alongside hers. Encouraging, long caresses that shot fire to her nipples, causing them to pucker, to throb as they tightened almost to the point of pain. But such a sweet pain...

Just when she felt she'd never take another breath, like she didn't want to move, to break the delicious connection, he lifted his head, leaving her lips tingling. She breathed deeply, trying to draw much-needed air into her lungs.

"That's the way, honey." His voice, a deep, husky rumble of encouragement at her ear, sent shivers of pleasure over her body.

A line of nibbling kisses stretched along her jawline, playful nips that nonetheless ratcheted up her breathing when he licked and nibbled up to her lobe.

"You taste fantastic. God, I could drown in your taste..."

Oh, she knew that feeling. When he sucked the skin of her neck, behind where her hair hung down, the sensuous tickle flashed goose bumps over her skin and she arched into him, a soft, needy moan escaping before she could stifle it.

The velvety rasp of a tongue swiped a slow line down her neck. Teeth took erotic nips at the sensitive flesh above her collarbone, and her breath sped up, pitiful little pants puffing from between her lips.

She wasn't the only one breathing roughly. He lifted his mouth from her neck to rest against her forehead.

"Summer honey, you're driving me crazy, you know that? The way you taste, feel..."

In some distant part of her brain she was vaguely aware of his hands sliding over the silky fabric of her dress as he spoke, caressing her buttocks with the slippery fabric. The hand fondling her ass moved, the fingers slipping into the crevice, sliding down...up...down...pressing in, the effect not only teasing the sensitive pucker, but making her bare pussy ride his cock.

His head lifted and a soft growl rumbled up his throat. "Honey..." he inhaled deeply, his body tightening, "do you have any panties on?"

Words were beyond her. Unable to speak she shook her head.

A second later, as though a switch had been flicked, Ziggy was devouring her, muffled grunts rumbling in his chest as his tongue thrust deep, his mouth voracious, one hand clenching on her buttock while the other wandered up to pinch a hardened nipple. Sexual energy poured off him, swamping her in a blanket of heat and lust, drawing her into the rabid sensuality that hung over them like a cloud, waiting to be unleashed.

Breathing roughly, he pulled back.

“Have you ever fucked in public?”

Chapter Two

The crude delivery of his question shocked her, although why she couldn't say. An innocent virgin, she was not.

She shook her head dumbly, even as a flood of sensual heat suffused her body, tightening her nipples, making her clit tingle, her heartbeat speed up.

A sense of unreality, of things spinning out of her control, tickled at her mind. The only reality, the only anchor was the warmth of Ziggy's body surrounding her, enfolding her in a sense of security.

"I'll never hurt you, Summer. I'll protect you, I promise you that. But I need to know if you trust me. God, say yes, honey."

Briefly she wondered what he meant, but she lifted her head and looked into serious, pleading eyes. Eyes that asked a thousand unspoken questions that could be answered with one word.

"Yes."

A brief nod was all the reply she received before his large hand palmed her thigh, lifting her leg to sit along the line of his hip, her foot dangling over his ass, the feel of leather under her calf...

"Give me your mouth."

She reached up.

"Good girl. That's it."

His lips covered hers with a long, drugging kiss that wiped coherent thought from her mind. She gasped into his mouth as rough fingertips teased with surprising gentleness along the damp lips of her pussy, featherlight touches that flowered open the folds before slowly easing inside. A single finger slipping into her moist channel on the slide of her arousal. Moving out then back in. Joined by a second thick digit, the movement still slow, easy, but making her feel full, needy, so that she tensed and clenched her inner muscles on the thickness.

She lifted her head, trying to calm her breathing. But one look into Ziggy's eyes, seeing a need there every bit as desperate as her own, took that breath and slammed it into her chest.

Her eyes fluttered shut as Ziggy's mouth lowered to buss against her lips, rubbing at them, licking until she opened for him. And surrendered to a force greater than both of them.

In time with his tongue, his fingers, still buried deep in her pussy, began to thrust, once, twice, his thumb brushing over and around her clit in a way that made her legs weak. Then he withdrew, lowering her leg until the trembling limb touched the floor.

She gasped in shock when he painted the shiny juices over her lips before he kissed her again, licking the taste of her off her lips.

And still his hips ground against hers, moving to the seductive rhythms.

"Next time I'm going to eat that pretty cunt, honey. I want you to come for me so all those delicious juices flow into my mouth."

Her pussy clenched as much at his words as the hoarse, raw sound of his voice. *Next time? There was going to be a next time?*

He reached up to take her hand, keeping it firmly in his as he lowered it between their bodies.

"Feel that?" She nodded against him as their joined hands cupped and pressed against the huge erection. "Do you want it? Do you want me?"

She nodded again. Unable to talk, to think past the insane craving he'd sparked inside her.

"Tell me."

Her eyes flashed open.

"Tell me, Summer, or we stop and just dance. Now give me the words."

She stared at him in confusion. What words? Her brain was refusing to work, too frazzled by the physical sensations assailing her.

The hunger in his eyes was banked, not gone, as evidenced by the tension that filled his face as he removed her hand and lifted it again, resting it on his shoulder.

"No! Please." What was she saying?

He kissed her nose, her forehead, the gesture, with this man, hinting at a tender sensuality so at odds with what she was used to. "Tell me what you want, Summer. Otherwise..."

"I-I want...you." The words rushed out of her mouth before she had a chance to think about it. Before it forced a lie from her lips she'd regret later.

"Thank God," she thought she heard him whisper against her brow. "But I need your help. You with me, honey?"

She nodded.

"Okay, open the studs. Real slow. I want to enjoy every second of your hands on me."

Slow? She'd never survive *slow*. She was so damn close to coming just from feeling him rub up against her.

Still, she did as he said, releasing the studs as slowly as she could. Tension tightened his body and his hands gripped her hips a little harder, every time her fingers inadvertently rubbed over his erection. And lord, he was hard, filling the leather so that the pants were pulled taut over his groin. When the last one released, his hand covered hers and guided it inside the gap until she held his cock in her hand. Heavens, it was so hot! A grunt left his lips as she freed it from the constriction of the leather, unable to

resist running her hand down then back up the silky smooth skin. Her body responded, drops of her arousal tracing a slick path down her inner thighs.

"Feel good?" he asked, the hoarse sound back in his voice.

She nodded and his hand joined hers again, trapping the heat against her palm as he set up a leisurely stroking.

"Feels damn good to me too." His hand stopped hers as he groaned against her hair. "A bit too good." He returned her hand to drape around his neck, but the feel of the erection nestled between their bodies scorched her tummy through the thin satin fabric of her dress.

The bruising touch of his mouth on hers once more stopped her from saying a word as the front of her dress was eased to the side, the thigh-high split allowing him to do so easily. Her heart skittered in her chest, adrenaline pumping through her as she suspected what he was about to do. A large hand lifted her leg again under the knee, draping it over his hip and holding it there, opening her further to feel the indescribable pleasure of his hard cock sliding along the slick folds of her labia.

She gasped against his mouth as the broad head of his cock breached her vagina. Thick, hot, it seared an exquisite path. With a few unbearably slow pushes of his hips, his cock nudged a little deeper each time until he was fully seated inside her.

"Sweet Jesus, you're so fucking tight."

Her breath caught. Between her tightness and his size, she was full. So full she felt as though they were locked together — no longer two people, but one.

She bit her lip as he shifted them slightly, to better balance them, and the slow scrape of his cock along her channel made her gasp. "Ziggy? Oh God!"

Her nails bit into the fabric-covered flesh of his shoulders as the tempo increased, little by little, each slow thrust pulling the hood covering her throbbing clit over the ultrasensitive nub. Warning tremors sparked through tissues and nerve endings so that she wanted to scream with the sensation. Her breathing stuttered, and she closed her eyes against his chest trying to stop the explosion she could feel gathering.

But nothing could stop it. It was relentless — up her legs, down her back, along every zinging nerve in her body, streaks of heat and electric sensation gathered until the walls of her channel began to clench and release, the muscles of her tummy almost cramping in anticipation.

She was grateful for the feel of his arm tightening around her waist as he kept up the relentless tempo of his thrusts, his breath at her ear rough and ragged. "That's okay, let it go. Come for me, baby."

Moving from her ear to her neck, his teeth grazed and nipped until they reached the sensitive flesh where her shoulder met, and he nuzzled then bit, not hard enough to break the skin, but clamping his mouth on her skin in an almost feral branding, his lips sucking strongly on the flesh held between his teeth.

Her body exploded. As if the bite and the words were the sign her body had been waiting for, heat flared in her belly and lower. Explosions started going off through her body, small at first, but escalating in size and intensity until her whole body was shuddering, breaking apart at the full force of the climactic wave that surged over and through her.

In some remotely connected part of her brain she was vaguely aware of his lips covering hers once more as the scream she could feel bubbling deep in her chest tore free. Then she was coming apart in his arms, her body shattered into a million pieces like a jigsaw that's been tossed into the air—all the parts of a whole, but the pieces scattered, waiting for someone to put it together again.

Ziggy wrapped his arms tighter around her, held her close, their bodies rocking together, and cradled her as she rode out the tight fisting and release of her womb. The clenching fading to small shudders before she slumped against him, her loosely linked arms around his neck not enough to hold her up.

"Fuck!" His hold on her tightened and he kissed her. "That was beautiful. *You're* beautiful."

With a slight dip of his knees, he slipped out of her. After the feeling of being so connected, suddenly she felt empty, barren. A gaping void without him inside her, filling her. Her leg was lowered, her dress allowed to drop. Then his hand was cupping her face, his lips scattering butterfly kisses over her mouth.

"Take off the mask for me, Summer."

Her eyes blinked open.

The music switched, the beat changing from the sensual pulse that had woven an erotic fantasy around her to a thumping rock number. All at once, the steamy fog dissipated and reality crashed back in with a brutal awareness.

They were not alone.

And she had just allowed a complete stranger to fuck her. On a dance floor.

What was she doing? Had she lost her mind? It had been over a year since she'd been with a man. From choice. Her heart and body had been slowly recovering from the battering they'd taken. But this...

As if all her carefully erected defenses had crumbled to dust in the aftermath of her mind-blowing orgasm, she was left feeling weak, disoriented. Mortified.

She blinked. Oh hell... "What have I done?"

When she felt able to support herself, though her hands and legs still shook, she pushed back with a shove from a mystified Ziggy. Stripped naked emotionally, unable to even look at him, she broke free of his arms and stepped back and away.

"Summer! Wait—"

"No. No..." She held up both hands, as if the flimsy barrier they presented would be enough to stop him.

"Summer."

The soft command with the hard, dominant edge made her shiver. But how could she stay? How could she face Rico? She couldn't. The clients. Everyone would know. God, she'd let a stranger fuck her.

Stepping back, she raised watery eyes to Ziggy, warning him with a look not to follow. Then turning, she fled on shaky legs through the archway toward the sanctuary of the ladies' room.

* * * * *

Ziggy watched her flee. Only the look on her face had stopped him from following her. Fear. Horror. Like a trapped animal.

And it called to every protective, possessive instinct inside him.

He could still taste her, feel her. His cock throbbed where he'd stuffed the rigid length back inside his pants, his balls heavy and aching with a need to come.

But surprisingly, the one moment that stuck in his mind from what had just happened, was the feel of his teeth on her neck just before she came.

He'd nearly bitten her. Shit!

Never had he had the urge to bite any woman before, but with Summer he'd had to fight hard not to. Christ, it had taken every ounce of control not to let the animal inside have its way and clamp down until the skin broke under his canines and the little trickle of her blood slipped over his tongue.

Restless, he paced, his eyes never leaving the archway she'd fled through.

His mind a maelstrom of confusion, he resumed his spot on the barstool where he had a clear view. And watched. He'd wait for her to come out, and then they'd talk. He had no idea what the hell had just happened, but he damn well intended to find out. Affirmative action. Yeah, he'd take her back to his place and they'd talk until he sorted it out.

He ignored the snarl of his wolf, the baring of its teeth at his plan. It wasn't real big on talking. All it wanted was her naked underneath him, spread wide so that he could bury balls-deep in all that heat and softness again.

And that would happen too. But this time there'd be no running away. Not until he got some answers. Whatever had just transpired between Summer and him was an aberration. Christ, he didn't even know the woman.

At that thought, a clenching tightness in his chest made him rub it, trying to ease the tension he could feel clawing through him.

He shook it off. It was nothing. He just needed to get off. That was all. His cock was still hard as a rock, his balls full and heavy, still pulled up tight against the base of his cock.

Leaning back on the stool, his legs outstretched in front of him, Ziggy waited for Summer. A half hour later, his cock still pounded in protest at its unrelieved state. To be honest, he'd had no intention of coming with Summer then, but hell, it hadn't been easy

stopping. The walls of her sweet cunt had gripped him like a tight fist, only the release of her juices flowing over his cock making it slick enough for him to move.

Whatever the fuck had happened, he knew for sure he wanted to explore it further. Christ, her scent was still on him and it was making him feel crazy, out of control.

After an hour, protective concern had replaced the slow, simmering lust lingering in his system. Something was definitely wrong. He could sense it in every bone in his body. Muscles strung taut, his body on alert, he stood to go to the ladies' room, barge right inside if necessary, just to see for himself if she was all right.

He'd barely taken a few steps in the general direction, when a firm grip on his shoulder pulled him up and made him pause.

"Don't. She's not there."

Ziggy turned around to find Rico, now dressed normally, standing behind him, his expression stern.

"Where is she then? Something's not right."

"Upstairs in my private rooms. Sleeping, with any luck, since I slipped something into her tea." At Ziggy's questioning glare, he tilted his head in an indifferent shrug. "As you know better than most, there are many back corridors around my establishment—"

"I know that, dammit! But is she all right?"

"I need to discuss something with you in private, Ziggy. Come to my office?"

"What the hell is going on, Rico?" Confused by the brief, uncharacteristic rawness of his response to Summer, he tamped down on his sudden edginess and fought to regain his normal control. Though not without some effort—his body now felt as wired as it had prior to a covert mission. Something was going down, and his radar was screaming at him.

Ziggy followed the vampire down the brightly lit hallway behind the bar to the office. In contrast to the hall, the office was dim. Illuminated solely by the phosphorescent glow from two computer monitors and three closed-circuit television screens that flicked over the feed from security cameras positioned unobtrusively around the club. In fact, the last time he'd been in there was to approve the final installation of the internal and external security Were Watching had set up for Rico.

"Can I sit down," Ziggy asked with a raised eyebrow, "or won't I be staying long enough?"

A ghost of a smile crossed Rico's face as he sank down into his own leather chair behind the large teak desk. "Sit. Trust me, you'll be glad you are." He nodded to one of two padded, leather seats that sat in front of his desk. An uncomfortable silence filled the space that followed Rico's words.

Ziggy sat back and waited.

"You remember my warning, Ziggy. It applies to *everyone*." From the heavy emphasis applied to the final word, Ziggy was in no doubt of Rico's meaning and reference.

"I'm not going to hurt her, Rico."

Rico's expression remained impassive. "You've had a taste of her now. I want to know what your intentions are."

"A taste? Is that how you put it? Like she's some dessert on the fucking menu?"

"You would call what you did something else?" Rico's tone was brusque. "Answer my question."

"You sound like a concerned parent."

The first outward sign of Rico's agitation was the hand he ran through his hair. His face remained hard, his expression grim. "I feel like one, dammit. Are you planning on mating her?"

Shock hit Ziggy and would have bowled him over if he hadn't been sitting. "Mating?" *What?* A flicker of unease followed as he recalled how close he'd come to biting her.

"You came close tonight—deny it if you will, but you'd only be lying to yourself. You sensed what she really is to you from the moment you laid eyes on her. Even I could feel the connection you two shared."

There was a connection—an overwhelming sexual one, but not... "She is *not* my mate." At Rico's raised eyebrow, Ziggy bristled. "I don't intend to mate—now, or at any time in the future."

"You're either a brave man or a foolish one, Ziggy, to tempt Fate in such a fashion. She has a way of gifting us with that which we believe we neither want nor need." Rico frowned. "And in this, you two may be more similar than you realize." He opened his mouth as if to say more, but paused instead, a cryptic expression on his face Ziggy found impossible to read.

Ziggy leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, looking at his hands and noticing now how big and rough they looked, the skin tingling as he remembered how it had felt to palm the deliciously soft skin of Summer's buttocks. He raised his eyes. "To answer your question, I don't know what my 'intentions' are, Rico. I honestly don't know. She's not my mate, though. I can tell you that without a doubt."

"So sure of that, are we?" A single eyebrow rose in query.

"Yes."

"We shall see." Rico shrugged, a knowing half smile on his face that only increased Ziggy's frustration. "So you mind telling me what happened out there?"

Ziggy straightened in his seat, his jaw firming as he gritted his teeth. "I think that's between the lady and me, wouldn't you say?"

A short, sharp bark of laughter fell from Rico's mouth. "Perhaps you two are more suited than you or she think. She told me exactly the same thing. Except her phrasing was a little more...blunt."

At Ziggy's raised eyebrow, Rico added, "More along the lines of 'minding my own fucking business'. However, I consider myself Summer's protector. I would give my life for her – it's as simple as that."

"There's nothing simple about that damn statement." Fighting the need to pace, Ziggy leaned forward again, linking his hands. "So give me something to work with, man. What's the story?"

"I'm not sure I should tell you. It's part of the reason I asked your intentions."

Rico steepled his fingers, his frown deepening as he watched Ziggy. "I need some reassurance, my friend. If you're just looking at Summer as a one-nighter then pick another lady. She's been hurt – more deeply than you can possibly imagine. And you shook her up tonight." Rico leaned back in his chair, the front legs lifting a little off the floor making the joints protest with a soft squeak. "Now that may be a good thing. Maybe it's time for her to get involved again instead of suppressing her sexuality as she's done since she we met." The legs of the chair hit the floor with a thump as Rico leaned over his desk. "But let's face it, you're pretty fucking intense, Zig. And I've seen how you go through the unattached subs here –" He held his hand up to forestall Ziggy's reply.

"I know you don't hurt them. In fact all reports I've had have been to the contrary. Very much so. And hell, some subs like the one-offs, can cope with giving it all up to a Dom just for the night. But not Summer. She may not even be into sexual submissiveness. May be unable to give that much trust to a man ever again."

A horrified suspicion snaked through Ziggy. "What're you saying? That she was raped? What?"

"First things first, dammit, Zig. She's an all-or-nothing girl. So if you don't think you can give her that, then do her a goddamn favor and leave her be. Let someone else ease her out of it. *Comprende?*"

Ziggy wasn't looking for forever with any lady. Not even long-term. Hell, he didn't know if he could even do short-term. Yet an invisible band constricted around his chest at even the mention of another man with Summer. He could feel the growl rumbling deep in his chest.

"I'd like to oblige, Rico, but there's just one problem...at the moment I don't think I can. Now tell me what happened. All of it."

His body tense, he leaned back in his chair and waited for Rico to make the next move.

It became obvious that Ziggy might not like what he was going to hear judging from Rico's body language.

After a minute, Ziggy figured he'd given him long enough. "Maybe it's better if you just spit it out. I'm a big boy – I'm sure I can handle it."

When Rico looked up at him, the red around his eyes had flared, almost obliterating the blackness of the iris.

"Whoa, man! What's that look for?"

Rico blinked and dipped his head. When he looked up again, the redness had cleared except for a pale red rim. "Sorry. It happens when I think about what I'm about to share with you."

Ziggy's body went taut, but he sat silently. Every hair on his body was raised. That gut feeling that told him something bad was going down just wouldn't leave him. The feeling intensified when Rico stood and began to pace.

After a minute that seemed to stretch on for hours, Rico paused in his pacing, his back to Ziggy, but the tension in the vampire was evident in the way the fabric of his shirt strained across his broad back. He turned slowly. Crossed his arms.

"Irrespective of what happens when you leave here tonight, what I'm about to tell you about Summer does not leave this room."

Ziggy glared. "That goes without saying, Ricardo. Just tell me, for chrissakes."

The minute Summer's name had been mentioned, he knew that whatever needed to be done, he was the man—the only man—for the job. Whether he knew it or not, Rico was about to be replaced as her protector. No ifs or buts about it.

Rico sat once more, leaning back in his chair.

"Okay, background. I first met Summer about a year ago. She essentially saved my life one night." Ziggy's eyes widened and a hint of a smile passed over Rico's face. "You find it hard to believe how a soft little thing like Summer could save anyone, especially a crusty old bloodsucker like me, yes?"

Ziggy shrugged indifferently, although his insides were churning. "It's your story."

"I'd been on the hunt for a rogue vamp René had warned me was coming close. He had his hands full in Florida and was unable to pursue him. Long story short, I killed the vamp, but not before he did some very serious damage to me.

"Really, I should have died that night. I was in the middle of nowhere and dawn was about an hour away. A woman came out of the darkness—dirty, she obviously hadn't bathed in a few days, hair matted and tangled, clothes bloodied and torn. She looked like a wild woman. But somehow she got me standing, and with a minimum of help from me, managed to get me to her car. I have no idea how far it was—I spent most of the time with my eyes shut from the pain, leaning on her and following her lead. At that point I have never been more ready to die.

"Leaving me leaning against the car, she laid back the front passenger seat as far as it would go then got me in the car. While I lay there bleeding and moaning and useless as a babe, she got some sort of tarp out of the trunk and covered the car. Then she laid back the driver's seat too and got in, lying on her side next to me.

"I'll never forget the feeling when she put her hands on me." Rico looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes briefly. "I had a slash in my neck that burned like acid—the

scar, though faint now, is still there—where the rogue vamp had tried to rip my throat out and very nearly succeeded. But Summer placed her hands over the gash, closed her eyes, and...I can't explain it—warmth, the most soothing, healing warmth, and the burning started to ease. As if she were somehow taking it into her own body." Rico shook his head. "I think back to that night and I still can't decide what it was. Anyway..." He waved his hand in the air.

"Then she leaned closer, shut her eyes and told me to take what I needed."

"She knew you were a vamp?"

"Apparently so." Rico noticed Ziggy's raised brow. "Summer has her own, shall we say, 'talents' that take some believing. She will know what you are, my friend. Whether you decide to tell her or not."

Rico then ran his hands down his face, his expression distraught. "I was weak from so much pain, I needed to feed, and I could hear the blood pounding through her veins like the sweetest nectar. So I fed." He looked down, clenching and unclenching his fingers. "I wasn't gentle. As close to death as I'm ever likely to be, driven by pain and hunger, I was beyond gentle by that point. But she just lay there letting me take what I needed. More and more until I could feel my strength begin to return.

"If her hand hadn't dropped off my neck, taking her warm touch with it, I probably would have drained her, I was so mindless. But I stopped. I truly believe she would have let me suck her dry at the cost of her own life."

"Shit!" Ziggy exploded softly under his breath.

"But the connection between us had taken place," continued Rico. "And what happened next..."

Rico launched himself out of his seat, his restless pacing resumed.

"Images hit me. One after another battered at my brain." He grasped the back of his chair, the digging of his fingers gouging deep indentations in the leather. "You and I have both seen the darker side of life... I haven't killed a mortal in centuries, Ziggy. But I will kill one more time. And it will be the stinking *bastardo* who hurt Summer."

Ziggy shifted in his seat. The anger, the fury pouring off Rico was palpable. And it involved Summer. His own reaction to the news was awakening the animal inside him as well.

"She was on the run, you see. Hence the dirty, disheveled appearance. By this time my vision had returned fully and I could see the shape she was in. It was no better than mine, if anything worse, and yet she'd helped me..."

Rico slammed a closed fist onto the desk, the heavy wood creaking under the impact.

"She had been abused—no, that doesn't begin to describe it. The *bastardo* almost killed her." He held up his hand to stop Ziggy from asking the obvious. "I don't know why. Summer won't talk about it. All I saw was what he did to her, and the wounds she sustained.

"Her back...was a mess. She'd been beaten. And raped—both vaginally and anally. Her forearm bone was cracked in two places. Her lip split, and her right eye was still swollen almost shut."

"Christ, Rico!" Rage, as sharp and ragged as he'd felt with Lucy and Link, surged through his body, catapulting him out of his seat 'til he leaned over the desk. "What did you do?"

Rico speared him with a penetrating look. "The only thing I could do. To save her life in return, I slashed open my wrist and held it to her mouth, forcing her to feed."

Ziggy's heart began to pound. He knew Summer hadn't been turned, but more importantly, how *close* was she? "How many times?" he asked over the lump in his throat.

"Just once."

Once. Relief surged through Ziggy. Even two feedings would have been risky. Hell, she'd be ripe for the plucking by any vampire bastard who wanted a permanent snack on legs. But three... He pushed the thought out of his mind. That was *not* going to happen.

"Then we both slept until the next nightfall," Rico continued, "bundled up in her car, hidden deep in the woods. The next night we made our way back here. There's much more, but that is for Summer to tell you, should she decide to."

"Why didn't she go to the police?"

Rico laughed, but it was a humorless sound. "According to my...*contact* in the NOPD, the man she was 'involved' with has listed Summer, his *fiancée*, as a missing person, one who is 'mentally unstable'. With quite a hefty reward—believe me, we are not talking nickels and dimes—for information regarding her whereabouts."

"Shit!"

"We didn't discover this until fairly recently. You see, she's been convalescing with me and wasn't really venturing out much. About a month ago she decided to find her own little place. Felt she was 'cramping my style'." Rico rolled his eyes. "So I had my contact run some checks, see what turned up. I tried to talk her out of moving, but if nothing else she is a very independent young lady. She's determined not to be a burden." This time Rico shook his head. "She does, however, try to be circumspect."

"So what do you need from me? A hit? Where's the scum who did it?"

"This is a very dangerous man, Ziggy. And he is obsessed with Summer—I sense that from her memories. It is an ugly, evil, demented obsession. He will be looking for her. Any man would, once they'd tasted her, I imagine. This reaction from you is proof enough of that."

"You haven't...?" Ziggy left the rest of the question hanging in the air.

"No. Since the attack, you are the only man to have that honor. That little incident on the dance floor was her first time since..."

"Ah Jesus!"

"Precisely my concern." Rico sat and leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking underneath him. "You're not the first to try. You are, however, the only one to succeed."

Why him? Had Summer felt their connection as keenly as he had? The thought made the wolf inside him howl with an unfamiliar possessiveness. The need that was growing to take care of her—hell, just to see her, touch her, make sure she was all right—was almost overwhelming. "She shouldn't be alone."

"I hardly think more of you is what she needs right now, *amigo*. She is safe for now. Maria is with her. Should she wake I will be advised straightaway. No, she needs time. Especially from you. From what just happened." Rico paused, his tone changing, becoming softer, concern laced in every word, "But as I said earlier, if you can't give her more than a one-night stand, Ziggy, please, leave her be."

He considered Rico's words for the space of a heartbeat, before his body and mind rejected them. Fuck that! No way in hell could he stay away from her now. No, she needed protection. *His* protection. She needed him. "That all?"

"For now. Just one thing—she is as family to me now. Don't hurt her and make me kill you."

Ziggy stiffened, not missing the implacability of the warning barely softened by the concerned look on his friend's face. "Save the warnings, Rico. If anyone hurts her, it won't be me. And don't worry, they'll die, but from my hand—not yours."

"Good. Then we understand each other."

Chapter Three

"No, Mom. Can't come. Sorry."

Ziggy picked up a pencil and began doodling on the pad in front of him. The phone tucked between his ear and his shoulder, he let his mind drift away from his mother's voice, filling it instead with thoughts of a tiny woman who smelled like temptation and tasted like sin. His body instantly on edge, he gritted his teeth and tried to push the thought of Summer out of his mind. Two whole weeks and he hadn't seen or heard a thing. And Rico was less than forthcoming, dammit. Where the hell was she? The snapping of the lead on the paper yanked Ziggy out of his preoccupation, surprised to see his random doodling had become a bold, definitive "S". He really needed to shed this fixation on her. He was worse than a lovesick teenager. Pushing back his chair, he stood and paced over to the window, pulling down the metal slat on the old Venetian blind a little to look out at the crowded car park.

The blind flicked back up with a snap as he released it, his mental meanderings dissipating quick as a blink when his mother's words finally pierced his consciousness. "What? No! Hell, Mom, forget it. No way." Ziggy clenched the phone tighter and gritted his teeth at his mother's less than subtle attempt at matchmaking. "Because I'm too damned busy, that's why!"

He regretted his sharp outburst before the words hardly left his mouth, wincing as his diminutive, but nonetheless formidable mother gave him an earful about having respect for his elders. He flopped back down in his seat, eager to get the call over with.

"O-kaay. Sorry. But Mom, you're as transparent as cling wrap." Ziggy frowned. "I don't *need* your help to find a date." *Good lord, would she just give it up already?* "I know, I know." His mother's preoccupation with "grandbabies" was going to drive him insane. "When I'm ready, that's when!" *Which I never will be.*

He sighed as she continued to wheedle, trying to get him to change his mind. "Look, I really don't care what you tell Lexie, Mom, that's your problem. You should've checked with me first. And before you ask, no, I won't be changing my mind." He gritted his teeth as she continued. She sure was a stubborn old thing. "Fine, but next time you get the urge to organize my social life—don't." He chuckled at her response. "Yeah, sure, love you too."

Ziggy hung up the phone and ran his hand down his face. Relief at his narrow escape almost palpable. Christ, when was she going to get the message? This stupid lupine obsession with mating and pups. It was enough to drive a man to drink.

Or other things...

His eyes landed on the desk calendar and his chest tightened. Memories flooded back. Two years. Christ, he hated this day. Ziggy rubbed the dog tags he rarely took off,

remotely aware of the cool smoothness of the metal disturbed by the etching of numbers and words. Reaching into the bottom drawer of his desk, he pulled out a bottle of whisky and a glass, pausing a moment, his eyes bleak, to lift out the photo frame tucked away at the bottom. Absently running his fingertips over the smooth wooden frame, he looked at the shot of two men in front of a jungle backdrop taken five years earlier, faces smeared with camo paint, dirty, sweat-streaked fatigues, both wearing wide, toothy grins in deeply tanned faces.

Link and him.

Before Lucy.

Before discharge.

Before...before...

Closing his eyes, he waited for the pain associated with the memory to pass. Each year got a bit easier, the sharp images of their deaths fading a little. The passage of time was blunting the edges.

There was still a long way to go before the feeling of loss didn't cut into him each time he looked at his best friend's face from happier times.

But if his mother was expecting him to provide the heir to the Trudeau line anytime in the foreseeable future, she was in for a big goddamn disappointment. No fucking way.

A sharp knock on the door brought him out of his thoughts.

The door opened a crack. "Hey, anyone home, or has the business gone belly-up already?"

"Clive?" Jolted out of his reverie, Ziggy bounded out of his chair, a smile of genuine happiness on his face at seeing his old Special Forces buddy. They shook hands and hugged, slapping each other on the back.

"Sorry for barging in, buddy, but I've been knocking for about five minutes. Thought it was a bit odd that the front door was open but nobody seemed to be home."

"Yeah, well, just a little trip down memory lane."

Clive's eyes flicked over the desk briefly, seeing the photo, before looking back at Ziggy, his expression understanding.

"Ah, hell, is today the anniversary?" asked Clive.

"Yeah. Two years."

"None of us could believe it, Zig. Link, of all people. I mean, the guy was solid as a rock." Clive shook his head.

Reaching for the photo, Ziggy picked it up and looked at it once more before stepping around his desk to put it back in the drawer. He grabbed another glass while he was at it, waving it in Clive's direction, gaining a nod. After he'd poured a hefty shot of the dark amber fluid in each glass, they clinked glasses in unspoken acknowledgement of their missing friend and downed the liquor in one mouthful.

"So," said Ziggy, feeling the burn of the alcohol reach down and warm the coldness in his gut, "take a seat." Ziggy motioned to one of the easy chairs in front of his desk then sat too, relegating the whisky to the bottom drawer once more. "How's it been, man? You been out long?"

"About eighteen months now. I wasn't far behind you and...well, you and Link."

"Not going back?"

Ziggy glanced over the changes civilian life had made to his buddy. Clive, nickname Piper, with his blond hair and blue eyes and built like a brick outhouse, had always been a favorite with the ladies, the uniform just making them fall all over themselves to get him to notice them. He'd been gifted his nickname—Pied Piper, shortened over the years to just "Piper"—as much in seriousness as a joke, stemming from the fact that women just seemed to follow him around.

It was strange to see his brute of a friend sitting in front of him in a classy suit, looking like he was born to the good life. Clive made himself comfortable, hooking his ankle up on his other knee. "No, no more for me. Getting too old to keep up with the new kids. Besides, I kinda like the idea of waking in the same bed each morning with a soft woman instead of you tough old bastards, with exploding shells for a wakeup call."

Ziggy grinned in response.

"So how'd you hear I had some work going?" He'd put the word out six months ago to his old Army buddies and Randy's contacts on the force when things at Were Watching started taking off like a rocket. So far they'd only had a few nibbles.

"Stuey told me. Said you'd passed the word around the old team if anyone was interested to give you a call. I've been babysitting pansy-assed celebs around the country since I got out. Bored me shitless. Thought I'd come see what you got going on here."

"Well your timing couldn't be better. We're growing faster than we can handle. Work coming in from out of state as well as local. We need someone with your diverse talents. The job won't be boring, I can promise you that. Interested?"

"God yeah. Sure as hell beats what I've been doing."

Ziggy jotted down some figures on a sheet of notepaper. "Here's the salary, plus medical and all the usual." He handed it to Clive.

Clive's eyebrows rose and he smiled. "When do you want me to start?"

"Soon as," said Ziggy with an answering grin. "How long will it take you to move?"

"I'm moved. Got it all out in the truck." Clive chuckled. "Old habits, and all that—still travel light. Just gotta find somewhere to bunk down and I'm good to go. Although I wouldn't mind a week just to unwind before I start if you can hold off that long. Got some relations hereabouts to catch up with. Get to know the area, find somewhere to live..."

"What happened to...what was her name?" Ziggy clicked his fingers as he thought. "Carol...Cheryl? She with you?"

It had surprised the heck out of all of them when Clive decided during their final tour to give up all the ladies and confine himself to just one. Pretty little thing. Bit sharp for his tastes, but then he also had no thought to settling down—with anyone. He liked his life just fine.

"Sharon. You always were shit with names, Zig," chuckled Clive. "Nope, Sharon's still in San Fran."

"So settling down wasn't all it's cracked up to be, huh?"

"Might have been. We parted company just after you came home. I got the 'letter'." A dark frown creased Clive's brow, the blue eyes turning stormy. "Seems the little lady didn't get off on the fact that I was hardly ever home. Found out later that after we left on that last tour, she'd started going back to the club where we met. Last I heard she was trying to find herself a new Master who spends more than one night a week at home." He flicked a fleck of lint off the hem of his trousers, before he looked up at Ziggy and shrugged. "Eh, that's the way it goes. She isn't the only fish in the sea. Next time, though, I'll pay a bit more attention. Too damn used to being on my own, I guess. I need to work on my romancin' skills." His lips turned up in a wry smile at Ziggy's look of disbelief. "Forgot they like to be noticed even when you aren't fucking them. By the way, any nice clubs around these parts? I figure you're the best person to ask."

"A few." Over the years, he and Clive had visited a few BDSM clubs together on their travels. Ziggy reached for a pen and paper and jotted down some names and addresses. "If you have any problems, feel free to use me as a reference."

"Thanks, I will. Might just check out a couple this weekend. See what suits."

Clive let his foot drop to the carpeted floor with a muted thud. Leaning forward to rest his elbows on his thighs, he clasped his big hands loosely in front of him. "So, how about you? You got somebody special?"

"Nope."

"Any contenders?"

"No." As the word left his mouth, Summer's face hidden by the dainty mask flashed in front of his eyes. He'd been back to the club each weekend since that night looking for her, with no luck. Questioning Rico was like talking to a brick wall. His repeated "She'll be back when she's ready" was starting to piss him off.

"You haven't changed, then."

"Nope," said Ziggy not wanting to get into a discussion about it. "So," he said, changing the subject, "how does Monday week sound?"

"Perfect. Little bit of R&R before I knuckle down again. Sounds damn good."

* * * * *

Ziggy dropped the phone in the cradle and leaned back in his chair, hands linked across his stomach, the worry line between his brows creasing with his concern. It was an instinctive reaction, colored by his own history, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

His brother wanting a few days off he could cope with—he could spread his work out over the other guys.

No, distributing his workload wasn't the problem. What a turnabout—his gripes with Randy in the past had been due to his brother's overzealous attention to "detail" in servicing their female clients' needs—security among the least of them. This time the "servicing" was of an entirely different nature.

Crissy. His brother's mate. And more importantly the fact that, according to Randy, his human mate was fertile and he intended to take *every* advantage to see that the situation bore fruit—again.

Now *that* scared the shit out of him. Nothing against Crissy. She was a really nice girl. Randy was obviously crazy about her, and her, him. Their little baby girl was the apple of everyone's eye. In fact, he should be relieved his mother would likely have another grandkid to fuss over before long. Not that it stopped her from bugging *him* to find a mate, and that was something he had no intention of doing—ever.

Long dark hair and a lush body, the memory scented with a hint of orange blossom fragrance filled his mind, making a liar out of his thoughts.

Summer.

Damn, it'd been two weeks and he still couldn't get her out of his head. No matter how hard he worked, how long the hours—and Randy and his father had both ranted at him recently about "all work and no play"—at the end of the day when he tried to sleep, she was there, in his mind, her image taunting him, his body aching for the touch, the taste...

And the relentless pounding of his cock was driving him insane.

His hands itched as he remembered holding her. It wasn't even her physical appearance. Every physical feature he looked for in a woman, Summer didn't have, but damn if he could stop thinking about her—the constant hard-on was testimony to that. For starters, he liked his ladies tall, since he was a big man himself. Summer was short, even with the high heels. And he preferred big tits. Loved 'em, in fact. Compared to the rest of her measurements, her tits were small—he'd had no problem cupping them in his palm. Soft, so soft... Hard little nipples he just wanted to suck on 'til she screamed for mercy. Wide hips—child-bearing hips, his mother would call them, he thought with a groan—flaring to the most beautiful ass... Oh man, that ass... Christ, he couldn't even think about her without his hands twitching to grab handfuls of that soft flesh—and man, there was plenty of it. But God, she'd fit against him so perfectly.

Maybe Randy had the right idea... No! He pushed the thought of her away resolutely. Not in this lifetime. He closed his eyes as the painful memories flashed

through him. The horrible images of Link and Lucy ones he'd sworn to never forget as long as he lived.

His hand shaking, he reached for the phone again.

"Dammit!"

Ziggy cursed as the unstable stack of files on the corner of his desk started to slide, sending an almost empty Starbucks cup sailing across the desk. A dirty brown trail of gludge spilled over the papers cluttered there.

Hoping to minimize the damage, he sprang out of his chair to grab a few paper towels from the dispenser above the little sink in the corner, and did his best to mop up the mess.

Holding the quote he'd just spent two painstaking hours typing by the corner, he gritted his teeth as he admitted something he'd been avoiding for a while. He needed help.

Were Watching was no longer the fledgling little PI and security company it had been eighteen months or so ago when they first opened. True to the results of their feasibility study, need for security in New Orleans was on the increase. They'd added another six security guys for the regular on-site work at clubs and businesses, plus one more security installation specialist and two PI's to their staff. Not to mention Clive.

But what *he* really needed was a woman. Short, tall, fat, skinny—he didn't care. As long as she could type letters. Answer the phones. Massage his goddamn aching neck, he thought, as he tried to reach the knot that had started at top of his spine and was now spreading further down between his shoulder blades.

Tossing the scrunched and coffee-colored towels in the little wicker basket under his desk, he sighed and stood, running his fingers through his hair as he sorted what could be rescued from the mess on his desk.

Five minutes of sifting, stacking and a minimum of discarding, and he was satisfied the situation was salvaged—somewhat. A muted rumble of thunder in the distance caught his attention, and he turned. Through the open, slatted blinds behind his desk, the darkened sky caught and held his attention, just a trace of moonlight piercing the heavy front moving in from the east. Miles away, lightning flared in the sky for a brief instant before plunging the night into morbid darkness again.

Goddamn it. It was after midnight and high time he was home. The rest of it could wait until tomorrow. In fact, it was a perfect night for a run. It had been over a week since either the time or the opportunity had presented itself and his body was literally aching with the need. Just thinking of stripping off his clothes and giving the wolf a chance to run free fed energy to his tense body. He smiled and surrendered to the sense of anticipation, exhilaration beginning to fill him.

And hell, it just might get rid of that knot of muscles in his back.

Grabbing his jacket, he headed toward the door, arming the security system via the illuminated keypad, before he reached beside it to switch off the lights, locking the door behind him.

Whistling a discordant tune, he tossed his jacket over his shoulder and headed outside, taking a moment to breathe in and appreciate the myriad night scents, the smell of rain in the air filling his nostrils, and smiled.

* * * * *

Summer stood back and scanned the storefronts again. According to the address she'd jotted down out of the phone book, Crystal Palace *should* have been shop 24B, right in front of her, not Were Watching, whatever that was. But she'd been up and down the street a few times and nothing even remotely resembling a New Age shop was to be found on this block. She double-checked the street name again, just to make sure.

She muffled a curse. The rest of the New Age shops in town hadn't needed any new employees, and she was getting just a little desperate.

While the income from two nights a week working for Rico at least covered her rent and utilities in the little one-bedroom apartment, she still needed to eat. Or she could go back and stay with Rico... No! She had sponged off him long enough, even though she knew he would support her completely if she just let him. The man was much too generous, and she refused to take advantage. She had to stand on her own two feet.

Maybe it was time to try something else...something she was infinitely better qualified for. Why waste her business administration degree, even if she was using another name. Unless she applied to manage one of the larger firms, chances were they'd be unlikely to check her degree and her new identity would be safe. Suzannah Gray was, to all intents and purposes, dead.

She knew The Bastard—she still couldn't say his name without feeling her stomach heave—was still looking for her. She should have done the job right and killed him while she had the chance. At least then she wouldn't be looking over her shoulder continuously.

And when the warnings she'd learned to trust came—that disquieting prickle so that her skin felt as though it were crawling—she went to ground. And stayed away from her real name and anything else he might use to find her.

Luckily he didn't know about her psychic gifts. But then, if she'd been using them and not trying so desperately to suppress them, she wouldn't have gotten into the situation she had.

So New Age shops it was. Unless The Bastard developed a sudden fetish for crystals or tarot readings, she should be safe.

She'd been given the chance for a fresh start. Succeeding was up to her. The knowledge and psychic gifts she'd inherited from her beloved grandmother were all that presently stood between her and poverty—if she could just find Crystal Palace.

A burst of homesickness hit her as she thought of her grandmother. She missed Rayna. Desperately. She was the only family Summer had left.

As a child, she'd been so hungry for affection. Even now she was still coming to terms with the fact that neither of her parents had loved her, abandoning her emotionally to Rayna's care—or in her mother's case, physically as well. Cold, grasping, openly derisive of her gift, her mother's desertion when Summer was barely an adolescent still hurt when she looked at other moms and their kids.

Which had left her bible-bashing father, a more taciturn, unbending man she'd never known. And when her gift had matured along with her body, he too had turned his back on her, claiming she was painted with the same devil's brush as his own estranged mother. So much for "Christian" beliefs.

Until the day the heart attack claimed him. Then Rayna had blown in like an angel to rescue her, picking up the grandchild she'd been refused access to in case her "witchery" infected his daughter.

She loved that adorable old woman more than words could say. Now she couldn't even go home to visit her in case her ex traced her there. That would put Rayna in danger, and that was something Summer just couldn't do, no matter how much she wanted to see her. The Bastard didn't know where Rayna lived, and the old cabin in the hills near Mistletoe Park was hard to find. It was the only way she could think of to protect the feisty old darling.

Summer spared a glance up at the cloudless sky, the sun beating down relentlessly, a soft haze of heat in the air around her. A single drop of perspiration tracked its way down the side of her face, followed quickly by another. It was hot and muggy and she was tired. The humidity had barely relented with the storm the night before. At least she'd had the presence of mind to plait the most recalcitrant curls that fluffed around her face into long braids, starting at her temple, substantially minimizing the effect of the heat her hair generated.

But something was telling her—*insisting*—she was in the right place. She'd traipsed over most of the Quarter, and this was the first real "sign" she'd had all day. Surrendering to the cosmic prodding, she took her faltering confidence in hand and opened the door to 24B. With luck, perhaps someone inside knew where Crystal Palace had moved to.

As she opened the door, a light, pleasing jingle from bells suspended over the door made her smile.

The first thing that hit her was the blessed blast of cool air on her face, making her smile even wider. Closing her eyes in bliss, she stood there a moment, arms held out, feeling the refreshing chill as the air-conditioning reached under her clothes to the perspiration that dampened her body.

She shook herself and opened her eyes. Sadly, the other impressions of the office weren't nearly as happy.

The whole room screamed out for some TLC. Drab, off-white walls tending toward gray, pockmarked with holes from long-gone hooks, plaster peeling in spots, a coffee table with the fourth leg missing piled high with magazines, and a poor, neglected and

dusty dieffenbachia that looked as if it hadn't had a drink since it was plunked in the corner, however long ago that was.

A parody of an office desk that had most likely seen more use as a card table, judging from the stains and cigarette burns, was pushed up against a corner. A black phone that should have been donated to the Smithsonian years ago sat on the "office" desk, completing the depressing picture. The computer was reasonably new, surprisingly. Even to the flat screen monitor. She wondered what it said about the owners of the business that while all else was either antiquated or neglected, the computer looked like a new addition. Perhaps they were dragging themselves into the twenty-first century, one bit of technology at a time. Maybe the phone would be next...

Shrugging the thought off, she became alert to an impression of tension permeating the air, like a pungent air freshener used a little too judiciously. Her curiosity piqued. Whatever business Were Watching did, obviously it must be high stress. But a strong sense of...she could only describe it as "coming home", hit her. She was still puzzling over that, trying to sort out the impressions, when a deep, male, and if she wasn't mistaken, very harried voice boomed from the inner office.

"Be there in a sec. Take a seat. Have a drink."

"Thanks," she called out a little uncertainly to the faceless, masculine voice.

Unwilling to test the stability of the rickety-looking chairs, Summer instead looked around for the water cooler. Just her luck. Besides the fact there were no paper cups left, it was dry as a bone. Probably the last time it received any water was about the same time as the dieffenbachia.

"Ah, shit. No water. Sorry."

Grinning at the unexpected expletive from behind her, she turned toward the voice, and froze, stifling a gasp of shock.

Oh God, no!

Ziggy?

Well, that explained the earlier sensation.

Her eyes pored over him like honey on a hot day, lapping up every feature. If it were possible, he looked even better in the daytime. Her eyes glanced at his hands—big hands, a bit rough but capable of the most gentle of touches... A blush rose up as she remembered them fondling her, touching her intimately, and she ducked her head in embarrassment.

Her head was telling her to run, but her body reacted to him with the same erotic punch it had the last time. Like little explosions going off, the exquisite sensations settled low in her womb, fluttering like crazed butterflies. Fighting to overcome her body's response to him, she turned to leave, her only thought to get away before he somehow figured out who she was.

A hand darted out to grab her arm, stopping her escape.

"Hey, I didn't mean to frighten you."

Tendrils of electricity spread outward over her flesh from their point of contact, and she held on to her rib cage, sucking in small, quick breaths, feeling as though she were fighting for oxygen. In a startling reaction, she could feel her pussy moisten, her clit throb, the lips of her labia plumping as blood surged to fill them in readiness. The fact that her body was overriding her mind and getting ready to fuck him again was maddening.

With annoyance, she turned back to face him. He wouldn't recognize her. After all, she looked nothing like the woman he'd met at Rico's. Gone was the long, black wig, the sexy dress, the high heels, mask... No, today she looked about as different as it was possible for a woman to look. Nothing remotely sexy about her current getup, and for that at least she was grateful.

Still, she held her breath when his eyes darkened to a light brown highlighted with gold flecks as his nostrils flared, and he appeared to...sniff. *Not again!*

Great! Even if he couldn't smell her arousal, the tightening of her nipples had to be noticeable under the soft, gauzy fabric of her top unless he was blind. Which, considering where his narrowed eyes landed, he possessed a healthy dose of 20/20. She was small enough that a bra was not an absolute essential, but sacrificing it to the heat had been another less than sensible idea, one she was cursing now, and a quick glance down at her chest showed her beaded nipples sticking out like little headlights under the soft blue fabric.

Under such intense scrutiny, she could feel the blush spreading all over her body until her face wasn't the only thing that felt inflamed.

"Sorry about that," he said, and a cheeky grin very much at odds with the dark, dominating man she remembered, tipped one corner of his mouth, setting off crinkles in the corner of his eye. "There's another water cooler in here, ma'am, if you're thirsty," he offered, his lazy tone in sharp contrast to the intensity of his piercing eyes as he leaned against the doorframe. Those eyes, that look, were the stuff of fantasies. Hers in particular. Every night for the past two weeks. She could push away every other memory if she tried hard enough, but those eyes kept looking at her, through her, seeing every second she tried to forget.

"Come on, I don't bite," he encouraged.

Sure, she'd heard that line before. She had a nice little hickey on her neck that seemed to be taking a lot longer to fade than normal as proof. Maybe he didn't bite, but he came damn close. And somehow she didn't think a little paper cup of cold water was going to make a whole lot of difference to the erotic inferno burning her up.

No, better to walk away this time, before – "Sure. Thanks."

Now her mouth was ganging up on her too? What happened to the "No, I'm fine. Thanks all the same," she'd been going to say as she skedaddled out of the office?

Traitorous feet had her moving, and he stood to the side and motioned her in. As she brushed past him, the heat radiating from his body washed over her, along with his familiar earthy male scent that made her think of the fresh smell of rain on sun-baked

earth. But it wasn't only that. As if electricity sparked between them, the shock of it made her stumble slightly so that he grabbed for her to steady her.

"You okay there?"

There went that jolt again. Straight to her clit.

A bemused expression crossed his face, before she could see recognition start to dawn.

Okay, now is a really good time to leave, her mind screamed at her.

He sniffed again. Leaned a little closer. His fingers tightened like a vise around her upper arms. She tugged ineffectively, since his hands wouldn't release her.

The amber irises darkened.

It was like being sucked into a whirlpool. She was unable to look away.

Time stood still as his hands slid slowly up.

Over her shoulders.

To cup her face.

She froze.

God, he was so much taller without her high heels on. He seemed to tower over her, big, dark...dangerous.

"No, it can't be — *Summer?*" Incredulity tinged the word.

Ah, blast, poop, damn — *shit!* How the hell could he tell, anyway?

She could leave. Just say no. This man did things to her that quite frankly frightened her. Not that he would hurt her. But it was *her* reaction to *him* that scared her half to death.

Closing her eyes, she willed her inner voice to give her some guidance. In that brief moment when she emptied her mind, her mouth opened and a single word escaped on a breath.

"Yes."

Chapter Four

Over the past two weeks an aching knot had been growing steadily tighter in Ziggy's chest, and with that one small word, it released, allowing him to breathe again. He drew in a deep steadying breath, pulling in her distinctive scent until it filled him and, he was surprised to realize, calmed him. In fact, he felt downright happy.

God, he couldn't believe how close he'd come to letting her get away. But her unmistakable orange-blossom fragrance he hadn't been able to get out of his head since that night, had swirled around him.

That night...

He realized he still cradled her face in his hands, and a pair of what he could see quite clearly now were milk chocolate eyes looked up at him, watching him, a shadow of fear still lingering from moments ago.

Hell! That had to go. No way did he want her scared of him. Lusting after him, craving him in the same way he'd been dying for her since that night—yes. But no more fear. That look in her eyes would never be there again. Not if he had anything to do with it. And he intended to have plenty to do with it—starting right now. At least until they caught the bastard who was looking for her.

She started to wriggle in his hold, and the wolf inside rumbled his displeasure.

"Don't move, sweetheart, or I might have to put you over my knee and spank that cute ass for running out on me the other night."

He could have bitten his tongue when the threat came out, knowing what she'd suffered.

But when her lashes flickered at his softly uttered words, the small surrender it indicated, a little surge of satisfaction flared inside him. Not only that, but the scent of her arousal was stronger in the air. That was good. He wanted her wet, dripping for him. And when she was, he intended to lick every creamy drop.

"Much, much better. Now let me look at you..."

And that was when it struck him, just how tiny she was. In some ways she reminded him of Lucy. Especially the fact that next to him she was so petite. Heck, he stood almost a foot taller than her. He glanced down and noticed the flat sandals, which would account for the fact that this time the top of her head didn't even brush his chin. But it made him burn with anger that anyone could hurt a little thing as exquisite as Summer. The knowledge that some perverted mongrel had beaten her, raped her, made him sick to his stomach.

He lifted a hand to run it over the unruly mass of long mahogany curls. Soft. Silky. So different from the straight black ponytail. Tangling his fingers in a handful, he raised

it to his nose and inhaled. God, all of her smelled good. The pale, lightly freckled skin of her face was unblemished, except for a thin, faded scar he traced with his thumb that ran from just under her left eye to her jawline, and a bump in her pert nose that indicated a break had happened at some point.

He recalled what Rico had said about her other injuries and he knew these wouldn't be the only marks left on her body by the scumbag who'd beaten her. Anger and rage so fierce filled him that his hands trembled. He dropped his hands abruptly and stepped back and away to get himself under control.

As he did so, he didn't miss the look of hurt that passed over her eyes before she blinked and it was gone.

"Better with the mask on, huh?" she said with a weak smile that looked more sad than sarcastic. "As I've discovered with most things in life," she said softly, her beautiful brown eyes becoming glassy, "the fantasy is heaps better than the reality." Her head dropped and she looked around, as if she'd forgotten for a moment which way was out. "Look, sorry to disturb you, Ziggy. I'm gone. Forget I was here."

She spun so quickly on her heel, she was halfway out the door before his hands landed gently but firmly on her tense shoulders. He massaged them and waited until he could feel a slight release of the tension under his hands before turning her around.

"You're wrong, baby. I thought you were stunning the first time I met you, I won't deny that. But now I've seen the real you...you're gorgeous."

"But—"

"No buts." He looked over her face, taking in every exquisite feature, but the thing that wrenched at him was the need he saw in her eyes—the need to believe that someone, *anyone*, could see past the scars to what lay underneath. "Trust me on this, Summer. You take a man's breath away." Keeping his eyes open, he lowered his head, a small grin creasing his face as her lids fluttered shut and her lips parted just a breath.

Soft, moist warmth met his lips and he closed his eyes finally, savoring the taste of her, trying to rein in the raging, insatiable hunger for her he'd felt since she'd come apart in his arms that night at the club. Tilting her head, he moved to get a better fit, get closer, sink inside the heated sweetness of her mouth.

It took conscious thought to stop himself from pushing against her, rubbing his cock up against the soft yielding of her tummy. Licking across her lips, he nibbled and tugged on her bottom lip. After a moment, her mouth opened under his and he slipped his tongue inside.

He moaned. Jesus, she was sweet. A taste he wanted to drown in over and over.

Lips so soft, moving under his, a shy little tongue slipping out to rub in a timid flick and stroke against his. Yeah! He nipped it lightly, relishing the shiver he felt pass over her body. Damn, he'd really missed this.

Harder, deeper, he sank fully into her. His arms wrapped around her, holding her close so that his body could nudge up against hers, his thickening cock fighting for room to expand against the restriction of his jeans.

Then it was gone. The warmth, the moist heat, the softness, and he was left holding air with his mouth hanging open in shock.

Pushing against his chest, Summer had wrenched herself away, nearly tripping over the chair as she stumbled backward.

"No." One hand held up in front of her and the other sitting on her heaving chest, she looked him square in the eye. "Just...no."

Okay, so maybe it had been a little intense, but they had some things they needed to get clear on—first thing being him getting inside that delicious little cunt again before his cock strangled itself to death trying to break a hole in his zipper.

Then they were going to talk. About lots of things. Number one being her moving into his house until they managed to track down the bastard hunting her.

A frown creased his forehead as that thought settled a little deeper into his mind. Moving in with him? Hell.

No.

Yes.

Yes, moving in with him. For her safety. It would make it easier to watch over her.

He had a spare bedroom...

Or not... He mentally shook his head. No, in his bed would be even safer. Nothing would happen to her there. Unless he was the one doing it.

And it wouldn't be indefinitely...

Or maybe not. Of course it depended on the nutcase trying to find her. Who knew how long it might take. Weeks. Months even.

But she would be safe. That was the main thing.

The restless pacing of the wolf inside him settled down at last, giving his seal of approval.

He held his hands up in surrender. "Okay, I won't touch—for now."

He frowned at her cautious squint.

"I mean it, Summer." Yep, he was going to have to take this nice and slow.

She took a deep breath and he found himself mirroring her. "Just a drink?" she confirmed.

"Just a drink," he agreed. "Take a seat, honey," he said with a toss of his head at the empty chairs, and then walked the couple of steps to the cooler and grabbed a small cup.

Okay, so he needed to handle this a little more delicately if he was going to get her cooperation. While the Dom in him sensed the natural submissiveness in Summer, at this point, asserting his dominance over her was not going to get him what he wanted—which was Summer, in his home, in his bed.

Nope, from what Rico had told him, being the dominant hard-ass was only going to get him the big brush-off. And he had no intention of letting this little lady out of his sight.

Resolved to doing whatever it took to gain his objective, he filled the paper cup and turned back to her.

Feeling dizzy from the wash of emotions filling the small space, Summer reached blindly for the chair sitting at an angle in front of the large wooden desk. Her eyes followed Ziggy, and his bent-over position gave her a perfect peek at the tight buttocks delineated in the faded jeans. He stood and turned, the heated glint in his eyes letting her know he'd noticed where her eyes had been locked.

"So, Summer...were you looking for anyone in particular, or has my luck just taken a turn for the better and you were looking for me?"

She shook her head and blinked. It was bad enough she had to contend with the frenzy of hormones jumping around in her system, but she could feel such a medley of emotions pouring from Ziggy that just confused her more. Subsequently, managing coherent thought was nigh impossible. "Wh-what?" she asked as she took the cup he offered.

Where was her brain? "N-no, actually, I wasn't looking for you at all. Not...no." She took a small sip and relief poured through her as her voice finally decided to work and she could utter more than monosyllabic words. She remembered the piece of paper crumpled in her hand. "Actually I was looking for a shop called Crystal Palace. The phone book said it was in 24B. But that's here."

He perched a butt cheek on the edge of his desk, his legs effectively bracketing her, and gave her the benefit of his full attention, which was on a par with having a fully loaded bazooka aimed at her. "Sure is. But that must have been an old book—we've been here for over twelve months now. But the phone book misprinted it originally. Crystal Palace was next door. 24C."

Was? She mentally groaned.

At that moment, the phone rang and Ziggy quirked an apologetic grin as he excused himself and reached to the side for the phone. As he stretched over his desk, his crotch, which was in line with her eyes, came fully into view, the pronounced bulge confirming what she thought she'd felt earlier, and the reason for her breaking away. It was either that or jump him.

Confused by the long-dormant flurry of emotions rioting through her system, she watched him, noting every feature of his face with an artist's attention to detail—the startling dark gold eyes framed by dark lashes that creased into laugh lines at the corners, the hard line of his lightly stubbled jaw, the strong, straight nose that gently flared from the bridge to the tip, the wide mouth displaying even pearly whites when he smiled—she stopped herself short of drooling as he grabbed a pencil and jotted

down the details of the call, telling the person on the other end they would phone before a man came out to do the “installation”, whatever that was.

“Now, where were we?”

“Crystal Palace. I—”

“Just a sec.” He tilted his head in apology as he answered another call.

Apart from the odd “hmmm” and “uh-huh”, he didn’t say much, but his brow furrowed more and more as the call progressed. “I can get one of my guys to come out, ma’am. Sure... No, not Chad... Because he’s busy on another case... Sorry, lady, but he doesn’t make those sorts of house calls. Anything else? Good. Bye.” He hung up the phone with a grunt.

Christ!” He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair again, brushing it back off his forehead, but a honey-colored wavy lock defied the direction and flopped back down to sit over a darker brow when he looked back at her. “Sorry about that. Now, Crystal Palace. They didn’t move elsewhere if that’s any help to you. They were having a close-out sale when we looked at this property to lease.”

“Oh crap!” Despair slipped over her. If she couldn’t find a full-time job soon, she’d be out on the street. Or back to Rico’s. And the man had done enough. More than enough.

“In the market for some incense, were you?”

In spite of the dejection filling her, she allowed a small smile to escape in response to his light teasing. “No, I was hoping to get some work. Look, I don’t want to waste any more of your time—”

He grabbed the ringing phone again, mouthing an apology as he did so, motioning her to stay. She perched on the edge of the seat, jumping when he snapped into the phone at someone called Chad, telling him he needed a leash. He slammed the phone down and frowned.

“Sorry, that was my cousin. There’re times I think I should have someone watching him—not the other way around.” He gave her a lopsided grin before clasping his hands in front of him. “Look, I don’t know how badly you’re needing a job...” He cocked his head at her as if expecting a response. “But if you can you answer phones, email, type letters, do some filing...just simple stuff...”

He was offering her a lifeline and she knew she’d be a fool not to take it. “Phones—sure. Typing?” She allowed herself a small grin. Did eighty words a minute count? “I think I could pick it up. I’m a quick learner.”

He smiled at her, a full, wide smile that hit his crinkly eyes as well as his very kissable mouth, and a rash of little explosions went off in her libido making a beeline to her nether regions.

Her response to Ziggy was one hell of a reaction after the numbing hiatus her sex drive had taken to all men after her experience with her bastard of a fiancé and his brother. The number of times she’d wondered if she’d ever feel “normal” again... It had

taken her months and months until she could even kiss a man, and that was still only with certain men—these days she took note of what her senses were telling her. And the kissing was more friendly than anything—the second things started to get more personal, too sexual, she froze up colder than an ice cube. Until Ziggy...

"I badly need someone to help me out here, as you can tell." He waved his arm around the office as if one look was all it took. "I was going to advertise, but I just haven't had time. You interested, Summer? Monday to Friday. For an indefinite period."

She sucked in a breath. It was perfect. Just what she'd been looking for. The only problem was Ziggy and this insane urge she had to get naked with him every time she saw him. Well, maybe not quite so insane to most women, but to her... "Okay. On one condition."

The smile that had started to crease his face faded.

She took a deep breath. "The kissing thing..."

He smiled. "What kissing thing is that, honey? You want more?" he asked as he leaned closer, his overwhelming masculinity washing over her.

"N-no. I don't want any."

"Really?" His eyes narrowed, the gold darkening to a rich caramel. "Maybe we should put that to the test..."

"No!" His fingers cupped her chin and when a broad thumb traced a line over her bottom lip, making her mouth water, she knew her libidinous goose was cooked. "Well, just not here, okay? I find it hard enough to concentrate around you without you frying my brain with one of those humdingers..."

"My kisses fry your brain, huh?" A smug look of satisfaction crossed his face.

"Oh stop it. You know damn well they do."

For a moment, the strong, relentless dominance of the man fell away as he picked up and held her hands in his. "Would it make you feel any better if I told you yours do the same thing to me?"

"Now you're kidding me." She freed her hands and stood, putting some space between them.

"Like I said, shall we put it to the test?" His eyes sparkled, the look both hungry and sensual.

Oh, the temptation... She licked her lips nervously and firmed her resolve. "If the job comes without kissing, I'll take it."

He watched her a moment, his look considering, then banked the blazing sensuality until she felt she could breathe again. "Hmmm...I'm not sure about those terms, but we can negotiate the finer points later. How soon can you start? I know tomorrow is Friday, but could you start then rather than leave it 'til Monday? I have an appointment out of the office tomorrow morning that could take a couple of hours, and it'd be great to have someone here in case any calls or clients come in while I'm gone."

"I can do that. But Ziggy, this is business, right? What happened between us at the club...well, that was...it was a one-time thing. I don't want to have to worry about you groping me—"

"Grope?" he snapped in disbelief. "Did you say *grobe*?"

"You know what I mean, darn it. I can feel you even now. Your eyes are all over me."

"And there's a damn good reason for that. I'm not used to women running out on me."

"I imagine not," she said under her breath.

He walked over to his filing cabinet in the corner and extracted an employee details form, grabbing a pen and handing both to her, motioning for her to fill it in.

"And whether you think so or not, Summer, you and I are going to have a talk about that. After hours, if you prefer. In fact, that sounds perfect. How about dinner tonight?"

"No."

"Then Friday night..."

"Ziggy! I'm working at Rico's."

"Not the last two weeks, you haven't. That's something else we need to talk about."

Her jaw dropped. "You were there?"

"Looking for you. Saturday, then—"

"I'm working that night too. And Sunday I'll be tired," she snuck in quickly.

"So that leaves tonight. Best we get this sorted out before you start work, don't you agree?"

He sounded so darn reasonable, his face giving away nothing but genuine concern and interest, that if the memory of the way he'd fucked her on a dance floor a couple of weeks ago wasn't still in her mind, clear as a bell, she'd think they were talking about something inconsequential.

"Just talking," she said to confirm.

"Over dinner." He looked quickly at the details sheet he'd had her fill in. "I'll pick you up at seven. You'll need jeans. Now about tomorrow morning...how does 8:30 sound?"

She nodded, still a little wary.

"Then welcome to Were Watching, Summer," he said, that easy smile creasing his face highlighting the crow's feet at the corners of his eyes. "Glad to have you on board."

He held his hand out and a tingle zapped over her skin, traveling outward from where their hands met. There it was again. Her eyes widened when the buzz traveled over her skin, sizzling nerve endings as it went, ending up at her clit and making her clench her thighs together to alleviate the desire to rub the tickling nub.

Not willing to risk a moan escaping instead of actual speech from the effect his touch was having on her, she remained silent and just nodded. It was a minute before he seemed to realize he was still holding her hand, and with apparent reluctance he let it go. And with that, her body settled back to normal. For some reason, she wanted the other back...

Ziggy watched Summer as she left the office. In fact he watched her all the way to her car, a beat-up little early model Honda Civic that looked like tape and a whole lot of faith and hope were all that were holding it together. He added, if not a new car, then at least a more reliable later model one, to the list of things Summer needed.

He looked over Summer's employee details form once more and frowned. Moving her out of The Bywater was number one on his list. Sure, it was cheap and probably all Summer could afford, but in recent years it had really gone downhill, becoming a favorite haunt of pyros—the vampire scum who preyed on little girls like Summer. And in the meantime...

He wondered what time Ricardo was likely to surface. He had a few questions he needed answers to. It was time to find out a bit more about his newest employee.

* * * * *

At ten minutes to seven, Ziggy pulled up in front of Summer's apartment—and using that term was being generous, looking at the decrepit building in front of him—and turned off the Harley. Broken shingles, paint peeling or nonexistent in spots, boards falling off—the last maintenance done on it was probably turn of the century.

He looked up and down the street.

Still. Quiet. Not a soul about.

It was disconcerting, as if life had fled the place. It hadn't. People tended to hide indoors in this area. Unless they had a death wish. He wondered if Summer stayed at Rico's on the nights she worked at the club. With any luck, she wouldn't be staying here any more nights—and if she decided to be stubborn, which was damn likely, he thought with a grunt, then he had a team of men he could pull in to watch over her.

Grasping the old bronze doorknob, he opened the door, inset stained-glass panels on the top half of the door a sad remnant of the building's finer days. A tall staircase loomed right in front of him, half the spindles either broken or missing. To either side, doors, some with peeling paint, the rest defaced with indecipherable graffiti, remained closed.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he reached a landing covered in threadbare brown carpet. In some spots, the wooden floorboards underneath showed through. The doors and grayish walls on this level looked in slightly better condition—someone had at least made an effort to make it look cared for. A ghostly version of the graffiti downstairs

remained, as though one of the tenants had taken the time and effort to attempt to remove the worst of it.

Stepping down the hall, he located Summer's apartment and knocked. He glanced at the peephole, expecting to see her block it from the other side. Or at least the chain rattling on the door. Instead the door opened with a flourish and Summer stood there, eyebrow raised as she waited for him to walk in.

"You're early," she commented as he walked past.

He was also furious—his mood had gone from sugar to shit in two seconds flat. "Why the hell didn't you check to see who it was? You've got a peephole. And what about the chain on the door? Jesus, Summer—"

"Will you shut up?" she bit out, cutting him off.

He broke his bare perusal of her apartment and glared at her. "Excuse me?"

"I knew it was you."

"How the *hell* did you know that?"

She turned away, a blush creeping up her neck. Forget that. If she were embarrassed because she'd done something so freakin' stupid and dangerous, he intended to drive the lesson home so she wouldn't forget.

"Summer? Explain. Now."

"You're a big bully, you know that?"

"Look, you're about two seconds from that spanking I mentioned earlier. So tell me. Now. How did you *know* it was me?"

Her chin came up in defiance as she glared up at him. Christ, she was cute when she was angry. He'd kiss that little pout right off her mouth if he weren't so mad he could spit.

"I'm...psychic. I...know things."

What the fuck? "Oh, and some little voice told you it was me and not some whacko on the other side of the door waiting to rip your head off?" he replied, his voice rising with worry that she relied on something so bizarre to identify her visitors. She needed more than a bodyguard—she needed a fulltime keeper. "Do you have any idea how dangerous this area is? Are you *nuts*?"

"See?" She turned away from him, not before he saw her eyes flashing with a mixture of hurt and anger. "I knew this was a bad idea. You're the same as all the others." Without looking at him, she stomped past him toward the door and opened it wide, standing there tapping her foot. "Why don't you just leave?"

"I am not leaving. I'm taking you to dinner."

"No, you're taking your lousy attitude and your overbearing bossiness and disbelief and getting the hell out of my apartment," she said, her fist clenched on her hip.

This was not good. He had plans for tonight, and they didn't include scarfing down a hamburger on his own because he'd pissed off Summer. Besides, there was something in her eyes, that hurt he'd caught a glimpse of, that bore looking into. Taking a deep breath, he packed down the remnants of his anger, and looked over at her. Now she looked sad. Her bottom lip quivered, and her little back was all straight and stiff, but if the door hadn't been there to hang on to, she looked like she'd crumple in a heap. Shit, he was an idiot. Shaking his head, he strode over to her, closed the door, and scooped her up in his arms. Ignoring her ineffectual wriggling, her demands of "put me down!" he turned, looking for somewhere to sit with her. He spied a beaten up old recliner – the only chair in the room – under an open window, and made his way there.

Restraining her still squirming body, he sat down, locking his arms around her as she moved to escape.

"Don't tempt me, baby," he warned. "My hand is just itching to wrap around that gorgeous ass of yours." He waited until she settled down, her body still rigid, her back ramrod straight, her plump bottom nestled into his lap.

"Look, Summer, I'm sorry for the way I acted. The things I said. But I was – *am* – worried about you. This is not the safest part of town." He ran a hand over her jeans-clad leg, trying to rub some of the tension out of her. "Now, tell me about this psychic stuff. I promise I won't be a smart-ass."

She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes as she looked at him, as if trying to decide if she could believe him.

God, she was going to be a handful. He recalled Link having the same problem with Lucy. For a man so used to controlling battle-hardened soldiers, the minute Lucy stamped her dainty little foot, the big guy would go all soft. It would have been laughable except Link would have thumped the shit out of him if he'd been game enough to so much as *look* like he thought it was funny. Now he understood. Hell, he felt like he was stepping through a minefield. "Honey, I was worried as hell, okay? I can't help it. Especially with you." He grabbed her chin so that she faced him. "I care about you and I don't want you to get hurt. Besides, it's in my blood to protect. I've been doing it for too long to stop now, so it's not like I can just turn it off. And even if I could –"

Instead his words were cut off when she reached to kiss him, effectively stopping his motor mouth. It was the first time, he realized with a small flare of satisfaction, she'd initiated the contact between them. It was a shy, tentative little kiss, and for once he let her lead.

As kisses went, though, it was one hell of a way to shut him up. Slow to start, but before long she seemed to warm to the idea and had a hold of his head and was doing a number on his tongue that made everything from his tonsils to his toenails curl. His fingers were likely leaving dents in her hip, he was holding on so hard. That dumb "no kissing" rule was history.

She broke away finally, panting. "You talk too much, Ziggy."

He couldn't resist a small grin. "Well, hell, honey, anytime I do, you feel free to do that and let me know. Jesus, woman..." He grimaced and moved her forward on his lap. "Sorry, small problem with circulation." That was putting it mildly. His cock was one big ache. After that kiss, if she'd so much as twitched that ass of hers, he'd likely have come in his jeans.

A smile creased her face that lit up her eyes, and he damned if it didn't make him want to kiss her all over again. He had to get her talking – quick.

"Now tell me. I'm listening."

Looking to get comfortable, she snuggled into his chest, fingering his shirt, and his arm came around her to hold her close. There was something about sitting there like that, holding her, that just felt...hell, it just felt right.

"I've had this...gift...curse...whatever, since I was about ten. My grandmother has it too, although hers is much stronger. I guess you would say I can feel people, like an empath. The good stuff is fine, but with bad people, I hate it. I can't filter it, so it all gets through."

"So how did you know it was me?"

"Well, that's another facet to it. You see, each person has a certain vibration – like everyone has a different smell, you know? No two people are the same. So I could *feel* it was you."

"O-kaay." He considered that. Made sense, he guessed. "So how reliable is it?"

"Completely. Mine, anyway." She looked at him closely. "You know everyone has some degree of psychic ability."

"Even me?" He smiled at her.

"Now that's a scary thought," she teased, "but yes. Most people just block it out, or try to explain it away. Some call it instinct. Those 'feelings' they get that something or someone doesn't feel right, that something's about to happen..."

"You and my mother should talk – No, on second thoughts..." He rolled his eyes.

"She's psychic?"

"Well, I wouldn't have called it that, specifically. But she always knows when either my brother or I are in trouble. Sends in the ground troops to 'rescue' us – that would be Dad. Dad knows better than to doubt her. Damn if she isn't right every time."

"It sounds like she could be, Ziggy. At least she trusts her intuition, unlike most people. I'd love to meet her one day."

"No you wouldn't. Trust me," he laughed. He could just imagine his mother's reaction if he took Summer to meet her – she'd have the preacher there in two seconds flat. "So, any other stuff I should know about?" He stroked her hair then twisted it around his fingers, enjoying the silky feel.

"Some. Nothing as strong as that though. Some precognition, but I'm still working on that. And...well, other stuff...not important. Most people don't believe it."

"I must admit, I've never run into anyone with those particular gifts before, but if you say you have them, then I believe you."

"You're not just saying that?"

The hope he saw in her eyes about broke his heart. It was obvious from her defensiveness she'd suffered a lot of ridicule over the years.

"Nope. Never say anything I don't mean."

She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks, Ziggy."

"You're welcome." Hell, the way she was looking at him, he could feel himself about to do a Link and go all soft and gooey. But at least hurdle number one out of the way. "Now, I'm hungry. How about you?"

"Always." She grimaced. "You don't think I got this gorgeous body from starving myself, do you?"

"You're right about that, honey. It is a gorgeous body." And right then he was inclined to do any amount of convincing necessary.

"Uh-oh. You've got that look in your eyes again."

"What look?"

"The one that usually precedes you trying to tickle my tonsils," she said and giggled, the sound so lighthearted it took him aback. She slid off his lap and stood, holding out her hand. "Come on. Feed me."

"My pleasure, ma'am."

Chapter Five

Originally, Ziggy had intended taking Summer to a place that made the best burgers south of the Mason-Dixon line, but after that kiss, he decided he didn't want her fainting from lack of food later on when he got her to his place, especially since he had plans that involved considerable outlay of energy. Instead they ended up at Mr. John's, who did, as far as he was concerned, the best steaks, and the meanest Filet Oscar in New Orleans. He couldn't wait to watch her eyes as she sank her teeth into it.

His back, ass and thighs were still tingling from her being wrapped around him on the back of the bike. That was the plus side. The downside was that with her behind him he'd been unable to see the glory of that denim-clad ass spread out over the leather of his pillion bike seat.

The gingham shirt she was wearing was showing its age though, the red and white check starting to fade, collar a tad threadbare. She looked like Elly May Clampett down off the farm, such a contrast to the sexy, classy woman in the cheongsam he'd met the first night. Both of them were sexy, though, and both of them turned him on. Fired his protective instincts. But *this* Summer...she drove him nuts in the best way.

Independent, feisty, soft and cuddly—hell, he didn't cuddle women. For some reason, he cuddled Summer. Loved it. Couldn't get enough of it.

He liked his women submissive, willing to give up all control to him, and most importantly, he liked them briefly. So why the heck was he so intent on keeping Summer as close to him as possible?

Protection. He nodded his head. Some nutcase was trying to hurt her. Until that was taken care of, he'd do whatever it took to keep her safe.

Which was why he couldn't hand that job over to one of his guys. They were all just as capable of looking after her as he was. Even Chad. For all his tomfoolery, when it came down to it, his cousin was a damn fine bodyguard. However, knowing Chad, he'd be trying to find a way inside her pants within the first five minutes.

His body went rigid at the thought. But he forced himself to picture it—Summer wasn't his, after all—her lying naked on a bed, all creamy flesh and the sweetest little pussy, legs parted in invitation, some other man between her thighs, lowering his body to hers as he began to— His pulse sped up, his heart hammering in his chest. He slammed the door in his mind shut on the thought. Sweat broke out on his forehead, his neck, his gut cramped, and for a moment he felt sick.

Christ! What was wrong with him? He pushed the food around on his plate, his appetite gone.

He started as a small hand covered his, caressing it, sending soothing warmth through his body. At once his pulse returned to normal and he felt as if he could take a breath again. Could she be reading him?

He glanced down at the hand still lying on his, smiled, then raised his eyes to look over at her. A grin broke free as he watched her eat. Damn, it was a sight! After dating quite a few women who thought lettuce, tomato and a little oil-free dressing constituted a three-course meal, it was a pleasure to watch a woman dig in. And Summer sure could hoe. Her steak was disappearing as if she hadn't eaten for a week.

That set off another disquieting thought. She was living in a dump—sure, it was clean and she'd obviously made an effort to make it "home"—but only in the most generous sense could it be called furnished. And her car...it looked as if it were about to wheeze its last breath any second. Was it possible she wasn't eating... No, Rico wouldn't let her starve.

But then Ziggy had already learned she didn't like men fussing over her. Chances were Rico had been given the same message.

The comforting warmth over his hand disappeared as she reached instead for her knife and cut off another mouthful of steak. The pink flesh dripped with juices. As he watched, mesmerized, she added a little of the crabmeat and sauce and slid it off the fork and into her mouth, her eyes fluttering shut as the flavors hit her tongue. His own mouth watered just watching her. A look of such pleasure filled her face as her lips closed around the mouthful and she savored the taste, his mind jumped into action picturing the same look on her face as he fed her his cock. That cute little mouth stretched around his width. Her eyes trembling shut as he slid over her tongue and down her throat.

Shit! Now why did he go and think that? He'd just got his damn body under control. But a small drop of Béarnaise sauce sat on her lip, and he was dying to lick it off. When her tongue flicked out to snare it—not with just one lick, but two—his libido damn near had him grabbing her arm and heading for his bike and his bed.

"You're not hungry?" she asked as she looked from his barely touched plate to her almost wiped clean one. Her expression changed to mortification. "Oh God, I'm being a pig, aren't I?" Her fork clattered as she dropped it on her plate.

He grabbed her hand where it had settled on her lap, squeezing it. "Anything but, honey. I just had no idea," he leaned over to whisper next to her ear, "how fucking horny it would make me watching you eat." Under the tablecloth, he moved her hand to his lap, to cup the aching bulge of his cock.

Her eyes widened. "So this is like foreplay?"

"Just remind me to cook at home next time we eat," he said and groaned as her fingers began to absently trail over the denim-encased shaft.

"Next time?"

"Yes, next time." He lifted her hand off his cock before he laid her across the table and made a banquet of her naked body. "You okay if we move on to the talking bit? We can talk over dessert if you're still hungry..."

He couldn't miss the ashen look on her face. She pushed her plate away.

"Talk about what?"

"You. Me. The other night."

"There's nothing to talk about, Ziggy. It was a one-time thing, I told you that. It won't happen again. If that's what this dinner was about, so that you could butter me up to have another bite at the cherry —"

"Whoa! Hold on a second." He grabbed her hand, pulling it into his lap, and just held it — *away* from his cock.

"Look, I know you don't mix sexually with the clientele at Dark Side. I would have known it even if Rico hadn't pulled me aside and told me —"

"He did *what*?"

"Hey, settle down. He was concerned about you."

"But still..." Her face was flushed, he just wasn't sure if it was from embarrassment or anger.

"I knew anyway, honey. You were so damn snug I had trouble getting all the way inside."

"Oh, wonderful." A deeper flush of color stole up her neck, settling in a crimson blush over her cheeks. "God, you really come right to the point, don't you?"

"Hey, don't be embarrassed, Summer. I'm honored you chose me. I just wish I'd known so that I could have made it better for you."

She choked on a nervous laugh. "Don't be ridiculous, Ziggy. If it had been any 'better', I would have had to crawl out of there on my hands and knees because my legs had turned into limp noodles."

"At least then I might have stood a chance of catching you," he grumbled.

She totally ignored his comment. "What else did Rico tell you?"

He sat back, wondering how much to share. Knowing Summer, even the little he did, she'd be pissed as hell. And it wasn't something he wanted to discuss in a public place. He motioned to the waiter for the check.

"Ziggy?" she prompted when he didn't answer her.

Pulling enough bills out of his wallet to cover it, he stood, grabbing his jacket off the back of his chair. "Come on, let's continue this conversation back at my place." When her stubborn chin came up and she looked as if she might put up a fight, he used the only ammunition he could think of. Food. "You like Ben and Jerry's?"

"Depends." Her eyes narrowed as she looked at him. "What flavor?"

He stifled a grin. He wasn't above using whatever means necessary, and if food was what it took with Summer, he'd keep the fridge and freezer stocked to the brim. "You have a choice of Chunky Monkey or Cherry Garcia."

"Oh God. Chunky Monkey." She jumped up. "Lead on, MacDuff. I'm right behind you."

He chuckled as she almost pushed him to the door.

Knowing he'd soon have her right where he wanted her, he wrapped her in his jacket as she got on the bike and took the shortcut to his house. He wondered if she'd figured out yet she wouldn't be going home tonight...

* * * * *

"You going to tell me?"

While Ziggy was in the kitchen getting two bowls of ice cream, at the last minute throwing on an extra scoop for Summer simply because he'd discovered a particular enjoyment in watching her eat, she had walked around his living room, his dining room, looking, running her fingers over furniture, stuff he had lying around.

For the first time, he'd looked at his home, trying to see it through someone else's eyes. It was comfortable, but it certainly wouldn't be making it into *Home Beautiful*. The leather sofa and two overstuffed chairs sitting in front of the fireplace, the huge flat screen TV, magazines scattered around—comfortable. The socks and clothes left lying around or draped over the backs of chairs where he'd shed them the minute he walked in the door just made it look like a guy's place. Not that he'd ever noticed before, and certainly not with any of the other women he brought home—as extremely rare as that was. Usually they made a beeline for the bedroom, got down to some serious fucking, and when it was all over, he either took them home, or they got in their car and left. Simple. No mess. No fuss.

It was a place to sleep, and on the rare occasions he took a weekend off, a place to relax, unwind.

In a sense, it was a perfect expression of him—functional but comfortable, no frills, but didn't feel as if he were living in a jail cell, either.

Just...easy.

So why was he watching Summer, hoping for some sign of approval, for God's sake?

He shook off the thought and picked up the two bowls and spoons, catching her in the living room, staring at some photos on the mantelpiece.

"Who's this? Hunks on parade?"

It was a snapshot his mother had taken of him and Randy and Chad the day they opened *Were Watching* for business. "That's my younger brother Randy," he said, pointing at the fair-haired man, the family resemblance strong between the two of them. "And my cousin Chad," he indicated the man with the long black hair.

"Hmmm..."

He stared at the back of her head and frowned. "Hmmm? What's hmmm?"

"Randy. He's cute."

He stiffened. "He's also married. I'm sure his wife agrees with you."

"What about Chad? God, I'd kill for hair like that. I wonder if it feels as silky —"

"Never mind about fucking Chad," he snapped.

"Well, I wasn't actually talking about fucking Chad, but now that you mention it, is he married too?"

His jaw firmed, his teeth gritted, and he was all set to say to hell with the ice cream, and give her that spanking until that gorgeous ass glowed, when she turned and he caught the teasing light in her eyes.

"Menace! Here..." he nudged her stomach with the bowl, "your ice cream is melting."

"Grumpy!" She took the bowl from his hand with a pout.

He waited as she curled up on the sofa and then sat next to her, so close that his thigh did more than brush up against hers. They were like Siamese twins who'd been fused at the hip. She looked at him, then at the space on the other side of him on the couch and rolled her eyes.

"You ever heard of 'personal space', Ziggy?"

"Sure have. There's three kinds..."

"Three?"

"Yours, mine...and ours." He flashed a grin and rubbed his leg up against hers. "I prefer the 'ours' type."

"Gee, I'd never have guessed," she said drolly. Her look turned thoughtful. "By the way, I've been meaning to ask... Your name..."

Ziggy's grin dropped and he focused on his ice cream. "Hmmm?"

"Is it a nickname?"

"No."

"You mean to say it's your *real* name" Her eyes widened.

His lips thinned as he looked at her. "Yes."

"Your parents actually named you that?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

"Mom."

"Why?"

"You eating that ice cream or not?"

She tucked her spoon in and pulled up a dripping, half-melted spoonful. The moan as she sucked it off the spoon did nothing for his restraint. Watching her mouth wrap

around the spoon brought other, more heated thoughts to mind. He groaned silently as she dragged out withdrawing the spoon. Unable to tear his eyes away from the path her tongue then took as it ran over her lips, top and then bottom.

"You know, getting answers out of you is kinda like pulling teeth. Why 'Ziggy'?"

He pulled his eyes away from the delicious image before he undid his jeans and pressed those cold lips somewhere infinitely more pleasurable, and leaned his head back against the seat. "Mom. She was a huge David Bowie fan. *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*."

"Never heard of it."

"Not surprised. He was big in the Seventies."

"Which century?"

He opened one eye and tossed a frown at her.

She laughed at his expression, a mischievous glint in her eye. "Anyone ever call you *Stardust*?" she said with a husky, teasing voice.

"Not if they want to live."

"Oh."

"Shut up and eat."

She glanced at his empty bowl. "You really need to learn to savor your food, Ziggy."

He glanced pointedly at hers. "There's kind of a time limit on how long a person can *savor* ice cream before a straw becomes necessary – in case you haven't noticed."

"That's okay." She swirled the spoon around, making lines in the runny mess. "Now it's slushy. Just how I like it."

"Cool. Next time I'll nuke it in the microwave for a minute or two."

"Where would the fun be in that? So...Rico. Tell me what he told you. Then I can decide whether to open the blinds on him tomorrow morning and give him a bad case of sunburn."

Ziggy choked. "Jeez, Summer. You play rough."

"So you talk and I'll shut up."

"That'd be a change," he muttered under his breath.

"He's very protective of you," he started off, "so let's just get that straight. And he hasn't told anyone but me."

"Oh great. I'm so glad," she said, sarcasm dripping from her words. "But why you? Why is he telling my business to people at all? It's not as if I want the whole dang world knowing –"

Ziggy covered her mouth with his hand to stop the tirade he could sense building. "Because I was the first person you'd let close enough to fuck you since the attack." When she sat quietly, he removed his hand.

She took another scoop of ice cream, playing with it before she put it in her mouth as though she were thinking. Ziggy was learning fast that a quiet Summer, or a thinking one, were not necessarily good things. "So he plans on telling anyone I choose to have sex with?"

"I doubt it. He was warning me off, truth be told. I wasn't taking too kindly to being told to stay away from you." Her words, and their implication, suddenly hit him. He turned his head and glared at her. "And what the hell...just who else are you planning on fucking? What—have you got a wish list or something?"

She dropped her spoon in her bowl and looked at him. "I beg your pardon?"

Shit. What the hell was he saying? Now he sounded like a jealous lover. Christ, maybe he was. That'd be a first. But then he'd actually have to qualify as something more than a one-night stand.

He gritted his teeth. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for. I have no idea what came over me."

She lifted her chin, her lips pressed closely together. "Accepted. You had me worried for a minute there. You sounded like you thought you had some...I don't know...some claim on me or something."

Ziggy ground his teeth together until his jaw ached and locked his fingers together in his lap. Because he was either going to say the wrong thing, or he was going to wring her neck. Either way, he'd only get himself into deeper shit. But more to the point, she was right—he had no claim on her, or she on him. Which should make him very, very happy, but for some reason just pissed him off more.

"And? What did he say?"

Ziggy opened his mouth to speak, but stopped and looked up as Summer's hand closed around his arm. The angry petulance in her eyes had faded. In its place, a hint of...fear, uncertainty, something that knocked the blustery wind right out of his sails.

"All of it, Ziggy. Please? I need to know how much you know."

He placed his hand over hers, his big brawny mitt completely covering her more dainty one, and sighed. "He told me about how you two met, what happened between you. That you know *what* he is." He watched her closely.

She nodded and glanced up. "Don't look like that. I've been dealing with weird stuff for the past twenty-eight years. Trust me, a vampire is not that odd. Some of my ancestors on my grandmother's side are way weirder than that. What else?"

"That you'd been raped and beaten, almost killed the guy who did it. Almost died saving Rico."

Her head hung down, watching as the spoon scooped and dripped, scooped and dripped in the melting ice cream. He put his arm around her, took the bowl from her with his other hand, and placed it on the coffee table.

"How much more is there, honey?"

"That's the majority of it." Her face closed down. "That's enough."

"Look, this guy could be searching for you. You need protection."

"And that's you?"

"If you'll let me."

"I can't pay you."

"Who said anything about paying me? I'm offering."

"Is that why you offered me a job...so you can keep an eye on me?"

"Hardly." He offered her a half smile. "You'll find out tomorrow just how much I need help."

"And what about us...this sexual attraction?"

Something in her tone made Ziggy pause, and he looked more closely at Summer, their eyes locking as he considered his answer. Pure sweetness mixed with steel on the prettiest little face he'd ever seen. Stubborn chin tipped up, meeting his eyes dead on, she never backed down with him like a lot of women did. And he loved it, that determined look she got on her face. Made him want to bundle her up and cover her with kisses every time... Damn, there was that tightness in his chest again. But his little Summer would never be a poker player—her expression told him everything her words didn't. This was it, the deal breaker. He wasn't going to lie to her, though, not after they'd come this far. "That's something I'd like to explore further, if you do too."

"I'm not sure, Ziggy. I've never had such an intense reaction to a man before. It was...I felt..." A tear tracked down her cheek, hanging for a moment on her jaw before dropping onto her shirt.

His heart about broke from the look on her face just then. She was riding an emotional edge, and he didn't want to push too far, but there was something he had to know. "Why'd you run out on me, Summer?" As he watched her closely, a second tear joined the first, the wet patch growing larger. His fingers itched to brush the tears away, but he held still.

She sniffled then took a deep breath, her body straightened, and she swallowed, her eyes finally breaking contact with his as she swiped at the remaining wetness on her cheeks. "That night with you was the first time since...since I escaped. I didn't think I could...would let any man touch me ever again. I still don't know if I can..."

He picked up her hand and held it against his lips, feeling the chill of her fingers. "Why don't we just take it slow and find out? Let me help you." Summer looked up at him, her eyes still glassy, but he sensed the resolve in her not to allow any more tears free. She was one strong lady, he'd give her that. "I won't hurt you, Summer. I hope you know that."

He made a decision and stood from the couch. With her still in his arms, he strode to the bedroom.

"Hang on, where are you taking me?"

"To bed. Only one way to work this out, honey. You're just going to have to trust me again."

"But-but I need to go home. I have to work tomorrow."

"I know. I'm the boss, remember?" He slung her a cheeky grin, trying to lighten the mood a little. "I'll be sure to be understanding if you're a little late."

Her lips firmed. Man, he was getting to know that look. "But this is just sex, right? To see if I can...you know..." she queried. "No commitment for more. And it has nothing to do with work. It's just between us. Agreed?"

He tensed. Now, what the hell did she mean by that? She didn't want anyone to know about them? Or worse, she wanted to be able to fuck other guys? His body tensed at that thought. Everything inside him screamed his rejection, but he knew enough about Summer to know that if he didn't agree, he might as well kiss her goodbye now. He could well understand Rico's frustration.

But frickin' hell, he refused to dignify her damn stupid question with an answer. Fuck it. They had whatever they had, and he wasn't making any *agreements* just so she could slot him into some safe category. The realization that that was exactly what she was trying to do just pissed him off. It was about time he showed her who was in charge.

He put her down when he reached his bedroom, turning her to face him, his fingers holding firm to her jaw so that she couldn't avoid his eyes. "You want nice simple sex, honey, you got it. But run, and I'll chase you, Summer. And catch you—don't doubt that. Now be a good girl and undress."

He was mad, dammit. Nice, easy sex was what she wanted, then that's what she'd get. And why the hell was he fighting it, anyway? Fuck, she had him tied up in more ways than he cared to admit. He reached for the hem of his own shirt and pulled it over his head, tossing it on a chair. Loss of control made him uneasy. And he hadn't felt in control since the night he first met her. He sat down on the bed to take off his shoes, kicking them into the corner. He looked up to see her standing there, her face pale.

"You want me to do it for you?"

"N-No."

He'd just stood and flipped the top stud open on his jeans to slide down the zipper when he caught sight of her shaking hands struggling to undo the buttons on her shirt. At that he sat again and watched. When she tried for a minute and couldn't get them undone, she dropped her arms. Her eyes were closed but tears still fell, the glossy drops sneaking under the shivering lashes to track down her cheeks. Alarm filled him when a tremor, and not one of arousal, shivered over her body. He sniffed. Her scent wasn't tainted with fear. It was more akin to horror.

"Summer?" he said, standing slowly, his anger snuffing out as a sense of dismay at what he'd just done filled him. "Honey? Talk to me, baby."

"I can't, Ziggy." Her voice was so soft, if he hadn't been watching her, his senses screaming at him, he doubted he would have heard her at all. "I'm sorry, but I c-can't."

He covered the few steps separating them and grasped her shoulders, rubbing them, concerned now by the continuous tremors shaking her body.

"Come on, honey, talk to me. I can't help if I don't know what's wrong." In spite of an almost crushing need to wrap her up in his arms and hold her tight, he kept some distance between them, his voice gentle but firm.

"Would you like some help?"

Summer shook her head vigorously, her eyes still clenched shut—then they snapped open, the pupils large and dark in her pale face, and she nodded.

Keeping his movements slow, he worked the buttons of her shirt undone until the two sides parted and revealed a hint of red lace.

As he slipped his fingers under the fabric and started to slide the blouse over her shoulders, she sprang out of her stupor and grabbed the two halves, pulling the blouse tight across her chest as she wrenched away from him.

"No, no, no."

Hell, what was the matter? A thought occurred to him, a disquieting recollection from something Rico had said. He swallowed, taking deep breath. If his suspicions were correct, it was no wonder she was reacting like she was. And he was a fucking idiot! Again.

He could see her fingers struggling to close up the shirt again. She had the first button aligned with the wrong hole so it sat wrong, and she hadn't even noticed.

"Summer, stop," he said in the firm, deep voice he used on subs. He felt a moment's relief when her hands froze.

Stepping up behind her, he reached around, gently removing her hands from the fabric and releasing them at her sides.

"Now don't move," he said, maintaining the same tone.

A hitched breath that turned into a little sob left her chest. But she stayed still. Trembling like a leaf in a high wind, but she stayed where she was.

"I'm going to take off your shirt now, Summer. There's something you don't want me to see, isn't there?"

She nodded.

"It's going to be okay, honey. Trust me."

It was a big ask, he knew. And while he could see her desire to be submissive, he doubted, after what she'd been through, that she'd be prepared to trust any man sexually enough to give him that much power over her. That would take time. Lots of time. Which was why he was surprised when she relaxed a little, the bunching in her shoulders slumping as he pulled back the shirt, over her shoulders, down her arms, peeling the fabric off her like a second skin.

Horror was quickly followed by disgust, and the more he revealed, the angrier he became until white-hot fury boiled inside him, fraying his control until it was barely hanging by a thread. Many welts crossed her back, some faint, a shade or two darker than her skin tone, but a few so raised that the skin had not only been split, the flesh had been flayed wide open and left a jagged white ridge when it mended.

His breathing increased, heart hammering in his chest, his nostrils flaring as he fought to suck enough oxygen into his body to calm his racing pulse. As a medic in the Special Forces, he'd seen men—ones they'd retrieved from capture—with injuries like this. He knew what kind of pain she must have borne. What incensed him further was the thought of the hidden scars she carried, the ones no one could see. No wonder Rico was so protective of her. There was a lot more to Summer's history than he knew—that much he was sure of. This had not been a one-time beating. This had been done over a period of time, judging from the scars. An image of Summer being whipped by a faceless man until she bled, begging and pleading for mercy, pierced his mind, and a murderous rage filled him, threatening his sanity, his control.

Suddenly Summer gasped, bending over as she held her head. "Stop it, Ziggy, please...stop!"

Chapter Six

Stop? Concern and confusion as to her meaning had him stepping around her, his hands gripping her shoulders as he leaned down to speak to her. “Stop what, honey? I don’t understand.”

“I-I can feel it. Your anger. It’s like a knife st-stabbing in my head.” Tears were running down her face.

After what he’d just seen, the thought that he had caused her more pain just about killed him. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes, cleared his mind, consciously pushing away his violent emotions, grabbing at anything he could think of that made him feel good—the softness of her skin, the memory of her sweet smile when she looked at him, her laugh...that little giggle he so loved to hear, the pleasure he gained just from touching her, cuddling with her.

And as he did, something became clear to him—the pleasures, the happy moments, all of them, were tied in with her. He’d changed inside since he met her. After pushing people—especially women—away for the past two years, in the space of a couple of weeks this woman’s happiness had somehow become inexorably bound to his.

With a deep, shuddering breath, she relaxed, her hands leaving her head to rest on his forearms.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

She was thanking him? For what? It seemed like every time he touched her he caused her more pain.

But not any longer. One day he’d find out the whole story, but for now his only focus was on giving her pleasure, replacing the horror in her life with something good.

Holding her tight, he pulled her against his chest, smoothing his hand over her hair as her head nestled against him, his body heat wrapping around her to warm her, gradually stilling the little shivers that afflicted her.

With a finger under her chin, he lifted her face, noting the damp cheeks, the tense little lines around her eyes, her mouth.

“You’re a beautiful woman, Summer Grayson. Every precious inch of you. Even the scars you carry.” Her eyes teared up again, her head doing a little shake of denial. “Yes, baby, even the scars. Because they’re a part of you. They show what a strong woman you are—a survivor. Don’t ever, *ever* be ashamed of that.”

He lowered his head and kissed lips that quivered underneath his. Soft, gentle, he brushed his lips over hers and his heart clenched as her eyelids fluttered shut and her mouth parted under his. The sweetest mouth on the planet. His tongue moved into the warmth, brushing over her teeth until he found her tongue, lying quiet in her mouth,

and licked at it. Rubbed over it in a sensual caress. And when hers curled around his, the touch tentative, the tip flicking the underside of his, a ball of fire shot straight to his groin.

Had any woman's kiss ever been this sweet, this intoxicating? Without breaking the kiss, he took her hands and wrapped them around his neck. As if that were a sign for her to let go, she took the initiative, pulling herself up tight against him and pulling him down to her as she kissed him harder, her mouth hungry, her tongue rasping against his in a provocative little dance in the same way her leg had lifted and was rubbing along his in an unspoken plea for more.

From her mouth down to her waist, he could feel warm skin, smell the soft scent that flowed from her pores, the heady perfume of her arousal. And knowing what she was offering was only for him inflamed the possessive streak inside him until he wanted to howl with it. His large hands cupped the lusciously rounded curves of her buttocks and he lifted her, a shaft of pure, sensual hunger overwhelming him as she wrapped her legs around his hips. The damp heat from her pussy poured over his cock, flaring a sharp craving to taste the evidence of her arousal he could picture flowing over those swollen lips.

In two strides his knees nudged against the bed and he lowered her down, following her to flop beside her when she refused to relinquish her hold.

He cupped her breast, his fingers rubbing over the hard peak of her nipple through the lace. She writhed against him, little moans swallowed up as he kissed her harder, eating at her mouth as hunger for her poured through him. A primal urge to strip her, rut on her wildly until he'd marked her all over as his, beat at his brain, the wolf inside not helping by growling his displeasure at being kept from her.

But he wouldn't rush her. Not this time. He wanted her aware of every second, wanted her to know, to recognize that this time he was making love to her. If it killed him, he'd bring her every bit of pleasure he knew how to give.

A needy whimper left Summer's lips when he lifted his mouth from hers. No man had ever kissed her like that, made her feel as if she'd die if she couldn't keep tasting him. He was such a hard man, so dark in some ways, filled with a terrible pain of his own she had yet to decipher, but he handled her with such gentleness, it almost brought tears to her eyes again.

She reached for his shoulders to pull him back, but he captured her hands in his, bringing them to his mouth to kiss each palm, his tongue swiping a circular line in the center that fired her clit to throbbing madness.

"Lie still. Let me love you, Summer."

Placing her hands over her head, he wrapped her fingers around the wrought iron filigree on his bedhead. And watched her. The heat from his amber eyes scorching a path clear through to her soul as he ran his fingertips up her arms, the rough pads tracing the outline of her collarbone, then lower, the huge palms coasting over her

nipples to cup each breast. With a quick flick, her bra opened. Like unwrapping a present, he peeled back the two halves, his tongue flicking out to wipe a line over his lips as he took in her tightly beaded nipples. His thumb scraped over the sensitive tips, the dark, dusky-rose buds puckering even further to a hardness that almost hurt.

She watched in mute fascination as his mouth lowered, his eyes never leaving hers as his lips parted and then closed over a needy peak. A rush of shocking heat enclosed the nipple, a rough tongue rubbing over it so that it lengthened.

Then he suckled. Each drawing pull sent a bolt of pleasure arcing straight to her clit. Sensations overwhelmed her. Her senses were screaming with each raspy brush of his tongue. And while she gave herself up to the erotic tugs, his free hand fondled her other breast, pulling on the nipple, twisting the flushed bud so that she writhed alongside him, her hips squirming, shifting up and down in a quest for something more, some deeper stimulation.

At some point he switched breasts, but by that time she was mindless, so lost in the arcs of exquisite pleasure suffusing her that she was hungry and desperate with need. God, she wanted him. Needed him inside her, taking her hard and deep.

She whimpered when his mouth left her breast, his tongue trailing a damp path over the rise of her breasts, up, until he was at her neck, the warm caress of his breath teasing her there.

"I'd love to see rings on these sweet little nipples, Summer. So that when I see you sitting at that desk, I know they carry my mark."

Then he kissed her, no gentle meeting of mouths this time, but a hard possession, his tongue pushing inside, thrusting, demanding, taking.

Her body was on fire. His fingers were twisting her nipples, first one, then the other, fanning the flames higher so that she felt she might explode if he didn't fuck her soon.

As his mouth left her lips to close again over an abused but ultrasensitive nipple, his hands were busy at her jeans, tugging the zipper down, his fingers slipping under the elastic of her panties to cup her mound.

"Oh baby, damn, you're so wet." His words were guttural, his breath searing as he tortured the other peak with his lips, nibbling and pulling as he sucked her breast deeper into his mouth.

When a finger breached the lips of her pussy, sliding inside to set up a slow thrust and withdraw, she thought she'd go insane from want.

His mouth was at her ear, his teeth tugging on the lobe.

"I'm going to eat you, honey, all that sweet cream pouring over my finger, it's mine. You hear me?" A second digit joined the first, stretching her further. "All mine, baby, and once I've sucked up every drop, I'm going to fuck you. Make you come again and again." His fingers pulled out, leaving her empty. They painted her lips, the strong scent of her juices filling her head until he kissed her, the impact of his hunger in her mind so overwhelming her that she gasped into his mouth as he licked and nibbled at

her lips. "I'll fuck you so hard and so long until I'm the only man you think of, the only man you remember..."

With that he clamped down on her tongue, holding it between his teeth as he sucked, his fingers once again filling her cunt. As he worked them in and out, the mound of his palm pressed on her clit so that she exploded, her eyes staring unseeing as intense brightness filled her vision and shudders racked her body over and over until finally she lay limp.

In the sated aftermath, she became aware of him lifting off the bed. Felt the soft scrape of denim down her thighs as he removed her jeans. Her eyes swung around, searching for him in the muted light of the room.

His face fierce, almost savage, he shucked off his own jeans until he stood naked.

Magnificent.

His thick cock—hard, swollen, the shaft engorged with blood—stood straight up from the curly thatch of light hair at his groin. Her mouth watered as she looked at it, the dark ruby crown glistening as a pearl of creamy fluid breached the small slit in the top.

He wrapped his hand around the shaft and stroked slowly, his eyes lifting to hers. A heady look of such carnal sensuality filled them as he captured the glistening bead and rubbed it over the head of his cock.

"You want this, baby? It's yours. All yours."

She nodded, words unable to find their way past the thickness of her tongue or the sudden dryness of her throat.

"First I want you to spread those legs for me. Let me see how much you want me."

She wanted him as much as the first or last breath she would ever take. When she parted her legs, his heavy-lidded eyes narrowed, his nostrils flaring, the hand gripping his cock stroking a little faster, a little rougher.

"Touch yourself, Summer."

His words came out in a rough, guttural command. Releasing the headboard, she swiped a finger through her slit, and he nodded.

"Taste it."

The hoarseness of his voice made her shiver. When she did as he said, bringing the shiny finger to her mouth, he ceased stroking and growled low in his throat, clenching his fist around the base in a viselike grip.

"Fuck, that's beautiful."

As her finger moved to gather some more juices, his hand shot out and grabbed hers, stopping the movement.

"Uh-uh. The rest is all mine, honey."

Her hands were returned to the headboard, and her heart stuttered when he placed his hands on her knees, easing her legs further apart, his hands skimming up her thighs

to hold her down before he lowered his head and ran his raspy tongue up the folds of her vulva.

She arched against him as he licked and thrust. His touch was relentless. Voracious. His lips moving to nibble and suck on her clit. She cried out, begging, pleading with him for more. Already she could feel her body tensing, sense the explosion about to tear through her. She gasped when a finger dipped into her wetness, becoming slick with the juices that poured from her before moving to the tight pucker of her anus and prodding until it slipped inside to the first knuckle. It was all it took for her body to shatter.

Time, place, conscious thought all vanished as she rose higher, captive to the pleasure tearing her apart.

And when it felt as though her mind would depart her body, the pleasure too much to bear, a protective, cosseting, but very male presence—curiously familiar yet unfamiliar all at once—curled around her, caring for her, licking over the ragged threads of her sanity to enfold her in a soul-deep embrace that allowed her to soar higher without fear that she would crash and burn, and never return.

As she came down from the peak, her mind returned to her body, at once missing the protective presence that had cradled her.

That final plummet and all her senses returned—the feel of the sheets on the skin of her back, the sweat painting lacy trails over her body. And on and on her body spasmed as Ziggy forced another, smaller climax from her, the vibrations of her release leaving her shaking as he lapped at the abundant juices spilling from her cunt.

Her body still shuddered, her breath gasping, and she felt she'd die if it didn't stop soon.

"No more," she gasped. "Please, Ziggy, I can't..."

"Shhh, trust me, baby, stay with me. Just this..."

And then his cock was at her entrance, the bulbous head breaching the swollen lips of her pussy before he began a long, slow slide inside.

"Nice and easy, baby." He grunted and slid in a little further, raking over moist flesh that clasped him tight, tunneling inside so deep it felt as though the tip of his erection butted against her cervix. "Yeah, that's it...all the way, honey, you can take me..." An excruciatingly slow thrust and withdrawal began, scraping over swollen, sensitized flesh that screamed for more.

She let go of the headboard, her hands reaching for him, curling around his neck as she arched her hips up against him, allowing him to sink until she felt the warmth of his groin flush against her pussy, and the completeness of his possession seared a path through her sanity. A large hand cupped her buttock and changed the direction of his thrusts so that he nudged and rubbed over the pad of nerves inside her vagina.

Nerve endings screamed at her, crying out for harder, faster.

At the touch of his other hand smoothing sweaty strands of hair back from her face, she opened her eyes and saw the control Ziggy was exerting to hold back, felt his resolve to be gentle. He really was a wonderful man. Determined not to hurt her, so concerned with her own enjoyment, that he must have been causing himself pain in holding back until he felt she was ready. But she didn't want gentle—the time for that was past. She wanted him to lose that iron control. To pound into her until his eyes crossed and he couldn't see straight.

She licked her lips, watching as the amber depths fired with heat when he followed the movement. "Kiss me," she said on a breath. "Kiss me now."

Ziggy watched the flare in her eyes, the same voracious need he felt, lighting them. Transferring his weight to his elbows, he lowered his head and swallowed his surprise when she grasped his head, holding his mouth on hers, forcing her tongue inside to thrust against his.

Fuck, at this rate he wouldn't last more than a minute.

She was wild in his arms, her body bucking underneath his, the silky tightness of her cunt dragging along the length of his cock as she rolled her hips underneath him.

When her lips left his mouth, her tongue lapping over the sweat-streaked skin to his shoulder then the base of his neck, he shuddered, his scrotum pulling up tight against the base of his cock.

Then she bit him. He groaned at the sweet little pain. "Oh yeah! Oh God, yeah!" His whole body clenched as the minx bit him and sucked, pulling the skin up against her tongue.

Electricity shot down his body straight to his dick, his balls so heavy and tight they ached. He let go of another thread of his rapidly fraying control and pounded into her. Desperate to come, to explode inside her, relish every sensation as his cum pumped out of the head of his cock.

Wrenching his shoulder away from her mouth, he barely noticed the dazed eyes, the swollen lips, before he sat up, pulling her with him so that she straddled his folded legs, and he proceeded to hammer into her. Deeper, Christ, he had to get deeper.

Her eyes widened, her body tensing just before he felt her cunt clamping on his cock, over and over, as her mouth opened in a silent scream.

Burying his head at her neck, he licked the flesh as he thrust, feeling the scalding fluid boiling up his shaft.

He nipped at her shoulder, the taste of her sweat, the scent of her cum, pushing him closer to the edge of a gaping maw of not only physical but emotional pleasure. He opened his mouth wider, his canines growing, lengthening. The wolf's rabid urging to clamp down and taste the metallic sweetness of her blood on his tongue pushed him into a place he'd never been before, with any woman. And he ached, hungered for it. Just a little. Not a bite, barely more than a pinprick. Until a drop of Summer's blood landed on his tongue. *Oh, sweet, sweet heaven.* So good he wanted to howl. More, he

wanted more, his tongue licking over the skin, his lips setting up a steady suction to lap up every intoxicating droplet.

"My wolf..."

Shock at what he was doing hit him like a bucket of ice water, pouring over his sweat-streaked flesh, Summer's words searing a path deep inside to the animal prancing and clawing inside him in restless anticipation and expectation. With a roar of regret, he tore his mouth from her shoulder.

As he felt his cock thicken and begin to pulse, the reality of what he was doing jolted through him and he jerked from her throbbing cunt. A howl ripped through him with the mind-blowing force of his release, and he watched helplessly as stream after scalding stream of his seed exploded over her quivering belly to drip on the bed. His mind screamed at the waste, the wrongness of it.

As sanity began to return, the full horror of what he'd nearly done hit him. The thickening of his cock, a sensation he'd never felt before, but unmistakable, the gathering of his semen under the head of his cock as his body prepared to knot inside her. Mate with her...

The impact of how easily it could have happened rocked him to his core. He'd never been tempted, never wanted to so much that it was a physical pain not to.

Stunned, his eyes turned back to Summer as she slumped in his arms. "Sleep...must sleeeeeeep..."

Her head lolled against his chest and he clenched her more tightly. Holding her head firm against him, conscious of the steady beat of her heart, the soft inhalations of her breathing against his chest, he waited for his breathing to calm.

Limbs shaking, he lay a now-sleeping Summer down on the bed, noticing the wash of his seed coating her belly, feeling a sense of gut-wrenching loss at the sight.

His legs still unsteady, he stumbled into the bathroom, grabbed a hand towel, and went back to clean the mess he'd caused, patting Summer dry so that she could rest easy.

It wasn't until he leaned over her, wiping the sweat off her breasts and face, that he noticed her shoulder. A large, berry-red discoloration. Frowning, he leaned closer. Sniffed. Licked.

Nothing different. No sign of his scent. So maybe he hadn't bitten her. Not really.

Relief made him weak. He pulled the sheet over her, tucking it around her before he walked outside through the open French doors.

He sucked in the muggy night air, trying to dispel the effects of an adrenaline overload. Geez, what was wrong with him? One more second inside that luscious cunt... So easy. It would have been so damn easy. To mark her. To mate her. He just couldn't believe it. Him! His wolf snorted in derision, prodding him to return to the woman who was, or should be, their mate.

My wolf. Hell, hearing Summer say that was the only thing that saved them both. So she must know...but how? And what did she mean? She didn't want more. *Just sex...* She'd said so herself. And hell, *he* didn't want a mate.

But the pull of her scent, so deeply ingrained now, pulled at him, urging him back to her side.

Overwhelming tiredness hit him then like a runaway train. God, one monumental climax and he was shattered. When was the last time *that* had happened to him? Too many thoughts pummeled at him for any of them to make sense—especially since his brain was fucked as well as his body.

He needed sleep.

Turning around, he headed back inside, slipping under the sheet to pull Summer up against him. With a leg slung over her hip, arms wrapped around her pulling her closer against him, the tension all but faded from his body. The heat of her snuggling against him warmed his chilled flesh. And deeper.

As sleep claimed him, a different need filled him—this time not for sex. It was the cry of his wolf howling for his mate.

Chapter Seven

Rising up through the cocooning layers of the most restful sleep she could remember in years, Summer became aware of the strong arms lifting her from the bed, clasping her against a very warm body.

She peeked one eye open and noticed Ziggy was carrying her in the direction of a gleaming white-tiled bathroom already swirling with steam from the glass-enclosed shower.

"You know, you keep carrying me around like this and you're going to risk a hernia," she informed Ziggy as she nestled her head under his chin, unable to muffle the contented purr in spite of the chiding nature of her words.

He snorted. "A little thing like you? Hardly."

"Well, don't blame me when you slip a disc, or something."

He stopped just short of the shower, his arms tightening around her as he began to bend over. "God! Damn! Christ!"

Her arms tightened around his neck as her balance shifted and her eyes snapped open, catching the grimace of pain on his face. "What? You've done it, haven't you?" She wriggled in his arms. "Put me down, you fool! I knew it."

Ziggy straightened, a laugh breaking free before he lifted her closer to kiss her forehead. "Just teasin'."

Summer frowned up at him. "Idiot!" But couldn't resist a grin as he lowered her feet to the floor. It was good to see him laugh—from what she'd been able to ascertain, it wasn't something Ziggy did a whole lot of.

He opened the door, ushering her inside the spacious cubicle. Showerheads at opposite ends of the tiled expanse poured warm water in enticing arcs. She immediately ducked under one, sighing with pleasure at the feel of the warm spray running over her body.

The shower at her apartment was the size of a broom closet, and the trickle from the showerhead could hardly be called a flow—she could spit in greater quantities. Which was why luxury such as she was currently experiencing was not to be taken lightly. Heaven only knew when she'd be given a similar opportunity.

When strong fingers began to massage an apple-fragrance shampoo into her hair from behind, she hummed approval.

"You know if you're looking to score brownie points, this just aced it. This isn't worth one cookie—you just earned the whole bag."

Hands turned her until her head was under the spray of water at her end of the shower, and she tilted her head back, allowing the shampoo to rinse out. Eyes open for

the brief period it took, she cast a quick look at Ziggy, surprised to see a small smile on his face. Then she was turned back, her hair wrung out then conditioner applied in a relaxing massage.

In spite of her flippancy, she really had to wonder if she were dreaming. In her experience men did not wake her up to shampoo her hair in a bathroom that had enough luxury features to keep Ivana Trump happy. In contrast to the heavily masculine décor of the rest of the house, the bathroom was a decadent wonderland. Double shower, huge Jacuzzi, ferns to relieve the starkness of the white tiling, and a large square skylight situated over the Jacuzzi.

"You're going to spoil me."

"So? Something wrong with that?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He turned her again to rinse out the conditioner and this time she kept her eyes firmly closed. A deep sadness washed over her. "Because this is a fantasy, and I have to go back to my place today."

She tried to shrug off the maudlin thought, forcing a cheery tone to her voice. "What do I do tomorrow morning when I'm showering in a tiny box with hot water that runs out in one minute, and no one to wash my hair?"

"You could stay here..."

"No. I couldn't."

"Why not?"

So many things had shifted for her last night, realizations she was still coming to grips with that she would save to sort out later. But nothing had changed for Ziggy. The other presence she had sensed last night—his wolf—lay quiescent. "This is just meant to be sex, remember, Ziggy? 'Sides, I don't want to cramp your style."

He snorted. "You're not 'cramping my style'. That would be Chad's problem, not mine." When she opened her mouth to answer, Ziggy's lips firmed, his look cutting off her reply. "Consider it protection then. You don't know if...*when* that asshole will find you again."

"I'm not some damsel in distress. Nobody came to my rescue before and I had to take care of myself—I can do it again."

"I'm not saying you can't. But why do it all on your own this time?"

"Because I like being independent."

Ziggy frowned down at her. "You just like being stubborn."

"I'll be fine."

"You won't—"

"And I promise to call you if anything creepy happens, okay?"

"Stay here."

"Nope. Take it or leave it."

"Stubborn."

"Independent." She could see there was no way he was going to drop it, unless she did something to change the direction of his thoughts...

His eyes widened as she dropped to her knees, her fingers wrapping around his cock.

"Summer..."

"And I'm very, very hungry."

Two large hands reached down to cup her face, concern darkening his eyes. "Are you sure, baby? I don't want—"

She knew what he was going to say, what he was thinking. That what she was about to do might cause her pain. That the memories of an earlier time would taint the pleasure she wanted so desperately to give him. Her heart clenched at the worry that filled his eyes. But thanks to this man, the previous night had been the start of a cleansing of sorts. The pleasure he'd given her, she hoped had flushed away a lot of the horror and pain. And she needed to do this. Not only to prove to herself that she could. But she needed to taste him so badly she ached with the want. "Oh yes, I'm very sure."

At the first touch of her lips closing around the head of his cock, Ziggy's brain imploded. The feel of the warm water at his back was nothing compared the suckling heat of her mouth. Heat enough to sear his skin had his scrotum pinching so tight he flinched as his balls pulled up flush against the base of his cock.

And she had yet to do more than cover the head.

From the moment he'd laid eyes on Summer, he'd imagined her mouth on him, around him, but nothing could have prepared him for the reality. He'd had plenty of women suck on his cock, but none had ever felt like this, like his mind, his pulse, his soul were being caressed by silken lips, laved by the velvety rasp of a tongue. He fully expected to hear angels singing any second, because this was as close to heaven as he had ever been.

Her eyes were shut against the spray of water off his body, and he devoured every facet of her features—the long auburn lashes, the high cheekbones, and God, the way her swollen pink lips stretched around his width as she bobbed her head, taking him deeper and deeper into an ecstasy he'd never dreamed existed.

He tangled his fingers in her hair, gripping the sodden strands as she slid further over him until the head of his cock touched the back of her throat. He closed his eyes to fully absorb the pleasure, just the feel of it enough to make his hands clench and his hips thrust, jerking, trying to slide the rest of the way.

"More, baby! Oh yes," he gritted out through clenched teeth.

When she began to struggle against his hold, whimpers grunting in her chest, his eyes snapped open.

Her eyes were shut tightly, but there was unmistakable terror in the frantic struggle as she tried to free herself. She reminded him of a trapped animal. Appalled at his loss of control, at what he'd done to her, he let go abruptly, his cock slipping from her mouth as he stepped away until the cold tiles hitting his back pulled him up.

Her head dropped, her body was shaking, little tremors running through her. Mortified, he crouched down in front of her, panic filling him. Had he hurt her? Christ, he hadn't meant to. He'd just never felt anything so damn good.

Lifting her head, he brushed the dangling strands back off her face, seeing the tears that filled her eyes, tumbling over the lids to join with the water streaming down her face.

"Honey? God, did I hurt you?" On his knees, he pulled her trembling body into his arms, rubbing a hand over her back to soothe her.

Dumbly, she shook her head, sucking in a deep breath before she swallowed. "No. No, it wasn't you, Ziggy. Just a memory." She pushed back from him. "It's gone. It's all right."

His hands clasped her shoulders as he made to rise. "It's not all right. Let me help you up."

She stayed where she was, her left hand covering his. "No, I want to do this, Ziggy. Please."

Though her eyes pleaded at him, his gut clenched as he remembered the look on her face from moments before. "I won't be the cause of you hurting, Summer—physically, or memories, or whatever."

"But you don't understand. I *need* to do this. I need to get rid of the horrible memories, replace them with good ones. Like last night." Her eyes looked up at him, a weak smile taking away the shadows. "What you gave me...no one has ever made love to me like that, Ziggy. I felt...it was beautiful. And I want more. Is that so wrong? I can't let that bastard control my life. He's done that for too long."

"Good memories." He nodded then crouched down in front of her again and kissed her. "You sure you still want to?"

She nodded. He stood and straightened.

Her hands slid from his hips down his thighs. "Very sure. There's just one problem." A cheeky smile peeked out when she looked up at him. "He's gone kinda limp, Ziggy."

He snorted. "Around you, that's a first. But it's no wonder—you scared the hell out of me."

"Maybe I can encourage him to come out and play again."

He rolled his eyes, his breath catching as her hands ran over his ass. "Yeah, just looking at him should be enough."

She did more than that. After a shaky start, she relaxed into the suck and withdraw. Hot, sucking heat. A tongue that teased the nest of veins under the crown of his cock

until he could hardly resist the urge to thrust deeper. Fighting for control, his fingers clenched and scraped at the tiles, seeking a hold to stop him from grabbing at her. He suspected he was scouring deep gouges in the porcelain, but he was beyond caring. Beyond thinking about anything but the scraping and licking as she worked his cock deeper and deeper into her mouth. His head dropped back, eyes closed, as he conceded the importance, for this time at least, of allowing her total control.

Until she asked him to touch her.

Her eyes looked confused with the hunger he could read in them. But he did as she asked, keeping his movements slow enough to encourage rather than frighten. Cupping her face, caressing the soft skin of her cheeks as he fed her his cock. His pulse sped up as he shuttled a little faster, a little deeper each time. Like a velvety ribbon, her tongue wrapped around him, licking and stroking, teasing the sensitive flange as he withdrew so that he wanted nothing more than to sink deep again.

When her hands moved from his thighs, one to cup his balls, the other to grab hold of his ass, fiery tendrils of electricity raced over his body, centering at the base of his spine to shoot through to his cock so that it thickened, pulsing, leaking pre-cum over her tongue. She hummed at the taste, the vibration traveling down his shaft to settle in his scrotum. Damn, he was close. But did she want all of him?

“Summer? Baby?”

The question hung between them for a brief moment, before she nodded, her eyes heavy-lidded with pleasure, not pain, as she looked up at him, the sight of her mouth full of his dick filling him with such an intense feeling of possessiveness he grunted and had to grit his teeth until his jaw ached, to stop the howl breaking free.

And when she tipped her head back, swallowing on the down thrust so that the final inches slid down her throat, his cock fully sheathed in the heavenly depths of her mouth and throat, he tipped his head back, water pelting over his face as he came violently, semen blasting from the head of his cock with such force he had to lock his knees to keep standing.

* * * * *

At last the Jeep turned the corner and Summer walked back inside, up the stairs to her small apartment.

She knew she had nothing to fear there—Ziggy had checked the apartment from top to bottom before he’d been satisfied enough to leave her there alone. If not for her insistence—she refused to call it stubbornness, a word that Ziggy used *all* the time—that she drive her own car in to work, he’d still be there.

She wanted a bit of time to get her head on straight. Being with Ziggy was messing with her mind. Since the night she’d escaped The Bastard and found Rico, she’d resigned herself to never having the things other women could look forward to. Too damaged. Too scared and too scarred. But in one night, Ziggy had changed all that. Bless him for that, for giving her back a part of herself she had thought gone forever.

And now, at least, her suspicions were confirmed on another point that had perplexed her. She'd never forgotten the image of the wolf she'd sensed the first night she met him. Now, at least, she knew why.

Werewolf.

She wondered why he hadn't mentioned it. She'd given him opportunity last night by admitting she knew about Rico. Did he think it would frighten her?

After what she'd been through, it would take more than that to unsettle her. But that wasn't the only thing niggling at her, and she knew it.

What concerned her more was the bond she felt growing between them—all of them—him *and* his wolf. In all her life, she'd never felt anything like it. All her senses, every element of her gift was magnified when she directed it at him. She could have sworn once or twice she could even hear what he was thinking.

Whatever had made her think she could keep their budding "relationship", if she could even call it that, easy? Since they first met, that first night at Rico's, the connection between them had been there. And the more time they spent together, the stronger it grew. Weaving around them, pulling them together, invisible threads that linked them.

A connection Ziggy was fighting, seemed determined to deny. And that was something she refused to force. He had his own demons, that much she knew for sure even if she didn't know what they were. If he didn't come to it willingly, for whatever reason, there was nothing she could do.

Her heart, though, cried out for it. It was like a burning hunger, a completion her body and soul craved that transcended all other things.

With that knowledge too, came the realization that the day would come when his rejection of it, of them, would necessitate her leaving. The pain she'd suffered previously would be nothing compared to his denial of the bonding their souls seemed determined to fuse.

* * * * *

Ziggy glanced at his watch again—nine a.m.

He'd been in the office for over an hour and still hadn't completed any work. Not that he hadn't tried. But thoughts of Summer kept distracting him. Had been ever since he'd dropped her off at her place on the way to work.

Sure, she was a pretty little thing, but that didn't explain his reaction to her. Talk about outside his comfort zone... He was used to dating some of the most beautiful, intelligent, sophisticated women in town. Once or twice when the sexual urge became overwhelming, he took them home and had some nice, bland vanilla sex. But normally, if he couldn't take care of it at one of the clubs he preferred, he ignored it. Kept it leashed and under control. So why the hell was his cock ready to fire again, and he'd still been buried deep inside her mouth pumping out one of the most unbelievable orgasms of his life—he looked at his watch—two hours ago?

Since he left her he'd done nothing but recall the unmistakable scent of her arousal, the anticipation as she'd knelt before him and he'd watched in hungry fascination as her lips parted. He'd been unable to think of anything but cupping her head and sliding his cock into that sweet, soft mouth, watching her eyes widen, the brown darkening with pleasure as he slowly fed her every inch. In and out. The shaft glistening as he withdrew, stretching out the tortuous pleasure before sinking once more into the delicious heat. Again. Picking up the pace. Seeing the lashes flutter down over her eyes as he moved faster, his grip firming, her little moans and whimpers of excitement vibrating along his shaft as he reached further, stroked deeper...

The sound of the bell over the door jerked him out of his sensual memory. He opened his eyes with a snap, his breathing ragged, as he realized with dismay he was cupping his crotch, the palm of his hand rubbing the bulge up and down through the fabric of his trousers. Hell, he'd had fantasies that didn't even come close to the reality of fucking Summer, watching her mouth destroy his sanity.

He stood abruptly and sucked in a deep breath. Fuck.

"Hello? Ziggy?"

The sound of Summer's voice in the outer office—soft, a slight tremble to it—did nothing to ease the painful cramp in his trousers. The sexually dominant side of him wanted to hear that little quiver in her voice as he told her what to do—starting with sucking the hard-on right out of his cock again so he could walk normally and think with something other than his dick.

"Take a seat, honey. Be right out."

He stifled a groan as he walked to the window, thrusting his mind away from thoughts of fucking her on the desk—right then, right now—until he relieved the heaviness in his balls. Instead, he forced himself to recall the figures for the business projections he'd be taking to the bank later that morning.

A minute or two later, satisfied he had himself under control, he walked out to greet his newest employee.

Employee, he reminded himself forcibly, hoping that simple fact would be enough to cool his hunger.

When he saw her, bent over the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet while she placed her bag in there, all thoughts of figures, banks and anything remotely coherent fled as he took in the vision in front of him. Gone was the shapeless skirt and baggy peasant blouse of the day before. That he could have coped with, since it wasn't quite so in his face.

But no, she had to wear those damn jeans again, hugging the sweetest ass he'd laid eyes on or nibbled on in a long time. He was finding out just how much he loved curvy women—or rather, one curvy one in particular. A woman he could really grab on to. One with enough flesh to cushion him for a long ride. One who wasn't going to stab him with a bone sticking out. Who wouldn't crush if he held her a bit tight.

Summer had curves—in abundance. Hips, that cute little tummy, and man, that ass. His hands itched thinking about that part of her anatomy.

Mentally stomping down on the instantaneous lust that rode him, he opened his mouth and hoped something more than a pathetic whine came out.

“Morning again.”

Finished fiddling in the file cabinet, she turned and looked up at him, biting her lip as she smoothed her hands down over her hips. “I hope you don’t mind that I came a bit early.”

Fuck, if she’d arrived a few minutes earlier, they both could have come—early, late, and everything in between.

“Don’t be silly. Of course I don’t mind.” He frowned at her. Her hands were smoothing imaginary creases out of her jeans again, forcing his eyes to the fullness of her body. Damn, did she have to do that? “What’s wrong?”

She bit her lip and her face dipped. “Look, I’m sorry about the outfit. It’s the best I could do at short notice.”

Good lord, she thought she looked *bad*? Hell, if she only knew...

He stepped forward, taking her hands in his, noting the nervous tremble in her grip as he did so. Her scent teased at him—something was different. A different perfume, perhaps? She smelled so good it was an effort not to drag her closer, wrap her up so that he could bury his head into the curve of her neck and inhale the tantalizing fragrance, lick the highly sensitive skin there.

“It’s fine, Summer. We’re not very formal around here.” He tried to smile, to put her at ease, and was rewarded by a tremulous smile in return. “You look great. Perfect.”

More than perfect, she looked damned edible. But her smile widened so he guessed he must have said the right thing.

“Now, let me show you where everything is, give you the basic rundown on what I need you to do.”

After he’d familiarized her with the basic office—what they did, where everything was—he seated her at her desk and booted up the computer. While he waited for it to finish loading, he glanced down at her.

With regret he noticed she’d finally tamed the glorious waist-length mane of dark brown corkscrew curls into submission in some sort of chignon. Just as well. His fingers itched to dive into it, pluck out the pins that held it captive until it flowed down her back, especially since he knew it was every bit as soft and silky as it looked. She was like a dark angel. A mixture of innocence poured into a body that would tempt a saint to sin.

Christ, there he went again. His mind seemed to be permanently stuck in the head of his dick. The soldier in him recognized that it was time for a major tactical retreat. Regroup. Marshall his defenses. Plan his strategy. Get out of the office for starters. At least until he could get himself under control.

As quickly as he could, he ran her through the software on the computer, showed her where various files were kept, and withdrew to his office to shore up his ragged defenses.

* * * * *

Ziggy threw down his pen and glanced at his watch for the gazillionth time that morning. This was ridiculous. Every time the phone rang, he listened for Summer's voice as she answered it. Whenever the bell rang over the door, he had to force himself not to charge out into the office to see if she was coping okay. His productivity, instead of increasing, seemed to have taken a nosedive since she walked in the door. Twice she'd come into his office to ask him a question and he'd had to wheel his chair closer to the desk so his erection wasn't sticking up like a flagpole in his trousers.

Thank God it was time to go to his appointment. He stashed his leather day planner under his arm and walked into the reception area.

"I have a meeting with the bank, Summer. I should be out until lunchtime."

He looked around the office and cringed. He proceeded to shoot off instructions at a rapid-fire pace.

"I know this place is a mess, but do what you can with it. If you need anything, just get it and charge it to the business—within reason, of course. Take messages for all but emergencies, in which case call me on my cell phone—here." He handed her a business card. "If you can't get hold of me then this is Randy's number."

She nodded. "Mr. Married Cutie—got it."

For the sake of his sanity, Ziggy chose to ignore that comment. "He's mostly in the field, but he should be in later this morning." Another business card was pushed into her hand along with a piece of folded paper. "Give him the note if he gets here before I get back. Okay, gotta go. Hey, don't look so worried, you'll be fine." He smiled and squeezed her arm, barely resisting the temptation her upturned face and mouth presented, and before she had time to stop him with one breathy, sexy, innocent word, he was gone.

Ziggy strode to his car and tossed his folder on the front passenger seat of his Cherokee. He slid into the seat and gripped the steering wheel, staring sightlessly out the windshield.

Shit.

No doubt Summer thought he was stranger than hell for the way he'd just raced out of the office, but if he'd stayed there one more second looking at that curvy ass and pert tits that tasted every bit as sweet as they looked, he'd have had her bent over the desk with either his tongue or his cock filling her. He was worse than a teenager drooling over his first taste of pussy.

Christ! Why had he agreed to keep their relationship quiet?

And when the hell had it become a "relationship"?

Already his cock was beating a tattoo in his pants. Just what he needed for a business meeting with the bank—a hard-on that could serve as a jackhammer.

He grabbed his crotch and tried to reposition his throbbing erection so that it wasn't straining against his fly. Dammit, he'd just have to sit there until the darn thing went down. To help the process along he started the car and blasted the air-conditioning, making it as cold as it could get. If icicles started forming on the vents, then just maybe it'd be a good enough substitute for a cold shower.

* * * * *

One-thirty p.m.

Summer sat at her desk, tapping her pen on the pad, unable to stop watching the clock as she waited for Ziggy to return. She told herself she really just wanted to see his reaction—after turning on the answering machine and leaving him a note in case he beat her back to the office, she'd been down the street during her lunch-hour to the little secondhand furniture place and picked out and had delivered a few safer-looking chairs for people to sit on and a more stable coffee table. At least this one had four legs. Not to mention the slightly scuffed, but definitely more presentable, not to mention sturdier, desk she'd picked up for a song.

Plus, she'd found the invoices and ordered some more water, some stationery, and organized a few new plants to take the place of the deceased dieffenbachia. The office looked more pleasant, welcoming.

She smiled to herself. The job was a breeze. Apart from a stack of phone messages, there hadn't been a single emergency—so far.

Thinking she might take a closer look in his office and see what, if anything, needed doing in there, she was about to rise, but stilled in her seat as the bells over the door jingled. She looked up to see two of the hottest-looking guys she'd seen in a while—well, apart from Ziggy—walk through the door.

Randy and Chad.

It wasn't hard to recognize them from their photos, even though the camera lens had done neither one of them justice. In the flesh they were like every woman's most sensual fantasy. Both tall, although Chad was a bit leaner than Randy. And whereas Randy had that same serious mien Ziggy often wore, Chad looked like Trouble with a killer smile.

As different as night and day, how on earth they could be cousins had Summer itching to know their family history. In fact, Chad's features had a decidedly Native American cast. But with the long, glossy black hair he wore flowing down his back, the deep blue eyes and outfit of black leathers, he was the definition of sin and sex personified. He had the sleek look of a large cat. A very large cat.

And as for Randy, Mr. Married Cutie, well his wife was one lucky lady. Sun-streaked golden hair and a nicely muscled body that just screamed “sex”. Maybe it was genetic – Ziggy had the same thing going.

Phew! She mentally fanned herself. This job was worth it for the eye candy alone.

“Hi, Chad, right? And Randy?”

Chad smiled down at her, gifting her with the full impact of his considerable sex appeal as he perched his cute tush on the edge of her desk. “Well now. And who might you be, sugah?”

She smiled at the patent sensuality in his tone. Women must really tumble when he turned on that charm. “Summer. Summer Grayson.”

“Well hel-lo, Summer.” His brow crossed as he looked at her. “Have we met before? I can’t believe I wouldn’t remember a mouthwatering morsel like you...”

“No, Ziggy...ah, described you to me.”

Chad grinned. “Did he swear a lot and frown while he was *describin’* me?”

Summer laughed. “I think the odd expletive might have escaped.”

“Sounds about right. He thinks I live to make his life miserable, but don’t believe everything he says...” He leaned closer until they were almost touching noses. “I’m cute but harmless.”

She leaned back and rolled her eyes at the blatant come-on. “Uh-huh. And is Randy cute but harmless too?”

“Don’t worry about him.” He waved his hand in the air without breaking eye contact. “He’s married.”

She chuckled, noting the teasing light in Chad’s eyes, but swung her eyes away to his cousin. “Randy?” Summer said.

Randy looked over from his distracted perusal of the office. “Summer? Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise,” she said and smiled. Light green eyes sparkled against the tanned face and the sun-streaked hair. Damn, his wife sure hit the jackpot when she snared him. “I have a card here with your name on it. Ziggy gave me your name and phone number if any emergencies came up and I couldn’t reach him. Plus a message.” She handed him the piece of paper.

Randy looked at Chad and laughed as he took the message. There was definitely a family resemblance between Ziggy and Randy, especially when they smiled. “That’s an improvement. Big brother actually thinks I’m capable of handling emergencies. Wonders will never cease.” He slid his gaze back over to Summer, his intent look considering. “Don’t tell me he finally hired someone to help him out here?”

If a woman could get past the sinfully good looks, a sharp mind was churning behind those green eyes. She was being assessed and appraised so skillfully she felt a bit like a bug under a microscope. Not that she minded – Were Watching was his business too. She grinned in acknowledgement. “Yes, that would be me.”

"Did he say when he'd be back?" Randy asked, head down as he read the message.

"About lunchtime." She shrugged. "Maybe the meeting with the bank ran longer than he thought..."

"Or maybe," said Chad, looking directly at Randy, "Carly from the bank wanted to talk to him about makin' another *deposit*." He waggled his eyebrows.

It was said in fun, but still Summer's chest constricted. Why hadn't that occurred to her? Maybe Ziggy wasn't free after all, which could explain his reluctance to admit to anything more than sexual attraction and a desire to protect her. But then, what did that say for him that he would sleep with her if he were involved with another woman?

"Yeah, she can dream," said Randy with a derisive snort, laying to rest Summer's concerns. He crossed his arms as he looked around again. "Something's different."

"Ah, yes. I bought a few bits of secondhand furniture to replace the firewood that was masquerading as chairs and a table. I hope that's okay. Ziggy did say —"

His face broke into an easy smile, the warmth of it putting her at ease. "It's fine, Summer. Looks good. Nothing like a woman's touch..."

"So, sugah," said Chad, butting in and resting his elbow on the top of her computer monitor, "what time do you finish up? Maybe we could go get a drink, even a bit of dinner..."

"What? The three of us?" she teased.

Chad's eyes flashed with devilish interest before he winked at her. "Nah, Randy has to get home right on time or Crissy ties him to the bed and spanks him..."

Randy grinned good-naturedly. "You are so full of shit, Chad. Your turn is coming, man."

"Depends on whether I meet the right lady," he said, looking at Summer.

"Jesus, Chad, give it a rest. You're gonna give the poor lady a toothache with all that *sugah* you're throwing around. 'Sides, what about sweet little Georgie?"

"Sweet? Georgie? As in Crissy's cousin? You sure we're talkin' about the same female?"

Randy laughed in reply. He held up the message. "Steve needs a hand with that installation at Mason Pharmaceuticals. Think you can drag yourself away from Summer for a bit?" He winked at Summer, and even that was enough to set off a little flutter in her chest. She had to admit, these Trudeau guys had more than their fair share of sex appeal.

"Only so she'll have a chance to miss me." Chad leaned over to pick up her hand. She was surprised when he kissed it. "I'll be back," he said, his voice a sexy purr.

"And I'll still be here..."

She was still chuckling as the door closed behind them.

* * * * *

As Randy turned the key in the ignition, he cut Chad a bemused look. "You wanna tell me what that was all about?"

"Don't tell me you didn't notice."

"Notice what?" Looking behind him, Randy backed out of the parking space, before braking the car and putting it in first gear.

"Guess that answers my question," said Chad. "Summer. She's wearin' *Eau de Ziggy* as if she bathed in it."

"You're kidding me."

Chad's eyes widened. "You think I would kid about a thing like that?"

"Well he's far from being a virgin. So what are you saying, he's mated her?"

"They're not mated, man, but I'll bet he came damn close."

"My brother? He's about the most anti-mating furry we know."

"True enough. But man, that is some serious scent she has going on."

Randy shook his head. "Well hell. Ziggy." He thumped the steering wheel with his palm and laughed, then pulled out into the traffic. "I'll be damned."

"You wanna bet he's fightin' it tooth and nail?"

"Maybe not. Summer seems pretty nice."

"You mean you're actually looking at other women again?"

"I may be mated, but I can still appreciate an attractive woman without wanting to get her horizontal – unlike someone I know."

"They love my body, man – what can I say?"

Chapter Eight

Okay, so she was bored. Just a bit, Summer thought as she grabbed another pile of files to sort from Ziggy's filing cabinet.

It had taken about five minutes to work out how he "managed" his filing system. And only another two minutes to come up with a better, more efficient system. At this rate, she'd have the whole office organized within a couple of days and do herself out of a job. But just sitting and answering phones was boring her to tears.

So far though, she hadn't found an assets register, so maybe that was next...

She stopped, nearly dropping the files as a shudder passed through her, along with a prickle of foreboding that tracked down her spine.

The jingling of the doorbell interrupted her thoughts.

Ziggy? No, it didn't feel like him at all.

Dumping the files back in the file cabinet, she closed the drawer. A burning pain shot through her head, the sharpness of it leaving a line of perspiration on her upper lip. Something told her not to move. Pretend she wasn't there. But she couldn't. What if it was a new client? With growing trepidation, she stepped around the door to Ziggy's office, pasting a smile on her face.

The smile dropped. Chills raced over her body, and she began to shake, small, uncontrollable tremors that began at her knees and soon invaded her whole body. She forcibly stiffened her knees, refusing to succumb to the paralyzing mental terror that flared inside her.

"You!" Although the word was more a breath than a whisper, the man lifted his head and turned, a parody of a smile on his face.

"Hello, Suzannah darling. Or should I say *Summer*."

Large, not just tall but built like a linebacker, he could easily have been one of the most handsome men on the planet, if it wasn't for the sick, malevolent thoughts that filled his mind and tainted even the air around him. A mind full of twisted obsessive thoughts that made her want to retch. The wave of nausea washed through her and she swallowed rapidly, shuddering as the sour acid of bile burned her throat.

"What are you doing here?"

"Now, is that any way to greet family, Suzannah? Aren't you going to give me a kiss hello? It's been a long time, darling."

He took a couple of steps toward her and she backpedaled into Ziggy's office as he advanced, scuttling around Ziggy's desk until it was all that stood between them. "If you ever touch me again," she managed to grit out, "next time I'll do the job properly and kill you. You're no family of mine, you sick bastard. Get out."

He leaned over the desk, his twisted scent washing over her, so that she shivered.

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong. You belong to me, darling. I marked you. You're mine."

She thought of the scars that covered her back. "No. I'm not yours. And I never, ever will be."

He laughed, the sound chilling. "Ooh, feisty! Who gained a backbone?"

Without taking her eyes off him, her hand crabbed across the desk until it reached the stainless steel letter opener. Her fingers closed around it. "You won't hurt me again. I'm not alone now. I have people who care about me."

His eyes hardened, his lips thinned as a muscle in his jaw began to tic. "Which means I'm going to have to punish you again, Suzannah. I'm not happy to hear you've been slutting around New Orleans. Sleeping with the boss now too, hmmm?"

"That's none of your business."

"Everything about you is my business, *honey*."

She flinched at the way he said the word. As if...no, he couldn't...

The phone rang. She risked a quick glance at it, but when she didn't answer it, the machine kicked in.

"Summer?"

Ziggy!

Her pulse raced hearing his voice, and her hands itched to pick up the phone.

"Pick up, honey... Damn. Look, I'll be there soon. If you get this, stay put."

The click indicated he'd hung up.

"Aww, ain't that sweet. I'd better go before lover-boy gets back. But I'll be around, Summer. And I'll be back for you. Soon. I'm looking forward to it."

His fingers ran down her cheek and her flesh crawled at his touch.

Stunned to the point of immobility, she registered from the little bell that the door had closed. He'd gone.

Her heart was pounding. Bile rose up in her throat and she covered her mouth with her hand, closing her eyes and swallowing on the burning acidic taste.

Images swirled through her mind, her own personal montage of horror, and her vision began to darken around the edges, the air becoming thick and rancid with the smell of whisky and blood and the memory of pain...

Bruised, beaten, huddled in a corner, her clenched fist pulling the shreds of her tattered dress more firmly around her shivering body. Chills raced over her bare skin along with the aftershocks of disgust roiling through her body.

But she was free. If she just moved. Got out of there.

Free! The word pounded into her brain, forced there by her mind in a desperate attempt to maintain her fragile sanity.

Free. A choked sob broke from her, followed by another and then another, a deluge of pent-up emotion finally allowed a release.

Even unconscious, bleeding from the numerous wounds she'd inflicted on him, he still had the power to terrify her. She looked down and realized her arms, her hands were covered with blood. Still rolling in a skewed circle was the Jack Daniels bottle she'd belted him with to finally knock him out.

His body, sprawled half on the bed, half on the floor, his hand still fisted around the scrap of fabric he'd torn from her... So big, so powerful, his strong body the source of her greatest waking torment and sleeping nightmares, looked even now as though it could spring to life, except for the crude-looking weapon sticking out of his chest, the flow of blood from that wound alone hopefully enough to kill him.

But she wasn't waiting to find out. Refusing to surrender to the mind-numbing horror, she swallowed deeply, and inch by slow, painful inch, raised her body, flinching as a shaft of agony shot through her left arm as she tried to use her hands to creep up the wall behind her. Sobbing with pain as her flayed back brushed on the wall. Struggling one-handed, she persevered until she stood on wobbly legs.

"Yes!" she cried, feeling a surge of triumph at the small achievement as tears poured freely down her cheeks...

She should have killed him then, finished the job so that he couldn't come back to haunt her ever again. She wouldn't make the same mistake a second time...

* * * * *

With a double-handed but still shaky grip, she lifted the mug of coffee to her mouth and sipped, stopping short of gulping the scalding liquid to try to wash the bitter aftertaste out of her mouth.

The bells jingled, and her body tensed, her eyes cutting a nervous look in the direction of the door.

Laughter followed Randy and Chad as they entered the office and her adrenaline-spiked pulse settled back into a more normal pace.

"Back so soon?" she asked, trying to sound normal as she placed her mug of coffee on the desk and stood, grabbing up some files to put back into the filing cabinet. Taking the brief moment with her back to them to try to school her features into a "normal" mask.

"Couldn't stay away from you, sugah," said Chad as he settled himself on the edge of her desk again. "Hey, are you okay?"

She turned around to see Chad watching her closely.

"Something happen while we were gone?" His eyes scanned her face, the laughter fading from his eyes.

"N-No. Nothing. Everything's fine."

"You look a bit...rattled."

"I'm fine. Truly. Just a headache."

"If you're sure..." He watched her until she nodded. Then smiled at her. "Well then, that coffee smells almost as good as you. If I turn on the charm, any chance I could persuade you to make me a cup too?"

"Charm, huh?"

"It's my middle name. Right along with sexy and available."

She couldn't help herself. After the nervous strain of the past half hour, amusement blossomed inside, slowly unfurling to replace the tension in her body. A small chuckle broke free. And for that she was more grateful to Chad than she could say. "I'll see what I can do."

Chad's eyes flared and a grin lit his eyes, creased his face.

She shook her head in resignation as she stood. "You are going to be a handful, Chad, I can just see it."

"How could you tell?" he quipped and waggled his eyebrows.

"God, remind me to bite my tongue."

"Actually –"

She chuckled again and held up her hand to forestall the next comment. "How do you take it?"

"Lots of cream, but no sugar. I'm sweet enough."

"You got that right. Randy?"

"Just black for me. Thanks. Ziggy not back yet?"

"No, not yet." She headed into the small kitchenette at the back of the office. It seemed to serve as a staff room-cum-spare office where the coffee maker, a small bar fridge and a spare computer and desk lived. She poured their coffees, grateful to have a reason to grab a few more minutes to regain her equilibrium. At least with Randy and Chad back, she'd be safe...for now.

When she brought out their coffee, she noticed Randy was in Ziggy's office on the phone, but Chad hadn't moved from his position on her desk.

She'd just handed Randy his coffee and was walking through the doorway when the phone on her desk rang and Chad leaned across to pick it up.

A shiver ran up her spine as she listened, an ache building in her head that usually meant...

"Suzannah? Nope, nobody here by that name..." said Chad.

Summer's breath locked in her throat and she went cold all over. Only one person knew her by that name.

A loud smash brought her out of her stupor, and she gasped as hot coffee splashed over her feet. She glanced down at the mess on the floor, then up at Chad, who looked at her with a mixture of concern and curiosity.

"Of course I'm sure, man," he continued, "I own the damn business." She could feel Chad's agitation growing. "No, no Suzannah. Anything else?" he bit out. "Good. Bye."

Summer didn't wait for the questions. She ducked into the back room to grab some paper towels, hoping to busy herself cleaning up the mess while she tried to formulate some excuse for her bizarre behavior.

Chad had already picked up the broken pieces of crockery by the time she returned, and took the towels from her, mopping up the coffee as she watched. When he was done, he dumped them in the wastepaper bin beside her desk and turned to her.

"You want to tell me what just happened?"

"I'm sorry, Chad. It must have...just-just...slipped...out of my hand. I'll get you another one."

Before she could take a step, he was in front of her, gripping her shoulders as he looked at her closely.

"Hey, you're shakin' like a little leaf there, sugah." He wrapped her up in a hug. Just the feel of his warm arms around her and his genuine concern helped settle the odd tremor that still rattled through her. Resting her head against his chest, she allowed herself to be comforted for a moment.

"Something's wrong," he said, his voice a muted rumble in his chest from where her ear lay against it. "Talk to me—maybe I can help..."

Randy walked out sipping on his coffee, breaking the moment and saving her from answering.

Just then the doorbell jingled but Chad didn't move, nor would he release her when she made to move away. If anything his hold firmed, his arm tightening around her as she felt his head turn toward the door.

"Randy. Hey, little brother. How's it going?"

The familiar deep voice made her pulse pick up, and Summer looked around Chad's bulk to see Ziggy standing in the doorway, a scowl darkening his features. And even though he spoke to his brother, his darkening eyes never left Chad's.

As his scowl deepened, Summer looked up at Chad with a small smile of thanks, relieved when he released her. Tension still filled the small space, but this time it was different. Obviously the trip to the bank hadn't been a good one—Ziggy looked as if he wanted to put his fist through a wall.

Legs still a bit shaky, she sank into her seat behind her desk.

Dropping his folder onto her desk, Ziggy moved around to stand next to her, his hand resting on the back of her chair, so close she could feel his body heat. She fought down the impulse to get closer.

"Something happen while I was gone?" Ziggy asked them.

Ziggy and Chad continued to face off, until Randy, looking curiously from Chad to Ziggy and back again, shook his head at both of them and slapped his brother on the shoulder.

"Well, you can congratulate me, for starters," said Randy, a huge smile creasing his face from ear to ear. "Crissy's pregnant again."

At the announcement, Summer felt the tension and concern already present in Ziggy heighten and flood over her. Now why would he feel such strong concern? Surely it was good news? Randy certainly seemed happy with the idea.

"Already? You don't think you're rushing things a bit, bro?"

Considering the news, and Randy's happiness about it, Ziggy's response seemed odd, and Summer glanced up at him, catching the hint of pain in Ziggy's eyes before he shuttered them.

Randy grinned, the relaxed pose with his hands in his jeans pockets doing nothing to hide his obvious excitement. "No way. All that practicing has to lead somewhere. Anyway, Crissy wants a little brother or sister for Amber." He punched Ziggy playfully on the shoulder. "Besides, since you don't look like you're stepping up to the plate to provide the heir..."

"You got that right. No mate, no babies."

Summer pondered that. Ziggy didn't want kids? Why?

He managed a small smile. "Anyway, congratulations, Randy. It sure didn't take you long this time. You two must have been working at it night and day."

"Just about," Randy laughed.

In spite of Ziggy's answering smile, she couldn't help noticing the rigid line of his jaw. All along the link she shared with him, his sense of disquiet over Randy's news rumbled. But what cut was the confirmation that Ziggy really wasn't looking to settle down. With anyone. So what she'd sensed from him about rejecting their bond had been accurate. And in a place deep inside, the knowledge that he would reject her, reject them, hurt more than she would have imagined.

Ziggy pulled his brother into a firm hug before returning to his position behind her, not surprising her when he braced his hand on her shoulder and squeezed distractedly. Silly man. He needed the physical connection nearly as much as she. But it was apparent when she glanced up at him that he wasn't even aware he was touching her, just taking comfort from their connection.

"Mom know yet?"

"Yeah, Crissy and I drove out and told her and Dad last night. Mom was kinda excited."

"Kinda?" Ziggy snorted. "Two grandbabies in less than two years—I'd say 'excited' is slightly understating it, wouldn't you?"

Randy laughed. "Okay, she was *very* excited. Poor Crissy. Mom's planning shopping trips for more baby things, and knitting stuff already." He shook his head.

"Yeah, well I'm pleased for you and Crissy, Randy. I really hope everything works out for you—for both of you." She could still feel the tension through their connection in spite of his words. It seemed to intensify when he swung his attention to his cousin.

"Now, Chad... I don't know what I walked in on, but whatever you're thinking, cuz—forget it. My new assistant is off limits. Got it?"

Chad stood, passing her a small knowing smile and a wink before he turned back to Ziggy. "*Your* assistant? Don't you mean *our* new assistant?"

"No," said Ziggy firmly. "I mean *mine*. You need one, go find your own. Got it?"

"Oh yeah, man," said Chad, his eyes laughing, "I got it all right."

Just then the door opened. Summer's jaw dropped as three more men strolled in, filling the already crowded space of her office with an overdose of testosterone.

One tall guy dressed in biker leathers with a long blond plait and a gold hoop earring, who had muscles on his muscles. He was introduced to her as "Smooth". She wasn't sure how he'd come by the nickname, but if it was either the velvety-smooth baritone that caressed her senses as he said her name, or the way he took her hand and kissed it as he winked at her, then the name definitely fit.

"Slick" introduced himself next. Actually he introduced himself as Tim, but was shouted down by the others until he rolled his eyes and nodded. Slick was an anomaly. One of their PIs, he dressed in a suit, which stood out in a roomful of denim, T-shirts, and leather. When she asked nicely, he wasn't forthcoming on how he'd earned his nickname, looking distinctly uncomfortable in fact, and all the question garnered from the rest of them were loud guffaws and slaps on his back. There was a story there she was dying to discover.

And finally, Steve. He was the one Randy and Chad had gone to help, and was obviously the geek of the group, judging from the dark-rimmed glasses and the laptop bag slung over his shoulder. She found out he did a lot of the high-tech security installations. Quiet, but when he said hello and shook her hand, she sensed still waters ran very deep with him. In spite of the glasses, he had rich chocolate brown eyes and a warm smile a woman could melt into. It was only the firming of Ziggy's grip on her shoulder that snapped her out of it.

The offices of *Playgirl*, she decided, had nothing on *Were Watching*.

She stood and smiled at all of them, immediately missing the warmth of Ziggy's hand on her shoulder before scooping up Chad's and Randy's mugs as well as her own and taking them through to the back office to rinse out.

When she returned, Chad was in her seat, and Smooth had taken Chad's spot on the edge of her desk as they all talked and joked with each other.

From her position behind her chair, she glanced over at Ziggy, who had moved to his office doorway and stood watching her closely, his look bemused, considering, before he spoke. "Okay, men, time to let Summer get back to work. Clear out."

Chad wrapped his arm around her waist from his seated position. Reaching behind him, he opened the bottom drawer of her filing cabinet and leaned down for her shoulder bag. As he stood, he handed it to her.

"No way, Zig. Work's over," he said. He had to raise his voice to cut into the multiple conversations. "It's Friday afternoon. I vote we take little Miss Summer out for a welcome drink. Agreed?"

Even over the raucous shouts of agreement, a subtle disturbance in the air, a warning growl she felt rather than heard, made her look around.

Her gaze landed back on Ziggy. His amber eyes were dark, his body tense, and anger radiated from him in waves. And his stare was locked on the firm grip Chad had on her waist.

"Chad. Step in here for a minute before you go."

"Sure thing, man." He stood and gave her a quick squeeze before he strolled into Ziggy's office.

Letting the other conversations wash over her, Summer sat watching the closed door for a few minutes, wondering what was being said.

Hitching a leg up to rest on his other knee, Chad assumed a relaxed pose. "What's up?"

"Summer."

"She's a cute little thing, all right. She yours?"

Ziggy bit down on the "yes!" that nearly burst from his mouth. "For now, for all intents and purposes, yes. So hands off."

"Hey, you got it, man. Just checkin'."

"But there's more to it, and here's what I want you to do."

"I'm all ears."

"This is not a joke, Chad..."

As he proceeded to fill Chad in on the basics as he knew them, the humor dropped from his cousin's face to be replaced by a seriousness very few saw. "So I need you and the men alert. This is not a guy you want to underestimate. And I won't have Summer's safety compromised because you lot just want to have fun."

"That's cool—I'm on it. So what are you doing to find this psycho?"

"Not much so far. It would help if we knew who he was. That's something I need to discuss with Summer. Okay, that's it for now. Got it?"

"Got it." Chad stood to leave, but turned around with a slight frown on his face.

"What?" asked Ziggy.

"I don't know. Maybe it's nothing, but..." Chad looked over at Ziggy, the frown deepening. "This afternoon before you got back."

"Yeah?"

"It was weird. Randy and I met Summer when we came in earlier, then Steve called and asked us to go help him on that job he's doing for Mason Pharmaceuticals. When we got back, Summer looked like she'd seen a ghost. Man, she was shakin' like a leaf.

But she shrugged it off and I didn't think anything about it. She went to get Randy and me a coffee each, and I was on the phone when she returned. Some guy lookin' for a Suzannah. Now that I think about it, she heard that name and damn if she didn't go pale as a ghost like before. Dropped the mug. Coffee went everywhere—splashed her feet, all over the floor... When I tried to talk to her about it, she brushed me off. Reckoned the mug slipped. Personally, I think that's bullshit. 'Specially now." He ran his hand along his jawline while he contemplated something. "Maybe Summer ain't really Summer. Maybe she's this Suzannah."

"And if that's the case, it means this psycho has tracked her down to here. Shit!" Ziggy stood and began to pace. "Okay, here's what we'll do..."

"Well how the heck was I supposed to know?" Steve ground out, hands on his hips. "I met her...him...whatever..." he threw his hands up in disgust, "online, on one of those dating websites."

Summer couldn't help chuckling along with the rest of the guys. Poor Steve. He was blushing redder than a watermelon.

"Sides, that...that...*thing* was tiny. No bigger than little Summer." He looked at her as if pleading for some support.

She felt for his discomfort, and wrapped her arm around him as the hooting broke out again at something Smooth said. But the hilarity vanished the second the door to Ziggy's office opened. Tension spread around the room. Even Steve stepped away from her, taking a position against the wall. Feeling as though she'd missed something that had just been said, she looked around at the guys, noticing the same implacable expression on each face. She turned toward Ziggy's office.

At least Chad looked normal as he walked over to her and wrapped an arm around her waist then winked down at her. "You okay, sugah?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I think."

"Summer? Could you come in here for a minute, please?" Ziggy stood in his doorway, his look shuttered.

She glanced up at Chad, but he was watching his cousin.

"Don't worry," Ziggy said, "they'll wait for you, won't you, men?"

"Sure." Chad smiled down at her as his hand moved from her waist to run over her shoulder in what felt like a soothing gesture. "Take your time, sugah. We're in no hurry."

Confused by the spike of emotions in the room after the teasing hilarity of just moments before, Summer walked past Ziggy into his office, turning as she heard the door snick shut.

"Ziggy? What—"

Before she could even finish the words, Ziggy was there, his hands cupping her face as dark amber eyes stared down at her.

His head lowered and his mouth took hers, his tongue pushing against the seam of her lips as he forced his way inside. Emotions from Ziggy swirled in her head—possessiveness being chief among them. No coaxing. No persuasion. With a sense of urgency his tongue fucked her mouth, the rub and thrust a vivid reminder of what he'd done to her the night before. When a hand slipped down to her ass, closing over the soft flesh to press her against him until the hard ridge of his cock scorched her tummy, she stiffened.

Pushing against his shoulders, struggling against the grip he had on her, she finally broke away from him.

"What the hell are you doing?" she whispered, her breath rasping on the words.

"I could ask you the same thing..." he rumbled.

"What are you talking about?"

"Out there."

"I was being *nice*, which is more than I can say for you."

"It looked a darn sight more friendly than *nice* when I opened the door, if you ask me."

"Ziggy. We agreed. *You* agreed. We leave the sex outside of work.

"This isn't sex."

"No, but it might as well be. You think they don't know, or suspect what's going on in here?"

"I don't give a fuck what they think—"

"Well, I do. Now, if you don't mind..." She turned toward the door, but his hand on her elbow stopped her.

"You going to Rico's tonight?"

"Yes, it's Friday."

"I'll pick you up."

"I can drive—"

"I'll pick you up," he said, his tone brooking no argument. "What time?"

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. Ten p.m."

"I'll be there at nine. Sooner if I can."

"But I'll still be getting ready..."

A devilish smile creased his face. "Good. Then I can watch." Before he let her go, he kissed her again, gently this time, then ran his thumb over her bottom lip in a soft caress. "Okay, go be nice. But not too nice, hear?"

"Get a grip, Ziggy. They're hardly likely to *do* anything. I think they all received your message loud and clear." She curled her lip and rolled her eyes at the knowing, satisfied gleam in his.

When she opened the door to Ziggy's office, Chad was waiting, a cryptic look on his face that the faint smile couldn't disguise. With a casual salute at the man she could feel standing behind her, Chad ushered her toward the front door, being held open gallantly for her by Smooth.

It was odd, but she couldn't shake the feeling of a warm hand caressing her neck. And it wasn't Chad's. She turned briefly as she reached the door to find Ziggy staring intently at her.

* * * * *

Walking up the path to her front door, Summer was very aware of Chad's Harley gurgling in the driveway. Though she'd insisted it wasn't necessary, when the guys had discovered where she lived, they'd fought over the right to follow her home. Chad won. They were as bad as Ziggy. How on earth did they think she'd managed before they all came along?

She opened the door, reaching for the hall light, surprised to see the dull, creamy glow from the bare light bulb in the foyer. More often than not it was burned out. Somebody else must have changed it this time, perhaps Mr. Benardin, since he was the only other tenant who lived there permanently. Had for the last forty years, long before it became the decrepit dump she admitted it currently was.

She turned and waved to Chad, surprised to see him with his cell phone up to his ear. He smiled and revved the bike in acknowledgement. She could almost feel the curious eyes at windows. It wasn't often a Harley came down the street and now there'd been two in one week.

She closed the door and headed for the staircase. She'd barely placed her foot on the first step when she stopped, her chest tight, her breath catching in her throat.

No! Not again!

Body shaking, she closed her eyes and forced her senses to flare out, testing the evil that lingered. Insidious, so sickly sweet she could almost taste it. She bent over and gagged. Fighting to take a breath, she managed to calm her pounding heart enough to suck in some much-needed oxygen.

Hand on her chest, she panted, aware, when the draft blew down the hallway, of the sweat breaking out on her forehead, her chest, her arms. A little calmer, she analyzed the feeling and realized it wasn't fresh. And the person it belonged to was no longer there. If he had been, her brain would have felt on fire by then, like acid eating into her head.

Legs trembling, she made her way upstairs. With a shaking hand, she unlocked her door and stood, gathering impressions before entering fully. The sense of him was stronger. He'd been in her apartment. That much she was sure of. Stepping slowly, she scanned each room, aware of the taint left by his fingers as he'd touched things. The windowsill, her knickknacks sitting on the old mantelpiece above the disused fireplace.

Her one chair—he'd sat there for some time, obviously either looking...or waiting. He'd probably expected her to come straight home from work.

When she reached the bedroom, her heart stopped. Clothes tossed around. Her underwear, or rather the remnants of them...she felt a shudder of revulsion to think that he'd handled something so intimate. With a finger she hooked a piece of tattered lace. Not only ruined, but tainted by his sick touch. No way could she wear any of them again—even if he hadn't shredded most of them. But with nauseating horror her eyes were drawn to her bed. Her bed. The one item of furniture that was hers. She'd bought and paid for it herself with her meager funds. Dressed it up so it looked real pretty. And he'd dirtied it. On each bedpost a red rope dangled—the nylon type *he* preferred, the strands hanging there as if waiting...

Memories assailed her. Horrible, dark images. Her screaming, bound, left for days without food, water—in *punishment*. Tears burned the back of her throat as she swallowed repeatedly. She rubbed her wrists, feeling the fiery rub on raw skin as if the abrasions were fresh. But what nearly forced her to her knees was on the bed, the tangible reminder of her past terror lying there in silent accusation—a long, thick fragment of broken crockery, dried blood covering the faded flower pattern, looking bizarre against the girly *broderie anglaise* covering of her treasured white quilt.

"Pack a bag."

She shrieked and jumped as the dark voice snapped at her ear.

Chapter Nine

Big hands landed on her shoulders, holding her still a second before turning her around.

"Sorry to scare you, baby..." Ziggy glanced away from her to look at the bed, his eyes blazing, "but you are *not* staying here one more night."

Her heart raced, adrenaline pouring through her body like a tidal surge. "How did you...I locked the door..."

"Yeah, a kid could break in here with a library card, Summer. I was only going to show you how easy —"

In spite of the flicker of remorse she thought she caught in his eyes, she thumped him twice on the chest, biting her lip before she felt her strength drain and she slumped against him. "Would you stop sneaking up on me! You're going to give me a heart attack."

Strong arms surrounded her and she nestled into Ziggy's warmth. He pulled her in close and his voice softened, "Hey, hey. After what you told me before, I thought you would have sensed my vibrations, honey. Or heard me. I sure as hell made enough noise."

"Well, I didn't hear you. You creep around doing that silent warrior stuff... Scare a soul half to death..."

She wasn't really annoyed at him. It was mostly at herself. He was right—she should have sensed him.

"Yeah, well better scared than dead. Pack a bag, honey. Now. As much as you think you'll need for a long stay. Truck's outside, so we can fit in plenty. All of it, if you like—I'll send the guys around for the big stuff tomorrow."

"But...but..."

He let her go and walked over to the solitary wardrobe. "My place or Rico's. That's all the choice I'm giving you." Opening the old wardrobe that had come with the room and, like the rest of the furniture had not only seen better days or years, but decades, he reached up to the top shelf and pulled down her suitcase. He dropped it on the bed, grabbing up the shard of crockery with a look of disgust.

"Guess I don't need to ask what this is or who put it here."

In three quick steps he was in the kitchen, dumping it in the trash, before he moved to the window, lifting the curtain enough to cast a look outside.

He turned back around to face her, his face hard. "Pack. Or I will. Your choice."

If she hadn't been able to discern the overriding concern and protectiveness oozing out of him, she might have taken exception to his bossiness. But this time she wasn't going to fight him. She might like her independence, but she wasn't stupid. Now that The Bastard knew not only where she worked, but where she lived, she needed somewhere to stay and the protection Ziggy was so willing to provide, until she had enough money saved to leave town and find some other place to disappear into.

Leave...

The implications of the word hit her, made her stop in her tracks. It would mean leaving Ziggy. That thought hurt so badly, it made her breath lock in her chest as if a clamp was tightening around it. Already he meant so much to her. It was too soon. Insane. Crazy. *Not crazy*, a voice in her mind told her.

"Ah, child, there is no 'how will I know?' When you meet the match to your soul, your heart will know..."

But now? When her life was a mess? She started emptying her drawers, and looked over at Ziggy, catching him watching her, heat and a savage tenderness in his eyes she doubted even he was aware of. Her heart began beating again and hammered in her chest. Expanding her senses, she tested the undeniable connection between them. It was working both ways now, not quite as strong for Ziggy, but he was reading her, even if he wasn't conscious of it. Reaching a little further, she caught the hint of the other... She screwed up her face as the impression of a warm tongue licked up the side of her face. Then that same familiar warmth enfolded her. His wolf.

She knew it now, could identify its touch, its essence, close in sensation, vibration to Ziggy's but with subtle differences. Ziggy's need to protect her was as much from his wolf as from the inherent need to protect and fight for those weaker than himself. It was a big part of what made him a warrior.

But even as strong and capable as he was, she couldn't bear the thought of him being hurt because of her.

It was a very real fear, a growing one since the incident at the office, that she might be placing Ziggy in danger. The realization that he might be hurt or worse—killed—because of her nearly made her change her mind.

She stopped tossing clothes into the suitcase and looked over at him. "This could be dangerous, Ziggy. He won't stop until he gets me back—dead or alive."

"I know that."

"You hardly know me. That's a big ask of any man. I need to be sure you know what you're letting yourself in for."

He walked over to her, stopping in front of her to cup her face in his hands. "Have a little faith, huh? I'm a professional, honey. I do this stuff for a living, remember?" He gave her a small lopsided grin before leaning down to place a kiss on her forehead. "Besides, I offered. I'll rest a whole lot easier at night if you're safe beside me."

Her hands reached up to cover his. "But that's the thing, don't you see? Any other man who touches me is in danger. He's sick, evil. If he knows we're sleeping together, you'll be a target too."

"Then I guess you'll just have to trust me to keep us both safe."

He leaned down to nuzzle at her lips. The touch was light, not a branding, possessive kiss like the one in his office earlier, more an assurance for both of them, but it went on and on, so that when he pulled away, her breathing was ragged.

"I've been wanting to do that all day." His eyes were heated. "What say we go home and I can do it a bit more?"

"I have to work tonight, remember?"

"You don't have to, Summer. You're working for me now."

"But I need the money. I can't stay with you —"

His lips firmed. "You can and you will. And if it's more money you need, I'll increase your goddamn pay —"

"It's not that! I hate letting people down."

"Rico will understand, dammit." He gritted his teeth.

Understanding dawned and she laid her hand on his arm, feeling the tension in his muscles. "I know you want to protect me, but I can't hide forever, Ziggy. That doesn't work. Don't you see that?"

"What I see is that you're being damned stubborn again," he griped.

"Me? Stubborn?" She folded her arms across her chest and stood her ground.

His eyes narrowed as he considered her. "You have no intention of changing your mind, do you?"

"No."

"You'll go even if I forbid it."

"You could always just take me to Rico's now. I'm sure he'd be more than happy to let me *stay* at his place..."

"You're a brat," he acquiesced, a little less than graciously. "Okay, you can go. But only if I go with you. And you're coming home with me."

"Oh, you are so generous," she said and batted her eyelashes at him.

"And no more sitting on men's laps."

"O-kaay. Zig —"

"And no more kissing other men, either."

"Ziggy?"

"What!"

She put the final few items into her suitcase and snapped the lid shut. "Why are you acting jealous?" she threw over her shoulder as she walked past him out of the bedroom.

He snorted. "I am *not* acting jealous. I'm just concerned for your safety. Especially since *you* don't appear to be." He looked around the room. "What about the rest of it?"

"It can stay. I'm paid up until the end of the month. Who knows, I may need to come back."

"Over my dead body," he mumbled as he took her bag from her and walked out the door."

She looked back at the shabby apartment—the threadbare carpet, the walls stained with mildew, and swallowed against the flicker of fear that flared up at his words. "That's what I'm afraid of..."

* * * * *

As they walked through the club, heading for Rico, Ziggy noticed the men looking at Summer and glared an unmistakable warning at more than one. Tongues hanging out. Eyes telling her what they wanted to do with her. Why the hell couldn't she see it?

But no, she thought she was *fat*. His mind flicked back to the fight they'd had at his place. The minute she pulled those leather pants up her hips and he saw the way she looked poured into them, he'd wanted to take her to the floor and fuck her there and then. Now every other man in the club who looked at her was thinking the same damn thing. At this rate, they'd be lucky if they got out of there tonight without him kicking some guy's ass.

What he wanted to know was why the only decent clothes she owned were what she wore to the club. He had a feeling Rico might have had something to do with that. Knowing Summer, it was the only way she'd accept the "gift". But it hadn't escaped him that everything else she'd unpacked from her bag at his place had been on its last legs. Damn stubborn woman.

"So, how's my girl?"

Ziggy watched as Summer moved with easy familiarity against Rico and kissed him hello.

Watched and burned.

He was out of line, and he knew it. One person on earth he knew he didn't have to protect her from, but the need to pull her away surged up inside him just the same until his body was howling with it. He couldn't stop himself from moving closer and putting his hand on her back.

Some part inside just had to touch her, remind her of *his* presence.

This close, he didn't miss the smirk that Rico threw him over Summer's shoulder.

"I'm fine, Rico. I even got another job." Summer glanced behind her at Ziggy and threw him a small smile.

Even under the cute little mask, he could tell her eyes were smiling at him.

"So, does that mean you don't need me anymore?"

She punched Rico on the arm playfully. "No, silly."

"You trying to take my favorite girl away from me, *amigo*?" he asked Ziggy as his arm looped around Summer's waist.

Ziggy's eyes were drawn to the movement. He raised his glare to Rico. "Just keeping her safe."

Rico returned the look, his smile dropping. "Safe?"

"He's as overprotective as you are," she said to Rico, nibbling on her lip. "I guess that's why I'm...I'm staying with him for a while," she finished with a rush. "So if you need me that's where I'll —" She broke off when Rico tensed. "Be. What?"

"What aren't you telling me, Summer. What happened?"

"What makes you think something happened?" She pushed away from Rico and folded her arms.

Man, she couldn't lie worth shit. Even he could sense the nervous vibes she was giving off.

Rico was staring at her as if trying to get inside her head, which, as it turns out, he was. "Your walls are up. And while I may not be able to read your mind with those damn blocks you have up, Summer, you can't control your body. I could feel the shivering, and it sure isn't because it's cold in here."

Summer flicked a glance at Rico that looked a little guilty, thought Ziggy, before she pleaded with Ziggy with her eyes for some backup. No way. Rico deserved to know, just like he'd want to know if he were in the vamp's place. He'd be damned mad if she kept something this big from him. Hell yeah.

She swallowed and her voice faltered. "He's back, Rico. The Bastard. When I got home tonight, he'd been in my place —"

"He *what*?" Rico roared. "I *knew* this would happen. I told you living on your own was a lousy idea." He turned to Ziggy. "And where the fuck were you? I thought you were supposed to be *protecting* her?"

"I was right behind her if you must know," Ziggy growled. He was still pissed that whoever the bastard was had managed to get that close to her without him knowing...or being there.

Summer turned to look at them both, a worried look on her face. "Hey. Come on, you guys. It's okay." She turned to Rico. "Ziggy was worried too. He insisted I stay with him. And since I'm not stupid, thank you very much, I agreed."

Damn straight he'd been worried. He'd been fucking nuts to let her go home without him.

"You could come back and live here, sweet," offered Rico. "I'll make sure you're safe."

Summer took a breath to answer, but before she had a chance to get the words out, Ziggy rode over the top of her. "Thanks, but she's fine with me."

"I'm not so sure," said Rico, his eyes shooting a warning. "Tell me that won't happen again, Ziggy."

"It won't," he grunted. "She won't be alone again. Not until we catch this sick son of a bitch."

"So how did he break in?"

"What was to break?" Ziggy snorted. "The place was hardly secure. What the hell were *you* doing letting her move into that dump?"

"You think I had any say in the matter —"

"Hel-lo!" Summer stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at both of them. "I'm still here, guys, remember? And I can take care of myself, you know."

Rico pulled her close and nuzzled her hair. "We know you can, sweet thing. We just don't want anything to happen to you. Okay?"

It was okay with him if they left right now and he took her home to bed, and wrapped her up so tight that nobody could get near her, thought Ziggy, choking down on the growl he could feel building.

"You two think you can play nice if I go do my thing?"

"Just remember what I said, honey." Ziggy took her hand and pulled her toward him, noting the slight resistance as she cast a quick, self-conscious glance back at Rico. And that just made him burn more. He had no problem with letting Rico, and any other man in the club for that matter, know that for now at least Summer was off fucking limits.

His fingers flexed and firmed as he spanned his grip around her hips and held her flush against him. He discreetly rubbed the bulge in his pants against her leather-clad crotch and primal satisfaction filled him when her face flushed, her lids fluttering the way he knew they did when she was in the early stages of arousal. "Be nice, be friendly, but keep your distance. Rico doesn't want to be picking up any body parts because I misinterpreted some guy's intentions."

"Yes, oh master." The soft, breathy words that caressed his ear inflamed every dominant bone in his body—the growing one between his legs most of all. And while he was prepared to wait as long as it took until Summer was ready, sexually, the fact that she had submissive written all over her just made him want her all the more. His jaw firmed when the words were replaced by a ghost of a smile on Summer's face, before she turned and walked away.

But not before a small, ladylike snort reached Ziggy's ears. Ziggy gritted his teeth as a chuckle next to him forced him to realize that Rico had caught every spoken—and unspoken—word of their brief conversation.

"Wow. You're really making great progress, Zig."

"Drop it, Rico."

"*Master*, no less. I'm impressed."

The last thing he needed was heckling from the highly amused bloodsucker. "Don't make me hurt you, man."

"Actually, watching Summer with you makes me feel a whole lot better. From the look of it, you have as much control over her as I had."

"She's stubborn."

"That's one word for it, I guess."

His eyes never leaving Summer as she walked over to greet two new arrivals she obviously knew judging from the smile on her face, he felt his body relax a little when she did nothing more than give a welcoming hand squeeze to one, and brushed an air kiss against the other's cheek.

"Summer seems to be okay with you," Rico observed.

"You sound surprised. Actually she's still getting over you telling me all you did the night we met. She can be a tad feisty when she has a mind."

"Really? Fiasty, huh?"

Ziggy felt the amusement still emanating from Rico and shook his head. "Well, that's one word for it. She's cute when she gets riled."

When Rico just grunted, Ziggy cast a quick glance at him, just catching the smirk before he wiped it off his face. "Whaaat?"

"Nothing."

Unfortunately, if Rico was aiming for the innocent look, the laughter in his eyes killed it.

Ziggy settled back into his seat, letting the dim lighting enfold him. He could watch Summer closely without being observed in return.

And watch he did, soaking up the atmosphere of Rico's. It was as comfortable as being at a friend's place. But that was what Rico had aimed for. He'd succeeded on all counts. Just one of the reasons why people felt so relaxed there.

And in the midst of it, Summer moved through the people like a ray of sunshine, laughing, talking, putting new visitors at ease if necessary, joking with regulars.

He had to admit, Rico'd had a stroke of genius hiring Summer to "hostess" the club. She had a way with people, that's for sure.

In fact, it was hard to focus on anything else as he watched her—the thumping beat of the music faded, the voices laughing and talking loudly to be heard over the din.

Through it all, Summer floated from one group to the next—whether groups of unattached Doms looking for some action, or Dom/sub couples having a night out, maybe taking in a scene or two in one of the rooms with public viewing.

That was the only time he felt nervous, when she took new members on a tour of those rooms.

He knew what went on in some of them. Hell, he'd been in them more than once himself. With the upstairs viewing decks, anyone could watch what was going on.

Did her memories bother her when she saw what was being done to the subs? The whippings, the bondage... Sure, it was all consensual, but there was a very fine line between pleasure and pain.

"She's okay, Zig. She's a lot stronger than you give her credit for, you know."

So absorbed in his thoughts about Summer, Ziggy had forgotten Rico was still there. "So you say."

"She's been able to separate the two—what happens here," Rico waved his arm around the room, encompassing the people, the atmosphere, "compared to what happened to her. She is aware that the intention here is for pleasure for all parties. It's a crucial distinction."

"True."

"And maybe, someday, recognizing that difference, seeing the pleasure the subs gain from it, will allow her let go of her past and go further herself."

Ziggy pondered that. "You're pretty smart for an old guy."

Rico chuckled. "Yes, well, one of the few advantages to a long life."

* * * * *

Raining.

Ziggy drifted in that half-sleep, half-awake state and listened to the rain outside. Even the rain couldn't dissipate the smell of the humidity, hanging in the air like a blanket.

Stretching his legs out over the cooler part of the sheets, he tried to go back to sleep.

Something niggled at him. Something wasn't right. He tried to remember what it was...

The boom of thunder directly overhead, loud enough to rattle the panes of glass in the windows, shook him from his slumber. The searing flash and crack of lightning that followed had his eyes snapping open. Sitting bolt upright in bed, he looked around the room in a befuddled state. Something was missing. But what?

He scratched his head, suddenly realizing, after precious seconds, what was wrong. Summer was gone.

Stupidly, as if to confirm what his eyes knew to be true, he ran his hand over her side of the bed.

Shit!

They'd had a blazing row when they'd arrived home from the club the night before over the not-so-small matter of her making goo-goo eyes at Miles Romansky, even though she said she wasn't. Sure hadn't looked that way to him. They were only "friends", he mimicked in his mind. *Yeah, right.* Romansky, the bastard, was just waiting for an opening with Summer. It was as clear as the big nose on his ugly face.

But they'd sorted it out, he'd taken her to bed and made her come so many times she nearly screamed the house down, and then he'd bundled her up in his arms and legs so they could sleep.

So where in the Sam Hill was she?

Frantic, he flung himself off the bed and rushed through the house, checking rooms, calling her name. When he was unable to locate her, he tore back into his bedroom, hopping around the floor on one leg, then the other as he tried to pull his jeans on.

Where could she have gone?

He'd been sleeping so soundly, what if someone –

Another flash of lightning made him turn. What he saw out the window made his breath catch.

Outside, the elements had gone crazy – lightning crackled and streaked across the sky in blinding incandescent zigzags, rain poured down like a giant dam had sprung a leak in the heavens, and the wind was whipping up a gale. And there in the midst of it, her arms raised, head thrown back and eyes closed, stood Summer.

Completely naked.

He couldn't move. There was something...primal, elemental about seeing her there like that. Like a goddess in some mythical tale, the sight of her had a magical quality that transfixed the watcher.

The ethereal illusion was shattered when she sneezed. Not once, but three times. Shaking himself out of his dumbfounded stupor, he rushed outside and scooped her up before she had a chance to protest. His jeans were soaked in seconds, rain tearing at him as he rushed his precious bundle back through the yard and into the house.

He didn't bother with a towel, or the Jacuzzi – he turned on the shower and didn't put her down until the hot water was steaming up the room.

He lowered her feet to the cold tiles. Checking to ensure she was standing up okay, he ripped off his jeans and then lifted her, stepping under the warm spray then turning her around so that her back was flush against his chest.

"You want to tell me what that was all about?" he snapped in her ear.

"What are you so angry about?"

"Angry? This isn't angry, honey. This is seriously pissed off. If I was angry, you wouldn't be able to sit for a week."

"Ziggy, what's wrong with you? It was a simple storm. I like them. They center me, ground me. Besides, I needed some space..."

"Space? From what?"

She wriggled in his arms, trying to break free of the hold he had on her. Instead he turned her around so that she was facing him but didn't release her. When she refused to either answer or look up at him, he tipped her chin. The look in her eyes about broke his heart.

"Oh, I see. Not what – whom." Feeling like a total idiot, he loosened his grip on her, cradling her head against his chest. Again he was reminded of just what a tiny little thing she was. And when his hands ran over the bumps and ridges on her back, he just wanted to bundle her up tight and never let her go.

A flush of tenderness washed through him and he kissed the top of her head.

She raised her head to look at him, her eyes tracing every feature of his face with such an intent look it was an almost physical touch. "You panicked, Ziggy. Why?"

Panic was the word for it all right, and it was becoming more and more familiar anytime he thought about her, looked at her, tried to imagine her not being there –

She tapped his chest with a finger. "I just don't understand you."

Huh? "You don't understand me? I'm not the one running around naked in a storm in the middle of the night."

"I needed some air, okay? Sleeping with you is like sleeping with a cross between a boa constrictor and an octopus."

"I was protecting you."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Oh sure. If that helps you sleep at night..."

He frowned. "What does *that* mean?"

"Just what I said."

"Oh no, you don't. Nothing with you is that simple. Tell me."

"Sure, if you tell me what's with you and the mating thing?"

Ziggy stiffened. Letting go of Summer, he turned away, then grabbed the soap. Avoiding those knowing eyes, he started lathering his body. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Call me curious. You're one of the most affectionate men I've ever met, Ziggy."

Well, that was certainly a word he could honestly say had never been used to describe him before. Summer tapped him on the shoulder and held out her hand for the soap, and when he reluctantly slapped it in her hand, she turned him around so she could wash his back.

"You're always touching, hugging. Some woman would give her eye teeth to have all that attention directed at her."

"Because I'm not interested, that's why." As Summer's slippery hands massaged and pressed, warmth that had nothing to do with the hot water pelting down on him flowed into the tight muscles and he could feel the tension ease, loosening the knots in his back and neck. "And how the hell did we get onto this topic anyway?"

"You need someone."

"What I need is to get some sleep. And so do you."

"Just remember, Ziggy, that this...me living here...isn't permanent – it's only while I need the protection. Then I'll be moving on. Find another place..."

She was leaving? His head spun around in time to see the light in her eyes flicker out, leaving her looking resigned, weary. Tired.

"Hey, you don't have to go until you're ready. You're welcome here for as long as you want."

On tiptoes, she reached up to him, pulling his head down until she could kiss him softly. "That's the problem. I know what I want. Do you?" Before he could answer, she turned and left the shower, leaving him standing there confused with the water pouring over him.

She made short work of drying herself, and by the time he was out of the shower and back in the bedroom, she was bundled under the covers, curled up in a tight little ball.

He crawled in behind her, hands already reaching for her to pull her up against his body, when her earlier words hit him and he stopped himself. It had become a habit already—curling himself around her while they slept. But recalling the reason why he woke alone in the first place, he dropped his hands, and rolled onto his back.

"You don't want to snuggle?" a muffled voice came from the other side of the bed.

He almost laughed at her choice of word, except it choked in his throat before it had a chance to break free. That was exactly what they did. He'd never "snuggled" with another woman in his life. But he was seriously beginning to wonder if he could sleep any other way now.

"Yeah, I want to snuggle, honey. With you, all the time." He cocked his leg over hers, sighing deeply when her ass nestled up against him. His cock, already stiffening just from being near her, slipped along the soft skin at the cleft of her buttocks. "Just wake me up next time I get too much for you. You damn near took ten years off my life when I woke and you weren't there. Hell, I thought...I thought you'd gone and left."

His hand had crept up to cup and fondle the fullness of her small breast and her hand covered his, mirroring the movement. "I didn't mean to alarm you. And I'll never just leave, Ziggy. I wouldn't do that. Not after all you've done for me."

"I'm doing it because I want to, Summer."

"I know." She sighed. "This is nice, isn't it?"

He closed his eyes, inhaling the sweetness of her, unable to stop a slow slide of his cock backward and forward along the silky skin of her ass. "Yeah, it's real nice," he agreed, shocked to realize just how true that was. "Now go to sleep, baby, or it's liable to get a whole lot nicer, and you need your beauty sleep."

"Are you inferring—" Mock indignation filled her words.

"Shush. Sleep!"

"Yes, master," she said with a small chuckle.

He wriggled closer and nipped her shoulder playfully. "Cheeky wench."

* * * * *

Ziggy held open the office door for Summer, and followed her in. When she sat down in her chair behind her desk, he placed his hands on the arms of the chair and spun her around to face him, leaning over her. His eyes dropped as they followed the plunging neckline of her new T-shirt—just one of the things she'd bought that morning when he took her shopping for some new clothes. Hard as he tried, he couldn't drag his eyes away from the shadow of her cleavage, the way it showed the soft swelling of her petite breasts. Damn, she looked good enough to eat. The only problem was, he wasn't the only male likely to think so.

He ran a finger down her cleavage, slipping it under the edge of the fabric to skim over her nipple. He couldn't resist a satisfied grin when it puckered at his touch. "You don't think that's a little daring?" he asked, finally looking up at her.

She smirked. "I wondered how long it would take you to notice."

He looked offended. "I notice."

"Only when it's shoved under your nose."

"What can I say? I'm a guy. Anything other than naked takes us a bit longer." His eyes dropped down for another look. "It looks nice." *Very* nice. "Edible, in fact."

"Speaking of food..."

"Oh yeah." His voice turned husky at the thought of feeding her. "I just love to watch you eat."

She chuckled. "Yes, well, God forbid I might fade away to a shadow."

He looked her up and down. "Nope. No fading. I like you just the way you are." He glanced at his watch. "I should be done here by lunchtime. What say you and me go for a picnic this afternoon?"

She laughed. "You? A picnic?"

"What?" he asked with a grin.

"Never mind. Just teasing. I'd love—"

The phone rang, cutting her off. As Summer answered, he leaned down and nibbled on her ear, inhaling the tantalizing scent that always surrounded her. It drew him like nothing else. She squirmed and tried to brush him off.

"No, he's right here. Just a sec..."

She thrust the phone at him. "Crissy. For you."

He took the phone, but didn't move, keeping her trapped. "Hey, Crissy. What's up?" He hung his head and nodded to whatever his sister-in-law was saying. "This afternoon? Well, I don't know. I'm looking after a-a cli—" He looked embarrassed as Summer caught his eye. "You do? What exactly did Randy tell you?" When Summer made a move to get out from under the cage his body formed, he fired her with a look hot enough to melt her panties, and a silently worded *Don't move*. "He did, did he?" Ziggy laughed. "Okay, we'll be there...about four. See you then."

He reached across her to hang up the phone, then stood and straightened. "Sorry, honey. No picnic today. But you have the dubious pleasure of meeting the rest of the

family. We're celebrating Crissy and Randy's impending parenthood." He rolled his eyes. "I'd lay money my mom is behind this..."

"I'm sure I'll enjoy it."

"Don't be too sure," he said and frowned.

"Hey, sugah."

Ziggy turned as Chad came down the hallway from the back office.

"Bossman got you working on a Saturday? Damn, I'd be asking for a raise."

Ziggy looked at his watch and raised an eyebrow. "It's before midday. Isn't this a bit early for you?"

"Funny man. You got a minute, Zig?"

"Sure." Ziggy paused a moment. His back to Chad, blocking his cousin's view, he leaned back over Summer. She looked up at him with those melted chocolate eyes, and all he could think about was kissing her. "Call me if you need me, okay? For anything," he finished and waggled his eyebrows.

Summer laughed out loud, the sound pure music to his ears. She leaned closer. "Maybe I'll give you a neck massage later...if you're good," she whispered.

"I'm always good. Remember?"

"God, remind me to bite my tongue in future."

He laughed out loud and couldn't resist a satisfied look. He'd had her coming so hard that morning, she'd told him in graphic detail how good he was. Repeatedly. He could afford a smug moment or two.

She shooed him away. "Go on, big head. Chad's waiting."

With a grin still on his face, he stepped past a bemused Chad and walked into his office. He turned as he reached his desk and heard the door close. When no words were forthcoming, he looked up to find Chad looking at him strangely. "What's up?"

"Man, I should be asking you that question."

Ziggy flopped down in his office chair. "Sorry, I'm not following you."

Chad tossed his head. "That. Out there. That was just plain weird, man. You feelin' okay?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You. Smiling at a woman."

"I smile at women."

"Yeah, but not..." Chad shook his head. "Never mind." He took the seat in front of the desk, leaning forward, his arms resting on his thighs. A long curtain of black hair fell forward and Chad tucked it behind his ear. "We got a situation, cuz. And it ain't good."

For the first time in a long time, Chad didn't look happy. In fact, he was more grim than Ziggy could ever remember seeing him. Which meant that whatever had happened was some serious shit. "Tell me."

Without saying a word, Chad dropped the envelope he'd been carrying on the desk. With a curious look at his uncharacteristically serious cousin, Ziggy opened the flap and dropped the contents onto his desk. His heart started pounding. Heat filled his face. Anger roiled through him in a continuous wave.

It was a photo. Of Summer. Naked, hogtied and gagged.

Chapter Ten

In all his years as a sexual dominant, Ziggy had seen a lot of things—hell, he'd done a lot of things—most people would never consider part of “normal” sexual behavior. But he could honestly say he'd never caused any woman or submissive real pain. Even in dungeon play, it had always been consensual. And even then, it was the kind of pain that leads to the most intense pleasure. Always.

The face that looked back at him from the photo told him that for her it was neither pleasure nor consensual. It made him feel sick, made him want to hurt the man who'd done it to her, in the worst possible way.

Similar feelings to those he experienced when he and Link found Lucy—the helplessness to change what had happened, the uncontrollable anger—came back to sit like acid in his gut.

“Where'd you get it?”

“Delivered by courier this morning—young kid, school age.”

Ziggy picked up the photo again and raged inside.

“When we catch this bastard,” Ziggy said, his voice hoarse, “I'm going to fucking kill him.”

Jeesus. Apart from the marks and welts of the whip all over her bound body, it was the look of fright and pain in her eyes that cut him to the core.

“Yeah, well you and me both. Christ, Zig, she's such a sweet, tiny little thing. How could any man do something like that?”

“We've gotta find him, Chad. Now!”

“Maybe I have a start on that too.”

“You do?”

“Steve and I stayed up last night. Doin' a bit of checkin' on things. Damn, that boy is good! Nobody can hide from him. And I mean nobody. You know he could hack like that?”

Ziggy nodded. “One of the reasons I hired him. What'd he find?”

“First he started lookin' for Summer Grayson. That turned up a bit fat zero—seems our little sugah ain't exactly who she says she is. Understandable. So I got him to check Suzannah instead—after that little incident the other day—and he started checkin' out Suzannah anything that was even close.”

Chad tossed a computer printout on the desk under Ziggy's nose. “Suzannah Gray. Previously engaged to one Brian Ridgeway...” he tossed another printout on the table, this time a grainy photo downloaded off the internet, “thirty years old, ex-Special

Forces. Family money, and since he got out of the service, three priors for aggravated assault with intent—none of them Summer—but the charges were all dropped. Lack of conclusive evidence, alibi, you name it. Nothing a damned good lawyer and lots of money couldn't pull off. But it seems our boy is particularly fond of a certain style of sexual games that involve pain."

Ziggy picked up the photo. Dressed in a tux at some society function, the man was very well built but wore the formal clothes with ease. He guessed women would find him good-looking, in that smooth, well-off kind of way. Then he recalled Summer's scars, the terror in her expression in the other photo, and he just wanted to kill—slowly, painfully. "Got you, you sick, pathetic bastard."

"Steve's doin' some checks right now to see if we can trace his movements. I'm bettin' that was him on the phone yesterday."

"And at Summer's place too," added Ziggy.

"Huh?"

"Yeah, just as well you phoned me when you dropped her off."

"He was there?"

"No. But he had been. Bastard ripped up her stuff pretty bad. Poor little thing was in shock when I walked in. Nearly jumped clear out of her skin when I came up behind her."

"Understandable. Damn, I wish I'd stayed. Next time —"

"There won't *be* a next time."

"Meaning?"

"Summer's staying with me."

Chad's eyebrow rose. "Oh."

Ziggy's expression hardened. "You got a problem with that?"

"Hell, no."

"Good. Because it also means that he not only knows where she's working, but also where she was living. The only two unknowns are Rico's and my place. We better count on him finding out those two real fast too. Assume nothing."

"Sound plan. What do you want to do now? This is your show, man."

"Keep Steve on the intel. But I want Summer under guard at all times. Two men on rotating shifts, plus she'll be with me every second—if that's not enough, we call in more guys. Hell, if it comes down to it, I don't care if we need to use every man we have until he's caught. You cool with that?"

"Yep. Randy will be too."

"Suggestions for who to start with?"

"Count me in, for one. If he's keepin' a close eye on her, and if you're not in the office, then there's reason for me to be, since he's gotta know I'm one of the partners if

he's done his homework. Let's assume he has. Let's assume he knows about all of us—you, me and Randy.

"Plus it isn't odd that I'd call in to your place now and then—in case you need to go for a run, or something. So my presence won't be unusual."

"Makes sense."

"Who else?" asked Chad.

Ziggy sat back in his chair and steeped his fingers in front of his lips, thinking. "Any of the guys are good. But I'd like Clive in on this."

Chad looked confused. "Who's he?"

"Old army buddy of mine. Came to see me last week looking for some work. Summer hasn't met him, since he doesn't officially start until next week. And Clive is a Dom. He can be an extra pair of eyes the nights Summer works at Rico's. But for nighttime surveillance, you work out a roster with whoever is available. I'll pay double for working those shifts, out of my own pocket if necessary."

Chad waved his hand, dismissing the offer. "Doubt that'll be necessary, Zig. Summer's one of us now. Leastways that's how the guys think of her—made quite an impression when we took her out."

"I can just imagine." Summer seemed to make an impression on every male within sniffing distance.

"And we look after our own, man. She'll be well guarded."

Ziggy nodded. "I want them alert and armed, and ready for anything that might go down."

"You got it. And I think it's about time you sat little Summer down and got the full story. The job will be hard enough. Any info she can give us will help."

"Agreed."

A knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," called Ziggy.

Steve stuck his head around the door. "Got some news."

"Sit," motioned Ziggy at the chair next to Chad. "Ridgeway?"

Steve sat, taking off his glasses to rub his nose. "Yeah. Sneaky bastard must be using cash because he isn't leaving a paper trail. Dug up some stuff on his service time though."

"And?" asked Chad.

"Seems Lieutenant Ridgeway was captured. Spent about eleven months in a Saudi torture chamber—drugged, raped, beaten repeatedly. When he was retrieved, he was sent stateside. His physical wounds healed. The mental trauma, though...he discharged himself after six months. Family pressure was brought to bear to facilitate it. According to the reporting psych who, I might add, advised strongly against letting him go, he's like a stick of dynamite just waiting for a match. Seems she was right on the money."

"How so," asked Ziggy.

"She was abducted on her way home one night after a late stint at the office. You guessed it—bound, beaten... She was released after a week. No description given. No charges pressed. She's now staying with her sister in Australia. For an indefinite period."

"Ridgeway?"

"That's my bet. Maybe he didn't appreciate her picking at his brain. Besides, who else would scare her off that much that she'd drop it rather than pursue it? Anyway, that's the guts of it." Steve tossed a printout on the desk in front of Ziggy. "The rest of it's in there."

Steve stood. "I'll get back to it. Just thought you'd want to know."

"Yeah. Thanks, Steve. You done good, son," Ziggy said.

"Okay," said Chad after Steve had left. "Let's get Summer in here." Chad must have noticed Ziggy's reticence. "Look, man, if we're going to protect her, if we're going to nail this sicko, we all need to know what we're up against, what happened. The time for secrets is past."

"Summer honey? Could you come in here, please?"

In spite of the calm tone of Ziggy's voice, she could feel his emotions rioting inside. A fact that made her edgy. But she stood anyway. She took a step and stopped. "The phone?"

"It's okay—it'll come through to my office."

She walked around him and sat in the chair next to Chad while Ziggy closed the door and walked around the desk to resume his seat.

"Look, we're sorry to do this, Summer, but we need to ask you some questions."

"What about?"

"This guy who's after you." He watched her closely, reading her, noticing the way her body stiffened. "He's too close, honey. And we can't protect you unless we know it all. You understand? That means the whole story, not just the abbreviated one you told Rico."

Bile started to rise up in her throat. "No. No..."

"Yes, honey. You see..." Ziggy looked at her with sad eyes. "This arrived this morning—hand delivered. Chad was here to sign for it." He handed her the envelope.

"What is it?" she asked, afraid she already knew.

"It's you, Summer."

With shaking fingers, she opened the flap and glanced inside. One glance was enough. Shudders tore through her, and her fingers couldn't hold the envelope. It fluttered to the floor. She closed her eyes tightly, hand on her chest to stop the wave of nausea that rose.

Ziggy was beside her before she knew it, holding her close.

"Shhhh," he said as he stroked her hair. "We're here for you, honey. We won't let him hurt you again. I promise."

She took long shuddering breaths, trying to still the pounding of her heart. Curling her fingers around the fabric of Ziggy's shirt, she nodded against his chest.

"Okay," she whispered. Ziggy stood and pulled the extra chair over to sit beside her, so close his leg touched hers. She looked up at him and nodded when his arm rested on the back of her chair. She appreciated his closeness more than she could say. "But don't interrupt until I'm done, please." She looked at Chad as well. "Otherwise I won't be able to..."

Breathing deeply to prepare herself, she closed her eyes and blanked out her mind, shutting the door on her emotions. It was a technique she'd used with Brian. A way to block everything, even physical pain up to a point. It was the only way she'd survived. It was the only way she'd get through the retelling of it now.

"Just take your time."

She opened her eyes and fixated on a spot over Ziggy's shoulder, her eyes looking in the direction of the window, but focused inward.

"My name isn't Summer, it's Suzannah. Suzannah Gray. I met Brian...that's Brian Ridgeway, when I was twenty-one. We dated for about nine months before things really became serious and Brian asked me to marry him. I loved him. I thought he loved me. I guess that was my first mistake.

"Our sex life started out pretty normally—understand that I was a virgin, even at twenty-one when I met Brian, so my experience in things wasn't all that extensive. But over time, Brian became more and more dominating." She blushed. "I didn't mind—I liked that side of him. I liked being...submissive to him.

"But he mustn't have been as satisfied as I was. We'd been together about...I don't know...about eighteen months when he first brought his older brother into the...the sex with us."

Even without the benefit of them touching where Ziggy's leg rubbed against her, Summer could sense the sudden tension in Ziggy at her words.

"I'm not a slut." She raised her chin in defiance. "But I enjoyed it...enjoyed having two men giving me pleasure. Except...well, after a while Brian began to get jealous. Suspicious. As if because I'd 'allowed' another man to do those things to me, that I was suddenly handing it out to every man I met. That was when the 'discipline' started. He had to punish me, you see, because I'd been bad. He said it was because...because he loved me.

"About this time, Brian was sent over to the Middle East. He was in the Special Forces. He'd been there for about twelve months when he was sent out on a mission with his unit. He and one other man were captured. The other one died. Sometimes..." She bit down on her lip as tears burned the backs of her eyes. When she shut her eyes, she didn't notice the tracks they made down her face, not even conscious of them falling

until they fell onto her hands. She rubbed at her hands, rubbing the moisture in absently. "There were times...after...when-when...there were times I wished Brian had died too," she uttered softly.

"I didn't find out the details until he came home. In fact, he hardly spoke of it. But he was different. Harder. Rougher. Angry.

"And he would fly into a rage over the littlest things—one night I forgot to feed his dog Buster before we had dinner and he nearly went ballistic. And yet...and yet, he would be really sweet over the silliest things—like watching a chick-flick with me on TV and cuddling me while I bawled my eyes out over the stupid movie."

She looked up at Ziggy, her eyes searching his, seeing the confusion there. "I honestly don't think he meant to hurt me. I realize that sounds dumb and blind, but when we made love, he'd start out gently, loving like he used to be, then without warning a rage would come over him, as though the demons in his mind were taking over, and I'd end up being the target.

"I phoned his brother who was in California by this time, to see if he knew what had happened to Brian, since they were both in the forces, and they'd both been over in the Middle East at the same time. Apparently, when he was captured he was tortured and...and raped by his captors.

"When he was finally rescued, the Army put him in psychiatric therapy. I think his brother was as surprised as me to hear he'd been released.

Suddenly a big, warm hand covered hers, and she realized she'd been wringing her hands.

"You okay, honey?" asked Ziggy.

She nodded, but gripped his hand, feeling his strength pour through her.

"I tried to be supportive—I could see he was having problems—but things just got worse. The 'discipline' became out-and-out beatings, and after one in particular, I'd had enough. His brother had turned up unexpectedly—I guess he was concerned after my phone call, not that I'd told him what was happening, but maybe he'd put two and two together that I wouldn't be asking if things were okay.

"But when he arrived he found Brian... Well, he put himself between Brian and me and stopped him. Not before he was hurt too. Somehow he restrained Brian. I ran away. Left the apartment and went to a girlfriend's for a while.

"That was it for me. I'd done my best, but he needed professional help, and he wouldn't get it. After that I phoned Brian and told him the engagement was off. He wasn't someone I felt safe with any longer."

She paused, sucked in a much-needed breath.

"He seemed okay with it at first. He would phone occasionally to see how I was. Just friend-type stuff. He told me he was in therapy, trying to get help. And that he wanted us to still be friends." She laughed mirthlessly. "I was so stupid. But I really hoped... I see now he was lulling me into a false sense of security.

"I went on a sort of date one night with a guy I was working with—nothing serious, just dinner and a movie between friends... I found out later that Brian had been following me."

The anger she'd felt back then came back. "All that time he'd been tracking my every move.

"When I got home, he was waiting for me. He seemed fine until I let him in my apartment. The minute the door was closed, he just went insane. Accused me of all sorts of things. Sick things. But it wasn't even so much what he was saying—it was the way he was acting, looking at me." She shivered as she recalled the feeling of impending disaster she'd had that night—as though bugs were wriggling around and crawling under her skin all over her body. "I-I was so scared. When I told him to leave, we ended up having words. Bad move. The last thing I remembered was him backhanding me. I don't know how long I was out for, because the next thing I knew, I came to in his hunting cabin—tied up and gagged.

She took a deep breath, then another, inhaling and exhaling, waiting until the little shivers settled, her heartbeat slowed down, and she could talk with a steady voice.

"What followed...I don't know how long he held me there—weeks, I think. I lost track of time. He tried to force me to submit to him. But I refused. I don't know what I was thinking, but I'd had enough. I didn't want to play his game anymore. I wanted a normal life, without all the fear, the worry if I'd say or do the wrong thing.

"That was like a red flag to a bull to Brian. I think something had pushed him over an edge—probably me.

"He-he abused me repeatedly. It seemed to go on for so long, and after a while, I didn't care if he killed me. He would leave me alone for two or three days at a time, not bound, but on a long chain attached to a metal collar around my neck so that I couldn't leave the cabin—no food, only the water in the tap. I think he was trying to weaken me.

"It didn't work—instead I became more and more determined to get out of there. I'd do whatever it took. And I began to...prepare. Whatever I could find that could possibly be used as a weapon, I started to hide in spots around the cabin—rusted screws, wire, broken crockery. God, by that point I was so desperate. I knew I couldn't hold on much longer. No one knew where I was, I'm sure, so I couldn't hope for anyone to rescue me."

She paused, gathering her strength for the rest of it.

"One night Brian arrived later than usual. He'd been drinking heavily. He-he tied me down and whipped me." She closed her eyes and breathed through the memory, trying to regain her detachment, reach that place again in her mind where she could divorce herself from it, look on it from a distance. "I've never known such pain.

"After that he...he forced himself on me, then laid down on the bed with a bottle of Jack Daniels.

"He started to touch me again." She didn't realize she'd started crying again until a tissue found its way into her hand from Chad. She dabbed at her eyes quickly. "And I

knew...I knew I-I couldn't let him. Not again. So I found the old, broken piece of plate and stabbed him. I don't know how many times."

She looked up at Ziggy, still amazed that she couldn't remember. In her mind it just seemed as if she'd kept going until the strength left her arm. "I wanted to k-kill him. I wondered if I had, but by that point he was unconscious and I just wanted to get away while I could. I didn't want to take the risk of him suddenly coming to.

"I found the key to the chain in his-his pocket, and freed myself. I used his car to get away. That's when I found Rico..."

Chad stood and paced, running his hands through his long hair. He turned and faced Summer. "We'll get him, sugah. Don't you worry about that." He took a couple of steps until he reached her, bending over to kiss her on the head. "I'm going to go check with Steve to see if he's managed to turn up anything else."

After Chad left, Summer sat there, lost, still trying to shake off the memories. She started when Ziggy stood and scooped her up off her chair, sitting down again with her in his lap, his arms tight around her. He tucked her head under his chin and she closed her eyes as she soaked up his warmth.

Neither of them spoke for a moment. Nestled against Ziggy, she felt safer and more cared for in that moment than she'd ever felt in her life.

"Take me home, Ziggy."

"Sure, honey. Anything."

* * * * *

Ziggy had to admit he was at a loss as to what to do.

He took his eyes off the road for a moment and snuck another look over at Summer.

Her head was leaning against the back of the seat, her eyes closed, her face paler than usual.

At moments like this, she looked like an innocent young woman—too young for what she'd been through, and her innocence... It tore him up to think of what she'd been forced to submit to. No wonder Rico had been concerned about the two of them together.

It was true, he loved his dominant side, loved nothing more than a submissive woman allowing him to determine her pleasure—by whatever means. His decision. His control. With Summer, though, that particular sexual need hadn't seemed as all-consuming.

Still, a part of him longed to give her the sexual high that a true submissive could attain. And Summer was definitely a sexual submissive. There was no doubt in his mind. But to his surprise, for the first time in many years, he had rediscovered the intense pleasure in letting a woman take the lead. The episode in the shower—unable to touch her, waiting on cues from Summer, giving her the control—had been one of the most mind-blowing in his life.

The car bounced and jostled over the uneven driveway. When the car stopped, he put it in park and reached over, his big hand covering Summer's.

Her eyes opened, her gaze slightly unfocused as though she'd been a million miles away. "We're home?"

If it didn't make him feel so good, he'd be worried about his reaction to Summer calling it "home". But dammit, it felt like a home. It *was* home. Probably for the first time since he'd bought the house years ago.

"Sure are, honey. Come on, let's get you inside."

Hopping out and scooting around to her side, he opened her door, taking her hand as they walked to the front door.

He held it open for her then closed it as he followed her inside, watching as she dropped her little backpack on the coffee table.

"What do you feel like? A shower? Something to eat? How about a nice soak in the Jacuzzi?"

She turned to face him, an expression on her face he hadn't seen before.

"Summer?"

"No, nothing like that."

Never taking her eyes from him, she kicked off her sandals then took hold of the hem of her T-shirt and began to lift it.

As the top went higher, his mouth became drier and drier. A little more skin, a hint more of the luscious curves of her breasts until she took it off over her head to reveal the lacy, strapless bra underneath.

Her hands ran over the mounds, pausing a moment to circle around the hardening buds of her nipples showing through the lacy fabric.

God, he'd never seen anything as erotic as Summer at that moment. And that was no crowbar in his jeans—his cock had jumped up the moment the lace of her bra became visible.

He cleared his throat. "What're you doing, baby?"

Her hands had traveled down to the studs at her jeans.

He licked his lips as she flicked each one open then tucked her fingers under the waistband to slide them down over her hips. The little wiggle she did to get them over her ass nearly undid him.

"Undressing."

"Yes, I can see that, baby. But why?"

He nearly swallowed his tongue and choked when he realized she had no panties on under her jeans. Reaching behind her, she quickly undid the bra, letting it lie where it dropped.

With delicate steps she walked over to him, shocking him speechless when she knelt down on the floor in front of him and raised her eyes to him.

"I want you to dominate me." Then her eyes and her head dropped, her chin nearly touching her chest. Her hands linked behind her back so that her breasts were thrust out.

At the sight of Summer on her knees in front of him, looking for all the world like the perfect submissive, all the blood in his body drained away to pour into his pounding cock.

Images of what he could do, the ways he could bring her to pleasure, battered at what was left of his brain.

But overriding that was concern for her. After what she'd been through, why on earth would she want this?

He squatted down in front of her, sniffed softly. Amazing. She was sitting there calm as you please, but inside she was shaking like a leaf. For all the control she was displaying, her body was a roiling, pitching sea of anxiety. It poured off her in heat-like waves.

What could she possibly be doing? He lifted her chin with a finger. "No, baby."

"But why? You don't want me?"

The look of desperation in her eyes undid him.

"Not like this, Summer, no."

Her shoulders slumped before she nodded, her head still down. "I understand." With unconscious grace, she rose from the floor and stood, turning.

He stood too, and watched in confusion as she walked to her clothes and began to pick them up. "What do you understand?"

"Why you don't want this. With me."

She headed toward the bedroom, but he stopped her before she reached it with a gentle hand on her arm.

"It's not that, Summer." He ran his hands through his hair. The feeling of floundering filled him. But hell, she really knew how to throw a man for a loop.

She turned around. "Look, Ziggy. I'm not dumb. I hear the other subs at Rico's talk. I know what you like. I know how you like to do it. They've been remarkably forthcoming on the subject—even before I met you. You have quite a reputation."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Why have you never wanted to do that with me?"

"Well, hell, I don't know." The conversation was spinning out of his control and he had no idea how to get it back on track. Heck, he didn't even know what she was getting at.

"Look, just forget it. It doesn't matter. I'll be gone soon and you can get back to your life." She turned away, heading toward the hallway and the bedroom beyond once more.

There it was again. That threat about her leaving. She couldn't. Not yet. Not...yet. Something was becoming clear to him though. Something he should have realized before this. Now he could see it, he was slapping himself that he had missed it all this time.

"Stop!" he said, using the commanding voice he used during scenes at the club. It was small satisfaction that Summer stopped as if she'd just run into a brick wall.

"On your knees."

She flicked a nervous glance back at him.

"Don't look at me. Just do what I said. Now."

The bundle of clothes hit the floor. Then she dropped to the floor, assuming the same position she'd held moments ago.

Moving over to her, he knelt down behind her and sniffed a line up her neck until he reached her ear. He didn't miss the nervous shiver that rippled up her spine. "Spread your knees, Summer."

When she had done so and was settled again, he reached around and ran a finger through her labia, parting them. Wet. But not wet enough. Not for what she was asking of him.

"Hands behind your back." He watched and waited as she did as instructed and nodded. "I'll be back in a moment. Stay right there, Summer. Don't move a muscle."

At that, he stood and walked away.

Where was he?

Had she done the wrong thing? She wanted so much to get beyond the hold The Bastard had on her, be what she felt Ziggy needed. The question was, could she do it?

Nausea began to pitch and roll in her empty stomach. The waiting wasn't helping. Sweat began to bead on her upper lip, her brow, drops sliding down the cleft between her breasts.

Panic. Fear.

Her pulse raced.

No. No. She couldn't—

"Summer?"

A warm hand brushed the hair back from her face and her eyes blinked open. She hadn't realized how tightly they'd been shut until she opened them to gaze back at a very concerned Ziggy.

"I'm here, baby. Shhhh..."

Gentle fingers coasted up and down her shoulders, calming, easing the frantic pounding of her heart.

"Do you trust me, baby?"

She nodded. To attempt to talk around the lump in her throat would have been impossible.

He leaned forward and nuzzled at her lips. Soft, not demanding. Her body began to relax, the rush of adrenaline eased off. This was Ziggy. He wouldn't hurt her. She trusted him.

He stood, offering her his hand so that she was pulled to her feet.

"Now, let us begin."

He circled her slowly before coming to stand in front of her again.

"Undress me, Summer."

Deep, commanding, that voice was different.

Feeling surprisingly timid, she reached for the hem of his T-shirt, pulling it from the waistband of his jeans. As she pulled it further up his body, the delicious smell of Ziggy's skin hit her. She wanted to taste him so badly.

The dark disc of his nipple tempted her lips, but as she reached for it, she glanced up at Ziggy. His face impassive, he shook his head at her. "Just undress. Nothing more. Unless I say so."

He lifted his arms and with some difficulty, she pulled it over his head.

"Now the jeans."

Fingers fumbling, she opened the studs, one by one. He was hard. As each stud released, more and more of his erection was revealed. First the ruddy crown, the small slit oozing a drop of moisture, then the rigid shaft, swollen, veins full and ridged. Her fingers tingled as they brushed against the golden hairs leading from his navel, down lower, growing thicker as more and more flesh was revealed.

She gasped when the last stud was released and his cock sprang out, thrusting at her from a bed of golden hair. Her mouth watered for a taste. As she knelt down to work his jeans down over his ass, his thighs, her mouth brushed against warm flesh.

If she just turned her head. Opened her mouth. The musky smell of his arousal teased at her. Tempted her for a taste. Just one... She inched her head around—

"Summer," Ziggy said warningly. "Just take off the jeans, baby. That's all."

With a frown of frustration, she leaned over to run them down his legs to his ankles. She waited while he lifted each foot so that she could pull off his boots and socks, then the jeans.

When that was done, she looked up at him standing so big and tall above her, arms akimbo as he looked down on her.

"Stand."

Pushing up off the floor, she stood.

Dark amber eyes watched her intently. She shuffled uncomfortably under the directness of his impassive expression.

"Feet apart. Hands locked behind you."

She moved quickly to obey.

"Now, don't move."

Instead, Ziggy moved around her, circling.

She jerked when a finger traced a long line down her spine, ending in the crease of her buttocks, but eased away when a finger burrowed deeper into the crease to press into her anus.

She flinched as a loud smack hit the air at the same time heat warmed her buttocks and the skin stung.

"I said, don't move, Summer. And I meant it." Ziggy's hand smoothed over the smarting skin, easing the sting a little. But even so, her eyes watered. "I'm your Master, baby. And you know what that means. If I want to touch you – anywhere – you let me."

"But –"

"Yes?" Ziggy came to stand in front of her, his eyes questioning, daring her to answer. "You don't agree? This *is* what you wanted."

"I agree."

"Master."

"I agree, Master."

"Good." He stepped away from her and picked something up off the coffee table. "Let's begin."

The touch of cold metal on her wrists and a loud click made her head snap around to look around at Ziggy.

She pulled on her wrists. A frisson of panic shot through her as she tugged, harder. The cuffs were locked tight.

"Stay still, baby, or I'll have to punish you."

She bit her lip. Sweat tracked into the corner of her eye and she blinked rapidly to clear it.

Ziggy's hands ran down over her buttocks, then back up the sides until he cupped her breasts from behind. "Hmmm, nice!"

He fondled them, tweaking the nipples, but still a small yelp left her throat as he pinched her nipples hard. In spite of the sharp spike of sensation that traveled directly to her clit, her body began to tremble.

Ziggy's hand cupped her chin and held her head still as his warm lips moved over hers. She leaned into him, needed the warmth, the connection to steady her. "You okay, Summer?"

She nodded.

"Answer me."

"Yes."

"Yes, *what*?"

"Y-Yes, Master."

"You want to keep going?"

"Y-Yes...Master."

"Good. Then let's move along."

In the next second, darkness filled her vision, nothing but endless blackness.

Panic started to rise inside her. "Ziggy?"

No reply.

Endless seconds passed. She began to shake.

As Ziggy observed with a concerned gaze, small shudders began shivering through Summer. His brow furrowed as her head spun around, straining to hear where he was, what he was doing.

What was coming next.

He stood to the side and flicked the velvet flogger against his hand. Summer flinched at the small sound it made. When he trailed the ends over her breasts, a small whimper left her lips. Watching her closely, he slipped it over her shoulder, down her back. Her head began to swing back and forth, small sounds of discomfort murmuring low in her throat. He doubted she was aware of them. He was though, and every one of them cut into him like a sharp knife.

When he swished the fabric softly across the cheeks of her buttocks—once, twice, nothing more than a whisper of the velvet over her flesh—a soft, distressed moan broke free.

Alarmed, he moved in front of her.

As he watched, a tear skidded down her cheek under the edge of the blindfold.

Her teeth were worrying her bottom lip so hard he thought he'd see blood there.

And when he trailed the velvet strands up over her pussy, she stepped back.

"Summer?"

Her head was swinging around now, the movements becoming uncontrolled.

"No. No, no, no, no..."

"Summer. Stand still."

In spite of his commanding tone, his words fell on deaf ears. Behind the blindfold, Summer was somewhere else, locked in a memory.

All of a sudden, an anguished wail left her mouth. No words, but the sound was like that of a terrified animal. Her arms began to tug and pull at the cuffs binding her wrists, abrading the soft skin there and raising red marks.

"No. No. No!"

Chapter Eleven

Deciding it had gone on long enough, Ziggy reached for Summer. "Baby, calm down."

"No. Nononono..." She wrenched away from him, stumbling as she bumped into the coffee table, then the couch.

He wrapped his arms around her, trying to stop her before she hurt herself.

"Summer, stop. It's Ziggy, baby. I'm here." Trying to hold her still with one arm, he reached for the blindfold, tearing it off her face and tossing it to the floor.

Her eyes were shut tight, the skin around them damp as tears tumbled through the closed lids.

"Summer! Open your eyes. It's me. Look at me. Summer honey, please." After a long moment, she opened reddened eyes. Slightly unfocussed, trapped, haunted, exaggerated by the continuous stream of small whimpers that left her throat.

"Come back to me, baby. That's it." He kissed her cheeks, her eyes, feeling the dampness against his lips. He had to get the key for the damn cuffs. "I'm going to get the key for the cuffs, Summer. So just stand still, okay?"

Her body so tightly strung, she looked as if she might snap, nonetheless she nodded at him, her head bobbing up and down continuously.

He rubbed his hands up her arms before releasing her.

In a second, he was behind her, fumbling in his haste to get the small key in the lock. He was surprised to find his own hands shaking. His normal composure was shot to ribbons.

Then her hands were free, and she turned to him, wrapping herself around him so quickly, so tightly, he took a step back to brace himself.

He bundled her shaking body up against him, tucking her head under his chin, his arms wrapped tight around her while he murmured words of comfort. His hand rubbed up and down her back until gradually the shaking eased.

"That's it, baby. You're okay. You're fine. You're with me and I'm not going to hurt you."

A small nod was his only reply.

When he felt she was ready to move, he walked her over to the couch, sitting down and pulling her onto his lap. She immediately snuggled into his chest as if she were trying to climb inside. But hey, that was fine with him.

For long moments they sat there. Not talking. But he felt every beat of her heart, every inhalation as if it were his own.

"Ziggy?" a small voice asked after a while.

"Hmmm?"

"I'm sorry."

"Hey, there's nothing to be sorry about."

"I couldn't. I really wanted to, but I couldn't—"

"Baby, I know that. I knew it before you asked me."

"Then why...? God, I made a fool of myself, didn't I?" She was crying again, continuous little panting sobs that rolled out in between each word.

Ziggy kissed the top of her head, hugging her tighter. "No, you could never do that, honey, but it was important to you to try. I could see that."

The crying eased off again and she was quiet for a moment. Feeling blindly, his hand flopped around on the shelf under the end table beside the couch until he hit on the box of tissues. He grabbed a handful and handed them to her. She dabbed her eyes and blew her nose, then settled back against his chest again. "I thought I was ready. I wanted to be."

"One day you will be, Summer. But it isn't something you can rush."

"Maybe I'm not really submissive."

"Oh, you're submissive, baby, never doubt that. And the time will come when you can give that sort of control over to a...to a man." The words almost stuck in his throat. The thought that he, let alone Summer, could trust another man to take her to that place—he wasn't sure he could stand to even think about it. "But you were doing it as a reaction to Brian and what he did to you. There are lots of reasons why you'll want to take that step again, but they have to be for you, honey, not because you're trying to bury a bad memory."

"But you want it, Ziggy. You don't go to Rico's just to warm a seat..."

He chuckled lightly at her attempt at humor. "True. I'm a very dominant kind of guy. But that's not what you and I are about, Summer."

Here was the truth about them. And it had hit him like a sledgehammer when a very terrified Summer had presented herself to him in that purely submissive pose. The reason *why* he had embraced the Dom/sub lifestyle to the exclusion of "normal" relationships for the past few years. After Link and Lucy, it had been a way to keep an emotional distance, not get involved in any way other than the sexual. It gave sex that "edge" as a substitute for the emotional high that had been missing. That emotional high was something he'd had with Summer since the first time. It was why he didn't really miss the D/s stuff when he was with her.

He stopped and lifted her chin off his chest, needing to see her eyes, to know that she understood what he was saying, what he was about to say.

"One day you will be ready, Summer, and I pray to God that you trust me enough again to let me be the man. But with you...I don't need it, baby. Do you understand me?"

What I feel when I'm with you...like now...you satisfy me in every way that's important to a man—don't ever doubt that, or feel that you're not enough. You are."

"You're sure?"

"Very, very sure."

He tipped her head up and kissed her. No rush, no desire to devour her. No, it was a different, gentler need that hit him this time. Keeping it soft, slow, he moved over her lips, relishing the way her mouth moved under his, the small hand that crept up his chest to lodge at the side of his neck. The gentle pressure there that indicated she was ready for more.

And when her mouth opened under his, he didn't dive in as his insatiable hunger for her usually drove him to do. A subtle exploration—slow, erotic—that went on and on, setting off a slow burn that began at his tongue and snaked down his body to his cock.

Without breaking the seal of their lips, Summer moved, lifting her hips until she'd positioned herself over his cock, waiting.

His hand slipped between their bodies, holding the rigid length upright, and as she slid down his length, indescribable warmth encased him.

Keeping her movements unhurried, in time with their tongues, she raised and lowered, the rhythm one that built like a rolling tide.

His hands moved to her hips, his grip firm so that when she lowered he pushed up, deep inside her, as far as he could go, then hung there on the edge of oblivion before letting her rise again.

It was the most amazing experience of synchronicity with another person he'd ever experienced. When she began to pant into his mouth, her movement increasing just a little as her orgasm shook her, his cock and balls answered her body's call, and with more reluctance than he'd ever felt, he had to break off the kiss to lift her off his erection before the swelling formed and it was too late. As if she could read his mind, she slid off his lap and took his cock into her mouth, the single touch of wet warmth and a velvety tongue all it took before he began to spurt inside her mouth, long, slow pulses of release shooting down her throat that went on so long he felt lightheaded at the end of it.

When he was finished, she climbed back onto his lap and they sat, arms around each other, while they waited for racing hearts to slow, for breathing to catch up.

It was, he realized in amazement, the most perfect moment of his life.

* * * * *

From the time they left his house that afternoon, all the way across the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway to his parents' house in Mandeville, Summer lay with her head back against the headrest, eyes closed, and seemed to doze. He couldn't help a

concerned glance at her as they drove up the long driveway to his parents' place. He reached for her hand, and placed it on his thigh.

A sweet smile crossed her face as she squeezed his leg. "Hey, stud."

He grinned at the name then lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed the knuckles, one by one.

She amazed him. She captivated him. Every moment he spent with her, the pain of knowing she could one day walk away from him cut into him a little deeper.

After the couch, he'd picked her up and taken her to bed where he'd made love to her for hours. Slow. Intense. Every touch one of almost unbearable pleasure. How could she possibly think she wasn't enough for him—for any man? No other woman had even come close to inspiring the emotions in him that Summer could.

Times like this the thought of her leaving one day made him want to take that final step and tie her to him. It nearly killed him to feel the knot swelling in his dick when they fucked, the awesome rush that accompanied it, and have to pull out of her at the final moment. He knew she felt cheated every time he did it, so why couldn't he just let go of the bloody, devastating memories of Lucy and Link, and the fear that it could happen to him, and commit to her? He'd carried that baggage around so long now it was like a choking rope around his neck.

Her hand left his and reached up to stroke over the side of his face. He captured her hand and glanced over at her, laying a kiss on her palm as he did.

"Stop thinking about it, honey," she said with a brief smile. "You're trying so hard to work it out, you're giving *me* a headache. Whatever is meant to happen, will happen."

Even though he wasn't sure whether she was referring to Brian, or them, he nodded.

As he pulled the car to a stop, Ziggy gripped the steering wheel tight and took a deep breath.

"Come on, silly. It won't be that bad," Summer said with a soft chuckle.

He groaned. "You haven't met my mother. Trust me—it will be that bad."

"I promise not to give her the wrong idea about us. No nibbling you on the ear...no kissing you..." She ran a finger over the bulge in his jeans that was showing noticeable signs of being interested. God, he'd just fucked her nonstop for most of the afternoon. It should be limp as a noodle. "No inappropriate touching..." Just for good measure, it stiffened under her fingers, so that she giggled.

He palmed her face in his hand, taking a quick taste of the temptation of her lips. "You are a witch."

He pulled back with a frown on his face, and passed a hand over her forehead. "You okay, Summer? You feel a bit warm."

"I'm fine," she reassured him. "A little tired, maybe, but you wore me out."

"I could always reverse out of here and take you back home to bed."

She laughed. "To rest, I suppose."

"Naturally. I can help with that too."

"No way. And give up a chance to watch you sweat in front of your mom?" She shook her head, and reached for the door handle. "Come on. This should be fun."

"You have a very, very odd sense of humor," he grumbled as he got out the car.

* * * * *

"For a client, he's very...*attentive* to her, don't you think?"

Crissy gave a quick look at her mother-in-law trying to peer unobtrusively out the kitchen window that opened onto the outdoor pergola, then finished rinsing the dinner plates and stacking them in the dishwasher.

"Mom. Don't go there," Crissy warned. "I recognize that look in your eye."

Violet Trudeau turned, her eyes lit up with humor. "And what look is that, dear?"

Crissy laughed. "Don't pull that innocent line with me. You know what I'm talking about." Crissy tilted her head at the window.

Pale orange rays blending to a rich mauve from the setting sun filtered through the fluttering leaves on the crepe myrtles visible through the window. But illuminated against the pastel backdrop sat half a dozen people still talking and laughing—Ziggy among them. "Ziggy will only get his back up if you push. Just let things happen."

"But look at them! He hasn't left her side all afternoon."

He was Crissy's poor, besotted brother-in-law. Vi was right—times like this, Ziggy reminded her very much of her husband. Randy was every bit as protective of her. Especially now that she was pregnant again. She smiled with affection at the sight of Randy cradling a sleeping Amber in the crook of his arm. Their little girl sure was the apple of her daddy's eye.

Her eyes traveled then to Ziggy, sitting next to him. The two brothers were so alike in some ways it was scary. Her mind cast back to before Amber was born. When she'd been in Summer's position and Randy had been protecting her. Now that she knew Randy, what he'd been through at that time, she could understand what was driving his brother. From the looks of them together, Ziggy had met his mate in Summer, that was for sure. Poor Ziggy hadn't quite caught up with that fact, though. At least Randy had known, and *she'd* been the one who'd lagged behind in the realization.

"Ziggy's protecting her, Mom. He has to stick close."

"And for goodness sake," Vi continued, "when was the last time you saw him laugh so much?"

"You forget, I haven't known him all *that* long."

"Trust me, it's a rare occurrence. No, it's only a matter of time," Vi concluded with a knowing look.

"Mom. Protection. Remember. That's the story and he's sticking to it. And until he says something else —"

"Oh really, sweetie. I wasn't born yesterday. What about all that touching?"

Crissy had to admit, there'd been a lot of that. What made her want to smile was that she doubted Ziggy even realized he was doing it. Little touches on Summer's arm, rubbing her back, even swallowing up her tiny hand in between his big mitts more than once. Summer was doing her best to ignore it, but the reality was that Ziggy hadn't been more than an arm's length away from her all afternoon.

"Look, Mom," Crissy said as she turned a concerned face to Vi. "From what Randy's told me about his brother, Ziggy needs to come to this decision on his own. Pushing him will only make him back away."

"Who back away from what?" asked Crissy's cousin Georgie as she came into the kitchen.

"Ziggy back away from Summer," filled in Crissy.

Georgie snorted. "No way. That boy is hooked. He just won't admit it. Typical man. Can't see the nose in front of his face."

Crissy and Vi shared a smile as they watched Georgie hike herself up onto the countertop in front of the kitchen window, jean-clad legs swinging, so that she had a clear view outside—at one man in particular from the looks of it.

"Just the men, dear?" asked Vi, sharing a knowing smile with Crissy behind Georgie's back.

Georgie turned around as she caught the teasing tone in Vi's voice. "What? Me?" She huffed. "No way! Especially considering the only unattached male out there is Chad. Mr. Bossy Boots? Not on your life."

"Chad? Bossy?" Crissy couldn't help a laugh breaking free. "We talking about the same Chad? He's about as easygoing a guy as I've ever met."

Georgie looked incredulous. "That laid-back, bad-boy image has you all fooled, hasn't it?" She shook her head. "Nope. He's his father's son, all right. I pity the poor woman who ends up with him. Personally, I don't know how Isabel's stood it all these years. All that macho, I'm-the-man-you're-the-little-woman crap."

Georgie slapped her leg and started laughing.

"What?" asked Crissy.

"Chadwick. Silly boy." Without taking her eyes from the scene outside, she carried on, "He doesn't move away from that girl, Zig's going to have him strung up by the short and curlies any second."

"What are you talking about?" asked Crissy, moving to the window too.

Chad had squatted down next to Summer, talking to her and laughing as they shared a joke. A joke that Ziggy obviously wasn't getting. He'd moved closer to Summer—if that were possible considering they were in two separate seats. He had an

arm around her waist, and his head right next to hers, rubbing it while he shot Chad a definite “hands off” look.

“Dumb twit,” said Georgie with a frown.

“Who?” asked Vi.

“Chad, Vi.” She turned an exasperated eye on her. “Stick with the program, darlin’. Chad’s trying to muscle in on Zig’s little *sugah*. And Zig’s about to smash his face in. This is getting good. Go, Zig!”

“Oh,” said Vi, throwing a discreet wink to a smiling Crissy at Georgie’s use of Chad’s favorite endearment – even down to the twang he used.

“Uh-oh.”

“What?” Crissy and Vi both asked, looking back out the window.

“Must be too much for Summer. She’s making a getaway.”

As they watched, Summer turned to walk away, only to be stopped by Ziggy’s hands on her shoulders as he stood too. He said something, she shook her head, lifted her hand toward his cheek, but then dropped it. More words transpired before Ziggy nodded, and let her go.

Crissy and Vi looked at each other curiously as the door opened a minute later and Summer stepped inside.

“Room for one more?”

Vi smiled broadly. “Hello, dear. Join us. We’re just talking about men.” She wrapped an arm around Summer’s shoulder and hugged her.

“Oh good. That sounds more my style than the conversation outside.”

“Which was?” asked Georgie.

Summer gave a knowing wink. “A woman never kisses and tells.”

“And which one were you kissing, Summer?” asked Vi.

Crissy rolled her eyes and laughed. “Give it up, Mom.” She turned to Summer. “She’s incorrigible, as you can see.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Trudeau. Ziggy and I are just friends.”

Vi gave her a motherly hug. “Just call me Vi, dear. And sometimes that’s the best place to start.”

Summer laughed too. “Is that how it was for you and Mr. Trudeau?”

Crissy snickered. “No Trudeau man can wait that long. So yes, prove me wrong, Mom. We’d all love to hear what the old warhorse was like in his younger years.”

“His name’s Rod, Summer.” She released Summer then turned to her daughter-in-law. “And you’re right, Crissy...” Vi glanced out at her husband, now talking intently with his two sons and Chad, and a misty look came over her face. “The friendship part was a little...delayed...”

Her words petered out as she watched her husband, a small smile lighting her eyes, her mouth tipping up at the corners.

Crissy glanced at Georgie and Summer and winked. "Ah, Mom... Earth to Vi. You there?"

"What?" She looked around. "Oh, sorry. No, Rod literally swept me off my feet. I don't think I found out his surname until we were getting married. He wasn't much of a one for...ah...talking."

"Looks like his number-one son took after him," offered Georgie.

"Oh, I don't know," grinned Summer. "Ziggy talks a lot."

Georgie shook her head. "Pillow talk don't count."

Summer blushed and turned to Vi. "Actually, could you show me where the bathroom is? I'd like to freshen up a bit."

"Certainly, dear. Down the hall, second door on your left."

Summer walked away, and Vi frowned. "Did she look a bit piqued to you? She's a little flushed."

"Probably just the heat," offered Crissy. "I know I'm feeling it."

"Pregnancy will do that to you." Vi smiled fondly at her. "But it's worth it, isn't it? Ask Izzy when she gets here. All her babies were delivered in the heat of summer. Poor dear. I thought she was going to shoot George when she found out about the last one. She threatened to leave him and go and live in Alaska." Vi looked at her watch then lifted her head, as if listening. "In fact, they said they'd be here about seven-thirty. That sounds as if it could be them now."

They watched Vi walk out the back door and head for her husband. The normally stern visage softened noticeably as his diminutive wife neared. Georgie hopped down off the counter. "He's not all bad, you know," she said to Crissy.

"Who? Rod?"

"No. Chad. But there are times he treats me like a kid sister. Drives me nuts."

Crissy laughed. "Oh, sweetie, you are so wrong. Trust me, he doesn't think of you like a kid – sister or otherwise. You better keep an eye on him. He sure keeps his eye on you."

"Chad? He acts like I annoy the crap out of him on a regular basis."

"Still –"

Both of them turned at the loud crash and following thump that came from down the hall then looked back at each other.

"Summer?" Georgie said and took off down the hall, Crissy following along behind her a little slower.

When Georgie opened the door, it was to find Summer in a heap on the floor, a blue china dish holding fancy soaps she must have knocked on her way down, lying in pieces on the floor.

"Is she okay?" asked Crissy, looking over her petite cousin's shoulder.

"I think she might have fainted." Georgie moved the hair off Summer's face and they both noted the sweat beading on her brow. "She does feel pretty warm. I think she's got a fever, Cris. Better get Ziggy."

"Yeah, and stand back and watch the show."

"What do you mean?" Georgie asked.

"You'll see." Crissy turned and backed out the bathroom.

After soothing a fussing Amber back to sleep, Randy continued stroking her head as he watched his father and brother. The two of them were so alike—quiet, intense, not much for talking. Which was why he was so surprised at the turn the conversation had taken—he just wasn't sure it was the wisest thing to do.

One thing he knew about Ziggy, his brother did things in his own sweet time.

Randy rolled his eyes when his father asked, "So what are you going to do about Summer, son?"

"Just what I'm doing, Dad. Protecting her until we catch the bastard who's after her."

"And then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"You just going to let her go?"

Ziggy slumped down in his seat. "Hell, I don't know. That's up to Summer."

"You given any thought to mating her?"

"Mom put you up to this?"

"Your mother has her own agenda, one I quite wisely stay right out of."

"Look, Dad, I've told you before that I have no intention of taking a mate. If Summer decides to leave once this is all over, then that's her choice."

Randy shook his head at his brother's comment. As if Ziggy would let any other man touch her. Hell, Chad had nearly burned on the spot from the look Ziggy gave him. And he was only teasing her about something.

"Don't let the past hold you back, son. That's all I'm saying."

"Good. Thanks for the advice," Ziggy grumbled. "I'll be sure to take it under consideration."

Randy was distracted when Crissy came hurrying over to them.

"What's up, babe?"

"It's Summer." She looked at Ziggy. "I think she fainted. She's—"

"She what?" Ziggy jumped up so fast his chair tipped back and rolled away a couple of feet.

Amber woke up with a start, hands flailing, her little face puckering up as she launched a loud, startled cry. Randy tipped her over his shoulder and tried to shush her, but she wasn't about to be placated.

"She fainted, Ziggy. Maybe she's coming down with some—" Ziggy was gone before she could even finish the sentence. Crissy raised her eyebrows at Randy.

"Here, give the little darlin' to her grandpa," said Rod, holding out his hands. "I'll take her for a walk. Settle her down right quick."

"I know what you're thinking, but don't go there, honey," Randy warned as he handed his squalling daughter to his father then pulled his wife onto his lap. "Not all the Trudeau men are as sharp as I was—I knew you were mine the minute I laid eyes on you."

"But convincing me was such fun, yes?" Crissy leaned over to kiss him. "Poor Ziggy. He's so gone over Summer. All this baloney about 'protecting' her. Sure, that's a priority for him, but the man's in love."

Randy's grin vanished and a pensive look replaced it. "Zig has some good reasons for not wanting to mate with anyone."

Crissy looked a bit sad. "Lucy and Link?"

Randy nodded. "What he saw when they found Lucy...and then being the one to find Link like that... He'll be able to put it behind him one day, babe. He just needs to do it in his own time. The right woman could help him with that."

"He's found the right woman. I just hope Summer's still around when he gets it through his thick skull."

Randy looked surprised. "She's leaving?"

Crissy played with Randy's collar while she considered her answer. "He's sleeping with her. But he won't mate her. Most women would see that as a rejection. And no woman who loves a man can take that indefinitely."

He ignored the obvious answer. "How do you know he won't mate her?"

"Summer and I had a nice little chat earlier—when Ziggy left her alone for ten minutes. She didn't come out and say it, exactly, but she's in love with him. She's got that glow."

"Summer's in love with Zig?"

"You can't tell? But..."

"But?"

"He won't come inside her."

"Hell! She told you that?"

"She was concerned. Who else is there for her to ask? She knew he was a werewolf. Wondered if it was some crazy lupine thing. You and I both know what he's avoiding. Which means Ziggy also knows in his subconscious what she is to him."

"Maybe she feels that leaving him will give him time and space to decide what he wants. If he wants her."

Randy frowned. "If she really is his mate, it'll kill him when she goes."

"Well, ultimately it will be up to Ziggy if she stays or goes, Randy. She only asked me for advice about the mating. I hope I didn't say the wrong thing. You wolfie guys are not the usual beast we're used to dealing with."

He pulled her closer to kiss her warmly. "Nope, we're better."

She tried to stand, but he kept hold of her, refusing to let her up. "In some areas, I guess so," she said with an air of nonchalance.

Randy frowned. "Excuse me? You care to explain that comment?"

"Gotcha!" she said, and kissed him. "You guys are so damn easy..."

"Minx!" he growled as he lifted her off his lap and slapped her bottom.

* * * * *

"What did you do to her?" Chad asked Georgie as he raced into the bathroom after Ziggy.

"I didn't do anything to her, you jackass. I just found her —"

"Take it outside, you two," cut in Ziggy. "God, give her some breathing room!" He glared at the number of curious bodies currently filling the small bathroom.

The room emptied until it was just him and Summer. He was still trying to tamp down on the panic that had torn through him when he'd seen Summer slumped on the floor. Making her more comfortable on his lap, he took the damp washcloth that his Aunt Izzy handed him, giving her a grateful look.

"I'm pretty sure it's just a dose of flu or something, Zig. Lots of fluids, keep the temperature down, and she should be back to normal in no time." Izzy turned and shooed them all out of the bathroom. "Vi? Grab me a thermometer, sis. And some aspirin or ibuprofen too, please. It will help bring down the temperature."

Izzy crouched down beside Ziggy and ran a hand over Summer's hair. "She'll be right as rain. Don't worry. After so many kids, I think I've seen just about every bug and virus around."

"I want to take her home."

"Sure. Just give the medicine a little bit of time to kick in first. She'll be more comfortable then. Call your doctor once she's settled, just to make sure."

"Thanks, Aunt Izzy." Even though he'd been a medic in the Forces, for some reason he felt totally at a loss where Summer was concerned.

He wiped the washcloth over her flushed face. He'd noticed she seemed warm earlier. Why hadn't he taken her straight home? "Come on, honey. Open those beautiful eyes for me."

It felt as though his heart started beating again when her lashes fluttered, then the lids lifted slowly, although the eyes, as he expected, were glassy, feverish.

"Ziggy?" she croaked. "What happened?"

"You fainted. Looks like you're coming down with something. Probably that rain dance last night didn't help things," he said with a gentle tease.

"I'm sorry." She moved to sit up, but winced and grabbed her head.

"You've got a bit of a bump on your head, too. Just take it easy. We'll be heading home in a little bit." Which reminded him...

"Izzy, could you give Randy a yell for me?"

"Sure, darlin'."

His aunt left the bathroom, her voice carrying as she called out for his brother.

In a moment or two, Randy stuck his head around the door.

"What's up, bro?"

"Could you take care of things in the office for the next week or so?"

"Sure. Why?"

Ziggy nodded down at Summer, hoping his brother took the hint.

Randy's eyebrows rose before understanding dawned. "Oh. Oh, right. Ah, got it. No rush. We'll be okay."

Summer struggled to sit. "No, Ziggy. You can't do that. I'll be fine—"

"No you won't. It's okay, the guys can still look after the business without me there."

"But Ziggy..."

"No discussion. It's settled. Thanks, Randy."

Not looking where he was going, Randy almost ran into Chad coming inside as he was about to head out the back door.

Chad pulled him up, grabbing his arm to stop him. "Hey, man, what's up?"

"Hell if I know. Zig's taking a week off. Asked me to run the office while he's gone."

"Yeah, right."

"No, I'm serious."

"You're shitting me! Why?"

Randy tossed his head in the direction of the bathroom. "Why do you think?"

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle!"

"In this crazy family, *anything's* possible," said a derisive Georgie from behind him.

Before she could duck away, Chad grabbed Georgie and pulled her around in front of him, his arm around her waist anchoring her to him, in spite of the halfhearted tussle

she put up. He licked up the side of her neck, causing her to giggle. "Now don't be like that, *chère*. You're just jealous because you're stuck with that boring Chuck Norris-wannabe boyfriend. Anytime you want to live on the wild side a little, you just let me know."

Georgie snorted. "I'm allergic to cats, remember?"

"I don't hear you sneezing, *chère*. Maybe you're not allergic to me."

Randy rolled his eyes. "You two really should get a room."

"Who should get a room?" asked Vi, pushing her son out of the way.

Randy almost laughed as Chad and Georgie sprang apart as if they'd been burned before Vi could see them. Oh yeah, another one was gonna bite the dust anytime soon... Stifling the chuckle, he glared down at his diminutive mother. "Never mind, Ma."

Vi laughed and patted his cheek. "Never mind, nothing. I'll find out." She looked up the hall toward the bathroom. "Ziggy and Summer okay?"

"Yeah, Zig's taking the week off to look after her."

Her mouth dropped open. "Ziggy? Taking time off *work*?" She rubbed her hands together. "Perfect!"

"Jesus, Ma! Give it a rest..."

Chapter Twelve

Throwing one leg out to stretch it, Ziggy shifted on the wicker chair, then stood. There was only so much sitting a man could do. And he'd done more than his share the past few days. He cut a glance inside at Summer. She was murmuring in her sleep, a result of the fever that still worried him, but most of it was unintelligible babble. If the doctor he'd called in hadn't reassured him the virus just needed to take its course, he'd be sweating himself.

He'd seen injuries that would make most people turn pale as a ghost, but looking after Summer left him feeling about as useless as tits on a bull. He just couldn't stand to see her sick, knowing there was nothing he could do but make her comfortable. And wait.

Waiting wasn't his strong suit, he'd discovered.

But he'd sponged her, given her as much water as she could take those infrequent moments she was awake, fed her the soup his mom sent over when she felt she could keep in down.

That was fine. He didn't care what he had to do, or how often. It was the inactivity, the waiting the rest of the time that was killing him.

Moon was almost full, he noticed. Wisps of clouds floated across the face of it after the earlier rain had cleared. Stars were out. It was a perfect night for a run. In fact, it was just what he needed. Things had been quiet. Summer was sleeping. Maybe a quick one...

He walked over to the bed.

Summer had rolled over on her side, dragging the sheet with her so that it was twisted around her torso. Gently, taking care not to wake her, he tugged on the cotton until it came free then settled her more comfortably. Apart from a small murmur, she didn't stir. He frowned when he noticed how tired and pale her face looked.

He dampened the cloth once more, and wrung it out before patting at the sweat on her brow.

On his way out the door, he picked up the small radio off the padded chest at the foot of the bed.

"Slick?"

"No, man. He's been gone about half an hour." Chad. "You need him?"

"Hell, is it that time already?" Ziggy checked the clock on the bedside table. The men switched shifts every four hours. Four-thirty. Where had the night gone? "No, I just need you to move in close. Things have been quiet and I really need to go for a quick run. Stretch the kinks out."

"Sure thing. I'll be there in two."

It was just as well it was Chad, thought Ziggy, as he waited on his cousin. Not all the guys at Were Watching knew their employers weren't exactly what they seemed. At least this saved him having to run off a ways before he changed.

Chad sauntered up the steps leading to the veranda off the bedroom where Ziggy waited.

"No movement out there?" asked Ziggy as he unbuttoned his shirt.

"Quiet as a mouse."

Ziggy stepped out of his jeans, draping them and the shirt over the wicker chair he'd sat in previously. Naked, he turned to step down from the verandah, but paused when Chad spoke.

"So, under what circumstances am I allowed in the house?"

The grin on Chad's face brought out a tired chuckle from Ziggy.

"If the guy who's after her comes close, cover her with your body to protect her if you have to. Apart from that, you go near Summer and, boy, you're gonna be the first eunuch pussycat."

"Ouch!" Chad grabbed his crotch protectively. "Message received, loud and clear."

"Knowing you, somehow I doubt it. I won't be long."

"I'll be here."

"You'd better be," Ziggy threw over his shoulder before he changed, smooth skin becoming fur, bones lengthening, strengthening and face altering into a long muzzle before a dark amber wolf dropped to all fours and raced away through the sheltering thicket of trees that bordered the backyard.

As he ran, Ziggy relished the freedom this small respite afforded him. He felt enervated, alive. Night scents assailed him—damp earth, the rotting undergrowth, the heavy fragrance of magnolias and jasmine carried to him on the fluttering breeze. He inhaled deeply, feeling the tension leech out of his body.

A score of animals shared the night with him—tree frogs, the constant chorus of crickets, the odd raccoon and fox. It was times like this he loved being able to shift to his wolf form. Things were so much less complex, decisions as simple as eating, sleeping, fucking...

He looked up at the moon. Time to head back. He turned back toward the house. Summer. She'd never be like him. Never know the freedom he had. Maybe the answer was to find a female of his own kind. But that would mean letting Summer go when this was all over.

Couldn't they just enjoy what they had? Did it have to be all or nothing? Would she be satisfied with that? And was it being fair to either of them?

Maybe when they'd caught the man hunting for Summer...maybe then they could sort it out. But now? Now he just couldn't think past keeping her safe. Keeping her alive.

Coiling the energy in his back legs, he sprinted the remaining distance, feeling the pleasant burn in his muscles, racing the final mile to the house.

When he padded up to the verandah, Chad rose from the steps where he'd been sitting.

"Feel better?"

Ziggy nodded.

"Cool. I'll get back to prowling then. Later, man."

Still in wolf form, Ziggy stepped inside. He didn't know why he didn't change, except that this side of him needed to be with Summer, touch her, as much as the man did.

Front paws up on the bed, he sprang off his back feet, landing softly. Settling down behind her, he placed a paw on her hip, and proceeded to lick along her arm, her neck, her shoulder.

"Ziggy?" a soft voice asked.

In response, he nuzzled her cheek with his nose, pulling back to see her eyes still closed, but a wan smile on her face.

When she shifted, rolling onto her back, her arm going around his back to rub and pat, he laid his head on her stomach and watched her, checking her breathing, satisfied she was comfortable. At that, he shut his eyes.

* * * * *

Voices woke her from a light sleep. Familiar voices. One was Ziggy—she'd recognize that deep bass anywhere. The other one though...

Small flutters of panic started to go off in her brain as she recognized the man sharing the step with Ziggy.

More disconcerting was the way the man and Ziggy seemed to know each other. Very well, if the light joking and camaraderie between them was any indication.

Brian's brother...what the hell was he doing here?

Fragments of the dream she'd been having began to filter back. Or what she'd thought was a dream.

Him standing there in the doorway to the living room. Watching her. His expression closed, his stance silent but bristling with energy and power.

Just watching.

And waiting.

For what?

Confusion filled her. Why was Ziggy talking to him? About what? Her?

What did it matter, her mind screamed at her.

She had to get out.

Leave.

She sat up in bed, too quickly, judging from the way her head pounded and the room spun. She sucked in deep breaths, waiting for the lightheadedness to pass. A breeze blew over her skin, and a small shiver made her realize she was naked.

Embarrassment colored her cheeks, the heat of a flush traveling up her body.

Putting that wasted emotion aside—Brian's brother had seen and touched her in every way, including the Biblical—she moved her legs over the side of the bed, panting at the drain on her energy even that small movement took. Action was forced through limbs left sluggish and weakened from the virus. She braced herself before attempting to stand. A swallowed curse left her lips as she caught her toe in her sandal poking out from underneath the bed.

She tore her foot free, shaking it to drop the leather strap.

She had to go. If his brother was here, Brian was sure to be close too, which meant that Ziggy was in danger. But if she wasn't there...

No, no time to waste.

Leaning on the furniture on the way, she stumbled to the walk-in wardrobe. With barely a glance, she grabbed the first thing she found, an old T-shirt of Ziggy's, and her jeans that were thrown over the lip of the dirty clothes hamper.

Hair fell in her face, and she brushed it away impatiently.

Move, Summer, she berated herself.

The shirt was easy. Arms in the sleeves, over her head. Jeans in hand, she stopped and closed her eyes. Her head was pounding like the Dutch National Clog-Stomping team was having a hoedown. She wiped at the sweat gathering on her upper lip. Hot day. Must be near midday. Her stomach growled at her. How long since she'd eaten? Not that she was hungry—food was the last thing she felt like.

She'd eat when she got to Rayna.

A shiver ran over her, pebbling the skin with gooseflesh. Leaning heavily on the doorjamb, her eyes fluttered shut as she tried to lift one leg into the jeans. Three tries and she got it. Now the other one. She was panting heavily by the time she got the second leg in her jeans, and had to pause before she had the energy to pull them up.

She was so weak. And tired. But she had to keep pushing herself.

Ziggy was in danger.

Her stomach lurched as she tried to let go of the wooden doorframe. Blood pounded through her head, her vision speckled with white spots.

No time...to waste...must go...now...

She took one step toward the bed, then a second. Stars burst in her head, and then she was falling, her body landing with a dull thump on the floor before the lights went out.

* * * * *

"Well, I'd better head out," said Clive. "I'll have those reports for you first thing in the morning."

"Great. Thanks for filling in for Smooth. His little lady is giving him some grief about the hours he's been working. Thinks he's got another woman on the side. Guess he needed to smooth some ruffled feath—" Ziggy stopped, turning his head in the direction of the house. "Did you hear that?"

"What?" asked Clive.

"Like a...I don't know... a thump."

"Nope. You want me to stay while you check it out?"

"If you wouldn't mind."

Ziggy turned and went into the bedroom through the French doors, Clive following.

His heart locked in his chest when he noticed the empty bed.

Until he saw the bare foot.

His heart started beating again when he saw Summer, crumpled into a tiny bundle on the floor.

"Awww, baby," he said as he picked her up and sat on the bed, checking her over. From her even breathing, she looked to be sleeping. Had she been sleepwalking?

"You stay here. I'll check the rest of the house," offered Clive. He raced out of the room as Ziggy sat on the bed, Summer on his lap.

He brushed her hair back, and shook his head. "Just where the hell did you think you were going, sweet thing?" he asked her sleeping form. She was still a little warm. But at least her color was coming back. According to the doctor yesterday, she should be over the worst of it. Now he had to wonder. And why was she dressed? Surely she hadn't been thinking of getting up already?

He was still pondering the answers to that when Clive came back in the room.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Nothing. She okay?"

"Yeah. Not quite sure what happened. I'll ask her when she wakes up. It's very odd though."

"Fevers make people do strange things, Zig." Clive scratched his head. "Take care of your little lady, buddy. A little thing like her doesn't deserve the shit this guy's putting her through. Anyway, I'm outta here. Smooth drove up while I was checking out front, so you're covered."

"Thanks, Clive," he said. "Later, man."

After Clive left, Ziggy sat there cuddling Summer. When he absently kissed her forehead, she stirred, moaning. Looking closer, he noticed the bump on her head.

"Well, I can see which part of you hit the floor first. Guess that explains the noise I heard, huh? You so eager to get away from me, honey?" He laid her back on the bed and shook his head. "Silly goose."

"Right, let's get these clothes off you."

* * * * *

The extra shifts must be getting to him, Chad thought as a yawn hit him. Either that or he was getting old.

He pushed open the door to Were Watching. Expecting to see an empty waiting room, he was surprised to see Randy filling the doorway to Ziggy's office, frown on his face to match the hands on his hips.

He rubbed his eyes and looked again.

"Now that's just damn scary."

"What?" asked Randy.

"You. The whole Ziggy thing you've got goin' on there." Chad shuddered. "You look so...so serious. Must be the seat you're sittin' in." He nodded behind Randy at Ziggy's office. "And one Ziggy in the family is more than enough."

"You're nuts, Chad."

"I'm jus' sayin'..."

"Come in. I've got some news." Randy turned and reentered the office, flopping down in Ziggy's chair, running a hand through his hair. "I tell ya, I don't know how big brother does this all the time. Running this place is like being warden at a funny farm. Some of the requests that come in..."

"Yeah?"

"Let's just say there are some crazy people out there, and leave it at that. But that's not what I wanted to show you. I've been in touch with Nicole today."

"Your ex-partner?"

"Yeah. I called in a favor, and asked her to run Brian Ridgeway's photo and MO through the system. See what came up, if anything."

"I take it we hit pay dirt?"

"And then some." Randy picked up a sheet of paper off the desk and handed it to Chad. "Seems Summer's ex has been a busy boy."

Chad scanned down the page, his eyebrow raising. "I knew about the three priors—Steve found those too." He tapped the bottom of the page. "Didn't know about these, though. You told Zig?"

"Not yet. Only picked it up off the fax a little while ago."

Chad read over the MO's of the attacks. A common thread ran through all of them. Similar to Summer's, but to a much lesser degree. "How sure are they Ridgeway is the perp?"

"The first two victims didn't see their kidnapper. Blindfolded the entire time. The last one, though. He just may have screwed up. Seems he wanted the blindfold off for that one, so she could enjoy the full 'experience'."

"That doesn't make sense. He's obviously seeking an outlet for his obsession with Summer. Which would be why the first two were blindfolded. They were a tool—nothing else. So why let the last one see?"

Randy picked up another piece of paper and flicked it over to Chad. "Take a look at that and tell me what you think."

"Oh, fuck." Apart from the bruising and abrasions, the face that looked back at him could have been Summer's younger sister. "She gonna be okay?"

"In the hospital. They've got a guard on her 'round the clock. She'll likely recover physically a lot quicker than she will psychologically. Poor kid. She was a virgin before Ridgeway got his slimy hands on her."

"That bastard!"

"Agreed. But at least that proves he's in the area. The first one, though, was San Francisco. Interesting, according to Nicole, that the vic in that one, although she didn't see his face, nailed him on the voice. Old flame, perhaps?"

"Hmmm...maybe," considered Chad. "Although that's a bit risky. Maybe someone he had a bit of a hankerin' for who gave him the brush off? You know, like revenge."

"Guess so. Next two have been in N'awlins, though. And whereas that San Fran one was six months ago, there's a big gap between it and these next two. A month apart? He's getting edgy. First one was grabbed in the alley outside an uptown bondage club. That second one, though, was picked up as she ducked out for a cigarette during her dinner break in the alley next to the bar she was working at—early evening."

"Wrong place, wrong time for her. He's getting desperate."

"Look, you think you could run by Rico's and Marcus' clubs tonight? Take copies of his photo with you to leave with them. Ridgeway is cruising, but I've got a feeling he could show up in either of them—maybe not Rico's so much, but Marcus' place is known for foxy ladies out for a good time. And tell them to get their bouncers to keep an eye out. Even if Ridgeway cruises past, we want to know about it."

"What about the NOPD?"

"Nicole's pissed on that one. They're short-staffed—*again*—so it's only her and her new partner so far. She wants to be kept in the loop though—fair exchange of information."

"Just so you know, Randy, Zig ain't gonna want to take him alive. You realize that."

"Yeah, kinda figured that might be the case." Randy ran his fingers through his hair in agitation. "Look, if it does go to Shitsville, don't tell me the goddamn details. Nicole's gonna be all over me with questions if a dead Ridgeway turns up, and she can read me like a fucking book."

"Well, you two were partners for how long?"

"Too damn long," Randy said and grinned.

* * * * *

"I'm fine." Summer rolled her eyes at Ziggy. She kept patting his arm, the one that had her shackled to him, until he released her—reluctantly—so that she could slide off his lap, then stood. "And I have work to do. Don't want the boss to fire me." She winked at Rico.

"You don't need two jobs," grumbled Ziggy. Why the hell she felt she had to come back to work at Rico's was beyond him. Hell, even Rico had been surprised when she'd turned up. "And besides, you're still recovering."

"Ziggy, I've been over it for days now. Time to put the nursemaid to bed, and get back to being the big bad wolf again. I kinda miss him."

"He's still here, honey. Just be careful in whose direction you wiggle that cute ass, or you'll see him jump right out at you."

"Ooooooh, scary!" Her eyes flew wide open, but she struggled to stifle a chuckle.

"Summer..." he warned, trying hard to keep his face stern.

She straddled his lap, a leather-clad leg on either side of his, and wrapped her arms around his neck. "But what big teeth you have..." she whispered in his ear.

Small teeth nipped up the side of his neck.

"And what big eyes you have..."

She sat back a little and batted her eyelashes at him. For the first time at the club she wasn't wearing the mask...or the wig, for that matter.

Her nose nuzzled his cheek, her tongue flicking in his ear.

"And what an amazing tongue you have..."

The feel of her hot breath and wet tongue gave his erection an unneeded spike. "Okay, that's it," he said with a laugh, spinning her around to place her facedown over his lap. She squealed when he spanked her lightly a few times. When he let her up she was flushed, her eyes dancing. Damn, she looked gorgeous.

"Go on. Do your 'hostess' thing. Maybe I can talk the boss into letting you off early. Then we can go home." He spanked her once more for good measure as she walked away.

She took a few steps then turned around and blew him a kiss. "Later..." she said, and growled playfully at him.

The feeling of eyes boring into him hit him.

"Yeah?" he said to Rico, finally dragging his eyes away from Summer.

Rico cast him an appraising glance. "I must admit I'm surprised."

Confident for the time being that Summer was okay, Ziggy sat back and considered his friend. "Surprised? About what?"

"You. Summer."

"I know I'm going to regret asking this, but how so?"

Silence followed and lengthened at Ziggy's question. He looked curiously at Rico. Head cocked, the vamp seemed to be considering his words. Whatever. Ziggy didn't care. He caught Summer's eye on the other side of the club as she spoke to one of the doormen. And while she may have been talking to the other guy, her eyes remained on him. He didn't miss the cheeky kiss and wink she blew his way. An answering grin crept onto his face. For reasons he didn't want to analyze, the sight of that smile, knowing it was exclusively for him, made him feel closer to Summer than he'd ever felt to anyone. And they weren't even horizontal. He shook his head in mystification.

"She teases you."

Ziggy turned to Rico, belatedly wiping the grin off his face. "Huh? Oh yeah, she does, doesn't she."

"I've never seen you like this, Zig."

"Like what?"

"This relaxed with a woman, for starters. Can this be the same Dom who is normally stern and so in control almost to the point of brusqueness?"

"I'm on duty."

Rico laughed. "Of course. Good to see you enjoying your 'job' so much. Perhaps you're more like your brother than you realize."

Ziggy looked closely at Rico. Rico was heading somewhere with this line of conversation—a direction Ziggy wasn't sure he wanted to travel. Leastways not with the vamp. "What are you getting at? Sure, Summer's a great lady. We have fun. As for being relaxed, what of it? I'm watching her. She's covered."

"Summer is just a job? She's getting the same care, the same attention any other woman would you were protecting?"

Ziggy frowned at him, but didn't answer. So what if he was enjoying himself? Was there a law somewhere that said he couldn't?

"I know that look, Zig. Do you have any idea what you looked like earlier?"

"What do you mean?"

"When you came in. That was more than a bodyguard look..."

Ah, hell. Not again. "Leave it, man," Ziggy replied to Rico, his eyes never leaving Summer. "Trust me—you don't want to go there."

"You looked like you wanted to kill any other man for even looking at her. Look at you—even now, your eyes follow her the whole time."

"I'm protecting her, for God's sake!"

"Why won't you admit it? You're the same with her as Randy is with Crissy – that same lupine possessiveness. She's your mate. And you'll only hurt Summer by denying it. You think she doesn't know? She can –"

"Fucking hell!" Ziggy spun around to face him. "Drop it, Rico."

"Why? Embrace it. For chrissakes, let go of that rigid control for once and enjoy what life is offering you."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Oh, what an answer." Rico tapped his chin as his eyes narrowed. "You're scared. That's it, isn't it? You're not just denying it – you're scared to admit she's your mate."

"Rico..." he growled warningly.

"You've bitten her."

"No, not really. I haven't." Ziggy froze. He'd noticed the mark hadn't gone. But he hadn't really bitten her. So why was it still there?

"So there are degrees of biting? Amazing. Is that like there are degrees of being dead, or degrees of being pregnant?"

"Shut up, Rico."

Conflicted with thoughts about what it could mean, Ziggy frowned, worried now.

"I could smell the change in her when you sat down, Zig, even if I hadn't seen the nice little mark you left."

Shit! Maybe it wasn't too late. If he stayed away from her, and the effects were only temporary because he hadn't really bitten her... No. It had been a nibble rather than a bite, a little nip – nothing more. But then how could he protect her if he stayed away?

"So what's stopping you from taking the final step?" Rico asked, cutting into his tangled thoughts.

"What? None of your fucking business!"

"You could have it all, you idiot – a woman who loves you –"

"She doesn't love me –"

"Hell, Zig, open your fucking eyes! You've seen her act like that with other men? Trust other men like she trusts you? Ziggy, she could give you sons...daughters...and don't tell me you don't want them. All you furries are like baby-making machines, popping them out left, right and center –"

"Fucking shut up!" Ziggy gritted out, the desperation of a situation swirling out of his control make the anger rise inside him.

"I'll shut up when you damn well admit it."

"She is not my *mate*!" he bit out and stood.

"And that, *idiot*," snapped Rico, standing now too, "is called denial."

"Christ, you and my mother should get together. She's always at me to mate, settle down, have goddamn babies." He'd had enough. It was time he settled this thing with Rico once and for all. "How many times do I have to tell you?" he growled. "She. Is. Not. My. Mate. I have no mate. I have no intention of *taking* a mate, or having babies or any of the rest of that bullshit. Now or anytime in the foreseeable future. Summer or any other female. Sex is sex. Fucking is fucking. Some is just more enjoyable than the rest. End of story. Got it?"

He paused to take a breath, his pulse racing, and it wasn't until he stopped speaking and a blunt silence filled the gap, that he realized his voice had risen with his ire. But when Rico's normally dark eyes flicked briefly to a point over his shoulder and flared red for an instant, Ziggy's whole body tensed. He closed his eyes, almost dreading turning around.

He slid around on his seat, every muscle in his body taut.

Summer stood still, several paces away.

Chapter Thirteen

It was obvious she'd been on her way over to them. Obvious too from the way her hands were smoothing over her hips the way she did when she was nervous or unsettled—as if there were a chance in hell there were any wrinkles to smooth out of those skintight leather pants—that she'd heard his conversation with Rico, at least the last part. He didn't miss the little quiver in her bottom lip. The wan cast to her face. He might even have been fooled into thinking she was about to cry from the glassy eyes, but there was no doubting what emotion she was feeling—he could smell the anger pouring off her, it was so strong.

"Must you two discuss me like this, like I'm some...some bone to fight over?" she growled out in a harsh whisper as she came closer until she stood in front of them. Her fists clenched and released, clenched and released as fury burned through her. For all that she barely reached their chins, even with the high heels, there was no doubting she was willing to lay into either one of them if they opened their mouths. "You were obviously unaware, but half the club was listening in on your little spat. And now that you've effectively humiliated me, I'll thank you to keep your goddamn mouths *shut!*"

She lifted her chin then turned on her heel to walk away but stopped, swinging back to face Ziggy. "But for the record, you're perfectly correct," she said, her eyes shooting daggers, "sex is just sex. And one fuck—one man—really is the same as any other." At that she spun around and walked off.

"Fucking hell," whispered Rico.

Ziggy ignored the softly uttered expletive. His stomach was pitching and roiling as he sat stunned and watched her walk away. As real as a solid punch to the gut, such a profound sense of loss hit him that inside something wrenched. It wasn't only her words. This was more. The earlier warmth between them...it was gone, and in its place was a great yawning chasm of...nothing. Could their connection have been that strong? It was as though somebody had cut off a limb, so overwhelming was the feeling that something, some integral, essential part of him, was missing.

He stomped down on the urge to go to her, had to force himself to stay where he was. Christ, her safety—her life—was on the line. The last thing he needed to do was complicate it with a whole lot of emotion.

Looking for anything, anyone to vent his frustration on, instead he turned back to Rico and growled. "What? No smart-ass comment?"

Rico's face hardened. "No, I doubt there is little one could possibly say to that. At least now we know Summer is under no illusions as to the depth or focus of your attentions. So much simpler, yes? For one of you at least." Rico stood to walk away and paused. "So few of us are given the gift of finding that one person who can complete us.

I know—I've been looking for so many centuries that I've all but given up hope. At times the thought of spending even one more year on my own is more than I can contemplate. And yet you would throw away... I just hope you realize the monumental mistake you're making." Shaking his head, Rico turned and left, ducking behind the bar, to return to his office.

Now on his own, Ziggy sat there looking out over the club, searching the crowd for a glimpse of Summer and wondering what the hell had made him say the things he had.

He didn't want a mate. Or anything that came with it. The memory of Lucy and Link was never far enough away.

Of course, Summer wasn't Lucy, his rational mind told him, but just the same, it wasn't a risk he was prepared to take—with either of them.

He finally caught sight of her sitting with a Dom he didn't recognize, and his sub. She only stopped a moment before she stood, smiled briefly, then moved farther away.

The longer he sat there watching her, certain truths became clear. Truths he'd been fighting to deny, now was fighting to accept. This wasn't only about Summer's protection. That was just bullshit. It was a need. His need. Whenever she was in the same room, he had to look for her. Make eye contact at the very least. He'd much rather be touching her. Constantly.

He was so screwed.

All this time he'd avoided any form of attachment. He'd let no woman close, except for the brief time they spent fucking. And out of the blue he'd been bowled over by a tiny angel with a luscious ass he needed a whole lot more than he suspected she needed him.

Fear wasn't something he succumbed to very often. With fear came loss of control. But at that moment reality kicked him hard in the ass, and the fear of losing Summer threatened to choke him. Her life, his sanity, was hanging on a single unguarded moment—if the stalker took her, it would be the moment that would kill him as surely as it did her.

* * * * *

Swinging her shoes from her fingers, Summer walked past Ziggy and entered the house. She flopped on the sofa, the shoes on the floor beside her, not even bothering to reach over to flick on the lamp.

He pushed the door shut and looked over at her. She'd hardly said two words to him in the car. Not surprising. But she was thinking, and with Summer that was bad. When she got to thinking, any damn thing could happen.

The thing that had really hit him, driving home from Rico's, was that he couldn't tell *what* she was thinking. Not that he'd taken to reading minds, but this whole "brick wall" thing had made him realize just how much he'd become in tune with her.

Now there was just nothing and he felt like crap. Only his werewolf senses allowed him to recognize that her scent no longer held anger. What had replaced it though, he had no idea. Just a big, fat nothing. He headed into the kitchen.

"You want a coffee or something, Summer?"

"No, thanks."

He opened the fridge and grabbed a beer. He didn't often drink, but there were times... He popped the top but paused before lifting it to his lips. "Wine? A beer? Anything?" he called out.

When there was no answer, he stuck his head around the hanging cupboards that divided the two rooms and looked into the living room.

Empty.

"Summer?" He left the opened beer on the cupboard and went back into the living room. "Summer? Honey?"

A small noise in the bedroom got his attention.

He headed in there. He couldn't see Summer, but her new underwear was in a neat pile on the bed.

A small grunt in the walk-in closet had him moving in that direction. He got there just in time to see her nearly brain herself trying to get her old suitcase down off the top shelf. It slipped and almost landed on her head before he grabbed it and lifted it down.

"Is this what you wanted?" he said with a frown. Now what was she up to?

"Yes, thanks."

"Why didn't you just ask?"

"I didn't want to impose. On the bed, if you don't mind."

He looked at the bed, the suitcase in his hand, and tossed it to land on the soft mattress before turning back to see her taking things off coat hangers, and draping them over her arm.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm packing."

"I can *see* that. The question is why?"

"Sorry. You asked me what, not why—"

"Don't play word games!" He reached over to cover her hand as she laid the clothes in the suitcase. "What the fuck are you packing for?"

"There's no need to swear at me." She pulled her hand out from under his and headed back into the walk-in closet. Her voice sailed out behind her. "Well, I realized something tonight, Ziggy."

So maybe she wasn't angry anymore, but if not, what the hell was with this? He couldn't hide the scowl on his face as she came back out with an armful of shoes. She looked blankly at him for a moment, then turned around and headed back in there. When she returned she had a white plastic carry-bag in her hand.

"Better have something to put them in—don't want them making my clothes dirty."

He watched her stuffing the shoes in the bag, his unease growing by the second. "And?"

"And what?" Her brow creased in confusion.

In two strides he was next to her, pulling her hands out of the suitcase and slamming the lid closed. When she reached for it again, he leaned on it and waited until she looked at him.

"What did you realize?" he bit out.

She spun on her heel and walked into the bathroom.

"Sex really is just sex, Ziggy."

"Huh?"

"You're a wonderful lover, Ziggy, fantastic, in fact. But you made me understand that I can still be intimate with other men. I don't have to let what happened to me close me off from that part of my life."

"Oh really?" If that comment was leading where he thought it was leading... His body tensed when he followed her into the bathroom and saw her tossing toiletries and makeup into a floral plastic zip bag.

"Yes, thank you for that. It means more to me than you can know."

He reached to grab her but she was already gone, walking back into the bedroom.

"But me staying here isn't fair to you, Ziggy."

What the fuck? "I invited you, if you recall."

"Well, not really. You insisted—"

"Whatever! I'm guarding you. You're safe here."

"But it's not fair, don't you see?"

"No, I don't fucking see."

He yanked the toiletry bag out of her hand, tossed it in the suitcase, closed the lid again then put the whole lot under the bed. He turned to face her with his arms crossed. "Why don't you explain it to me?"

"Fine. You're putting your life in danger—and don't fool yourself that you won't become a target—and in repayment you get, what? A few good fucks? Well, I hope they were good for you... I mean, they were great for me—"

He grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to look at him. "Hang on. So you think that I'm guarding you and taking payment with your body?" A snarl escaped. "No, don't answer that. It's too fucking ridiculous..." He threw his hands up in the air. "This whole conversation is ridiculous."

Like a summer storm, he could feel the fury building into a dark, seething mass inside him. She was just going to leave? *It's been nice, but...* No. No fucking way. "And where the hell are you going to go? That madman is still out there."

She faced him with her hands on her hips, her little chin tipping up in defiance. "I have options. Same as I had options before I met you. My place is still empty. But that probably isn't the wisest choice."

"You got that right!"

As if he hadn't spoken, as though she were thinking out loud, she carried on. "Too hard to defend. I could leave town, of course, but he'd just follow me, and I'd be in the same position I'm in now."

"So that leaves —"

"So that leaves either Rico's, or there are a few lovely men at the club —"

A few lovely — "No! There are no 'lovely' men at the club. They're all sexual predators. They'd chew you up and spit out the pieces."

"Don't be silly. They all know me. They know Rico would kill them if they hurt me. Ooor..."

The way she dragged out the last word really got on his nerves. "Oh, this I've gotta hear, baby. Or?"

"Or Chad's."

He saw red. More than anger bubbled up inside him. Fury. Red-hot. Like a volcano about to explode. "*Chad's?*" He was barely hanging on to his control, but the thought of his cousin...and Summer...Chad's hands touching... "What does my cousin have to do with this?" he growled.

"That night we all went out. My first day at Were Watching, remember? He offered me a bed at his place if I ever needed it. He's such a sweet guy."

"A bed?" That was just fucking wonderful! "I'll just bet he did. Chad's 'bed' sees more comings and goings than Grand Central Station."

He was going to kill him. Right after he strangled him. And tore out his sneaky, slimy guts. "And he's not fucking sweet! He's like a walking, talking erection. All that 'sugah' this, and '*chère*' that. He just wants to fuck you," he said, his voice rising to a bellow.

He watched, dumbfounded, as Summer lifted her top off over her head and dropped it on the bed. Then she turned to him and smiled. He knew that smile. That smile was one she got when she was turned on. And it was for *Chad*?

One word, one thought kept pounding through his head... *Kill, kill, kill...*

The first man who touched her...*kill*... Who so much as *looked* as if he were going to touch her...*kill*...

"Hmmm, probably. But that could be good, Ziggy. I'd like to explore this 'sex is only sex' thing a bit more. And Chad's...well, I think it would be a good move for me, don't you? He certainly sounds as though he has lots of experience. And you've gotta admit, he's pretty easy on the eyes."

"Don't go there, baby. I'm warning you."

As if he were talking to the air, she totally failed to respond at all. Instead she wriggled and pulled on her leather pants, tugging them down until she was standing there naked. Little red nipples. Those hips. The soft curls between her thighs...

His. All of her. *His. His.* Hands itching, mouth watering, he stepped toward her.

That smile reappeared. Then she turned and headed into the bathroom, buttocks jiggling as she went.

He tore at his clothes, not even pausing when a loud *riiip* followed him grabbing his T-shirt in two hands and yanking on the fabric until it hung off his shoulders in tatters. He shrugged it off. Jeans followed and he shook his body from head to toe. He needed to feel Summer, her warmth, all over him. And he needed it *now*!

The more he thought about her leaving, the more furious he became. And the thought of any other man touching her... His body tightened, muscles clenching and bunching until it felt as though his skin couldn't contain it. Her scent reached him, that sweet orange blossom, overlaid with the musk of her arousal, a blend of honey and cinnamon that poured from her. Hunger burned through him. Heated his insides. His breathing accelerated as he sniffed and listened. The sound of her heart pounding, her pulse beating out a rapid *thump, thump*. It made every instinct inside him want to pounce. Subdue. Lick. Bite... Definitely bite...

His. His. His.

"Summerrrr. What 'rrrr you doing now?" he growled, trying to get his mouth to form words around the canines that had dropped with the inhaling of her musk.

"Taking a shower. Could you do me a favor and phone me a cab? I should be done by the time it gets here. I want to be nice and clean...you know, in case I get lucky."

In a flash, he hit boiling point, and a reddish haze colored his vision. His skin rippled as shudders raced through him. A snarl left his curled lips. "Shut up, baby. Do us both a favorrr and fucking shut up!" No, no cab. No Chad. No other men! No fucking anyone else. Ever!

"But a fuck is just a fuck, remember? This is just about the sex, Ziggy. And I want to be fucked."

"No way. No! Fucking! Way!"

The words sounded wrong, garbled, but warning bells were going off in his head. Something was happening. Little ripples skittered up his spine, spreading out along his arms, his legs, his neck. His pulse sped up and he inhaled deeply, his nostrils flared, all his senses exaggerated, seeking, sniffing out and sucking in that one in particular. Honey and cinnamon. The intoxicating smell of Summer's juices leaving that pretty little pussy, glistening over the plump, swollen lips, preparing itself for him. For *him*. Not for any other bastard. Never.

He'd kill any man who so much as laid a finger on her. Because she was his. *His*. Yeah.

He ran his tongue over his canines, licked over his lips.

Soft rumbling growls vibrated up his chest.

If she was horny, she was right where she needed to be. End of fucking story.

He inhaled again. Sweeeet. Real sweet.

She'd been checking the water, and turned as she heard him approach. Her eyes widened as she took in his naked form.

Yeah, baby, this is the real me.

Summer raised an eyebrow when a big, hairy hand reached over her and hit the lever in the shower.

The water stopped.

"You. Arrre...arrre..." He sniffed again and smiled.

She waited for him to answer. "Yes? I'm what?"

Mine, his body and mind screamed at him, possessiveness pouring over him, out of control. The need to claim her – all of her – making him burn.

Scent. His.

Lips. His.

Pussy –

"Fine. I'm obviously not taking a shower then," she huffed. "I'll have one when I get where I'm –"

She moved to pass him, brushing up against him as she did, and the feel of her skin was like a brushfire searing his needy flesh.

With a deep growl, he lifted her, hands taking hold of her hips in a viselike grip as he pinned her against the wall.

Her legs wrapped around his hips, flowering open those plump pussy lips so that her scent flowed over him again – spicy, sweet. Tasty. Horny.

Turned on. Good. Fuck, now. Fuck...fuck...

Dipping slightly, he looked down briefly to position the thick crest of his straining cock at her glistening entrance, then surged inside in one hard thrust.

She cried out his name, and all at once, his body began thrusting, pounding into her. Instinctive, the rhythm one of relentless urgency. Undeniable. Unstoppable.

More. He needed more.

"Z-Ziggy?"

Something was beating, pounding at his consciousness but he couldn't make sense of it. Her tantalizing scent swirled around him, inciting the feeling of possessiveness until it was a fever in his brain. Eating at him. Pushing him. To take her. All of her...

He cocked his head and looked at her through the reddish haze. Her eyes were closed, small grunts leaving her lips with every thrust of his cock deeper and deeper inside her.

He sniffed. Sweet. Happy. Horny.

His.

Yes. Oh fuck, yes. Ripples of sensation were rolling over his cock as her cunt clenched repeatedly around him. He leaned down to take a nipple into his mouth. Latching on, he sucked hard, laving the tip with his tongue, her panting filling his ears. She screamed the moment her muscles gripped him harder, forcing him to stop thrusting and wait. *Mustn't hurt.* Satisfaction powered through him as her body shuddered with the first climax.

Her eyes fluttered open.

Kiss me, filtered into his head. Odd. He tilted his head at Summer, wondering where the voice had come from.

Two small hands reached around his neck to pull him closer. Lips on his. Soft lips. Summer's lips. Her tongue. All heat and fire and his. All his.

He gave a satisfied growl, nipping at her lips as she rolled her hips against him, drawing his cock in deeper, deeper, until her body and his were like one thrusting, pulsing, pounding force. He was on fire. Every nerve ending on his skin zapping with lightning pulses.

Hunger, driving, pushing. Never enough. Never complete.

More. He needed more.

He lifted his head, breath wheezing in and out of his laboring lungs, and looked down at her. Lips bruised and swollen from the ferocity of their kisses, her chest rising and falling.

She was breathing as hard as he, but her heavy-lidded eyes showed a new determination, a resolve. "Bite me, baby."

Her words resounded in his head—*bite me, bite me*—and he roared. Control gone. Shattered.

Pulling out of her, his cock glistening and dripping with a combination of his precum and her juices, he pushed her down onto the floor. The sight of her on her hands and knees, her head hanging, her back a mass of scars, and something inside—protective, possessive, instinctive—broke free.

With a howl, he fell on her, covering her, for a brief moment soaking up the heat, before he nudged his cock at her pussy, grunting loudly as he slid inside.

The pleasure was so intense, streaking along his cock like fire.

"Ziggy—"

"Don't...talk." His body shook with the effort it was taking not to ram into her and rut on her like an animal. To stake his claim.

But she wanted sex. He'd give her fucking sex.

Biting into his lip as he gritted his teeth, he dragged his cock out, moaning as each inch slipped over the silk of her cunt. He inhaled, his senses rioting with the richness of the smells surrounding them, something more, something so addictive he couldn't get enough. The musky heat of her pussy, and the earthy, wild smell of his own body.

"More," she whimpered. "Please, Ziggy."

"I told you...not...talk," he got out, the words difficult to say.

But he slid back inside, small growls rumbling out of his chest more or less continuously as the animal inside him was unleashed.

He began to push into her, shallow thrusts, sinking further and further into the ecstasy as her tight walls clamped around him.

Then deeper, harder.

He licked up her back. His tongue lapping up the sweat that glistened over her skin, relishing the visceral reaction of her body under his—submissive, compliant, everything a wolf's mate should be.

And when her arms dropped, her head lowering to the floor so that her ass was raised, the perfect picture of submission, his cock buried that final inch into heaven. He licked over the skin of her shoulder, the taste of her inflaming him, destroying what remained of his control, and he bit, sinking the sharp points of his teeth into her.

The taste of her flowed over his tongue, like nectar, like the sweetest juices, and he closed his eyes to the taste of bliss. Her scream of pleasure only ratcheted up his excitement, and when her cunt walls started to spasm around him, he growled against her skin and sucked harder.

Cum boiled in the tight sac beneath his erection. Warmth streaked through him, up his calves, down his back, his heart began to thump against his rib cage. His cock thickened, the shaft swelling to form a knot beneath the glans. A second orgasm followed Summer's first and with muffled growl, he came. Hard jets exploded from the head of his cock as it jerked and pulsed, the thick fist around his shaft locking them together as he flooded the walls of her womb with blast after searing blast. It was like dying and being reborn.

Pleasure and satisfaction unlike any he'd ever known filled him.

His teeth let go, his tongue licking and flicking over the bruised skin as they both sucked in deep breaths.

He wasn't finished. Not yet.

With raspy strokes of his tongue, he soothed and licked her until she began to relax under him. Nuzzling at the soft flesh of her neck, rubbing along her cheek, he waited for her tight pussy to release him.

Licking up to her ear, he nipped the lobe and then ran his tongue over the soft skin. When the convulsions of her cunt had eased and finally stopped, her body turning lax under him, he pulled out slowly.

"Need...more, S-Sum— More." He panted over her neck. Trying to clear his head. Tamp down on the compelling need that hadn't been quenched.

"Stay s-s-still. D-Don't move. Won't hurt."

"I trust you, Ziggy. I always have," she whispered, her unsteady voice belying her words.

Pushing up off his hands for a moment, he looked at his shiny cock, thickly coated with the wash from their juices, satisfied it was enough.

Tucking the swollen head at the pucker of her anus, he pushed a fraction, holding her hips as he nudged again and again at the opening, lubricating it. When she flinched, he paused. More pre-cum was dribbling out of the slit at the head of his cock, aiding his entry, but he couldn't risk hurting her.

He could actually feel her as she forced herself to relax, allowing her body to turn languid, the tight ring of muscles at the opening of her anus to soften.

"Do it, Ziggy. For me. Please."

Fierce emotions swamped him, softening the primal drive he felt to take her this final way. He nuzzled her in response, licking a line up her cheek as he pushed in again. Taking it slow, his body rigid as he tried to hold on to his control. Nudging a little further each time as the lubrication allowed his cock to slide more easily.

There was nothing like the feeling of it—like being surrounded by the warmth of melted butter, but with the tightness of a clenched fist—heat, pressure, and total submission. A long groan rumbled out of his throat when the head of his dick popped through the sphincter. He stopped, taking care not to go any further inside. No rush. Relishing the tight clasp, he dropped to his hands again, savoring the warmth of her skin against his once more.

"Ready?"

With her eyes closed, she tipped back her head until it lay on his shoulder. "Always, Ziggy."

Resting his head against the side of hers, inhaling the mixtures of their scents, he began to push, slowly at first—thrust a little, withdraw, again and again—ensuring Summer stayed soft and relaxed, alert to any tension in her body, until finally the full length of his shaft was completely buried inside her. Then he stopped.

It was a moment that buffeted him with emotions he'd never felt before—a sense of closeness, of complete unity with another person, as though they truly became one. And because it was Summer, and knowing what she'd endured, it was the most humbling moment of his life. A precious gift.

Eyes closed, he savored everything about her.

Slowly, still covering her completely, he began to move.

The slide and withdraw, dragging his cock through the tight fist of her muscles. Relishing the small moans of enjoyment from her, the mewling little sounds as he began to increase his motions.

In a move he wasn't expecting, she turned her head toward him, her mouth questing, hungry, catching his tongue with her teeth and sucking it into her mouth.

With the force of a lightning bolt zapping through him, electricity surged all through his body to spear into his cock.

Ah, hell. Not that... Dear God.

Unable to hold back the beast any longer, any semblance of control shattered as she sucked at him with the same hunger that plagued him, he began to thrust and pound into her helplessly. Faster and faster. The heavy sac between his thighs drawn up tight.

Sweat poured off him, dripping off his hair, his forehead, running down his chin, as streaks of pleasure shot down the length of his cock, filling it, expanding it, more...more...

When his tongue found and lapped over the bite mark on her shoulder, then bit again, softly this time, his tongue flicking over the ultrasensitive skin between his teeth, she let out a long scream of pleasure as it sent sensations through to her clit. At once her cunt began to spasm, the reaction shooting through to her ass to clench on his cock. The animal inside him roared triumphantly. Primal possessiveness reverberated through every cell in his body so that he exploded in a haze of mind-blowing ecstasy.

Long moments later—how many had become irrelevant as he soared the heavens with the angel beneath him—Ziggy gradually came down from the peak. Summer's small body moved under him, splayed out on the floor in total exhaustion so that cold air attacked the sweat-streaked skin of his torso. But it pulled him back from a brink he'd never imagined could be so intense, so earth shattering.

To the sound of gasps and pants, oxygen being sucked into starving lungs, Ziggy eased his cock free, the reddened pucker of Summer's ass winking shut as if to deny him further entrance.

As the beast inside calmed and settled down, Ziggy became aware of where they were.

Damn, they hadn't even made it out of the bathroom.

After taking a second to stretch the kinks out of his back, Ziggy grabbed a washcloth from the shower, dampened it with warm water, then sponged it over Summer, wiping the perspiration from her skin. He was especially gentle as he dabbed at her pussy and anus. Quickly, he cleaned himself as well before he lifted her and walked into the bedroom with her in his arms. In testimony to her exhaustion, she slept through the whole thing.

Mated. He'd done it.

Would she hate him?

What if things went the way with Summer they had with Lucy for Link?

He couldn't stand the thought... Summer had been a victim once already of one man's obsessive passion. How could he have put Summer at risk like that again, and with himself?

Ziggy lay there, staring at the ceiling, aware of Summer's soft breathing beside him that told him she slept. She had hardly batted an eyelash when he'd lifted her from the floor and brought her to bed. Completely exhausted.

He rolled onto his side, his hand automatically reaching to run a finger down the silky skin of Summer's arm. His eyes traced the delicate features of her face, the parted lips swollen from their kisses. He'd taken her with an urgency that, after they were done, had scared him, except that he'd needed to taste her, mark her, fuck her – Jesus, *mate* with her – with a desperation that shook him to his core.

Never in the past, with any woman, had he lost so much control that he'd almost allowed the full change to sweep over him. He still shuddered thinking about it.

He ran a finger lightly over the mark on her shoulder. Unable to help himself, he leaned over to lick it.

A small hand curled up on his chest, distracting him, and he held the fingers in his big hand, lifting them to nuzzle the soft skin on the back of her fingers. The soft snuffling sound she made when she slept, instead of making him smile tonight as it usually did, just filled him with a confusing sense of sadness. There was something he should know, something...something niggling at his mind, trying to gain purchase, but with every yawn, it skipped further and further away.

Christ, he was tired. So tired he could barely keep his eyes open. His body and mind both so exhausted, so completely drained he felt as though he could sleep for a week. The part of him inside that was growing to crave that special closeness that mates share, reached for her, tucking her sated, unresisting body up against his, his legs wrapping around hers, his arms cuddling her tight against his chest so that she couldn't bat an eyelash without him knowing about it.

The feel of her touching him skin to skin from head to toe, the warmth of her breath on his chest, settled the disturbing restlessness inside him, and allowed him to finally slide into a dead sleep.

Screaming.

And blood.

So much blood.

The small body on the bed, covered by sheets stained scarlet and sodden.

Except for the belly. The yawning cavity still pulsing and throbbing as the blood pumped out in a steady flow.

Lucy. Oh, sweet Jesus.

Pale hands reached for Link, questing...but no, it was him they were trying to reach.

Confused, desperate, he stepped back and spun his frantic gaze around the room, looking for his friend.

Where was he?

Fuck, Link. Where the hell are you?

Sobbing, hands shaking, he reached for the torn skin of Lucy's abdomen, trying to pull the pieces together again.

But they wouldn't meet.

He couldn't fix it.

Link! Where the fuck are you?

Link can't help, Ziggy...

That voice. Feminine. Familiar.

Not Lucy.

Not— No! No! No!

Sucking in stuttering breaths, he reached out with one shaking hand, and tugged the sheet away from the face.

Pulling his bloody hands back, he screamed out.

Noooooooo!

Summer??

But it couldn't be. It was Lucy...

Suddenly the closed eyes snapped open. Accusing. Condemning.

It's your fault.

It's...your...fault...

Your...fault.

Yourfault...yourfaultyourfault.

No, he wailed. *Nonono! NO!*

With a jerk he sat upright in bed. Sweat pouring down his face.

He held his trembling hands up in front of his eyes.

No blood.

Summer asleep beside him.

But the disturbing thread of the dream began to weave together into knowledge and understanding.

Then, too, did the shocking realization of what had happened.

Battering at his senses, unfamiliar scents filled the bedroom—changed scents, choking, undeniable, leaving no doubt in his mind that his worst nightmare was about to come true with a vengeance.

Skittering off the bed, he stumbled and fell. Then backed away toward the door.

No, it wasn't happening.

Not again...

Chapter Fourteen

She'd found it. The one thing that could wound her to the very core of her soul.

And to come from Ziggy, of all people.

She shook her head in disbelief.

That was what hurt the most. That he would be the one to wield the knife that cut the deepest. Carve a hole in her heart she doubted she'd ever recover from.

Stunned. Shocked into immobility, her mind left reeling.

Summer rolled onto her side as she mentally and physically huddled from the final blow delivered just seconds ago.

Dragging herself from the bed, she stumbled to the shower.

Warm water poured over her face, and from under closed lids, tears streamed down her face.

If she could, she'd rewind last night. She knew now that she'd made a mistake. A terrible, terrible mistake.

But with the snapping open of his eyes and the flaring of his nostrils, devastating pain and rejection stabbed at her fragile confidence. Panicked eyes. The dark shadows she'd sensed that first night—suddenly Ziggy was filled with them as he looked at her.

And he'd just taken an irrevocable step with her that he couldn't deny, but he also couldn't accept.

Mated.

The word almost shouted in her head.

What had she done to him? If she hadn't been equally convinced that his feelings for her transcended this "bodyguard" business, she would have let him be. She would never have pushed him as she had.

There was no way she could have anticipated the terrifying horror pouring from him as he'd stumbled to get away from her when she reached for him. Within seconds he'd disappeared through the French doors, leaving her alone.

Rejection such as she'd never felt, overwhelmed her. It was beyond her ability to comprehend.

She raised her chin, her expression firming. After what she'd already survived, she'd survive this too, dammit.

She snapped off the shower. Grabbing a towel, she wrapped it around herself, tucking the end securely between her breasts.

Ziggy wouldn't need to worry about her pushing him further. And if she didn't get the message he'd just given her—well, she wasn't that stupid. He didn't want her or any woman as a mate—regardless of what she'd thought.

So she needed to fix what she'd done. And the only way to do that was to leave. And if someday Ziggy ever wanted to mate with someone else, she certainly wouldn't stand in his way.

Sadness threatened to choke her.

Staying and seeing the horror in his eyes whenever he looked at her would kill her. She was strong, but no woman was that strong.

A sharp rattle, followed by a muffled swish hit her ears. Ziggy?

Her heart began to thud. Her towel had started to slip, and she grabbed for it, holding it firm between her breasts just as a large shape filled the doorway.

"Hey, sugah."

"Chad?" For a moment she'd thought... "What are you doing here?"

Hurrying past him, she moved into the walk-in closet. She looked at him pointedly, waiting for him to leave. When he didn't take the hint, she glared and spun her hand at him, then waited until he turned with a smirk, so that she could dress. She quickly shrugged on one of Ziggy's oversized shirts and pulled on a pair of jeans, fighting to control the rising sense of desperation, that things were spinning out of her control. "I'm dressed. You can turn around now. As I was saying, why are you here? If you're looking for Ziggy, he's gone," she said disconsolately.

Chad turned back and stepped toward her, his expression serious, questioning. "I know. My night for backup."

"Backup?"

He nodded. "Two guards around you at all times, darlin'. One close. One on the perimeter."

"Oh."

"Ziggy took off out of here like the hounds of hell were after him. In pooch form, no less. Hey, you okay?" He tilted his head as he looked her over. And sniffed.

What was it with these guys? Always sniffing. "Why do you ask?"

"Because the agony pouring out of here is so thick, I could feel it—" He reached for her and stood rock-still. "In the yard," he finished belatedly. His hand hovered over her stomach before he pulled it back as if burned. "Hell!" His nose and face screwed up as he ran his fingers through his hair. "Oh shit, you're—"

"I'm what?"

"You're pregnant, Summer."

"What??"

"Damn!"

Pregnant? "But I can't be!" Her hand smoothed down over the still concave depression of her belly. "How can you tell?"

Chad looked more uncomfortable than she'd ever seen him, as though he didn't know what to do with his hands, where to look. "Sugah, that smell don't lie. Trust me on this. Fuckin' hell! No wonder Zig..."

Oh great! Just great! As if her pushing him to mate hadn't been enough, she'd managed to conceive? She bit back on the sob that was a mere breath away.

"No wonder Zig', what? Would you mind finishing sentences, please?"

Chad's expression softened, his eyes tortured.

Anxiety flooded through her. Something else was going on here, something she had no idea about and it worried her even more. "Don't look at me like that, Chad. Tell me what you were going to say. Now."

"No wonder Ziggy took off like he did."

"And?" She waved her hand at him to encourage him to go further.

"Ziggy don't want babies, ya know?"

"Well it's a little late for that now, isn't it?" Another tear snuck out and trickled down her cheek before she bit on her lip to stop any more.

"Shit," said Chad.

"Yes, you said that already," she bit out, "and it didn't help the first time, either. Do you think you could be useful and enlighten me as to *why* Ziggy has such an aversion to mates and babies?"

Chad was back to looking at her with those sad, pitying eyes again.

"Sorry, sugah, but I can't. It's personal, and it's Zig's story to tell, if he's inclined. Why don't we just settle down and wait until he gets back, hmmm?"

"No."

She looked around for her suitcase.

"No? What are you looking for?"

"My suitcase. I'm leaving."

"Hey, hey." Chad's arms came around her and pulled her toward him, tucking her head under his chin. "Don't be silly. He'll be okay once he gets used to the idea."

"No, he won't," she mumbled against his chest before she pushed away. "You didn't see the look on his face, Chad...the horror..."

They both started at the creak on a floorboard that sounded through the house louder than a gunshot.

Chad's whole body went on alert as he turned around to face the bedroom door, tucking her behind him. "Go into the bathroom now, Summer."

She stood stunned for a moment, before the warning prickle hit her – belatedly.

"Now!" Chad repeated, the sense of urgency strong in his voice.

"I'd stay right where you are, Suzannah, unless you want your other boyfriend to be hurt."

Her heart in her throat, she turned to the open French doors and stilled, icy dread washing over her, freezing her in place. The huge shadow that filled the doorway she'd know anywhere.

Brian!

"Exactly how many men do you have, hmmm? But then one never was enough, was it?" He stepped further into the room, the hand holding the gun tense in spite of the relaxed look of the rest of his body. He glanced around casually. "Aren't you going to introduce me, sweetheart?"

She couldn't speak. She glanced at Chad. He watched Brian closely, obviously looking for an opening.

"No?" He shook his head at her and tsked. "Where are your manners, Suzannah?" He looked at Chad. "I'm Brian. Her fiancé. And you're dead."

No warning. No threatening taunt.

Just the sound of a gunshot as the gun he was holding spat fire, the force of the bullet hitting Chad in the head and spinning him around to send him crashing against the chest of drawers. Summer screamed as Chad's body settled into a slump, blood running down the side of his face.

No! No, she cried.

"Come on, Suzannah. Time to go home." Brian held his hand out to her, the sick smile on his face making her stomach pitch.

She glanced at Chad's motionless body. Anger consumed her. Brian had taken everything from her—her self-respect, her freedom, and now he was going to kill the only people apart from Rayna who had ever really cared for her.

"Home? After what you did to me, do you honestly think I'd go anywhere with you?"

"What I did to you? You left me to die, Suzannah. And now you need to be punished."

"No. Not again. Never again. So you might as well shoot me too, Brian, because there's no way I'll ever let you get your hands on me again."

"Really?" He looked around the room and smirked. "Nobody here to stop me. Where's the other boyfriend anyway? Not keeping a real close eye on you, is he? He know you're fucking his cousin too?"

She refused to answer. Trying to get away, she inched around the bed.

Brian stepped closer. And closer.

Seeing the twisted look of sick obsession on his face, Summer gagged. How could she ever have loved him? Inside he was a boiling mass of hate and violence. Revenge. Barely a flicker of the love he'd once felt for her.

Her legs hardly able to hold her, she retreated, step by step, until the bed hit the back of her knees.

He moved closer, leaning toward her until she could almost feel the warmth of his breath on her face.

She stiffened, bile rising in her throat as she steeled herself for the touch of his mouth. He stopped a breath away.

"Suzannah?" The dark rumble was one she knew. A precursor to one of his rages. This close, his eyes looked thunderous. With a pinching, steel-like grip, he grabbed her hand, wrenching on her wrist.

"Why do you keep doing that?"

"W-What?"

"Holding your stomach like that, rubbing it. You sick?"

"N-No."

"So what's up?"

"N-Nothing." Panic bloomed anew. God, if Chad was right...if Brian found out she was pregnant with another man's child... She really would be better off dead.

"There ya go again!"

Horrified, she realized where her hand was and pulled it away from her stomach as though the flesh burned.

"If I didn't know better..." he began. Then his eyes narrowed, his expression darkened.

She flinched away, knowing what that look meant.

"Are you pregnant, Suzannah?"

Lips pressed tightly together, Summer shook her head frantically, but fury mottled Brian's face.

"Don't lie to me," he warned.

"I'm not. I'm not."

Out of nowhere, an open palm backhanded her, snapping her head to the side.

"You never could lie for shit. You are! You fucking whore! How dare you!"

She didn't hear any more. Stars exploded in her skull, blasting a pain through her head before they began to wink out, one by one, and darkness filled her vision as she landed on the bed.

* * * * *

Ziggy pulled to a stop so fast, his paws slid on the loose earth.

Something wasn't right. Summer? He lifted his head and sniffed the moist night air, trying to pinpoint the reason for his sudden anxiety. Tongue lolling, breath panting in

and out of his mouth, he looked around. He hadn't even noticed where he was going. It occurred to him he was miles away from the house.

Why was he running away from Summer?

In a moment of panic, he'd run out on the woman his heart and soul had taken as his mate. Dammit, the woman who right now was pregnant. With *his* pup.

The horrifying nightmare had scared the shit out of him. A shiver rippled the fur up his spine just recalling the images that had seared into his mind. He paced in a circle, shrugging off the thought of it.

But what had made him confuse Summer, the strongest, most resilient woman he'd ever known, with the mentally unstable Lucy?

All this time he'd avoided mating—with any woman. That fear, that memory had blocked him constantly.

And when the Fates had seen fit to bless him with a woman who was a perfect match to him, who had survived her own horror and come out of it still able to laugh and love—and he knew, even though she'd never actually said it, that Summer loved him—what did he do?

He lifted his head and sniffed the night air again.

Something was definitely off. Out of whack.

A strange static began to ring in his ears. He shook his head to try to clear it.

Except it wouldn't go away. Instead it became louder.

Clearer.

Ziggy? ZIGGY!!!

Summer.

Jesus Christ! That must be what he'd been sensing.

He turned back the way he'd come, stretching out his pace.

Faster than he'd ever run, spurred on by the knowledge of disaster brewing.

SUMMER!!! he screamed in his head.

Images, sensations began to flow over him—sadness, fright, absolute terror, and at their center was the essence of Summer.

Pain, sorrow—his heart sped up as he realized it was her.

What about Chad? Where the hell was he?

What the fuck was happening?

His thoughts swirling in a mindless frenzy, he began to pound back to the house, eating up the ground so fast the land flew by in a blur. Because he couldn't stop. He had to get back there. With a sickening realization, he knew something had happened. Knew it like a knife in his gut.

* * * * *

Groggy, sharp needles of pain shooting through her head with every thump of her pulse, Summer tried to open her eyes.

All around her was sound of things crashing, ripping. And on top of that, Brian's ranting, his unintelligible rage adding to the shafts of pain through her head until she wanted to grab her head and moan with the agony.

"Brian, that's enough." A deep male voice spoke. She knew that voice. *Clive?*

Her body felt tired, battered. Pushing herself to see, she fluttered one eye open and focused on her skewed view of the room.

From what she could see, Brian had pretty much torn the place up. How long had she been out?

Nearly crying from the pain, she turned her head slowly until she could see Brian. Panting, he stopped. And turned. The narrowing of his eyes, the tensing of his jaw that led to a small tic. He stepped back a pace, a rueful smile kicking up the corner of his mouth.

Both eyes blinked open finally. Around her the room looked like a hurricane had swept through.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't big brother." There was no missing the sarcasm, the derision in Brian's voice. "I wondered when you'd get here. How'd you find me?"

Brian's brother, Ziggy's "friend", stood just inside the room. Hands at his sides, his body relaxed. Yet he still looked ready to spring into action. Every bit as tall as his younger brother, Clive was broader, quiet, calm strength pouring from him.

"I've been tracking you for a while, Bri. It wasn't hard—I'm betting you were behind those two attacks recently. They're your style, your 'brand'." Clive's confused eyes stared at his brother. "Why, Brian? Why hurt them like that?"

Brian smiled. "They liked it. Little bitches all love it, that little bit of pain."

"And Suzannah?" Clive jerked his head at her. "You think she *likes* it too? You nearly killed her last time. I can't let you do it again. Leave her be."

"Says who? You?" Brian laughed before his voice turned rough and edgy. "You have no say in what happens between me and my woman. Just back off."

"She's not your woman, Brian. Not anymore."

"I don't need you to tell me my business, Clive, so fucking back off!"

"And I can't let you hurt her. Not again."

Brian stalked toward his brother, his fists clenching at his sides. Summer grabbed her head, the violence she could feel suddenly surging through Brian nearly making her pass out with the pain. Her vision faded and returned. She tried to warn Clive, shaking her head at him. He glanced briefly at her before his attention was taken once more by Brian's relentless progress toward him.

"I'm a bit tired of you butting your nose in where it doesn't belong, big brother. You want her too, don't you?" He snorted. "Well, stand in line. Seems my sweet little Suzannah is fucking half of New Orleans."

Clive shook his head. "You know that isn't true, Bri. Come on, let's go home." Clive reached for him. "You need help."

She could feel the sadness coming from Clive, the sense of almost hopeless desperation. As though he knew what he was attempting was a lost cause, but he had to try anyway.

"Help? *Help?*" Brian's face hardened. "You mean like the 'help' they tried to give me at the VA hospital?"

"We can get you into a private hospital this time. But this isn't the way."

"What? Taking back what's mine?"

Clive tried to stay calm, but she could see the tension in his body, the readiness. "Suzannah's not a thing for you to own, or take. Leave it, Bri. Please."

Summer stole a slow glance at the bedside table. Ziggy's gun. If she could only reach it...

"No. Suzannah's mine. She's always been mine," Brian snarled. "And she has to pay for betraying me. Just like Sharon."

"Sharon? What does she have to do with it?"

Sharon?

"It's okay, big brother. I took care of it for you."

"Took care, how?" Clive's face paled. The shock, horror visible in his eyes.

"Just like I took care of those other sluts. Just like I'm going to take care of Suzannah. Then she'll know to behave."

"You bastard! Sharon was nothing to do with you."

"She was fucking with you, man. Screwing other men behind your back. Like they all do."

"What did you do to her?" Ice dripped off Clive's words.

"Let's just say her next lover won't find her quite so...attractive."

Oh God, no. Summer redoubled her efforts, moving an inch at a time, closer to the gun.

"You sick bastard!" With an anguished roar, Clive rushed him. The next minute, he buckled under the impact as Brian's fist connected with his jaw, snapping his head back. Brian followed it up with a breath-stealing punch to the gut then clubbed Clive over the back of the neck as he leaned over, gasping.

Clive landed on the floor, but reached out to grab Brian's ankle, pulling hard so that Brian landed on his back with a loud crash that made the house vibrate, the gun jerked out of his hand as he landed, skating across the floor. Ignoring it, Summer grabbed for Ziggy's gun, hiding it behind her back as she watched the two men on the floor. Rising to his hands and knees, Clive drew in rasping breaths.

"You're sick. Whacked." Clive looked up at Summer, his expression resolute, determined. "Run, Suzannah. Get out of here. Go!"

"No!" Brian roared. "She stays."

Brian flipped up off the floor the same time as Clive stood and rushed him, arms around his waist, driving him into the wall with a cracking thud.

Clive locked an arm around his head and tightened his hold. "Don't make me hurt you, man."

Brian appeared to swing at Clive, an uppercut, when suddenly Clive stopped moving, his grip on Brian weakening.

Brian broke free, running a hand over his throat.

Clive held a hand to his stomach, his hand coming away bloody. Shock slackened his features.

That was when Summer noticed the knife covered in blood in Brian's hand.

"You dumb bastard," Brian spat at him, leaning over his brother. "You think I'd just walk out of here after it took me this long to find her?"

Clive tried to straighten. "You're not taking her, Brian. Not past...me." In a last-ditch effort, he charged his brother, but Brian was ready. His fist came up to smash into Clive's solar plexus with so much force, Summer could hear bones crack, and the air whoosh out of him.

Clive crumpled onto the floor, rolling into a ball, moaning.

"Now," Brian said, turning around to her, wiping his bloodied knuckles on his shirt, "you're coming with me, and don't give me any fucking trouble."

With shaking hands, she brought Ziggy's gun up in front of her in a two-handed grip. "No. Not again. Don't-don't...touch...me."

He laughed. Tipped his head back and belly-laughed.

"You gonna use that thing?" He snorted at her in derision. "You don't even know how." He tilted his head sideways. "Probably still got the safety on."

She might be shaking like a leaf, but her brain was still working and she refused to fall for that ruse. She knew she'd flicked the safety off.

"Good try, Brian. But I'm not going anywhere with you..."

"Come on, sweetheart. It's you and me forever. Now drop the gun." He reached out—to grab her or the gun, she didn't know.

But she couldn't go back. She just couldn't...couldn't...

The sharp retort was quieter than she was expecting.

Muffled.

Brian's eyes locked with hers, full of disbelief, before he fell to the floor, groaning.

Shivers began to shudder through her body, making her shake, her teeth chatter. Gritting her teeth, she steeled herself, her grip on the gun firming even more. There was no time to fall apart. Brian was still breathing, which meant he was still dangerous.

And he could still come after her. But it was about more than her this time.

Feelings of maternal protectiveness washed over her, overwhelming her. The knowledge that inside her was someone who was relying on her, who needed her. A new strength, a solid determination surged through her.

Her finger twitched around the trigger, the coldness of the metal burning her skin as she pointed the gun and pulled the trigger.

The recoil jerked at her body. She'd done it. She'd actually shot a person. Shot Brian. Twice. With intent to kill...

What had she become? What had this man forced her to do?

Appalled, she forced herself to move, to put one foot in front of the other. She tried to step around him. To get away. She screamed when a hand shot out and clenched around her ankle. She screamed. Frantic, she lashed out, kicking with all her might, until she connected with his head. The grip on her ankle slackened, and she jumped away, nearing the French doors.

He wasn't unconscious—just stunned. She looked around the room. Chad still lay where he'd fallen. Tears streamed down her cheeks at the pain she felt. Clive lay on the floor, the pool of blood around him growing bigger.

"Suzannah," Brian growled.

Not taking the time to think, she scooped up Ziggy's car keys from the bedside table.

"Suzannah!!!"

Panicked at Brian's roar of rage behind her, she tore through the doorway before he had time to recover and stop her.

Hands shaking violently, it took her a few tries to get the key in ignition. Once she did, she kicked over the motor, and without a backward glance, gunned the engine, sending stones and dust flying as she slipped and skidded her way down the driveway.

Sensations, thoughts, were battering at her brain. She sobbed, the effects of shock beginning to take a hold.

A familiar touch cut through the torrent of emotions knocking like hammers inside her head, calming her, soothing her. *Summer?* a worried voice enquired, the path used in her mind a familiar one. Rico.

She could go there.

No. It was the first place Ziggy would look. Right now she just needed to get away. From everyone.

Summer! Answer me!

Rico's frantic voice pounded in her head.

It was more than she could cope with. Even knowing the pain, the terror it would cause him, with heavy reluctance she blocked the link.

SUMMER!!!

A different voice.

Ziggy.

Pain racked her, stealing her breath.

In a snap, she shut down the link on him too. Like a shell, a hollow feeling of emptiness filled her.

Hands clenched on the steering wheel, she drove on, wiping tears from her eyes, letting the darkness swallow her up so that she disappeared into the night.

Chapter Fifteen

Summer!! Ziggy screamed in his mind. *God, answer me, baby.*

As though someone had switched off a light, plunging a room into darkness, a light went out in his head, leaving a terrifying emptiness he couldn't explain. It sent shivers up his back, so that the fur along his spine stood up.

Summer?

His legs continued to eat up the distance, the house only seconds away.

The closer he came, heaviness seemed to weight his legs, making every step leaden no matter how hard he pushed, as though he were trying to wade through quicksand.

Summer. The aching emptiness intensified as he realized he couldn't sense her.

It hit him then just how strong their connection had been. Since the first time they'd met, their connection had grown stronger so gradually that he hadn't even noticed just how deeply she'd become a part of him.

Until now.

He searched inside but it was pointless. It was gone. Completely.

Nothing there. Just...nothing.

What did it mean? That she was hurt? Unconscious? *Dead?*

Immeasurable loss filled him. Utter desolation followed, surging through his body until he let out a primal, thunderous howl, so fierce and loud it burned his throat with its intensity.

As he approached the tree line bordering his yard, he shifted on the run, striding the last few paces to the French doors on two legs.

The rich sent of blood hit his sensitive nostrils, and a trembling rage began, eating away at his tenuous control.

His bedroom looked like World War Three had taken place there.

Bedding on the floor, smashed furniture, fallen bodies, blood... Oh God, the blood.

"Summer?" he cried out, frantic. "Summer!"

"She's not here."

Wild-eyed, heart pounding in his chest, Ziggy turned to find Rico standing behind him.

"I can see that! Where *is* she?"

"Gone—"

"What the hell do you mean, gone?"

"That's all I know. She's shut down the link we share. I can't sense her. You?"

"Nothing. What about Ridgeway?"

"Not here either."

"Christ!"

Rico reached out to Ziggy, his hand clamping on his shoulder. "She's alive and she's alone, Zig. For now. That much I can tell you."

"Great lot of fucking good that is," he spat.

"Well, it will have to do."

"Zig?"

Ziggy spun around, looking at Chad. Propped against the chest of drawers, blood dripping down the side of his face. Ziggy squatted in front of him. With a trained eye, he noted the graze of the bullet along the side of his cousin's skull. His eyes were still slightly unfocussed, the lashes fluttering as they tried to open even with the blood dripping into his eyes.

"What happened, Chad?"

"Ridgeway." Chad tried to sit up straighter, but groaned and flinched as he held his head. "Bastard shot me," he said, running tentative fingers around the path the bullet had taken.

"And Summer?"

"Don't know, man. Shit, I'm sorry. I was knocked out."

Rico patted Ziggy on the shoulder. "There's more. I've called the paramedics."

Ziggy stood and followed him through the connecting doorway to the lounge room.

He dropped to his knees beside Clive. "Ah, shit. Not Clive too..."

The man in question groaned, the sound ragged and raw and laced with pain. Still, he turned tortured eyes on Ziggy. "Brian. My...b-brother. He's...he's...the one..." Clive's face contorted in pain, and he gasped.

Rico prodded Ziggy gently. "Come on, Zig. Get some clothes on, my friend. I can hear the sirens, and you're still naked."

Feeling shell-shocked, Ziggy took the jeans Rico handed him, and dressed quickly.

"Zig—" Clive rasped.

"Yeah?"

"His address. My pocket. Go there..." At that, Clive's eyes fluttered shut as he slid into unconsciousness.

A bit unsteady on his feet, Chad wobbled a moment, grabbing the chest of drawers to steady himself, before he stepped over to join them as they stood over Clive.

"Ridgeway's his brother? Why the fuck didn't he *say* something? Jesus!"

Not expecting an answer, Ziggy dug the piece of paper out of Clive's back pocket then turned to Rico. "I've gotta go. I've got to try to find them before it's too late."

"Sure," said Rico. "I'll stay and make sure Clive is taken care of. Go. Go. I'll call Randy. Let him know."

Clasping Rico's shoulder briefly in thanks, Ziggy turned to look at Chad. "You coming or staying?"

"Coming."

"You up to this? We'll have to move fast."

"Yeah, just a bit groggy. But we cats have nine lives, remember? I figure that was one. I got eight more left. And there's no way that bastard is getting away from us."

* * * * *

Since his car was gone, they took Chad's truck to Ridgeway's rundown apartment. Neither Brian nor Summer were there.

What they did find was enough to make the rage and need for retribution boil even hotter in Ziggy.

Articles of Summer's clothing, a whole cache of photos like the one that had been delivered to Were Watching... What sickened him more were the videos set up on the old TV. He shuttled through a few, enough to understand that Ridgeway had taped a good portion of his and Summer's sex life. Ziggy wondered if Summer had been aware she was being videoed in all of her intimate moments with the sick scumbag.

No way would he leave them for anyone else to find.

A quick call from Rico let him know that Clive was on his way to hospital. He asked Rico to drop in to Ridgeway's and confiscate everything that related to Summer in any way.

He snapped the phone shut and looked at Chad. "You up to this? I can track him on my own, but I'd really appreciate..." Chad's tracking skills were legendary. It was his biggest skill, and one Were Watching used a lot on missing persons' cases. He just never thought they'd have to use it for one of their own.

"I'm with you, cuz, all the way. Let's head back to your place—I can pick up the scent from there." Chad took one more look around the room and shook. "But in our fur, man. When we find him, I want to tear his fucking throat out."

Ziggy couldn't agree more.

* * * * *

They ran for an hour or more through the blackness of the night, the sky swollen with heavy cloud, blocking out even the smallest ray of light from the moon.

Chad was relentless, picking up the scent, losing it, tracking back, following the faint spoor left by Ridgeway. It soon became clear the man must have had wilderness training apart from his Special Forces training, because he moved like a ghost. Hardly a

sign left of his passing. But nobody could outdo Chad. In jaguar form, his coat black as midnight, he was like a dark wraith.

Swallowed up by the emptiness of knowing Summer was gone, Ziggy pounded along behind Chad, vengeance settling thick in his mind, thinking of all the ways he wanted to kill the bastard.

When they finally picked up the strong scent of blood, Chad leaned over to sniff one drop, tongue flicking out to lick at it, before turning to Ziggy, his lip curling around a growling hiss to let him know they were on the right path.

Good. He just hoped the bastard didn't die before they had a chance to finish him off. From the pace and stealth of the bastard's movements, it was obvious Summer wasn't with him, and for that small mercy Ziggy was grateful.

When they finally found him he was gasping for breath as he rested against a tree.

Ziggy let out a growl, and Ridgeway's head shot up. He spun around to face the noise, his face sweating, his gun drawn.

It was obvious he'd been expecting something a bit more human than a wolf and a black jaguar – especially traveling together.

Ziggy had already begun the change as Chad padded up to the left of the oak Ridgeway was leaning against.

Ridgeway's eyes widened as Ziggy stood upright, totally naked.

"What the fuck?" Ridgeway uttered. "What *are* you?"

"Sorry for the cliché, dickhead, but I'm your worst nightmare."

Ridgeway rubbed his eyes.

"That's right. Take a good look, Ridgeway. It's the last thing you'll see."

"What the hell are you? Some kind of freak?"

Ziggy glanced at Chad. Using discreet hand movements, he signaled for him to move around Ridgeway from behind and cut off his escape in case he tried to make a dash for it.

"I just wanted you to know, Ridgeway," continued Ziggy, "that it's payback, time, you sick bastard."

"For what?"

"For what you did to *my* woman."

"Your woman? That vicious little slut?" Anger flared quickly and violently in Ridgeway's expression before it disintegrated into insane laughter.

"She's screwing all your friends, you dumb prick. She hasn't changed. What she needs is a man who can teach her, tame her."

Fury boiled inside Ziggy. "Like you did? You nearly killed her! You've scarred her for life."

Ridgeway leered. “Yeah, those’re my marks on her. How does that make you feel when you’re fucking her, sucker? Every one of those stripes on her back I fucked her over. You know that? She cried and she screamed, and man, did that feel good.”

Blood was dripping down the fingers that held the gun. Small pinkish bubbles spitting out of his mouth as he spewed his venom.

“I’m going to kill you, boy,” Ziggy gritted out.

“For what? You should be thanking me for taking her off your hands. They all love it...love the pain...they beg for it. You hear me? She fucking begged me for it!”

Recalling the pain in Summer’s eyes, the agony that poured from deep in her soul as she related to them what Ridgeway had done, and something snapped in Ziggy. The thought that somewhere Summer was running to get away, sick with terror.

Knowledge of the indescribable fear Summer had gone through, having to fight and protect herself against the deranged bastard—the man who had caused her more pain than any woman should ever have to bear—fed his fury.

Letting loose a ferocious growl, Ziggy felt the tenuous fragments of his control splinter, and he sprang at Ridgeway, his body changing as he leapt.

In some corner of his mind, Ziggy registered the sharp retort of the gun going off, and then the high-pitched scream, broken off as his jaws clamped in a viselike grip around the man’s throat. With animal satisfaction he relished the give of warm flesh as his teeth sank deep and blood spurted out over his tongue. Sharp. Metallic. Hot.

In a fit of feral rage, he shook his head back and forth in unceasing arcs until he heard the loud crack of a broken neck.

It had been years since he’d killed anything—man or animal—in his wolf form. But as he released the limp body of his mate’s ex- fiancé, nothing could make him regret the choice he’d made.

Panting, he stood over the lifeless body. It was done. He would never terrorize Summer—or any other woman—again.

Now to find his mate—his pregnant mate—and bring her home.

* * * * *

Four months later

Ziggy walked into his house and remembered why he stayed so long at the office these days. The silence was oppressive. Funny, he’d never noticed it before Summer. In fact, if he’d been asked, he’d have to say he preferred it.

But not anymore. It just made him feel alone. More alone than he’d ever been in his life. More alone even than he’d felt after he lost Link.

Staying at the office wasn’t achieving anything. He, Chad and Steve had looked into every possible lead. Chad’s tracking skills, awesome as they were, couldn’t follow a car down a sealed highway.

Even Clive had helped when he got out of hospital. At first, Ziggy had been disinclined to trust his old friend, suspicious that somehow Clive had led his brother to Summer, even inadvertently. Instead it had been the other way around—Clive had discovered that Brian was in New Orleans, and taken the position with Were Watching in the hope his job with them might give him entree to resources he was unable to access on his own. Knowing the unstable mental state of his brother and his obsession with Summer, he'd been racing to find her before Brian did. It was a sad—or fortuitous—twist of fate that found them all in the same place.

After they'd sorted things out, Clive had been a good source of intel on Summer—Ziggy just couldn't bring himself to think of her as Suzannah—and her life in Georgia. The people she knew, where she'd worked. Clive had even gone back to Georgia where Brian and Summer had lived to search through Summer's old apartment, his brother's things. Looking for anything, any crumb they could follow that might help them find her. Dead ends, every single fucking one.

He shrugged off his clothes as he walked through his dark house, then kept going until he reached his bathroom. Flicking the tap on, he stepped into his shower and stood, letting the water flow over him.

As he did ninety-nine percent of the time when he wasn't working, and even when he was, he thought about Summer.

Wondered where she was for the gazillionth time.

If she was safe...

If she was happy...

If she was still... An image came to mind of her standing in front of him, smiling, her belly full and swollen with their child.

Of course she was—she wasn't Lucy. If any woman would fight to hold on to her child, it would be his little Summer. Rico was right—fate had gifted him with the perfect mate. She was like a drug that never left his system. An addiction he could never be free of—didn't want to be free of. And he'd fucked up. How on earth could he profess to protect others when he couldn't even protect the woman who meant more to him than his own life?

Where the hell was she? One little woman, pregnant at that, couldn't just disappear off the face of the earth. She only had two months left of her pregnancy. Did she even know that because of him, what he was, her pregnancy wouldn't be the usual nine months? How was she surviving? Was she working? In a shelter? What?

Christ, this was killing him. So much of the time he felt like he was losing it. His concentration shot. He was like a rabid dog.

He leaned his head against the tiles and closed his burning eyes but her image stayed there, taunting him. God, how he wanted to touch her, hold her, tell her...

"Tell her what, you stupid shit?" he lifted his head and railed out loud as he thumped on the tiles in frustration.

Tell her that he fucking loved her!

With a snarl, he flicked off the tap, shutting off the water. He yanked a towel off the rail behind the door and roughly dried himself.

Throwing on some jeans and a T-shirt, he stomped through the house to the kitchen. After slamming a few cabinet doors, and staring at the inside of the mostly empty fridge for five minutes, he grabbed a beer then slammed that door shut too.

"Anyone home?" a female voice asked.

He walked through the house and squinted as light suddenly burned his eyes. When he could see again, he noticed Randy's hand on the light switch. Next to him, blinking, stood Crissy, his brother's quite pregnant mate, little Amber sitting on her hip.

Pain at seeing her like that seared the air in his lungs as his thoughts turned to Summer, what she'd look like.

"Any reason why you're in the dark, man?" asked Randy. "Thought maybe you forgot to pay your utility bill."

"No. Works fine."

"Do you mind if we visit for a bit, Ziggy?" asked Crissy.

He flopped down on the single-seater sofa. "Please yourself."

She sat down on the couch, Randy sitting beside her and taking a squirming Amber from her before he draped an arm around his wife's shoulder.

"Any word on..." she started.

He gritted his teeth as he glanced at her. "No. Nothing. She's disappeared as if she never was."

"What about Rico?"

He sighed. "He said he'd call if he sensed anything."

"I just don't understand why she'd take off like that," mused Crissy. "She loved you, Ziggy."

"And you know this how?"

A small grin that quickly faded crossed Crissy's face. "It was as clear as the noses on your faces. You were as bad as Randy."

"Excuse me?" said Randy.

She patted his leg and smiled at him. "Don't get your fur all ruffled. I meant it in a good way, stud."

"Well then why the hell hasn't she come back?" Ziggy interrupted. "Hmmm, Ms. Know-it-all?" Anger started to boil inside him, sparked by the never-ending frustration and desperation that pounded at him.

"Zig—" Randy let out a warning growl.

"I don't know," she snapped back. "Why don't you tell me? What did you say to her?"

"I didn't say —"

"Yes? She knew you'd protect her from Ridgeway, so why did she take off?"

It was clear Chad had kept his word and not told anyone the truth about Summer — not even Randy. There were no secrets between his brother and his mate.

"Crissy..." Randy cautioned as he stood to quiet a fussing Amber who was clearly picking up the tension in the room. "Don't —"

"No, Randy. I want to know. A woman doesn't just run out on the man she loves without a damn good reason."

"What's it to you, anyway?" Ziggy bit out.

"More than it is to you, obviously," she snapped in reply. "God, she was your mate, Ziggy. How can you stand it?"

He jumped up out of his seat and began to pace. "I can't stand it, okay? It's making me crazy!" He ran agitated fingers through his hair, pulling on the strands until he felt the pinch of pain. He stopped, thinking over what Crissy had said.

"Hang on, how did you know Summer was my mate? I didn't...we didn't..."

"Honestly, you guys can be so damn dense. At the barbeque at Mom's —"

"Not possible."

"Why? Because you hadn't knotted her then?"

"Crissy!" Randy covered Amber's ears.

"Give it a break, Randy. She's not even a year old. She can't even talk. It's highly unlikely she's got a handle on the peculiarities of werewolf mating just yet."

Ziggy sat back down and rolled his eyes. "Hell. Your woman needs a muzzle on her mouth, bro."

Crissy snorted. "As if! Look, Einstein, *we* could all tell Summer was your mate even then. However far you'd gone, you'd marked Summer with a big 'trespassers will have their throats ripped out' sign. *You* were the only one in denial. All that bullshit about protecting her." She snorted and brushed off Randy's warning growl, fixing him with a testy glare. "Unless *you* want to be wearing the muzzle, quit with the snarls, wolf boy. I've had just about enough from you alpha males." She said the last with such derision, Ziggy's eyes widened in surprise.

"That just earned you a spanking, mate," Randy rumbled at her, his expression dark.

"Oooh, I'm shaking in my boots." Crissy rolled her eyes at Randy. "You're going to spank me as a *punishment*?" She patted his cheek and chuckled, before she turned back to Ziggy. "More importantly, Summer knew she was your mate."

"So why didn't she tell me?"

"Oh, excuse me? Mr. I-don't-want-or-need-a-mate? Sure. Right. You would have run for the hills."

At her words, Ziggy looked down, heat filling his face.

Crissy lifted herself off the sofa in that way only pregnant women do, brushing off Randy's hands as he helped her gain her feet. "What did you do, Ziggy?"

Ziggy looked at her, glowing in spite of her anger, a perfect picture of impending motherhood, her hand distractedly rubbing over the bulge of her tummy. And his heart tore apart. He could feel a howl of such pain about to tear free that it would rip his soul apart.

"Summer's...pregnant," he managed to get out.

Crissy stood stock-still. "When?"

"The night Ridgeway came here. The night she left."

Crissy stood with her hands on her hips. "And just where the hell were you?"

"Crissy honey, don't—" said Randy, coming up behind her and circling her body with his arm.

Ziggy looked at his brother and his mate and their child, and the full realization of what he'd lost, what he'd thrown away hit him like a sledgehammer.

Sickened with himself, he looked away.

"I was...out."

"Out, what? Out having a beer? Out having a run?"

"Out running away, I guess...I'm ashamed to say." He slumped back into the chair and rested his head in his hands. "I don't know what happened. Summer told me she was leaving—just like that. Going to stay with some other guy. She started counting them off, and I...well, I kinda lost it. Lost control. Didn't stop until I'd fully mated her.

"It wasn't until later that night. I was having a really bad nightmare... I thought it was Lucy, but it wasn't—it was Summer. The sightless eyes. The blood. And oh God, the great gash ripped in...ripped... That's when I woke up. And that's when the change of scents hit me. Not just the mating scent. It was that rich, sweet smell, like a fruity liqueur. You've got it now, Cris."

"I do?"

"But by then it was too late. It was my worst nightmare. That Summer could end up like Lucy. And it was my fault. Christ, I couldn't stand it. I ran. Took off to try to escape the images..."

"That's why Chad was here, why he was hurt..."

"Yes. When I got back, it was all over. And Summer was gone."

"But that still doesn't explain why she wouldn't come back."

"Summer is an empath and psychic, Crissy. And because I was her mate, she could feel me, read me more than she could anyone else. When I realized she was pregnant, with the memory of the nightmare and the horror, the terror that filled me—I'm pretty sure she must have felt it too. I just couldn't control it." And it was that thought that gutted him, haunted him more than any other, that Summer was somewhere thinking he didn't want her, or their baby.

"Oh God. So that's why... She not only thought you didn't want her, she thought you didn't want...?"

He nodded. "At least, that's as much as I can figure out."

"And now she's alone. And pregnant."

"Christ, what can I do? This is making me insane. I-I need her." He could feel his eyes beginning to moisten and dropped his head in his hands.

Crissy walked over to him, sat on his lap and hugged him. He laid his head on her shoulder, appreciating the warmth, the love he could feel from her.

"You'll get her back, Ziggy. Just don't give up."

"I have no intention of doing so. I'll find her...*them*...if it takes me the rest of my goddamn life."

* * * * *

That night as Ziggy lay on his bed, he watched the moon through the open French doors. His whole body...mind...soul hungered for Summer. If only they had a small clue to follow, a tiny lead...

Tired beyond bearing after so many sleepless nights, his eyes started to flutter shut when a small voice in his head began to nudge at him.

He tried to ignore it, but it was like a mosquito in his ear. After a while he closed his eyes, but was rudely jerked awake.

There it was again. He'd had plenty of time to reflect on things with Summer, and this was just like when he used to "hear" her in his head.

Again, that mental nudging.

They weren't words, as such, but this time the tone of the message was imperative. He sat up in bed, trying to figure it out.

It took a lot of concentration, but eventually he was able to distinguish the "voice" of this connection. Not Summer, but the link was the same. And this was one "message" he had no intention of ignoring. Whatever it meant, he meant to find out.

Grabbing the clothes he'd had on earlier, he threw them on then tossed a few essentials into a small duffel. Swiping his keys to his new SUV off the coffee table where he'd thrown them when he came home the night before, he headed out.

* * * * *

A day and a half later, after many wrong turns and wasted miles, he had found the key. The "voice" along the link grew stronger or weaker, depending on whether he was headed in the right direction. Like a homing beacon, he followed that signal as if his life depended on it.

Driving through the early morning along Georgia Highway 150, nary a car around to distract him, he eased off the accelerator to turn off the road, switching to four-wheel

drive as he made his way through a pretty forest. He slowed right down, sensing in some way from the excitement he could feel along the link, that he was nearing his destination.

When the link that had sustained him over so many hours and miles seemed to snuff out, he pulled up the SUV and stopped. Around him the myriad sounds and damp, earthy scents of the forest assailed him.

Not sure which direction to go, he resolutely stepped away from the SUV, figuring he'd just try all four directions until he hit on the right one. Two hours later, sweating after scrambling through undergrowth, over deadfall, and through thickets of trees, some of which plumb stopped him dead, he finally saw the telltale stream of smoke ahead that possibly indicated a cabin close by.

Deliberately not crashing through the brush, so that he could scope out the area before he bulldozed his way onto the wrong piece of turf—the last thing he wanted was to spook some hermit with a gun and an itchy trigger finger who didn't like visitors—he edged around the property until he could find a good vantage spot to look down into the small clearing.

Sure enough, there was the cabin—judging from the size of it, no more than two or three rooms at most. A small stream trickled on by at the edge of a small grassy yard. With the sun shining down, a cool breeze taking the sting out of the heat of the day, it was a picture-postcard view.

He stiffened as the sound of female voices and then laughter came from around the side of the cabin. His heart leapt into his throat at the sight of the two small women rounding the corner and heading on down to the stream—one gray-haired and surprisingly spry for her age, and the other one younger, the fall of rich dark curls tumbling in a wild tangle down her back, achingly familiar.

All the longing, the pain he'd felt at Summer's disappearance threatened to choke him when he saw her again. Her sweet face framed by that riot of curls and all he could think about was kissing her. Every gorgeous inch of her. His eyes tracked down to the belly bulging under the fullness of the stretchy dress she wore, and his relief made his heart begin to thud so loudly in his chest, it was like the primal heartbeat of nature. He stood and moved a few paces, unable to take his eyes off her for even a second to ensure his footing, when suddenly she stopped talking to the older woman, and froze, her head lifting and turning from right to left as though searching out an intruder.

Unable to wait another moment, he stepped clear of the trees and walked steadily toward her. The smile on her face faded. A look of such alarm crossed her face, her hands rushing to encircle and shield her tummy in a move that could only be interpreted as protective, that it stopped him in his tracks.

He stood and watched her. Taking in every beautiful feature, inhaling the sweet scent of orange blossom he'd never forgotten, reacquainting himself with all the things about her he'd fallen in love with.

"Ziggy. What are you doing here?"

One foot in front of the other, slowly, so that he didn't spook her, he came closer and closer. "I've come to take you home, honey."

"No."

That stopped him. Only the surprise of hearing that flat-out rejection could have made him pause. But only for a second. If it had been said with heat or hate, it might have deterred him. But he hadn't missed the flare of hope that streaked through her eyes for the briefest second.

"Yes, Summer. It's time to come home."

She seemed frozen to the spot.

"Suzannah! Where are your manners?" said the older woman with a wink at Ziggy. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your mate?"

She shook her head. "No. He's not...we're not..."

"Oh, pshaw, child. Of course you are. I could sense him miles off. Couldn't you?"

Summer shook her head again, still staring at Ziggy, as if she couldn't believe he was standing in front of her. "No, I never...I-I shut it down."

Ziggy looked at the older woman. "Then that was you?"

"Me what?" she asked.

"You guiding me here. It was a voice in my head...like Summer...but not..."

The old woman threw back her head and cackled. "Oh, this is wonderful," she said when she could take a breath. She leaned over and kissed Summer soundly on the cheek. "Sweetie, you've been beaten at your own game."

She reached for Summer's tummy and ran a hand over the swollen curve. "You've got a strong one in there, child. He's looking out for his momma already." The old woman looked at Ziggy with sharp eyes then held out her hand. She smiled when Ziggy grasped hers, placing her other hand over his and rubbing it. "I'm Rayna, Suzannah's grandmother."

"Ziggy, ma'am. Summer—I mean, Suzannah's mate."

"Summer's fine. And don't worry, I know all about you, young man." With a final pat on his hand and a small laugh, she turned to Summer, cupping her face in a hand misshapen and twisted by arthritis. "Don't you go throwing your happiness away like it's last week's trash, child. Remember what I told you... When you meet the match to your soul—

"My heart will know..." interrupted Summer. "Yes, I know, Rayna."

"Then hear what it's telling you now. Trust it."

At that, she hobbled back to the cabin, a small chuckle reaching them. Then he and Summer were alone.

She took a step to the side, and he was there, in front of her. Then she moved to the other side, and he blocked her, standing so close that he could count the freckles sprayed across her pert nose. Unwilling, for a single second more, to keep from

touching her, his broad hands trembled as he cupped her face, thumbs smoothing over the soft skin of her cheeks. His heart hammered in his chest as he forced himself to believe that this was real, that somehow...somehow, he'd found her again.

"I love you, Suzannah Gray."

Her stony expression didn't give him confidence.

"You don't believe me?"

Her little chin came up in defiance. "No."

"You're not sensing what I'm feeling, honey?"

"No, I'm not."

He considered her stubborn expression. She wasn't scared of him, but there was definitely determination there not to let him in. Well, they'd just have to see about that.

"You blocked me, baby, when you ran. Remove the block."

"No."

"Scared of what you'll find? Remove it, honey. Now. This is *not* the time to be stubborn."

"I am *not* stubborn."

He could feel her resistance. Feel her trying to withdraw, escape—again. But not this time. Never again. At a loss, he did the only thing he could think of to reach her.

He kissed her.

She wriggled in his hold at first, but he had no intention of letting her get away. He settled into the kiss until the tension in her body eased and she began to relax into him. Soft to start, moving over her lips, he closed his eyes and drowned in the pleasure. Unsure exactly how, he tried to send his mind into hers, pouring everything he felt—the complete devastation when he realized she'd left him, the desperation of searching for her only to have every lead reach a dead-end, the love for her and hope that had kept him going, night after every long lonely night... The need he felt to hold her and their child...protect them...love them with everything he had to give.

Summer gasped, pulling her face away to suck in a deep breath, and all at once, the emptiness inside that he'd felt ever since that night she ran, burst apart, and blossomed into a warm glow around him, over him, through him.

With a little whimper, she tried to break away from him. His arm curled around her waist, pulling her flush against him again. "No way, honey. You're not getting away from me this time." And lowering his mouth to hers, he kissed her again, harder, hunger for her spilling over into the kiss as he ravaged her mouth until she responded in kind.

He jerked when something hit him in the stomach. With a laugh, he opened his eyes to her surprised ones. "Was that what I think it was?"

Her chin came up. That damn stubborn resistance of hers.

"Don't ever doubt me again, Summer. I might be a bit slower than some men coming to the realization, but I love you, honey. More than my life."

"You didn't want us." Her eyes watered as her hands moved to protect the swollen mound. "I felt it. The thought of being mated to me horrified you."

"I was scared, Summer, but you've got to believe that I *do* want the baby. Next to you, our child is the most important thing in the world to me." She still looked a little wary. "I know you don't want to believe me, but I can explain. Please?"

He held out his hand and she took it—reluctantly—and he led her over to the stream, helping her ease down on the edge, her feet hanging over the water.

Holding her hands firmly in his, with halting words, he relived the memories of Link and Lucy. He told her all of it—the parts he'd never even told Randy or Chad. The pain. The horror when he and Link had found Lucy. The devastation when Link had shot himself rather than try to deal with the pain of losing his mate.

"That's why I panicked, honey. Those memories had been haunting me so long, I just couldn't have survived if you'd decided you didn't want it." He smoothed his hand over her belly. "But it wasn't you. Not our baby. Never that."

"I do want it, Ziggy. I want *them*, actually. More than I've ever wanted anything in my life."

His breath caught in his throat. "Them?"

Summer blushed and gave a small chuckle. "You never do things by half measures, Ziggy. Yes, them."

Epilogue

Ziggy glanced up from the TV to find his cousin lounging against his open front door. "What's up?" he asked Chad as he shifted Hope onto his other arm where she continued to gurgle contentedly to herself. He motioned at the sofa. "Pull up a pew."

He looked curiously at the dual scratches bisecting his cousin's right cheek. "Some little lady take offence to your version of charm?" he teased. Chad was a typical werecat – if it wore a skirt, he had to chase it.

"That was no lady," he said and snorted. "And she wouldn't know charm if it jumped up and bit her on her nipple."

Ziggy looked closely at Chad, noticing the scowl and the way his body tensed as he said "lady". "Well, gee, let me guess...sweet little Georgie?"

His sister-in-law's tiny cousin might just turn out to be the handful that Chad couldn't sweet-talk his way into bed. That should be a novel experience for him. His Native American looks and all that long black hair got him way more action than most guys could dream of. The only guy he knew who scored more often had been his brother Randy. But now that Randy was out of circulation, and contentedly so, it left the field wide open to Chad.

"That little wildcat is neither sweet nor little. She's a goddamn pain in the ass."

"Do tell. I thought there was something between you two..."

"*Between us?* As if." Chad finally sat down, scuffing his boot on the rug. "Nah, she's still with that limp-dick boyfriend of hers."

"Jealous?"

Chad snorted. "Me? Jealous? Get real, man. Plenty of pussy knockin' on my door without me needin' to chase after nasty little bitches with claws."

Ziggy stood and grinned. "Want a beer?"

Chad already had his arms out for Hope. "Here ya go, l'il *chère*. You just sit here with Uncle Chad. You're a sweet little thing, ain't ya?" He held out his finger for Hope to latch on to.

Ziggy watched in amusement as a softer side of Chad that was becoming more common, especially around his and Randy's kids, surfaced.

"A beer?" he reminded his cousin.

"Yeah, sure," said Chad, not even lifting his eyes from his gurgling niece.

A knock came on the door as Ziggy was walking past, and Rico stuck his head inside. "Not for me, thanks. I had a snack before I came."

Ziggy rolled his eyes. "Come on in. Summer won't be long. She's just changing Richard."

A laugh rumbled out of Ziggy's chest at the proud look that melted the vamp's face, and he slapped his friend on the back. Two months after the births and Rico still couldn't believe they'd named their boy after him. Summer had been insistent, though, and he'd been disinclined to disagree.

The sounds of Chad and Rico filtered through to the kitchen as Ziggy grabbed the beers. Sounded as if the same old argument was going on between the two.

"C'mon, Chad. Hand her over, *amigo*. You've had her long enough."

"I only just got her. Get away. She wants to be with her Uncle Chad, don't you, sugah."

"I'm her godfather, remember?"

"And?"

"So..."

"In a minute."

"I'm counting."

Ziggy grinned as he popped the tops on his and Chad's beers.

He looked over as Summer came down the hallway, a smile on her face. He leaned down as she reached up to kiss him, his arms going around her to cuddle her close. God, she smelled good. He nuzzled her neck, feeling her shiver, before he released her with a chuckle.

"Tease," she said, smiling. She tilted her head in the direction of the living room. "Those two at it again?"

"Yeah."

She moved away from him into the living room, and he watched the sway of that luscious ass. Damn, he sure loved the changes pregnancy had made to her body. He still couldn't keep his hands off her. At this rate, she'd be pregnant again in no time. A wicked grin tipped up his mouth. Maybe tonight, when the kids were asleep, and they got rid of all their unexpected guests... Christ, he couldn't remember a time when he'd had so many damn visitors.

"You! What are you doing here?"

At the feminine outburst, Ziggy tore his eyes away from his wife's ass and his plans for later. Georgie was walking down the hall with her arms full of his wriggling son.

Chad stood, holding Hope in his arms, and Ziggy just felt like laughing out loud. If only the two of them could see each other and the picture they made.

Maybe he should have told Chad that Georgie was here... But then where would the fun have been in that?

"What am *I* doing here?" shot back Chad. "*I'm* their uncle. What are you doing here?"

Ziggy walked back into the room to see a red-faced Georgie quickly hand Richard off to Rico.

"I'm...helping." She brushed her hands down her pants, before turning for the door. "Summer wanted some help, and... Oh, never mind. What's it to you, anyway?"

Chad handed Hope over to Summer, and gave them both a quick kiss on the cheek before following Georgie out the door. "Yeah, yeah. You're not following me, are you?"

"Will you listen to yourself? Why the heck would I want to follow you anywhere? Just stick to your bimbos, Chadwick. You couldn't handle a woman with a brain."

"You're jealous."

"Of what? Ms. Booby-Doos?"

"Brenda."

"You mean with those two brain cells she could actually remember her name?"

"And what about Mr. Limp Dick?"

"Do NOT talk to me, Chadwick."

"Yeah, yeah, you want me. Admit it. I'm the only one who can really turn you on, *chère*..."

"In your dreams..."

Summer closed the door on the two of them and turned back to Rico and Ziggy. "I don't know about you two, but that's TMI for me."

Putting the two beers on the coffee table, Ziggy sat down and patted his lap. Still holding Hope, Summer settled in and leaned back with a tired sigh.

"You two look wonderful," said Rico, a touch of wistfulness in his voice.

It was true, Ziggy realized. He felt wonderful too. So good that at times he had to pinch himself to remind himself it was real. Summer had completed him, in ways too numerous to mention. And parenthood... Well, he was beginning to see Uncle George's side of things. He wondered how many he could talk Summer into having.

A soft snuffle sounded from Summer, and he looked down at her, noting she'd dozed off. Looking after twins was a full-time job. He wrapped his arm tighter around her, ensuring his daughter was secure.

When she snuggled against him, strong feelings choked him. Things could have turned out so differently. But he had Summer and he had their family, and he would protect them all with his dying breath. "Moments like these, my friend, I wouldn't trade for anything."

About the Author

One thing Susie Charles could never say is that her life has been boring. Having lived in more places than she can remember and tried enough different occupations to fill a job guide, has given her a wealth of experiences to draw upon in her stories.

Now, as a writer of erotic romances, she works diligently to live up to her lusty image. Always looking for inspiration wherever she can find it, she has a disconcerting habit of checking out the “talent” when she goes shopping with her adult daughters – although, for them, she draws the line at whistling at strange men. She spends her spare time walking along the beach where she lives, ostensibly exercising while she plans new stories, but more often than not visually distracted by the delicious abundance of almost naked male flesh she uses as “inspiration”.

Needless to say, with her boundless and undiminished appreciation for the male of the species, her heroes are always hunky sex gods who will do *anything* to make their lady happy. Being of the curvy variety herself and knowing how most males just love curves, her heroines are never model-thin, and are fun, sassy and intelligent to boot.

Susie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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