

The book cover features a woman from the back, wearing a black mesh tank top and black shorts, holding a handgun in her right hand. She is standing in a room with a window in the background. On the wall to the left of the window, there are several bullet holes and the dark silhouettes of two people. The title 'Packing Heat' is at the bottom in a red, stylized font, and the publisher 'Changeling Press' is at the very bottom in a smaller, red, stylized font.

Hannah  
Beckham

Packing Heat

Changeling Press

# **Packing Heat**

## **Hannah Beckham**

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## **Packing Heat**

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Maya Eddings, a six-foot empath, owns a private security firm in Kansas City. Whether she's wearing sneakers or Prada, she never leaves home without her best accessory, a 9mm handgun. Maya's life couldn't be better, with the exception of two men who want her to be exclusively theirs.

Matt Brewer is an investigator for a law firm, and a werewolf. He wants Maya to be his life mate, but while she likes a little tail, actually growing one isn't all that appealing to her. Besides, his mother hates her.

Stephen Daniels, architect, and part incubus demon, thinks Maya can be the cure to his incessant one-night stands. He wants her -- body and soul. Okay, really he just wants her body. But Stephen's her best friend's younger brother and that could get sticky.

With a mystery to solve and two hunkalicious men fighting for her attention, Maya's beginning to wonder if she's bitten off more than she can shoot.

## Chapter 1

Maya Eddings patted her 9mm pistol while she stood outside the elevator doors, waiting for what seemed like minutes, but actually only seconds had passed. Nervous habit, really. It helped her to concentrate on the job. Her client, Milo Bach, a minor rock star with a major ego, fidgeted with a hand-held video game, making grunting noises every time he pushed a button.

Glancing in his direction, she rolled her eyes. He wore too long jeans and a seventies' style, wide collared silk shirt. He was good-looking enough -- if you liked the David Cassidy meets Twisted Sister type. Milo had come to Kansas City to play Kemper Arena and it was Maya's job to make sure he survived his press conference and autograph session.

His manager, Kit Stan, had hired Maya to get him safely from his room on the seventh floor of the Adam's Mark hotel to the lower lobby. Apparently he'd been getting death threats from a rabid fan, and it wasn't hard to see why. A little less than thirty minutes with the rock star, and Maya was ready to kill him.

She waited as the elevator door opened then peeked around the corners. *No passengers. Good.* Maya ushered Milo and his manager swiftly into the car and pushed the button for the first floor.

"Hold the elevator," a deep masculine voice yelled from the hallway.

Maya leaned her head out of the opening and wet her lips. *Mmm. Nice.*

He was tall, at least 6'4", medium blond hair, and under the tight black pants and a cobalt Nehru jacket, she could see he had broad shoulders, a narrow waist, and long muscular legs. *Tempting, but uh-uh.* She was off men, even if they happened to be unbelievably beautiful.

He arrived at the doors, just as they were closing. His arm shot out in between them, making them bounce open. Maya stepped forward with cat-like quickness, placing her hand on the man's chest. Incredible heat poured down her arm, not burning hot, just strong sensual warmth. Her nipples went rigid under her black leather jumper.

*Shit.*

His mouth -- upper lip slightly fuller than the lower -- curved upward in a gorgeous smile. His remarkable bright green eyes were accented with gold rings around his pupils. Her breath caught in a short gasp and her tongue went tingly.

Even though his arms stayed at his sides, Maya felt hands brush against her breasts, caress her ass, rub down her mound to her wet folds. *It's all in your mind, Maya*, she told herself. *He's just standing there. Nothing else. Just standing there...* Exuding some major mojo.

Heat and desire rolled off the stranger and she fought the impulse to close the distance between them and kiss his luscious mouth. Instead, Maya shook her head and nudged him back one step into the corridor. "Sorry, Stud, you'll have to take the next elevator."

He tilted his head to the side, raised an eyebrow, and backed away. "No problem, hot stuff."

*Yikes!* His smooth low voice sent goose bumps over her body. He winked as the doors closed between them. "Oh, jeez, I need to get laid," she mumbled, then turned her attention back to the client.

The rocker must have heard her, because he leaned against the elevator rail and whispered to her, "Hey, Maya, you gorgeous Amazon, what say we blow this joint and take a little me and you time?"

Usually she didn't mind the Amazon reference -- being six feet tall, she was used to it -- but the rock star was getting on her last nerve. Besides, his smarmy lust-filled emotions were dripping all over her. As a bodyguard, Maya's empathic abilities came in handy, but certain men *and women* could be overwhelming.

"You and me," she corrected and mentally added, *asshole*.

He snuggled his body in closer to hers. "Exactly. Me and you." His long hair brushed against Maya's shoulder. If he kept up the touching, he might not survive the trip to the lobby.

Rolling her eyes, she put out a hand to push him off. She patted the handgun in her hip holster. "No, the correct way to say that is 'you and me' and the answer is no." She wanted to add that big hair bands died in the 80's, but held her tongue. Besides, she hadn't been paid yet.

Milo put up his hands defensively. "Hey, baby, what's with the 'tude? Most chicks dig me. After all, I'm going to be a legend." He smiled -- very self-assured.

Maya shook her head and held down the button on the two-way radio that clipped to her belt then spoke into the headset. "Jack, everything set?"

A voice came back over, "Yeah, boss, good to go."

"Tyler, you set?"

"Yeah, no problem," came a new voice.

The elevator slowed to a stop. "Have you ever heard of Michael Damian?" she asked Milo.

"Who?"

The doors opened to the lobby. "My point exactly. Rock on, dude. Your fans are waiting." Maya stepped out between him and a mob of screaming teenage girls chanting "Milo." She needed aspirin -- and quickly.

\* \* \*

The press conference had gone on for thirty minutes, nearly twenty-nine too long. Maya was amazed at the long line of teenagers, boys and girls alike, along with some twenty-somethings who crowded into line to get Milo's autograph.

In the corner stood the tall man from the elevator. His startling green eyes met Maya's. Her clit throbbed at the heat in his eyes. Her ardor must have been written all over her face, because he smiled, slow and meaningful.

Involuntarily, she took a step toward him when a sudden wave of rage and anger directed at Milo washed over her. She went into full alert mode, tearing her gaze from the hotty with the body.

Scanning the crowd, she saw the channeler of those emotions weaving his way through the press of bodies -- a stocky man with dark glasses and a long gray trench coat made his way closer to the client. Though Maya couldn't see his eyes, his emotions were easy to read, but it was a bit more difficult to decipher his intentions. She had a sinking feeling he wasn't a line-jumper there to get his CD signed.

*Back to the job*, she sighed, casting one last fleeting look at Mr. Sexy Tight Pants. "Tyler," she said into the headset, "glasses at two o'clock."

"See him," was his response.

"Jack?"

"Copy that, boss lady," he said.

Within a couple of seconds, Jack and Tyler closed in on the man's position.

Maya had problems trusting people, but Jack Simon was an exception. She'd worked security with Jack for several years. He liked her for who she was, not because he had aspirations for getting lucky with her. As a matter of fact, Jack wasn't even remotely attracted to her. He liked his women shorter and with more meat on their bones.

Bald, and only about five-foot-seven, he could take down someone twice his size in a second. He was in charge of securing the lobby, while she babysat the money. They'd recently hired Tyler Jackson, a former Marine, as back-up muscle. Tonight had been his first gig with them, and they were curious to see what kind of mettle he was made of -- hopefully not at the client's expense.

"Take it slow, boys. This could be nothing."

They both nodded. Milo leaned close to Maya again. This time his hair grazed her face. "You look hot in black leather, baby." He patted her on the ass, and if he hadn't been paying her three hundred dollars an hour, she'd have broken his hand. *Jerk.*



"I am hot," she sneered. As a matter of fact, she was damned hot. Between the body heat from the crowd and the leather jumper she wore, Maya was sweating her ass off.

The man in the trench reached inside a pocket.

"Be alert, boys. He's digging." She really wanted to knock the guy on his backside, but no sense in getting arrested for assault because a suspicious-looking character was hunting for his pack of cigs.

Maya moved in front of Mr. Rock Star.

"Now that's what I call a view," he said. She pulled her 9mm and laid it against her thigh, easy for the rock star to see, hard for the crowd. "Just kidding." Milo took a step back. "No need for violence."

That made her smile. Up until five years ago, she'd been an English teacher at a local high school, and hardly viewed as dangerous. Maya had grown bored trying to explain the finer points of sentence structure and punctuation to hormonal adolescents who used colons as nipples for doodled breasts.

Besides, every emotion in the young pimply-faced cretins was punctuated and full blown, too much to handle for an adept sensitive -- eight hours a day, five days a week. Ugh. Luckily, next to William Faulkner, karate became her passion. That's how she met Jack and, eventually, became hired muscle. Most days she didn't regret a thing.

Jack moved in from the left and Tyler from the right. As trench coat pulled his hand from his pocket and showed the grip of a gun, Maya shoved Milo Bach down. "Go time, boys."

Jack and Tyler moved swiftly in unison toward the trench and Maya ran forward, trapping him in a triangle. "Gun! Everybody down!"

Of course everyone in the crowd panicked, nobody ducked down, and chaos ensued. *Fucking idiots!* People were running around messing with her view. Maya considered firing a warning shot, just to scare them, but then she knew she'd be down at police headquarters all night filling out paperwork.

*What the hell*, she thought, *I'm going to be down at the station all night anyways*. She held up her piece, ready to fire, when she caught sight of trench coat pulling his gun all the way out and waving the barrel. "Now, Jack, go!"

Jack tackled him from the right side as Tyler threw his body low to the man's left. Trench coat slammed to the floor, but somehow the bastard managed to keep a hold of his gun. He raised the barrel and aimed toward the ex-Marine.

"Tyler! Watch out!" Maya got to the man just as he squeezed off a round, nailing the blond bulldog in the shoulder. She kicked the assailant's hand and the gun went sailing. Following with a knee drop to the chest, Maya ended the fight by cold-cocking him with the butt of the 9mm. She rolled the guy over and put cuffs on him. As she scanned the room for wounded, green eyes from across the lobby met hers in approval. The hotty tipped his head then walked out of the hotel.

Maya resisted the urge to go after him and went to check on her men. Jack knelt next to Tyler using cloth napkins to keep pressure on the wound. "He going to be okay?" she asked.

Jack smiled. "Yeah, went clean through."

Tyler grimaced. "It hurts like shit."

"Well, kid," she said, "welcome to private security." She patted him on the back. "Nice move out there, by the way. Too bad you had to go and get yourself shot."

In all the hoopla, Maya had almost forgotten about the client. She looked around for the rock star, but couldn't see him. "For Christ's sake!"

"Over there, under the table." Jack gestured with his thumb. "I think he's going to need a new set of britches."

Grinning, Maya shook her head. "They don't pay me enough for diaper changing."

They got paid well that night. The rock star's manager threw in an extra two grand for good measure. Tyler wasn't happy, but he would be after he recovered. It was good money for a couple hours of work.

\* \* \*

Stephen watched Maya talk with the police as they hauled away the perp. The raw grace of her power and smooth motion when she'd taken the man down nearly drove him crazy. For a moment, he'd almost jumped into the foray with her, but she'd nicely managed to take care of herself. He knew she was an empath.

And he didn't need to be empathic to know what she was feeling when she'd touched his chest during the planned "chance" encounter at the elevator. His hand ghosted over the area above his heart where he could still feel the tingling of her hand. She wanted him and he meant to let her have what she wanted.

Seeing Maya, feeling her touch, had taken all his energy -- the heat he'd felt within her, the rush of his blood pounding his arteries until he thought he would burst.

He hated the compulsion to have sex with anyone with a pulse, but such had been his life as a partial incubus, sex demon. Which meant no real super powers, except the ability to seduce just about anybody whether he wanted to or not. As a college student, he'd thought the whole thing was wicked-cool, getting laid on a nightly basis. But lately, all his demon had done was get him into more trouble than the sex was worth.

Unfortunately for Stephen, the incubus gene occurred every two generations in the males of his family. He'd been in the second generation since the last, and the only male. It was a dark family secret, to which only the men in his family were privy. There wasn't a cure, but finding one right lover might keep his demon part from seeking out many. At least it had worked for his grandfather.

Maya Eddings, he thought, could prove to be the answer, his redemption. His body burned at her touch, confirming what he already knew. She would be his salvation.

*I will have you, Maya Eddings,* he thought darkly.

\* \* \*

Maya spent most of the night downtown at the police station and the rest at the hospital with Tyler. The ex-Marine had done well for his first night. It took a bit of convincing on her part to make sure it wasn't his last. Finally, about four a.m., she'd

arrived home and put on her Winnie-the-Pooh nightshirt. She loved the Pooh, his little butt poking out of Rabbit's home.

She rubbed his golden bottom plastered over her breasts. Her nipples tightened. *Who was that gorgeous man at the hotel?* He'd definitely made an impression.

Dead tired, she flopped on her bed. *Oh, my green-eyed mystery man, make my wet dreams come true.* She sighed wistfully then conked out.

## Chapter 2

The phone rang, rousing Maya from a hard sleep. She looked at the alarm clock. Jeezus, it was six in the morning. Fumbling for the receiver, she knocked it on the floor. "Damn it!" She felt around and located the phone. "Hello. You've woken Maya Eddings. Be afraid. Be very afraid."

"Maya?" the voice on the other end answered. "You sound gruff, babe. Rough night?"

"Hey, Paula." Maya relaxed. "You should know better than to call me before ten. I don't even get up to pee before ten o'clock." Paula Daniels had been her best friend since the sixth grade. They'd even gone to college together. She was one of the few people in Maya's life who didn't regularly piss her off.

"I know, I know," Paula said, "but I have a favor to ask, and I wanted to catch you before I headed to work."

Rubbing her sleep-worn eyes, Maya sat up on the edge of the bed. "Name it."

"Well, why don't you hear what it is before you make any promises..."

After Maya got off the phone, she found herself wide awake and with only two hours of sleep. She tried closing her eyes and making her mind blank, she tried reading, she tried some soft music, and nothing was working. No way in hell she was going to fall back to sleep.

Paula had asked Maya to escort her younger brother to a formal business party. Apparently his date had cancelled at the last minute, and he needed someone on his arm to impress. Saying "no" to Paula wasn't an option. Maya owed her -- big time. Her family life had been for shit and Paula had made her part of the family.

Paula's little brother had been fourteen the last time she'd seen him -- gangly with a bad case of acne. Strange kid, really. That was ten years ago, in their senior year

of college. Stephen had sniffed around Maya the entire time like a wayward puppy. Just great. She hoped he was over it.

Rolling over, Maya checked out the clock, again. Shit, it was only seven in the morning -- her prime sleepy time. She brushed her teeth and checked out the tube. An old rerun of *LA Law* was playing. It made her think of Matt Brewer, the neighbor across the hall. He was an investigator for a law firm -- mostly window peeping for divorce cases -- and someone she'd slept with once or three times. Maybe more, but who was counting?

*Mmm, Matt.* One hot ticket, all beautiful body, curly black hair, and blue eyes. His father was Irish and his mother Greek. The lethal combination made him look like he belonged on Mount Olympus.

Maya really liked him, but he'd wanted something she wouldn't give him -- a relationship -- a life mate. Matt was a lycanthrope, a werewolf, born to it on his father's side, and once a lycan got it in his head to have a woman, he could be relentless. But Maya wasn't the settling down kind, nor did she have any plans of having puppies.

Besides, his family hated her. Specifically, his mother. Isadora Brewer, Izzy to her friends and practically anyone but Maya -- she'd insisted Maya call her Mrs. Brewer -- was not a nice person. She wanted Matt to settle down with a nice were-chick, like she had room to talk! She'd started out human enough herself.

Just remembering the night Matt had arranged for Maya to "accidentally on purpose" meet his mom made her teeth hurt. The woman talked loudly, succinctly, and with lots of gesticulations. Talk about pissed. When Isadora found out Maya knew of Matt's lycan status, she flipped her wig. Seriously, she wore a wig. Okay, it was more like a hair piece, sort of looked like a squirrel's tail, but still...

It didn't really matter what his mother thought about her. Maya lived by the philosophy that friends were for fucking. Unfortunately, Matt hadn't seen it that way.

Lord, just thinking about him made her twitch and go wet. She turned off the TV. Dammit! Between Matt and Mr. Green Eyes, sleep looked less and less like an option. It

had been three months since her last date. Which meant she hadn't been laid in nearly ninety days.

Damn Matt! And his moral conscience. The last part she thought with less anger and more regret.

She focused on the door, willing a knock she knew wouldn't come. She even considered doing a little knocking herself. No, she told herself, I will not go across the hall. Matt had made it perfectly clear that unless Maya wanted more than a bedmate, he was out. Besides, he had started to date some woman named Penny, Jenny, Wenny, oh, who the hell cared?

She sat quietly on the couch, clit aching for attention. "Fuck it," she mumbled. Matt didn't leave for work for another two hours, and who knew...

Maya didn't even bother to comb her mess of short black hair; instead she beelined across the hallway to Matt's apartment. Hesitating for just a moment, she knocked.

From inside she could hear, "Just a minute." Then a small crash. "Shit, Jesus, fucking plant." The door opened and Matt, wearing nothing but flannel pajama pants, his broad muscular chest staring her in the face, or rather her staring at the firm pecs, stood eye to eye with Maya while holding a sore big toe in hand. Not a great start.

He looked confused. "Maya? Is something wrong? It's seven o'clock in the morning. Something's gotta be wrong if you're ringing this early." He let go of his foot. "You look like hell."

"Stop talking." Maya stalked toward him. "Before I change my mind." She grabbed him into a kiss. His lips were unyielding at first, then they warmed to hers. His tongue slipped between her teeth. She put her hand on his cock, feeling it grow beneath the flannel.

"Wait, wait..." he said a little breathlessly. "I can't do this. I'm seeing someone."

Maya's grip tightened, not enough to hurt, but enough to get his attention. "See her, fuck me."

Heat touched Matt's hazel eyes as Maya pushed him back into the apartment, closing the door behind them. She wrapped her arms around him. He captured her lips in a hungry kiss, darting his tongue between her teeth, exploring her mouth. His hands brushed down to caress her ass.

"Mmmm, nice ass. But you could have put on something sexy."

Maya blushed, remembering she was wearing "the Pooh." She stripped the nightshirt over her head, leaving only black silk panties against her pale skin. "How's this for something sexy?"

Matt smiled as he drank in her body, leanly muscled, and her bare 34 C's standing erect and ready for attention -- not so erect that she could pass the pencil test, but still... "It works."

She moved close for another kiss. "You're lucky I brushed my teeth." She lightly bit his lower lip.

Matt, the same height as Maya, growled, lifting her off the ground. He cradled her body. He kissed her neck and carried her to the kitchen counter. Sidling between her legs, he rubbed a hand between her breasts then down to her abdomen. "You've got a great body, Maya. I love the way it feels in my hands."

She put her tongue in his ear, then whispered, "Less talk. More action."

In response, he looped a finger around the wet silk of her panties and she moaned as he slid between the folds of her sex. "Damn, do you walk around in a constant state of horny? You're the only woman I know who's always ready."

"That a bad thing?" She squirmed with frustration, grinding against him as he withdrew his hand and placed it on her shoulder. *Crap!*

His face grew somber and serious. Never good news. "Yeah, Maya. Sometimes it is. I want more than sex from you and I'm not willing to settle for scraps anymore." He stepped away from the counter and scooped her nightshirt from the floor. "I think you should go home."

She hadn't expected that. She couldn't read Matt's emotions, not like she could most people. Apparently lycans were on a different frequency than regular humans, but



he'd always been honest with her to the point that she didn't need to. Now was no exception. "Fine. I don't need you to get off anyways," she said through gritted teeth.

"Oh, I know." A glint of anger flashed in his brown eyes. "You are nothing if not self-sufficient. Now." He gestured to the door. "Goodbye."

A small scream of aggravation slipped from her lips. "You're such a... such a... woman!" She grabbed her clothes from his hands. The look he gave her made her nervous. Never smart challenging an alpha male, but he'd pissed her off.

Before she could get to the door, Matt was on her, shoving her against the wall. The nightshirt dropped to the floor, leaving his chest pressed against her bare flesh. He cupped her naked breast, molding the soft mound in his palm as his mouth went to her lips, her jaw, kissing with teeth grazing over her skin. "You're treading in dangerous waters, woman," he whispered in her ear.

She wanted to say something cute, funny, to lighten the mood, but "Danger is my middle name" seemed way too clichéd. Instead, she answered by sliding her hand into his pants and felt the heat of his cock thrumming, while her fingers tangled in the curly hair surrounding it. Her other hand traveled to his head, holding his mouth firmly to her skin as his lips moved down her chest, his mouth capturing her nipple, sucking it in.

Matt grasped her leg, pulling her thigh up onto his hip. She moved her hand from his cock, allowing her pussy to grind against the rigid length. Frustration drove him; a barking grunt sounded through the quiet apartment as he lifted her off the ground again and carried Maya to his bedroom.

He threw her on the bed and she landed with a whoosh of breath leaving her body. He tugged the waist of his pajama bottoms down to his thighs, his feet doing the rest of the work as the flannels hit the floor. She drank in his body, fine black hair covering his broad chest with a pleasure trail leading to the rough curly hair framing his erect cock. "This is a mistake," were the words that came from his mouth, but his eyes told a different story. Matt wasn't going to stop himself this time and Maya rejoiced.

She slid to the edge of his bed, pulling his hips to her, and took the length of his cock into her mouth. Matt moaned, hips bucking forward in response. As her lips slid along the soft tender skin, her hand snaked into his nightstand and pulled out a condom.

He'd told her in the past that sex could transform a human to lycan, and even in her passion-drunk state, her pussy aching, wet, and ready, she remembered. Lycanthropes didn't get diseases or illnesses. Their genetic make-up made them nearly invulnerable. But even the promise of long life and good health couldn't convince Maya that it was cool to grow a tail.

Slipping his cock from her lips, she sheathed the thick length of him. "Fuck me," she whispered, nearly begging. "I want you inside me."

Matt, standing at the edge of the bed, reached down and pulled her legs up, pushing her thighs back to position the bulbous head at her opening. "Damn, you're so fucking wet," he said, sliding the tip back and forth against her clit.

She squirmed, trying to force him inside. If he didn't hurry she would come before his shaft could fill her. "Stop teasing, and fuck me, Matt."

A ferocious grunt escaped his lips as she felt the apex of his cock enter her, followed by his entire length as he thrust his hips forward, nearly savage. Again he thrust, holding her thighs down, her knees to either side of her chest. The angle allowed his balls to slap against her ass with each forward advance.

Maya's fingers traced over her swollen nub, filled with blood, aching to be touched. She slid her hand until his cock slipped back and forth between her middle and ring fingers, feeling him as he moved in and out of her cunt. The tension in her body pulled like strings on a marionette, yanking and tugging, building with unadulterated pleasure as the ridge of his cock rubbed over the sensitive spot a mere inch or so inside her channel.

"Oh, God," she whispered, tears forming in her eyes as his fingers dug into the muscles of her thighs. Pleasure overwhelmed her senses. "Matt," she breathed. "Matt, Matt, oh, shit, damn."

A jolt of ecstasy took her, filling Maya with the rapture that came with orgasm as her hips bucked against him. Her arms flew up and behind her head as she tried to grasp onto something, anything to keep her grounded. Maya moaned into a pillow that she'd managed to grab a hold of, her back shuddering as she came and came.

As the orgasm subsided, Matt's thrusts quickened, but remained steady, his hard cock working the sensitive spot in her pussy until she could feel the pressure of a new climax building, working its way through her once again. "Feels so good, so good..." Her words trailed off, then pinched back a scream as the next wave of pleasure hit, bowing her back.

Maya pushed her legs upward until her feet were by his head, taking the entire length of his shaft deep into her slick, swollen cunt. Her clit bounced against the mass of hair above his shaft as he gripped her thighs and pulled her fiercely toward him with every hard thrust of his hips. She looked into his deep blue eyes, slightly rimmed in gold now, intense, possessive as he drank in her sex-slackened face. With a snarl on his lips and his teeth clenched tight, he bucked forward. Maya came again as Matt pumped his orgasm into her, then held her tight as the last of his energy spent.

"That was fantastic," she said with a smile as he solemnly, and with regret she noticed, withdrew from her.

"What does it mean, Maya?" he asked.

"I don't know. It was fun, right?"

Disappointment covered him, she could tell by his body language, even if the look on his face had gone cold. Why couldn't he be satisfied? Maya sighed as Matt sat next to her on the bed. "I can't do this again. It hurts too much." Unshed tears rimmed his eyes. "Don't come over again. Please."

She wanted to hold him, to tell him it would be all right. Hurting him was the last thing in the world she wanted. But she couldn't give him what he needed, and it pissed her off that he wouldn't take what she could give. On that note, she picked up her clothes and left.

## Chapter 3

Maya chose vanilla. She always chose vanilla. It reminded men of chocolate chip cookies, a warm oven, and Mom. The scent took men back to wholesomeness and unconditional love, something they secretly craved, but never expected from someone who hadn't given birth to them.

She slipped on a tight black velvet number with spaghetti straps and a split up the side to accentuate her long legs. It was like a glorious path that led down to her new Prada three-inch strap sandals. Maya turned her ankle out to admire them. They'd cost a pretty big chunk of change. But when you're six feet tall, you have two choices, try to hide it or flaunt the hell out of it. Maya chose to flaunt.

At six-fifty-nine, Paula's little brother knocked at the door. At least he was prompt. When Maya opened the door to find Mr. Green Eyes wearing an impeccably tailored black three-piece tuxedo with a black silk tie, fitting his narrow waist and lusciously slim hips perfectly, she nearly fainted. "Uh, I think you have the wrong apartment."

He smiled, sultry and sexy, the sizzle in the air palpable. "Hello, Maya."

*Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!* An orgy of emotions crashed against her. "Stephen?"

He looked around. "Were you expecting someone else?"

Oh, how his voice sent visions of sugar plums dancing through her head. "You've, uh, grown up some since the last time I saw you."

"Yep, grew a few inches and the acne cleared up nicely." A devilish grin crossed his face.

Other things had grown up nicely on him as well, the bulge in his pants for example -- so much so that her eyes lingered for a moment longer than she'd intended.

"Maya," he said in a soft deep voice. "It's good to see you again." He leaned close and kissed her cheek. "Hmmm. You smell good."

The touch of his lips, innocent and simple, made her feel weak and, frankly, horny as hell. He was already a little too smooth and for another thing this was Paula's brother. *I will not molest Paula's brother in any way.* "Nice to see you, Stephen." And it was nice. Way too fucking nice!

Maya grabbed her Dolce and Gabbana handbag -- small enough to be feminine, but large enough to carry lip gloss, a credit card, ID, some cash, and a gun. "Now, before we go, there are some ground rules that have to be established."

He nodded and even that looked sexy.

"Cut that shit out."

He smoothed his hair, his eyes going all bedroom GQ. "Cut what out?"

"Never mind. Okay. Pay attention," she told him, shaking her head to clear her hormone-addled thoughts. "Hand holding's fine, slow dancing is negotiable, but there will be absolutely no touching of any body parts covered by this dress." Of course, even the touching of uncovered body parts might not be a good idea.

"Absolutely," he agreed, but his light eyes sparkled with mischief.

So the black dress didn't cover much, her intent was still clear. She grabbed her wrap and linked arms with him. "This is a favor for your sister, buddy. Nothing else." Even if her body disagreed.

"Okay, Maya." He winked. "Got it."

She adjusted one of her three-inch strappies and they headed out. In the hallway, the door opened to 37B. Matt walked out. Great! It wouldn't have been so bad if he hadn't looked so damn good -- tight black jeans, and a black T-shirt to match. She glanced at Stephen. What was it with men in black? Well, to be fair these two fellas would've looked good in burlap.

"Hello, Matthew." He hated to be called Matthew.

He smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. "Maya." He looked at Stephen then back to her. "You babysitting tonight?"

Maya's face went hot. Stephen grabbed her hand and kissed it gently, all the while watching Matt. One tiny little gesture that nearly sent her into a frenzy, wanting to strip off his clothes and knock boots right in the hallway -- with both of them.

She forced herself to calm down and caressed Stephen's face. "Best gig I ever got." That slapped the smug right out of Matt. She waved at him as they walked away. "Ta-ta, Matthew."

His apartment door slammed shut by the time the elevator door opened. Maya and Stephen tumbled into the carriage laughing. "Thanks," she said to Stephen.

"Ex-boyfriend?"

"Ex-something," she murmured. He put his arm around her, and for a moment, she snuggled in -- invisible hands snaking down her back, her buttocks, and thighs -- but quickly came to her senses. "Hey, now. The rules still stand as prearranged."

Stephen smiled and went obediently to his corner of the elevator.

"And stop smiling!"

\* \* \*

The hotel ballroom was filled with the standard stuffed shirts and dressed up trophy wives. The way people treated Stephen made Maya feel like she was on the job. He was a regular minor celebrity. Apparently he was the youngest person to ever make junior partner at Dream Makers, Inc., a downtown architectural firm. The party was for him.

The place was decked out in a Greco-Roman theme. Large pillars lined the dance floor. The wait staff wore sandals, togas, and circular ivy headdresses. Maya hoped they'd skipped the purging basins. They were quickly ushered to the head table shortly after they arrived -- cameras clicking left and right.

"I'd have worn my good dress if I'd have known I was going to be in the spotlight all evening," she said.

"You're gorgeous." He took her hand and kissed it again, sending melting twitters through her. Twenty flashes went off simultaneously.

Maya picked up an olive branch centerpiece -- talk about overdoing it -- then set it back down. "I'm used to guarding the public spectacles, not being the spectacle. I don't think I like it very well."

"Sorry. I guess I should have warned you."

His expression told a different story. He seemed very pleased with himself, and he looked like everything was going as planned. And she wondered, what exactly *was* the plan?

A graying man in a well-tailored tux walked over to their table. A blonde woman in her forties, pretty in an Anjelica Huston way, with big breasts -- probably fake -- was draped on his arm.

Stephen stood and they shook hands. "Mr. Peterson."

"Call me John. After all, you're a partner now." The older man smiled. "No one deserves it more. The Harper account was a pure *coup d'état*." He laughed and Stephen looked quite pleased with himself.

"Thank you, Mister, eh, John."

Peterson gestured to the woman on his arm. "You remember my wife, Emma?"

"Of course," Stephen said. He kissed Emma's hand. "Lovely to see you again, Mrs. Peterson."

She smiled. "I'm flattered you remembered me."

Her hand lingered in his just a little too long, which told Maya that the woman had a bit of a crush on young Stephen. That and the waves of lust blowing off her like dust in a windstorm.

Stephen broke contact first then looked down at Maya. "This is Maya Eddings, my date."

Peterson took her hand and nodded his head. "A pleasure to meet you, my dear."

Mrs. Peterson leaned over and lightly kissed her cheek. "Nice to meet you, Maya." Her smile was tight and phony -- like her tits -- and just as strong as the lust had

been toward Stephen, the jealousy she telegraphed toward Maya could knock out an elephant.

"Well, come along, Emma," Peterson said. "We've mandatory mingling to attend to." He looked at Stephen. "We'll talk later, my boy."

After the Petersons left, Maya and Stephen settled back down to the table. Maya clawed the air. "Meow."

"What?"

"She's a real feline."

"Who?" Stephen brushed a piece of lint from his sleeve. "Emma?"

"Oh, it's Emma now?"

Cocking his head to the side, he gazed at her. Those emerald eyes of his were startlingly clear and innocent -- with just the hint of devil. Much to her dismay, Maya felt uncomfortably female. Stephen raised an eyebrow and asked charmingly, "Just what type of man do you think I am?"

Maya was just about to tell him *exactly* what type she thought he was, but they were interrupted. A middle-aged man, medium height, graying at the temples, and in a classic tux with bow tie, stood next to the table. He cleared his throat. "Daniels."

Stephen stood and took the man's hand in a firm shake. "Watkins."

"Congratulations on the promotion." The gentleman gave the appearance of control, but his real feelings washed over her in angry waves. So far the night had proven a veritable cornucopia of intense emotions. In other words, an empath's nightmare.

Straightening the back of his jacket, Stephen sat down. "Thank you."

She expected a backlash of anger, irritation -- something from Stephen toward the older man, but nothing. Right then Maya realized she couldn't read him. There was no strong *anything* from Stephen toward Watkins, and she cursed herself for being too blinded by her own hormones to notice. It was as if he could pick and choose what emotions Maya felt from him, because she definitely felt lust from him. More and more interesting.



Watkins glanced at Maya then back to Stephen. "Your date is lovely."

*His date can hear you. Not that you're really paying attention, she thought.*

"Yes, she is," Stephen agreed, never taking his eyes off Mr. Classic Tux.

Since it was apparent that she wasn't going to be introduced, she offered her hand. "Maya. Maya Eddings."

Watkins lightly took it. "Samuel Watkins." He leaned forward and kissed her knuckles. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ms. Eddings." A pen fell out of his breast pocket and rolled onto the table. Stephen picked it up and gave it back to him.

Watkins smiled at Stephen, but it wasn't a happy smile by any means. If he could unleash the feelings behind those eyes, everyone in the room would have been dead. "Good luck, Daniels," he said as a way of parting. Maya thought it was an odd thing to say.

"That man doesn't like you very much."

Stephen shrugged. "You're not wrong."

"Care to elaborate?"

"He's been working with the company for eleven years. I've been with them for one year. He's an associate. I'm a junior partner." He shrugged again. "No great mystery there."

She leaned back in her chair and took a sip of champagne. "Why you?"

"Why me what?"

"Why make you a partner and not him?"

"Oh, that." He waved his hand as if shooing a fly. "I'm in demand. He isn't."

"He's not any good?"

"He's okay with basic mid-economy structures. But he has no vision for the high end market." He rubbed his face. "Look, I'm not interested in talking about Watkins."

"But..." Maya shook her head. "Never mind." Hey, if he didn't want to talk about it, who was she to push?

Stephen looked relieved. A soft slow waltz played in the ballroom. He stood up and offered his hand. "Care to dance?"

"Yeah, sure, why not?" Maya was annoyed that he wouldn't answer her questions.

Stephen danced like he'd been born to it -- effortless, like gliding across ice. Maya concentrated on everyone else except Stephen to keep her knees from buckling as he held her in his arms.

Through the crowd, she noticed Watkins at the bar talking to a man in his mid-thirties with a white streak going along the right side of his dark brown hair. The man looked scruffy and out of place. Watkins' face turned red as the conversation grew heated. Maya didn't know why, but she was intrigued by the scene.

Both men seemed pissed. Watkins waved his hand in a dismissive gesture and started to walk away. The other man grabbed Watkins' arm. The look exchanged between the two men could only be described as less than friendly.

"Earth to Maya," she heard Stephen say.

"Yeah?"

"What's going on? You haven't heard a word I've said."

She pointed to the man at the bar. "Who's that?"

Stephen shrugged. "Dunno. He looks familiar, but not anyone I can place."

A man in a white tux, mid-fifties -- handsome in that Sean Connery older but distinguished sort of way -- went to the bar and began to talk to the other man. "Who's that with him now?"

"Him?" Stephen pointed to white-tux guy. "That's Carl Calbert. He's one of the senior partners at the firm."

Calbert leaned over and said something into the man's ear. The man nodded and left the area.

Stephen swung Maya around then dipped her as the waltz ended, one hand on her back, the other in her right palm, while an invisible hand trailed from the center of her chest to her stomach. It startled her enough that her feet slipped on the floor, but he held strong and leaned close while she was still in a vulnerable slant. "I'm feeling neglected."

She grabbed his arms and pulled herself upright. "Poor baby." Maya started back to the table. Stephen followed. Six women made goo-goo eyes at him before they got back to their chairs. He made eye contact and smiled at every single one of them -- *the bastard.*

Stephen gave her an odd look. "Something wrong?"

Maya rolled her eyes. "Why me?" It wasn't rhetorical.

"Why you what?"

"Your date cancelled?" Maya shook her head. "I don't think so."

He put his hand to his chest and did that little mock surprise thing Maya hated so much. "Are you accusing me of conspiracy?"

"Possibly."

"Would you believe that I've had a mad crush on you since puberty, so I took this opportunity to try and impress you?"

She turned her head until their mouths were mere centimeters apart. Maya was torn between wanting to thrash him or to kiss him. Okay, more than kissing, but she opted on neither, instead leaning back. "Maybe." She smiled. Stephen sighed. *Good*, she thought. *He's disappointed. Disappointment is good.*

He looked like he was about to say something when a waiter approached. "Are you Mr. Daniels?" the young man asked.

"Yes," Stephen said.

The guy handed him a folded note. "I have a message for you."

Stephen looked at it then scooted back in his chair. "If you'll excuse me for a moment." He stood up.

She grabbed his arm. "What's up?"

"I've been summoned by Peterson."

"You want I should go with?"

"No, it's in the... executive boys' room... If you get my drift."

"Ah, the toilet."

"Exactly."

She got up and started to follow him.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm going with you."

He looked a little shocked, so she amended her statement. "I have to use the ladies' room. I'm sure it's near where you're going." He seemed hesitant, so she added, "Don't worry. I won't embarrass you around the other boys."

He smiled and put his arm out for her. "Thank you, Mother," he said.

"Huh." Frankly, she was insulted and planned to soundly kick his ass the next time he referred to her as mother.

\* \* \*

Stephen had gone into the men's room, while Maya pretended to go into the ladies'. After he disappeared inside, she went to stand next to the men's door. She was getting tired of all the passersby staring at her like she was a pervert -- or worse, desperate. Looking at her watch, she noted that it had been five minutes since Stephen had gone in. She hoped the meeting wouldn't last much longer.

The man from the bar brushed past her and entered the bathroom. Two seconds later he was backing out in a hurry. "He's killed him! Someone call the police," he shouted.

Maya pulled her gun from her purse and pushed her way in as the man took off in a sprint toward the hotel lobby, still yelling. A faint sour odor filled the room. Stephen was standing over Watkins and there was a small amount of blood on the floor next to his head.

Her mouth dropped in pure shock and she wasn't easily shocked. "Stephen..."

He looked up at Maya, his face a little green. "I... I... He's dead."

She moved closer, slowly, so she wouldn't scare him and so she could get a better view of Watkins. A pen was sticking out of the side of his neck.

She noticed Stephen's tie was loosened, his sleeves were drenched and his hair was wet around the edges. "Uh, Stephen," Maya said, trying to keep the tightness out of her voice. "What the hell have you been doing in here for the last five minutes?"

His face turned bright red. "Throwing up."

Well, that explained the smell. "What happened?"

"I don't know." He looked up at her, wide-eyed, like a deer caught in the headlights. "You have to believe me, Maya. He was like this when I came in."

She believed him. Problem was, she wasn't the one who needed to. The cops would be there soon, and he'd have a rough time convincing them he was innocent.

"Start from the beginning," Maya said. "Don't leave anything out."

Stephen's face tightened with stress. "I came in to meet with Peterson and I saw Watkins on the floor. I went to him, saw blood on the back of his head and the pen sticking out of his neck. I turned him over and checked for a pulse, but he was..."

"You flipped the body?"

"Yeah, I..."

"Oh, man. You never touch the body!" Maya might have been overreacting, but Stephen was already in deep *caca*, and moving the body wasn't going to help his case.

He slumped against the wall, looking tired and scared. Maya put her hand on his arm and she didn't feel fear, disgust, remorse, any of the expected emotions; again, she felt lust, savage and pure. When she let him go it faded.

"It'll be okay," she told him. Damn, she hated making promises she might not be able to keep.

## Chapter 4

The boys in blue had taken everyone's name who'd been at the party and let most of them go home. Most that is, except Maya, though they did kick her out of the bathroom. They'd taken Stephen downtown for questioning. Maya advised him to say nothing and call his lawyer. They'd taken her gun, even though she had the paperwork in her purse that said she was legal to carry concealed. She'd been a little hostile about that, but all in all, tried to be cooperative. A homicide detective Maya had encountered several times walked toward her looking none too friendly.

She put on her biggest, most charming smile. "Sandenski. How you doing? Long time no see." Maya didn't bother to shake his hand.

"Ms. Eddings," he said. "Why is it that someone is always getting shot or killed around you?"

"Now, now," she said. "Nobody got shot tonight. Which reminds me, can I get my gun back?"

Sandenski grimaced. Obviously, he didn't get her sense of humor. "I should have your private enforcement license pulled, Eddings."

"The worst you can do is get me suspended. But even that wouldn't stick for long."

He glared at Maya, and she decided not to press her luck. "I wasn't on the job tonight, Sandenski."

He crossed his arms and laughed one of those "you're-the-butt-of-a-good-joke" laughs -- the kind that was more of a snort than a real laugh. "You always bring a gun on your dates?"

Maya gave him her best professional smile -- empty of meaning. "Yes." She wanted to say something witty and sarcastic, but looking at Sandenski, she figured, why bother?

His face sobered as if an invisible fist had punched off the noxious grin. "So, what happened here?"

"I already told your boys."

"I want to hear it from you."

They stared at each other for a long moment in a match of wills, waiting to see who'd crack first. But it'd been a long night and Maya was too tired to play games. She shrugged. "Stephen went to meet a guy named Peterson, one of the senior partners, in the bathroom. I waited out in the hall for him. A couple of minutes passed. A man went in then came out yelling. I went in. Watkins was on the ground dead."

"Anything else?"

"Like what?"

"Did you see anyone else go in or out of the bathroom?"

"Nope." But damn, she wished she had. "Can I get my gun back now?"

Maya called Paula and they met down at the station.

"Are they crazy?" Paula said. "Stephen wouldn't hurt anyone."

She put her arm around Paula's slim shoulders, pushing aside her long sandy-blond hair. "I'm trying to figure out if they're going to press charges or not. They haven't yet, so that's a good sign."

About that time, Stephen was paraded across the station lobby in handcuffs, escorted by two officers. Not good.

Paula saw him and panicked. "Stephen! Stephen!"

He turned and looked at her. His eyes were gaunt with dark circles shadowing under them. Paula tried to make a dash for him, but Maya grabbed her arms.

"Why is he handcuffed? Where are they taking him?" Paula cried.

Maya knew where they were taking him -- in-processing. He'd be printed, photographed, and then put in a holding cell. She saw John Stokes, a detective and friend. "Stay here. I'm going to find out what's going on." She left Paula and walked over to John.

"Hey, Stokes," Maya said. "How's it going?"

John looked up and smiled. Even with slightly crooked teeth, yellowed from years of smoking, it was warm and infectious. "Maya-may-I. Second time this week at the station. This getting to be one of your regular haunts? Or you just looking for an excuse to see me?"

Maya smiled. A friendly face was a definite plus at this point. "Just looking for any excuse. You know me." She kissed his round cherub cheek. "I was hoping you could help me."

"What? No how's the wife? How's the kids? Just bing-bang-boom, can you help me?"

"Okay." She grinned at him. "How's Sharon? How's the kids? Now, can you help me?"

John smiled. "Sharon's doing great. We're working on number three, which you'd know if you ever bothered to accept a dinner invite. The kids are ornery. And yeah, I'll try and help. Whatcha need?"

Sometimes, Maya really loved John. "Congrats on the new baby." She gave him a hug, then put on a serious face. "Stephen Daniels. They just took him down for processing. What's going on?"

The smile faded from John's face. "That's Sandenski's case, Maya. You'd better ask him."

"I don't think he's in the mood to answer any of my questions. Besides, I'm asking you."

"Well..." He hesitated. "I don't know about this, Maya. Sandenski outranks me. I could get in some deep shit for discussing this case with you."

"Come on, John. Who am I going to tell?"



John tapped his finger on the counter several times, looked around, and in a quiet voice, said, "Daniels consented to a fingernail scraping."

"What! Where was his lawyer?"

"Keep it down." John rubbed his fingers through his thinning hair. A look of guilt passed over his face. "He consented before his lawyer arrived. It tested positive for blood, Maya. Sandenski figures that's enough to hold him until forensics gets back with their report."

Paula was leaning against the wall, weeping into her hands. She was always stronger than Maya. Maya didn't have the guts to cry in public -- not even when her father died. "Thanks, John." She hugged him again.

A loud voice drew her attention. It belonged to a three-piece blue suit that exuded max amounts of confidence. He was talking to Sandenski. "My client is not going to stay here for one more minute. Do you hear me? Unless you plan to formally charge him, he's walking out with me."

"I can hold your client for seventy-two hours, Mr. Baler, without charging him," Sandenski told him.

The man, Baler, pulled out a flip cell phone from his pocket, dialed a number, said a few quiet words that Maya couldn't hear, then handed the phone to Sandenski.

"Hello." Whoever was on the other end caused Sandenski to blanch. "Yes, sir. I understand perfectly." Sandenski handed the phone back to Baler.

"You are not to talk to my client again unless I am present, Detective. Do I make myself clear?" Baler said.

Sandenski waved a uniform over. "Crystal," he told Baler. He gave the uniform instructions and the police officer headed toward the processing area. "I don't give a shit if your client is connected to the president of the goddamned United States. If he's guilty, I'm taking him down. Do I make myself clear?"

Baler nodded. Stephen was led into the lobby by the uniform and released to his lawyer.

\* \* \*

Baler had given Stephen last minute instructions, like keeping his mouth shut, then handed him over to Paula and Maya. It was nearly three-thirty when they got him back to his loft down on the Plaza. Maya had already figured out that their boy was rich and well-connected, but his loft, oh man, it was a work of art.

She whistled softly. "Wow," was all she could manage. The floor plan was open. In one corner, a king size bed sat upon a large platform surrounded with stainless steel uprights and large glass panels. A glass block wall was next to it, which Maya could only assume was the bathroom, since she could see into every other part of the loft. And with the exception of black suede furniture, everything else was steel and glass.

Stephen hugged his sister. "Paula, why don't you go on home?"

"I'm not leaving you."

"I'm fine."

Paula looked unconvinced.

Stephen put his hands on her shoulders. "Honest." He kissed her forehead.

She glanced at Maya, then nodded. "Okay."

"Good night, Sweet Sis." He kissed her cheek. "Try not to worry. I'm a big boy now."

Maya admired the brave front he was putting on for his sister. It made him seem even more grown up -- mature. "I better get going too."

An unexpected look of determination came over Stephen's face as he walked to Maya and took her hand, again making her weak and nearly breathless. "Thanks for tonight."

He looked down and his bangs fell forward into his eyes. Maya resisted the temptation to reach out and brush them back. "They'll get this figured out." She forced a smile. "No worries." She gave Stephen's hand a final squeeze, fighting the impulse to shove him onto the floor and do naughty-naughty things to his tall leanly muscled body, then went to Paula and put her arm around her. "You ready, babe?"

She nodded. "I'll call you tomorrow, Stephen."

When they exited the loft, Paula stopped. "What's up?" Maya asked.

"Maya, I know I've asked you for too much already, but could you help Stephen? Look into this... situation... and all."

"I'm not an investigator, Paula."

"You have a private investigator license."

"Yeah, but only so I can carry concealed. I guard bodies. That's what I do."

"Please," she said. "Could you just talk to him? Do a little digging? You know people and... What if something happens to him?"

"What do you think might happen?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I just... I couldn't handle it if anything else happened to him."

Maya nodded. "Of course."

"Thank you!" Paula hugged her hard.

"Don't get too excited. I can't make any promises."

Paula was smiling like she didn't believe her. "I have faith in you."

"Gee thanks." Maya wished she shared her best friend's confidence.

\* \* \*

After Paula left, Maya decided it was a bad idea to go back in the loft and talk to Stephen, but she turned around to the door anyhow. She knocked and waited for a moment -- no answer. She knocked louder. A moment later the door slid open. Stephen stood in the entry with his hair wet, body damp, and nearly naked with the exception of the black silk boxer briefs that clung to his firm thighs. Her mind screamed *run!*

Stephen looked surprised to see her. "Maya?"

"Uh... yeah. Paula asked me to investigate the murder. She's worried about you."

He shrugged and walked back into the loft, leaving her in the open doorway. "I don't know what I can tell you."

"You never know," Maya said, sliding the door closed. "Humor me."

"Suit yourself." He grabbed a damp towel that was lying on the back of his couch and rubbed it vigorously over his mop of blond hair. "Want some coffee?" He

shook his head, water shaking onto the floor. It reminded Maya of a really chic Calvin Klein ad, which made her want to run out and buy underwear and perfume.

"Sure," she told him, making her way to the kitchen area. "Why don't you get some clothes on and... uh... I'll get it ready for us." He was making her uncomfortable with his semi-nakedness.

Now, normally, she would have been fine in this kind of situation. Maya had no qualms about sex, but Paula was her best friend, her family, and the thoughts she was having for Paula's little brother felt almost like incest -- almost.

He chuckled -- kind of soft, and sexy, and low, and it made things tighten in her body. Her resolve to keep it strictly professional deteriorated, and Maya refused to turn around and look at him. Instead, she made a beeline for the coffeemaker.

The kitchen was like something out of the future -- stainless steel counters, polished white stone floor, and glass cabinet doors -- even the refrigerator was see-through. It all seemed oddly sterile. It reminded Maya of one of those "Kitchen and Bath" magazine cover shots. Stephen had been a messy adolescent who lived on cereal and peanut butter sandwiches. She ran her fingers across the cabinets -- they felt cold.

"You're getting fingerprints on the glass," Stephen said.

Startled, Maya turned around. She'd have thought he would have gotten dressed, but no -- he was still in his boxers, no shirt. *Yippee skippy*. "Where do you hide your Cap'n Crunch?"

Stephen smiled, but it wasn't like earlier, when he'd been amused. Walking over to a long steel corner unit, he opened it up, and pulled out a box. "Regardless of what you may think," he said, "some things don't change." It was Cap'n Crunch's Crunchberries.

Maya barked a laugh. "You're blowing your new image. What would your fancy clients say?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Why do you think they're hidden?" He looked over at his empty coffeepot. "I thought you were fixing the java?"

## Chapter 5

They sat on the couch in the living room. Maya was thankful he'd had large chunky well insulated mugs. His hair was mostly dry now and hung haphazardly in his face. She asked the question she'd been curious about all evening. "Why didn't you come right out after you saw Watkins?"

"I've never seen a dead body." He shrugged. "They don't teach you how to react to that kind of situation in college."

"You were in there for several minutes..."

"I was a little freaked out, Maya." He rubbed his fingers through his hair. Irritation edged his voice as he added, "I don't know what you want me to say."

"It's just that..." She couldn't help but notice how sexy his hair looked, still damp and a little mussed. "I can't alibi you. I can't tell the police for sure that you didn't do it. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," he said then sipped his coffee. "I wouldn't ask you to lie for me. If that's what you think."

"That's not what..." Her cell phone rang. Maya walked over to her purse and retrieved it. The display read 5:00 a.m. "Hello?"

"Hey, Maya." It was John Stokes. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"Hi, John. Nah, I was up. What's going on?"

There was a pause. "They found Daniels' fingerprints on the pen that was sticking out of Watkins' neck," John said. "They haven't issued a warrant yet, but it's just a matter of time."

"I understand, John. Thanks for the information."

"You might want to get a hold of him and tell him to call his lawyer. He's looking at some big time trouble."

"Thanks, John."

"One more thing," he added. "The pen didn't kill him. It was a blow to the back of the head."

"Any clue as to what he was hit with?" she asked.

"Nothing that could be found in the bathroom. Whatever it is, it has a strange criss-crossing pattern. Weird."

"Interesting."

"I thought you might think so. Talk to you later, babe."

"Bye." Maya hung up the phone and looked over at Stephen, who was sitting quietly on the couch with a curious expression on his face.

"What is it?" Stephen asked.

She told him what Stokes had relayed.

"Shit. I feel like I'm in the goddamn Twilight Zone."

Maya couldn't disagree -- none of this felt real. He was being set up. At least she was ninety-nine percent sure. But by who and why? "Do you have any enemies? Anyone who'd want to see you out of the way?"

"Sure." He nodded. "But I don't..."

"Who?"

"Maya, I don't see how this is going to help?"

She stood up and started to pace. The Prada shoes were starting to kill her feet. She kicked them off. "Look. Someone is trying awfully damned hard to make you look guilty."

Stephen sighed and leaned back. "About two weeks ago, right after my junior partnership was announced, the FBI approached me. They said the firm was under investigation and wanted me to be their eyes and ears."

"What'd you tell them?"

"That I wouldn't do it."

"And?"

"They told me they'd make sure I went down when they got enough evidence to convict the partners."

"Yeah, okay, but I don't think the FBI would resort to murdering someone to get to you."

"You're right, of course." He swiped his hands through his hair, his green eyes impossibly bright. "Well, there's Carl."

"Carl? You mean Carl Calbert, the guy who was talking with the scruffy man at the bar tonight?"

"Yes, that Carl. I sort of... umm... slept with his wife."

"Sort of slept with his wife? How the fuck does someone *sort of* sleep with someone else?"

"I just meant it wasn't planned. It was only twice. The second time, he caught us."

"So, Calbert knew you had sex with his wife? A partner at the firm, and you still made junior partner."

"Apparently, he was outvoted at the meeting."

"Who else?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"I'm beginning to think you've burned a few more bridges than you're telling me."

Stephen shrugged. "There's Emma."

"Peterson's wife? Please don't tell me you banged her as well."

"No. But not because she didn't want to. She's been a little obsessed with me."

"What about Peterson? You think he could have picked up on any of that? Got jealous?"

Chuckling, Stephen leaned forward and shook his head. "Peterson's a nice man. Clueless, but nice. Emma's a pariah, but he thinks she's a goddess."

"Don't underestimate a man's ability to pick up on signals." Maya rubbed her eyebrows which had been ever tensing since the conversation began. Not only was

Stephen a suspect in a murder investigation, he was a womanizer and working for a shady architect firm. "Anyone else?"

"Watkins."

"I think we can rule out the dead guy." Sunlight crept into the windows. Maya checked her watch -- five-thirty, ugh. She walked over to the windows and realized her dress was starting to get damned uncomfortable. "Do you have some sweats or something I can change into? I can't think in this dress."

The side of his mouth turned up in a crooked smile. "Sure. I can't think while you're in that dress either."

"Don't get cute." *Too late.*

After Stephen brought her a black pair of jogging pants and an oversized top, she looked around the loft. There wasn't a single wall that couldn't be seen through. "I'm not changing in front of you."

He pointed over to the wall of frosted glass bricks near the bedroom area. "You can change in the bathroom if you like."

Scrutinizing the barely muted glass, she nodded. Not much privacy, but it would do.

She felt more than saw Stephen's gaze rake over her body before he asked, "Need company?"

Maya shivered and fought the whim to say, "Hell, yeah!" but instead she said, "I think I can handle it on my own. Thanks."

Stephen looked a bit confused. "Aren't you attracted to me?"

"I told you..."

"I know. Rules. But that's not what I'm asking. You don't feel... compelled to have sex with me?"

It was an odd question and while she could definitely see his tall luscious self between her legs, the answer was... "No." *Yes.*

Her answer seemed to relieve Stephen, which both surprised and annoyed Maya all at the same time.



Stephen shifted on the couch, silk boxers sliding up his thigh, revealing a strong curve of butt cheek. Her pussy thrummed as her lower gut clenched. *Holy shit.*

Maybe changing clothes wasn't the best idea. Getting naked anywhere near him was a bad idea. Her mouth went dry. "Uh, I should probably go home. We can talk tomorrow."

"You could do that." He leaned forward. "Or not."

This was too much. Matt the morning before, and now Stephen. It made her feel downright greedy. The fact she was even considering having sex with her best friend's brother rattled her cage. "Feast or famine," she mumbled, taking an involuntary step toward him.

Stephen started to stand and Maya held up a hand. "Don't." Her breath caught at the look in his startling clear eyes. "Don't get up."

"Maya."

"Don't talk. Don't breathe. Don't move." Grabbing her coat and purse, Maya readied a hasty exit. "This is so not going to happen."

Stephen's focus stayed on her as she rushed to the door, slid it open, and stepped out into the hallway. Once the door was closed between them, Maya slumped against the wall. *Holy smack. Close call.* It took five steps to the elevator to realize she'd forgotten her shoes. "Fuck!"

"Looking for these?"

Maya pivoted on the ball of her foot. Stephen stood in the doorway, dangling her strappies. Like a carrot before a donkey. "Yeah, I'm an ass."

She closed the gap between them in a few short strides. Her mouth met his, pressing hard, lips, teeth, tongue feasting over each other and she breathed in the sweet scent of his freshly scrubbed body.

They fell into the loft. Stephen tugged her dress up as he pressed her body to the wall just inside. His hands moving down her thigh as his knee moved between her legs parting them. A finger looped the side of her stringed bikini panties and gave them a sharp tug, the strap breaking under the strain. She moaned her excitement.

His lips left her mouth, trailing kisses down her neck, breasts, abdomen, his hands pulling her dress up further around her waist. Firm hands grasped her buttocks as his mouth found her pussy, his tongue flickering against the clit, licking and sucking the swollen bud sweetly between his lips. Maya's legs buckled, but Stephen held her upright, a feat that impressed her and fueled her desire even more.

Tight tension coiled itself within her -- the burning edges of an orgasm on the horizon. His tongue was doing incredible things, long, impossibly long it seemed, as it made its way into her pussy, sliding in and out, flicking to her clit then back in, fucking and sucking her while his teeth grazed her sensitive flesh. "Oh, fuck, I'm going to come."

He paused, one hand moving to her breast, pinching her taut nipple between his thumb and forefinger. "Come for me, Maya. I want to taste your desire explode in my mouth."

She nearly sang her compliance as his lips melded once more to her swollen pussy. Impossibly, she felt his hands everywhere, stroking her, caressing, as his tongue dove in and out and over, blood rushing away from her head to her cunt. She shuddered as a bell rang out in her mind, her sex contracting in spasms around his tongue. She flung her head back, it whacked against the wall, but even that minor pain didn't stop the rapture as he kept taking her, all of her, into him.

When the vibrations of the last of her orgasm subsided, Stephen withdrew his lips. Kneeling between her legs he eased her down onto his lap, his cock pressing hard against her soreness. "That was a delicious appetizer." He licked his glistening lips, wet with her own lubricant. He breathed his desire across her neck. "Now for the main course."

He slid his cock from the side of his silk boxers. The end butted up against her pussy then slipped inside. It wasn't as thick as Matt's cock, but longer, much longer, and Maya groaned as he went deeper. "Oh, my," she whispered, throat hoarse from the orgasm.

Laying her on the floor, Stephen was slow, methodical, with deliberate strokes, those magical hands touching her everywhere. Pure sensation, she couldn't think, only feel. His cock seemed to vibrate inside of her, resonating throughout her system. A mass of pleasure and flesh, raw passion. "Faster," she panted. "Take me faster."

Needing him, wanting more, wanting all he had to give, she dug her fingernails into the firm muscles of his buttocks, urging him. But Stephen maintained the pace, slow even thrusts.

"I want this to be wonderful for you."

"It is," she nearly shouted, her body crying for him to take her hard and fast. "It is." She smacked his ass. "Now, faster."

His thrusts quickened, matching the rocking of her hips, grinding her clit against his groin, the coiling tightness building, and she wanted him to come, come with her.

"You're so hot, hot and tight. I can feel your pussy clenching my cock. It feels so good," he murmured. "So good."

"Yes. Yes." The rocking motion became more aggressive, his thrusting more insistent, his rigid cock bottoming out inside her, painfully, pleasurable. His mouth took her breast. He sucked hard, teeth grinding around the tight nipple.

"Ahhh!" she cried out as orgasm burst from her. She screamed as ripples of ecstasy crashed through her body, shaking her to the core. Stephen's moans of pleasure joined with hers as his hips bucked forward and held tight in place as he finished.

"I knew it would be that good." Stephen smiled, his green eyes translucent in the afterglow. Maya couldn't disagree. It had been fucking mind blowing.

"Get up." She patted him. "Stephen, get up." What had she done? Exactly what she'd told herself she wouldn't. *Shit, shit!* "I have to go."

"What's wrong?"

Damn, there was that look again. The same one Matt had given her. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I just have to go." She scrambled to her feet and tried to smooth her dress. It had a rip that went up to her waist. "Crap." Slithering out of the trashed gown, she grabbed his sweats, the ones he'd gotten for her earlier. "We need to talk."

## Chapter 6

Stephen dropped Maya off at her apartment building before going to see Baler. They arranged to meet for lunch later in the day at Manny's on Southwest Boulevard -- but until then she was going to take a snooze. He'd reluctantly agreed they would keep their relationship friendly, if not professional -- and that Paula would never find out. She didn't need the headache.

Barefoot and still wearing the sweats, Maya went into the elevator as Matt was getting off. *Bleeding hell!*

He held the elevator door open with one hand. Sniffing the air, he shifted closer. "Late night?" His face was blank, carefully guarded.

*Argh! Why me?* If only she could read him, feel something. She blinked, trying to concentrate. "No, early morning. Just got back from a run."

He looked down at her bare feet. "Without your shoes?"

She shrugged, too tired to come up with a really good lie.

"I can smell him on you, Maya," Matt growled, his words rough and dangerous. She couldn't think of anything to say -- at least not anything plausible. Besides, when did she have to justify herself to him? He was the one who made it perfectly clear they were O-V-E-R over. Instead, she smiled. "Good to see you, Matthew, as usual." Giving him a little shove away from the elevator door, she gave him a finger wave. "Bye."

Matt frowned, eyebrows arching together in annoyance -- much better than rip out your throat anger. And in a way, it was kind of sweet. Even jealous he looked hot. Maya blew him a kiss as the elevator closed between them.

Before leaving the apartment for lunch, she called Jack Simon and told him what was going on. He agreed to get the lowdown on Dream Makers, Inc., for her. Jack had

some pretty insidious contacts, so she didn't bother to ask him where he'd get the info from, but she knew he'd come through for her.

She showed up at Manny's Mexican Restaurant sporting her favorite pair of black low-rise jeans and a fitted dark green V-neck T-shirt. Not quite rested, but feeling much more alert, and a lot guiltier... *Ugh, Paula's kid brother. How could I?...* since she'd had a couple hours of sleep.

Stephen arrived before her. He wore a tailored charcoal gray suit, hugging his body in all the right places, making him even more drop-dead sexy -- which answered her previous question about the "how." Three waitresses were fawning over him at the table. Even the older gal who worked as a host gave Stephen the hoochie-eye.

Looking around the room, Maya noticed that nearly all the women in the restaurant were gazing at him like they were diabetics and he was a chocolate bar. *Goddamn*, the boy was cute, but he didn't warrant this kind of attention, did he?

Joining him, Maya felt the animosity roll off the waitresses as two of them left and the remaining woman reluctantly took her order. She put up a block and the emotions subsided. After the waitress left, Maya turned to the mouth-watering young man. "What is up with you and women? I mean, jeezus. It seems like every woman you meet really does want to have sex with you."

"Even you." The right side of his mouth turned up in a partial smile.

Everything about him made Maya's lower parts go tight and wet. She licked her lips. "Well..." She cleared her throat. "I've had a dry spell. This morning had less to do with you, and more to do with a needy libido." Not entirely true, considering she'd had sex with Matt the day before. Translation -- a big fat lie. "It can't happen again."

"Okay," he said. But he smiled that infuriating smile.

"Cut that out," Maya chided as the food arrived. "What did your lawyer say this morning?"

"He keeps telling me not to worry, everything they have is circumstantial, but naturally, I'm worried," Stephen said while slicing his burrito. Maya took note that he hadn't taken one bite of food since the waiter had brought out the meals. He just played

with it -- cutting, moving, picking, piling. There was a small stack of diced onions and green peppers off to one side of his plate.

She had to ask. "Why don't you just ask them not to put onions and peppers on your food?"

He pushed another onion piece aside. "I had a friend in college who used to work as a cook. He said that whenever a customer would special order a dish or return food for adjustments it would piss him off so much that he would spit in the food. It's always haunted me." He finally took a small bite, chewed then swallowed. "So unless I'm in a five-star restaurant, I just settle for whatever's on the menu and adjust the meal to suit me."

Her mouth dropped. "Manny's is a classy place! I can't even believe you would suggest something like that would happen here. And as for your friend... let me just say, eww!" There! How was that for righteous indignation? The problem was, she'd ordered a tamale -- hold the chili sauce -- and now his story had her suspicious of her own food.

He took another bite of his burrito. "Mmm," he said. "This is pretty good."

One of the waitresses, a young chicky with pulled back brown hair, large breasts, little waist, sauntered over to the table. She'd undone the top two buttons on her blouse. Leaning toward Stephen, she asked, "Can I get you anything?"

Maya's emotional block held, but she didn't need it open to know what the waitress was feeling. "Why don't you just throw your panties at him, for Christ's sake? You could always drop a couple more buttons, but I didn't know double-Ds were on the menu."

The waitress snapped up straight and walked off in a huff.

"That was rude. Especially since you claim to have no designs on me."

Maya rolled her eyes and pushed her plate away. "So what exactly did the lawyer say?"

"I told you. He said not to worry." He scratched his chin. "Peterson says the note that came to our table wasn't from him. I think your theory about someone being out to get me might just be on spot."

The note! She suddenly felt like an idiot. Some investigator she was turning out to be. Slapping her forehead in frustration, she asked, "What did you do with the note?"

"I threw it away."

"Threw it away! How could you throw it away?"

"I threw it away before I went into the bathroom," he said, getting agitated. "I'm not a psychic. I didn't know that when I walked in there'd be a dead body. Jesus."

Maya took a deep breath. *Okay, calm down.* "It's fine," she said. "Are you going to be all right today?"

"Sure. You got plans?"

She did now. Maya envisioned an entire afternoon digging around in a Dumpster. It wasn't going to be pretty, but the note could be the key to finding out who framed Stephen. "Yeah. I need to take care of a few things."

They both stood up at the same time and grabbed the check. "I'll get it," she told him.

He shook his head. "No, my treat."

She could have argued -- women's lib and all -- but decided against it. "Thanks."

He winked then grinned. "Next time... your treat?" he asked mischievously. It wasn't food on his mind.

"In your dreams," she said, brushing past him toward the exit.

"In yours," she heard him say. He wasn't wrong.

She went straight out of the restaurant without looking back -- no sense in letting him know he might be right.

Maya managed to get a cab quickly, which is cause for celebration in Kansas City. She got out at the Hyatt. It didn't seem nearly as glamorous as it had the night before. But nothing looks good in the brightness of pure daylight.

Skipping the front desk, Maya went straight to housekeeping. She told them that she'd accidentally thrown away an important phone number and they were happy to oblige. The good news -- pick up wouldn't happen until Wednesday and it was only Sunday. The bad news -- now she was committed to digging around in trash. Woo and freaking hoo.

The Dumpsters were around the back of the hotel. Maya had borrowed some latex gloves from the cleaning crew and dug around, tearing into multiple white trash bags. The stench was amazingly strong and rivaled boiled cabbage and beer farts. She took some Kleenex from her purse and stuffed two wads up her nostrils.

The first couple of bags were filled with paper towels, napkins, stale cigarette butts, ashes, business cards, half-eaten appetizers, and other items, but no note. She said a little prayer to find the note before having to go through the entire Dumpster.

When she ripped into the fifth bag and turned it out a long silvery cylinder nearly landed in her lap. Maya picked it up before she realized what it was -- a stainless steel metal vibrator. "Eww!" she squeaked, dropping it back onto the pile.

Screw it. Time to go home, take a hot, hot bath and sterilize her skin, then come back later with a biohazard suit and a gas mask.

A homeless woman dressed in layers of shirts and two coats popped her head over the top of the Dumpster just as she climbed out. "My territory, bitch," she said in a gravelly smoker's voice. Her dirty face pinched up. "Go find your own stash!"

Maya got out and brushed off her jeans. "Pardon me. Didn't realize you had prior claim."

The bag-lady picked up a sack, ripped into the side with her teeth, and pulled out trash a little at a time. "Yessiree, this is Bertha's treasure. Everyone knows that. Mine and no one else's."

Maya got the distinct impression Bertha wasn't talking to her anymore.

"Bottle," the bag-lady said, tossing an empty wine bottle into her shopping cart. She unfolded a piece of paper. She crumpled it up. "Trash." She threw it on the ground in front of the cart.



Maya scooped it up. A note! Some of the words were smudged with chocolate sauce -- at least she hoped it was chocolate sauce. It said "Call me, Marcia" then listed a phone number. Damn, she couldn't get that lucky.

"Drop my treasure, thief!" Bertha screeched.

"You said it was trash."

"Treasure!" she insisted.

Maya shook her head and dropped the note. No sense in getting her all worked up.

"Skunk tried to steal my stuff. I run it off, but good." Bertha cackled through a toothless grin. "Now go on! Scat."

"Skunk?" She scanned the area.

"Skunk gone. Old Bertha gave it a good whack." The old bag lady held up her fist. "Gonna whack the tower too, if it don't get its skinny ass out of Bertha's territory."

The tower? It dawned on Maya the woman was talking about her. Then skunk... She remembered the white streak in the guy at the bar's hair. Maybe... "When did you see the skunk, Bertha?"

"How do you know my name? You've come to take me, haven't you?" She began to croon, then howl. "Take me away, take me away. I knew you was watching me. I knew it."

Maya reached out to the old woman and Bertha jumped and started swinging her fists. "Don't touch me! Don't disappear me. Why, why, why?" she cried.

The woman was obviously off her rocker. "When did you see the skunk?" She reached in her pocket and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. "Tell me and you can have this. More treasure for Bertha."

She put her mittened palms over her ears and crouched low. "Don't say my name, not out loud. There's power in a name. There's power. The skunk. He had power. But I run him off. In the dead of the night, I run him off."

"Last night?"

“The lights were flashing, noise wailing.” She made a siren sound. “Now get. Leave! Bertha has given her pound of flesh.”

Dropping the twenty on the cart, Maya walked toward the gate of the tall privacy fence. No way she was walking back through the lobby after wading in filth. Bertha had seen the man from the bar run out the back of the hotel when the police came. One more clue that didn’t amount to much.

She looked back and saw the woman hold up the vibrator, twist the bottom, slap it against her palm, then toss it over the side into her shopping cart. Another “treasure.” Eh, whatever got her through the day.

## Chapter 7

The cab driver made sour faces at her all the way back to her apartment. Maya tipped him well. He deserved it. It was the quickest ride she'd ever had from any taxi service. Granted, the smell of "eau de garbage" probably drove his foot down on the gas pedal, but he was tactful enough not to mention it. Again, he deserved the tip.

After showering, she put on her SpongeBob BrainyPants nightshirt and settled into the couch with a mug of herbal tea. She'd gone beyond tired after only a few hours of sleep in two nights.

At nine o'clock, Maya had begun to drift off to dreamland when someone knocked at the door. Her nerves completely shot, she jumped to her feet and grabbed for her 9mm.

The knock sounded again. "Maya," came a muffled voice through the door. She recognized the voice. Matt.

*Just my luck.* She opened the door. "What do you want?"

He was standing with his hands behind his back. "I just came to make a peace offering."

He brought his hands around to the front, holding a carry-out bag from The China Garden. Maya thought about slamming the door in his face, but her stomach growled in protest. "Well." She sighed. "Come on in." After all, a girl had to eat.

Matt looked her up and down. "You wear the sexiest clothes."

"Really?" He obviously lacked the sophistication to appreciate SpongeBob. "You can leave."

"Kidding."

"Fine. Sure." Maya flopped onto the couch. "Whatever, even."

Matt rummaged through her fridge and came out into the living room with a Diet Pepsi. "Help yourself," she mumbled loud enough for him to hear.

He shook his head. "Somebody's grouchy."

*Thank you, Mr. Obvious.* "What do you want, Matt?"

"Just to talk. I miss you."

"I doubt that. We see each other every day." She bit into a potstick dumpling. "How's Penny?"

Matt rolled his eyes. "Jenny." He shrugged. "But I call her sweetheart most of the time."

Inhaling when she should have exhaled, Maya lodged a piece of dumpling in her throat which of course started a horribly unflattering coughing fit.

"Are you choking, Maya?" Matt asked then started whacking her on the back. Like that helped.

She jumped up to get away from him. "Don't... touch... me," she managed to say between wheezing breaths. The phone rang. "Hell... hello?" Her throat was still irritated.

"Hey, Maya." It was Steven. "You okay? You sound a little breathy."

She took a big drink of pop. Big mistake. It took her a few seconds to stifle a belch. "I'm fine. How are you doing?"

"Hanging in there. Did you find the note?"

"No. Sorry."

There was a pause on his end.

"You there?" she asked.

"Yeah, I guess it was too much to hope for."

"Hang in there. I haven't given up. I'll try and track down the waiter tomorrow, maybe go talk to Calbert."

"Okay." Another pause. "Maya?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks again."

She nodded, mostly to herself. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Maya turned around after hanging up and Matt had made himself comfortable on her couch. She pushed his legs off the couch and sat down, burying her face in her hands. "I'm not cut out for this."

"Cut out for what?" Matt asked.

"Nothing."

Matt shrugged. "Who was that on the phone?"

"It was my friend Noneya." She leaned forward and sniffed the containers of Chinese on the coffee table. "Mmm... Smells good."

"All right, smart ass." He handed her a pair of chopsticks. "Dig in." Matt smiled, his straight white teeth sparkling like a toothpaste ad.

She'd like to dig in, all right, right into some hot wolfy ass. "Quit grinning like that. You'll blind me."

"Can I help it if I have dazzling pearly whites?" He slipped his tongue over his teeth. "Besides, I thought you liked my mouth." He took a bite of Lo Mein and raised an eyebrow. "At least you never complained before."

Even with the noodle dangling from his lips, the man was gorgeous. And his mouth -- oh, that mouth -- well, it would get a five-star review from even the toughest critic. What the hell was he playing at? It wasn't like Matt to do games. Not his style. She took a bite of noodles and her mouth tingled a bit. "Don't flatter yourself, dog boy."

"Ouch." His face grew somber. "So, your new boyfriend's a murderer."

"Talk about ouch." Maya leaned forward. "I knew this wasn't just a drop by peace offering. How did you even hear about this?"

"Don't you read the paper? I do. It's all over the front page of the *Kansas City Star*."

The newspaper was rolled on the kitchen counter. Untouched. "But..." She walked over and picked up the *Star*. "Dream Makers, Inc., Golden Boy Chief Suspect in Hotel Slaying." Shaking her head, Maya sat down on a stool by the counter. "This is not good."

"I thought you knew."

"Oh, I knew he was a suspect, Matt. But Stephen didn't do it."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I..." How could she be sure? Stephen was as much an enigma as Matt. She couldn't read either one of them. But in her bones, she knew he was innocent. *I wouldn't sleep with a killer. I couldn't.* Even as the words entered her mind, Maya's apartment began doing its own version of the twist. "Help."

\* \* \*

Matt paced the floor, debating the merits of calling 911. Maya's breathing was deep. He could hear her heart thumping strongly in her chest. He'd put her on the couch after she'd collapsed and propped her feet on some pillows. It had only been a few minutes, but if she didn't come around soon, he'd make the call.

"She has to be okay," Matt mumbled. He moved to the kitchen and found a clean dishrag. Wetting it with cold water, he went back to Maya's side, applying the cool compress to her forehead and neck. "Maya. Wake up. Wake up, now."

If anything were to happen to her, he'd lose it. He'd gone too far with the comment about Jenny, and even with the one about Maya's new thing being a murderer. And then the food... "Maya. Please wake up, honey."

Her eyelids fluttered open. "Oh, dear Jesus," she whispered hoarsely. "My head's pounding. What happened?"

"You fainted."

Her violet eyes grew wide. "I don't faint. Did you call me honey? You know I hate shit like that."

Matt smiled as relief washed over him. She was going to be just fine. Impulsively, he kissed her. The warmth of her lips, holding firm at first, unyielding, then melting against his, fed his constant desire for her. He should stop. It was wrong to continue his pursuit of this woman who drove him completely crazy in more ways than one, but something about her wouldn't let him let go -- possibly the tongue she slipped between his teeth.

He slid his hand along Maya's side, cupping the smooth curve of her breast, his thumb rubbing over an already hard nipple. She moaned into his mouth, her back arching toward him.

Fuck! He'd promised himself he wouldn't fall back into her arms, not again, not without her complete commitment. He had Jenny now, more suitable to his family, to his life. She was lycan and understood the dedication that came with a true pairing.

But it was Maya, always Maya, who played in his mind, his heart. She called to the animal in him, and his wolf wanted her. And therein lay the danger. His animal threatened to shift every time he had sex with Maya, taking all of his strength and will to hold it back, to keep it from turning her into a were creature against her will.

She had no idea how hard it was for him to be with her and not really have her completely. Maya couldn't, wouldn't be that cruel. Yet, he'd never told her, because deep down, he didn't want her to stop showing up. No matter what he said to her.

Grabbing him by the shirt, Maya flipped Matt onto the couch and straddled his thighs.

"Feeling better?"

"You know it." She rolled her hips forward, rubbing her sodden panties over his fly. The warm wetness of her pussy soaked into his jeans -- her fingers fumbling with the button on his pants, working the zipper, and releasing his cock against his abdomen. Long fingers grasped his length and he sagged under her touch. She was the strongest human female he'd ever met, part of the attraction, really. An alpha male needed a strong mate.

He flexed his fingers as she eased her moist heat over his cock, working as always to fight the change. His wolf wanted her badly and every time was a struggle. She was mounting him, which helped, but not much.

Rocking her hips back and forth, she said, "Shit you feel good. So thick inside me." Her eyes looked funny, completely glazed.

"Maya." He tried to stop her, but he wanted this, wanted her. The dose, it had been too much, maybe not enough and she was reacting to it. His jealousy had pushed him to this. Otherwise he never would have gone this far.

She hummed her delight, the muscles of her pussy gripping his length in her motion. His balls tightened against his body when she pulled up her knees, taking him deep and squeezing the loose skin of his sac between her buttocks. "Ohhh," he sighed. Fighting his orgasm. He couldn't. Couldn't come inside her. It wouldn't change her, but she didn't know that. She'd hate him after.

"Yes, yes," she murmured rocking faster, sliding up and down his shaft. He could smell she was close, the musk of her sex getting thicker, permeating his senses. "Matthew, Matthew," and while he didn't like being called by his given name, it sounded like heaven from her lips.

Unbidden, his hands went to her firm breasts, squeezing, pinching, teasing them with his fingers. Her grinding became more urgent, harder against him and he felt the blood rush to his cock, rock hard, ready to burst. Her humming grew louder and she pushed harder against him, thrusting her hips forward, hands reaching out to his chest. Her fingers tangled in the hair and yanked as her orgasm spilled from her body, an earthquake of tremors and shudders.

"Fuck..." The word trailed off, as his balls jerked to his body and he couldn't hold back any longer. He pushed Maya back and pulled out, stroking his cock over her, masturbating as his climax hit, spilling himself over her stomach.

Her eyes cleared a bit to stare up at him, hazel, with just the hint of gray and brown. "What... what just..." She scrambled back. "Oh, God. No condom. No condom."

And he knew what she feared. "It's okay. I didn't come in you."

"Fuck, fuck." She grabbed her shirt, wiping at the creamy substance on her abdomen.

And with that gesture, Matt knew. He had to end it. She would never accept being his mate. The idea disgusted her.



\* \* \*

Again, he'd made it clear they were through. Men! "Why did you even come over? You want me to let you go, but you can't seem to do the same. If you want out of my life, then get out of my fucking life!"

"It's not that easy."

"Well, it's not hard either." Maya threw up her hands in frustration. "Why do you have such a problem with just being my lover? I can't give you more than that right now. I don't know how. Besides, you don't see me whining because you have a girlfriend. Why can't you date her and just... hang out with me every once in a while."

Matt grabbed her by the arms and held her to the wall. His eyes turned a funny amber color as his dark pupils undulated between large and really large. He sniffed along her neck and Maya held perfectly still. Scared to rouse his animal, scared that she'd have to fight her way out of the hold and one of them was going to get hurt. "I want all of you," he growled.

"Okay," she said calmly. "I get that." *Dear Lord, don't let him go wolfy now.* She'd only seen him change a little before, in the eyes, the hands, but never full-on lycan.

"I can smell your fear, Maya."

"That's bad, right?"

"It's good. Too good." His lips moved toward hers and she turned her head. "You push me too far, woman."

*Shit!* His nails had started to change, turning into claws. *No, no, no.* Her fear was amped up and she could swear the hair on his knuckles was growing longer. "Stop, Matt," she said quietly, firmly. His tongue licked at her jaw line. *I will not panic.* That affirmation was a bit late.

"Play with the wolf, and you're liable to get bit." He snapped his teeth in emphasis. The bones in his face crackled and snapped, reforming, elongating, becoming canine.

"Oh, hell no." Maya brought up a knee and nailed him in the groin. He doubled over with an "oof." She brought her instep down in one quick motion along his shin,

landing hard on his foot. Surprised, Matt let go of her arms. Dropping to the floor, Maya rolled toward the coffee table, snatching her gun from it. She leveled the cold piece on him. Just in time, because he'd recovered quickly, and in the millisecond it took for her to get the 9mm, he'd turned completely -- covered in a thick black fur, twice as broad as his human self.

"Matt," she cautioned as he stalked toward her, stripping his torn tight clothing from his body, "I don't want to shoot you."

"Your bullets can't kill me."

He seemed pretty confident. "I may not kill you, but I'll hurt you. I don't want to hurt you. Do you get that?" She could read the headlines already. "Private Security Diva Maya Eddings Found Naked and Ripped to Shreds on Her Apartment Floor."

Werewolf Matt took a step closer. Maya aimed and squeezed, and with a loud bang, the bullet buried itself in the lycan's thigh. He howled. Honest to God howled. "Oh, dear Lord, I've just made him angrier." She looked at the large cock dangling, growing even larger, between his unnaturally animalistic legs. "Or hornier." Neither was a good option.

Maya scrambled backward until her shoulders met the wall, only ten bullets left now that she'd discharged the chamber round. Somehow, she didn't think it would be enough.

Dropping to all fours, Matt barreled forward in two giant lopes, while Maya emptied the rest of her rounds squarely into his chest, each one jerking him, but not stopping the momentum. She threw the gun, whacking him between the eyes, stalling him for a split second as she jumped to the left. His head put a hole in her wall. Matt went still, then collapsed, his face planted firmly in the drywall.

"Jeezus H. Christ." Maya rubbed her sore wrists. There were deep scratches she hadn't noticed during, but now, they hurt. Bad.

Matt's fur grew shorter, the bones shifting around, crunching, grinding, making her teeth hurt to hear and watch. She picked up the phone, then put it back down. Who could she call?

Soon, Matthew Brewer was human-looking again. His naked body slumped forward, knuckles dragging the ground, head still in the wall. "Oh, crap, I've killed him."

Carefully, slowly, she approached, gently touching his neck. A bounding pulse leapt against her fingertips. He moaned. "Matt?"

He still didn't move.

Maya pulled on his shoulders, dislodging his head as he flopped backward onto the carpeted floor. The rounds she'd put in his chest bled, the wounds weeping dark red blood. He coughed, blood spattering from his lips. "Oh, God. Matt. I'll call an ambulance. Hang in there."

He grabbed her forearm. "No," he wheezed. "I'll be fine."

"You're coughing blood. There's nothing *fine* about that."

"I think you punctured my lung."

"Even more reason to call an ambulance."

"Did you have to shoot me in the chest?" His voice was already getting clearer.

"You were trying to kill me."

He laughed, not an easy laugh, but one that was forced, causing another coughing fit. "I wasn't trying to kill you, Maya. I was trying to fuck you."

"Asshole."

"Sorry." He closed his eyes. Maya had never seen him look so vulnerable, wounded, and not just because of the bullet holes, which were healing and closing, two bullets already expelled from the skin and on the floor.

She brushed drywall dust from his cheeks. "I know how dangerous it is to be with you, Matt. But next time..." Leaning down, she kissed his forehead. "I will kill you."

Grunting, Matt rolled onto his side. "Let me just lay here for a minute. You can kill me later."

"I'm feeling totally freaked right now." Maya slid her back down the wall until her butt hit the ground. "You've never lost control before. I've never seen anything like it."

"I don't want you to be afraid of me."

"Uh, that's not what you were saying a couple of minutes ago." Maya shuddered, her eyes widening as three more bullets worked themselves out of his chest.

He flicked at one of the mangled pieces of lead that had caught right under his skin. "Yeah, well... there is that."

His body might have been magically healing itself, but it was doing nothing for the dark stains on her carpet. "Would you look at this mess? You got blood all over the place."

"You shot me. Eleven times. There's bound to be blood."

"You attacked me." She punched his arm and he groaned. "What the hell got into you?"

"You got into me." He pointed to his temple. "Deep. In here. And I can't for the life of me get you out."

"We've known each other for a while now, Matt. Over two years, and you've never gone all furry on me before."

"You've never slept with another man since we've known each other."

"Oh, my God! It's a territorial thing. You've been sleeping with Jenny for the last three months, but I decide to get with someone else and you totally freak? It works both ways, buddy. You can't expect me to stay celibate while you're off gallivanting with the were-chick." She got up, went to the sink. "Besides, I've got much bigger problems than your ego. Like finding out whether Stephen is guilty of murder, or if he's being framed."

The skin on his chest had closed over the wounds and he pulled himself against the wall. "Can I help?"

"Oh, I think you've done quite enough. Don't you?" She wrung out a washcloth and threw the steaming towel at him. "You're paying for my carpet cleaner rental and you'll be working it, by the way."

"Just hire someone to clean the carpets."

"I can see explaining the crime scene scenario to them. Not!"

"Fine. I'll clean the rug."

"Damn right you will." She picked up a notepad and wrote down the names Emma Peterson, John Peterson, Carl Calbert, and Samuel Watkins. "If you're serious about helping me, I could use the lowdown on these people. Especially Calbert."

Calbert had been talking with the guy who found Stephen over Watkins in the hotel john, and he was angry at Stephen for sleeping with his wife. It was adding up to be an unlikely coincidence. "Also any known associates, especially a guy with a white streak on the right side of his head... and anything shady with the business." Couldn't forget the unlikely, but possible FBI connection. "Can you do that?"

Matt took the slip of paper and looked over the names. "Yeah, I can do that."

"Good." She gave him a hand up. "Now get dressed and get the hell out before I shoot you again."

## Chapter 8

The receptionist tap-tapped her way through the “William Tell Overture” while Maya waited on Carl Calbert in the lobby of Dream Makers, Inc. She thought it was a long shot that he would have murdered Samuel Watkins to get back at Stephen for the affair with his wife, but people had killed for less.

The hotel had given her a list of names for the waiters working that night and none of them had been the guy who’d brought the note to their table. So much for corroborating witnesses. Jack had called that morning and told her a contact in the IRS was suspicious of certain accounts handled by Calbert and Peterson, but they didn’t have any proof. The numbers added up.

Even Matt and his connections were coming up short. She wasn’t any closer to figuring out the mystery and the idea that Stephen might be guilty weighed heavy on her. After all, she hadn’t actually seen the note and just had Stephen’s word for what was on it.

But he’d been terrified. Even if she couldn’t feel it from him, she saw it in the look in his eyes. He couldn’t fake that, could he?

The door opened to Carl Calbert’s office and, lo and behold, Emma Peterson and her perky breasts walked out. The blonde buxom woman’s blue eyes were pinched in annoyance as she crossed the lobby without even a glance at Maya.

*Bitch.*

The receptionist stopped tapping and rolled her eyes. “Mr. Calbert will see you now.” Annoyance seemed to be the general emotion for Dream Makers, Inc.

“Thanks,” Maya said, then mentally added again, *Bitch.*

Carl Calbert, still looking very Sean Connery behind his large marble desk, barely acknowledged Maya’s presence in the room.

"Mr. Calbert, I know you don't know me, but I'm Maya..."

A derisive grunt from deep in his chest cut Maya off. "I know who you are, Ms. Eddings. You are an only child, both parents deceased, you own a private security agency, and you're thirt --"

Maya cut Calbert off. "I get the picture. You know who I am." She met his deep brown eyes. "I have a few questions about the night of the party, if you don't mind."

His eyes crinkled. "Actually, Ms. Eddings, I mind very much. I have already given my statement to the police."

Maya had expected irritation, maybe even anger, but what she got from Carl Calbert was something totally unexpected. The man was amused. *Amused!*

"Maybe I'll have a question or two you haven't answered."

"What could you possibly ask, Ms. Eddings?"

"Do you believe Stephen killed Samuel Watkins?"

"Asked and answered."

This was getting her absolutely nowhere. She tried a different tactic. "How did it feel walking in on your wife making love to Stephen Daniels?"

Calbert's head snapped up sharply. "How dare you..."

*Ha, ha!* The amusement drained from him and was replaced with anger. "I dare. You better believe I dare, mister. So, we can talk about your wife, or we can talk about this case. Either way, I'm cool with it."

"I can have you thrown out of the building."

"Yes. Yes, you can. But then I'll go right down to the *Star* and have myself a nice little talk with a reporter about the affair. While it won't help Stephen's case, it will certainly be print worthy. Scandals always are."

"What do you want, Ms. Eddings?"

"I told you, just some answers."

The whole of his demeanor changed. There was still the undercurrent of anger, but outwardly, he became calm and relaxed. "I really have no idea what I can tell you, but ask your questions."

"Did you talk with Watkins the night of the murder?"

"No." His emotions didn't fluctuate. Maya was using them as a makeshift lie detector and the first response was *True*.

"Do you know why anyone would want to kill Watkins?"

"No." This time there was a ripple. *False*.

"Come on, Mr. Calbert. What are you not telling me?"

"Samuel wasn't the easiest man to get along with, but I don't know of anyone who would kill him. Other than Daniels." Partial truth.

"And why would Stephen want to kill him?"

"He's your boyfriend. Why don't you ask him yourself?"

"He's not my boy -- never mind. Who was the man with the white streak in his hair you were talking with at the party?"

"I have no idea of whom you speak." Not only did his emotions jump, his entire body tensed.

*Ding, ding, ding. Liar.* "I saw him talking to Watkins and you that night, Mr. Calbert."

"I talked to many people that night. It was, after all, a party. I can't be expected to remember every person."

"Oh, he was quite distinguishable. Not only did he have a white streak down the right side of his head, he was the only guy there not dressed to the nines."

"Well, unfortunately, men don't notice such things, Ms. Eddings."

*Liar* again. Carl Calbert was a polished man, from his perfectly coiffed hair and beard, his thousand-dollar tailored suit, and his well-manicured, highly polished nails. He'd have noticed. "Forgive me if I don't buy it. Not at all. I don't think there's much you miss."

"You flatter me, Ms. Eddings. Is that all? I have a busy schedule today."

"One more thing. Why was Emma Peterson just here?"

"I don't see what that has to do with the case," he said, but his emotional meter was pinging off the radar. "Now, if you'll see yourself out."



For a moment, she said nothing, fixing her eyes on Calbert. "Got it." The man definitely had secrets, but until Maya's ability became reading minds, she wasn't going to find out this way. Maya stood, leaning forward, palms flat on Calbert's desk. She spoke calmly. "I'll find out what you know. Count on it, buddy."

The meeting had gone much as she'd expected, Calbert not telling her anything she didn't already know, but she was still pleased with herself, something she couldn't keep off her face as Calbert's brown eyes scrutinized her. One way or the other, she would find out what he knew, and the bug she'd placed under his phone was a good start.

Walking out of the building, she pulled out her cell phone and hit redial. "Jack, how's the reception?"

"Perfect, Maya," he said to her.

Excellent. Wireless magic. Gave a whole new meaning to "can you hear me now?"

"Great. Call me if you get anything interesting."

## Chapter 9

"Emma came to see me today," Stephen said as he walked past Maya into her apartment.

"Did she come?" It was petty, and a bit too close to jealousy to suit Maya.

His demeanor, normally fluid and relaxed, stiffened as his face went rigid and cold. "I guess you'd rather speculate than actually hear what happened."

Maya opened herself to him, to feel the anger behind his words, but there was nothing. She reached out, touching him with her fingertips. Desire poured over her like hot oil and what made it worse was his body language, tone. The look on his face said he was not feeling lustful in the least. "What are you?"

Stephen shook his head. "This was a bad idea." He turned to leave, but Maya kept her grip.

"You're not normal. I want to know why."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know I'm an empath, right?"

"Yes. I've known since I was twelve. Now, let me go."

Letting go was probably the smart thing to do, considering Maya wanted to ravage him, but she held on. "I feel one and one thing only from you, Stephen. That isn't natural."

He froze, then took a deep breath. "What do you feel, Maya?"

"Passion, lust, desire, yearning..."

"That's more than one thing."

"It's all the same and you know it. But I want to know why." She did let go then. "And I feel your hands, even when I know you aren't touching me, in intimate places, stroking, caressing... What in the fuck are you?"

Eyebrows arched, he reached forward, close but not quite touching. "I can't. You wouldn't understand."

*Holy cow!* There was something. But why hadn't she picked it up before? In her heart of hearts, she knew Paula was completely human, so what could Stephen be that his sister wasn't? "Trust me, Stephen. I've seen a lot." Like a lycan shifting in her living room. "Matt's..."

"A werewolf. Yeah, I know."

"Oh, God, please don't tell me you're a shapeshifter as well."

"I'm not a lycanthrope. Though it might be easier if I were."

A vampire, maybe? No, they didn't exist. Did they? Besides, she'd seen him out in daylight and that counted, didn't it? "Talk to me."

"You'll hate me, Maya. I don't think I can stand that. Not now."

She nearly closed the gap between them when a growl came from the open door. "Stay the fuck away from him, Maya."

"Matt? Oh shit." Maya stepped around Stephen, using herself as a wedge between them. She wasn't sure what Stephen was, but doubted he had the strength to go one on one with the wolf, and she didn't want to have to shoot Matt again. "What are you doing here, Matt?"

"I could feel him, again, from my apartment."

Maya drew a frustrated breath and held it. She expelled it noisily. "Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?"

Stephen answered from behind her. "My kind has a strange effect on lycanthropes. He's not just angry, Maya. Can't you see, he's turned on?"

Matt aggressively pushed forward, landing Maya squarely in Stephen's arms with all the whispers of silent promise playing across her skin. *So not good.* "Your... kind?" she managed breathlessly. With Matt pressed in front of her, and Stephen behind, she couldn't think.

"He's incubus," Matt snarled. "I wasn't certain until I got closer to him. But I'm sure now."

As angry as he looked, Maya couldn't ignore the rock hard bulge behind the zipper of his jeans which now pressed against her thigh. "There's no such thing as a..."

"Demon," Stephen finished for her. "Not in the way Christian mythology explains it, Maya. But we are real. Pure flesh and blood."

"And hormones..." She felt faint again, but willed herself to stay upright. A shit storm was brewing and she was caught in the eye. Nervousness rose in Maya and she wished she could lie down and put her feet up. That's what people did when they were going into shock, right? Something about getting the feet higher than the heart.

Matt paused. "You're turning white."

Stephen leaned her back in his arms. "Her lips are going blue."

Mutual concern. Fantastic. At least her health had stopped the pissing match. "I need to lie down."

Matt grabbed her legs and they took her to the bedroom and put her on the bed. The dizziness started to go away. "What's wrong with me?"

Nodding, Matt got a cool cloth from the bathroom and put it over her forehead. "This happened last night." He was talking to Stephen, obviously. Talking was good, better than mauling. "I think I did it to her."

"What did you do?" Stephen asked.

"I put a little bit of aconite in her food last night."

"You put what in my what?" Maya's dizziness worsened.

"Wolfsbane," Stephen filled in. "It's a poison."

"Only in bigger doses." Matt had the nerve to look embarrassed.

Adrenaline rocketed through Maya and her head cleared completely and quickly. "You fucking poisoned me?"

Matt's pupils widened, shrinking the rim of blue that surrounded them. "I only wanted..."

"To manipulate her into being your mate." Stephen stroked the side of her face, soothing, calming, sending good ju-ju through her body. And Maya wanted it to stop.

She sat up, instantly regretting the action as the room began to spin again. Slinging her legs over the side of the bed, she put her head between her knees. "Like you aren't trying to manipulate me too."

Matt's cheek rubbed against her arm, almost submissive, and Maya imagined if he had a tail it'd be tucked between his legs. "I'm sorry, Maya. I thought..."

Maya didn't have the energy to shrug him off. "What does this stuff do exactly?"

"In humans, it slows the heartbeat and drops blood pressure. I didn't give you enough to last this long though. I don't understand."

"In lycans," Stephen added, "it acts as a love potion of sorts." His gaze shifted to Matt. "It's being around you that's making the effects last."

"You tried to give me a love potion?" she asked from between her knees, trying really hard not to hyperventilate. Matt's hands slid across her back and down the side of her breast. Her nipples went rigid against his touch. Stephen kept his distance, a few short inches, but thank God or Maya was going to have an orgasm. Not the best reaction at the moment. "Quit touching me."

"I can't help it." His remark was accusing, and Maya managed to turn her head sideways at Stephen, who raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

"How come you know so much about lycans?" Probably not the obvious question, but his extensive knowledge made her curious.

"Let's just say I spent a really wild week in their company during spring break one year." He didn't even have the nerve to look sorry about it. "They have a strange reaction to my unique... chemistry."

Matt's hand slid down her back, just under the waistband of her pants -- his fingertips brushing her ass. Her eyes rolled back as she fought the impulse to help his hands along. "Oh, shit."

She turned to Matt, the fog in her brain clearing. His blue eyes had started to turn wolfish, gold rimming the edges of his irises. *Shit, shit, shit.* Her gun was in the living room in her purse and if he turned again she wouldn't be able to stop him. "You

have to leave, Stephen. Put some distance between the two of you. Whatever you're doing to him, it has to stop."

"It's too late. My pheromones are airborne and they've saturated the room."

"Airborne, jeezus." How delightful. Not. Maya could feel the little vein in her forehead pop as her pulse quickened.

Stephen scooted in closer. "Being afraid just gets him more excited," he whispered as Matt licked her shoulder.

*No shit, Sherlock.* "I... how can I keep him from changing?" she asked Stephen since Matt no longer seemed to care about conversation -- his hands roaming her body, pushing at her shirt, his shirt already gone. *When the hell had that happened?*

"I can help, but you have to trust me."

"Trust you, my ass." If she could run, she would, but her legs were like solid planks nailed into place. "You're a demon."

"That doesn't mean evil, Maya. It's just another way of saying different. Like Matt's different. Like you're different."

"I'm not a demon or lycan."

"No, but not quite like other humans, are you?"

Tension pulled tight through Maya as Matt's mouth nipped along her arm and his hands fumbled with his pants. "Why aren't you stopping him?"

"I can't. Any act of aggression will force the change in him. And if that happens..."

"He'll kill us both?" she asked hopefully.

"He'll fuck us both. You'll be changed into a lycan, and when he changes back, he'll hate himself for doing it, and for *doing* me."

Okay, the fact that Matt would fuck them both was bad enough, but what the hell had Stephen said about changing her? "I would be made lycan?"

Maya tried to pull away from Matt and he responded with a snarl, his blue eyes nearly all yellow now and his fingernails elongating, thickening like claws. She eased back into his grasp and couldn't seem to get enough air.

"Didn't he tell you? There's two ways to become lycan. You can be born that way, or transformed through sex with a lycan in full-on were mode. It's a protein in the semen that does it."

Gulping in a breath, Maya muttered, "God damn, damn." That's why Matt had meant to have sex with her after he'd changed the night before. "What can you do to help?"

"I can make him come with me."

"And that's going to help how?" She couldn't believe what he was suggesting. Bad enough having two lovers, but two at the same time?

"I only mean, if we do this together, I can bring him to orgasm before he completely shifts."

"What about after? Won't he just want to go again?"

"The pheromones will be neutralized for the moment and his body will build a tolerance of sorts. If it all goes well, we might get out of this no worse for wear."

"Speak for yourself, buddy." The thought of being a man-sandwich both repulsed, and in a baser way, attracted her. *Fuck!* If it wasn't bad enough that she'd slept with both of them over the last two days, at the same time would literally push her into the red on the slut-o-meter.

Matt's pants were down around his knees now, and he was humping against her leg. "For Christ sake." Even worse -- it felt good. "Fine! Whatever. Let's get on with this."

Stephen slowly, not making any sudden movements, positioned himself behind Maya, but not yet touching her. "If we do this right, it can be quick."

"Let's fucking make sure we do this right, then!" Matt's head moved between her legs and he bit down on the inside of Maya's thigh. "Yow..." she started to screech, but Stephen shushed her. "... za," she whispered.

"He's just holding you steady, letting you know he's there."

"Like I could miss that." At least the humping of her leg had stopped. "What do I do?"

"You've never had a threesome?" Stephen asked, amused.

"No. And I get the feeling you've done it way more times than I want to know about."

"Well, this isn't going to be your average threesome."

"No shit."

"For one," Stephen continued, "I'm going to try very hard not to touch Matt. While he'd be responsive, he wouldn't be happy when it was all over, and in this state, it would be too much like rape. He wants you, even when he's not juiced up on pheromones, so you're the better option."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Do you care about Matt?"

It was hard to think with dog boy licking her inner thigh. "Uh... yes. Yes." His tongue, slightly roughened, brushed over her panties. "Oh, yes."

"Then do exactly what I say if you don't want him to hate himself or you when this is over."

She needed Stephen closer, pressed against her. She needed his extra something to get through this. She cared about Matt, maybe even loved him, and wanted him most of the time. But the whole situation was freaking her out. "Touch me, Stephen."

"Not yet."

"Why the fuck not?" She squirmed backward and Matt grabbed her behind the knees and yanked her forward, his claws lightly scraping at her calves.

"Calm, Maya. Calm," Stephen soothed. "When I say not yet, it's because you need to hear me, really hear me."

"Okay." Her chest tightened. "I'm listening."

"Get his attention first."

Maya squirmed as Matt loosed a series of nips and licks, tugging her panties with his teeth. "I think I have his attention."

"Not what I had in mind." Stephen moved in closer, his shirt brushing against her back. "Take his face. Make him see you. Talk to him, gently."



*Gently, gently. Right.* She eased her hand to cup his cheek. "Matt. Matt, can you hear me?"

His growl, low and feral, vibrated against her skin.

"Is that a yes?" Shaking her head, she fought the panic. "Matt. Matt. Matthew." She tilted his face upward. For a moment, lucidity touched his eyes.

"Maya." He breathed her name like a sigh. And just as quick it was gone. Matt grabbed Maya by the hips and flipped her on the bed, her face landing between Stephen's legs.

"Oh, God, oh, God." Reacting, she grabbed Stephen's arm, *big mistake*. The connection sent a warm rush of hunger and desire through her. "Oh, God." The head of Matt's cock rested against her pussy, rubbing over her slick clit, and she ached to be filled. "Yes," she whispered hoarsely, her hand sliding over the thick bulge of Stephen's groin, as she pushed herself back onto Matt's cock.

Stephen's hand intercepted hers before she could undo his pants. "You don't have to. I can come by watching."

"I want to," she said, then moaned as Matt shifted his hips, sinking deeper and deeper into her.

"It's me. I'm sorry, Maya. I never meant..."

"No time for remorse." *Translation -- shut up and get your pants off.* She wanted to feel the silky texture of Stephen's shaft against her tongue, taste him.

Before he could think to respond, Maya had his cock loose, taking the length into her mouth. He moaned. Matt grunted from behind her and she pressed back to slow him down.

"Don't," Stephen muttered. "Don't go slow. He has to come before he shifts and locks up inside you. If that happens you'll be unable to separate from him for up to an hour."

The idea of the thick cock imbedded, locked inside her should have frightened her. "That would be bad," Maya reminded herself as she licked and sucked the incubus' rigid length. Her hands cupped his balls, tugging, rolling them between her fingers.

Matt's body came over the top of her, his chest pressed against her back in a rush of hot skin and sex. The building thrusts coinciding with a chuffing noise, animalistic, from deep in his throat. His palms flattened on the comforter -- his nails were thick and pointy, his fingers elongated, but not yet furred.

Instinct, instinct and the pleasure of his balls bumping against her clit, made her rock her pelvis backward then forward to meet his strokes as she swallowed hard over Stephen's cock, taking him into her mouth deep, deeper, into her throat. Her body had one purpose, one only, to pleasure and be pleased. Pure sensation, no thoughts, no plans, just action.

A low keening moan filled the room, and she realized she was making the sound, her throbbing clit aching, pulsing, as Matt's cock felt like it became enormous within her hot slick channel, sliding forward and back.

Stephen's hands grabbed her by the top of her head, not pushing, tugging, tight to the scalp, a hissing sound escaping between his teeth. Maya tilted her head, her brain sex-fogged as she watched his eyes widen, dilate. His pupils were red with fire while he watched -- watched her being fucked by another man. A flutter low in her stomach told her she would come soon.

She grabbed Matt's hands and yanked herself forward, forcing Stephen onto his back and Matt to follow. Letting go of Stephen's length, she stripped off her shirt and squeezed her breasts around his cock. "Holy fuck, you feel so good. You both feel so good."

Matt's arm looped her waist, lifting her ass up. His arm was hairy. *Dear Lord!* Hairier than normal. And unexpectedly, that turned her on even more. "Hurry, oh, sweet Jesus, hurry," she said to anyone listening.

"Get up on your hands, Maya." Stephen's voice was dark, heavy with night things, things that don't come out in the bright light of day. "I want to watch him fuck you."

"But..." Before she could get her question out, Stephen had forced her up on all fours, turned around and slithered beneath her. She could feel the heat of his breath

against her stomach, his hands pulling her down, her throbbing nub connecting with his lips.

"Haaah..." Her breath fluttered out as he licked and sucked at the sensitive flesh while Matt continued his assault on her pussy. "Hoooh, too much. Fucking hell. So good. So good."

Burning heat sped rapidly through her body. Maya grasped Stephen's cock, stroking it as it grew more rigid and reddened with blood. Screaming, she spent her orgasm, bucking against both men, needing it to end, wanting it to last forever, the pleasure so intense as wave after wave of ecstasy rippled through her.

Stephen cried out against her cunt and she felt him come, the hot spray leaking down her hands. She stroked him faster, milking him, her pussy doing the same with Matt, until...

A moan, like a howl, but still human, drowned out the sound of Maya and Stephen. Matt used Maya's thighs like handles, pulling her tight against him as he came. The sound he made was triumphant, sad, and angry all at once. When he finished, he let her go and staggered back, withdrawing quickly, leaving Maya to mourn the loss of sensation.

Sighing heavily, she collapsed on top of Stephen, then rolled off to the side. "Wow."

Stephen leaned back against the headboard. "You can say that again."

"Wow." Maya began to laugh. She couldn't help it. The entire thing had been surreal, frightening and wonderful. "And just in case I didn't say it before. Wow."

Matt sat in the corner of the room, shadows covering his face. "I'm sorry."

"I don't know what to say to that." Reaching over, she flipped on the lamp near the bed. Matt had gone back to human mode, blue eyes, regular nails, no extra fur. Bonus. "I'm not going to lie and say I didn't enjoy it. I did."

A hand slipped across her shoulder. *Stephen*. She entwined her fingers with his. Something inside her had clicked. *I'm meant for both of these men, and maybe neither of*

*them*. Something else clicked as well. "Oh, my God, oh, my God. You didn't wear a condom!"

Matt dipped his head farther. "No."

"Am I going to turn all wolfy? Please, please, someone tell me that his super-sperm didn't do some freaky mojo shit to me." Pulling away from Stephen, Maya jumped to her feet. "Somebody shoot me. Better yet, I should just fucking shoot the both of you!"

"I didn't turn. You're safe." There was a touch of indignation, if not a little disappointment in Matt's voice that pissed Maya off.

"It's true," Stephen added. "The change was stopped in time."

Throwing her hands up in exasperation, Maya paced the floor. "Well, I just feel all kinds of better."

Matt slid his back up the wall. "I guess being mated to me is a fate worse than death."

"What the fuuuck? Why can't I attract nice normal guys?" She clapped her hands once. "I got it! I'll take out one of those dating ads. Single white female seeks non-paranormal guy. Doesn't matter if you have a prehensile tail, webbed toes, or a third testicle, as long as you're totally human."

"A prehensile tail?" Stephen coughed, choking back a laugh.

Matt snorted. "Dude, I'm still trying to get past the third testicle."

Looks were exchanged between the two men, as if they suddenly remembered they were rivals not friends.

"I'm just saying," Maya continued, trying to lighten the darkening mood. "Something other than a fur-growing or sex-hormone-secreting supernatural guy might be a nice change of pace."

"But at least we're interesting." Stephen chuckled.

"Interesting I don't need. I'd be happy with stable. That seems to be lacking in this room." She grabbed clean panties and a bra from her underwear drawer. "Now,

I'm going to go take a shower and you're both going to get the hell out of here before I decide to go bat-shit on your asses."

As she prepared her grand exit from the room, her cell phone rang. "For the love of Nellie. What now?" The display showed Jack's name. "Talk to me," she grouched into the receiver as she headed to the bathroom.

"You're in a bad mood," Jack answered.

"Yeah, I'm in a bad fucking mood, Oprah. Now, tell me what you got in as few words as possible."

"Meeting tonight. Calbert, Mrs. Peterson, and an unknown. Twelve sharp. Mayweather's Food and Drink. 958 Wyandotte." The phone went dead. He'd hung up!

"Rude. Just rude." Maya looked at the clock. Eight-thirty, plenty of time to clean up. Even though Jack had hung up on her, she knew he'd be there, backing her up all the way. It was a comforting reality.

"I'm going with you," Matt said, coming up the hallway behind her.

"Damn you and that super-sonic canine hearing."

Stephen stepped out of her bedroom behind Matt. "I'm going too."

"No. Calbert knows you."

"He knows you also," Stephen said around a sigh. "I'm coming, Maya. End of discussion. Someone is hell-bent on ruining my life and I'm going to find out who and why."

The testosterone in the air surrounding the two gorgeous, if a bit disheveled, men was palpable. Rolling her eyes, Maya gave up. "Fine, fine. But I'm not taking either of you anywhere looking like you just rolled out of bed. Go home." She made a shooin motion. "Get cleaned up and meet me back here around eleven. We'll head out together." A disturbing thought occurred to her. "We won't have a repeat of the earlier... err... incident, will we? You two being around each other and all. I am not having a three-way at a local bar and grill. I draw the line there."

Matt's brow rose in worry, but Stephen shook his head. "The reaction that lycans have with my hormones seems to only happen the first time they come in close contact

to me.” He shrugged. “That’s not to say they don’t enjoy my scent after, but it’s not like putting a dog in a roomful of bitches in heat, it becomes more like...”

“Oysters for humans?” Maya filled in.

“Something like that.”

Her shoulders eased, despite the tension, and she could see that Matt looked relieved as well. “Thank you, Jesus,” she heard him whisper, and her heated thoughts of another trio-o-fun trip went out the window.

“Okay, great. All settled. Now get the hell out of my apartment.”

Matt walked by brusquely, but Stephen paused next to her and dipped his head, his lips brushing against hers. An audible growl came from Matt, though he didn’t turn back to look.

“Not nice,” she scolded the lusciously tall, green-eyed man.

He smiled -- simple, pleasant, beautiful. “I can live with that.” Patting her ass as he headed out, Stephen added, “Catch you later, hot stuff.”

“Not if I catch you first,” she mumbled, clenching her clean undergarments as she headed to the shower, praying that she couldn’t catch what either of them had.

## Chapter 10

Boot heels clacking and the soft pad of men's dress shoes were the only noises in the alley behind Mayweather's as Maya, Matt, and Stephen headed to the back door entrance. Maya opened her bomber jacket, pulled out her gun from the shoulder holster, checked the clip, replaced it, took the safety off then put it back in place.

She glanced at the guys and gave them a once-over. "I know I said this already, but you two clean up good."

Matt wore a deep blue button down shirt and black slacks while Stephen dressed in a silver Nehru jacket and black leather slacks. Both men knew exactly how to accentuate the positive. Not that she'd ever noticed any negatives in their looks.

"Thanks," Stephen answered. "You clean up real nice yourself, Ms. Eddings."

Maya beamed a radiant smile at the green-eyed incubus.

"Agreed," Matt grudgingly replied, not wanting to be shown up by his rival. "You smell nice as well." He snapped his teeth. "Good enough to eat."

Unsure whether to be fearful or flattered, Maya said, "It's vanilla."

"I know, but it's not the smell I'm referring to." This time Matt smiled, his white teeth shining in the moonlight sending naughty shivers down her spine.

"We'll pretend it's my shampoo and move on." She took a lock picking tool from her front pocket and put it to the keyhole on the door, grasping the handle with her free hand. It turned. "Huh," she grunted. "Not locked."

Pulling the 9mm, Maya carefully opened the door and peeked in. A shadowed figure leaned against the wall. "It's about time you got here."

"Goddamn, Jack. You about got your ass shot off." She holstered the weapon.

"I can think of worse places to get shot." Jack's hand ghosted to his groin then he waved them in. "Come on. Mrs. Peterson and Calbert are in a corner booth away from the windows." His gaze traveled to Matt and Stephen. "What's with the entourage?"

"They can handle themselves." At least Matt could, and she prayed that Stephen had more skills than just mind-blowing sex.

They all shuffled past the "his and hers" johns in a tight line. The smell of beer and stale cigarette smoke filled the place. It was nearly midnight, and Maya motioned the boys to stay back while she positioned herself at the end of the bar. It was out of sight from Calbert's booth, but Maya could see him and Emma having an intense conversation through the mirror.

"If only I could read lips."

Jack came up behind her and placed an ear bud in her hand. "Don't have to. The table's miked."

Surprised, pleasantly, Maya placed it in her ear. Sure enough Emma's voice came across, a bit distant, and there was a little static, but clear enough Maya heard her say, "I don't like this, Carl. Not one bit."

Maya grinned at Jack. "How'd you know where they'd be seated?"

"Didn't. Just bugged all the tables and numbered the receivers."

Resisting the urge to pull the earpiece off and check the number, Maya settled in. Her sights were set once again on Emma and Calbert.

Emma leaned forward. "This is foolish, Carl. They can't prove anything. As far as anyone knows, Stephen killed Watkins."

*Okay, tell me something I don't know.*

Carl responded, "It's not just that Eddings woman. It's Toll. He's demanding a higher payment."

"Blackmail? You made me come to this godforsaken hole over blackmail? He can't prove anything, Carl. I swear to God, you're three points shy on the IQ chart of a moron."

*Good one,* Maya thought, storing it in her extensive database of putdowns.



Carl shifted uncomfortably. "He has the account books. The *real* account books."

"How in the world..."

"You hired him, Emma. He's a skin-walker. So how hard do you think it was for him to take my image and go right into my office unnoticed?"

*What the fuck is a skin-walker?*

"But how'd he get the combination to the safe?" Emma's tone was accusing and it wasn't hard to see who was in charge.

Carl managed to blush. "Well, I paid him from the cash stock... and uh... he might have seen me open it."

"You really are an idiot."

Carl's face blanched. "Crap. Here he comes."

Maya turned toward the door. *Yep, dark hair, average looking, white streak on the right side.* So that was a skin-walker. Looked pretty much like a man. Of course, so did Matt and Stephen.

The skunk, as Old Bertha so named him, scooted into the booth next to Calbert. He had a briefcase. Opening it, he pulled out a small handheld computer and slid it to Calbert. "I've asked you both to come, because I'm not stupid. I know your private bank account requires two passwords, and two signatures, and I want three million transferred to my account. Now. Or the documents will find themselves in the hands of the police. Along with an anonymous tip that you're both responsible for the death of Samuel Watkins, and why."

Emma cast him a seething glare. "I'm going to kill you."

Licking his dry lips, the skin-walker blanched and his skin rippled gray. "Don't mess with me, witch."

"I'm a sorceress, Toll. Don't forget it. And don't forget that I had Watkins killed for trying to blackmail me." She leaned forward, looking terribly and horrifyingly beautiful. Her blonde hair had taken on a shimmer, lights dancing under her skin.

Scanning the room, Maya opened herself to the emotions of the other customers, but while there was the standard grocery list available, no one seemed to notice or care

that Emma was looking wickedly scary and supernatural. *What the fuck have I gotten myself into?* A werewolf, demon, skin-walker, and now a sorceress? Maya wondered which fairytale creature was going to show up next.

An intense heat spread across Maya's back, and she turned. Matt stood behind her, nearly pressed against her, his earthy-masculine scent nearly overwhelming. "I thought I told you to hang back."

"Emma Peterson is not human?" His pupils undulated, making his eyes go black to blue to black.

"Yah think?"

"You can see her, see her true self?"

"Yes," she hissed, guessing what she was seeing was the real Mrs. Peterson, sorceress-extraordinaire. "I think we need more information before proceeding." The idea of confronting Emma and Toll, even in public, scared the shit out of Maya. She had no idea what either of them was capable of, but the fear that rolled off Calbert told her it would be bad. Really fucking bad.

"Good idea," Matt agreed.

Then things went from bad to worse. "Maya! Maya Eddings, as I live and rock!"

No, it wasn't the lion, the witch, or the wardrobe. *Fucking hell!* Milo Bach was yelling her name and heading straight for her with his posse in tow. The skin-walker and the wicked witch... err... sorceress looked up, eyes flashing to the mirror, and their angry gazes flickering to Maya. She heard the distinctly female voice through her headset. "Get her."

"Oh, shit." Her hand went to Matt. "Run. Run fast." Jumping off the barstool, she knocked Milo Bach over and back into his group. They stumbled back into each other, sentient bowling pins trying not to fall over. It gave Maya the head start they would need.

Bolting to the hallway, she pushed Stephen, Matt, and Jack, shoving them toward the back, pulling her piece in the process. "Run, goddammit!" She didn't know

what would happen if they were caught, whether they could stand against Emma Peterson or not, but she didn't want to find out.

Stephen's shoulder shoved against the back door as it flung open. All four of them tumbled into the alleyway. Maya couldn't stop herself from falling hard onto the pavement, the gun sliding a few feet from where she landed. Scrambling on all fours, she managed to pick it up. When she oriented on the exit to the street, Emma Peterson stood between them and freedom.

Maya looked around for another exit. Nothing. "Fuck me running."

"That might be doable." The voice came from behind her. Maya whipped her head to the back doorway. Toll stood a few feet from them holding a club-like object with a criss-crossing jagged end, the same pattern Stokes had described for the wound on Watkins' head.

"You have been a disappointment to me, Stephen." Emma's voice was curt, scolding. "I really thought you'd join us, but alas, I'm going to have to kill you."

*And your little friends too.* Maya took aim. "Back off, bitch."

"My dear, Ms. Eddings, bullets are so last season."

Before Maya could even think of squeezing off a shot, an invisible force threw her against the wall -- holding, pressing, squeezing the life from her. She wanted to worry about Stephen, about Matt, about Jack, but she couldn't think, couldn't breathe. Emma had been quick, quicker than Maya, and she was helpless. Forcing her head to the side, she saw the sorceress was glowing, bright orange hues, then a blur. Stephen? He'd rushed the woman, and when her attention focused on the incubus it left Maya.

With a surprising thud, Maya hit the pavement. Taking aim again as Emma used her power to throw Stephen off, Maya squeezed three rounds into the sorceress' chest. Blood poured from the wounds, as the blonde woman looked both astonished and pissed.

Maya smirked. "I'm bringing sexy back, bitch."

"You've ruined my dress, you little whore."

Okay, sooo not the response Maya expected. And the fact that Emma Peterson was still standing and her glow had turned from bright orange to fiery red did even less for her confidence. Jack was on the ground, unconscious. Matt and Toll were grappling in the corner. Stephen was pinned against the Dumpster, and the sorceress was reaching into her chest and digging out bullets as she stalked toward Maya. “We’re so fucked.”

“You have no idea,” Emma seethed and swiped her hand through the air, drawing a quick but intricate symbol. “*Altescension*.”

The world went black.

## Chapter 11

"Ain't this a bitch," Maya mumbled, her head pounding with what she could only equate to the worst hangover of her life. She swallowed down the bile forcing its way up her throat. Everything was gray, from the walls, the metal beams in the ceilings, to the cold concrete floors. She'd been stripped down to her T-shirt and skivvies. "God, please don't tell me I'm dead, because I was really hoping dead would be more pleasant."

"We're not dead," Matt growled from behind her. "Though it's probably a better alternative."

"Jack... Stephen?" Worry coursed through Maya as the chill of the room seeped into her bones.

"I'm here," Stephen said. "Jack... he's still alive. But I don't know for how much longer."

She fought back the tears, struggling to maneuver so she could see them, but she was shackled to a column with handcuffs. "Can you move?" she asked either of them.

"No," came a simultaneous response. Then Matt added, "She's bound us magically."

"I'm in cuffs." But they were everyday cuffs, nothing magical about them. Probably Jack's. Apparently the *human* wasn't worth a magic spell. It pissed her off.

"Maya," a voice whispered in the shadows.

Her eyes widened. "Tyler?"

He silently made his way to her. "I followed you guys from the bar. That was some freaky shit. The blonde chick literally floated you guys into the back of a van." He held out the cuff keys and started fiddling behind her.

A click-click and her wrists came free. "I hope you brought the fucking cavalry," she whispered harshly, crawling past Matt and Stephen to Jack. "Jack. Jack." She patted his chest, turning his head slightly to look at the blunt trauma. "This is not happening." The vicious wound to his head needed tending. Immediately.

"I didn't call the cops, Maya. I... I..." Tyler stammered over his words.

"S'okay. Get Jack the fuck out of here while I figure out how to help Stephen and Matt."

With a curt nod of his head, the large ex-Marine lifted Jack with a grunt. "Back in a few, boss."

"No. Take Jack to the hospital." Tyler nodded again. As an afterthought, Maya added, "And call the fucking police, for heaven's sake."

Sending her thoughts out, probing the room, Maya felt no one else's presence besides theirs. *Why would they just leave us here?* When everything had gone black, she'd fully expected to wake up, or not wake up, in the ever after.

She scrambled to Matt and Stephen, the two men locked naked and back-to-back, knees bent close to their bodies. Trying to pry them apart, she stuck her fingers into the crease between them.

"I can break this bond if I can shift. Magic can't hold a lycan. It's why they fear us," Matt said.

"Who? Who's they?" A flash of being sandwiched between their hard luscious bodies popped into her head. She shook the soo not helpful thought from her mind. "And why are you both naked?"

"The wizards," Matt answered. "And because they didn't want to take a chance that we'd have something on us that might alter the magic."

"I can't hear this, not now. I'll deal with it all later." All her paranormal nightmares were coming true. "Get to shifting."

"I can't. She's suppressed the instinct in me and I can't force it."

"Great. Just fantastic. Our only hope for breaking the magic that holds you is locked up inside and the wicked witch is bashing down our doors ready to take us and our little dog too."

"You can help him, Maya." Stephen's green eyes framed red pupils. He was definitely channeling his inner demon.

"You're a demon, Stephen. Can't you just ju-ju your way out of this? Surely demons are stronger than wizards?"

Stephen chuckled, but it wasn't pleasantly. The sound sent a ripple of desire and yearning through Maya, the lips of her sex swelling beneath its temptation. "So not the right time."

"It's all I can do. I told you before. I'm not a demon in the conventional mythological way you think of demons. I am sex. Pure and simple. It's what I do."

"That's helpful. Not." She had to think, get her head clear, but Stephen's pheromones were saturating the useful part of her brain. "How," she breathed heavily, drinking in his intoxication. "How can I help him shift?"

Matt's eyes were deep, dark in thought. He sniffed the air, and she knew he was pulling in her scent. "You smell good enough to eat."

Logic railed against emotion, but it was losing the battle quickly. "Sex. You think sex can tap into his... animalness?"

"I think so."

While the idea brought about pleasant shivers through her stomach and lower regions, she couldn't help but worry. If Matt wolfed out, he'd break the magic that held them, but he might not stop there. "I'm scared."

"I won't hurt you, Maya," Matt said, his voice quiet with inner pain.

"There are more ways to hurt me than just physically." She closed her eyes, turning her head to avoid the wounded look on his face. "I don't want to be a lycanthrope. I don't..."

"I promise --"

"How can you? Really? In the last two days, you've tried to turn me into your permanent bedmate twice!"

Stephen added his two cents and a nickel. "Do we really have a choice here? Risk this or risk Emma filleting the flesh from our bones. While Matt and I might survive, you wouldn't."

His voice was gentling, sex on every syllable. He wanted her to try, his fear making the choice harder and harder for her to resist. Maya smacked Stephen's shoulder. "Stop. I can make the decision on my own without your mojo rising all over and through me." This close to both of them, the extra nudge wasn't needed. She felt the lust ease away slightly. "Thank you."

Unreal. Maya backed away, putting distance between her and the boys. She needed to think, formulate a plan. Leaving them both sounded good. After all, they did say they would probably survive and for sure she wouldn't. No, she couldn't leave them. Not like this.

*Think, think.* She didn't want to have sex in the cold, gray warehouse. Definitely not. Later, after the mess was over, it would all be negotiable. Then like a miracle, a plan came to her. She prayed it would work.

"I can understand why Matt can't get us out of here, but Stephen, certainly you could. You're much smarter, handsome, more clever." It sounded stupid, even as the words tumbled from her lips, but she kept it up, the look in Matt's eyes shifting from hurt to anger. "I choose you over Matt. You're the stronger of the two. And a woman needs a strong man."

Matt snarled, gnashing his teeth. Stephen's face turned ashen. "Maya, what are you doing?"

"You know it's true, my incubic love god." Okay, she'd gone a bit overboard, pushing her own gag buttons. A thousand warnings went through her, like how stupid she was, and how she might not be able to repair the damage she was doing to her relationship with Matt. But she pressed on.



"I could die a happy woman under your touch, my demon lover." She straddled Stephen's knees, dragging her fingers through his hair, touching Matt's head as well, purposefully.

"Shut up." Matt groaned, and her heart sunk at the pain and misery she was causing him.

"How cute. The submissive puppy wants me to shut my mouth. Tough. I only respond to real men. Not whipped dogs." Maya brushed her lips against Stephen's ear, blowing promise and seduction as her hair fell to Matt's shoulder.

"I am alpha."

She snorted. "Maybe to a ferret."

The heat poured from the lycan's skin. *Dear God, let it work. Don't let this be for naught.* Stephen's mouth connected to her collarbone, sliding teeth and tongue along the ridge and Maya moaned her pleasure. She pressed closer, bidding Stephen to take more, the plan shaping into something else altogether as her pussy went wet, aching, and a small sigh escaped.

"No!" Matt roared. Then again -- this time the "no" turning to a howl that chilled and frightened Maya. She shrieked as the fully-furred lycan pounced, knocking her away from Stephen and onto the hard floor. There was a tussle of movement as they rolled along the floor ending with Maya helpless, pinned down by an angry man-wolf.

Not one of her brighter plans, she decided. Maya called out, "Matt. Matthew. You're free. You've done it."

"I'm going to show you who's a whipped dog, bitch."

Oh, shit, oh, hell. He meant it. "Stephen!" she screamed.

"Don't cry out for your boyfriend. His turn's coming. Cry for me. I want to hear you whimper."

*Fucking hell.* Appealing to his alpha side had worked, but the result was ending the same way sex would have. With sex.

"Scream," he said again.

Obliging, she cried out when he sunk his teeth into her shoulder. He came up, his muzzle burgundy with her blood, his yellow wolfish eyes taking her in. It wasn't sex, it was food. She was food. Worse and worse. She did the only thing she could do.

Stopped fighting.

She remembered a book she'd read about wolves, and mimicking submissive behavior. Drawing her arms in, Maya arched her back, bared her neck -- like offering her throat to the big bad wolf wasn't the scariest fucking thing ever -- tried to make herself as small as possible and whimpered. Honest to God whimpered. The wolf cocked his head, covered in confusion.

Confusion was good. She could live with confusion.

The penetrating stare from those golden eyes lessened. "You submit?" he snarled, gnashing his canine teeth.

"Completely."

Blue began to edge the gold, but he stayed in full-lycan form as he rolled to the left then up on his feet... paws? *Thank you, Lord.*

She glanced sideways and found Stephen pulling himself up, his perfect bow mouth bloodied and battered. "I'm sorry," she mouthed, but even as the words left her lips, the cuts healed over, quickly, leaving him unmarred.

Before she could even think about it, a shrill screech pierced the air. "Where the hell are they?" It was Emma Peterson.

Matt growled, stalking toward the voice.

"We need to get out of here," Maya said, but Matt ignored her direction.

Stephen had picked up a loose pipe from the floor. *Like that's going to help.* And Maya lamented the loss of her gun. Not that it would help either, but it would've made her feel better. A false sense of security was better than no sense of security.

Matt stepped out into the open. "I'm here, sorceress. Do your worst." He flexed his gnarled fingers and the hackles of his back stood on end, his tail straight out.

Emma Peterson looked surprised, and a flash of fear passed over her face. Even Toll looked nervous, though the big sword he now carried felt like an equalizer.

Feeling more confident, Maya stepped out into the open with Matt. *Stupid.* Emma's fear was replaced with seething hatred as she clenched her fist and let loose with a fireball. A goddamn honest to goodness for the love of Pete fireball!

With no time to duck the hurling ball of flames, Maya clenched her eyes and braced herself for the pain impact would bring. When nothing happened, she opened one eye, then the other. Matt had moved in front of her, taking the fury of the wizardess like she was throwing confetti. *Holy shit balls.*

To the left, Stephen was dealing with his own battle, going *mano y mano* with Toll the skin-walker. His pipe against the other man's sword. The edge of the blade swung down, hitting the pipe, nearly knocking it from Stephen's hands, but he managed to hang on, shoving the blunt end into Toll's stomach.

The sword came up in a high arc, then sliced neatly through Stephen's hand, the appendage hitting the ground, his fingers still wiggling. Maya felt sick. He was getting slaughtered.

She moved to help, only to stagger back as the tendons and bones sprouted from the amputation, blood vessels and flesh moving in next, re-growing his hand as he continued the fight. *Fuck meee.*

Calbert, who had been hiding in the shadows apparently, moved up behind Maya, and in the commotion, she hadn't noticed until he planted the barrel of a gun to her temple. "Tell them to stop, or I'll kill you."

His voice was shaky and she could feel the overriding fear and panic that coursed through him. In front of them, Matt tore into Emma's arm, shredding the flesh. A bloody piece of muscle flew over and hit Maya in the chest.

A warm wetness brushed against the back of her thigh and she realized -- Calbert had pissed himself. In that moment, Maya knew the gun was nothing. Calbert was human and human she could deal with. Stomping on the arch of his foot, she followed with an elbow to his side, spinning as he doubled, then cranked his arm, the one holding the gun, behind his back. A shot rocketed off, echoing through the chamber.

Grabbing the gun with one hand, and his hair with the other, Maya rammed Calbert's head onto her up-swinging knee. He dropped to floor -- out cold. "Mother fucker."

Matt was still tearing Emma to pieces, her body parts scattered and bloody, his fur mangled in blood and body fluids. *Eww*. But Stephen was losing his battle, and while the whole hand re-growing thing made her think he'd be okay, helping him was her natural impulse.

She tried to get a bead on Toll, but Stephen kept moving in front of her. Maya fired a warning shot over their heads and the two men tumbled to the ground in a grappling match. When they rolled out of it, there were two Stephens.

They stood staring at her, both with that quiet ease. The Stephen on the left shouted, "Shoot him, Maya. In the head. He can't survive a head shot."

The Stephen on the right said, "I'm Stephen, shoot him. Shoot the skin-walker."

The snarling and growling ceased behind her as Matt's battle ended. He moved up behind her and she could smell the stench of death covering him. "Can you tell who's who?"

"No. They both smell the same."

"Well, I'm going to shoot one of them, dammit." In her head she eenie-meined, but in the end, couldn't pull the trigger.

The Stephen on the left spoke up. "Shoot us both in the head."

Mouth dropping, Maya shook her head. She couldn't.

"You saw my hand. I'll survive the headshot. The skin-walker won't."

Maya swallowed hard as adrenaline surged through her. He made sense. She took aim, and when she did, the skin-walker shifted as he turned to run. Squeezing the trigger, Maya breathed out as the bullet jettisoned from the chamber and smashed into the back of his head.

Sirens wailed outside the building. "Oh, fuck." How in the hell was she going to explain the bloody massacre? "Get out, both of you. You can't be here," she told Matt and Stephen.

"What about you?" Matt asked, his body now human, naked, and covered in blood.

"I'll think of something. Just go."

They hustled out the back, both with parting glances to Maya. She could hear the screech of more cars pulling into the parking lot. She ran over to Calbert, smacking him in the face to rouse him. "Wake up, fuckwad."

Calbert's eyelids fluttered open. "What happened?"

She grabbed a handful of his hair and dragged him to his mauled girlfriend, what was left of her, anyway. "You see this," she hissed. "That man over there, the one with the bullet in the back of his head, is responsible. He had some kind of wild dog that tore her to shreds." She pointed at what used to be Emma Peterson. "You shot him using my gun as he ran to escape, his dog getting out before him."

"And why, why would I take the blame for this?"

"You want to bargain? Fine. You can either take your chances with the law, fess up to the murder of Watkins and Toll, or you can end up like your partners, dead and unrecognizable. You got it?"

Panic and fear rocketed through his system. "I... I..."

"Can it, asswipe. My wolf..." she couldn't believe she called Matt hers, "... will eat your tiny little shriveled heart for breakfast. Got it?"

"Yes, yes."

Sandenski arrived in the building followed by a crew of blue as the agreement was made. "Drop the gun, Eddings," he ordered.

She backed away from Calbert and set the weapon on the ground. "It's about time you jokers arrived."

One of the cops took one look at the bloody scene and threw up. "What the fuck happened here?"

"They kidnapped me. Can you believe it?" Well, at least that part was true. "They knocked my ass out and when I woke up, this was the mess I showed up in."

Calbert was standing a few feet away with my gun. He hasn't told me exactly what happened yet, but I'm sure you can manage."

Sandenski didn't look like he believed a word coming out of her mouth. But that was his tough luck. He had his killers and Stephen would go free. They would find gunpowder residue on Calbert's hand, lending to the credibility of Maya's story.

"What happened to your shoulder?"

"Same thing that got that poor bastard." She pointed to the scattered flesh that had been Emma Peterson. "Must have got me is all I can figure."

Raising an eyebrow, Sandenski looked at Calbert, who mutely nodded. *Smart boy.*

"Fine. Let's just say I buy it... for now." He motioned to the paramedics. "You're going to the hospital and getting checked out. You can come down to the station tomorrow for an official statement."

A heavy sigh flowed from Maya. The hospital sounded good. A hot shower and a warm bed sounded even better, but she didn't argue. She wanted to check on Jack, and find out exactly what Tyler had told the police so she could get her story straight for tomorrow. One of the paramedics put his jacket across her bare shoulders.

Sandenski put his hand out before she passed him. "Nice legs, by the way."

Maya smiled. Sandenski was a putz, a total asshole who lived to make her life miserable, but he was a good cop. And she could live with him admiring her legs.

The morning paper read "Dream Makers, Inc., Executive Arrested for Murder." Maya smiled as she folded the paper and placed it next to her coffee. She didn't need to read the article since she'd basically invented it. Three days had passed since "Bloody Tuesday," as she called it, happened. Thankfully, Jack was doing well. It had been touch and go for the first two days, but he'd opened his eyes the night before and spoke to her.

Stephen would be coming over soon. They had a date. A real one. He was taking her to dinner at the Crown Plaza, though he'd agreed to keep it to himself and not tell

Paula. She wasn't ready to face her friend yet, but she didn't want to give up Stephen either.

Her relationship with Matt was tenuous at best, but he'd agreed to date her as well. Both men, sharing her equally, and it gave her hope for another trio-tryst, but she wasn't counting her chickens before they hatched. Of course, the lycan would continue to see Jenny. His family expected it, and as he put it, "If you can see someone else, then so can I." She sighed. Fair was fair. Luckily, Stephen was content to have her and only her. The doorbell rang and a zing of excitement coursed through her body.

She ran to the door, then slowed her pace to open it. Bright green eyes stared at her with deep, dark thoughts. Naughty-juicy thoughts, and Maya decided, "Fuck it." Grabbing his head she yanked him down into a kiss, dragging Stephen into the apartment and slamming the door behind them. Dinner was way overrated.

## **Hannah Beckham**

Hannah Beckham is ready to be fitted for her own straightjacket and a magical stay in the rubber room. After a stint in the Army, Hannah found writing a great way to escape the insanity that is her life. She likes tough heroines with a sense of humor, and heroes who are hunkishly supernatural and a little damaged. She's always up for email. Readers can write her at [hannah@hannahbeckham.com](mailto:hannah@hannahbeckham.com) or visit her website at [www.hannahbeckham.com](http://www.hannahbeckham.com).