

Sandhain Productions Ltd.

Sydney Somers

Don't Let Go

SPELLBOUND

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
512 Forest Lake Drive
Warner Robins, Georgia 31093

Spellbound: Don't Let Go
Copyright © 2007 by Sydney Somers
Cover by Scott Carpenter
ISBN: 1-59998-474-1
www.samhainpublishing.com

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First **Samhain Publishing, Ltd.** electronic publication: May 2007

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Chapter One

“You have got to be kidding me.” Sabrina Lancaster Jacobs glanced down at the knife pointed at her abdomen. Her heart kicked against her ribs, but she swallowed the first sharp tang of fear the second it rolled across her tongue. After all, she knew something the mugger in front of her didn’t. Something that gave her the edge regardless of the weapon within inches of slicing her from navel to sternum.

If the guy had the balls for it.

Bree studied the teen dressed in a stained white T-shirt and ripped jeans, his oily blond hair falling in clumpy strands down his unshaven face. Tattoos decorated each arm from wrist to shoulder. She had to give the kid credit for at least going to someone who was somewhat skilled with their artwork. She’d come across more than her share who’d foolishly plunked down cold cash with any Tom, Dick or Harry who had *Tattoos* scrawled across their door.

The teen’s hand trembled, his eyes glassy. He probably needed a fix. He flexed his fingers around the hilt, readjusting his grip. “I don’t got all night, lady.”

Bree snorted. Her mother would have laughed at that. No one could mistake Bree Lancaster for a lady, and she had a whole family who reminded her of that on a regular basis. Real ladies didn’t have tattoos—albeit nicer ones than the kid in front of her—and they didn’t ever dye their hair for any reason but to mask the telling strands of gray, not even on Halloween, and they certainly didn’t paint their fingernails black.

As far as she was concerned, being a lady was highly overrated, and Bree was perfectly happy in failing to meet her family’s expectations in that regard. And she would have been even happier to make it home in one piece after spending the last ten hours on the flight from hell, without being threatened

with a knife. A rusty one by the look of it. The kid was definitely not a professional.

His eyes narrowed. "I want your wallet." A brittle layer of agitation clung to his voice.

She cocked her head and sighed. She *really* didn't need this. The kid clearly wasn't familiar with the actual scary types that eked out a living ripping people off in Europe.

Bree shook her head. "I'm not giving you my wallet. Drop the knife, turn around and go home."

The kid hesitated, looking uncertain, but didn't retreat.

So the guy had some willpower in him after all. Not a lot of junkies did. Bree tried again, really pushing to implant the suggestion in his subconscious. "*Occumbo is quod vado.*"

The knife clattered on the sidewalk, his eyes widening as though he couldn't believe he'd dropped it.

"Go home," she encouraged again. "Don't bother anyone else tonight."

With an incredulous nod, and probably assuming he was somehow trippin', he turned and shuffled away as though he had only stopped to ask her for a light.

Bree let out the pent-up breath locked in her chest and picked up the knife. She wasn't one for close calls and could have done without the burst of adrenaline pounding thick and fast through her system. She wanted to feel bad for the kid, but being as bone tired as she was, she couldn't summon much sympathy for anyone when all she could think about was crawling between the sheets of her very own bed.

A first in the last year and a half.

Bree carried the knife to the edge of an alley and set it down. With her back to the street, she concentrated her thoughts and felt the small amulet strapped to her ankle warm her skin. "*Exuro.*"

The knife melted into a silver and black pool of steaming liquid. No one else would find themselves at the wrong end of that particular weapon again. Damn junkies. Given her baby brother's brush with the addictive lifestyle not so long

ago, she had more tolerance than most for what they went through. But when it came to threatening and hurting others to satisfy the cravings, her compassion took a hard dive out the window.

She probably should have given the teen a good scare. A little glimpse at what he'd look like if he kept heading down that road. Then again, she wasn't in the mood to have a run-in with the Tribunal. She'd behaved herself while she was in Europe—most of the time—and wasn't all that eager for a chat with the powers that be.

Ignoring her tired muscles, Bree continued on towards her boutique. Her small house lay in the opposite direction, but she knew she had to see the shop before she turned in for the night. She wanted to walk through the doors, smell the familiar scents, breathe them in and just...be home.

She passed few people on the dark June night. It was late, and being a weeknight, few tourists were out and about. The lights inside the boutique were still on, surprising her. She'd expected Marion would have already gone home for the night.

A smile tugged at her lips as she quickened her steps. The bell over the door tinkled, announcing her presence. Bree dropped her bag at the door, grinning wider as Marion came out of the back room, her glasses low on her nose as she read from a tattered hardcover.

Everything from Marion's flyaway gray curls and half smile on her lips as she read something amusing, to the familiar pink blouse and faded jeans made Bree's heart ache. A lump wedged in the back of her throat. Mark had always looked so much like his mom.

Bree didn't move for a long moment, just watched Marion. It wasn't until right this moment she realized how much she'd missed her. The only woman to ever look at her and accept her for everything she was, unladylike faults and all.

On the heels of that thought, Bree found her voice, swallowing past the well of emotion that caught her by surprise. "Miss me?"

Marion's head snapped up.

Smiling like she hadn't in months, Bree rushed forward and threw her arms around the older woman's neck.

"I didn't think you were coming home until next week." Marion stepped back but kept a fierce grip on her hands. Her gaze was far too probing as she studied Bree.

Bree shifted in place, knowing what Marion dug for, and hoping the other woman wouldn't go there just yet.

Appearing satisfied for the moment, Marion nodded. "You look good." A light sheen of tears filled her eyes before she hugged Bree again. Breathing would have been difficult if she weren't clinging just as tight to Marion.

"I'm glad you're home."

"Me, too." Bree drew back and surveyed the small changes Marion had made to the shop in her absence. More plants, a few new displays highlighting new merchandise. A section of books by erotic authors looked to be new. Something she'd have to take a closer look at, along with much of the boutique, when she wasn't too tired to process it all.

"I figured if you didn't like the new wall color then you'd be able to change it back pretty quick."

"I like it." The pretty shades of burgundy and caramel made the store feel inviting but intimately feminine, perfect for their primarily female customers.

"Let me finish closing up, and then we can catch up." Marion gave Bree another critical once-over. "You look happier than you did in Paris."

"That was six months ago."

She nodded. "I know." Her attention slid to the left and Bree followed it to a framed picture of Mark that sat on the counter near the cash register.

A steel weight pressed in on her chest, but the pain of the memories his picture dragged to the surface was fleeting. Now she could at least look at it without her grief hurting so badly. Even six months ago that wouldn't have happened.

She heard Marion tidying up behind her and absently played with the wedding ring she still wore as she stared out into the dark night. For the first time on the flight home she'd thought about tucking it away when she got settled back in her place. Seeing both Mark's picture and Marion, she wasn't sure she could now.

Before thoughts and regrets that still made her ache for her best friend could sink in, she focused on the here and now. On how nice it was to be home. A year and a half was a long time to be away from everything she knew, but backpacking through Europe had been the change she needed, a way to cope.

Bree frowned, taking a step closer to the window and studying the street out front. "Marion, where's your car?"

When the other woman didn't answer, Bree turned around.

Marion tucked a few slips of paper into the drawer behind the counter. She slung her purse over her shoulder. "Ready to go?"

She waited as Marion shut off the lights and followed her outside.

"What happened to your car?" Bree asked again wondering if it was getting repaired. She smiled thinking of how Marion's face had lit up when Mark had driven it into the driveway.

"I don't have one at the moment."

"Since when?" Marion adored her sleek black Mercedes. It had been the last thing Mark had bought her before he died. Bree remembered how Marion hassled him about buying his mother such an extravagant gift. A dying man's prerogative, Mark had said. Bree couldn't imagine Marion willfully parting with it for any reason.

Marion started walking.

Bree caught up to her and planted herself in front of the other woman. "Whoa."

Marion avoided her gaze. For a moment, all her teen years caught up to them and the shoe was on the other foot, with it being Marion's turn to play the uncomfortable guilty party.

Bree crossed her arms. "Is there something I should know?"

"Everything is fine, Sabrina."

She cringed. "No need to go all momlike on me. I just know how much you loved that car."

Marion lifted her face, but made no attempt to explain anything.

Taking Marion's hand in hers, Bree noticed the recent worry lines edging the mossy green eyes. Eyes that seemed to have aged far too much in such a short time. Why hadn't she noticed that when they last saw each other? "Tell me."

"I was going to tell you. I just... You just got home. You don't need to be worrying about anything but getting settled and—"

"I'm as settled as I'll ever be. Now tell me."

A chastising look scrunched Marion's brows together. "I will. No need to be thinking about using your gift to help me along."

Bree shook her head. "I wouldn't." Though sometimes it just came second nature, as it did to all members of her family. Not that it would have gotten her anywhere with Marion. The woman had far too much strength to be lulled into saying or believing any more than what she wanted to.

An apologetic smile caught the corner of Marion's mouth. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm just tired, and with everything else lately, I'm not feeling like myself." She took another breath. "It's gone. My money, my nest egg, it's all gone."

"What?" Bree shook her head. "How?"

To some people fifty thousand dollars wasn't a lot, but to Marion who had struggled to support her only child by working two, sometimes three jobs, for most of Mark's life, it was a small fortune.

"I don't know. I mean, I used the same investor very good friends recommended. I had no idea he wasn't doing exactly what he said he was with my money."

Anger burned through Bree's veins. "An investor took your money?"

Marion nodded sadly. "I feel so stupid. I just thought it would be smart to do something with the money Mark left me. I never would have realized..."

"Why didn't you tell me? When did this all happen? You know I would have come home."

"Which is exactly why I didn't say anything. You needed to be over there until you were ready to come back on your own. I wasn't about to rush you."

"How long ago?" Bree pressed.

Marion sighed. "A few weeks ago. I didn't know what he was doing for a long while. I should have known when he didn't return my calls right away that something was up. And his secretary keeps saying he's away on business..."

"Who is this guy?"

"He works at a firm downtown. His name is Mason Dade."

"Well, he picked the wrong woman to rip off." Marion needed that money as a little extra cushion to offset her meager pension when she retired.

"Bree, there's nothing you can do."

She snorted.

"I know that look." Marion pointed a finger at her.

"What look?" She shouldn't have bothered to say that much. She didn't even come close to sounding remotely innocent.

"The look that says you're about to jump in headfirst without looking."

With a roll of her eyes, Bree threw an arm around Marion's waist. "Let's forget about it for tonight."

But Bree wouldn't. She didn't care what she had to do to find the guy who screwed with Mark's mom. Her gut churned with a gnawing guilt that left her sick to her stomach. She and Mark had been best friends since the third grade, and their relationship had taken a far more personal turn right before he'd been diagnosed with cancer. For years she'd spent almost as much time at Mark's as she had at home with her own parents, sometimes more.

Even before Mark knew he was terminal, he made Bree promise to look after Marion, reminding her of it again hours before he died. And what had she done less than a month after he died? Took off for Europe because she didn't know how to handle losing her best friend and husband. Instead of being there for Marion like she'd promised, she'd buried her head in the sand, completely ignorant—selfishly so—to what was happening to the people she loved. She'd been back in the country little more than a couple hours only to find out just how much she'd let the both of them down.

Bree forced a smile as Marion tried to steer the conversation in a more light-hearted direction. Like getting Bree's house decorated. She tried to keep

up with Marion's suggestions but couldn't keep her thoughts on anything but making up for not being there for Marion.

And it started with Mason Dade.

* * *

"Did hell freeze over?"

Finn Calder didn't glance away from the window and the fading sunlight falling over the city. "I didn't get the memo if it did."

Violet sighed and came to stand beside him. Tonight his younger sister was dressed in a stunning red cocktail dress. She and Reece obviously had plans. The detective she seemed intent on keeping still annoyed him, but Finn was certainly having a whole lot more fun pushing his buttons since Reece hooked up with his baby sister.

"I'm talking about the fact that it's Saturday night and you're working. I find it hard to believe you don't have a date lined up."

"I cancelled."

Violet snorted. She turned and perched on the edge of his desk, arms crossed.

The look on her face reminded Finn of his mother and the time she didn't believe him when he swore it was his older brother Dante who got red paint all over the clean sheets she'd hung outside to dry. It certainly hadn't helped his case that he hadn't thought to use his magic to erase the evidence staining his own palms before she tracked him down in the lopsided tree house he and Dante had built.

But this time he wasn't lying.

Violet cocked her head. "You're telling me you cancelled a date on a Saturday night with what's her name?"

"Michelle," he provided.

"MacKenzie," Violet corrected with a grin.

He narrowed his eyes. She had set him up on that one. “Right.” He dropped back in the black leather chair behind his desk and swiveled it around in a circle.

“You’re telling me the truth.” Disbelief poured off her tongue.

“Why would I lie?”

Violet’s mouth fell open. “I never thought I’d see the day my brother, the player, cancelled a date.”

“It wasn’t going anywhere.”

“Your relationships never go anywhere. Wait, does dating for a week or two even constitute as a relationship?”

With a shrug, he grabbed a pencil and bounced the end off the edge of his day planner. He was bored and restless and should have jumped at the chance to get away from the same four walls he spent far too much time in. Instead he called his date at the last minute, and for what? To sit here and feel envious of what Violet and Reece had?

Damn, there really was something wrong with him.

“Working a case?” Doubt still flickered in her eyes, as though she figured there *had* to be another excuse for his being here tonight.

“I might be,” he said, relieved to find something to think about other than why he chose to be alone on a perfectly good date night. “I have a meeting shortly, but that’s not why I cancelled.”

He still didn’t know why he cancelled. There wasn’t anything wrong with Michelle—MacKenzie. She was nice to talk to, easy on the eyes, wasn’t clingy. So what was his problem?

And why was he so fixated on examining this? Lots of guys just hung out and did guy things on the weekend. Drank beer. Watched sports. Maybe that was all he needed. Some guy time.

Finn reclined in the chair, feeling better.

“You know what Aunt Gertie would say about this, don’t you?”

Aunt Gertie had something to say about everything. “I’d rather not know.”

“She’d say it’s because you’re finally ready to find your soul mate.”

Finn felt his feet leave the floor, the reclined position of the chair carrying him backwards.

"Aequus." At the last second the chair leveled out on Violet's command.

Her lips twitched. "I should have let you fall."

Finn righted himself and the chair and stabbed his pencil at the door she'd left open when she walked in without knocking. "Go bug your boyfriend."

Violet laughed and pushed off from his desk. "You know he's still sore at you for your last stunt."

Grinning, Finn recalled the minor change in hair color Reece woke up with last week. He thought the pepto-pink rather suited the pain-in-the-ass detective, a well-suited nickname he'd used fondly until Violet came into the picture. Now she expected him to actually be nice to the cop. Perish the thought.

Luckily, he'd only received one e-mail from the Tribunal for that little prank. The three member council had, however, warned him a personal visit would be forthcoming the next time he used his magic against another without provocation.

A change of hair color hardly constituted as an act of malice from where Finn stood, but there was no such thing as a gray area as far as the Tribunal was concerned. Everything was black or white. And if it wasn't "white" you could be in serious trouble. Finn wasn't interested in risking his magic being bound. The only thing more annoying than having to deal with Reece at all would be facing him daily and not being able to at least threaten to do worse than pink hair. He shuddered at the possibility of it ever coming to that.

Finn tried not to dwell on exactly how much the Tribunal knew about him at any given time. Not one to be creeped out by much, the thought of any one of the council members poking around inside his mind during the more intimate moments in his life left him unsettled.

Violet had had her own brush with the Tribunal after a drug dealer and an old woman forced her to use her magic in self-defense. Not to mention they hadn't been thrilled to find out a detective knew about the Calder family. In the face of the unexpected circumstances surrounding Violet and Reece getting

together, his sister was forgiven for not first seeking the Tribunal's permission to tell Reece everything.

Violet paused in the doorway. "Don't work too hard."

"You know that's never been a problem for me." He winked at Violet. If Reece broke her heart, there would be pieces of him all over the damn city by the time Finn got through with him. Then he'd really have the Tribunal all over his ass.

"Call me tomorrow." Violet disappeared down the hall.

Ready to find his soul mate. Finn snorted. He believed in them as much as he still believed in Santa Claus.

"Knock, knock."

Finn looked up to see two familiar faces hovering in the doorway.

"Come on in."

Erica Dade sailed into his office looking every bit the sleek and sophisticated woman he remembered. She smoothed back the strands of dark hair that were never out of place with a practiced fluidity as she took a seat opposite him. With a predictable cock of her head, she sent him a grateful smile. One he knew from experience didn't come from any true sincerity, but a driven self-preservation.

What had ever possessed him to date the self-absorbed woman in college? He couldn't recall them having much in common but Carey.

Carey Dade-Houston took her time approaching his desk, the polar opposite of her older sister. Where Erica was forward and an attention seeker, Carey was more withdrawn. And the differences didn't end there. Carey was blonde and petite and her smiles were usually genuine. From the few times they'd crossed paths since her husband's murder a couple years ago, he didn't see her smile nearly enough.

Erica straightened. "I'm glad Carey convinced you to see me."

"Anything for Carey." They'd been too good of friends in high school to pass up her plea to see her sister on such short notice.

"Nice to see you again, Finn," Carey said, not venturing any farther than halfway into the room.

"How have you been?"

"Busy. Garrett Jr. keeps me running."

Erica's polite smile tightened. "I'm not sure exactly how much Carey told you on the phone."

Carey took that as her cue and started retreating towards the door. "I'll leave you to it. I'll be down in the car when you're ready to go, Erica."

Erica nodded, and when Finn waved to Carey, the brunette made a clearing sound in the back of her throat to regain his attention.

"I know that you plan on divorcing your husband and have reason to believe he's seeing someone else on the side," Finn finally said.

"I know he is. In fact, it's a stripper who works down at Take It Off. And I want to hire you to find the proof."

Finn cringed inwardly. He hated working cheating-spouse cases. If not for Carey he'd pawn this one off on his cousin Tate. With her ability to transport herself from place to place with a thought, she was fantastic for those click-and-run moments where one good photo often made a case.

Erica shifted in the chair and sniffed.

Carey had told him how upset Erica was about her husband's transgressions. Which was why Carey recommended Erica come see him to begin with. Although Erica's need for his professional help wasn't nearly as bad as Carey's situation had been when the trail on her husband's murder went cold. Distraught, she'd come to him hoping he could help. He'd been about ready to give up too when he'd stumbled upon a police informant with a beef against Garrett Houston and had killed the cop before eventually killing himself.

Watching Erica dab discreetly at the corner of her eye, Finn couldn't decide if she was truly upset or looking for sympathy. She hadn't been above such tactics when they were younger.

"And where is your husband now?"

"Away on a business trip." Erica snorted. "He returns Monday and has a long-standing date for a lap dance at Take It Off every week." Disgust filled her voice.

“Have you spoken with him recently?”

“Two days ago. He knows I suspect he’s been unfaithful and denies it. How stupid do I look?”

Ignoring the rhetorical question, Finn grabbed a pen to jot a few things down. “I’ll take the case. Let me get some more information. What is your husband’s full name?”

“Mason Geoffrey Dade.”

* * *

“A bit overdressed for a strip club, aren’t you?”

Finn tensed, but didn’t lift his head from the file where he scribbled a note for Violet. Maybe if he ignored Reece he’d go away.

He glanced at his watch. Damn. Already running late.

Reece leaned against the vacant reception desk. Calder Private Investigation’s temp had already gone home for the night. The front doors were locked, the lights dimmed. Why Violet figured Reece needed his own key was beyond him. He personally wouldn’t give the cop the key to anything more than a broom closet, but it wasn’t his call. Unfortunately.

Setting aside the folder, Finn crossed his arms. Reece grinned at him. The detective had gotten far cockier with him and Dante since he hooked up with Vi. The hair color incident last week should have reminded him that he hadn’t earned any place in this family yet. At least not as far as Finn was concerned. Though it did take some of the fun out of annoying Reece now that he knew the things he once believed strange coincidences were actually magic.

“Any reason you’ve got a shit-eating grin plastered on your face?” Finn slid his gaze to Reece’s pockets, wondering which one held the key. Maybe Reece wouldn’t notice a little snatch and grab à la Calder style.

“Heard your date cancelled on you the other night.”

“Somehow I doubt you stopped by to ask about my love life.”

“So what happened? She find a guy who could actually remember her name?”

Finn took a step towards him, but Reece didn't look the least bit fazed. Instead, the detective nodded knowingly to the front of Finn's shirt that hid the navy amulet he wore, an amulet given to him at birth. All members of his family wore them, the old magic running through their blood strengthened by the amulets passed down through each generation. Reece's acknowledgment of the amulet Finn wore was nothing more than a reminder the detective knew far more about the Calders than the average cop.

"I'd point out that I cancelled the date, but that would mean making conversation, and tonight I'm just not in the mood, *honey*."

Reece laughed.

Did nothing bring the old scowl to Reece's face? Once upon a time all Finn or Dante had to do was cross paths with Reece and the man would be ready to do battle. Now all he did was grin like he knew something Finn didn't.

A tingle skated across the back of his neck and Finn looked to his right just as Tate appeared beside them.

Reece scrambled back a step, bumped an elbow against the stack of files on the edge of the desk. "Jesus. Can't you people give a heads-up when you're gonna pop in like that?"

Tate and Finn exchanged smiles. She slung an arm over Reece's shoulder. "Now where would the fun in that be?"

Finn was used to Tate dropping in like this. Plus he, like most of his family, had developed a sixth sense for knowing when she was about to put in an appearance.

She handed Finn an envelope. "Here you go. Pictures for the Coleman case."

"Don't you ever worry you're going to pop in when there's someone who shouldn't see you?" Reece asked, looking mildly less freaked out now.

Tate winked. "Danger is my middle name." She smiled, then with a "Night boys," she vanished again.

Reece shook his head. "That is just weird."

"Only for you mere mortals." Finn tucked the envelope into a folder in the stack for Violet.

“Every time I think I get used to you guys, I’m thrown for another loop.”

“You’re just still freaked out that Tate dropped in to visit Violet and saw you naked.”

The detective crossed his arms. “I’d just stepped out of a very cold shower,” Reece reminded him for the hundredth time.

Finn grinned. Sometimes it was just too easy.

Again he felt the air sway and Tate reappeared. “Hey, I forgot to ask. Sawyer told me you cancelled a date. I bet him fifty bucks that he had his information wrong. And he does, right?”

“Why is everyone so preoccupied with how I spend my Saturday nights?” Why couldn’t he have a family who were absorbed with their own lives instead of his?

Tate frowned. “I’m out fifty bucks, aren’t I? Shit. I don’t think you’ve cancelled on a girl since your first and only blind date had nearly been with one of the Lancasters.”

“Lancasters? As in rival witch family?” Reece shook his head. “It’s odd enough knowing you guys can do what you do. But knowing there’s another family out there with magic in the blood...”

“Two others actually. But the Hastings are even worse.” Tate leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to Finn’s cheek. “Whoever the woman from the cancelled date was, she obviously wasn’t good enough for my cousin.”

“Michelle was fine,” Finn began.

“Mackenzie,” Reece corrected.

Finn scowled. The cop was seriously asking to wake up with something a whole lot worse than fuchsia-colored hair.

“Later.” Tate vanished again.

Finn didn’t wait for Reece to jump to another subject that would press him to ignore both his better judgment and the Tribunal’s last warning.

“Have a good night,” Reece called out when Finn headed for the front door. “Hey. Wait a second.”

Silencing the voice that told him to keep going, Finn paused.

Reece jogged across the lobby and handed him a twenty dollar bill. "Here, have a lap dance on me."

"You want me to hurt you. You must."

Laughing, Reece strolled away as though he'd just made the dig of a lifetime.

"Watch your back, Prescott."

"Say hi to the Tribunal for me next time, would you?"

That was it. "I'm keeping the twenty."

"It was worth every cent."

With a curse, Finn shoved the money in his pocket, barely squelching the urge not to make everyone's favorite nightmare of walking into a crowded room *naked* come true for Reece.

Finn wondered what he'd been thinking to stop and grab a latte when he was supposed to be at the strip club in just under thirty minutes. He allowed himself another minute to think about how much he hated working cheating-spouse cases, then moved ahead in the line.

He nearly groaned aloud when the older man in front demanded that his order be redone. Why was it that he always got stuck behind the unsatisfied customers?

He was about to leave the coffee shop when the man ahead finally shuffled off, his white head bent to again examine the contents of the small paper bag he carried.

Finally.

"Evening, Finn. Working or socializing?"

"Working." He smiled at Louise, a robust woman with springy red and gray curls. Tonight she wore a bright pink and yellow tie-dyed T-shirt and platform boots that proclaimed she was a tried-and-true flower child.

"The usual?"

“Yeah, and throw in one of those frosted danishes that I adore.”

Louise had her hand on top of the closest paper cup, then her face lit up and she darted around the counter with a gruff squeal. “Bree!”

Finn glanced impatiently at his watch one more time and ran a hand through his hair. He’d been so close to getting his hands on the coffee teasing his senses to the point he could feel the saliva pooling in his mouth. Not to mention one of Louise’s mouth-watering danishes. At this rate he’d have to shovel it in without taking the proper time to savor the frosting.

With nothing better to do as he waited for Louise, he looked back over his shoulder to see who had captured her attention.

Not his type was the first thing that crossed Finn’s mind as he stared at the blonde with stormy gray eyes. She threw her arms around Louise, her painted black nails standing out in contrast against the older woman’s shirt. A small scar on the blonde’s face was almost unnoticeable next to the tiny stud she wore in her nose. The flimsy pink skirt she wore was at odds with the chunky black boots laced halfway to her knees, and the glasses perched precariously on top of her head looked ready to tumble off any second.

Not his type and yet...he kept staring at her.

Her gaze flicked to his and held for no longer than it took him to take his next breath. The brief eye contact stirred his interest and he continued to watch her even after she transferred her attention back to Louise.

“When did you get back to town?”

“Saturday.” The blonde followed Louise up to the counter, stopping beside Finn. She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and cast him another sidelong glance.

Aware he was bordering on stalker-gaze now, he forced himself to follow Louise’s movements and not sneak a glance—who was he kidding?—at the parted V in the blonde’s blouse and the tantalizing cleavage peeking out. She shifted a step closer and he dragged his gaze up the smooth column of her throat and then to the corner of her mouth that kicked up and exposed a dimple.

Dimples had never done it for him before, but he was willing to reevaluate that as she caught his eyes one more time, holding a little longer this time.

"Saturday?" Louise said, her voice cutting through the moment he was trying to have here. "And you're just stopping in now. Shame on you, Bree." She handed Finn his coffee and bagged danish. "Just the way you like it."

"Thanks, Louise."

"Does she give you a hard time, too?" Bree's soft voice surprised him.

"Only when I forget to tell her how good her coffee is."

Someone cleared their throat behind him, and Finn moved to the side, allowing the next customer up to the counter.

Louise handed the blonde a filled cup. "Just for you, Bree."

She lifted the lid and inhaled deeply. "Thanks, Louise." A smile of pure pleasure curved her lips, and Finn found himself studying her parted mouth with nothing short of gut-churning curiosity.

"Now you just be sure to stop in here tomorrow and tell me all about your trip." Louise turned back to deal with the people ready to mob the counter.

Finn watched Bree lift the cup to her lips to take a sip. She closed her eyes to savor the flavor, the expression on her face downright sexy. He allowed himself the extra few seconds to drink her in unaware, wishing he had more time to linger.

"It's been a year and a half since I've tasted this." Her tongue slipped over her bottom lip to catch a stray drop before she smiled impishly at being caught in the act.

"Just move back?"

She shook her head. "I was...vacationing in Europe." Her eyes traveled slowly over his face with just enough unabashed interest to make it clear the attraction was mutual. She studied his cup. "Whatchya drinking?"

"Latte."

She shriveled her nose.

He peered at the dark contents of her cup. "And what do you have in there?"

"Hot chocolate."

"Ah."

She arched a brow. "Not a chocolate lover?"

“No, I was just thinking you looked more like the espresso type to me.”

“Appearances can be deceiving.”

“Not always in my business. Sometimes what you see is exactly what you get.”

She eased off towards the corner of the small shop as more people filtered in and out. “And what business is that?”

“Professional spy, naturally.”

She leaned forward and whispered, “Can I see your gun?”

“The one on me isn’t legal, wouldn’t want to get you into trouble.”

Bree laughed. “Don’t tell me you’ve had luck with these spy-pick-up lines?”

“So you think I’m coming on to you?” Finn moved closer as the continuing movement of traffic left people nudging his back as they passed.

She had to tip her face up now, but didn’t retreat even though there was room to back up. She chewed thoughtfully on her lip. “Are you?”

“That depends. Was the spy stuff working for you? You can admit that it was, just a little. They’d have to torture it out of me.” For the first time in months, he was enjoying just flirting and treading on the personal space of someone he found himself more attracted to every second he stood there.

“You must not be a very good spy if they could torture anything out of you. You’re supposed to take that sort of information to the grave, I think.” She imparted her conclusion with such sincerity he had trouble keeping the game going as his thoughts turned to what the hot chocolate tasted like on her lips.

“Every man has his weakness.”

“So what’s your Achilles heel? And spare me the ‘if I tell you, I’d have to kill you’ line.”

Finn grimaced. “You’re shooting down all my good material here.”

“If it was easy it wouldn’t be worth the effort.”

“You say that like I’m playing for a prize.”

She offered up a secretive smile. “Maybe you are.”

“Shit.” He closed his eyes as he realized he was really running late by now. “I have to go.”

Her lips twitched. "Of course you do."

"That's not a dismissal," he clarified.

"Don't worry, I won't be crying in my hot chocolate over it."

That was a shame. He glanced at his watch, wishing the second hand would stop ticking.

"Have a good night, *Mr. Bond*." She smiled once more, the slow parting of her lips sinking a little further under his skin.

He stared after her, then slowly followed her outside. She was already a few yards down the sidewalk. He needed to get a move on, yet his feet remained locked in place outside the coffee shop.

As though she sensed his eyes on her, she turned back around. With a mysterious grin and a salute she turned and carried on. He took a minute to appreciate her trim legs and the chunky-heeled black boots that had one hell of an appeal, especially if that's all she was wearing.

He took a drink of his latte, then forced his legs to cooperate and carry him in the opposite direction. To work. But in the back of his mind, he was preoccupied with the curious blonde with mysterious gray eyes.

Chapter Two

Damn it. She was late.

Bree shoved open the door to the boutique and darted behind the counter to grab the bag she'd stupidly forgotten there ten minutes ago. Had it not been for the stranger's mention of being late, she'd be running even further behind herself.

"Can I just say again how crazy you are?"

Checking her bag to make sure she hadn't left anything at home, she rolled her eyes at Marion. "It's fine."

"I know you did a little *dancing* in Europe, but are you sure you need to do that to talk to this guy."

Bree adjusted the strap on her bag. "Dade has been impossible to pin down. I don't even know that he's going to show at the strip club tonight."

It was nothing more than sheer luck she'd overheard the conversation between a couple of the junior execs at the firm where Mason Dade worked about his usual Monday-night date with his favorite stripper. His secretary had given her the run around and, unfortunately, had been a little too strong willed to be receptive to any suggestive coercion to talk about her boss.

Not that Bree was looking forward to pushing too hard. The Tribunal might be willing to let her use her magic to influence Dade into confessing what he'd done given the circumstances, but playing with anyone else would earn her a one-way ticket to reprimand land. An unpleasant place to visit, let alone wind up with an extended stay, or more literally, a severe punishment that probably meant her amulet taken and her magic bound.

She was unfortunately familiar with the way the Tribunal worked, seeing as how she'd experienced the latter a handful of times over the years. Not a fan of

being restricted that way, she was still willing to risk it to set things right with Marion.

"The last thing you need is the Tribunal getting wind of this and then you'll have your family to deal with," Marion reminded her.

Bree shuddered. The thought of facing her parents was worse than being stared down by all three Tribunal members in the drab stone chamber where they often passed judgment. Made all the worse by the knowledge that her parents still didn't know she was home yet and she wasn't in any rush to tell them. She knew the second they learned she was back they'd insist on a family dinner. She'd sooner cold wax her bikini line one hair at a time with the cheap stuff than be forced to sit there all prim and proper, pretending to be more like her mother.

Her parents hadn't approved of her marriage to Mark and had expected her to move back home when he died. They hadn't understood her need to get as far away from everything that reminded her of her best friend until she was ready to move on with her life.

Marion sighed. "I still don't see how giving this rat a strip show will accomplish anything."

She really shouldn't have said anything to Marion about what she planned, but damn if the woman wasn't too perceptive where Bree was concerned. She'd lied to her parents more than her share as a teen, but few times could she ever waylay Mark's mom. "We'll see," she answered vaguely.

Marion gently gripped her wrist. "Just be careful."

With a smile meant to reassure, Bree nodded. "I will. I've got to go. I'm already running late."

"You look distracted."

She shook her head. "No, there was just this guy at the coffee shop..." She headed for the door. "Anyway, I've got to go."

Marion followed her to the door. "A guy?"

Bree heard the smile in the other woman's voice. "It was nothing."

"Then why are you smiling?"

Bree sandwiched her lips together. Even her immediate reaction to the man from the coffee shop had caught her off-guard. She wasn't one to fall into some flirty conversation with any guy, especially the type that had smooth operator written all over his handsome face. Nevertheless, the ease with which she found herself playing along and enjoying their banter surprised her, made her regret that they couldn't have talked for a bit longer.

As that thought slipped through her mind, she caught sight of the picture of Mark.

"Don't," Marion said gently. "What you two had was different and special and you have nothing to feel guilty about." She gave Bree's arm a squeeze. "Plus, we both know that Mark would be the first to tell you not to look back."

Bree glanced down at her bare finger, her ring tucked away at home in her jewelry box. "Maybe I'm still not ready to let go."

"Because you don't want to be with anyone else? Or because you couldn't do anything to save him?"

The probing question struck a little too close to the truth. "I need to go."

"One more thing?"

Bree nodded, and the twinkle in Marion's eyes immediately loosened the tension embedded in her spine.

"Was the guy hot?"

With a roll of her eyes, Bree pulled the door open.

"We'll talk more about that later." The digging-for-details look in Marion's expression said it all.

Figuring it was easier to walk away before anything else could be said that would make the encounter out to be more than what it was, Bree waved and started down the street at a brisk pace.

She finished off her hot chocolate and ditched the empty cup in the garbage can on the corner. With the warm night air, she didn't need a jacket even as darkness crept across the sky. Traffic was light and most of the businesses in the area were closed for the evening. She passed by a pub as an exiting patron departed and the sound of Garth Brooks praising friends in low places left her smiling.

Bree picked up the pace and in her mind she replayed the brief encounter with the black-haired stranger in Louise's coffee shop. She caught her grin widening at the memory of his deep blue eyes and the playboy charisma. She should know. She'd come across enough of them while in Europe, and even the few who had learned she was a widow hadn't had any qualms about pressing her for a brief affair.

But unlike Europe and the few men she found there worth talking to for more than a minute at a time, she had wanted to talk a lot longer to the stranger whose smile had reached in and jolted every cell in her body into complete awareness. For the first time in so very long, she'd wondered what it would be like to feel the slow, intoxicating sweep of a man's lips across hers.

Her insides warmed as her imagination kicked into overdrive and cast the stranger from Louise's in the starring role of her first daydream in a long time. Maybe she could swing by Louise's in the morning and find out how much of a regular the guy was.

Bree rounded the last corner and had to pacify her starved hormones with the promise of continuing her increasingly distracting thoughts of the stranger later. She bypassed Take It Off's front door where a harsh techno beat rocked the air, and headed around back.

She wasn't certain how she planned on getting past the bouncer stationed at the building's rear exit. A distraction of some kind maybe? A little illusion perhaps. Unlike some other members of her family, she embraced her magic. It was a gift she'd been born with and she saw no use in just letting it sit inside her and waste away. For whatever reason her family and two others she knew of had been given such a powerful gift—fate, destiny, genetics, whatever—it was foolish to pretend they were normal.

Her parents had never ignored her father's abilities, but had been quick to remind her and her siblings they didn't need them. The rest of the world got on without such benefits and they should endeavor to as well wherever possible. Of course they hadn't shied away from using her dad's magic in helping to form a Fortune 500 company.

The back door to the strip club burst open and a man wearing a drenched denim shirt stumbled out. He jerked his hand in the air and flipped off the bouncer who followed him out.

Bree stayed close to the wall, watching as the drunk staggered in the opposite direction towards the back parking lot. The bouncer walked cautiously after him, whether to make sure the guy stayed gone or not, she couldn't be sure. She didn't have time to worry about it, but made a move for the door.

Her breath came faster as she slipped inside and blinked against the glaring overhead lights. She wasn't a stranger to breaking the rules and the rush alone was almost worth risking getting caught where she wasn't supposed to be.

Bree moved quickly from the door in case the bouncer spotted her sneaking inside. The narrow corridor turned a corner and she followed it along. Music drifted from the speakers out front and the scents of hairspray and perfume mingled with someone's takeout pizza.

A woman dressed in a Western outfit, complete with a Stetson and a pair of chaps that no doubt left little to the imagination at the rear, strode towards her.

Figuring she'd have to bluff her way first to see how it went, Bree paused in front of the redhead. "Could you tell me where I can find Candy?"

"You a friend or that stupid bitch who thinks Candy is doing her husband?"

Bree smiled. "Definitely a friend."

The redhead's eyes narrowed, then she tossed her head to indicate the hall behind her. "First door right before the main stage. She's doing private dances tonight, so if you want to catch her before the next guy, you best get moving."

"Thanks." Bree strode off, a slow jazzy beat growing louder as she neared her destination. She didn't knock on the door, assuming the redhead was right about her being in-between dances. Better to slip right in than have to deal with Candy slamming the door in her face. She didn't want to bring any more attention to herself than she had to.

The dimly lit room was small and consisted of little more than an armless black chair in the middle. A small rack of outfits rested against the far wall, and a stereo system sat on a square table next to a stack of CDs. The sound of

movement and a person humming brought her around to where light spilled out from a secondary doorway across the room.

A second later a woman with long, wavy brown hair walked out. She blinked in surprise seeing Bree there, then propped a hand on her hip. "If you're looking for a lap dance, only Shelia does the women."

"I'm not looking for a lap dance."

"Then you probably shouldn't be back here."

Bree readjusted the strap of her bag on her shoulder. "Does Mason Dade have an appointment with you shortly?"

"You know Mason?"

"He's a friend of my mother-in-law's."

Her eyes shrank to venomous slits. "If this is about his wife—" Her shrill tone grated the eardrums.

"It's not."

"Good, but you still need to leave."

Bree sidestepped, cutting Candy off when she headed for the door. "*Laxamentum.*"

The woman yawned. "What did you say?"

"Look, I really need to stay a while." The amulet warmed against her ankle.

"I don't think..." The woman trailed off hesitantly.

"You look tired. Why don't you go back into your dressing room and take a little nap."

"I'm really not that tired." The woman yawned again and turned without a word and retreated back to the other room. Bree followed her in, watching as Candy sat before the vanity countertop and lazily brushed her hair.

"*Quiesco,*" she whispered. *Sleep.* Following yet another yawn that almost made Bree feel sleepy, Candy rested her face on her bent arms and drifted off.

Spotting the clock mounted above the vanity, she realized she only had about ten minutes before Candy's regularly scheduled appointment. Bree guessed the man paid good money if she kept a set time slot open for him, unless there was something more going on between them than just a lap dance or two. She didn't really care either way if their relationship extended beyond

business. Obviously, Dade's wife felt differently judging by the two strippers' reactions.

Shrugging the bag off her shoulder, she bent to dig out the red corset and matching thong she'd stashed inside to help convince Dade to tell her *everything* she wanted to know.

Finn took a seat at the bar, ordered a beer, and swiveled around on the stool to survey the club doing a healthy business for a Monday night. Strobe lights blinked over the main stage, making the fluid moves of the woman wearing nothing but a pair of leather chaps eerily seductive. Most of the men were focused on the action on the main stage or one of the two smaller ones, their expressions ranging from a notch above boredom to drooling in their beer.

The bartender set Finn's beer on the counter and after digging out a few dollars, Finn moved away from the bar. As far as he could tell, Dade hadn't arrived yet, which gave him the few minutes he needed to get the camera in place. All he had to do was get into the room where Dade received his *personal attention*.

He was cutting it close tonight. He shouldn't have lingered at Louise's. Or at the very least, should have come out of it with the blonde's phone number. He'd been a little too preoccupied with the soft shade of her gray eyes and the sound of her voice during their brief encounter to get to that point. And by the time he realized it, he needed to haul ass.

If not for Dade being so hard to pin down, he would have risked losing tonight's opportunity for a few more minutes with Bree. He couldn't remember the last time he'd paid such close attention to a woman. He couldn't quite shake the image of her in his head. Everything, from the scholarly glasses immediately at odds with her nose ring to the pleated skirt and ass-kicking boots, teased his memory.

But right now he needed to focus on the job at hand and not the erection he was working up to. Hell, they'd barely shared a full conversation and already his libido was operating in overdrive.

Finn wanted this case wrapped up tonight. He had no interest in spending any more time trailing around after the guy than he had to. If luck was on his side, he'd slip in and set the camera in a discreet place and after a half hour or so, have all the proof he needed for Erica Dade. Assuming of course she was right about there being more to Dade's regular stops by the strip club than grabbing a beer and watching perky breasts bounce in front of his face for a while.

"You see Candy around? She's not in the backroom."

Finn cocked his head as a waitress approached the bouncer stationed close to the stage in case any of the men got a little too touchy-feely.

The bouncer shook his head. "I saw her not long ago. She probably went out back for a smoke."

When the front lights dimmed momentarily before the next girl strutted across the stage, Finn ducked into the door leading to the club's private rooms. Knowing Candy, who he'd discreetly inquired about yesterday, wasn't in the room made his job much easier. If he came across her, he'd planned on playing dumb and distracting her either by natural methods or the more unique ones at his disposal.

He stopped outside the first door. It had taken surprising little effort to get one of the club's regulars to chat about the place and who was who. A brief peek out back during his quick stop here yesterday was all it took to get a better feel for the layout of the place. It wasn't like he was trying to infiltrate Fort Knox, but he preferred to avoid going into any situation blind if he could help it.

The door handle turned easily, the music from the main stage masking his entry. He closed it quietly behind him.

Damn. He obviously should have taken a harder look in here yesterday. The sparse conditions didn't exactly give him a lot of places to hide the small camera.

Finn walked toward the stereo system, thinking it might be the only place the device could blend in. He doubted Dade would look too closely here. It was the stripper he'd have to worry about it.

The door he'd noticed off to his right opened, and the light dimmed even further.

"You're early," came the feminine voice behind him.

Shit.

Turning around slowly, Finn stared at the silhouette in the doorway, felt his eyes widen as she moved farther into the room. It took him a second to stop staring at the sexy corset and barely-there thong for it to penetrate his mind that he knew her.

From Louise's.

"You," she said softly, a trace of annoyance filtering into her voice. Her smile dimmed for a heartbeat before she turned it back up to full siren status. "I guess if I caught your name earlier this wouldn't have been such...a surprise."

"You're not Candy," he said, wondering if there was some important detail he'd missed. Louise had called her Bree back at the coffee shop. Maybe Candy was some kind of stage name, but he doubted it. Erica Dade had described the stripper as a lanky brunette just that morning.

The woman in front of him definitely wasn't the one who regularly gave Mason Dade his Monday-night lap dances.

"Candy went home. She wasn't feeling well. She asked me to fill in."

Finn didn't move a muscle. It was a fight to keep his gaze from roaming over every inch of tantalizing skin bared to him. The fact that she wasn't Candy pretty much ruined his chances for getting the evidence he needed for Erica tonight.

And that is a bad thing because?

She took another step in his direction and tilted her face up to study him closer. A flash of something filled her eyes before she blinked it away. Anger? He frowned. Maybe she wasn't crazy about her job. A handful of times his career as a PI had brought him into contact with a number of women who made money using their bodies one way or another. Some enjoyed it, for others it was a means to an end. Which category did she fall into, he wondered?

"Why don't you take a seat?"

Finn shook his head. He really needed to get out of there before Dade came along. Assuming the investor planned on keeping his appointment, he should be arriving any minute.

Bree lightly gripped the front of his shirt, tugging him forward. His gaze dropped from her mouth to the smooth swells of her breasts pushing against the top of the corset. Whoever thought corsets belonged in the past didn't fully appreciate the sexy look of them. Being a man who usually preferred a naked woman in his arms more than one all dressed up, he was seriously rethinking things.

She leaned up, her mouth close to his ear, her breath warm. "Trust me when I say, I can entertain you just as well as Candy can." She led him to the chair and circled around slowly, her hand trailing across his chest.

He tensed at the slow slide of her fingers. The soft friction fired his blood and he stopped himself from catching her hand and drawing her closer.

She turned him around and pushed him down on the chair.

Leave while you still can.

Finn ignored the sensible command his brain shot off and sat, distracted as she leaned down with her mouth inches from his. Her lips hovered close to his jaw and he shifted in place to accommodate the growing pressure in his groin.

She straightened, her breasts now on even keel with his mouth before she backed up a step.

"Now tell me, Mr. Dade, do you like what you see?"

What were the odds the first man to catch her interest in forever would turn out to be a low-life investor who didn't deserve much more than to be turned into a wart-covered toad and dumped into the closest swamp?

And she was really tempted to do just that. If she thought for a minute she could actually get away with it, she would. It didn't matter that such an attempt would suck her magic dry or that it wouldn't be permanent. She still might take her chances with repercussions from the Tribunal, just as soon as the scumbag confessed he'd taken Marion's money and she discovered what he'd done with it.

Glacier blue eyes roamed over her face in one long, hot pass. She resisted the instinctive urge to close her eyes under such blatant hunger.

Why couldn't he have been unattractive, or at the very least, leer at her? It would make the whole situation more bearable to know she hadn't wasted a second thought on this guy and what that full mouth might taste like.

She cursed inwardly. Fate was a real bitch sometimes.

Bree turned away from him, the weight of his gaze on her next-to-naked backside like a wave of warm water rolling down her spine. She chose the top CD and popped it in.

It didn't matter what she danced to. After being robbed while traveling through Germany, she'd chosen to make enough money to last her until her cards were replaced by dancing in a club. The money was good, the drunks, not so much. But it was better than calling her parents or Marion for help.

Lenny Kravitz's "Again" came over the speakers. Figuring this was business and it didn't matter what the song was, Bree moved back to him, hips swaying.

"I think there's been a little mix-up..." He trailed off the second she started to move her body in time with the music. Bree took her time, making sure every slow roll of her hips caught his full attention. In front of him, beside him, behind him. She made sure every angle gave him something to admire.

By the time she straddled his legs, not quite seated in his lap, Bree knew he was all but riveted. His gaze didn't linger on her breasts as much as she expected, catching him more than once watching her face as though it were as interesting as the rest of her.

That alone left her out of her element and she sought to distract him from seeing anything more than what she wanted by hooking her fingers under his collar and thrusting her breasts closer to his face.

He didn't even glance down. The corner of his mouth tipped up in the same playful smile she'd found her heart tripping to in the coffee shop. He raised a hand and, from the corner of her eye, watched it hover next to her waist as though he didn't know if he should dare touch her.

At the achy anticipation that craved to feel his hand come into contact with her bare skin, she cursed herself. Right then she wanted him to be anyone else. Someone whose touch she could not only welcome, but invite. Enjoy.

He finally lowered his gaze but instead of feeling relieved he was no longer searching her eyes, a new kind of tension stretched her insides taut as his mouth was centimeters from the tops of her breasts.

She shook it off and knew she needed to work at getting to the point of all this. She set her hands on his shoulders. "Like the show so far, Mr. Dade?"

"I think we need to get something straight—"

Unwilling to risk him pulling back because she wasn't his regular girl, Bree rocked back on her heels, sliding down his lap.

He closed his eyes, opening them a second later, and fastening onto hers. She brushed against him again, bringing her front in full contact with his chest.

He gripped her hips this time and shook his head. "You really need to stop doing that."

She leaned forward, her mouth hovering above his ear. "Is there a problem?"

"Aside from not being Mr. Dade, no, not really."

Bree froze. She leaned back and stared hard into his eyes. "You're not Mason Dade?"

"Right about now I sure as hell wish I was."

She started to back up, but he kept a hold of her, his fingers slipping under the edge of the corset. She sucked in a breath, daring to hope she'd heard him right. The slow caress of his thumb across her sensitized skin made it difficult to concentrate as a mix of relief and gratefulness eased her mind.

"I don't suppose there is any way I'm going to convince you to at least finish the song?"

"That depends." She took a step back, out of reach of the simplest touch that proved entirely too distracting.

"On?"

"Tell me what you're doing in here."

The question had been reaching, but the subtle shift in the icy blue depths told her he hadn't stumbled into the room purely by accident. So the question

remained, was he another client of Candy's, or did he have his own reasons for being here?

"I was looking for someone."

"Who?"

"Do all you exotic dancers ask so many questions during a performance?"

Bree shrugged. "Since I haven't been paid yet, I'm taking a few liberties."

"How long have you been doing this?"

She countered with "How long have you been coming here?" At the very least if he stopped in regularly maybe he'd talked to Dade a few times. The likelihood of the stranger ever having a conversation with Dade that would be of any use to her was slim to none. But given the fact that she'd crossed paths with him twice in one evening, stranger things had happened.

"Not very often." He leaned back, looking far too comfortable given the turn of events.

With no need to seduce the man with her appearance, she suddenly felt a little too bare. Snagging the closest item of clothing off the rack, she slid the white coat on.

The man arched a brow. "Is this where I ask for my physical?" She heard the faint trace of laughter in the deep voice and glanced down at the coat that mirrored a doctor's so closely it was obviously a prop.

She sighed. This wasn't getting her anywhere. "I have to go." Bree started for the small room where she'd stashed her bag. She needed to get out of here before this whole situation blew up in her face.

"Hold up a second." He rose from the chair and she was surprised to find he was taller than she realized. The top of her head only reached his chin.

Bree circled around, opened the door enough to grab her bag from the floor and stood upright.

He'd moved soundlessly closer, now no more than a few inches away. "You didn't answer my question."

A knock came from the outside door. "Candy, you feeling okay?" Another sharper pounding followed the gruff voice.

Behind her, Bree heard Candy moan softly. *Damn it.* So much for her extended nap. Too strong willed.

The dark-haired man frowned and tried to see past her. Bree let him, and when he slipped farther into the room, she pulled the door shut with him inside.

"Obfirmo ianua." Her heart raced as the whispered command trembled off her lips.

With the door temporarily locked, she gave herself a mental kick in the ass. Meet cute guy. Think cute guy is the wrong guy and make fool of self. Lock guy in room to avoid answering questions about passed-out woman.

Could she possibly have messed up the evening any more? Maybe she should have listened to Marion. Talk about the story of her life. Act first and think it through later. She shook her head. She'd foolishly thought she had it all figured out this time.

Riiiiight.

Another knock came from the outside door. "Candy?"

Bree scanned the four walls helplessly, wishing for a window and finding nothing that was going to get her out of this mess.

Could she get any more screwed?

Chapter Three

Finn jerked at the doorknob. It didn't budge. He spared a glance at the woman stirring behind him. He wanted to know who she was, but he wanted to know who Bree was even more.

He rapped his knuckles on the inside of the door. "Open the door, Candy or Bree or whatever your name is."

The blue streak she cursed in response would have made Dante cringe, but she still didn't open the door. He jiggled the handle again.

Things were not going according to plan. What should have been a simple setup was going all to hell faster than it had taken his cock to stand up and take notice of how stunning her breasts looked crammed into that corset. Good to know that while he was evaluating his recent boredom with dead-end dating his libido was still way in the game.

Footsteps shuffled away from the door. What the hell was she up to? Finn turned the knob again. "*Patefacio*." Nothing happened.

He frowned at the door but didn't have long to contemplate his magic not working as a louder voice from the main hall demanded to be let in. Bouncer probably. So much for ducking in and out. So much for nailing Dade tonight.

So much for finishing that lap dance.

Whoever Bree was, she knew how to move that body of hers, and she'd known how to make him forget what he'd come here to do. Maybe if he hadn't let himself be distracted by the luscious curves pouring from the top of her corset and swaying to within a breath of his mouth, he might have been able to piece together her intentions a lot faster. Her locking him in proved one thing. She wasn't supposed to be here any more than he was.

The woman behind Finn raised her head and yawned, stretching her arms over her head. The real Candy, he guessed. So what was she doing in here—napping?—while Bree was out there rocking that killer body of hers against his in ways that wrenched his gut into a hundred lust-curling knots?

“Bree,” he said against the door.

“Who are you?” the woman demanded. “And who’s Bree?” Candy frowned. “Was she the blonde in here a little while ago?”

“She doesn’t work here?” He was pretty sure he already knew the answer to that one.

“No.”

Of course not. Things could never be that simple. When he got his hands on her pretty little neck...

Finn tried to get the door to open again with no success. Perfect. *This* was why he didn’t do cheating-spouse cases. The next time anyone needed a favor, like Carey had when she sent her sister over to see him, he would politely decline to take on the case.

The voice from the hall grew louder and...closer? Bree had let the bouncer in. *Shit*. He tried the handle again, whispering the same words under his breath. His amulet warmed his chest, and this time the magic worked to release the lock.

Finn opened the door. Little more than a cursory sweep of the room told him Bree was gone.

The bouncer wasn’t.

“Who the hell are you?” the guy growled, muscles flexing in his biceps like some kind of involuntary tic. The menacing snarl frozen into the man’s expression on the other hand was anything but involuntary.

“I was just seeing about a private dance.” Finn cocked his head at the partially open door behind him. “Your girl was sleeping so I was going to find someone else who’d like my money.”

“Don’t move,” the bouncer warned and predictably moved to check on Candy.

Finn pocketed the small camera he'd left by the stereo and left. He was out the door and down the hall, exiting out back when he heard the bouncer yelling behind him.

The back alley was deserted. Bree would've come out this way. Where had she gone? And what was her connection to Dade? That seemed the only logical conclusion to draw. She didn't work inside, yet had known to expect Dade, but didn't know what he looked like since she'd mixed them up.

If nothing else, the case had certainly taken an intriguing turn. Now to figure out how she fit into the situation and why she'd wanted to give the cheating husband a private lap dance to begin with.

Bree unlocked her front door, grabbing mail out of the box while fighting to untangle her bag from her other wrist at the same time.

Instead of coming home one step closer, at the very least, to tracking down Marion's money, she knew nothing more than she had two hours ago.

Nothing more except the man from the coffee shop having the most intensely gorgeous eyes she'd ever seen. Naturally, it had to take dancing for him while believing him to be someone else to really hit that realization home. Home being a hot, achy place deep in her belly.

She didn't know what was worse. Dancing for him to begin with or mixing him up with Dade. The implications of both were what sent her fleeing the room at the first opportunity. She felt a little guilty over leaving him to deal with the bouncer while she made her escape, but it couldn't be helped.

Bree tossed the small handful of letters on the cabinet by the front door without looking at them and kicked off her heels. Wriggling her toes in the plush carpet, she cursed under her breath for not stopping and changing back into her boots on the walk back to her place.

Maybe if she hadn't been too preoccupied with wondering who the mystery guy really was or where the real Mason Dade was hiding out, she would have thought to stop and exchange the stilettos for her boots.

A burst of heavy punk rock from upstairs screeched through the air. Bree studied the ceiling overhead. She hadn't left the stereo on. Marion had her bridge night tonight. So who in the hell was in her house?

Gripping the rail, Bree stuck to the sides of the stairs as she headed up to avoid any squeaking that would give her away. At the top, she whispered, "*Telum manus*," and tightened her fingers around the old baseball bat that appeared in her hand, the same one that seconds ago had been propped in the hall corner near her bedroom.

A few feet closer to where light from her guestroom spilled across the dark hallway, she heard a voice join the music that was cranked up.

She pushed the door open with the end of the bat, and a smile split her lips. Bree leaned in the doorway and grinned at the paint-stained blue coveralls her sister wore as she stared at a half-finished mural on the bedroom wall. A lime green bandana held back riotous waves of soft brown curls that were a genetic curse as far as either of them were concerned.

It didn't take long for Angel to notice her. Another hip gyration to the harsh beat and a swipe of the paint brush. Then it was flung across the room as her younger sister finally spotted her.

"Bree!" She hurdled over the paint cans and drop sheets and, with a squeal, threw her arms around Bree's neck. "I knew when I came over tonight that you had to be back. I called Marion at the shop."

Angel jerked back. "Why didn't you call me the second your plane landed?" She shook her head. "Doesn't matter," she continued before Bree could get a word in, "you're home now. Finally."

After another firm hug that Bree returned just as fiercely, her sister drew out of the embrace. "Damn it."

Bree followed her sister's pained glance to where a splotch of blue paint stained the white lab coat she'd left the strip club wearing.

"*Abolesco*." Angel smiled when the paint disappeared. "Sorry about that." She took a longer look at the coat, her brow arching. "Costume party? You're missing the little nurse hat though."

"Don't ask," Bree said, stepping farther into the room. The ocean mural Angel was in the midst of painting was breathtaking. A stretch of beach hugged

the side of the wall, the bronze highlights in the sand almost glowing in the light of a setting sun dropping into the sweeping turquoise waves painted across most of the wall.

Angel chewed on her thumb, making a face at the taste of paint. "It's still not right."

"It looks fantastic to me."

"Figured I'd leave you a welcome-home present, something to do to pass the time until you came home. Marion was all hush-hush about where you were tonight."

"Just looking after a little business for her." Bree took a longer look at her sister, grinning at the glop of paint above Angel's eyebrow. At twenty-three, her baby sister had found her calling as an artist and regularly offered up some amazing paintings to Bree's shop. The more erotic ones Bree often commissioned, delicate silhouettes and shadowed limbs caught in a lover's embrace, always sold quickly.

"Got bored with the blond?"

Angel fingered the ends of her now sable brown hair. "Needed a change."

"I like it."

"I ordered pizza earlier and need sustenance. Come." Angel threaded her arm through Bree's and led the way back downstairs. The small three-bedroom house had been the perfect change for her after Mark died. One Mark had even pointed out in a real estate flyer before he died.

She hadn't been able to stay in their larger place with him gone, though she'd only spent a couple weeks here before she'd left for Europe. It didn't need much work, just some decorating to make the place feel truly hers. A task she hadn't been up for before.

In the kitchen, Angel flipped open the cardboard box on the table and dumped an oversized slice of pepperoni on a paper plate before handing it to Bree.

"Wine?"

"Sure." Bree took a seat, smiling at how comfortable Angel looked in her house. Her face must have given her thoughts away.

Angel ducked her head like she used to when they were younger and Bree caught her *borrowing* some of her clothes without asking. "I come by when I'm trying to avoid Mom and Dad."

"Still haven't moved out yet?"

"And leave the indoor pool, media room, and my own guesthouse?" She scoffed. "Besides, Mom and Dad only drive me nuts a few times a week."

"How have they been?"

Angel shrugged. "The usual. Dad his uptight self, and Mom, actually believe it or not, she's taken up pottery."

"Really?" Bree stuffed the last of the slice she'd managed to devour in record time into her mouth.

"And she's actually enjoying it."

To hear that the woman whose idea of gardening was to put on trendy gloves while watching a professional do the work was loving pottery came as a bit of a surprise.

"They don't know you're back yet, do they? I mean, they never mentioned it to me."

Bree shook her head. "I'll call them. I'm just trying to wrap something up."

Angel sobered. "I missed you."

"You should have come over to visit more than once."

"Had to be able to track you down first," Angel laughed. "I swear every other week I got a postcard from a different spot. You should see my wall." She tossed a crumpled napkin in the garbage and downed her wine like it was water. "So what business are you taking care of that has you dressed like a porn star?"

"Stripper," Bree corrected with a wink, then filled her sister in on the scum who took Marion's money.

"So you don't have any idea who the guy was you—" Angel tried but failed to hold in her laugh, "—danced for?"

"The woman who runs that coffee shop I love knows him, but other than that, nothing."

"Just a coincidence?"

"That he happened to show up right at the time Dade was supposed to be getting his own private dance?" Bree shook her head. "There's a slim chance they're not connected, but sometimes there is just no such thing as coincidence."

"And you danced for this guy?"

With a nod, Bree tossed her empty plate in the garbage.

"Was he hot?"

Bree mulled it over, not letting the instant "oh yeah" roll off her tongue too quick. Angel would take it and run with it as Marion had looked ready to earlier. "He was attractive."

Her sister pursed her lips as though Bree was getting to the good stuff. "Were you into him?"

"Before or after I confused him with someone else?" In which case, the answer was yes either way.

"I mean when you were doing your *thang*."

She carried their empty glasses to the sink, needing to channel the buzz that worked through her blood at thinking how much she'd liked certain parts of it. More so the very end when he hadn't wanted to let go of her when she realized her mix-up. "It was just to get a little information."

Angel sat back, crossed her arms. "So you hated doing it?" Something in her sister's tone dared her to agree.

She would have been perfectly happy not to think about the way those deep blue eyes of his had drank her in, the feel of his fingers on her hips for that split second she'd been thrilled he wasn't Mason Dade. And for that split second before she wondered why he was really there, a sharp longing had hit hard, one that screamed out for her to lower herself right into his lap and see what happened.

But it hadn't played out like that. The man was probably ready to murder her for locking him in the room and ditching him.

Shaking off thoughts of the disastrous night, Bree asked, "Are you going to stay over tonight?"

"That depends on whether or not you're going to answer my question." Angel stood up. "You didn't hate it, huh?"

"Not exactly." See, she could admit it.

"Are you going to ask Louise who he is?"

"No." He'd have questions most likely, if he even wanted to see her again after she ran out that way. So they had flirted for a bit in the coffee shop and she gave him a little lap dance. That didn't mean they had anything else in common.

* * *

"Was she hot?"

Finn nudged his older brother's booted feet off his desk, satisfied when they thudded on the floor. "She was worth a second glance, yeah."

And a third and a fourth...

Dante didn't look the least put out and propped his feet back up on the same corner. The brooding look on his face told Finn his brother was just hoping he would shove his feet off a second time.

"Rough day?" Finn asked, leaving his desk before he did just that. Dante was looking edgier tonight than usual, and Finn wasn't in the mood to help him work it off.

Dante ignored the question. "So you don't know who she is?"

Finn stared out across the city. "Beats me. But she knew who Dade was and she didn't work in the place."

"I should have taken the case off your hands."

Until he'd laid eyes on Bree, he might have agreed with his brother.

"Speaking of." Dante tossed a folder on Finn's desk. "Here's one you owe me."

"I don't owe you any swaps."

Dante lowered his feet and leaned forward, forearms on his thighs.

Finn arched a brow. "You're not honestly going to try that 'I'm a hardass' routine with me? Save it for Reece. He still buys it once in a while."

His brother cocked his head. "I covered for you on the Anderson case when you had that date with Maura."

"Michelle."

"MacKenzie," Violet corrected from the hallway as she happened past.

"*Clausus*." The door slammed shut but he could still hear her laughing from the other side. Pain in the ass.

Finn dropped back into his chair. One look at Dante and he knew there wouldn't be any getting out of this. He picked up the file and flipped it open. "No way." He closed it and pushed it back across the desk. No goddamn way.

Dante grinned as though that one comment had made his night. He got to his feet. "I knew you'd like this one."

"How long have you been waiting to drop this on me?"

"A week." He grinned.

"I've already got this cheating spouse one on the go. Have a little mercy, bro." Not that he expected it. This was Dante after all. Since Finn had been old enough to walk and talk, his older brother had shoved any chore on him he could get away with. And things hadn't changed much once they started working together.

"Look at it this way," Dante said from the doorway, "if you don't make any headway with tracking down your mystery stripper, you can go take in the *other* strip club for this case."

"I do not deserve a cross-dresser case," he hollered out but Dante was already gone.

Finn didn't want to think about where Dante was off to. Likely some dark hovel where he could brood in his beer. The only time the man seemed to be amused was when he was dumping something like this on Finn.

With a disgusted sigh, he swiveled back to the window wondering again what Bree had been doing in that club with intentions of dancing for Dade while his regular girl was catnapping in the dressing room.

He needed to talk to her. With her disappearing act last night, he'd sent his cousin Sawyer back to the strip club earlier today to see if his cousin could find out anything else about Bree, if anyone had ever noticed her around there before.

Finn hadn't expected to learn anything new, but couldn't help but feel however Bree fit was important to the case in some way.

The sun dipped down behind the city's taller skyscrapers as he replayed last night, wondering if he'd missed something. He rubbed the back of his neck, the muscles tight and knotted. He needed a drink. A coff—

Damn, he was an idiot. Louise would probably know how he could find Bree.

He turned around but didn't make it any further than halfway across the room before the phone on his desk rang. He thought about ignoring it but knew Violet would have his ass if she thought he was avoiding any clients. Dealing with them was her job, but oddly enough when he reminded her of that, all he got for the effort was a dirty look.

Finn backtracked to his desk and picked it up.

"You've got a guy headed up without an appointment. He jumped into the elevator before I could check to see if it was fine to send him up." The firm's temp receptionist rattled off the warning as though she'd just rushed up three flights of stairs to tell him personally.

"Did he give his name?"

"No. Sorry, Finn."

"Don't worry about it, Lori."

"Lauren," she laughingly reminded him before she hung up.

Out of all the temp receptionists they'd had, she was the only one who stood a chance at lasting since she didn't let any of them take advantage of her. Something he could shamefully admit he'd sometimes done since Gladys had retired six months before. The old broad had been the firm's one and only receptionist since his father and uncle had opened the doors twenty years before.

He set the phone down but still wasn't prepared for Mason Dade to stalk into his office moments later. With disheveled blond hair and bloodshot eyes, the man stabbed a meaty finger at Finn.

"Where the hell do you get off following me around?"

The sour smell of day-old alcohol wafted from Dade's breath. Some looked to have stained the shirt hastily tucked into pants he probably slept in.

"Don't stand there and play dumb, asshole. I know my wife hired you, the cheating little slut."

Finn crossed his arms, refusing to let the irate man ruffle him. "I think you need to leave."

"Her sister probably put her up to it, didn't she?" he snarled. "Never could keep her nose out of anyone's business."

Finn didn't comment, only lifted his phone to call for security. He could take care of the man himself, but any scenes that could reach the media brought Darby right to his door. The only thing worse than dealing with a pissed off Dante, was Dante's equally intimidating twin. So for the sake of self-preservation, he played it by the book. This time.

"If you think I'm just going to sit by and let you or your little blonde chase me around, you can forget it," Dade continued, stalking closer.

Blonde? Did he mean Bree? Finn replaced the phone after hearing security was already on their way. "It's time to go."

"Or maybe you're the one doing Erica. I know you two had a thing once. Wouldn't surprise me if the whore was paying you with sex to dog my every step."

"That's enough."

Violet appeared in the doorway. "Is there a problem?"

Dade sneered, jerking his head towards Vi. "Or maybe you're shoving your hand up this one's skirt."

That was fucking out of line.

Finn strode purposefully towards Dade. The hell with waiting for security.

Dade must have anticipated being thrown out on his ass but wasn't prepared to go down without a fight.

Finn dodged the off-kilter blow Dade aimed at his face and was forced to throw his own punch after another off-balanced swing from Dade. It only clipped Dade's jaw as the man jerked out of reach.

The short confrontation allowed security to arrive, about thirty seconds too late.

"What was that all about?" Violet asked as security hauled Dade to his feet and propelled him out the door.

"Stay the hell away from me," Dade yelled, his voice fading as he was herded towards the elevators.

"Pissed his wife hired me."

"Ah. Cheating-spouse case?"

Finn nodded.

"You okay?"

Aside from the adrenaline still pounding through his system? Erica was the proficient, polished drama queen and after Mason Dade's little display, Finn couldn't figure out how the two ended up together.

He nodded when he realized Violet was waiting for an answer. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just on my way out actually."

"Maybe you should leave by the rear parking lot in case the guy hangs around out front. No need to add more fuel to the fire and get Darby's panties in a twist."

"Good idea." He paused next to her and brushed a kiss across her forehead. "Sorry you had to hear him be a dick."

"I've heard worse."

"From who? I want names and addresses."

"So you and Dante can go kick some schoolyard ass?" She laughed and followed him out the door.

It took him under twenty minutes to get to Louise's place. Thankfully, she wasn't very busy, giving him time to get more info on Bree out of her.

"How are you doing tonight, Finn?"

"Been one of those days," he said, thinking about Dade's unexpected arrival. Certainly made his job harder knowing the man would be keeping an eye out for him. He couldn't imagine what possessed Erica to tell Dade about him.

Finn ordered his usual latte and gestured to one of his favorite danishes, his mouth watering when he saw how thick the frosting was. While she got his order ready, he moved in for the real purpose of his stopping by.

"The woman that was in here last night, Bree, I think her name was, does she work around here?"

And just like that Louise's face shut down. "I really would never have thought you two would get off to such a bad start like that."

Finn frowned. "Bad start?"

"I like you, Finn. And I like Bree. And heaven knows why you two must be oil and water, but I'd rather just stay out of it."

"I'm a little confused here." A lot confused actually. Bree had come in here and told Louise what had happened?

"She said you would probably want to know more about her, but asked me not to say anything, so don't ask me okay, sweetie?"

Louise handed him his stuff, and Finn automatically handed over the money as he tried to wrap his mind around this.

So she'd figured he would try to find her through Louise and made sure the older woman wouldn't say anything. He liked Louise too much to press her for more details when she looked so uncomfortable at being caught in the middle.

A minor setback, but not one that worried him. There were other ways to find out more about the mysterious Bree. He hadn't done a stakeout in a while. And with the exception of the cross-dresser case that was now on the bottom of his priority list, he could spare a little time to watch Louise's place, see if Bree put in an appearance.

He was on the sidewalk out front when his cell rang. Finn wasn't surprised to hear Erica's voice. She was probably looking to warn him that Dade knew about him.

"Finn? I'll be on my way home soon. Would you be able to meet me there in about an hour? I heard from Mason."

"Me, too."

Erica cursed. "He wasn't drunk, was he?"

"Probably had sucked back a few."

"Sorry about that." She said it the same way she would apologize for not mentioning a last minute change in venue for a lunch date.

"I can be there..." he glanced at his watch, "...in half an hour or so. I'm assuming your husband won't be around?"

"No. See you then." Erica hung up, and Finn pocketed his phone.

Taking a long sip of his coffee, he glanced over his shoulder at the coffee shop. Looked as though tomorrow was going to be a long, boring day.

Bree slid the window across and heaved herself in through the open pane. Any tighter of a fit and she would've been finding another way inside the Dades' house. The interior of the office was dark, and she fumbled with the penlight she'd tucked into her back pocket before she left her boutique earlier.

She listened for any signs of movement in the house. No cars had been parked out front or in the garage as far as she'd been able to tell. Thanks to the privacy fencing that was easier to scale than to see through, she doubted anyone spotted her slipping inside.

After a full minute of remaining motionless, Bree crossed to the door and cracked it open to hear anything the solid wood might drown out. Reassured by the silence, she turned on the small brass lamp on the corner of the Dade's desk. Strictly no magic tonight. No magic would hopefully keep her off the Tribunal's blip screen while she did what she'd come here to do.

She moved the chair out of the way and scanned the neat desktop, wondering if he could be foolish enough to leave any record here of what he'd done with Marion's money. She knew sneaking into his home to verify that was a risk not likely to pay off. Considering he wasn't going into the office and she was hitting one dead end after another tracking him down, she was running out of places to look.

And damn if she wasn't getting desperate. Bree couldn't shake the vibe the man was getting ready to bolt. It seemed a formal investigation was being launched by his firm. She'd gleaned that much from her quick trip there today. She doubted there was a lot of time before he split altogether with the money he'd stolen.

If the police didn't catch up with him first. Once that happened, she'd never get him alone, never stand a chance of getting back Marion's money. But if she managed to corner him before he slipped away, or could figure out what he'd done with the money, maybe, just maybe, she could set things to right for Mark's mom.

Bree started with the files on the top of the desk, not surprised to find nothing interesting there. Neither drawer produced anything useful either. Her hand had just closed over the handle on the filing cabinet when she heard what sounded like the front door closing.

Fuck.

Voices—a man's and a woman's—echoed down the hall. Had Dade finally come home?

The footsteps grew closer.

She'd never get out the window in time. One of these days she was going to get caught in a really bad situation, but she'd be damned if her spontaneity caught up with her tonight.

Bree managed to get into the closet and drag the sliding door almost shut but clumsily dropped her penlight in the process. She opened her mouth to call the object to her hand then remembered her determination not to use magic unless it was completely unavoidable.

The office door was opened, the voices still too low to understand more than a handful of words at a time.

Bree cocked her head at the sound of the man's voice, leaned to the side and chanced a peek through the crack in the door. The man had his back to her as he spoke with Dade's wife, but when he turned around and she got a good look at his face, all the stifling air in the closet evaporated.

"I don't know when he'll be home, but it won't be tonight," Erica said.

"When did he let you know?"

"Right after he railed at me about hiring you."

"Why did you tell him?"

"I have no idea how he found out about that, but it wasn't me."

The crisp tone in her voice told Finn she certainly had her suspicions on the subject though.

"I can't afford to move slowly on this anymore. He'll probably be in contact with his own lawyer any day now."

Finn studied the home office, thinking how cold and sterile it felt with its white walls and cold, stark black-and-white art. "You still need proof of his infidelity."

"That's why I called you over here. Since he won't be home tonight, I thought if he was careless enough to leave anything that could help us prove our case you might be the one to find something."

"Just don't get your hopes up. You think he's been having an affair for weeks and haven't been able to find anything. I'm not sure he'd leave any proof of something like that lying around the house."

"Maybe he got cocky."

"Maybe," Finn agreed, simply to avoid Erica arguing further, but he wasn't counting on it.

He was glad when the phone rang and she left the room to answer it instead of picking up the one on the desk. He knew Erica had already looked at their home phone records, but maybe she hadn't checked any for his cell phone. Chances were that would be the line he'd use to talk to anyone he was seeing on the side.

Finn looked over the top of Dade's desk, glanced down at the drawers. From the corner of his eye, he spotted something on the floor.

Frowning, Finn turned towards the closet, stopping a couple feet shy of it as he stooped to pick up...a penlight?

He straightened and swept his gaze around the room before bringing it back to the partially open closet door.

He reached out and caught the handle gently, not as surprised as he should have been to see Bree in the closet. "Hello, stranger."

"What are you doing here?" she hissed.

He bit the inside of his cheek thoughtfully. "This coming from the one clearly breaking and entering and holed up in a closet?"

She crossed her arms, looking ridiculous huddled in the small space and trying to make it look perfectly natural that she did so.

"But to answer your question," he added, "I'm working. Seeing as you have a lot more clothes on right now, I don't think you can say the same. Unless you came here for a late night tease, only to find that Dade isn't home?"

She snorted. "Believe me, the last person I'm interested in teasing is Mason Dade." She pushed away from the back wall.

Finn propped his arm across the doorway, keeping her trapped. "Funny you should say that since I very clearly recall you were definitely in a teasing mood last night when you thought I was him."

"That was a mistake."

"I'd almost believe you if you weren't so damn good at what you were doing last night."

A smile caught the corner of her mouth. "Some men are easy to please. Wave your breasts in their face and throw in a shake of the ass and they don't care if you pull on tap shoes and Riverdance."

He tried not to grin at the picture she painted, and managed it only by recalling *exactly* how good she had been at the lap dance.

He lowered his voice and moved until he completely blocked the narrow opening with his body. "I'm not some men. Answer the question, Bree. What

are you doing in Dade's house? And you better make it quick since Erica will be strutting back in here any second."

Her brows drew together. "How come you haven't told her I'm already here?"

Finn shrugged. "Call me curious. Plus I don't think you'd look too good in correctional orange. I don't think it's your color." Red, on the other hand, suited her perfectly. Before his semi-aroused cock could lead him in the wrong direction, he crossed his arms and repeated the question. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for information."

"On what?"

She tilted her chin in defiance. "I'll tell you when you tell me what *you* are doing here."

He shook his head. "You don't get to ask the questions. I was invited here. Somehow I don't think you were."

Bree rolled her eyes. "If you're planning to rat me out, get on with it already." She didn't look as comfortable with the prospect as the casual slant of her shoulders suggested.

He shrugged. "Have it your way." He turned towards the door.

Her hand clamped down on his arm. "Wait."

Chapter Four

Bree tightened her fingers on his arm, the warmth of his skin under his shirt seeping into her grip. His gaze slid over her face, the momentary heat that blazed there quickly disappearing under a questioning glance.

He didn't trust her. Good. She didn't trust him either.

She released her hold on him, wishing the closet was bigger and he wasn't so intent on intimidating her by crowding the narrow opening. The small space didn't leave much room, and every inch either of them moved made her increasingly aware of that. If the occasional twitch at the corner of his mouth was any indication, he felt it, too.

"Look. I'm not a friend of Dade's," she finally said.

Finn cocked his head. "So who are you?"

Your friendly neighborhood witch, hovered on the edge of her lips, but she settled on a more acceptable reply. "I'm just trying to find the guy."

"Why?"

"Couldn't we talk about this somewhere else?" Preferably someplace she wasn't breaking and entering.

By far this had to be one of her crazier ideas. Ranked right up there with her strip tease and following closely to the time she went for a joyride in her parents' car years ago, locking the doors before leaving it to look like it had been stolen when she realized how much trouble she'd be in for taking it. What kind of car thief locked the door had been her parents' suspicious demand two days later when the car had been found.

He arched a brow. "Someplace else?" he mused. "Like Louise's?"

The annoyed tone warned her he'd already been by there to try and find her. She was glad she'd thought to stretch the truth a bit when she told Louise

not to tell him anything. Despite Louise's assurances that Finn was a nice guy, the last thing she needed was more complications.

And Finn was clearly a complication.

"I knew you'd be pissed about the strip club."

"Why would I be pissed off about that? Could it have anything to do with being locked in a closet and left for the bouncer?"

She sized him up. "You might have been able to take him."

A muscle in his jaw ticked, but she couldn't tell if the small reaction was amusement or anger before he glanced at the door.

Bree sighed, prepared to say whatever she had to at this point. Her ears were already ringing from what would come out of Marion's mouth if she had to call her from the police station. "Come on, just let me sneak back out and I'll answer your questions. Promise."

He pursed his lips. "Cross your heart?"

She would have snorted if it didn't look like getting out of here hinged on her response. She nodded. "Whatever you want to know."

He crossed his arms. "You can answer them now."

"And every second I stay in here brings me one closer to getting caught."

Finn shrugged. "Maybe you should have thought of that before you broke in."

"Do you have family?"

His brows drew together. "Yes."

"A family you'd do anything to protect?" At his slow nod, she added, "That's what I'm doing here, but that's all I'm saying for now."

"Not good enough." He slid the door closed, and only the sound of Dade's wife's voice stopped her from making a sound of protest.

"That was Mason again," Bree heard Erica Dade say. "He left a number for our son, but that was it."

Through the small crack in the door she watched Erica sink down on the edge of the tan leather couch. Tears thickened her voice. "I don't know what happened with us."

Erica waved madly at the desk. "Tissues are in the top drawer," she mumbled, nearly hysterical now in an over-the-top, bad off-Broadway actress kind of way.

Good lord. Bree rolled her eyes at the melodramatic performance. No one watching her could think that perfectly balanced squeak and delicate dabbing at the corner of her eyes could possibly be sincere.

"I mean, you used to find me attractive, Finn."

Bree stilled. Now things were getting interesting. Maybe Dade wasn't the only one having an affair.

She watched Finn glance at the closet before he moved to hand Erica a tissue.

"People change," Finn answered diplomatically, ignoring her comment about her appearance altogether.

Erica Dade shook her head and sniffed louder, working her way up to a wail. "I haven't changed at all." She pointed to her breasts. "These look just as good as they always did. Touch them," she pouted. "These cost me a good little chunk of change, much nicer than some strippers."

At the mention of strippers, Finn cast a quick look at the closet. There was no mistaking the amusement in his expression before he turned back to Erica.

"Lots of men like older women. You did," Erica said smugly.

"I'm not twenty-one anymore."

Anyplace else Bree would have snorted at Finn's reply. Mrs. Dade might have drama queen painted over her polished face, but the last way to get her to shut up was to agree that she was in fact aging.

Men. Too bad there wasn't a stool in here. At this rate Bree would need to get comfortable. She only hoped the woman wasn't prone to long outbursts. Her present surroundings were far from accommodating for any length of time. If she didn't need to be ready to make a move for the window, she'd park her butt on the floor. When Erica started in on her college years, apparently when she and Finn had dated, Bree worried it might come to that anyway. Forget that the pins and needles when she finally got out of here would be a real bitch.

After another crying jag that sounded like a banshee being smothered with a garbage bag, Erica glanced helplessly at Finn. "Could you get me a glass of water?"

Finn hesitated and finally nodded, staring hard at the closet, though she doubted if he knew she could see him. Then he was gone, his footsteps echoing down the hall.

Bree watched Mrs. Dade dart to her feet to check her reflection in the long oval mirror on the far wall, barely making it back to the leather couch before Finn returned.

He handed Erica a bottle of water. "I'm sure this entire situation has been stressful."

She took the water, but ended up setting it aside. "You have no idea. I never expected to be traded in for a newer model." She burst into hiccupy, tearless shudders.

"If it makes you feel better, when you can prove he had an affair, you'll get the last laugh when you clean house."

Was Finn her lawyer?

Erica sniffed again, reached up and squeezed Finn's hand. "Thanks for listening to me. I'm an absolute wreck." Her nervous laugh couldn't have sounded any more forced. "Are you almost through in here? Any luck?"

"I'm almost done."

She dabbed a final time at her eyes and stood. "I'm just going to let Mason's mutt out and then I'll be back to walk you out."

Finn nodded, crossing the room to the closet before Mrs. Dade was even out of the room.

Her heart pushed into her throat. The bastard was going to tell her she was there.

He waited until the door was almost closed, then wrenched the closet open.

She couldn't tell if he was annoyed at her—probably—or at Mrs. Dade—even more likely. If Bree had to listen to a scene like that very often it would ruin her day, too.

"Start talking."

“Are you two having an affair?”

A glimmer of humor shone in his eyes. “I meant start talking about you, not me.”

“Can’t help but wonder if maybe Mr. Dade isn’t the only one getting a little booty on the side.”

He pressed his lips together, but his eyes gave him away. “Booty, huh?”

Bree shrugged. “You know, it’s a little cramped in here.” A lot cramped actually.

“That so? A jail cell will probably give you a little more room.”

“Jail is the least of my concerns.” She was more worried about the strip Marion would take off her hide for this if she was caught. Not to mention the lecture she’d get from her father and older brother for embarrassing the family yet again.

“I suggest you reevaluate your present situation then,” he warned, the sincerity in his voice a little too disconcerting to ignore altogether.

Footsteps clicked down the hall, pausing in the hall. “Finn?”

He stepped back from the closet, leaving the door open as he stepped to the left should Erica glance their way.

“Could you give me a hand with something before you go?”

“I’m not really finished in here yet.”

“It’ll only take a second,” she said.

Bree wondered if the silky pout used to work on Finn when the two had dated.

With a warning look that dared her to move, he left to help Erica. He really couldn’t be serious.

Bree didn’t even think it over. She bolted for the window. She had it open and one leg outside when she heard the return of footsteps. Damn it.

She waved a hand at the door on instinct. “*Clausus.*” The damn thing slammed harder than she intended. “*Obfirmo ianua.*”

Locking it gave her the extra couple seconds she needed. Her feet hit the grass and she ducked as she moved away from the house. Heart pumping, she

broke around the corner towards the backyard where she could slip into the next yard, and skidded to a stop.

The fluffy poodle with lopsided pink bows at her ears didn't look threatening. Not until it opened its mouth and showed off two rows of sharp little fangs.

Why couldn't she catch just one *freakin'* little break?

Bree made a break for it, feeling the air from the snapping jaws that barely missed nipping her ankle as she hiked over the fence.

Finn let himself in his condo and made a beeline straight for his recliner. He flopped down on the navy leather, groaning in relief when he sank deeper.

Something dug into his hip. He shifted to the side, grinning when he pulled the remote from the side of the chair. He didn't even have to get up to go looking for it. How the damn thing managed to vanish when he was the only one who used it was one of the great mysteries of the universe.

For the third time in the last hour, he tugged his amulet from under his shirt. The navy crystal looked the same as always, but he did notice the hemp clasp was looking frayed. He'd have to fix that before it came undone.

He frowned as he traced his fingers over the contours. Could he be getting sick? Twice now in two days, his magic had faltered with locked doors. Definitely not the norm. The only time it normally wasn't up to par was if he were getting sick. Magic and illness was not a healthy combination for witches and warlocks. The chicken pox had been a memorable experience for more than one reason.

He shuddered at the memory, still staring at his hand as though an explanation would appear for why his magic hadn't worked initially when Bree locked the door before bolting. Twice now the woman had gotten away from him and he wasn't any closer to figuring out how she fit into the situation.

Without getting up, he kicked off his shoes and dropped the chair back into a reclining position as he pointed the remote at the television. He needed sleep,

but his brain wouldn't settle down if he couldn't find something to take his mind off Bree. Not only was he preoccupied with trying to puzzle out her connection to Dade, but he kept thinking of her eyes, the small sexy stud in her nose, and that kiss-all-night mouth.

After their third encounter now, he was beginning to grow accustomed to the instant awareness of her. The tightening in his gut that made him feel like he was inching ever closer to the edge of a cliff, knowing the heady rush that would come from diving off. He was used to finding plenty of women attractive, used to dating more than his fair share of them, but when it was work—and Bree clearly intersected with this case—he had never before blurred those lines.

He couldn't say the same this time. Which meant one of two things had to happen. He had to stop the lingering thoughts that continued to creep in, making him wonder what her mouth would feel like sliding beneath his, how her body would arch and strain when trapped between him and a bed. Or he had to figure out who she was pretty damn fast to prove she was as harmless to the case as he hoped. And then he could find out about that mouth of hers without worrying if there was a serious conflict of interest.

A tapped-out knock on the door told him Tate was outside.

"All clear," he shouted, pleased he didn't have to get up. He was wiped.

His cousin materialized next to him in her usual whirlwind of energy that made her eyes light up. One of these days she'd find a guy who would be able to keep up with her. God help her then.

He glanced longingly at the fridge. "I don't suppose you'd snag me a beer?"

She laughed at his playful pout, then with little more than a nod, a cold one appeared on the side table next to the recliner.

"I have got to practice that one more." He knew Violet could call small objects, and so could Dante, but each time he tried it, something went wrong. It was far easier to grab a beer from the fridge by hand than to risk the liquid alone appearing in his lap.

She perched on the arm of the sofa across from him. "So I stopped by Dade's office today."

"Anything interesting?" He popped the cap on the beer and took a long chug.

“Seems your cheating spouse is about to be investigated by his firm.”

He leaned forward, feet back on the floor, his earlier tiredness fleeing with the new development. “Really?”

“A few clients have put in some complaints that he’s refusing to take their calls after informing them their investments were lost.”

“He’s an investor, that happens sometimes doesn’t it?”

“There’s more than a few people involved, and they weren’t all investing in the same things. The Securities and Exchange Commission is making preliminary inquiries and I doubt it will be long before the police are brought in, if they haven’t been already.”

“Thanks for looking into it for me, Tate.”

“No problem. It was either that or follow up on some cross-dresser case of Dante’s. I much prefer my men in loin cloths or leather pants than stilettos and fishnet stockings.”

Finn groaned at the reminder. “I may be in touch with you about that.”

She didn’t even bother to hide her grin. “Never saw that one coming.”

If his shoe wasn’t out of reach, he would have thrown it at her.

“Later.” Then she was gone as effortlessly as he used the remote to turn on the television.

Finn closed his eyes and tried to formulate his next plan of action.

Starting with Louise’s.

Finn hadn’t budged from his spot across the street from Louise’s in about two hours. He’d first thought he would be hanging out in the laundromat for most of the day. But given how impatient he was to find out who Bree was, he decided a change in plans was called for to speed the process up a bit.

He only had to wait another ten minutes before the florist he used regularly delivered a bouquet of lilies to Louise’s place. The older woman might not have been willing to tell him how to get a hold of Bree, but he doubted she’d let

flowers for Bree go to waste. Either she'd hold onto them, which meant she'd be expecting Bree, or she'd make sure they got to her.

As expected, the delivery guy arrived with the flowers and disappeared inside the coffee shop, emerging less than a minute later without the bouquet.

So far, so good.

He set aside the magazine he'd been holding and waited, watching. Hoping. Another fifteen minutes went by before a guy Finn recognized as one of Louise's bakers emerged from the shop with the same flowers in his hand.

Bingo.

Finn stayed on the opposite side of the street as he followed the baker down a few blocks, relieved that Bree was within walking distance as he'd hoped. The baker turned left and continued down the small side street.

Another minute later the guy disappeared into a small store. Located in one of the city's main tourist areas, Hidden Treasures was likely loaded with cheap knickknacks made in Taiwan.

Finn lingered across from the store until the baker emerged a couple minutes later, then he crossed the street to get a closer look at the place. He hesitated on the sidewalk, not catching a glimpse of Bree through the tall windows. Did she work here?

Only one way to find out.

He pushed through the door, his gaze taking in the small shop that unquestionably catered to women. At first glance he assumed it was another small boutique selling vintage clothes that were all the rage these days. Then he looked closer, not missing some of the small tables and displays that held items of a much more personal nature.

From the corner of his eye, Finn spotted an older woman with a bright smile rearranging a display near the cash register.

She waved when she saw him but didn't pounce immediately to see what he needed. It gave him time to take in the store and be certain Bree wasn't here. At the moment he was more distracted by the utterly feminine presentation of items that were normally all crowded together in some adult video store. Here it seemed like a lot of thought went into the best way to arrange the lingerie, padded handcuffs, flavored lotions, massage oils and sex toys.

He picked up a copy of the Kama Sutra and flipped through a few pages, feeling out of his element. He certainly wasn't unfamiliar with the merchandise, but there was something oddly intimidating standing in the middle of it all.

Finn replaced the book and turned, knocking a pile of red lace thongs on the floor. Cursing under his breath, he bent to pick them up.

"There you are," the woman said, as the door chimed.

"Sorry. Overslept. Late night."

He recognized Bree's voice instantly but was slow to come to his feet, sticking close to a section of shelves tucked in the corner.

"Who's the admirer?"

Dressed in fitted cargo pants and a camouflage tank top, her blond hair pulled back, the same black boots completing the look, Bree thankfully didn't notice him. "What do you mean?"

He watched the older woman nod to the flowers still on the counter.

"Are they from the guy you met at the coffee shop?"

He grinned hearing that, foolishly pleased he'd been worth mentioning. He moved a little closer without drawing attention to his presence. With her back to him, she plucked the card out of the flowers.

"I for one am glad you've met someone who sent you flowers. You deserve a little happiness again, Bree."

Again?

"Trust me," Bree said. "It's not what you think."

"Even if the man is only after one thing it's sweet that he sent you flowers."

"Marion," Bree scolded, a smile not far from her lips.

Finn felt the other woman glance at him and she winked to let him know she hadn't completely forgotten they had a customer.

Unlike how he'd completely forgotten he still held the underwear. He hastily set them on the table and pretended to browse, careful not to make any sudden movements around the shop that would alert Bree to his presence before he was good and ready.

He couldn't be sure if the soft sound Bree made was a sigh or a groan. "It would almost be nice if the man who sent them actually was interested."

Unfortunately, he was interested. A little too much.

“Did he leave a phone number?”

Bree shook her head. “How did these get here?”

“The baker from Louise’s who always had a crush on you brought them over.”

She scooped the bouquet up. “I’m going to tackle some filing. If you want to slip out and grab an iced tea I know you must be craving, I’ll keep an eye on things.”

Marion nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

Finn watched the older woman follow Bree out back, presumably to tell her there was a customer in the store before she left a minute later.

He strolled towards the door that likely led to their backroom and was leaning against the jamb just as she rounded a corner of shelves and spotted him.

She froze in her tracks.

“So what happened to going someplace to talk last night?”

“How did you—” She closed her eyes and cursed under her breath. “The flowers.”

He nodded.

“Neat trick.” Her tone said she wasn’t that impressed.

She cruised past him to the counter.

He stayed on her heels. “You were pretty quick last night.”

She smiled, but the slow curve of her lips lacked the genuine amusement from their first meeting at Louise’s. He waited for her to add something but she only flipped through some papers tucked next to the cash register. If she thought he’d go away if she ignored him, she was in for a long wait.

“It’s obvious that we both have an interest in Mason Dade.”

She cocked her head at him. “So you didn’t find what you were looking for in Dade’s office.”

“Neither did you.”

The secretive glimmer in her eye was most likely a bluff, but he had no way of knowing how long she'd been in Dade's home office before he came along.

Opposite her, he leaned down, his forearms resting on the counter between them. "Why don't we just compare notes?"

She arched a brow. "And impart all my secrets when you've already confessed to caving under torture? I'll think I'll pass."

Bree watched the lazy smile that came slowly to his lips before he said, "That was different."

"How so?" she challenged.

"That was flirting. This is business."

Palms down, she leaned into the counter, interested now. "And what business are you in?"

He straightened enough to keep them at eyelevel. "Let's start over." He offered his hand. "I'm Finn."

She didn't have time to contemplate playing along. He snatched her hand up, closing it gently in his.

"And you would be Bree, or is it Candy?"

She knew the teasing tone was meant to disarm her. Her stomach gave a soft tug anyway. "Bree."

"And this is where you work?"

"I own the place actually." She crossed her arms. "And what do you do Finn?"

"I'm a private investigator."

"And you were hired to?"

He shook his head. "My turn. What were you doing at the strip club and Dade's office?"

"That's two questions. And you already know the answer."

"Looking for Dade," he said. "Why?"

"If we're going to start over, then we play fair. You asked your questions, my turn again."

He looked ready to protest but gave a nod for her to continue.

“Why were you hired?” Given the bits of conversation she’d overheard, she would guess it had something to do with Dade cheating on his wife, but it didn’t hurt to be certain.

“Erica Dade wants to divorce her husband and needs proof he’s been fooling around on her.”

“One of your more glamorous assignments?”

He shrugged. “Better than trailing a cross-dresser.”

“Homophobic?” She grinned, finding it just as easy now to slip into the playful banter they’d shared the first night they met.

Finn cocked his head, his lips parting in a devilish smile. “Does that term apply when we’re dealing with cross-dressers and transvestites?”

“You’ll have to get back to me when you figure that out and solve your case.”

“Why are you trying to find Dade?”

“He ripped off my mother-in-law.”

His smile dimmed. “And what does your husband think of you breaking and entering to spy on the guy?”

“I’m a widow.” The word trembled off her tongue. It was the first time in a year and a half that she’d referred to herself as one. She picked up the receipt book and tucked it back under the counter.

“Didn’t mean to get so personal.”

“Yes, you did. Isn’t that what private investigators do?” She tucked a small box under her arm and carried it into the back room, not really surprised when he followed her just inside the door looking ready to apologize. “It’s fine.”

“Was your mother-in-law using Dade as an investor?”

She was relieved he got back to the subject at hand. “Yeah. He stopped giving her updates. She got concerned and called him. When he finally got back to her, it was to say the money was gone. She didn’t understand since she hadn’t authorized any high risk investments. Needless to say, he wasn’t very forthcoming with details. Wasn’t long before she heard other people were told

similar things. Then he started avoiding everyone and has been out of town more than he's been in his office for the last few weeks."

"His firm is onto him."

She set the box she carried on a nearby shelving unit. "I know, which means he's probably going to run and take with him any chance I have of getting Marion's money back."

"What makes you think he'll tell you what he did with it?"

It was her turn with the cocky grin. "I can be persuasive."

"Is that where the lap dance comes in?"

Bree might have been insulted at the barely veiled insinuation she'd go so far as to sleep with the scum for information if the idea wasn't too hilarious to take seriously. "That was merely to put him off guard."

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Considering you took a few minutes to get around to telling me you weren't Dade, I'd say it's an effective technique."

"There's a bit of a difference between me correcting your assumption and Dade spilling his guts. I mean, you were good, but I think it would take more than sticking your breasts in his face to get him to tell you what happened to the money."

"You have your methods and I have mine."

He pushed away from the wall. "Forgetting which ones are more successful, I can fully agree yours are the most entertaining."

Bree tried hard to ignore the warming that started in her belly at the sexy drawl. "Were you hoping to walk in on him the night at the strip club?"

He shook his head. "I was planting a camera and I wasn't expecting you. And you didn't give me time to get out of there."

"You could have left anytime."

The hot look he gave her made her blood swim faster. "You must not have checked out your reflection before you came out of the dressing room."

"So I was right. You are like every other man. A little skin and you stop thinking with the head on your shoulders." Despite the teasing comment, she retreated a step as the distance between them shrank.

He propped a hand on the wall close to her head. “Just so we’re clear—” his voice sent a hot shiver curling down her spine, “—there was a lot of skin in that club, but I wasn’t checking out anyone but you.”

His admission dried up her next retort.

“Which leaves me in unfamiliar territory,” he continued.

“How so?”

“I’d like to take you out to dinner, but with the Dade case, things are more complicated. I’ll have to wrap it up first.”

The tingling in her stomach fizzled out. “If you think I’m about to sit and wait for you or the police to nail him and lose my shot at recovering the money, you’re wasting your breath.” And just when she was getting accustomed to the slow burn working through her system.

He sidestepped to block her path when she started to move around him. “Maybe you should stick to watching over your shop and let the professionals do their job.”

“You’re trying to catch him cheating. I’d say our interests in Dade are vastly different.”

“And next time I might not be around to make sure you don’t earn yourself a one-way ticket to jail.”

Bree snorted. “Don’t do me any favors.”

“I’m just trying to look out for you.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“You’re right. So the next time I come across you someplace you shouldn’t be, I may have to involve the police myself.”

She shook her head, smiling. “I don’t think you will.”

“You don’t even know me.” He grinned, turning her words back on her.

“You still wouldn’t turn me in,” she added slowly, something in his eyes reassuring her.

“How can you be sure?”

“I guess I’m just willing to take my chances.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “There is one thing you should probably know.”

“What’s that?”

“I find confident women sexy as hell.” He tipped her chin up and slanted his mouth across hers.

The kiss was everything she hadn’t dared let herself think about.

Slow. Hot. Hungry.

His lips molded to hers, drinking up her small, breathless exhale before his tongue skimmed across hers. Bree reached out and gripped his shirt, tugging him until he was flush against her. The man knew how to kiss, and she felt her mind emptying of everything but how incredible his mouth felt working possessively over hers.

Every nip, every silky stroke of his tongue, every breath dragged between their mouths made her hold on tighter. The second he stopped, the real world would slide back into place, and more than anything, she wanted this. Wanted Finn with a yearning that burrowed deeper with each second he continued to kiss her.

Finn cupped the nape of her neck, tipping her head back as he deepened the kiss. She whimpered, catching his bottom lip between hers. His thumb trailed along her jawline, and she shuddered in its wake, wanting his mouth there. Wanting his mouth everywhere.

He broke away, taking his time to explore that very area before discovering the slope of her neck. His other hand flexed at her side, his fingers caressing the curve of her hip.

Bree caught his hand and brought it to where her body ached for his touch at the moment. She trapped her lip between her teeth to hold back the soft moan when he lifted her breast into his palm.

She arched into his touch, her nipples hard and begging for just one brush of his thumb. Finn came back to her mouth, pushing his tongue past her lips, catching her moan when he gently tugged one hard peak.

He started to pull back. “I don’t think this is the best place—”

She cut him off with another kiss. “Not yet,” she murmured against his lips. “Don’t stop touching me yet.” She nipped his jaw. “Just...not yet.”

His hand slipped under her shirt. "I don't even know that I can trust you," he whispered, his voice rough, strained.

"You can trust me when I say that if you don't shut up and kiss me, I will have to hurt you."

A man's smile was never so sexy. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned?"

"Something like that," she managed, then sucked in a breath when his erection rubbed against her belly.

He slipped a thigh between hers, the pressure soothing the building ache that pulsed between her legs. God, she needed more.

The fingers trailing up over her stomach pulled her bra down enough to free her breast.

"Finn," she hissed when he caught her nipple between his finger and thumb.

"You can't tell me to stop now," he groaned, his breath warm against her throat.

"Soon." She knew in the back of her mind this was craziness, but her body couldn't care less, every nerve ending craving the tension coiling tighter within her. Soon they'd have to stop. Soon.

She caught his chin in her hand and brought his mouth back to hers.

Chapter Five

"I got halfway down the street and forgot to ask if you wanted one?"

The two broke apart and Finn barely got his hand from under her shirt before Marion stepped around the corner.

A knowing—and not the least bit shameful—smile parted Marion's lips. "Never mind," she said, backing out the way she'd come.

This time Bree heard the door open with Marion's departure. She'd been far more distracted than she realized, having not heard her return in the first place.

Bree felt the weight of Finn's intense gaze. He leaned in for another slow, drugging kiss, but didn't linger. "I have to go."

"Hope it wasn't anything I said, or did."

"No." He offered up another lazy grin that had to come second nature to him. "Definitely no complaints there."

"Right, you have a big case going. Cheating husband." She tried not to smile as she followed him back out front. "And a cross-dresser, right?"

The look he threw over his shoulder told her he knew she was trying to bait him just a little. "It pays the bills." He stopped at the door, turned back, and hesitated. "Will you say yes?"

She frowned.

A glimpse of something that hinted at uncertainty edged his words. "When I come back and ask you to dinner," he added.

Hell, yeah. "Guess you'll just have to wait and see."

"I think you'll say yes." The cocky playfulness was back in full force.

"How can you be sure?"

“Let’s just say I’m willing to take my chances.”

She leaned into the counter. “You should know I find confident men sexy as hell.”

“Stop before I drag you back there again.”

Bree smiled, but didn’t push it, her body still coming down off the rush of being that close to him only moments ago. She couldn’t remember ever craving a man’s touch with such a fierce intensity and, at the moment, needed time to let that sink in before things moved any faster.

Although just a few minutes ago, she wasn’t sure even Mach 3 would have satisfied her.

Finn paused halfway out the door. “Bree?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll do whatever I can to help you get your mother-in-law’s money back,” he added quietly and then was gone.

The reminder put a serious damper on the delicious euphoria her insides still trembled with. Because as good of a kisser as Finn was, she wasn’t about to leave the fate of Marion’s money in anyone else’s hands.

Mark had counted on her to take care of Marion, and while she’d been tearing around Europe, her mother-in-law had been getting robbed blind.

Her shoulders slumped. And if it took treading on Finn’s case to get it back, then there wasn’t any way around it.

* * *

“We should have been having this dinner a week ago,” Bree’s mother said in a lightly chastising tone.

Bree stuffed a forkful of salad into her mouth to avoid addressing the point her parents had mentioned a dozen times since she’d sat down to eat. Why had she let Angel talk her into this?

“It’s too bad Aaron couldn’t make it. It would have been nice to have us all together for dinner.”

Bree wasn't about to ask where her younger brother was. Aaron had been clean for two years, but she knew her father hadn't forgiven him for almost throwing his life away. More than likely Aaron was working on another project her father had assigned him to, one he could monitor to make sure Aaron wasn't slipping.

"I'm just glad you're finally done partying in Europe and are ready to get your life back on track."

Bree paused, her next bite halfway to her mouth as she glanced at her father. Tonight he was looking as cold as ever, his face pinched as he held her gaze. His premature gray hair had only taken away the small bit of warmth he ever had, his eyes harsh, disapproving.

How had she ever let herself think the time away would have been good for them? There were too many years of her letting him down, him letting her down, to think any absence would help repair a relationship that had been too badly damaged by heartless words at a time in her life when she needed her family the most.

She set her fork down, grappling to get a hold of the anger she felt rising. "Partying? Is that what you think I was doing?"

"Wasn't it? You certainly weren't home looking after your scandalous business you claim to care about so much."

"I couldn't be here."

He nodded, but it wasn't a look of understanding that gripped his expression. "If you hadn't married him, you wouldn't have had to go anywhere."

"We are not going to talk about Mark."

"Why not?"

Across the table Angel gestured to the wine. "Pour me a glass, Bryce," she said to their brother who sat next to Bree. Bree knew the tactic was meant to break the tension quickly filling the distance between her and their father.

"The boy was sick. That certainly isn't any reason to run off and elope."

"That boy," Bree said with a crispness that iced her own blood, "was my best friend and I loved him."

"He was sick and needed you. That I understand. But marrying him?"

“Dad,” Bryce warned.

She shook her head at her brother, surprised he would say even that much to intervene on her behalf. More often than not, Bryce echoed most of her father’s sentiments when it came to her standing within the family.

“It’s fine,” she said. But it wasn’t. It never was. No matter how much time passed, her father went out of his way to point out how much of a mistake he thought she’d made in marrying Mark—in dropping out of college when she was so close to graduating to spend more time with him.

She pushed back her chair. “I have to go.”

“Sit down, young lady.”

Bree met her father’s furious stare.

“You disappear, spend months doing God knows what a continent away. The least you can do is sit and enjoy a meal with your family.”

“Another time.” She bent and pressed a kiss to her mother’s cheek. “I’ll call you.”

“Sabrina Lancaster. *Clausus!*” The dining room door slammed shut. “Sit down.”

“I am not a child.” She glanced at the door, embracing her anger for the added boost it would take to overrun her father’s magic. It would take the extra effort to first neutralize her father’s magic before her own could counteract it. “*Patefacio.*”

“Sabrina,” he snapped, sounding exactly as he had when he threatened to disown her when he discovered she’d married Mark. His words had cut just as sharply then as they did tonight. She clenched her fist at her side as she headed for the front door, hating that she still let his disapproval and anger hurt her.

She slammed the door behind her as she stepped out into the early evening air. She wouldn’t let him get to her. What was done was done.

Bree sat on the front steps, remembering too late Angel had driven her over here after their shopping outing earlier that afternoon.

She drew her knees up to her chest, missing Mark more than ever. He'd always been so good at reminding her that her father was an ass, at cheering her up when she let one of their fights eat her up inside.

The door opened behind her. "Need a ride?" Angel asked.

"Yeah." Bree stood up, not glancing at her sister. If she did, the tears she felt—pathetic self-pity tears—might work their way to the surface.

"Let's go. I have something for you in the car that I forgot to give you earlier anyway. It'll cheer you up." Angel gave her a conspiratorial smile and threaded their arms together as they headed down the driveway towards her car.

* * *

Bree stared at the front of the motel where Dade was staying. The man hadn't left town yet, but who knew how long that would last. Another day? Two? She knew he had a plane ticket, caught a glimpse of it on his secretary's desk, but hadn't gotten a peek at the date.

The receptionist there was getting sick and tired of seeing Bree's face no doubt. She'd gotten there late in the afternoon to hear the tail end of a phone conversation and watched her jot the name of the motel on a piece of paper before the woman ended the call that was clearly from Mason Dade.

The heavy mist turned to fat drops of rain as she hesitated. Twice now her attempts had only landed her in a precarious situation. Surely, the third time had to be a charm.

She could hear Marion's voice in her head. "Yeah, right."

Deciding it was now or never, Bree tugged the hood on her jacket closer to her head and jogged up the outside stairs. She walked along the open balcony of the unit farthest from the motel's main office. She wondered if Dade had purposely chosen it because it was tucked back in the corner of the lot, out of sight of traffic from the main road. If Dade had stolen so much money, couldn't he have afforded to hide out in a nicer place than this?

She scanned the numbers on the doors she passed and paused in front of the unit at the end. Bree took a breath and lifted her hand to knock, noticing the crack in the door. Muted voices.

The television she guessed and pushed open the door, deciding not to give the man a chance to shut it in her face.

“Mr. Dade?”

She swept her gaze over the room and immediately spotted two feet sticking out on floor on the far side of the bed.

Her heart kicked against her ribs. “Mr. Dade?” She skirted the edge of the bed, giving it a wide berth.

On the floor, in a blood-drenched shirt, Mason Dade stared vacantly at the ceiling.

Where the hell was Tate?

Finn jerked his sleeve back to check his watch for the third time in two minutes. She should have been here by now. He rubbed his jaw, his pinky snagging his amulet.

Damn. He fingered the frayed ends of the clasp, before sighing and tucking the amulet into his pocket. Something else he’d have to take care of later.

Through the rain splattered windshield he watched the vacancy light on the motel sign blink off and on. This might be their one chance of catching Dade with his mystery woman before he skipped town. And seeing as how, instead of being away on a business trip, Dade was holed up in this dive, Finn couldn’t help but wonder who the man was trying to lay low from?

He shifted in his seat, his mood not having improved from earlier that morning. He had gone into the office with the kiss he and Bree had shared yesterday still fresh on his mind, only to have to force it aside for work. Work that had quickly soured his stomach. Background checks were not the most glamorous part of a PI’s job, but a necessary one. Sometimes the results were typical. Sometimes so little as a quick glance showed something was off, requiring more digging. And some just left you with a hollowed-out feeling.

Mason Dade's check had more than a few red flags and each exposed layer only lowered Finn's opinion of the guy. Dade was the worst kind of pond scum and Finn wanted this case over with more than ever.

A shadow moved away from the lower building and started up the stairs of the unit in front of him. When the person stopped in front of the room Dade was renting, he flipped on the wipers to get a better look.

Through the dark and rain, nothing impressionable stood out. Dade's mystery woman?

The person didn't knock, but strode right in and...left the door wide open? Odd.

When the door remained open, Finn climbed out of the car and headed for the stairs. He'd already rented the room next to Dade and planned to wait for Tate before going in.

So much for Plan A.

The railing was wet under his hand as he jogged up the steps, sticking close to the overhang to avoid getting completely drenched as the shower turned into an all-out downpour.

Pretending like he wasn't sure where he was going, he walked past the open door, then back tracked as though to turn around.

The sight of someone bent over the foot of the bed brought him to a standstill. The woman straightened, and he caught her bleached face in profile.

Bree?

She stumbled back from the edge of the bed, her hand going to her mouth.

Puzzled, adrenaline trickling down his spine, Finn followed her gaze to the floor and spotted two dress-shoe-covered feet.

She bolted towards the door, spotting him in the doorway in enough time to barely avoid a collision.

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head. "I didn't do it."

He stared hard at the face of the woman who had worked too deep under his skin in such a short time, then moved past her into the room.

Finn came up short, seeing Dade's body on the floor.

"He's dead," Bree said quietly, shock edging her tone. "I already checked his pulse."

"Did you call 9-1-1?"

She shook her head. "I can't be here. I..." She met his gaze, worry creasing her brow. "I have a motive."

This wasn't a good position for either of them to be in. His family pushed the boundaries as it was by crossing paths with law enforcement on a regular basis. But being caught in the middle of a murder investigation was not where any witch or warlock wanted to find themselves.

"I didn't do it," she repeated again.

He searched her face, wondering if he was an ass for wanting to believe her.

They needed to get out of there. He grabbed Bree by the elbow and propelled her outside. "The door was unlocked?"

"And slightly ajar."

Damn. He stopped and stared at the front of the unit. If they left and just called Reece with a tip, it would only take one witness to put them at the scene. The only thing worse than coming across a scene like this would be lying about it and getting caught later.

Finn rubbed a hand over his face. Better to face the questions now before there was any reason for someone to suspect something.

He dug the key from his pocket and unlocked the room next door.

"That's convenient," she muttered, but he couldn't detect anything accusing in her tone.

He motioned for her to sit down and pulled his cell phone from his pocket and dialed Reece. When the detective picked up on the other end Finn said, "You've got a body in a motel room. Shot twice in the chest looks like." He rattled off the address. "I'm in the room next door, and to make things easier, as much as it pains me to admit it, it would be good if you could cover this one." Sometimes there really were perks of having Reece aware of his family's abilities.

His discovering the body wasn't that farfetched. Not with him in the midst of trying to catch the man with his mistress. He'd crossed paths with a number

of cops during other investigations and there was no reason to think anyone would find it that out of place.

Bree was, though.

He hitched a hip against the scarred wood table the small television sat on. "I was really hoping you were going to stay out of it."

She sighed, looking almost as though she wished she had. "Had you known me better you wouldn't have had such high expectations of me."

"You shouldn't have been there at all."

"I have just as much right as you do."

"I think you might have to accept the fact that you might not get that money back." *If* that was her only motivation for being here. He didn't like the whisper of common sense that demanded he doubt her. His gut told him that although the woman had a habit of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, among other things, she wasn't a killer.

Bree shook her head. "That's not good enough."

He shoved his hand through his hair. "When Reece gets here, you can't mention your mother-in-law. We'll just say you were with me." He straightened as the words left his mouth and he realized he was helping to cover for her.

"Do you often take women on the job with you?" she asked skeptically.

"You were curious about what I did," he provided, seriously questioning the wisdom of heading down this road, but knowing somehow it was the right thing to do. "We weren't even sure if Dade was really staying here."

"How did you find out he was here anyway?"

"I'm an investigator. I investigate things."

She cocked her head as though she needed a better answer than that. Right now he didn't feel like indulging. More so because he wasn't about to come out and tell her that his cousin, who was also a witch, used her ability to help him track down Dade.

He was putting his neck on the line for a woman he hardly knew and damned if he could put his finger on why exactly that was.

"Who's Reece?"

"My sister's boyfriend. He's a cop."

She shook her head. "I can't let you lie for me." She shoved to her feet and headed for the door.

Finn cut her off. "You're stuck here now. Someone might have already spotted you and if you vanish it's just going to punch holes in this story."

With a sigh, Bree turned back around and sank back down on the edge of the bed. She tucked her hair behind her ear. A vulnerability he didn't want to see lingered in her eyes and tugged at his insides. "I should never have left her for so long."

"Who?"

"Marion. My mother-in-law. I convinced myself that she was fine. If I had been here, I would have known what happened. I could have done something sooner."

"She wasn't the only one to get taken."

"Doesn't matter." She swallowed, and he worried she was going to break down on him. "I promised, damn it. I promised him I'd be there for her." Her shoulders slumped. "Dade's dead and now Marion doesn't even have the only thing Mark could give her."

"Who's Mark?"

Her fingers clenched around the edge of the bedspread. "He was her son and my best friend, my husband."

"This isn't your fault."

Her brittle laugh was heavy with unshed tears. "There we disagree." She walked to the window. "How stupid I was to think I could make this better for her."

Finn started across the room towards her but stopped at the knock on the door.

Bree stepped back as Finn opened the door and a drenched man stepped inside. "That was quick."

Reece scowled. "I was close by. You so owe me for having to cancel on Violet. And she was cooking for me. Do you know how rare that is?" He glanced at Bree. "I was just next door," he added gesturing to the wall separating the rooms. "Medical examiner is on his way. How did you stumble across him?"

"I was hired by his wife to find evidence he was cheating on her."

"Which explains why you're camped out next door."

Finn nodded.

Reece gestured to Bree. "And she would be?"

"Bree was curious about how I work so I brought her along. Wasn't really planning on finding him like that."

"So you went over hoping to catch him in the act?"

"The door was ajar when Bree went to get us some snacks while we waited to see if anyone was coming or going," Finn added, hating that he was stretching the truth here. "She nudged the door open a bit and saw Dade on the floor, or his feet anyway."

Reece glanced at her for confirmation. She nodded grimly. "My first dead body."

"Hopefully your last," Reece said. "Did either of you two see or hear anything?"

Finn shook his head. "No, we pretty much just got here."

Reece started for the door.

"Is it okay if I take her home?"

The detective thought it over. "Just keep your phone on in case I have to ask you anything else."

Bree watched Finn from the corner of her eye. He stared straight ahead, maneuvering his car through the unusually thick late-evening traffic.

"Where do you live?"

"I could have gotten myself home." Not that he was listening the other three times she'd said as much. "Richmond Park," she added when he arched a brow.

"Live in the area long?" His attempt at small talk lacked the easygoing feel that seemed to come so naturally to their conversations.

“Not really.” She stared out through the passenger side window, watching one rain drop after another lurch across the glass. “Who do you think killed him?” Her stomach pitched as the image of Dade’s body flashed behind her eyes.

“Given the number of people it seems he’s ripped off, on top of any old grievances, the list might be a bit long.”

She didn’t bother to say she should probably be on that list. They both already knew it.

Bree turned in the seat, studying him.

“What?”

“I’m just wondering why you’ve covered for me twice now.”

He flexed his fingers over the steering wheel. “When I figure it out, I’ll let you know.” He didn’t sound happy about trying to piece that particular puzzle together.

They sat in silence after that, her offering nothing more than a few more directions to her house. Bree frowned when he followed her up to the door but didn’t stop him when he trailed inside after her. The guy had lied to a cop, and even if she hadn’t asked him to do it, she appreciated it nonetheless.

Being implicated in a murder was all it might take for the Tribunal to step in and bind her magic. It was standard protocol when laws were broken or while investigations were being conducted to prevent any guilty party from using their magic to affect the outcome.

She opened her mouth to thank him again, staring at Finn when he kicked off his shoes and preceded her into the living room.

Was he looking for a night cap?

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Finn, but tonight has sort of thrown me for a loop and I’m wiped.”

“No problem.” He took a seat on the couch, propped his feet on the coffee table, pillowing his hands behind his head.

Curious, she leaned a hip into the doorway. “What are you doing?”

“Getting comfortable.”

Oh, really? “Here?”

He nodded, then had the gall to shut his eyes.

She crossed her arms, caught between confusion and amusement. "Finn?"

He cracked open an eye. "Mmmmm?"

"It's time to go." He didn't protest when she walked over and nudged his feet off the table.

"I'm staying here."

"I don't think so." She stifled a yawn with the back of her hand. It had been one hell of a day and right now the only thing she wanted to do was crawl into bed. Tomorrow she'd have to tell Marion about Dade and that wrenched her insides more than discovering Dade's body in the first place.

Finn leaned forward, but didn't get up. "I'm not letting you out of my sight until I hear from Reece."

"But you know I didn't shoot Dade."

"As you've pointed out before, I really don't know you at all." The arrogant tilt of his head was suddenly more annoying than sexy.

"Fine. Knock yourself out. I'll go stay at Marion's. She needs to hear about Dade anyway."

That got him to his feet and fast. He even managed to skid to a halt in the doorway before her. "You're staying put, too."

Bree snorted. "What are you going to do—restrain me?"

"Now that you bring it up that doesn't sound so bad really."

"And now is not the time to be all flirty and cute with me."

He grinned.

Tension stretched up the back of her neck, sinking deep into the muscles at her shoulder blades. "Let me get this straight. You don't really think I killed Dade, but you still think I'm a flight risk?"

He shrugged, shoving his hands in his pockets. "A guy can never be too careful, especially when he puts his neck on the line."

"And we'd hate to see any harm come to that."

"There, something we can both agree on."

Bree waited until he started back towards the couch and then made a move for the door. He must have expected the response and planted an arm against the jamb at the last second.

He sucked his bottom lip between his teeth thoughtfully, drawing her gaze to the slow slide of his lip as he released it. "You're not afraid to spend the night with me, are you?"

She damn well hadn't been, right up until he said it in that dark, sexy voice. Bree tipped her face up. "I don't like being taken advantage of."

One smooth dark brow arched. "Is that what I'm doing?"

"You're using this as an excuse to hang around."

"As attractive as I do find you, Bree, even I'm not that desperate for attention."

"This really isn't necessary. In fact I think it's ridiculous."

"I'd like to think of it as covering my ass."

The man had to be more stubborn than her brothers or even Mark. "I'm not going anywhere, Finn."

"And I plan to make sure it stays that way."

"For how long?" she asked through her clenched jaw.

He shrugged.

"So you're telling me that if I try to leave my own house—"

"I'll be right on your heels."

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you going to watch me pee when that comes up, too?"

"That depends on how big your bathroom window is."

"You're insane."

"Rational thinking is highly overrated in situations like these. Much better to go on instinct."

"And what is your instinct telling you now?" She meant for the comment to push his buttons. Instead he edged closer, his gaze dropping to her mouth.

"That you should go to bed and lock your door."

Bree swallowed tightly, wanting him to go and at the same time just plain wanting him. "Should I be worried?"

He eased away from her. "We can talk about this in the morning."

On a sigh, she started for the stairs. "There isn't anything to talk about. In the morning I'm going to get up and go to work, and you better not be here when I do."

"Don't bank on it," he challenged.

She spun back around. "This is *my* house."

"And I just lied for you back there."

"I didn't ask you to." She crossed to the door with intentions of holding it open until he left. She appreciated his help but didn't need another watchdog. Her father had been more than enough for one lifetime.

She caught hold of his wrist, not surprised when he didn't budge an inch. If he continued to be so stubborn, she couldn't be held responsible for what happened.

"Thank you for doing what you did, but I'm sure we can see each other in the morning. Maybe meet someplace for breakfast."

"I make a mean pancake."

"That's it," she shoved at him. "It's time to go."

The jerk laughed at her. "Maybe I will have to restrain you after all."

She snorted. "Good luck with that."

"Keep it up and you might regret testing me."

"Now I'm really worried." Though the fact that there were precious few inches between them did kick her heart into the next gear.

"You should be."

"You're not about to lay a finger on me and we both know it." Damn, she hoped she knew it.

He flattened a palm against the wall next to her head, and she tried not to think about where that gesture had led them last time even as her body hungered for it.

"Think you have me all figured out, do you?"

She needed to stay focused and not get sucked into the desire slowly licking through her belly. "I've got a good handle on your type."

"Oh, this I've got to hear."

"You're a player. Cocky. Charming. Don't like anyone, especially not a woman, to say no to you."

"Wow," he mocked, his voice seductively soft. "I'm impressed." He planted his other hand on the other side of her, caging her between his arms. "There's just one thing you've clearly forgotten from the last time I stood this close to you."

She rocked back on her heels, her skin hot in anticipation of a touch she craved more than her next breath.

"I'm impulsive as hell." He dragged her to his chest and crushed his mouth to hers.

The force of the kiss, the sheer intensity from the arms holding her, the feverish demand of his lips, had her looping her arms around his neck to hold on for however long the ride would last.

Finn pressed his body to hers, crowding her to the wall, his arousal hard against her belly. Achy and hot, her sex clenched in response. She lifted her lower body and rocked it against him, daring herself to lift a thigh to his waist so she could better feel the rigid length.

She didn't get the chance.

A musical ring that sounded suspiciously like Michael Jackson's "Bad" broke the moment and she laughed.

Finn took his time drawing back as he pulled his phone from his pocket, glaring at the display before answering. "Questions already?"

The voice on the other end was too muffled for her to make anything out.

Finn cursed. "You told me to keep the phone on. The phone is on. You tested it yourself now, asshole. Go do some detective work." He sighed and stuffed the phone back in his pocket.

"You really feel it's necessary to stick around?" It was much easier not to get distracted when there was some space between them.

"If I didn't three minutes ago, I sure as hell do now."

"You should know I don't put out the first night a man spends in my place."

He grinned. "I'd be disappointed if you did."

"I'll bet."

"Contrary to the image I project, I'm not a man who crawls into bed with all the cute blondes I find hiding in closets and posing as strippers."

"I suppose I should be flattered."

He cupped the side of her face and gave her another slow, tender kiss. "You really should go to bed, Bree."

"Alone."

"Alone," he agreed almost too quickly.

He really was going to insist on sticking around, she realized and threw in the proverbial towel. "You don't need to sleep on the couch. There is a guestroom, though you might need to move the drop cloths to find the bed. My sister is painting a mural in there."

"The couch is fine."

"Just for the record," she began.

"You still don't think this is necessary, I know."

"Then why are you staying?"

He took his time responding. "To make sure I'm not wrong about you. Now go to bed."

"And what do you plan to do in the morning?"

"Find out who killed Dade."

Chapter Six

The sound of breaking glass jolted Bree awake. Perched on the edge of her bed, she strained to hear any other sounds beyond her bedroom.

Had she dreamt it?

A cupboard door slammed. Obviously not.

Bree rolled her eyes and shoved off the covers. She dragged a pair of drawstring sleep pants on over the panties that would draw *way* too much attention. Raking her fingers through her hair, Bree padded down the stairs.

She hovered in the kitchen doorway, watching him in the dark, crouched down with his back to her. He cursed under his breath.

“Problem?”

He sprang up, his head catching the corner of the island in the process. This time his curse wasn’t so mumbled.

“Do you have to walk around on tip toes?”

She flicked on the light and cringed at the smashed pitcher on the floor. “Thirsty?”

“Among other things.” The deep tone had her gaze snapping back to his face.

The brief glimpse of longing in his expression and the sharp moment of awareness abated when he stooped to finish cleaning the mess.

Bree stared slack-jawed at the box sitting in the middle of the island, a note tucked underneath it.

Angel.

She really hadn’t been joking when she told her sister to keep the *thoughtful* gift Angel figured she’d appreciate. Bree eyed Finn, then darted to

the counter, snatching up the box and shoving it in the closest drawer before spinning back around.

Finn frowned at her.

She snapped her fingers. "Broom." She grabbed the broom and dust pan from the closet and tossed him a roll of paper towels to sop up the spilled water. She was careful to sidestep the shattered glass.

"You have no food," he said as though that explained the water and broken glass.

"I wasn't expecting company tonight."

"My mess. I'll get it." He took the broom from her and finished tidying up the mess. "Are your cupboards always so bare?"

She pulled a couple open to see just how little she had. "I've been out of the country for a while. Haven't gotten to picking up more than a handful of things."

"Been too busy practicing the strip routine?"

Bree winked at him over her shoulder. "Never hurts to stay on top of it."

"How did you learn to do that anyway?"

"Well, like most people, I've been taking my clothes off since I was a toddler."

He gave her a pointed look that reminded her a little too much of that half-finished lap dance.

With a sigh over just how bad the food situation was, she leaned against the counter. "I picked up a few things in Europe."

"How long were you over there?"

"A year and a half."

"And..."

"And then it was finally time to come home." She smiled at his attempt to probe for all the gory details of her short-lived stripping career, and got him a glass of water from the fridge.

She turned to pass it to him, not expecting to find him so close, and couldn't pull the glass back in time. She heard him suck in a sharp breath as the cold water soaked the front of his shirt.

Bree bit her lip. "Sorry."

Finn peeled the wet shirt from his chest, then tugged it over his head.

She drank in his trim abs, dragging her gaze up over his arms and chest before coming back to his face. "Work out much?"

He grinned. "Now and again."

"You should try pole dancing. Great for keeping the figure trim."

He gave her a heated once-over. "Of that I have no doubt."

She refilled the glass, careful to make sure he wasn't too close this time. "Try not to spill this one."

He took the glass and drained it in one long gulp. He set the glass in the sink and she glanced at his wet lips, thinking of not one, but both kisses that rocked her from the inside out.

"Sorry I woke you."

"I wasn't really sleeping anyway." Or not very well. She had lain there staring at the ceiling for the better part of half an hour, conflicted about having him here. She still thought it was crazy that he felt the need to stay parked in her living room for the night, and at the same time found, it nice to have someone in the house with her.

She didn't know the man from Adam really, but what she did know—that he was willing to put his neck out for a virtual stranger—proved Finn was a rare find among men.

Before she could follow that particular train of thought any further, Bree moved to the pantry. "What do you normally eat at midnight?"

He laughed. "Whatever I can find in the fridge."

"I didn't eat much at dinner. We could order something." Her stomach rumbled at the suggestion.

"That would mean sharing a meal with me when you don't want me here," he pointed out.

She wasn't about to tell him that he was starting to grow on her. "I could always eat mine upstairs."

Finn made an effort to look wounded at her solution.

Grinning, she said, "So what do you feel like? There should be some takeout menus in the drawer next to the sink."

She cringed the second the words left her mouth, and swiveled around as he pulled the box of condoms from their temporary hiding place.

"Like getting lucky in the kitchen, huh?"

She reached out to snatch the box out of his hands.

He caught her wrist in one hand and held the box out of reach with the other.

"You're becoming a serious pain in the ass." She stretched her other arm out for the box.

"I bet you say that to all the guys you drag home," he taunted.

"I'm fairly confident I didn't drag you anywhere."

He turned to keep it out of reach, his chest coming in full contact with her front. "Only because I'm too quick for you and have a serious aversion to rug burns."

Bree rolled her eyes. "Fine." She let go of his wrist. "Keep them."

He relaxed, and she made a jump for the box.

Laughing, Finn caught her around the waist. "How gullible do I look?"

"Let me grab my corset and I'll get back to you."

The hand splayed at the small of her back warmed her skin straight through the thin tank top. The lazy brush of his thumb back and forth was driving her to distraction.

"You tell me why you have condoms stashed in with your takeout menus and I'll consider handing them over."

"I don't think we know each other well enough to be sharing that kind of personal information."

"Maybe we need to change that." He dipped his head and caught her mouth in a searing kiss that liquefied her from the inside out. But just as she was ready to melt into him completely, he pulled back, handing over the condoms.

Without a word, and feeling the weight of his primal stare on her the entire time, she shoved them back in the drawer to deal with later. Having them out on the counter right now was the last reminder she needed about how long it

had been since she had a need for them. Or how much she wouldn't mind having Finn give her a reason to crack open the box.

Bree drew in a breath, willing away the warmth tunneling deeper and farther south. "So what do you feel like?"

"Pizza."

"Done." With that settled it was easier to face him. "Anything you don't like on it?"

"I'm not fussy."

"Good." She nodded. "Anchovies and pineapple it is."

He snatched the phone she'd picked up out of her hand. "Give me the menu. You're dangerous."

She laughed and handed it over, pleased when he called in an order for a large one with the works.

"I'd kill for a cold beer but will settle for more water."

"I have beer." Somewhere around here if Angel hadn't gotten her hands on them. "Go sit in the living room and I'll bring you one in a minute."

"That almost makes up for the 'pineapple and anchovies' crack." He shuddered and moved on to the living room.

Bree bent down to retrieve the few warm beer she'd hidden in the bottom cupboard to keep her sister from finding them.

"Gelidus."

Some days there were real perks to being a witch. Grinning, she carried two now cold bottles into the living room.

"Where were you hiding these, 'cause there's no way I would have missed them."

"Cold room," she lied, feeling no more than a trace of guilt that came part and parcel with keeping her family's secrets. Aside from Marion, Mark, and her other childhood friend Ryan, no one outside her family knew of the magic at her disposal.

Finn took a sip, a curious smile hugging one very kissable mouth. "Very cold room." He chugged more and sighed. "This, I needed." He leaned his head

back, but kept his striking profile aimed in her direction. "So what took you to Europe? Business?"

She shook her head. "Needed a change."

Something in her voice must have reminded him of their conversation from yesterday, and he didn't ask her to elaborate. "So when you got there, you thought to yourself, I think I want to strip for some European men?"

"Hey, there's good money to be made if you don't mind the occasional drunk with meaty paws."

Some of the humor left his eyes. "How long did you do it for?"

"About a month, then I moved on to other things." A month had been more than plenty.

"Such as?"

"Just traveling."

"Alone?"

She nodded and took another drink.

"A year and a half is a while to find yourself, isn't it?"

"I'll have to get back to you." She took another drink and noticed she had half the bottle gone already. "I'm not there yet."

He nodded to her hand. "I wasn't the only thirsty one."

"Dead bodies and all that."

He frowned and she was almost sorry for darkening the mood.

"The cop you called, he's good at what he does? He'll find who did it?"

"Reece is a pain in the ass, but yeah, he's a good cop. He's dating my baby sister," he added.

"You don't approve of them hooking up," she guessed.

"He was the last guy I wanted near Violet."

"How come?"

"He's a cop."

Bree frowned. "You're a PI." Both were just as bad as far as she was concerned. Both careers far too inquisitive by nature to someone with skeletons

in the closet. But despite that, Bree found it remarkably easy to talk to Finn in her dark living room going on one o'clock in the morning.

She tucked her knees under her to get more comfortable. At the other end of the couch, he draped his arm across the back, and she caught herself more than once watching his mouth, the sound of his voice playfully soothing as he joked about the different things he'd thought about doing to Reece.

She felt his gaze on her and smiled.

"Don't do that," he said softly.

She grinned wider. "Don't do what?"

"Make me want to kiss you again."

Her blood ran hot under those piercing blue eyes of his. "You say it like it's a bad thing." Right now it sounded pretty good to her.

A crease in his brow stopped her from moving any closer, but the doorbell rang before she could ask him about it.

"Pizza's here," she said for something to say, and started to get up.

"I got it." He stood and pulled his wallet from his pocket.

"I'll grab us a couple more beer."

"Sounds good."

While Finn headed for the front door, Bree drew another two bottles from the bottom cupboard, cooling them as she headed back to the living room with a couple of paper plates and napkins tucked under her arm.

He flipped open the lid on the pizza and set it on the coffee table. "God, this smells good."

They made quick work of polishing off the pizza and beer, and Bree found herself still wide awake. She snatched up the remote.

"No chick flicks," he warned.

She cocked her head. "She who holds the remote holds the power."

A spark of challenge flashed in his eyes. He lunged for it.

Laughing, she stretched it back over her head out of reach.

Finn scowled, but the corners of his lips twitched too much to take it seriously. "You get one shot and then I'm dethroning you."

Unconcerned, she smiled in victory and flipped through the stations, finally settling on *Top Gun*. "Masculine enough for you?"

"It'll do."

She wiggled to get more comfortable.

"You can stretch your feet out more. I promise not to bite unless you beg me real nice."

She pretended to boot him off the couch, and he caught her ankle. The firm grip sent tingles shimmying up her leg. He dragged his thumb back and forth for a minute then lowered her foot back to the couch.

Three planes raced across the sky on the television. "Now we're talking."

Bree relaxed as much as her supercharged body would let her. Every subtle move Finn made, every time he smiled at the TV, at her, made her ache to slide closer to him. Her eyes gradually grew heavy and she sneaked one last peek at him before she rested them for just a moment.

Bree sighed, leaning into the warm weight next to her. A hand drifted lazily up her side. Her eyes opened and she took in the dark living room.

Finn was half sitting, half lying on the couch with her snuggled next to him. Hell, she was half on top of him.

Bree started to sit up, but Finn gripped her waist, stilling her movements.

She lifted her face. "Sorry. Didn't mean to crowd you."

"Don't be," he whispered, then slid a hand up her back. She felt the slow pass right through to her spine, and her nerve endings hovered on the edge of what was coming next.

He hooked a hand around her neck and drew her down. Not even a herd of elephants storming through the room would have stopped her from meeting his mouth, moaning at the delicious contact.

With one hand next to his face and the other molded to his chest, Bree let herself fall into the kiss. His tongue slid over hers, hot and slow, and the thickening knots in her belly tightened. And that wasn't the only place. Sweet pressure rippled deep in her womb and she arched against him to relieve it.

Finn groaned, the fingers at her hips massaging deep. He shifted and his erection brushed the inside of her thigh.

Bree met his mouth, following each dip and caress, each glide of his tongue until her whole body hummed with a need that threatened to unravel her.

Finn knew he should have let her get up the second she tried to because there was no way he was letting go of her now. He tightened his fingers in her hair, the taste of her seeping into his senses until he felt, sensed, breathed only her. The seductive weight draped half-across him drove him crazy with lust, and he rolled more to his side and trapped her between him and the couch at her back.

She draped her thigh over his, and he had to fight not to press every inch of his aching cock hard against her. He nipped her lip between his teeth, then moved on to her jaw and throat.

Bree skimmed a hand over his back, her nails lightly raking, keeping him close. Not that it was a problem. He wanted to sample every millimeter too much to retreat any more than it took to suck in his next breath.

Her fingers threaded through the ends of his hair, giving a soft tug when he pulled the skin at her collarbone between his lips. Her shuddered moan brought him back to her mouth.

He wanted this woman so badly he ached to the core with it. And he knew he shouldn't. Knew he should back off and leave the fierce need clawing to the surface the hell alone. This wouldn't be the first time he pushed the real world away, but never before had it been so important.

Important to touch her. Feel her close. Be with her.

He groaned at the sweet taste of her, silencing the voice that begged to know where this could ever lead him.

Finn slipped a hand under her shirt. Her abs tightened as he played over the smooth expanse, daring him to travel higher. She hissed out a breath and pitched her lower half against him. He couldn't resist nestling his cock against her sex, catching Bree's answering moan with his mouth.

Cupping her breast, he broke away, a hot breath stuck in his throat. The woman had a nipple ring, too? "How in the hell did I miss this before?" He traced the small ring, and her chest heaved.

She offered a sly grin. "I only have one and you didn't get to both breasts the other day."

"A regrettable oversight on my part." He slanted his mouth across hers, kissing her deeply, each sweep of her tongue more heated, more passionate.

She gasped when he scuffed his thumb across the ring. Despite the fact he craved having her naked in his arms, Finn wasn't in any hurry and took his time getting to know her body, circling each taut peak before plucking it between his fingers.

And when he tugged her shirt up and caught her nipple between his lips, she cried out, gripping his arm when he pulled it deep into his mouth.

"Finn," she murmured.

With one more wet tug, he drew back. Her eyes were closed, the slats of moonlight through the blinds letting him see her face clearly.

He drew his finger along the waist of her pants and, on her answering moan, pushed them under the edge and met plain cotton underwear. She could have been wearing a thong or nothing at all, and his body still would have felt ready to snap.

Bree flexed her hips up, bringing her in contact with his palm. He added more pressure, wanting it to be his mouth there, tasting her.

Through the dampening fabric he followed the soft folds down and slipped beneath the edge of her panties.

She bolted up. "We have to stop."

He frowned at the concern on her face and nodded slowly. "You say we stop, we stop."

He sat up as she wriggled away from him. She stared into the darkness for a long time, then got up and moved into the kitchen.

Finn gave her a moment, letting his own insides cool before he followed her. He found her at the counter, watching the dark night beyond the kitchen window.

"Things are going so much faster than I expected," she said quietly.

"They don't need to."

"It's been a while since I've been with anyone." She shifted in place, but didn't look back at him. "My husband was my best friend and there's been no one since he died."

"Bree—"

She turned around, and the naked longing on her face struck him like a fist to the solar plexus.

"I want you more than I can remember ever wanting any man and I..." She let out a slow exhale. "I don't know what to do with that."

He nodded slowly. "Just let me be the first one to know when you figure it out, okay?" A small unexpected burst of pleasure warmed his chest when she smiled.

"I'm going to head up to bed now."

Finn curbed the urge to reach out to stop her as she passed. He had no idea how long her husband had been dead, but guessed it fell somewhere around the time she'd been out of the country at the very least.

"Don't let the bedbugs bite," he said, smiling himself when her lips curved before she disappeared back upstairs.

He lay back on the couch and tried to will away the tension still locking his muscles tight with need. Hands laced under his head, he stared at the ceiling and listened to her footsteps overhead.

She was as restless as he felt. The occasional sound of movement continued for another few minutes. His jaw clenched, wishing she would settle down so he could stop picturing her up there in nothing but her underwear and that tantalizing nipple ring.

When the restless movements continued, he sat up and prowled to the bottom of the staircase. His fingers wrapped around the banister, his foot on the bottom step. He closed his eyes and inhaled, grappling to not give her a reason to toss him out on his ass. And going up there when his body hummed with wanting her would not be a good idea. Not when she had put the brakes on before.

Finn paced away from the stairs, scowling at the couch. Staying here hadn't been his best idea. Bree wasn't going anywhere. She did what she did for Marion Jacobs. He didn't need any more proof of that.

He should go. Leave the woman in peace before the wicked thoughts burning in the back of his mind led him upstairs. There, a new plan. One he could live with. For tonight anyway.

Finn turned, catching a movement from the corner of his eyes as he bent to grab his shoes. He slowly straightened, his intention to leave forgotten.

Bree stood motionless in the doorway in her tank top and panties, her pants already gone.

"Please tell me this isn't some form of torture to punish me for camping out on your couch?"

She shook her head, then tugged off her shirt, letting it fall to the floor behind her. "For so long I've wanted things I couldn't have. But you..." she took another step into the room, "...you I want and you're right here. Right now."

His heart thundering and his gut tight, he met her halfway. He nudged her chin up when her gaze darted to the floor. With his fingers splayed across her cheek and jaw, he leaned in, his mouth near her temple. The floral scent of her shampoo teased him.

"Are you sure?" One of them had to be. He damn well wasn't certain if this road would lead him to heaven or hell, but knew instinctively it was one or the other.

And right now he didn't fucking care either way.

Bree slid her hands up his chest, her palms warming him straight through to his ribs. "I'm sure."

That was all he needed. On a groan, Finn took possession of her mouth, tracing the edges of her lips with his tongue before slipping inside.

Smooth and slick, she met him tit-for-tat, her kiss bold with the same streak of wild abandon that he was beginning to recognize ran a mile wide within her. He crushed her to him, reaching down to cup her ass and lift her against him.

"Upstairs," she murmured against his mouth.

Bree looped her legs around his waist and he all but heard the first snap that signaled control ready to give way. Control that kept him from tearing her panties aside and sinking his cock deep inside her right this second.

He started for the stairs.

“Kitchen first.” Her mouth worked at the corner of his jaw, her lips and teeth like a siren’s, luring him to his death with each slow lick and dragging nip.

“What now?” He set her on the island long enough to dip his head and flick his tongue over the small silver ring.

She dropped her head back and moaned. He moved to her other breast, treating it to the same lazy lash, before drawing the plump tip between his lips and sucking hard.

“The drawer,” she hissed when Finn grasped one nipple with his fingers, still occupied with memorizing the silky feel of her other one with his mouth.

Her request managed to penetrate the lust-filled fog in his head, but he didn’t move.

Bree flattened a palm against his chest and pushed him back a step. “Drawer. Condoms. Now.”

He grinned and obliged before scooping her back into his arms. They made it up to the upstairs hall, only stopping once when kissing her neck led to another leisurely trip south. One that made him rock himself against her sex when her panted moan turned to a desperate whimper.

No one was more surprised than him that they managed to get upstairs at all with the same clothes intact. Not that Bree had much on to begin with, but he wanted out of his jeans. Bad.

“Door at the end of the hall,” she whispered, her lips tantalizing the skin just below his ear.

“Whatever you say.” He carried her inside, the lamp she’d left on giving him the right amount of light to appreciate her naked skin.

He lowered her to the bed, then stood back and took a second to tell himself maybe sticking around tonight had been his best plan yet.

Bree watched him swallow, and still he didn’t move from where he stood just out of reach. She silenced the doubts of where another spontaneous act would lead her. She wasn’t going to let them talk her out of this now. Not when

the sizzling in her bloodstream made her want nothing more than to get Finn out of those jeans.

She didn't have a long wait and sat motionless as he undid the fly before pushing them down his hips. Her eyes went instantly to the erection that sprang free, her sex throbbing.

Finn planted a hand on either side of her and bent to capture her lips with his. She didn't wait for the conquering thrust of his tongue, but sought it out for herself, craving the wet, mindless slide of it. She knew what it felt like at her breast, but there were still other places she could easily imagine feeling the shivery brush of it.

Finn nudged her onto her back, but didn't follow her down. Starting beneath her breast, he trailed his finger down her belly, catching the waistband of her underwear.

"I'm naked. Now you need to be."

The sensual promise in his voice of what was still to come left her aching. Aching to feel him press her into the mattress and prove to her that this was more than just because of lust. It was something more, something she yearned for, needed. Something she knew deep inside that he felt, too.

The unhurried caress of his fingers as he removed her underwear left her impatient. She lifted a hand, barely grazing the tip of his cock.

He sucked in a breath, and she grinned.

She pushed up on her elbows. "Come closer."

"Not a problem." Come closer he did, stretching out next to her, his upper body keeping her trapped against him. He caged one wrist and held it to the bed.

She arched a brow. "Think I'm going to get up and leave?"

He smoothed a hand down her stomach, paused at the curls hiding her sex. "Just in case you get a little too wild."

"Afraid you can't handle me?"

Giving her that trademark sexy smile, he prodded her thighs wider and stroked a finger down her already damp folds.

Bree bit her lip, catching most of the moan that trembled out. She lifted her hips on a shudder.

"I think I have what it takes." He slid a finger inside her.

She cried out, the heated glide tightening her womb. He added another stretching, pushing deeper. She laced her fingers through his where he held her hand above their heads, her other fisting in the sheet.

Holding her gaze, Finn withdrew and pumped again, then he bent to circle her nipple ring with his tongue. Still he didn't look away from her, dragging the tip into his mouth.

The sweet wet pressure electrified her nerve endings and her core pulsed fiercely with every thrust of his fingers. She didn't even know she murmured his name until the pad of his finger swirled across her clit and she said it again. Louder.

Finn grinned at her, moving up to do the same bone-melting things with his tongue, only to her neck this time. He continued to impale her with his fingers, working harder, faster, ruthless now as he pinched and rubbed the slick knot. With each thrust, she moved her hips, straining as she felt the first true threads of orgasm begin to unravel.

But not fast enough.

She tried to sit up.

"I thought you weren't going to get up and leave." His fingers speared her sex again.

Bree shook her head. "I can't wait any longer."

"Yes, you can." He thought to prove it by drawing one figure eight after another between her clit and down to her opening.

She thrashed her head, wanting to come, needing it the way she needed this man. Needing him in ways that scared her to her very core.

He buried his face against her throat, thrusting his fingers over and over until her body bowed up to meet his and she screamed out her release.

Slow, lengthy strokes brought her back down, but she wasn't ready for anymore *slow*.

He didn't stop her when she sat up and reached for the box on the nightstand. Damn thing was just out of reach. She stood, but two strong hands caught her around the waist and turned her around.

She didn't have time to question him before his mouth fastened around her nipple. Her knees trembled and she clung to his shoulders, indulging in one primal tug of his lips after another until she backed away.

"I've got it," he said, well within reach of the bedside table.

Sheathed, he reached for her, but she shook her head and nudged him onto his back this time before straddling his waist.

He leaned up on his elbows, his gaze intent on her nipple ring. "This I like."

And then nothing more was said as she lowered herself down over his cock. She moaned as everything drew tight, her inner walls squeezing him.

Finn's eyes were closed as she rocked up and back down. All attempts to savor the moment flew to the wayside as his fingers dug into her hips, urging her faster, pulling her down harder. His own hips pitched up to meet hers every time.

He hauled her lower to reach her mouth, his tongue stroking deep before he rolled and pinned her beneath him. In control now, he tucked her thigh high on his hip, and she groaned at the change of angle, the way he filled her in all the right places.

The muscles in his back worked, straining as he rode her hard. The pleasure bordered on an intensity that knifed through her, her orgasm cried out a second before he shuddered and came.

He collapsed against her, his breath hot on her neck. She closed her eyes, a complete and utter contentedness oozing out of every pore.

He started to move off, but she held on. "Not yet," she whispered. "Just...not yet."

Chapter Seven

Finn was already dressed by the time she came downstairs.

"I'll have to rain check on those pancakes I mentioned." He gestured to the pantry. "You need to get more supplies."

Her mock pout made her look way too sexy. She poured herself a cup of coffee, the sunlight from the window making the small stud in her nose wink.

"Well, I managed to not sneak out and leave town. Think you're going to be able to trust me in the light of day?"

"Probably not," he teased, "but I've got a meeting in an hour and a half so I'll have to risk it."

"I'm ever so grateful for that much."

"I'll call you later, though," he added, jotting his own cell number down on the notepad stuck to her fridge.

"I want to know the second you hear anything about Dade," she called out as he headed for the front door.

He saluted her. "Free for lunch?"

"I'll have to check my schedule."

"A few private dances booked for today?"

"I might be able to fit you onto my standby list."

He caught her around the waist and hauled her close. "That much in demand are you?"

"Don't worry. It's a very short list."

He leaned in and captured her mouth in a kiss that dared him to kick the door shut and drag her back to bed.

Instead, he slowly released her. "I'll call you at work."

Her smile tripped his heart in his chest. "I'll be there."

* * *

Finn fiddled with the clasp on his amulet, cursing when the stubborn thing refused to stay locked together. He tucked it back in his pocket where it had spent most of last night. With anything else, it would take no more than a few words to fix the problem. But their amulets were made to be immune to magic to prevent anyone but the wearer having power over it.

Which meant he would need to get a new chain from Tate. The woman liked to fiddle with making things like that. She'd be able to look after that, if she put in an appearance any time soon. He still didn't know what had happened to her last night.

He glanced at his watch, imagined Bree at work, and plucked up the phone. It didn't matter to him that it was barely nine o'clock. He wanted to talk to her. His fingers froze over the numbers, and he replaced the phone.

This wasn't like him. He was normally lucky to remember to call any woman he dated by afternoon to make plans for that evening, and here he was calling before nine.

"Guess who called Mom and Dad and mentioned you last night?" Violet strode into his office, plunked an extra coffee that he knew came from Louise's on his desk.

"Who?" he asked absently, shooting her a grateful smile since it gave him something to do instead of reaching for the phone again.

"Aunt Gertie."

He froze, then snatched up his coffee and headed for the breakroom. Given the last couple of days, this was one conversation he really wasn't in the mood to have. Violet predictably fell into step beside him.

"No client to hold hands with?"

Seeing as Finn's older sister Riley and Dante were not the best people persons, and with Darby and Sawyer running the company, Violet had taken the role to play the go-between on most of the cases.

Violet shook her head.

“Reece very late last night?” It said a lot that he was willing to bring up the detective at all this early in the morning. Anything to erase the troublesome glimmer that flashed in his sister’s eyes.

“Mom and Dad told her about your stripper.”

Hot coffee scalded his tongue. He grimaced, staring Violet down. “Who told them about that?”

She shrugged, not bothering to mask her playful smile. “Like anything is secret in this family.”

He tested the coffee again, sipping this time instead of letting a gulp get down his throat. “What did Gertie say when they told her?” he asked, feigning an amused interest instead of suddenly wanting to know exactly what his eccentric aunt thought of that.

Violet grinned a little too perceptively. “I guess you’ll have to call her yourself.”

“And subject myself to another soul-mate discussion?” As curious as he might be, he damn well wasn’t going there. “I’d sooner shave off my eyebrows.”

Violet arched a brow. “Where do I put my money down for that?”

He rolled his eyes and headed back to his office, relieved when Violet went on her way. This time when he sat down, he couldn’t stop himself from snatching up the phone and dialing the number he’d already committed to memory.

He recognized Marion’s voice when she answered on the second ring. “If you’re looking for Bree,” she said, “I’ve been instructed to tell you she thinks she has a timeslot open just after one o’clock.”

“Is she running errands?”

“No, she skipped town.”

Finn laughed. “What else did she tell you?”

“That you kiss like a god.”

He grinned, leaning forward as though the other woman was ready to divulge all of Bree’s secrets over the phone. “Really?”

Marion laughed. "Okay not so much, but the look on her face said it clearly enough this morning."

"Are you always so open with men interested in Bree?"

"You're the first man she's so much as thought about, so yeah, I'm allowed to be enthusiastic. But I should warn you that I have a doberman more than eager to turn your penis into a Happy Meal if you hurt her."

Finn cringed. "So noted."

"Good. Now where are you taking her for lunch?"

"That's a good question." He hesitated, then at the last minute gave Marion directions to the firm. "She can decide on the place when she meets me. If it's a problem, she can call me on my cell." He left the number again in case Bree left it at home that morning.

"I'll see that she gets it."

The rest of the morning dragged by, and each time he caught himself glancing at his watch, his gut clenched. Not even Reece had gotten back to him about Dade. From the corner of his eye, he spotted the folder on the cross-dresser case. Probably another wife wanting to find out what her husband was up to. Instead of getting to it, he knew he needed to focus on Dade's murder and put together his own list of suspects, but continued to catch himself wondering over the wisdom of having Bree meet him here.

By the time the clock hit one, he snatched up some files to leave for his sister with Lauren, and went to wait for Bree.

This had to be wrong. Her fingers clenched around the piece of paper. Even as she shook her head on the sidewalk outside of Calder Investigations, Bree knew it had to be right.

Maybe he just worked here. Maybe it didn't mean anything. Maybe she should have found out what his last name was before now.

She stared at the shiny glass door leading into the building. There was only one way to find out. Still, she couldn't put her legs into action.

She searched her memory, thinking of the times her father had ranted about the Calders. Tried to think about names she'd heard. Dante was definitely one and his twin sister Darby. And Sawyer. Those she knew for sure.

Bree glanced around as though her father were about to watch her walk into the lion's den. She had never pressed her father for a lot of details about the feud between the families. It didn't matter, or it never had before. Lancasters and Calders didn't speak or interact. Period. That's just the way it was. The way it had been for centuries. From the few times she'd overheard her father and grandfather arguing, she'd guessed that much of the ongoing hostility between their families had something to do with her grandmother's accident long before Bree was born. As far as she knew, not even Bryce knew the whole story, or if he did, he'd never shared it with her.

And here she was about to walk through the doors to confirm the fact Finn was just a regular employee. And he had to be. If he were a Calder warlock he would have been wearing an amulet last night. Only witches tended to sometimes wear theirs around the wrist or ankle. He'd had his shirt off with no amulet, and surely he would have commented on the small one she wore, wouldn't he?

She swallowed and started across the sidewalk. Her damp palm slipped on the door handle and she gripped it tighter. The details of the lobby felt blurred and faraway as she moved towards the receptionist.

Bree cleared her throat, nerves pinching it shut. "I have an appointment with Finn."

She squeezed her fists at her sides.

The receptionist smiled politely. "I'll let Mr. Calder know you're here."

The name echoed in her ears, and she spun on her heel and headed for the door.

"Miss?"

This she couldn't do. Five years ago she might have thought to date a Calder just to piss her father off. Prove that all the things he said were true, that she didn't fit in. And what better way to prove that than to go to bed with the enemy. Of course even then she would have known how stupid of a plan that was. All Calders hated them just as much.

Finn couldn't know who she was. The man was a private investigator. Isn't that what they did? Investigate people, run background checks. So why hadn't he on her? An hour ago she would have been pissed if he had and discovered that Jacobs was only her married name. Now she wished he had, wished that he already knew the truth.

She leaned her forehead against the warm glass. Out of all the men she could finally connect with, he would have to turn out to be a Calder. She closed her eyes. She really couldn't catch a break.

Just as her hand closed over the handle to wrench it open and put this place far behind her, she heard her name being called.

Bree couldn't bring herself to turn around as his footsteps drew closer.

"I think you forgot something."

She lifted her face and fought the instinctive warmth that washed through her stomach. She couldn't like him. Couldn't let herself like him.

Too late, a little voice whispered. Way, *way* too late.

"Me," he added when she didn't respond. "I don't know about you but I'm starved. Where would you like to grab lunch?"

The lazy curve of his mouth caused the refusal she needed to get out to lodge in her throat.

His brows drew together. "Something wrong?"

Where to begin? Life wasn't fair. Her best friend in the world died and when she finally felt the flicker of wanting something more from someone else...

Bree cursed under her breath. Why couldn't he have mentioned his name? Why couldn't she have asked? Why couldn't she have just stayed away from the Mason Dade situation?

She could ask herself a thousand "why" questions and it wouldn't change the fact that he was a Calder and she was a Lancaster.

"Bree?"

She shook her head, but none of the thoughts swirling through her brain made it to her lips.

"Glad I caught you." The detective from the other night crossed the lobby towards them.

“Perfect,” Finn mumbled.

Bree was actually relieved when the cop stopped next to her. His appearance bought her another few minutes to find a good excuse to leave or the courage to tell Finn just exactly who she was.

Reece inclined his head towards the elevators opposite the receptionist. “Can we talk for a couple minutes?”

“You going to interrogate us here or downtown?”

Bree shot a surprised look to Finn at his comment.

“Smart ass,” Reece grumbled. “Your office will do fine. I’ve got a few minutes to kill while I wait for Vi.”

“Lucky us.” Finn glanced at her. “You don’t mind holding off on lunch for another few minutes?”

Given the way her gut was slowly working itself into oily knots, she’d take anything that would put off the coming confrontation. She had no idea how he’d take the news, but doubted it would go over well.

She nodded and followed as they slipped into the elevator. In the cramped space she could feel Finn behind her, close enough that his shirt brushed her bare back, exposed from the light sundress she wore.

She caught Reece staring at the thick chunky-heeled boots she sported at odds with the dainty dress.

“They’re comfortable,” she said, pouncing on the chance for idle chitchat to keep her mind off the nauseous waves that rolled in her stomach.

“I’d hate to meet you in a dark alley somewhere with those on.”

She thought of the teen from her first night back in town. “My boots are the least of anyone’s concern in that scenario.”

Finn’s mouth brushed her ear. “I don’t know that I can take any more surprises from you.”

Yeah, this was going to go over *real* well.

The elevator crawled to the next floor, and Reece gestured for her to exit as the door scrolled open.

Finn led the way down to his office and held open the door for them.

Bree couldn't absorb anything in the room and barely registered Reece taking a seat in front of Finn's desk. He propped his feet up on the corner.

Finn's don't-piss-me-off glare only earned him an innocent shrug from Reece.

Scowling, Finn opened his mouth, glanced at Bree then back to Reece.

Reece just grinned at him before Finn knocked the detective's feet off the desk.

"I can go if you two want to be alone." In fact that would work out pretty well for her.

"Stay," Finn ordered.

Reece laughed, glancing over at her. "What did you say your name was?"

"Bree," Finn supplied.

Reece winked at her, but she got the impression the gesture was more to rankle Finn. "Just checking."

She didn't follow the hidden meaning that Finn seemed to grasp, judging by the deadly glitter in his eyes as he stared at the detective.

Despite that leaving still held the most appeal, Bree forced herself to sit down.

"Either of you think of anything else you might have seen or heard since last night?"

Bree shook her head, choosing to keep her attention on Reece. She felt Finn watching her, but couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes just yet. The memories of last night were replaying in her mind, only now they felt more like a dream rapidly fading at the sound of a morning alarm clock going off. And no matter how much she'd like to burrow back under the covers and recapture the sweetest of dreams, it wasn't going to happen.

"The killer had obviously been gone for a little while since I—we had been sitting in the car for a while, then we checked in and shortly after that found Dade's body," Finn said.

Reece cocked his head. "And what were you doing in the car?"

“Making out,” Finn answered in the same no-nonsense tone. He nodded towards the door. “Now go find my sister before I turn you...” he fumbled with the words, “...around and toss you out myself.”

If she didn’t know who Finn really was, the near slip might have sailed right over her head. As it was, it only made her curious as to whether the detective knew exactly what the Calders were.

Reece took his time heading for the door. He stopped part way across the room. “Did you come across anything that indicated Dade had a gambling problem?”

Finn frowned. “No. Erica didn’t mention anything about it.”

“I guess she was only interested in catching him cheating.”

“She knew about it?”

Reece nodded. “Apparently, he was even going to meetings for his little addiction.”

“And she kept silent about it?” Finn leaned back in his chair, mulling over the implications, Bree guessed.

“I imagine it would be hard to convince people to invest their money with a man who couldn’t hold onto any of his own.”

Too little, too late, Bree thought with another churn of guilt. That also explained what Dade was doing at a little crappy motel. He had probably already gambled away what he’d ripped off from people.

“And, Finn,” Reece added, “you’re going to leave this alone, right? Murder is a police matter.”

“Wouldn’t dream of interfering with an ongoing investigation.”

“Finn.”

“And should I, by some small coincidence, come across any useful little tidbit, I’ll give you a call.”

“There you are,” an attractive brunette said from the doorway as she slipped her arm around Reece’s waist.

When she spotted Bree, she smiled. “Client?” she asked Finn.

He shook his head. "Stripper." The teasing grin he sent Bree almost made her forget where she was, made her forget that as soon as this conversation ended she'd be leaving. Or he'd be throwing her out.

Violet crossed the short distance and offered her hand. "Nice to meet you. I'm Finn's sister, Violet."

Another Calder. Bree fought to keep her face from giving her away. She'd gone her whole life with only hearing the name and now, in a short space of time, crossed paths with two of them.

"I hope he gave you more than twenty?" Violet grinned.

Behind her Reece cringed, then a light seemed to dawn on his face.

"Stripper?" He glowered at Finn. "As in the same phony stripper you thought was also looking for Dade?"

Finn glared at Violet. Was there nothing that didn't get repeated in this family? His own fault for mentioning that one run-in with Bree the morning after it happened.

Violet bit her lip and mouthed *sorry*.

Reece faced Bree. "You knew Mason Dade?"

"I never actually met him, but I knew who he was."

"She didn't kill him, Reece." When Reece arched a brow, Finn added, "She has an alibi, making out in the car remember?"

"You should have mentioned it."

It wasn't the first time he'd failed to share information with the boys in blue, and it probably wouldn't be the last. He did hate that he felt a little guilty now. Meant he might actually be starting to like Reece.

If that thought wasn't enough to ruin his day.

"Why were you looking for Dade?" Reece had to repeat the question a second time before Bree responded.

She still refused to hold Finn's gaze for more than a few seconds at a time but had no problem looking at Reece. He couldn't help but feel unsettled by the fact she looked ready to bolt at any second. Not that he blamed her.

"My mother-in-law used Dade as an investor. Her money is gone. He wasn't returning her calls and wasn't seeing anyone at his office."

"So you tracked him down at the strip club?"

She nodded. "But Dade didn't show."

Reece raked his hand through his hair, and jabbed an accusing finger in Finn's direction. "You should have told me this last night."

Probably, but then he'd felt the need to keep Bree out of it. She wasn't a killer. Impulsive and probably reckless, but not a murderer. He's been in the business long enough to trust his gut, and there was no reason to think Bree was lying about that.

Or was it just that he didn't want her to be? What if he really was wrong about her?

He should never have cancelled his date last Saturday. His life had gotten a whole lot more complicated since then. But damn it, he liked the woman. Much more than he should and wanted Reece and Violet to get out so he could take one more taste of that lush mouth before they went someplace away from work.

"We should go," Violet said finally. "I'm in need of food."

"Anything else I should know that you've conveniently forgotten to mention?"

"Nothing comes to mind."

Reece sighed. "Where have I heard that one before?"

"You need a vacation, Detective."

With nothing left to add, Reece allowed Violet to usher him from the room.

"Nice to meet you," Violet said before they disappeared down the hall.

Bree faced him, still far from comfortable looking. "You and Reece?"

"Have a complicated and interesting history."

"How long have he and your sister been together?"

"Six months too long." Even that particular sentiment lacked its usual sharpness.

Damn if he still didn't feel a bit guilty for not adding that he and Dade had gotten into a little skirmish in the office. The second that came out, along with

his and Erica's past, he feared a handful of people—mostly cops he'd pissed off along the way—would be gunning to add him to the top of the suspect list. Right now he needed all the extra time he could get to follow up on other leads he hadn't mentioned to Reece that he'd been looking into this morning. Unfortunately, not a single one was promising.

And it would all come out. He had no doubt about that. Still the guilt gnawed at him. Maybe if Reece woke with hemorrhoids in the morning Finn would feel better.

The thought alone brought a smile back to his face.

Feeling better for the moment, he focused on Bree. "We should slip out before another member of my family descends."

"And they all work here?" She paled at the thought.

Finn smiled. "They're harmless."

"I should go," she said.

Finn caught her hand, keeping her from running out the door. The nervous glimmer in her eyes told him she had such an escape on her mind. But it was the helpless look on her face that got to him.

"Tell me what's on your mind," he coaxed gently, hoping she'd open up.

She nodded. "I..." Her gaze fell to his mouth, and the need to kiss her struck fast and fierce. "It's just—" She stretched up and caught his jaw in her palm, tugging him down to meet her mouth.

The kiss was simple, soft, and left him aching. For her.

He brought his arms around her, deepening the kiss until he knew he had to stop or he'd have her up on his desk in another few seconds. The idea sounded good in principle. Too easily he could set her up there, untie the knot at the nape of her backless dress until both breasts were bared.

"I can come back later."

Finn broke away at the voice. He spotted Carey in the doorway, a shy toddler edging behind her legs.

"I don't have an appointment or anything. I can call you later."

"No," Bree said, all too eagerly putting distance between them. "I was just leaving." She didn't meet his gaze when she tacked on, "Rain check for lunch."

“Bree?”

She vanished out the door.

Finn dodged around Carey who filled the doorway. “Take a seat. I’ll be right back.”

He started down the hall. “Bree!”

The elevator door was already closing when he got there. Shit.

Still frowning and wondering if he shouldn’t have just gone to pick her up at her shop after all, he strode back to his office.

Carey was fighting with her son over a mug on Finn’s desk. She grimaced as old coffee sloshed onto the floor.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, grabbing some napkins from his desk drawer to soak it up. Nothing a couple words wouldn’t fix later.

“Sorry if I was the reason your girlfriend left.”

“Bree’s not—” He couldn’t really define what was between them. At least not yet. But he planned to one way or another just as soon as he caught up with her.

“I’m sure you heard about Mason,” Carey said, pulling her son into her lap.

Finn nodded.

“The police haven’t told Erica very much. I was wondering if you’d heard anything.”

“Not much. Did you know about the gambling?”

Carey frowned. “Mason was gambling? That would explain the money problems Erica hinted at a few times. She never told me straight out what the problem was, but I figured something was going on. Have you talked to his partner and best friend?”

“No. With the change in circumstance, I’m sure the police will be having a chat with Walter Michaelson very soon if they haven’t already.”

“I don’t suppose there is any way you’d stay on this case?”

“The lead detective working it is good.”

“Who is it?”

“Reece Prescott. He came into the precinct after Garrett’s death.”

She nodded. "But the more people looking into this, the better the odds are of finding out who killed him, right? As long as you're not interfering with their investigation?"

"Erica would have to get in touch with me about that."

Carey nodded. "I'll see that she does. You're good at your job, Finn. You found out who killed Garrett and there is nothing worse than knowing the person responsible for killing your husband is still out there somewhere."

"If there's anything else I can do let me know."

She smiled gratefully. "Just help the police find out who did this." She stopped in the doorway, looked uncertain but only smiled and left.

Finn leaned back in his chair, glanced at the files on his desk, then his thoughts turned back to Bree and the way she took off. He was glad no other family member had descended on his office. She'd looked caught off guard enough meeting Violet.

Instead of enjoying a nice lunch with Bree, Finn devoured a sandwich from the deli down the street, using the time to make sure details on other cases he'd worked on were ready for any pending court dates so he could focus on Mason Dade's murder.

When he'd figured he'd given Bree enough time to get back to work and more in the mood to talk, he picked up the phone. He wasn't surprised when Marion answered and told him Bree was busy with a customer. Nor shocked when she gave him the same run around an hour later.

He was obviously going to have to make a personal visit. But first it was time to see if he could catch Dade's partner and persuade the man to open up a bit. Or at the very least, get another chat in with the receptionist.

Maybe Dade and his secretary had a thing going. Tate had implied the possibility and it wouldn't be the first time a boss was fooling around with his assistant. Another thread certainly worth exploring.

“Okay, before lunch you ran out of here all dreamy-like, and now you won’t even talk to the man.”

Bree didn’t look at Marion, but saw her prop one hand on her hip as though Bree had just turned down a date with the quarterback.

“That was his third call this afternoon.”

“I know.” And with each call her stomach became a whirlpool of nauseous cramps.

“I’m glad one of us is keeping track. Is it that you’re just not ready?”

“Maybe,” Bree answered vaguely, wishing it was that. Wishing it was nerves or cold feet. Anything was better than the truth.

She’d started to fall for the enemy.

A bitter laugh bubbled up. Her father’s enemy really. She couldn’t even say she knew the reasons behind her father’s personal dislike for the Calders, but was very familiar with the derision that filled his voice whenever their name came up.

She could have handled this twist of events had it not been for last night. Bree closed her eyes. Last night had been memorable. Waking with him snuggled up next to her as he nuzzled her neck, his fingers spread across her stomach, had been so much more.

And then she found herself standing in front of Calder Investigations and everything fell away.

With a sigh she fiddled with the same stack of erotic books for the third time. She should have said something to him about it before she took off. Should have just said...something.

She needed to get out of here. Needed to think. If nothing else, she’d quickly learned Finn was stubborn at best, persistent at worse. When she didn’t call him back he’d eventually come looking for her and she needed to get her head screwed on tight.

She could square last night away. Bury the feelings he’s awakened. Distance herself.

Let go.

The steady breath she dragged in called her a liar.

"Will you be okay for a while here?"

Marion snorted. "I managed the place just fine while you were away."

Now she was being an idiot with Marion. She offered an apologetic smile that no doubt fell miserably short. "Sorry."

"Go, sweetie. And what should I tell Finn when he calls again?"

That her last name at birth was Lancaster?

Without giving Marion a definite answer, Bree opened the door and let herself out in the warm, sunny afternoon wishing things could be different.

Story of her life.

* * *

Bree scowled at the pale blue sky, finding the sunshine glinting off the top of the headstone wrong and out of place. Mark had loved days like this, always finding one reason or other to be outside. Whether it had been riding their bikes pretending they were part of a stealth fighter squadron, building forts in the woods, heading to the beach or going hiking when they were older.

It didn't feel right to stand here and look at his final resting place on such a beautiful day.

She sat down on the grass next to the headstone the same way she'd sat for hours on his bedroom floor when they were growing up. She plucked at a few strands of grass, letting the ones not carried by the soft breeze slide through her fingers.

"You probably figured I would have been by here before now. Sorry about that. I wasn't ready before." Her throat thickened, and she swallowed against the lump of emotion before she choked on it.

She stared out across the expanse of grave markers, some laden with flowers, others bare. "I met someone. I'm sure you'd laugh to hear the whole story, but I doubt much would surprise you. Nothing I did ever really surprised you. Like you knew I was always just waiting for the next thing to come along to rush headlong into."

Bree tucked her knees up, rested her forehead on her arms. "I rushed headlong into things with Finn, too. You'd probably like him." Tears burned behind her eyes and she squeezed them tight until the sensation passed.

"He's a Calder," she added. "A freakin' Calder." The irony of it coated her insides in a layer of ice.

"And he doesn't know who I am and I know I should have told him..."

Bree closed her eyes. "I can't like him. Can't fall for him. I wanted to get to know him, wanted to spend more time with him. And now things are all fucked up and damn it if I don't already like him. A lot. Too much."

She studied the curve of the letters on the gravestone.

"What would things have been like if you hadn't gotten sick? Would we have still gotten married? Probably not."

The guilt wasn't as strong as it used to be over that particular thought that she'd been coming to terms with more lately. Their sexual relationship had come about slowly, the transition from best friends to lovers more of a natural progression of their closeness than a passionate affair of the heart. They'd only begun to explore such a new dimension to their relationship when Mark found out he was sick, and both his illness and things between them had changed quickly. She didn't regret a moment of their rash wedding, not when it had made Mark so happy. And she'd spent every day until his death doing everything in her power to keep him that way.

"But at least you'd be here to tell me I just have to forget the whole mess. So much would be different. I'd take different over this any day." She cursed under her breath. "A Calder, Mark." Maybe if she kept repeating it to herself it would sink in and she'd figure out what to say to Finn.

The grass blanketing the plot at her feet rustled with a gust of wind. She wasn't sure how long she sat there, searching for answers. Ones she'd never find here. The sun warmed her back and she still didn't feel like leaving even after she checked her watch and realized almost an hour and a half had passed.

Bree finally stood and with one more aching glance at the headstone, she walked away.

Instead of going back to the shop she headed for home. There were still a number of boxes to be unpacked. It was time to get fully settled in her home. Paint some walls, decorate. She knew Marion would understand. All the woman had done for the last year and a half was understand.

Maybe if she spent a few hours cleaning and unpacking, she'd figure out the best way to handle Finn. If it wasn't for the murder she'd call and tell him over the phone who she was. But Dade's death put a serious wrench in things. If Finn knew she was a Lancaster, there was no way he'd so easily believe she didn't kill Dade. She'd lose all credibility she had with him.

And he'd probably toss her to the wolves. Hell, from the way her father and brothers talked, he could even lie and say he saw her do it.

She wanted to shake her head at the possibility. Finn wasn't like that. But did she really know him well enough to make that call?

Yes.

Maybe.

If he knew she was a Lancaster, the playful, cocky man she'd met and let herself be charmed by would probably vanish. She wouldn't let herself hope that her family name wouldn't matter to him. Wouldn't set herself up for that kind of disappointment. The way her heart ached told her she'd let herself feel too much for him far too soon, and she'd pay the price when he found out the truth.

But how to tell him she was the enemy?

A dozen boxes, three CDs and one half quart of ice cream later, Bree surveyed her progress. Another full day of this and she'd have a good handle on the way she'd left things when she ran off to Europe.

She glanced at the clock. Angel would be here anytime.

The doorbell sounded.

Speak of the devil.

Bree assumed she must have left the front door locked on her sister as she headed downstairs. Not that it should have stopped Angel from letting herself in.

She pulled open the door and her heart pushed halfway into her throat.

Chapter Eight

Finn smiled at the surprise that registered on Bree's face and couldn't stop his heart from thumping at the smile that came to her lips before her eyebrows crashed together at his sudden appearance.

"Figured you wouldn't be able to ignore me if I just showed up."

"I wasn't ignoring you."

He cocked his head. "You were more convincing when you were pretending to be a stripper."

She crossed her arms but didn't manage to look as annoyed as she was probably going for.

"Okay. You weren't avoiding me. You just didn't want to talk to me."

"That's not...entirely true."

"So what have you been up to?"

When she glanced over her shoulder, he eased past the inside of the door. "You never said where you had to be when you ducked out on me at the office."

She rocked back on her heels. "I forgot there was something I had to do."

"Like?"

"Stuff."

"Work stuff?"

"No, cover-up stuff so you wouldn't know I actually shot Dade, and you just caught me in the middle of making travel arrangements to leave the country."

He studied her closely, not liking the grim resignation that haunted her eyes. "I don't think you killed Dade."

She snorted. "You say that now."

"I'm a good judge of character, but just out of curiosity, where are you headed because I hear the Philippines has no extradition policies with the US."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Packed a bathing suit?" Like the barely-there-untie-with-his-teeth kind.

The flicker of a smile. "Nude beaches are fine with me."

"Even better. You know..." he moved closer, "...I could use a vacation myself."

"You wouldn't want to take one with me." And just like that, the glimmer of playfulness vanished.

"Oh, yeah?" This he wanted to hear. "Why not?"

She stared at him then shrugged, nodded towards the door. "It's been a long day."

She actually thought she was going to kick him out. Look how well that worked for her last night. "It's only ten o'clock."

"I'm not usually a night owl."

Last night proved otherwise but he let the reminder slide for now. "You get to be tonight."

Bree frowned.

"How do you feel about cross-dressers?"

"Pardon?"

"You know, men that dress like women."

"Well," she said. "To each their own, but I do draw the line at sharing my underwear with any man."

He laughed and, in one forward motion, pulled her into his arms. He slid his mouth over hers.

She hesitated only a fraction of a heartbeat, just long enough to make him wonder. He didn't like the thought of her pulling away, wasn't ready for it.

He caged the nape of her neck in his palm, losing the other hand in the mussed strands that framed her cheek. When her fingers pressed against his chest, then tangled in his shirt as she leaned into him, he groaned.

The taste of her lips, the wet swirls of her tongue across his smoldered through his veins. He was so damn hot for her, hard for her, it was all he could not to combust on the spot.

"Trust me," he breathed when he finally drew back. "I'm not interested in your panties—"

Her face was flushed, her lips swollen, her eyes a smoky gray that burned him up from the inside. "That's reassuring."

"—unless I'm getting you out of them." He grinned suggestively. "We do have forty-five minutes until we have to be there."

"Where?"

"An exclusive transgender club downtown."

"Why?" She let him steer her upstairs.

"Because it turns out that Dade was blackmailing someone who has a fondness for all things feminine. My guess would be it's someone he works with or a close acquaintance."

"But you don't know who?"

Finn shook his head. "Erica Dade called me late this afternoon. She found a small locked briefcase tucked in the back of his closet. Inside were pictures of a guy in drag and account information where money was being deposited and then withdrawn."

"So you're hoping that if you go to this bar, you'll be able to spot him."

"We'll be able to spot him. Two sets of eyes are better than one." Plus there was no way he was getting Dante or Sawyer anywhere near the place.

He stretched out on the bed. "Did I mention that you have a very comfortable bed?"

Bree tugged at the front of her shirt. "I spent the evening unpacking boxes—"

"And need to get out of the house for a breather," he finished for her.

"Finn."

"Come on, you owe me one."

She stood in front of her closet but didn't pull anything out to change into. "How come Mrs. Dade didn't turn over this new information to the police?"

“She is in the morning. Which is why I only have tonight to scope the place out before the police presence goes up a notch and possibly frightens my guy off.”

“I thought you told Reece you were going to stay out of it.”

“But it will really stick in his craw if I don’t.” Just one of the perks to making sure his own back didn’t have such a big target painted on it.

“How old are you, ten?”

He gave her his best wounded look. “You’ll need to get changed unless coffee-stained shorts are fine with you to wear out.”

She propped a hand on her hip.

“Please.”

She blew out a breath. “Okay, but get your ass off my bed because I don’t owe you another show.”

Finn rolled his eyes, finding it way too easy to smile when he was around her. “I hope you don’t plan on being such a stick-in-the-mud all night.”

“Go.”

He backed out, closed the door and started down the hall. Then figuring he should make sure she’d moved from the foot of the bed, backtracked and poked his head in.

Naked from the waist up, Bree held her shirt at her side, jerking it up to cover herself on reflex. Her gaze shot to his as he took one step into the room and then another until he stood directly in front of her.

One soft tug on the hem of the shirt and she released it, letting it hit the floor.

He drew in a deep breath as the rosy tips of her breasts hardened, the instant ache in his groin bordering on unbearable. He knew this probably wasn’t the time, but trailed his hand down her bare arm anyway. Her skin was warm beneath his touch, goose bumps erupting over the smooth flesh in his wake.

She’d already kicked off her shoes and stood before him in only a pair of khaki shorts with the top button undone.

He brought her hand to his mouth, breathed in the faint scent of soap and lemons before pressing his lips to the inside of her wrist. "You're quick."

"I didn't expect you to be gone long."

Finn cupped her breast, slowly rubbing his thumb around the tight peak. Her lids came down over her eyes, her breath closer to a pant as she arched into his hand.

They wouldn't leave this room if he didn't back off now. Later he could indulge, find all the spots he'd missed last night, find more ways to make her moan, to make her come harder.

She coaxed his mouth to hers, taking the decision to stop completely out of his hands. When her tongue pushed past his lips and demanded he kiss her back, he was a goner.

Bree groaned when his mouth molded to hers, the soft working of his lips unleashing a fierce throbbing in the deepest parts of her womb. Parts that still hungered for more of what they'd shared in her bed the night before.

Moving away from his mouth, she delighted in the rough skin under her lips. She didn't hold back, nipping and tasting the flesh at his throat, the hollow beneath his Adam's apple, the curve where his neck met his shoulder.

The rasp of his T-shirt against her already sensitized nipples drove her to press closer, yearning for the sweet recess of his mouth. As if reading her thoughts, Finn caught her lower back, keeping her trapped against his mouth as he lowered his head.

Wet and warm, his tongue flicked over each tip, then pulled them deeper in turn. When he switched back to the other, she thought she'd go out of her mind. She wanted his hand, his thick fingers pushing inside her, stroking the knot already damp with an insatiable need. Not even squeezing her legs together brought enough relief to the pressure building within.

Relief Finn could give her.

She didn't want his hand creeping lower. She wanted it there, now, grinding hard against her sex. Impatient, she unsnapped the rest of the buttons on her shorts.

“Not yet,” he murmured, the exquisite pressure at her breast too much to stand. She sank her hands into the short strands of his hair, and every lush pull of his hungry lips made her want to shove him to the floor and straddle him.

“There isn’t enough time.”

She shook her head, denying the desperation she heard in his voice. “You said forty-five minutes.”

“That was ten minutes ago.” He nuzzled her neck, the butterfly kisses just as effective at turning her knees to rubber.

“So?”

“One half-hour isn’t enough time to touch you everywhere I want to. Not even a whole night is.” He traced the slope of her neck. “Not a week.” His teeth dragged and nipped. “Or even a month.” He pulled her down into his lap as he sat on the bed.

Now he was talking.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and met his lips, felt his arousal as he rolled his hips upward. The sensation was nothing more than a tease.

He shook his head. “We really do have to go.”

“In a while,” she whispered, dragging his mouth back to hers. She wasn’t anywhere done with him yet.

Finn stood so fast he almost dumped her to the floor. He left his hands at her elbows, looking so torn about walking out the door she grinned.

“As much as I really, really want to finish this, we need to go. We’ve only got one night to find this guy before the police start butting in.”

The “we” made her grin wider.

He started for the door, swiveled back around and yanked her to him at the last second. His hands locked against her spine as he kissed her with a reckless tenderness that knocked every cell in her body into an all out freefall.

Then he backed away.

“Be quick,” he added, already halfway out the door.

Breathless, her skin humming, her sex aching, Bree leaned against the closet door. How quickly the man took her from worry, to turned on, to

complete and utter mindlessness for him. Only the knowledge that the Dade case was important to him kept her from sitting down to wait for him to come back and check on her.

The sooner they got where they needed to be, the sooner they could pick right up...

The moment she caught her thoughts drifting to the big dark cloud ready to rain on that particular parade, she forced it all aside. She'd tell him the truth. She would. Maybe tonight was the break Finn needed, one that would point to Dade's killer and she could permanently bury the tiny fear of Finn stabbing her in the back when he knew she lied. More an omission of her real last name than a lie, but she doubted that would float as a legitimate excuse when the time came.

In record time she changed into a pair of fitted black pants she knew showed off her ass rather nicely and a flared-out halter top that would be cool enough since the temperature outside was still in the nineties.

She'd already caught her sister on her cell phone, rain checking on the late night moviefest Angel had suggested earlier. She also didn't want to run the risk of Finn meeting any of her family before she broke the truth to him.

Bree met Finn on his way back up the stairs. He almost looked disappointed she was all set to go. The look of barely controlled lust imprinted on his face made the warm throb between her thighs start anew.

"Let's go," he said simply, but didn't hold back from brushing her hair over her shoulder and dropping a lingering kiss on her collarbone.

Bree cocked her head as he stepped back. "You know, you really aren't dressed the part this evening."

He glanced down at his clothes, frowning. "What's wrong with what I have on?"

"Wearing stockings?"

"Uh, no."

"Bra?"

He snorted.

"Thong?"

A smile caught the corner of his mouth. "I thought you didn't want to share your underwear?"

"My point is that those things are usually part of the dress code for everyone at this place except..."

"Except?"

"The entertainment."

When he continued to look confused, she added, "The nice sexy guys that parade around the place, doing little shows."

"So you're saying my odds of getting in are greater if I'm in drag or a loin cloth?"

She followed him down the stairs. "I'm saying if you don't want to draw attention to yourself then...yeah."

"I'll take my chances."

"If you say so."

"Have a little faith."

Bree snagged a few bills and tucked them in her pocket along with her house key, not wanting to bother with a purse. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

The cocky tilt of his chin didn't even need his follow-up comment. "This will not be a problem."

"This is a serious problem." Finn stared at the line up across the street. All were women. Or more precisely men dressed as women. The only men that neared the place headed around back. The entertainment Bree had mentioned most likely.

"I can't believe this."

Bree shot him an I-told-you-so look. "Maybe we'll get lucky and spot the guy out here." Unchecked skepticism dripped off her tongue. "Let me see the picture again."

He dug it from his back pocket.

"Bree?"

She looked over her shoulder and Finn followed her gaze to the short woman in a glittery gold gown. No, a man *dressed* as a woman Finn realized after another look.

"Ryan?"

The woman tsked. "No one has called me that since the day you put your scrawny ass on a plane for Europe."

Finn watched as she launched herself at the newcomer.

"You haven't called," Ryan scolded.

"I haven't been back in town very long. I've been preoccupied with something."

Ryan cocked his head and gave Finn a blatant once-over. "I can see that." He set her aside as though she wasn't nearly as interesting. "And who is this grade-A piece of ass?"

"Finn."

"Model? Actor? Sex slave for hire?"

"PI."

"*Private* investigator? Even better."

"Ryan." Bree laughed.

Finn tried his best not to twitch under Ryan's starving gaze.

"Spoken for?"

"Working on it," was Finn's response as he tried to insinuate himself into the conversation instead of just *being* the conversation.

"Well, well, well." Ryan glanced at Bree. "Would Mark have approved of this guy?"

Bree's smile remained intact but a sadness crept into her eyes. Somehow Finn guessed her answer to this was important to Ryan.

"I think so."

Finn heard a "but" in there somewhere, but she didn't add any more.

Ryan pulled her into another fierce hug. "Postcards are not good enough. Though I have to say they make an interesting conversation piece when I have

people over.” When he stepped back finally, he gestured to Finn. “So what brings a PI out tonight? Work or pleasure?”

“Work.”

“He’s trying to find someone that’s related to a case he’s working on,” Bree added.

At her nod he pulled out the picture and handed it to Ryan.

Platinum blond braids fell over one broad shoulder, and he shoved them back the same way Finn had watched Bree sweep hers aside when it bugged her. “Looks familiar,” he said finally. “Can’t put a name to the face though.”

“We were hoping to get inside and look around.”

Ryan started at Finn’s feet and swept up. “And not raise red flags with the person you’re looking for?” Ryan laughed. “You have two options,” he said in all seriousness.

Finn shook his head even before Ryan voiced the same two possibilities Bree threw out before they left her place. There were some lines just not meant to be crossed.

Ryan mulled it over. “The entertainment will be much harder to pull off.”

“Looks like drag for you,” Bree chimed in, way too amused at the prospect.

“No way.” He damn near stuttered getting the refusal off his tongue that fast.

“Do you want to find this guy, or not?” They both stared at him expectantly.

He felt the need to point out the obvious. “It just so happens I don’t have any dresses among my wardrobe at home.”

Ryan beamed. “Lucky for you, my roommate looks about your size.”

“You need to sit still,” Ryan chided.

“Forgive me for not knowing the proper etiquette to having my eyes done up.”

“If it’s any consolation—” Bree began.

"Don't." He all but growled it.

"—you don't make a bad-looking woman."

Ryan leaned back and sighed, his eyes critical under the layers of turquoise shadow. "The best I could do on such short notice."

"We need to get going." He wanted this over with. Yesterday.

Ryan poked him in the chest. "If you'd done your research then you wouldn't be getting your nails done at the last minute."

Bree grinned as she finished coating the nail on his pinky in an iridescent green color. He'd insisted that really wasn't necessary, but like everything else that had happened in the last fifty minutes, neither of them paid a damn bit attention to what he wanted.

Ryan clearly enjoyed dressing like a woman. Good for him. Bree was a woman. Even better. But this... He dared a glance down at the scandalous outfit they'd fostered on him. This was so fucking wrong.

"I think we're done here." Even if Ryan didn't say so, Finn was ready to bolt.

Bree blew on his fingers and he yanked them back as her warm breath felt way too arousing for his current apparel. Hell, he even smelled like a woman.

If Reece or Dante ever got wind of this...

Finn shuddered.

"It's not that bad," Bree said, careful of his freshly painted nails as she guided him to his feet.

"Open your eyes, Finn."

He hadn't even realized he'd shut them again when Ryan lifted a small mirror, until Ryan said so.

"I don't want to look."

"Don't be a pussy," Ryan chastised good naturedly.

How bad could it be? Finn cracked one eye open, then the other, taking in the dark auburn wig that came just past his shoulders. His blue eyes were powdered with the same blue green shade Ryan wore and enough mascara he'd be rubbing the goo off for weeks. He wasn't even going to think about the fact that they made his lips look plumper.

"That's good," Finn said, eager to get his eyes away from his reflection. He hadn't looked as outright hideous as he expected, but it just...wasn't right.

"Don't worry, in a couple hours your carriage will turn back into a pumpkin," Ryan assured him. "Mark would definitely think he was a trooper."

"Yeah, he would," Bree agreed, a smile in her voice.

Their mutual agreement somehow pleased Finn. He was curious about the type of guy Mark had been. Looking at the two faces regarding him with a mix of amusement and satisfaction, he knew they missed the guy a lot.

"Okay, people, let's go. I've got people to see. Bitches to put in their place," Ryan quipped.

Bree snuck another glance at Finn out of the corner of her eye. Had she passed him on the street in the strappy flats, knee-length black skirt and off-the-shoulder red blouse, she would never have recognized him. As she watched, he jerked at the material that continued to slide off his shoulder.

"Stop it," he growled.

"It's for a good cause," she offered. "And whose idea was it we stop by here?"

"That was when I was an idiot."

"If you want to get a look at this guy you've got to blend."

Finn jerked his head at the packed club. "There are plenty of other masculine-dressed men in here tonight. I would have been fine."

"And if you had remained all masculine dressed and flashed that picture, you would have stood out like a Marilyn Monroe impersonator in a room full of Elvises."

Her joke about the drag queen show on center stage didn't ease the scowl on his face.

She adjusted the sleeve that kept sliding. "It just shows that you're willing to do whatever it takes to follow a lead."

"That's not stopping this damn bra from cutting me in half. How do you women wear these things?"

"We manage." She surveyed the club. "How do you want to do this?"

"I think you should try to stay stationary, maybe somewhere close to the bathroom."

"And you're going to?"

He grinned. "Ask around for a friend I haven't seen a long time."

"You do realize this guy might change up his appearance and it may be hard to pick him out."

"Ryan said he looked like a regular. Someone here will recognize him."

"Good luck." She winked before watching him nearly trip in the borrowed shoes as he threaded his way through the crowd.

For the next two hours they circulated. A couple times Bree thought she spotted the guy—or woman—they were looking for, but it turned out to be someone else entirely.

"Bad news," Finn said from behind her a short while later. "The guy was here earlier but none of the bartenders have noticed him around for a good while."

"Gone to another club?"

"Could be, but my feet can't take another hour in these shoes."

Bree pressed her hand to her mouth to hide her smile.

"Let's get out of here." His hand moved to the small of her back as they weaved through the crowded club. Ryan had already moved on to say hi to some friends.

The second they got into his car, Finn pulled the wig off. He grimaced and ran his hand through hair that had been sprayed and flattened to make sure the wig stayed on.

He sighed in disgust. "Good to know all this was worth it."

"Oh, it so was."

He glowered at her. "If you ever repeat a word of what I did tonight to another living soul..."

She zippered her lips. "I'll carry it to the grave."

"Good."

She kept the rest of her comments to a minimum on the drive back to her place. He pulled the keys out of the ignition once they'd parked.

"If you think I'm going near my condo with this getup still on, you're a few bricks shy of a full load."

"You probably don't have any makeup remover either I suppose."

"Fresh out."

He followed her into the house, and the click of the flats he wore on the floor before he yanked them off made her smile.

While he headed for the bathroom, she snagged him a beer from the fridge before going to check on him.

She found him staring at himself in front of the bathroom mirror.

"I'll bet you could use this."

He sighed in pleasure as he took the bottle. "I love you."

She laughed and nodded to the shelf next to the vanity. "Use the tall blue bottle of stuff."

"I think I'm just going to jump right in the shower and scrub it all off. If you don't mind."

"Have at it." She ducked out of the bathroom.

On the opposite side of the door, Bree heard a long, drawn-out sigh.

She paused. "Everything okay?"

"I just took the bra off and damn that felt good."

She was still laughing when she reached her room and flopped down on her bed.

"Bree?" she heard little more than ten minutes later after the water shut off.

She sat up as he walked into the room, a skimpy towel draped around his hips.

"I've got a problem."

One look at his face and she burst out laughing. The dark circles under his eyes told her it sure hadn't been waterproof mascara Ryan had applied.

Finn didn't look impressed and rubbed as though some of the remover had made it into his eye. "Haven't I been traumatized enough for one night?"

She sobered enough to hold her hand out for the bottle he carried.

She gestured for him to sit. "Take a seat."

When he complied, she moved closer to dab at the black marks under his eyes.

He squeezed them tight.

"Burn, did it?"

"Damn straight. Worse than pepper spray."

She wondered why he hadn't used magic to will the stuff away, but she clearly wasn't about to ask.

Her hand stilled as she noticed the dark blue amulet he wore for the first time.

"Family heirloom," he said quietly when he opened his eyes and saw her studying it.

"You didn't have it on the other night." She damn well would have figured out who he was a hell of a lot sooner if he had been wearing it then.

"The clasp was broken. I had it in my pocket."

She couldn't stop herself from lifting it gingerly into her palm.

"It won't burn you," he teased.

The truth was she half expected it to since he was from a rival family.

"All done?" he asked.

She let the amulet drop back against his chest and lifted her gaze back to his.

The longing blazing in the turbulent blue depths sent waves of heat streaking through her.

When she nodded, he stood up, taking the bottle and pad with him. She stared in surprise when he left the room without a word.

Bree got up to follow him, then stopped, wondering why she couldn't keep her hormones from firing with something so important lying between them.

Something she desperately wanted to ignore until it went away.

As if it ever could.

"I'm a very weak man," he said from the doorway.

She swallowed at the hunger in his voice, shuddered at the way his gaze drank her in like a man lost in the desert finally finding his oasis. And when his long strides ate up the distance between them, she couldn't move into his embrace fast enough. Couldn't hold back the moan when he crushed his mouth to hers, a sound that was much closer to a whimper for what she was suddenly afraid to lose.

Chapter Nine

Finn groaned at the hot swirl of her tongue, the firm nip of her teeth as she caught his bottom lip and pulled it between hers. Her hands were splayed across his chest, and he covered them with one of his own. She trembled, and he ached to know if it was the lust that caused it or something more.

He wanted to pull back and ask, to make her open up, but the thought of breaking from the silky weave of her lips, the ravenous sweep of her tongue, made talking a no-go.

At least until moments later when he pushed under her shirt and palmed her breast. The edge of the small nipple ring caught the pad of his thumb, and he touched his forehead to hers.

The pebbled tip pressed against his hand and his gut clenched in satisfaction that his touch aroused her as much as touching her aroused him. “Have I mentioned how sexy this is?”

“I haven’t heard you complain.”

“And you won’t.” He nuzzled her neck, sliding lower to the soft valley between her breasts. The rasp of the lace from her bra was rough against his cheek before he unclipped the convenient front clasp.

Starting with the ring, he first kissed, then laved the greedy points.

Whimpering, Bree rocked up on the balls of her feet, her hands at his back, her nails raking.

Finn licked at her breasts, nibbled, *sucked*. Letting his tongue caress and conquer until she arched and quaked in his arms. The towel at his waist was now tented with the erection he was dying to slide inside her and find a rhythm that would leave them both breathless.

She jerked the towel aside, her fist closing around his cock. A harsh groan tore loose from his throat and he straightened, caging her face in his palms, kissing her deeply.

Slow and steady, Bree's hand shuttled his steel length, her grip teasing, then firm. Both of which pushed him to the edge of losing his mind. He didn't relinquish his hold on her mouth, drowning in the forbidden taste of her.

Through one unsteady breath after another, he caught the snap of her pants. He needed her, needed inside her.

Her pants hit the floor and when he straightened, he went to work on the buttons of her blouse, but instead of pushing the shirt all the way off, he deliberately left it partly on, trapping her arms at her sides.

Finn hooked his hands under her ass and lifted her. She laughed, unable to anchor herself to him with her arms trapped at her sides. The amused sound died away as he lowered her to the mattress.

He edged lower down her body, his mouth trailing kisses to her navel that looked so damn sexy.

She squirmed underneath him. "I need help with my arms."

"Eventually," he said, and peeled her already damp panties away.

"Finn."

"This works for me," he said, smiling as he massaged the inside of her thigh, moving steadily higher.

When he encountered the soft curls, her hips lifted, and a whimper escaped. He leaned up and while his fingers traced the path that parted her sex, his tongue slipped in to brush hers. But he kept the kiss brief, exploring the smooth column of her throat, his thumb circling around the plump knot at her sex.

Bree arched off the bed, her lower lip trapped between her teeth as he slid into her slick opening. He clenched his jaw at the hot walls clamping down, then withdrew and pushed in harder, wanting her to come so he could watch it, feel it.

She shook her head, and he sat up. Grabbing her pillows, he set them in the middle of the bed, then draped her belly down over top of them, her knees

still bent. The saucy look she shot him was almost as hot as the sight of her tempting ass pushed in the air.

"Finn." The plea in her voice made it damn hard not to slide into her right then. Instead he stroked his fingers down the smooth cheeks to her center, flicking his finger over her clit.

Another roll of her hips and he dropped to swirl his tongue down the folds before pumping two fingers deep inside her.

"Yes," she panted, muffling her cry of release against the bed.

He couldn't wait a second longer. He needed to bury his aching cock inside her. Now.

"No more waiting," she begged, reading his mind as he made a grab for the box still on her dresser.

She jerked at her arms, but they remained trapped at her sides as he grabbed her hips and drove deep. His eyes rolled back, the snug fit pulling him every time he eased back.

It was useless to think he could go slow, and he thrust his hips faster, harder. Each slick glide that started out long and easy became short, fierce digs until he felt release shoot down his spine like twin rods of heat lightning.

With a shout, he strained against her, her skin like warm silk as he collapsed over top of her, then rolled to the side.

When she squirmed to get free of her shirt, Finn helped then tucked her against his chest, his grip on her waist unbreakable.

At least for tonight.

* * *

"He hasn't called yet today. Should I take that as a good sign or a bad one?"

Bree shrugged, not meeting Marion's curious gaze. For the last hour she'd been trying to absorb the financial numbers on the computer screen, but was continually distracted by thoughts of Finn.

Her mother-in-law perched on the corner of her desk in the backroom. "Should I assume you didn't clue him in?"

Bree laid the glasses she wore while using the computer on her desk. Surely there were some files she could take care of right about now.

“Bree?”

She cringed, but glanced at Marion before the woman switched to the look-at-me tone. That would be the worst.

“You didn’t tell him.”

She shook her head.

“But you’ve seen him again?”

Ducking her head, Bree pushed away from her desk. “He stopped by last night.” And stayed all night. Again. Waking next to that incredible warmth and insatiable appetite could be habit forming and utterly detrimental to her heart.

“And?”

To avoid answering, Bree headed out front with plans to distract Marion with renovation ideas. It might have been a decent plan until the front door opened and Ryan strolled in. Dressed in pink pastel shades even Bree couldn’t pull off, he stopped to ogle the newest display of lingerie.

“Ry?” Marion beamed, moving to pull him into a tight hug. “You haven’t stopped by in forever.”

“And you didn’t tell me Bree was home.”

“I would have if she’d stay in one place more than an hour at a time.”

Bree stuck out her tongue. “I’ve been here all morning.”

Marion snorted.

“So,” Ryan began, missing the cut-throat gesture she sent him with Marion’s back to her. He only winked and kept on going. “Have you met Bree’s new beau?”

Marion perked right up. “Only in passing. I’m guessing you have as well?”

She was really tempted to wipe Ryan’s innocent smile off his face. Or better yet, cover it up with duct tape.

Marion raised her hand as though she had eyes in the back of her head and knew what Bree was contemplating.

"He's a cocky one, isn't he? But has balls. I don't know how many heteros would go as far as he did for a case."

Marion frowned. "What case?"

Bree sighed. This is what she got for assuring Marion that Mason Dade was in the past.

"Just something Finn was following up on and wanted company," she quickly put in.

"The man is a dream in auburn locks." Ryan thrust his cup of coffee at Bree.

She rolled her eyes. "*Estus sursum.*" The coffee was steaming again when she handed it back.

"It's nice having you home, Bree," Ryan said over the rim of the cup. His dark eyes flashed with a familiar amusement that predated his learning the truth about her after she'd stood up to the bully picking on him at recess. Since that fateful day on the playground, Bree, Ryan and Mark had been inseparable. And like much of the life she ran from when she hadn't been able to deal with losing Mark, she'd missed Ryan far more than she'd realized.

"Glad I could be so useful." She grinned and turned back to the cash.

"Hold it."

She closed her eyes and swung back to face Marion.

"You didn't tell Finn, did you?"

Ryan's face lit up, all but smelling gossip material.

Bree shook her head, and the hollow feeling in her stomach she'd been ignoring most of the morning came back with a vengeance. "No."

"Tell who what?"

Marion sighed. "Finn's a Calder."

Ryan frowned.

"A warlock," Marion clarified.

The look of disgust on his face said it all.

"He's from another family, Ry," Bree clarified before he managed to ick her out by the thoughts of incest no doubt trolling through his head.

“You never mentioned there were other families.”

“Aside from my father and brothers, it’s never been a big deal to me really.”
Of course she hadn’t crossed paths with any of them before Finn either.

Still looking confused, Ryan tipped his head. “So what’s the problem?”

“The problem? The problem is I like the guy.”

“She’s worried he won’t take the news well when he learns who she is,”
Marion added.

“If you can get past his last name, why don’t you give him the benefit of the doubt?”

“I’m the black sheep of the family, remember? I’ve never fallen in line with any of my father’s expectations and that now means not sharing his opinion on the Calders. At least not Finn Calder.”

The longer she spent around Finn the less she cared what her family would think if they knew who she’d been spending her time with. It was Finn’s feelings she couldn’t account for. And if he was half as obsessed with hating the enemy as her family was, things did not bode well for her.

“And with Dade’s murder—” Bree sandwiched her lips together.

“What does the man’s death have to do with telling Finn the truth?”
Marion’s expression dared her to lie.

When she didn’t respond right away Marion took a shot in the dark. “How exactly did you hear about Dade’s murder?”

Bree scrambled to recall what she’d told Marion yesterday about it.

“Sabrina Lancaster Jacobs, don’t you dare tell me you were anywhere near that murder scene.”

“I wasn’t anywhere near that murder scene.”

“Liar,” Ryan spouted off like a younger sibling not bribed enough to keep his mouth shut.

“I found his body,” Bree conceded, flinching under Marion’s furious gaze.

“And?”

“Then Finn came in a minute later and found me there.”

"He doesn't believe you did it." Marion's matter-of-fact tone should have reassured her.

"Did you?" Ryan asked.

They both rolled their eyes at him.

"Right now he doesn't think I did it, but if he knew I was a Lancaster..." She shook her head. "If I tell him before the real murderer is found he could think I've been lying all this time."

The reminder of Dade's murder brought back the guilt at not being able to get Marion's money back. Marion had already let it go, or so she'd claimed when she'd learned of Dade's death, and insisted Bree do the same. Bree only wished she could forgive herself for not being there for Marion when she needed her. Right now the closest Bree expected to come to any closure on the issue was to find out who killed Dade.

Another chime of the door turned all three heads, and Bree was torn between ducking into the backroom and launching herself straight at Finn as he stepped inside.

"Morning," he said, his smile casual, but the long glance he aimed at her was infused with heat.

"Marion. Ryan," he added absently in greeting, still not taking his eyes off Bree.

Ryan tsked. "Rianna." He gestured to Bree and Marion. "Only those two and my own mother can still get away with Ryan."

"Rianna. Got it." Finn inclined his head toward the back room. "Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure." She left Marion and Ryan staring after them curiously as they turned the corner out of sight.

Finn caught her around the waist and caged her between him and the wall, his mouth coming down on hers hot and slow.

She tipped her head back more fully and moaned against his lips. He was killing her slowly, with the way each kiss crawled in and claimed a little more of her.

He started to pull back but she snagged his shirt and hauled him back for another long moment, telling him with her mouth all the things she couldn't bring herself to say out loud.

"Glad I stopped in," he said finally when she released her death grip on his shirt.

"Me, too."

"Have plans for dinner tonight?"

She shook her head.

"Good. I have stuff to take care of today. Dade's partner, Walter Michaelson to corner among other things and I think I got a lead on who Dade was using as a bookie for his gambling.

"If you need any backup," she offered.

"I'll keep that in mind." He stole one more quick kiss, then straightened. "I'll call you later and try not to have Marion put me off." With the trademark playful grin at full wattage, he disappeared back out front.

Bree lingered an extra few seconds to make sure she didn't still look like she would have enjoyed a lot more than just a kiss. Ryan and Marion wore matching grins when she emerged, aiming for cool and unaffected. She headed for the pile of invoices she wanted to sort through.

"Okay," Ryan began. "You've got a serious clusterfuck on your hands here."

"Ya think?"

"I don't see that it could hurt holding off a little longer. There's nothing wrong with letting him see that he can't hold your family against you."

Bree shook her head glumly. "It's not like we're talking anger over a business deal gone bad here. We're talking centuries of hatred. Nothing that can just be ignored."

"How is it both families live in the same city?"

"Cause neither would be the one to move when they both settled here and things went sour." She'd know more if probing for other details wouldn't raise a red flag where her father or brothers were concerned.

She took a breath, rubbed the heel of her hands against her eyes. "How do I get myself in these situations?"

"You can't put off telling him forever," Marion reminded her quietly.

"I know. But what do I say? Finn, I'm crazy about you but don't get mad, 'cause I can do magic, too."

They both stilled. "Crazy about him?" they both echoed.

"I just thought there was some attraction. Some fun," Marion said, and Ryan nodded vigorously next to her as though he'd been in on everything from the start.

"Well...I am," she admitted slowly, as much to herself as them. "I like him. A lot. The "distracted and thinking about him every few minutes" kind and I'm not handling it well."

"Because of Mark."

She gave a bitter laugh. "I wish it was that. I wish it was Mark holding me back. And it should be, shouldn't it? I loved him." She blinked at the unexpected burn against the back of her eyes.

Marion came around the edge of the counter. "You and Mark had something special, but I never fooled myself into thinking the two of you had some passionate affair. Neither did you or Mark."

"Or me," Ryan put in with a wink, helping to break any tension.

"I should just forget seeing him tonight for dinner." But even as the words left her mouth she knew that wasn't what she really wanted. Why couldn't things be less complicated? Hadn't she done enough time on the hard road?

Wonderful.

Now she was feeling sorry for herself.

"Look, if you like him, then give it a little more time. Let the man fall helplessly in love with you and then break it to him."

She couldn't decide if it was worse to tell him the truth now or follow Ryan's suggestion. And she really hated how the Dade case affected it all. Maybe she did just need to hold out a bit longer, give the police time to nail the real killer. Then she could come clean and hope things didn't turn ugly.

* * *

"This place is an interesting choice." And probably violating fifteen health codes.

The vomit-colored walls, dingy floor, dusty fixtures and Western themed knick-knacks inside the hole-in-the-wall restaurant Finn brought her to left a lot to be desired. Nonetheless, the small place tucked into the corner of a dead-end neighborhood had managed to attract a small dining crowd. One that looked to cater exclusively to pimps, dealers and down-on-their-luck senior citizens.

"Well, I did have an ulterior motive for tonight's location."

"Should I be afraid?" She eyed the door that led to the kitchen and the suspicious hole in the corner. The perfect size for a furry little mo—

"There he is."

She scanned the floor. "Where?" Then followed Finn's gaze to the man he meant across the room.

"That's Isaac Lewis, the bookie Dade was using." His brows scrunched together.

"What?"

"He looks familiar to me."

"Someone connected to an old case?"

"Maybe," Finn said vaguely as they watched the man in a dark suit take a seat in the corner opposite them.

"So now what?"

"We wait."

It felt like she'd been trapped in a cycle of nothing but "waiting" since she returned from Europe. "For?"

"To see if he's expecting any company."

"Were you able to get a hold of Dade's partner?"

Finn shook his head. "He's becoming as unreachable as Dade was."

"Could he have been skimming from the top, too?"

"Wouldn't surprise me."

A waitress came over and Bree tried not to groan when he ordered a burger and fries. Nothing about the place gave her a good vibe for the food.

Finn laughed, reading the skepticism on her face. "She'll have the same."

"Thanks. I think," she added. "So you think this bookie might be more involved in things than just the gambling?"

"Seeing as how he's my only tangible connection to the case, I sure as hell hope so, but it might be nothing more than a dead end."

From their seat she guessed Finn could still see the guy from the corner of his eye even as he seemed more interested in looking at her. Not that she was complaining.

They hadn't been sitting there more than a few minutes when the bookie was joined by a taller man impeccably dressed for the place.

"Fuck me," Finn muttered. "That's Dade's partner Walter Michaelson."

The Native American music, complete with some funky bluesy undertones that played from the speaker in the ceiling above their table, made it impossible to overhear the men's conversation.

Before Bree could suggest she do a timely walk by to catch anything, Michaelson jerked to his feet. He raised his voice but the waitress returned with their food, eliminating any chance they might catch a word of the heated exchange.

Michaelson stormed out while Lewis remained, looking unruffled.

"What was that about?" she wondered aloud.

"Good question."

She lifted the bun on her plate and her stomach heaved. The burger was barely tan in color. Instead, she picked up a fry, slathering it in ketchup before popping it into her mouth.

When Lewis looked almost finished with his meal, and she'd managed to pick at hers, Finn waved the waitress over to settle the bill. Outside, they ventured across the street to wait and see where the man was headed from here.

"Do you plan to fill Reece in on that little exchange?"

"Naturally."

Bree snorted. "You don't sound half as convincing as when you were pretending to be Dade."

"I did not pretend to be Dade."

"I clearly recall calling you Mr. Dade for a few minutes before you spoke up to say a word to the contrary."

He shrugged. "I was distracted." He tensed as Lewis stopped outside on the sidewalk, then turned back as though he'd forgotten something inside. "I do know that guy. He had ties to a murder investigation a couple years ago. A case involving a cop's murder. Erica's sister's husband."

"Small world," she said.

"I told Mom you were leaving the house for more than just work."

Bree froze at the sound of her brother's voice. Beside her, Finn cocked his head as they turned to face Bryce.

Before Finn got a good look at her brother, she snared her brother's arm and dragged him in the opposite direction. "Just one second," she said over her shoulder to Finn.

When they were out of earshot, her brother craned his neck to see the man she'd been with and she knew the second he'd recognized Finn. She grabbed his chin and jerked his face away. "Don't," she hissed.

His eyes narrowed. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Do not say one word."

"Are you kidding me?"

"He's helping me track down Marion's money," she spouted off to keep her brother from outing her. "And he doesn't know who I am."

"If you needed help, you should have come to me."

"This is what he does and he's sort of already involved in the whole mess from another angle."

"And that's all there is to it? Cause Dad will have a coronary."

She only hesitated a heartbeat. "Just business. Now go before things get bad here."

"I don't like leaving him alone with you."

"I've been alone with him before."

His nostrils flared, and Bree cringed. Probably not the best thing to say just now.

Bree nudged him in the opposite direction. "I promise you it's fine. I've got it covered and I'll call the second I get home tonight so you know not to send out a lynch mob."

"This isn't funny, Bree."

Wasn't that the truth?

"Goodbye," she added, nodding for him to get going, almost floored when he didn't put up more of a fight. Now that she thought about it, he seemed more than a little distracted.

She turned and headed back to Finn, aware of his gaze leveled on her.

"Who was that?"

A lie or the truth? "My brother actually." She braced herself for the worst, wondering how much time Finn put in at court on cases that her brother might be prosecuting.

She didn't know whether to sigh or break down right here and confess everything when he only stared down the street at her brother's retreating back.

"Afraid to introduce us?" Finn's smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"He had to run. Business. He's a workaholic."

He didn't appear satisfied with that for an answer. Not that she could blame him. If the two of them were ordinary people, things would be so much different.

"You okay?" Finn said a long moment later.

She was far from okay. Not once, not until this moment, had she ever wanted to be anything other than what she was, what she'd come into this world as, with the gift that was her birthright. And for the first time in her life she contemplated being *normal* so things would be easier between her and Finn.

She didn't know whether to be disappointed in herself, or fear what it might mean.

That maybe it wasn't just about *liking* Finn.

Bree was saved from answering, when Finn shook his head. "He should have come out by now."

They waited another couple minutes, then Finn ducked back inside and emerged a minute later looking annoyed. "He's gone. He must have slipped out the back or I somehow missed him."

"Well, at least you know there's a tie between him and Michaelson."

"I need to know what the connection is, though. Preferably before the cops start to take a longer look at me."

"You? Why you?" She'd been the one who'd found the body.

Finn opened his mouth, but was cut off by the ring of his cell phone. He pulled it from his pocket and glanced at the display screen. "Does the man have ESP or something?"

He held the phone away from his ear until whoever was on the other end stopped yelling. "Fine. I'll be there in a few minutes," he snapped.

Finn shook his head, tucking the phone away. "So much for that plan."

"Who was it?"

"Reece."

"Not good news?"

A resigned look darkened his face. "I've had better."

Chapter Ten

For the second time she found herself in the Calder building. Finn unlocked the main door and passed a small kiosk off in the corner that Bree guessed served as the security station.

“At least he’s not waiting to pounce the second I come through the door.”

“If he’s as pissed as he sounded, maybe you shouldn’t count on that being a good sign.”

The elevator opened and he motioned her inside ahead of him. The doors weren’t even closed and he caught her wrist, tugging her close. Unlike this morning, his mouth was far from tender and slow when it came down on hers.

Tonight there was nothing soft or leisurely about it. Instead, he dominated in every way, his lips a practice in primal instinct that rocked her to her soul. She clung to him as every breath that passed between their fused mouths felt like it might be the last.

He crowded her against the mirrored back wall, the hands at her waist slipping under her shirt. His touch as demanding as his mouth, his arousal pressed her belly, and the ache between her legs pulsed fiercely in response.

Behind him the door slid open, but he didn’t back away. The hand that moved up to cradle her jaw softened, the kiss slowing. The intensity that came out of nowhere retreated until she felt like someone had taken her to the roof and tossed her off, only to stop her descent within an inch of her striking the ground.

Reece wasn’t lingering in the hall as they emerged on the same floor as Finn’s office. “Maybe we got lucky and he got called away.”

She followed him down the hall and into his office. “Why did he want you to meet him here?”

“Violet was working late.”

“Seems we have a few more minutes alone.”

Bree smiled and slid easily into his arms, wanting to go back to place he’d taken her in the elevator with a longing that reached in and clenched her heart. She couldn’t remember ever feeling so caught up in anyone before. Didn’t know a time when she ached so much for a long look, a deliberate touch, a stolen kiss.

“Do tell.”

She arched a brow.

“The look on your face. Rather intense,” he said, then kissed her cheek, the corner of her mouth, her jaw. If he kept this up, she’d be locking the door to keep Reece out herself.

“Just thinking,” she managed to get out before the sensations burrowing through her stomach made it difficult to hold onto even that thought.

“About,” he prompted.

She moaned when his palm fit over her breast. “You.”

“All good thoughts I hope.”

Bree drew back a moment. “I’ve never met anyone like you before.” She was half afraid admitting that would freak him out.

The smile that split his lips brought one of her own to her face. “I can honestly say the same.” Something akin to pleasure edged his tone, and then he claimed her mouth in another one of those kisses that made her limbs go deliciously rubbery.

“I half expected you to go into hiding.”

They both glanced at the door.

Reece stood with his arms crossed, hard-assed detective etched on his face.

Finn sighed and eased away from her. “When have you known me to go underground before?”

“That was before you found yourself as a suspect in a murder investigation.”

Bree frowned.

Reece shoved away from the door. "Why the hell didn't you tell me you had a personal run-in with Dade?"

"You did?" Bree asked.

Finn didn't look at her but followed Reece's progress around the room, a look of boredom on his face. "Probably because I knew the second it came out you'd be at my door."

"Keeping this shit to yourself does not help your case."

"So it's a case now? Should I notify my lawyer?"

"Cut the bullshit," Reece snapped.

Finn straightened, all traces of patient amusement vanishing.

"You had a personal relationship with the victim's wife and physically assaulted the victim two days before he was found dead. Do you have any idea how bad that looks?"

Bree gaped. The relationship she knew about, but the assault?

"The victim's wife and I dated for a short time in *college* and Dade threw the first punch." Finn stalked around the perimeter of his office.

"That's not what I'm hearing."

"Ask your girlfriend," Finn growled. "She happened to pop in just after Dade stopped by to pick a fight."

Reece looked taken aback by that. He strode to the hall. "Vi?" he called out.

A moment later the stylish brunette paused in Finn's doorway. She frowned. "What's going on?" Her gaze panned the room before finally landing on Finn.

"Your boyfriend is getting ready to arrest me."

Violet looked as equally thrown by the comment as Bree felt. "What?"

"Why didn't you tell me about the fight Finn had with Dade?" Reece demanded.

Her dark brows slammed together. "I didn't know who he was other than an upset client."

Reece drilled a hand through his hair and spun to face Finn. "Do you know how many people you've pissed off that would love to pin this on you?"

“Do I care?”

“You damn well should,” Reece fired back. “You were found at the scene, fought with the vic and are allegedly having an affair with his wife.”

The lines around Finn’s eyes drew tight. “The hell I am.”

“Well, rumor is you are.”

“Rumor from where?”

Bree looked to Reece for the answer to that one, damn certain Finn wasn’t fooling around with anyone but her.

Reece didn’t say anything.

“I am not sleeping with Erica Dade. I did not kill Mason Dade.”

“Reece knows that,” Violet said. She glanced at Reece for confirmation.

The detective held Finn’s gaze a moment longer then finally nodded. “But that doesn’t mean people aren’t looking over his shoulder waiting for something concrete they can use to nail his ass to the wall.”

“They won’t find it,” he assured them.

“You better hope so.” Reece shoved his hands in his pockets only to pull them back out. “There’s only so much I can do with my superiors breathing down my neck.”

“Believe it or not, but our family has handled rough patches before a detective wiggled into the mix.”

“He’s just trying to help,” Violet said, no longer only on Finn’s side considering the way she laced her fingers through Reece’s, keeping the man from pacing any more bare spots in the carpet.

“Help with what?” A tall woman with long brown hair stopped in the doorway.

“Nothing,” Finn answered.

The woman frowned, then her gaze landed on Bree. She cocked her head.

“Michelle?” she asked, nodding to Bree.

“McKenzie,” Violet corrected, “but no, this is Bree.”

“The stripper?”

Bree glared at Finn. The corner of his lips twitched but he didn't dare smile at her.

Down the hall, a door slammed. A string of cursing grew closer and they all peered at the door expectantly.

Another woman, this one impeccably dressed in a pale silk suit, her dark hair pulled back from her stunning face, stalked into the room. "I have had it with the Lancasters."

Bree flinched, but didn't retreat even as they all crowded closer together. Closer to her. A Lancaster.

"Let me guess," the first woman began. "Bryce Lancaster is prosecuting one of our cases."

"The man has an ego bigger than the northern hemisphere." She spotted Bree tucked next to Finn. "Sorry, rough day." She offered her hand. "Darby Calder."

Finn nudged her shoulder as she stared at the outstretched hand. She finally reached out, her brain spinning. The woman obviously wasn't fond of her brother. But then no one needed to be a Calder or a witch for that. From Bree's experience Bryce Lancaster didn't register on most people's lists of favorite people.

"This is my other sister Riley," Finn added.

The woman who looked like she started bar brawls just so she could break them up nodded politely in her direction. "And what is Reece trying to help with?"

"Nothing," Finn said.

As if sensing Bree needed the support, he reached out and linked their hands, tucking her closer.

Riley and Darby's conversation continued for another minute as Darby vented about a pending trial and Riley added a few observations about a particular run-in she'd had with Bree's older brother.

She only bit her lip once to keep from defending the brother who could be the cold egotistical bastard Darby complained about. She knew there was far

more to Bryce than that, but coming out in front of a group of Calder's, especially with Finn still in the dark would not earn her any points here.

Days ago she wouldn't have given a rat's ass about points or hurt feelings one way or another, but the slow rub of Finn's thumb across the back of her hand and the kiss from the elevator still echoing within her kept her silent. Uncomfortable, but silent.

Finn was clearly distracted by the change in events with Reece and didn't add his own comments to his sister's. Bree kept waiting for him to say something that would force her hand. Something that would tell her outright if he shared Darby's dislike for her family.

He waited as the others slowly trickled out, until only Reece remained, hovering in the doorway. "Let me help you on this, Finn. I'm not the enemy here."

He started out of the room, but Finn called out, "Then you should probably hear what I found out tonight."

Finn reluctantly let go of the fierce hold he'd had on Bree's hand to keep her from bolting when his sisters had filed into the room. She didn't look half as shell shocked as the last time. An improvement at the very least. He'd caught sight of her face during the exchange, watched her lips part as though to add something, then changed her mind.

"Two things actually," Finn said, trying to focus. "Dade's bookie, Isaac Lewis was also involved in an investigation of a cop's murder. I'd have to review the case for the specifics but I know I talked to him and so did the police. We saw him having dinner tonight with Walter Michaelson."

Reece's brows shot up.

"It didn't look to be going that well," Finn continued. "Violet will know exactly where the file is on that case if you want more information on the guy."

He nodded. "Thanks."

"Keep me in the loop," Finn said before the detective slipped out the door.

"Same here." Then Reece vanished, likely to find Violet.

Before another family member who clearly had no life returned he crossed and closed the door, flicking the lock.

Silence.

He sat in the seat behind his desk and closed his eyes. So much to keep up with.

But Bree still hadn't said anything. He sighed, wishing she'd open up already. What if she didn't? What if she was content to hold onto her secrets for as long as this lasted? Whatever she thought *this* was. Maybe she only wanted a few days or weeks of fun, a brief affair.

That should have been even too much for him. His past relationships—not that he could count any as relationships really—had lasted only in terms of days. Not weeks. And yet the thought of spending that much time or longer with Bree didn't bore him or push him into a cold panic.

He caught her hand where she stood overlooking the city, bringing her to his side. "I know they can be overwhelming."

He watched her face, hoping to see something flash in her eyes that would signal her opening up.

She shrugged.

"Are you close to your siblings?"

"My family and I have an unusual dynamic." She stared back out the window over his head.

And that was apparently the best he was going to get out of her tonight. He told himself not to be disappointed, told himself they hadn't known each other long enough, and it wasn't as though he was telling her about his skeletons in the closet.

He leaned forward and tugged her until she perched on the edge of the desk right in front of him. He rolled the chair forward another inch.

"You're distracted," he said, pushing his hand up her bare leg.

"Just this whole Dade thing." But that wasn't everything and they both knew it.

Not pushing, he switched gears altogether. "I'm thinking it's not so bad that you're wearing a skirt right now."

She arched a brow. "Oh, yeah?"

He slowly pushed her skirt up. "Yeah."

Finn caught a teasing glimpse of her navy panties, and his cock hardened. "Do you have any idea the number of times in the last few days I've thought of you exactly where you?"

She pushed her legs wider. "Once or twice."

He shook his head and, starting at her knee, trailed his finger up the inside of her thigh. "More."

"Four or five?" Her eyes widened as he caught the edge of the slim elastic, and she closed her eyes.

"More," he said, slipping under and finding her warm and already damp for him.

"A dozen," she breathed, her fingers gripping the edge of the desk.

He parted the slick folds and found her clit. With a feather-light stroke that took considerably more control than he expected, Finn watched her squirm on the edge of his desk.

"Way, way more," he whispered and pushed a finger inside her.

She dropped her head back, her hips lifting for him.

He added another finger, and she moaned.

Finn pushed to his feet, yanking her shirt up to have access to her breasts. As tempting as the silky fabric was, her bra was in the way. That too was shoved aside, and he trapped one pert nipple between his lips as he added another finger to her opening.

Her fingers dug into his arm, and he swirled back and forth across the swollen knot.

"Yes, there," she murmured.

With every soft flick, she trembled. Clapsed in his arms, her skirt around her waist, her breasts damp from his mouth, she was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen.

Bree whimpered, and he muffled the sound of her release with his mouth. She stilled and then pushed off the desk, turning so her back was against him. She cuddled her bottom against his erection.

She flashed him a siren's smile. "You're not going to stop there I hope." Then she leaned forward, her palms flat on his desk.

His cock fought the confines of his pants, his sac heavy and aching. He couldn't free himself fast enough.

He fumbled to dig a condom out of his wallet, then tugged at his zipper, groaning as he freed himself. Bree rocked back against him, snatching his breath. Nestled against the cheeks of her ass, he clenched his jaw, his face pressed to the curve of her neck. How could each time only make him want her more, need her more?

She arched against him, her sex warm and wet. He slid in, inch by steely inch. Her inner walls closed around him, greedily sucking him deeper. He pulled back and pushed his cock deep inside her again.

Bree met every thrust. Harder now, he rotated his hips, plunging with savage need to stake a claim on her, brand her as his. He knew he hit the sweet spot within her sex by the way she whimpered low in her throat.

And then he couldn't hold back any longer, couldn't keep his fingers from digging into her hips as he slammed into her as hard as he dared.

Again. And again.

The hot walls fisted him in a vise-like grip and she cried out. The ripples of her orgasm stroked his length and then he was dropping over the edge right after her.

* * *

"Someone's looking chipper this morning."

He grinned at Riley who lounged in the door.

"Rather chipper considering his ass is on the line."

"It's not that bad."

"Dad doesn't think so. He and Samson are on their way over."

Finn winced at Riley's announcement. Not good. "Then that is definitely my cue to leave."

"And where are you off to?"

"Anywhere but here." The only thing he disliked more than Darby giving him a hard time was being tag-teamed by his father and uncle.

"Maybe to go see the one in here with you last night?"

Something in Riley's tone warned him trouble was coming. "Something on your mind?"

"Violet says Bree was also trying to track down Dade and was at the scene with you."

He nodded, not liking the way his gut knotted over where this was headed.

"I'm just wondering how much you know about her."

Finn shook his head even before she finished her sentence. "Don't go there."

"Following up on every lead, no matter how remote, is part of the job, Finn."

"She's not the job."

Riley crossed her arms. "So you're dating her then?"

"Yeah."

"Exclusively?" she challenged as though she'd caught him in a sticking point.

He came around the edge of his desk. "I'm not interested in seeing anyone else right now if that's what you're getting at."

"Did you look into her background?"

"Riley," he warned.

"I can't believe out of everyone that you wouldn't follow up on something like that when she's linked to a murder vic you were tailing."

"I've got it under control." He didn't wait for her to precede him out of his office.

"Finn—"

He swung back around. "Have I ever gone off half-cocked before?"

"No, but then you've never been interested in anyone for more than a few hours at a time."

"I happen to like her." A hell of a lot.

"And maybe that's blinding you here."

He crossed his arms. "I'm only saying this once, Riley. Back off."

She narrowed her eyes. "Fine."

"A real fine," he demanded.

With a shrug that didn't convince him in the least, she paused in the doorway. "I'll leave it alone. Just watch your back."

"Done."

* * *

Bree groaned at the sight of both Angel and Bryce on her doorstep. As she cursed under her breath she offered up a silent thank you that at least her father wasn't with them. Not that he'd visit her here. He had no interest in the small house she'd been charmed by at the lowest point in her life.

Looking wounded, Angel sailed past her. "You never said he was a Calder."

If slamming the door would have sent them on the way, she would have done so. Given the matching stubborn expressions they wore, it was useless to think they'd go without having their say.

"This isn't a big deal," she said, forced to pull it wider to let Bryce in, too. Angel she could handle, somehow their father's pessimism hadn't corrupted her. She couldn't say the same for Bryce.

"I was just on my way out," she started.

Bryce leveled her with a don't-even-try-that-one-on-me glare.

"Fine. Let's just get this over with." The sound of her own annoyance rang in her ears before she pressed her lips together. If the shoe was on the other foot, she'd probably be just as skeptical and concerned as they were.

Resigned to their intervention, she kept her voice even. "Yes, he's a Calder. Yes, he's helping me with Marion's situation, and yes, I do happen to like him."

The two of them exchanged looks at the last part. "And I don't care what either of you or Mom and Dad think about it," she tagged on to the end. She couldn't even call her and Finn a real couple, and already she was tired of justifying what she felt for him.

Worse, she was tired of justifying it to herself when nothing about her family's expectations had influenced her before this. They'd expected her to graduate, become a lawyer, be a partner in a successful firm. She was none of those things. She'd started her own business, married Mark, stood by him right until he slipped away while she'd held his hand. She'd wanted that life for herself. Had chosen it, not caring she didn't have her father's approval.

And not until this moment did it sink in that she didn't care if she had it when it came to Finn either.

"Fair enough." Bryce squared his shoulders the way he did facing a jury during opening statements. "So he's okay with you then?"

"I'm fairly confident our feelings are mutual."

"That's not what I asked. Is he okay with you being a Lancaster?"

He would have to zero right in on the only unaccounted for factor in the equation.

Angel gaped. "He doesn't know?"

She let out a breath. "No."

"But your feelings are so mutual," Bryce mocked.

"Things are complicated." And how much of a cop-out response was that?

"Or maybe it's because you know deep down that he's wrong for you. That's why you haven't told him the truth."

Bree rolled her eyes at her brother. "Clearly there is a reason you went into law and not psychology."

Angel's mouth fell open. "Damn, I think she likes him. Really, *really* likes him." She cocked her head thoughtfully, a wicked smile curving her lips. "How is he in bed?"

"Angel," she scolded.

"How would she know—" Bryce broke off. "No, you didn't." He shuddered. "Aside from not wanting to know anything about my kid sister's sex life, the man is the enemy."

"Is that so?"

"You know it. We just didn't all wake up six months ago and decide our families didn't like each other that much."

"Is that why Darby doesn't like you?"

Bryce stilled and the blank expression that came down over his face surprised her and had Angel switching her gaze from Bree to him.

"When did you see Darby?" he asked quietly.

Wasn't this interesting? "Last night."

He glanced away, looking distracted. Bree didn't have time to contemplate the implications of his reaction, her thoughts skidding to a halt at a knock at the door.

A quick peek out the front window told her it was Finn. "Out the back door," she gently ordered.

"You can't be serious," Bryce started.

She helped them out with a push. "Now."

Angel was too busy grinning to put up any fight.

Bryce, on the other hand, dug in. "And what are you going to do when he learns the truth and he won't have anything nice to say? The way Darby doesn't have anything nice to say about me."

"You worry about Darby and leave Finn to me."

"There is no Darby to worry about." His defensive tone would have raised more questions if Finn's second knock didn't prevent her from probing further.

He paused at the backdoor. "Bree, listen to me a sec. Aside from him being a Calder, I did what you're doing once. And when the truth came out, it blew up in my face."

"I'm not you."

But what would she do if it played out exactly as her brother predicted? What then?

Bryce shook his head sadly. "I don't want to see you with a broken heart."

"The way yours was broken?"

He didn't answer her, the sudden chill in his eyes making her regret the comment. "Let's go, Angel."

Bree stood motionless another second, thinking of her brother and whatever it was that had happened that he'd never mentioned.

The third knock sent her sprinting for the front door. The sun was just setting as she yanked it open.

Her lips parted in a smile she felt all the way down to her toes. "Hi."

His answering grin was the stuff daydreams were made of. "What do you have in black clothes? Preferably pants because I have a hard time concentrating when you only have a skirt on."

"Another night of drag?"

"I was actually in the mood for a little B&E tonight. I figured since you have more experience with that lately you might be willing to help a guy out. Give me some good pointers."

"Very funny. And just where are we breaking into?"

"Got a call from Reece. Apparently due to an ongoing investigation by another division, he's been told to leave Isaac Lewis alone."

"What kind of investigation?"

Finn shrugged and stepped inside, shutting the door behind him.

"But you plan to investigate him yourself."

"I knew there was more to you than your stripper body."

She punched him in the arm, and his hand snaked out to snag her wrist. "I don't need much of a reason to retaliate for that."

Bree arched a curious brow. "And what kind of retaliation are we talking about?"

His lips brushed her temple, his breath warm on her skin. "You'd be begging for mercy."

"Begging is not really my thing."

"You should be more open-minded." His mouth found a sweet spot just under her jaw.

Her eyes drifted shut. "If you want to do this now, then you really need to stop that."

Another pull of her tender skin against his lips, then he withdrew. "You're right." He swatted her butt as she turned to go upstairs and change. "Get a move on and bring some snacks 'cause we may be waiting around a while."

"Do you have to do this stakeout stuff very often?"

Seated next to him, Bree reminded Finn of a sexy cat burglar casing her next job.

"More than I'd like."

"How much longer do you think?" An impatient cat burglar.

Finn glanced at the front of the building they'd been staking out for the last few hours, having followed Isaac Lewis to his job. "Probably not much longer." The words had no sooner left his mouth than the main lights in the front windows were turned off.

"Finally," Bree breathed beside him.

"We're going to hold on a bit longer." Give Lewis time to get a move on before they checked out his files.

"Let's go," he said a few minutes later. The lock at the back door took only the precisely whispered words and a jiggle of a pick for effect. Bree stood a couple feet back with her eyes trained on the back parking lot at the heart of the city's industrial district.

"What are we looking for?" Bree asked when he pushed the door open.

"You stay here and keep your eyes open, and I'll do the looking."

"You've kept me up to play look out?"

"And I'm willing to spend hours making it up to you."

She laughed and kept her attention on the back parking lot as he started on the desk and moved onto the filing cabinets.

All he needed was one thing that would link Lewis to Walter Michaelson. Either Michaelson knew about Dade's gambling problems, maybe gambled right along with him, or maybe he'd wanted to curb his partner's tendency to spend the money the two had been swindling.

Or maybe what Finn was looking for was something that would prove Michaelson had hired someone through Lewis's organized crime connections to take Dade out before he brought his partner down, too.

“I don’t believe I left the back door unlocked.”

Finn stilled at the sound of Isaac Lewis’s voice and the heart-stopping click of a gun being cocked.

Chapter Eleven

"I'm really not fond of guns," Finn said casually, figuring the guy had come in through the front door instead of the way he'd left.

Lewis frowned. "I saw you the other night. You look familiar."

"What's your business with Walter Michaelson?"

With a laugh, he pointed at Finn with the gun. "That's right, you're a private investigator."

Finn smiled coldly. "I'd rather talk without the gun."

"I don't think so." The man swung it towards Bree.

Staring at the gun, Finn felt his amulet warm his skin. "*Estus sursum.*"

Cursing, Lewis dropped the gun, cradling his burned hand to his chest. The gun clattered across the floor and under the edge of the desk.

Finn didn't think twice before he dove for Lewis, taking him to the floor.

The other man managed to jerk his arm out from between their tangled bodies, his sharply delivered uppercut snapping Finn's head back.

Pain ratcheted along the side of Finn's jaw that caught the majority of the blow.

"Freeze!"

Lewis became motionless and they both glanced to where Bree stood holding the gun with an unwavering grip.

"Play nice," she advised Lewis.

The man thrust his hands in the air as Finn hauled him to his feet. "You two are pissing off the wrong people."

"What people would that be?" Finn gently probed the side of his face.

A brittle smile cracked Lewis's lips. "The ones I work for."

“You’ll need to be a little more specific.”

“I’m sure you’ll find out before too long.”

The warning didn’t sit well with Finn. “Why were you meeting with Michaelson?”

Lewis smirked.

The sound of car doors slamming echoed from the front of the building.

Aware of Bree’s gaze on him, Finn darted to the front window and spotted two burly looking guys heading for the front entrance.

“I was on my way to a late meeting.” The bastard couldn’t have looked more smug at the timely arrival of his backup.

Finn nodded to Bree. “Time to go.” He grabbed her hand and hauled her out the back. He took the gun from her and threw it in the dumpster before they rounded the corner, pausing just long enough to be sure the distance to the car was clear.

With her hand still clasped tight in his, Finn pulled her after him, not even glancing over his shoulder when he heard yelling behind them. He shoved her into the front seat, then cranked the ignition, pedal to the floor as a man appeared in the review mirror.

Instead of being another step closer to wrapping things up, another wrench had been shoved into the spokes. If not for Bree he wouldn’t have been overly concerned. He shouldn’t have brought her along tonight. His brother or Sawyer would have been up for this, but he’d foolishly wanted Bree’s help more than theirs. Or was it just her constant company he sought?

And how was that going to help him clear his name of any suspicion of Dade’s murder?

They were halfway to her house before Bree said a word. He’d watched silently from the corner of his eye, waiting to see how she would respond. Had she heard him use the spell that made Lewis drop his gun? Or had she been too distracted by the threat?

He wouldn’t get his hopes up that this was when they could finally be honest with each other. But damn, it would be nice.

"Weird how he dropped his gun like that," she said finally, casting him a sidelong glance.

Forced to keep his attention on the road, he couldn't detect anything on her face that gave away what she was thinking. Nothing but the same carefully guarded expression that was becoming easier to recognize. The same one that hinted at having something to say, but stubbornly remaining silent.

If she thought he was going to be the one to lay it all out there, she'd be waiting a while. He'd given her time and wasn't going to say a damn word before she told him exactly what she was holding back. If that comment was all she had to say on the subject, he'd let it drop right there.

But damn if the situation really wasn't starting to chafe. Maybe he was wrong about her. Maybe his instincts were off where she was concerned and Riley was right. Could he have let his attraction blind himself to her?

Forcing the truth out of her wasn't what he wanted. He wanted her to get everything off her chest when she was ready. And what if she didn't show any sign of opening up? What then?

Not happy with his present train of thought, Finn focused on driving, leaving it up to her to add more.

But she never said another word and remained silent for the remainder of the drive.

* * *

Finn tried not to grimace when he spotted Reece lounging in his doorway. "It's too early," he growled and went back to skimming his e-mails. Maybe just once he'd get lucky, and the detective would get a clue and leave him the hell alone.

"Rumor has it there was a minor incident at Isaac Lewis's office."

"Is that right?" Finn drawled. "Good to know that you can't look into the information I gave you about his connection to Mason Dade and Walter Michaelson, but you come by these kinds of tidbits easily enough."

"I'm not allowed to officially investigate him. That doesn't mean I'm not keeping my ears open."

"That's nice."

Reece didn't take the hint the discussion ended there and leave.

Finn waved at the door. "*Clausus*."

The detective slid inside before the door slammed shut.

Finn pushed away from the desk. "Would it help if I just came right out and say I'm not in the mood to talk to you?"

"Bored with Bree already?"

"Hardly," he growled.

Reece tipped his head. "She bored with you?"

The man was just asking for it. He really was. Given his foul mood, Finn was tempted just enough to give it to him too.

"Oh, don't tell me a woman has finally knocked you down a few pegs?"

"No."

"Then what's the deal?" The genuine concern in the cop's voice stopped Finn from getting too creative.

He pushed out an exasperated breath. "Are you a relationship counselor now?"

Reece gasped.

"What?" Violet asked as she stepped into the room and stared at the look of bewilderment on Reece's face.

"Finn just used the R word."

Violet swiveled around. Her mouth fell open "Get out?"

"Seriously."

"Bree?"

Finn closed his eyes while they talked as though he weren't in the room. Somewhere inside him he'd find the urge to throw them both out on their asses so he could sit here and be miserable alone.

Violet sank into the seat opposite his desk. "Did you two fight?"

"Not now, Vi."

"Finn?"

"There isn't anything to say. No, we didn't fight." But damn it, if he didn't wish they would already. They needed to clear the air instead of just letting all the things they weren't saying keep sliding.

"She was right," Violet said more to Reece than him.

Finn knew he shouldn't ask, but he did anyway. "Who?"

"Aunt Gertie."

Forget waiting for them to leave. He'd save them the trouble. He shoved to his feet.

"The soul-mate thing?" Reece asked.

He snorted. "Believe me, if Bree is my soul mate, then there are some serious cosmic anomalies at work here."

"Not that you believe in soul mates," Violet reminded him with a perceptive grin.

"I don't. I haven't even known her that long."

"Sometimes it doesn't take long," Reece said, the long look he and Violet exchanged belonging in a Hallmark commercial.

Finn scowled. "I'm taking off for a bit."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. I can't sit here and wait for the other shoe to drop. Right now I'm the closest thing the police have to a suspect for the Dade murder, or has that changed?"

Reece shook his head. "No. That's actually why I'm here. With Bree's relationship to Dade, the big boys aren't letting the fact that you two are each other's alibis float. They want me to bring you in for further questioning."

"I thought we talked already?"

"Unofficially, yeah, but they want someone else to do it. I think they're getting ready to reassign the case since I haven't been looking where they think the evidence points."

"To me," Finn said, wondering how much longer before one of the Tribunal puts in an appearance. "Can I meet you down at the precinct in an hour?"

When Reece didn't answer right away, Finn added, "You've kept them mostly off my back. I'm not about to screw you over."

"No problem."

Finn made it to Bree's shop in record time. "We need to talk," he said the second he spotted her behind the register.

The smile that came readily to her lips dimmed. "I take it this isn't a drag-me-in-the-backroom-and-ravish-me visit."

"I do love how your mind works. But no, I'll have to rain check on the ravishing." Before he got distracted by the idea she planted in his mind, he got to the point. "The police might want to talk to you."

She frowned. "I thought they had already."

Glancing at his watch, Finn quickly explained Reece's certainty that they were reassigning the case and what it meant for them.

"So we need to make sure our stories are the same if we're talked to separately."

He nodded. "We already told Reece that we were in the car before we went into the room together. Other questions might be raised as to what we were doing before that."

"I had dinner at my parents."

Finn nodded. "I was working. We met back at my place around eight?"

"Finn," she started.

He shook his head, already guessing where she was going with this. "If either one of us changes our story now, it will only make things worse. We both know that neither of us killed Dade."

"Do we?" she asked. "Are you sure?"

"You didn't kill him. Unless you think I slipped in ahead of you and did it."

She came around the counter separating them. "Not once did it cross my mind. Ever."

Because Finn sensed it was important to her that he believe that, he caught her hand. "Okay."

The frown on her face softened, and he brushed a chaste kiss across her forehead. She leaned in, her face tucked against his neck. The warmth of her snug in his arms was almost worth skipping out on the Q&A session downtown to enjoy. "So," he forced out, needing to get this worked out before he went to meet the preliminary firing squad. "We met at my place. You waited in the car while I rented the room next door to Dade's. We sat in the car for a bit, got distracted and fooled around, and then we decided to go into the room. Found Dade."

"What if someone else has come forward to say they spotted me going into the room alone?"

He shook his head. "Reece would have heard about that by now if there was such a person."

"Okay," she said finally. "I just want this to be over."

"You mean all this excitement is getting to be too much for you?"

She tightened her arms around him. "I think I would like to have a regular date night with you. Dinner somewhere we're not spying on someone. Maybe a movie afterward."

"It's a plan." He glanced again at his watch. "I have to meet Reece downtown, but I'll stop by later."

She lowered her gaze to the floor. "I'm sorry I was so quiet last night."

He cocked his head, waited.

"I've just had a lot on my mind."

"Anytime you want to talk about all the stuff on your mind, I can be bribed into listening attentively with cold beer and pizza."

As he hoped, her expression softened. "Let me know how it goes."

* * *

She was finally unpacked. Her back ached and she felt sweaty and tired. She wasn't going to think about the small piles of stuff that she wasn't sure

where she'd find places for yet. Every box had been opened and that was good enough for her.

Bree picked up the phone and tried for the tenth time to get a hold of Finn. Again his voicemail clicked on. She didn't bother leaving another message. She'd give him another hour and then she'd call Reece or Violet and see what was going on.

A quick check of the time told her it was almost five. First a shower and then she'd pop into work for a few hours and close up for the night. Try to finish getting caught up on everything that she'd missed while she'd been away.

In the bathroom, Bree stripped off her clothes and stepped under the warm spray. She made quick work of washing her hair, but missed a dollop of shampoo that rolled down into her eye.

Son of a bitch. She winced and pressed her fingers to her burning eye.

Through the frosted shower door, she saw a shadow fall across the floor. On instinct she snatched up the closest defensive instrument—a razor—as the door was pulled open.

"Don't you look tempting?"

Bree scowled, but with one eye pinched shut, doubted it had the same effect. She couldn't decide whether to put the razor down or let it fly at Finn for sneaking up on her.

"How did you know that I needed a shower?" He started to loosen his tie.

The burning subsided and she got both eyes open. "I guess it's safe to say they didn't have enough to arrest you."

He removed his shirt. "I hope that's relief I hear."

Bree let her gaze slide down his chest, her insides warming despite wanting to be annoyed with him. "I was oddly turned on at the thought of you in handcuffs."

His pants hit the floor next. "I'm not the submissive type."

"You really should try to be more open-minded."

Naked, he stepped into the stall, his height immediately making the space feel much smaller.

The rush of warm water at her back and the prime example of sheer masculinity at her front overwhelmed the senses. He stepped up closer and his body came into full contact with hers.

Bree closed her eyes, a race of electricity arcing across her skin at the intimate proximity. The hands he rested at her waist slid round to cup her ass. He reached for the soap, then lathering his fingers, began a leisurely full body massage that started at her behind.

With tight, deep swirls of his fingers, occasionally dipping to follow the slope down to her sex, he dragged every nerve ending wide awake, kicking and screaming.

She gripped his tight biceps, pushing up on the balls of her feet each time he skimmed her already aching cleft. "And how many times have you thought of doing this?"

His wolfish grin set fire to those few places within her not already humming with a need for his touch.

"I don't know that you're ready to hear all my fantasies just yet." He slipped between her folds.

Bree sucked in a breath, the easy slide across her clit making her whimper.

He pushed two fingers inside her and her senses tangled together. The sound of the water falling, the steam rising, the rest of the world miles away. The smell of the soap, the feel of his wet skin under her bunched fingers, the hot, sensual taste of his mouth as he captured her lips.

She met each silky sweep of his tongue then whispered, "Don't stop," when he picked up the soap and cloth and went back to caressing her skin. Her heart pounded faster, one ragged inhale after the other coming quicker, sharper. A teasing brush over her nipple, a long swipe of the wet cloth up the inside of her thigh, his thumb trailing in its wake.

Finn drew the cloth upward, over her breasts that felt so achingly full and heavy.

"Am I driving you wild yet?" His lips brushed her ear, slipping down her cheek before reaching her mouth.

Grinning, she shook her head.

“Let me try a little harder then.” He turned her around, his arousal slick and hard at her back. She pushed up, rocking against him.

Finn moaned in her ear, his fingers plucking at her nipples until every pull made her womb tighten and throb.

“Sit,” she ordered, turning in his arms to nudge him to the small ledge on the back of the tub that some idiot designer thought qualified as a seat. But it was big enough for what she had in mind.

His gaze darkened as he obeyed. His legs were pressed tight to the rim of the tub, but she managed to fit between them. The weight of his stare warmed her as much as the water that still beat steadily at her lower back.

The second her lips touched his shaft, he groaned. She circled her tongue around the tip and pulled him into her mouth. His hips gave a soft bounce in response, and she continued flicking her tongue over the head, dragging down to the base and back up before sucking him between her lips.

She sank her fingers into his thighs, the taste of him, the smooth flesh heightening her own arousal beyond measure. One of his hands tangled in the ends of her hair, but he did nothing more than cling to her as she made love to him with her mouth.

“Enough,” he growled, his fingers trembling where they gripped her shoulders. He pulled her to her feet, and in the same movement, turned her around, draping her thighs over his.

He didn’t allow her to go slow, the grip on her waist dragging her down, his cock impaling her. Palms flat against the walls on either side, she spread her fingers to gain any leverage she could, raking her nails at the feel of him sinking deeper with every thrust.

Again and again, he guided her, raising and lowering. Her inner walls stretched and strained around his cock, one hard bounce after another coiling her release tighter and tighter.

His arms came around her, and his fingers stroked the aching knot pulsing fiercely at her core. She squeezed her eyes shut, her need to come caught somewhere between pleasure and pain at the intensity of the orgasm building within her.

“Harder,” he groaned suddenly, his mouth at her shoulder.

She pitched up and rocked back then cried out as she shattered.

With a deep growl, Finn shuddered against her. She leaned back and turned her face to find his throat, pressing a kiss there as her body came down from the high.

Neither of them moved for a long time, letting the water rain down, his fingers trailing back and forth across her stomach until their breathing returned to normal.

"If you can make a shower that good. I can't wait to see what you do for a hot tub."

She tipped her face back to see him. "Play your cards right and you might find out."

Something flashed across his face, but it was gone so fast she couldn't decipher the look. But somehow she knew it wasn't good.

"Let's get dried off," he said.

Reluctant, but knowing they couldn't spend the rest of the day there, Bree turned off the water. He grabbed a towel and after draping one around his waist, handed a second one to her.

He gathered up his clothes, and after pausing to grab her comb, she followed him down the hall to her room. Bree watched him stop and stare out her bedroom window.

"Hoping to give one of the old ladies across the street a show?"

He turned and smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

She sat on the end of the bed, the anxious feeling returning to her stomach. "Something wrong?"

She'd almost given up hope he would answer when he finally turned and sat beside her. "I like you, Bree. A lot. The 'want to spend lots of time together' like."

"Does that worry you?"

Again his attention was drawn to the window, but it didn't linger there this time. "I've never felt this way about anyone before. I want to tell you things I've never admitted to anyone outside my family. And I want to hear you tell me

things that no one else knows. I want to know what you think about when you stare into space. I want to hear your secrets.”

Even when she was close to losing Mark, she hadn’t been as scared as she felt in this moment. There was nothing she could do to keep Mark in her life. Nothing. It had been beyond her control.

She wanted to be strong and brave and tell Finn the truth. Instead the words she knew she needed to say stuck in her throat.

So she did the only thing she could. She cupped his cheek, the rasp of his stubble scraping her palm, and kissed him.

Kissed him as though she hadn’t run from the most important moment to tell him the truth. Kissed him as though she wasn’t falling so hard and fast she didn’t know when her world would right itself again. Kissed him as though her heart wouldn’t shatter into a million pieces when he walked away.

Bree knew everything she tried to convey with one kiss fell miserably short when he slowly drew back.

“I have a meeting shortly.” And then he was on his feet.

She watched him dress, and every inch he put between them felt like a mile.

“I’ll call you later,” Finn said and then he was gone.

Bree felt the burn of tears and blinked them back, too pissed at herself to let them fall.

She knew everything still showed on her face later when Marion took one look at her and cursed under her breath.

Bree lifted her chin a notch. “I’m fine.” Her voice didn’t even wobble half as much as she expected it to.

“You’re not. You still haven’t told him, have you?”

She shook her head and dropped into the chair at her desk out back.

“Sweetie, you have to be honest.”

And when that blew up in her face? “He gave me the chance today and I screwed up. He’s pulling away.” Hell, they hadn’t even been together that long.

“Maybe he’s picking up on the fact that you’re holding back. How many men have you dated?”

Bree ran her hands through her still damp hair. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"How many?" Marion persisted.

"You already know the answer to that."

"Precisely my point. You and Mark were best friends for years and he knew who and what you are. You only casually dated a handful of guys before you married Mark. You've never tried to be with anyone and not be yourself."

Bree knew it was the truth and hated that it took Marion to point it out to see how much of a strain that alone was putting on her.

She turned to say something to the other woman, but Marion was already gone.

Wonderful. In a matter of an hour she'd managed to chase off two people she truly cared about.

How much better could the night get?

* * *

Bree headed up the walkway to Marion's house, wondering what was up with the cryptic call that came moments before she locked up for the evening.

She heard voices as she headed around back and let herself into the kitchen, coming up short at the sight of Finn seated at the table.

"Hope you're hungry." Marion nodded to the table where four settings were laid out.

"What's this?"

"Dinner," Finn answered.

She was relieved to see the usual cocky grin on his face. Much of the tension that had locked her insides into an icy tomb began to loosen.

"There she is," Ryan said, coming in from the living room. He enveloped her in a warm hug that went a long way to remind her of who would be there when all the cards were laid on the table. No matter what way things played out.

He grabbed a plate from Marion and motioned for Finn to help him in the backyard. The smell of a fired-up barbeque rode on the air as Ryan slipped out

the door. Finn followed on his heels, stopping to catch her mouth in a searing kiss on the way.

"You could have told me," she said to Marion when they were alone.

"And have you find an excuse not to come?"

"Why wouldn't I have shown?"

Marion crossed her arms. "Because you're looking for any excuse not to tell him the truth."

"It's not that easy." Bree sighed. She didn't even know how much longer she could get away with saying that to herself, let alone anyone else.

"Sabrina Lancaster Jacobs," Marion snapped.

Bree shot a glance at the door.

"You listen good, or I'll say it even louder."

When she faced the older woman, Marion's face softened.

"I have stood by you for a lot of things over the years. You came into my house, became a daughter to me, married my son when he was dying because you knew how happy it would make him. And when he died, you carted yourself across the ocean to another continent. I lost him too, and I was here. Alone. But did I say a damn thing?"

She didn't give Bree an opening to even respond.

"No. You needed time. So I never said a word. Never complained to you about how I lost a son and a daughter in the same moment because of it."

Tears blurred Bree's eyes and she blinked furiously to hold them back.

"Don't you dare cry, not yet damn it, I have stuff to say."

Bree caught her lip between her teeth to hold back the emotion that thickened her throat.

Marion rubbed the back of her hand down her face. "The Bree I've always known has been tough and strong and didn't give a damn what anyone thought of her, not even her own family. Yet you meet one man and now you're walking on eggshells around him. If he doesn't want anything to do with you because of who you are, then fuck him."

Bree gaped.

"And I can't even rag on him for missing out on such a phenomenal woman," Marion continued, on a roll now, "because you won't stand up to the plate and tell him the truth. Now stop being a damn coward and tell him who you really are, and take your licks if they come. If I'd known letting you troop off to Europe was going to make you afraid to take chances and be yourself, I'd have sent you back to your parents to deal with."

Bree flinched, and Marion pulled her into her arms.

"I'm saying this because someone has to. I don't care who the man is or where he comes from as long as being with him makes you happy. If you like him so much then give him the benefit of the doubt. He may surprise you."

"Surprise who?" Finn said from the doorway.

Bree glanced away, wiping at the tear that slipped down her cheek.

Marion kept her close, catching the last stubborn tear that leaked out. "Tell him," she whispered. "No more waiting."

She kissed Bree's cheek and nodded to Ryan who trailed back in behind Finn. He took one look at Bree and allowed Marion to nudge him towards the living room.

"I need some advice on a new outfit to wear on a date, Ry," she heard Marion say.

"You have a date?"

Marion grinned back at her as though Bree wasn't the only one with secrets. "You can ask me about it later."

"Did I miss something intense?" Finn asked when Marion and Ryan's voices faded.

That was one way of putting it. "She was just reminding me to be myself."

"You haven't been?"

Bree shook her head. "I don't know where to start really."

He moved closer. "Go on."

"Bree?" Marion called out.

Bree sighed. The woman wanted her to talk, and the second she tried, Marion was calling her name. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Bree."

The concern in Marion's voice pushed a rush of adrenaline through her veins. She moved around Finn and into the living room to see what the problem was, Finn right on her heels.

She skidded to a stop at the sight of the three men in the room. One gun pointed at Marion. The other at Ryan.

And one at them.

Chapter Twelve

Bree's heart kicked against her ribs. Instinct demanded she take away the threat to her friends, but with three guns she couldn't eliminate all three at once.

She shot a glance at Finn. His face was carefully blank, and at this moment she wished she'd told him what she was capable of before this.

The tallest of the men gestured to the front door. "Let's go."

Finn shook his head. "Not until we know what this is about."

"You're not calling the shots." Isaac Lewis stepped into the room, coming from the kitchen and jabbed another gun into the middle of Finn's back. "I told you that you didn't want to piss my people off."

"These your people?"

Lewis sneered. "Some of them." He inclined his head at Bree. "Do I put my gun to her head, or do we get moving?"

"They've got nothing to do with any of this," Bree said.

"They're to make sure the two of you cooperate." With the barrel of his gun, Lewis propelled Finn forward. "Put them in the front car. These two can ride with me."

Finn's gaze slammed to hers and in it she saw they had no choice but to go along.

Lewis kept his gun trained on Finn as they headed for the door, but pushed her ahead of them. She watched as Marion and Ryan were forced into the back seat of a dark SUV.

"We're cooperating. Leave them here." If anything happened to them...

"And have them call the police? How stupid do I look?"

She opened her mouth, but caught Finn's subtle shake, and remained silent.

In the car Lewis sat next to Finn, Bree beside him with a man from the front seat watching her closely, ready to shoot her if it became necessary. Lewis seemed to take pleasure in shifting forward and pointing his weapon at her.

Finn went rigid. "She's got nothing to do with this either."

"Not how it looked when I caught the two of you in my place poking your noses where they don't belong."

"Did you kill Mason Dade?"

Lewis laughed. "Let's save the talking for when we get there."

"And where is that?" Bree countered and, when Lewis ignored her, added, "If you touch a hair on either of my friends' heads, I promise you'll regret it." Regret it in the slowest, most agonizing way. The Tribunal could bind her magic for all she cared, but the bastard would suffer badly if Marion or Ryan were hurt by this.

Lewis shrugged. "I'm not worried."

"You should be."

She felt Finn's gaze on her, but didn't look away from Lewis.

The other man cocked his head. "You talk awfully brave for a woman with a gun pointed at her chest."

"That's because you have no idea what I'm capable of."

His expression was pinched, but he forced out a laugh, his smile no longer so smug. The conviction in her voice had given him pause at the very least.

Despite the rage of nerves making her stomach twist and curdle, she leaned back against the seat as though their present circumstance was no more than an inconvenience.

The ride turned out to be nearly twenty minutes, and by the time they pulled up in front of a building at the edges of the industrial park, she'd managed to channel her fear for Marion and Ryan into a healthy, burning anger. She was tired of Dade's business screwing with the people she cared about. Even though the man was dead, it seemed impossible to get untangled from him.

They climbed out of the car and she saw the other SUV parked farther away, but still close to the building. Ryan and Marion didn't emerge.

"They're going to stay right there while you have a chat inside." Lewis made it sound like they were being invited for drinks.

With only one more glance over her shoulder at the SUV's tinted windows, she and Finn were led into the building and down a long narrow hall.

They turned a corner and were ushered into a small reception area and then into a corner office where they were left alone.

She watched Finn survey the windowless room, but there was no way out. Even if they were desperate enough to try escaping through the ventilation system, the grated opening was too small for either of them.

"Who are these guys?"

Finn pulled his cell phone from his pocket. "At a guess. Mafia." He cursed when something about their location made a signal impossible.

"Mafia, wonderful." As if Dade's gambling problem hadn't been enough of an issue without it reaching so far. "I shudder to think how much he must be in to them for if that was his connection to them."

Finn stopped, snapping up the phone on the desk. "We're going to have to work together here."

Bree came to a standstill.

"When they come back, look after the guy on the right and I'll handle Lewis and whoever else."

She opened her mouth but no sound emerged.

He replaced the phone and stopped in front of her. "We're done playing games, Bree."

"Finn..."

"Or maybe I should call you Sabrina."

All the air in the room evaporated. "How long have you known?" She could barely get her voice above a whisper.

"Long enough." He reached for the phone again.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

There wasn't time to get into the conversation before the door was opened and a man came into the room, flanked by one of the men who'd brought them here and Lewis.

The newcomer moved around the edge of his desk, nearly six feet tall, his dark hair streaked through with gray, his eyes a twinkling blue color that better suited a department-store Santa than someone in the mob. "My friend here..." he tipped his head to Lewis, "...tells me you've been investigating him."

Finn shrugged. "Not really."

A cold slash of teeth. "I detest liars."

"Then you and I are going to have a real love-hate relationship."

The man laughed, but the sound was crisp. Chilling.

"Did you have Mason Dade killed?" Finn added, and Bree was glad that if she had to be in this situation with anyone, it was him.

"The investor?" The mob boss shook his head. "No, but then he owed one of my associates a very large sum of money. Whoever killed him saved me the effort."

"What about Dade's partner, Walter Michaelson?"

"Can't say I've met the man."

"Lewis here knows him."

"I know a lot of people."

The head guy looked annoyed at the added comment and silenced Lewis with a glare. He took a seat behind the desk. "So you're investigating Mason Dade?"

In the same bored tone Bree heard Finn use on Reece, he said, "I'm sort of the only suspect at the moment, so yeah, I'm interested in finding out who else had a reason to kill him."

"Like I said, I didn't get the opportunity. He was lying low." The man glanced at Bree. "And your interest stems from his fraudulent business dealings with your mother-in-law." At Bree's gape, he added, "I make it my business to find out what I can about the people who trespass against me and my employees, Ms. Lancaster."

A weird sense of relief washed over her. If Finn hadn't already known the truth about her, this would not have been the most opportune time for it to come up.

Taking a page from Finn's book and remaining unruffled by the situation, she crossed her arms. "My family in the car has nothing to do with this."

"That remains to be seen. I cannot afford any murder investigation to involve any of my associates. I'm not sure you realize that you're treading on very dangerous ground here."

"I don't think you understand," Bree said, her own smile coming to her lips, one that promised to deliver a harsh retribution if he didn't listen closely, "so I'm only going to ask you this once. Call your men down there and let my family go."

"I'd really listen to her if I were you," Finn suggested, that cocky grin sliding into place.

The man sighed and gave a subtle nod to the thug behind Finn.

Finn whirled. "*Exuro.*"

The man opposite him howled, the gun melting and sliding through the man's fingers.

Bree glanced at Lewis's weapon. "*Telum manus.*"

Lewis's eyes bulged as his gun appeared in her hand. "*Validus ventus.*" The books and contents of the shelves slammed into Lewis and the man cradling his burned hand to his chest.

The mob boss jerked to his feet, knocking his chair to the floor as he staggered backwards.

Bree watched as the letter opener on the edge of the desk flew through the air, stopping a hair's breadth from piercing the man's jugular.

Finn took a step closer. "Nobody moves or he dies."

Eyes wide, the man grabbed hold of the letter opener but could do nothing to pull it free.

She glanced at Lewis who cowered near the door. "Stay."

He gave a jerky nod, and keeping him in her line of vision, she pointed the gun in her hand at the one responsible for bringing them here. For risking

Marion and Ryan. "Call your men and get Marion on the phone. I want to talk to her."

"I don't know what you think you're doing." The wild look in the man's eyes made the threat he tried to imply laughable at best.

"You might think you're a powerful man, but what you've seen so far isn't nearly as much as either of us is capable of."

"So here's what's going to happen," Finn continued. "Our friends are going to take your car and drive away. Then the two of us are leaving. You go on about your business. And we'll go on about our business. And if you even think to come after us in retaliation, be aware that if anything happens to either of us or people we care about, there are others like us who will make your life much more uncomfortable than the police ever could." The letter opener nicked the man's skin. "Are we clear?"

The man nodded.

"Now make the call."

With hands he almost managed to keep from shaking, he picked up the phone on the corner of the desk and dialed.

"I want to talk to her," Bree said.

The man nodded. "Put the woman on the phone," he ordered.

He offered the phone to Bree.

"Marion? Yes, we're fine. Take the car, and you and Ryan drive to Calder Investigations. Finn and I will be fine. We'll meet you there."

Bree handed the phone back to the man, who gave the order to let them take the SUV. She waited for the phone and stayed on the line until Marion assured Bree that they were out of sight of the building.

"Are we clear on how this is going to work?" Finn asked, easing closer to Bree.

The two men off to the side looked baffled by what they were seeing.

Bree opened the door and stepped into the hall. "We're going to lock this door for a while."

Finn backed out and she knew he waited to release his hold on the letter opener until the door shut.

“Obfirmo iuana.”

Finn gave her a tentative smile. “Tag-team magic. That was actually a first for me with anyone other than my family.”

Bree didn’t say anything. She couldn’t let herself process the fact that he knew about her when they weren’t fully out of trouble yet.

As they headed down the narrow hall, they heard the front door close. The two men ahead skidded to a stop when they spotted them. It wasn’t until they reached for their guns that Bree realized they hadn’t been called off yet.

Finn swept out a hand. “*Trinus solum.*”

The two men’s legs tangled and they dropped to the floor.

Finn tugged her in the opposite direction, and Bree hoped that by the time they got back on their feet, their boss would order them to back off.

They darted into the main warehouse, sprinting past shipping containers for the rear loading dock area. Finn propelled the door open before they reached it, his grip tightening on her hand as he hauled her along behind him.

The gravel rolled under the heels of her boots, but she kept up with Finn as they rounded the far corner of the building. “Do you think he will leave us alone?”

“He didn’t build his little corner of the crime syndicate by being stupid. Unless he somehow convinces himself he hallucinated everything back there, I think he’ll leave it alone. If he’s telling the truth and didn’t have Dade killed and if we’re not bringing attention to his guys because of it, then he has no reason to feel threatened.”

Bree waited until they were a couple blocks from the building, her breathing easing as they slowed their pace before she brought up the one thing neither of them were addressing.

“How long have you known about me?”

He kept walking. “Since the day after I sent you the flowers and found out where you worked.”

“You investigated me before Dade was killed?”

“That’s my job. It’s what I do.” And he didn’t sound the least apologetic for it.

“Something you do with all the women you date?”

“Not every woman I’ve been interested in has been found standing over a dead man.”

She jerked him to a stop. “If you knew who I was, it’s a wonder you covered for me at all.”

“I didn’t think you killed him.”

Didn’t? “Changing your mind about that now?”

“It’s been harder keeping an open mind when you’ve continued to keep your secrets.”

“My secrets? All this time you knew about me and yet you didn’t say a damn word about your own.”

He grabbed her hand and kept her moving. “I’m pretty sure when you came to see me at work you figured that part out, if you hadn’t already known.”

“I didn’t,” she bit out between clenched teeth, not taking this well.

Finn shrugged.

Her mind fumbled to keep up with the events of the evening—hell everything that had happened since she’d come home. Finn had known who she was. And all the times she wanted to say something, to tell him...and he already knew.

The times in his office, the mentions of her family and she’d stupidly sat there and kept her mouth shut all the while he knew. The odd looks, the quiet comments that carried hints he’d known, and not until this minute did it all become so obvious.

Not only had she been foolishly afraid to be honest with him, she’d been blind as well. And his family, had they all known the truth too? Laughed behind her back at how much of a spineless coward she was?

And wasn’t she? Her family hadn’t “gotten” her so she ran to Mark. Mark died and she ran clear across the ocean to avoid dealing with that. Only to come home and meet a great guy, and didn’t she turn and run from dealing with the one thing that guaranteed a relationship between them would never work?

She was done running, done being the one too worried about the fallout to do a damn thing about it.

Finn glanced at her but didn't stop moving.

She planted herself in front of him. "Was it a game? Stringing me along, laughing with your family. Knowing that when I would finally figure out you already knew, you'd yank the carpet out from under me, is that it?"

Bree wanted the truth to be anything but that.

Finn crossed his arms. "Maybe you thought you were pulling one over on me, thinking you had the edge knowing I was a Calder and I stupidly didn't have a clue about you."

"Your family probably wanted you to keep me in the dark, didn't they?" She'd hoped that his silence that night in his office meant maybe he didn't share his family's opinion. Now she didn't know if his refraining from commenting was just part of his plan.

"Leave my family out of it."

"Why? They've made it perfectly clear that all Lancasters are the enemy."

"And your family thinks mine are so great?" he challenged, his own anger rising to the surface to match hers.

"I've spent most of my life trying to not to be like my parents."

"So that makes it okay that you weren't honest with me?"

"I wanted to tell you, was going to tell you." The anger over the way this had come out, the way she'd let it come to this, simmered through her bloodstream.

He didn't look convinced, and she refused to believe it was hurt that registered on his face so quickly she might have imagined it.

"Guess we'll never know about that," he said quietly.

* * *

"So he knows," Marion said from her spot on the edge of the bed.

They'd decided not to involve the police and bring even more attention to the mess the whole situation had become. One of the few things she and Finn had left to say to each other before she came home with Marion. Ryan had

already gone home, but not without a reassuring hug and a promise to call her tomorrow.

“He’s known for a while.” Bree stared at Marion’s ceiling.

“That’s why you’re here and not talking to him about this?”

“He didn’t have anything else to say to me and I was...pissed.” She pressed the heel of her hands to her eyes. How had everything gotten so fucked up?

“Things might have been handled differently if you told him the truth awhile ago,” Marion said gently.

Bree sat up. “Technically, he knew before I did and I don’t recall him saying a word.”

“Maybe he wanted you to tell him when you were ready.”

“That’s a convenient excuse now, isn’t it?” Wasn’t it? Hell, she didn’t know anything anymore.

“Or is it just easier to be mad at him instead of yourself?”

Cursing under her breath, Bree stood up. “I’m going to head home to my place. You’re making too much sense when I’m perfectly happy to be mad at him about everything right now.”

“You two obviously need to talk.”

“He’s a Calder and I’m a Lancaster.” She paused in the doorway, the truth of that statement slicing through her. The truth was, with the exception of Angel, she wasn’t nearly as close to her family as he was with his, and his determination to keep his family out of the conversation proved it. She might be able to live with the repercussions of aligning herself with the so-called enemy, but could he?

The undeniable answer to that weighed heavy on her heart.

* * *

“You and Bree still on the outs?”

Finn ignored the question and lined up his next shot.

“So you are,” Reece added at the precise moment Finn’s ball should have sailed into the pocket. Instead the cue ball flew off the table.

"Nice one," Dante said.

Finn flipped him off. He should have damn well stayed in tonight instead of answering the phone when these two called. He'd been hoping it would be Bree calling.

"So what did you do to piss her off?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he growled, picking up his beer.

Reece and Dante glanced meaningfully at each other.

The bottle almost tipped when Finn dropped it back on the counter, glaring at them. "When the hell did this start?"

"What?" they both asked innocently.

He waved his cue back and forth between the two of them. "Last time I checked, you were my brother and he was the cop we both enjoyed pissing off."

Reece grinned and went to take his shot. "Things change."

Finn arched a brow. "*Verto*." He grinned when Reece's ball zigzagged around the table.

"And some things don't," Finn said, finding some small satisfaction in that fact.

The ass straightened, not even fazed by the trick. "So what did you two fight over?"

"Forget it." He tossed his cue down on the table. He wasn't playing any better than a three-year-old anyway.

Reece pointed his cue at Finn. "It's eating away at you so just spit it out already."

"Jesus, you hook up with Vi and now you want to start talking about feelings and shit?" He wanted things to go back to normal. Before Reece was so chummy, before he realized he'd found the only woman to make him crave nothing but a night spent in her arms.

"You clearly have a serious thing for the woman, and yet you sit here wallowing with us," Reece pointed out.

Dante picked up his beer. "*I do not wallow*."

This time it was Reece and Finn who exchanged looks.

“That’s right,” Reece said. “You brood.”

Dante scowled. “Maybe he dumped her and just has yet to find a new conquest.”

“It wasn’t like that with Bree,” Finn snapped.

“So?”

“So I knew something about her that she thought I didn’t know, and when she found out, she was...irrationally annoyed about it.”

“Why didn’t you tell her you knew whatever it was?”

“I wanted her to tell me on her own.” And here he’d convinced himself doing that was the only way to know if the connection between them was something that could endure their families.

“So how did she find out?” Dante asked.

“During our little run-in with Isaac Lewis and his boss.”

“Ah,” Reece and Dante said collectively.

“There you are.” Violet stepped up to the pool table, dropping her bags at her feet.

Reece paid no attention to him and Dante as he hauled her into his arms and kissed her. “Finally done with shopping?”

Violet nodded, beaming at the reception. “Darby is satisfied with her court apparel for the next case, though I have no idea what prompted this sudden need to find something new to wear.”

“She’s been weird lately,” Finn said, glad to get out from under the microscope himself.

Violet took a seat next to Dante. “She’s been a little more stressed than usual.”

The door to the small bar flew open, and Riley stormed inside.

Ah, hell.

Chapter Thirteen

"So you two still haven't talked."

"It's only been two days." Forty-nine hours, eleven minutes and for every additional second that ticked off, her chest ached a little more.

"So what is it?" Angel questioned. "You don't want to be the first one to call?"

"Why are you being so okay with this?" Hell, had she misjudged everyone? She figured if anyone would eventually come round to the idea of her with a Calder it would be Angel. Considering her and Bryce's intervention, Bree hadn't expected it to come about this fast.

"There are bigger losers out there you could be dating than Finn."

"What happened to, 'he's a Calder'?"

Angel shrugged. "If he's the reason you've been smiling all dreamy-like, then that's all I need to know for now."

Bree sighed. "I don't even know that he wants things to keep going."

"Did he say that?"

"We didn't really get into it. After the other night—"

"So call him." Angel dug her cell phone out of her purse. "Call him. Please, your moping is driving me up the wall."

Bree frowned. "I haven't been moping."

"You screwed up. Everybody does."

"And what about him?"

"He wasn't the most honest either, but you started it. And so help me, I'll shove this phone down your throat if you don't call."

Bree flipped the phone out to dial, glanced down the street, then at the phone. Paused. She glanced back up the street, more specifically at a couple who emerged from the movie theater, hands clasped, heads close together.

Son of a bitch.

Bree hustled Angel into the closest doorway, never taking her eyes off the sidewalk as she watched Erica Dade and Walter Michaelson walk by.

“She’s a Lancaster.”

Finn didn’t look up from his next shot after Dante had thrust the cue back at him.

“She’s a *Lancaster*,” Riley repeated, intentionally putting herself in Finn’s line of sight as he bent to take the shot.

“Who is?” Violet asked.

Finn glowered at his oldest sister. “I told you to leave it alone, Riley.” He straightened, snatched his beer off the table and took a long drink. Now it really was time to go home.

Riley’s eyes widened. “You knew?”

He cocked his head, thought about just walking out without saying a word. He drained his beer and set it aside. “Yeah, I knew.”

“You’ve been dating a Lancaster and didn’t say a damn word to any of us?”

Dante perked up but just stared at Finn.

“Since when did you start clearing the men you fall into bed with, with the rest of the family?”

Riley gave him a dirty look.

“That’s right, you’re so work obsessed there aren’t any men to introduce us to.” It was a low blow and he didn’t need the rise of color in Riley’s cheeks to know it.

Violet propped a hand on her hip. “Bree? The stripper is a Lancaster?”

Finn rolled his eyes. “She’s not a stripper.”

"But she is a Lancaster."

"Yeah. I need another drink." Preferably at another bar where his family wasn't hanging out.

"So that's what you knew but didn't tell Bree?" Reece grimaced. "Ouch."

Violet stepped in front of him, looking confused. "Okay, let's back the broom up a minute. Bree would've known who you were the second she stopped by the firm."

Finn nodded.

"And you knew who she was before or after that?"

"The day before."

"But you didn't tell her you knew?"

He pursed his lips. "Nope."

"That's a sneaky bastardlike thing to do."

Finn raised a brow.

Violet shrugged. "I mean yeah, she's a Lancaster and all, but if she wasn't that would be mean."

"She could have told me who she was anytime." At least he knew his siblings would agree with him on that point.

"Would that be before or after Riley and Darby went on about the Lancasters when Bree was right in the room?" Reece put in, returning quickly to the game when Violet and Riley glared him down.

"I'm getting that beer now."

"I need a refill myself." Reece followed him to the bar. They waited while the bartender finished up with other customers at the opposite end of the bar. Reece's inquisitive gaze never wavered from Finn.

"What?" he finally bit out.

"I don't know the whole story behind this feud thing, but it clearly wasn't enough to stop you from getting involved with Bree. And if you make another crack about *feelings* I'm going back and..." he nodded to the others, "...leaving you to the wolves."

"I like her."

“So then work it out.”

Finn snorted, glancing over his shoulder to where his three sisters converged as Darby joined the group. “I don’t think you get how big of a hurdle it would be for our families to take.”

“Is being with her worth it?”

“We haven’t known each other—”

Reece shook his head, cutting him off. “Is. She. Worth. It?” Then the detective turned and walked away before he could answer.

Bree flipped the phone she’d borrowed from Angel closed for the third time in a half hour.

Where the hell was Finn? She’d left four messages since his voicemail had kicked in every time she called.

Maybe he didn’t want to talk to her and hung up the second he heard her voice on the message. Maybe it would serve him right for acting like an ass when she might very well have stumbled upon a new lead with Mason Dade’s murder.

She stared hard at the phone, willing it to ring, willing it be Finn calling her back.

From her car, she watched as the Dades’ front door across the street was opened and Walter Michaelson came out onto the porch. He lowered his head and Erica reached out and looped her arms around his neck, holding him close.

Rather friendly for her dead husband’s business partner.

A few minutes later Michaelson got into his car and pulled away. Bree flipped open her phone and dialed Finn again. Still no answer. Damn. Maybe she should go talk to her. She’d tell Erica she worked with Finn and go from there. They’d never met face to face for Erica to know her from her connection to Dade.

She put her hand on the door handle, shook her head. She should definitely wait for Finn.

And if Finn didn't call her back?

Bree pushed open the door, crossed the street and was halfway up Erica Dade's sidewalk when she nipped her spontaneous tendencies in the bud. Finn should handle this. And if it took calling him all night before he got the hint and called back, she would do it. At least a little while longer.

Next to her car, Bree realized she could always try to track down Reece's number if she couldn't reach Finn. Her fingers closed around the handle, but she stilled, a familiar scent teasing her memory. She frowned as she mentally tried to pinpoint where she knew it from.

Dade's motel room.

She started to turn around.

Her body jolted, electrical currents radiating from below her, screaming upwards. Bree opened her mouth to scream, her body so stiff and tight she knew the plea for help only resonated in her mind.

As quickly as the pain hit, it was gone. And she was falling. She wanted to reach out, to catch herself, but her limbs didn't respond, didn't stop the ground from rushing up to meet her. Or the explosion of pain that radiated down the side of her head before everything went black.

Finn let himself into his condo, pitching his keys on the counter. He didn't bother with anything to eat or drink and took a seat in the recliner.

The remote was next to him, but he didn't turn on the television. Stared into the dark instead.

He needed to call Bree. They'd left things too unresolved between them. They needed to talk and they needed to do it now.

Finn grabbed the cordless phone next to him on the table and was halfway through dialing when he changed his mind. Forget calling. He'd go over there. She couldn't refuse to talk to him that way.

The drive over gave him too much time to contemplate why she hadn't called. Why he'd been stubborn and just let her walk away that night. It wasn't even about who was right and wrong at this point. They were both guilty of holding back to some degree.

This was about telling her she was worth it.

Finn knocked and waited at Bree's front door, curbing the urge to let himself in anyway. That could potentially give her one more reason to stay ticked off at him.

He frowned when a small, more petite version of Bree opened the door.

She cocked her head.

"Is Bree home?"

A smile that made him think of Bree came to her lips. "Are you Finn?" At his nod, she grinned broadly. "I'm Angel, her sister."

He arched a brow. "Calder hater?"

"Bree likes you well enough so I'm reserving judgment."

"Is she home?"

Two golden brown brows came together. "Didn't you two already meet up? We were out shopping and she saw these two people, a couple, and she said something about Mason Dade and tried calling you. I assumed since I hadn't heard from her since she dropped me off that she got a hold of you."

Finn dug out his phone, noticed the volume was down on his phone. He frowned as he listened to her messages. Michaelson and Erica?

He started down the steps. "Thanks for letting me know. I'll go meet up with her now."

"Hey."

He stopped on the walkway.

"Don't break her heart, or I'll break yours. Literally."

If not for the deadly serious tone, he would have shrugged it off. Being that it came from a Lancaster, he paid attention.

With a grin that he hoped assured her hurting Bree was the furthest thing from his mind—though he should throttle her for heading to stakeout Erica's without him—Finn turned back towards his car.

He tried calling Bree back, but she didn't answer. After the third attempt he was getting concerned. The other fools on the road tonight seemed determined to cut him off every chance they got or drove slower than a toddler on training wheels.

He dialed her again, hoping she was just in a bad spot with limited service range. By the time he reached the neighborhood the Dades lived in and still hadn't heard from Bree, his anxiety jumped a few notches.

He didn't spot her car, wondering, almost hoping that she'd given up waiting for him and he'd passed her somewhere along the way. For all he knew she was in full secret-agent mode and was scoping out the Dades' backyard.

Finn scouted around the property first, then decided he was better off talking to Erica to find out if Bree had already been by here.

The inner lights were flicked on following his knock at the door.

Erica looked surprised to see him. "I wasn't expecting you to drop by, Finn. Is there something new with the case?"

"Possibly. Has anyone stopped by to talk to you?"

Erica frowned, but shook her head.

"I think an associate of mine might have come by."

"To talk about what?"

"You and Walter Michaelson."

Her eyes widened.

He glanced down the street, hoping, and disappointed when there was still no sign of Bree. "Can I come in?"

She snapped her arm across the jamb. "What's this about?"

Fine. He'd do it out here. No skin off his back. "Are you and Michaelson having an affair?"

"Who told you that?"

"Just answer the question, Erica."

"Walter and I are not sleeping together," she hissed.

Her eyes told a different story. "If you're holding back, Erica," Finn warned.

"I have no idea who would think Walter and I are having an affair. We're not."

"So what aren't you telling me?" And there was something she was definitely leaving out. His gut itched with the certainty of it.

"It's late, Finn. I'm going to bed." She slammed the door shut.

Wonderful.

He headed down the sidewalk. More questions and no answers.

And worse—no Bree.

Deciding to stick around and make sure she still didn't show, he settled back in his car, alternately trying to reach her again and calling her house.

After an hour and still neither he nor Angel had heard anything, he was really worried. On the hope that maybe she'd gone by his office to wait for him, he turned on the car and headed back downtown.

She'd called a handful of times in forty-five minutes, some, according to caller ID, where she hadn't bothered to leave a message. So why had she suddenly stopped calling him?

On the drive to the office, Finn remembered to try Marion's.

"I haven't heard from Bree since this morning," Marion said over the line.

Shit. Somehow he knew that wasn't good.

"Should I be worried?"

God, he hoped not. "I'll track her down and call you when I do."

He swung by Bree's shop on the way to work, but the lights were all dark inside and the door locked.

Where the hell was she?

The security guy wasn't in the lobby of the firm's offices when he let himself into the building. Probably on a walk-through. A locked door wouldn't have kept Bree out. He doubted she would have gone to his office, but he didn't know where else to look for her. He hadn't wanted to start pulling ideas from Marion and have the woman worrying needlessly.

As expected his office was dark. He flicked on the light. Then dialed Angel again.

"I'm getting worried," Angel said.

"I'm sure she's fine. Can you think of anywhere else she might have gone?"

"No. She should be answering the phone. I'll try and get a hold of Ryan. Maybe he's heard from her."

"Call me if you hear from her."

"Same here."

Finn stuffed the phone back in his pocket and knocked into the corner of his desk.

Files floated to the floor. He grabbed them up, tossing them back on his desk, not caring that everything was mixed up.

His hand froze on the corner of a picture.

The cross-dresser Dade had been blackmailing. He frowned. Something wasn't right. This wasn't the same picture as the one tucked in the briefcase from Erica's, but it was clearly the same man.

Frowning he flipped back through the files on his desk. A couple more photos. Where had these come from?

He saw the note he'd jotted on the file. He cursed under his breath. The case Dante had given him, the one he'd ignored when everything went wrong with the Dade case.

He skimmed the notes Dante and Violet had made. The wife wanted to catch the guy with another man. Wanted hardcore proof that his dressing in drag was more than just a fetish for women's clothing.

Finn flipped through the pages and saw both the name and a picture of the guy in his regular day-to-day clothes.

Walter Michaelson.

He'd put Tate on scoping out the transgender bar downtown in hope of still tracking down the guy Dade was blackmailing. So far Tate hadn't had any more luck than he had his first night there with Bree. And all this time the man's real identity had been sitting on his damn desk.

Finn snapped up the phone, his heart pounding at the implications, of why he still hadn't heard from Bree. "I've got a new lead for you," he said when

Reece picked up. "I've got the name of the cross-dresser Dade was blackmailing."

"What are you talking about?"

Finn gestured to the pictures as though Reece could see them through the phone. "The cross-dresser. Drag Queen. Transvestite. Whatever."

"What cross-dresser?"

"Didn't Erica Dade give you the briefcase?"

"I have no clue what you're talking about."

Finn's gut clenched. "She found a small briefcase of Dade's but couldn't get into the damn thing. I went over to help and in it was proof Dade was blackmailing someone. I guessed it was probably someone he worked with. She told me she was turning the case over to the police in the morning."

"When was this?"

"A couple days ago. But Dante gave me this case...anyway, the cross-dresser that was being blackmailed is Dade's partner, Walter Michaelson."

"And he's the same guy you saw arguing with Isaac Lewis." Reece was silent for a moment. "I'll go pay him a visit."

"I think Bree thought Michaelson and Erica Dade were having an affair," Finn added, closing his eyes as he realized that had been what Erica hadn't let on about. She'd known about Michaelson's extracurricular activities. "Bree saw the two of them tonight and assumed they were a couple. Erica must have known Michaelson liked his clothes on the feminine side."

"Hell, maybe it turns her on," Reece said.

"Reece, I can't find Bree. She called me and left messages when I was at the bar to tell me about this and to meet her at Erica's. I've already been over there and didn't see her. No one has heard from her since she ran off to play Nancy Drew."

"She's probably fine."

Finn closed his eyes. Then why did his chest hurt so badly?

Bree fought to open her eyes, but the swirling of colors behind her lids insisted she keep them shut. A thump of pressure grew until the agony in her head grated down every nerve ending. The merest hint of movement when she flexed her hand against the hard surface beneath her made her stomach roil. The acrid taste of nausea burned the back of her throat.

She needed to get up, but her limbs were too sluggish to respond. Tired and heavy.

After a few minutes, Bree forced her eyes open and blinked through the blurriness. Even when the glaring light overheard came slowly into focus, it felt like a layer of ice was over her eyes, keeping everything from clearing.

She tried to sit up, but could manage nothing more than to roll from her stomach to her back. A long stretch of pain curled down the back of her skull, and she pulled in sharp breaths until it subsided.

She was going to throw up.

Bree gritted her teeth, lying motionless until her stomach stopped heaving and the dizziness passed, to assess where she was.

Someone's kitchen. How had she gotten here?

A TV played in the background, but no other voices reached out to help her identify her location beyond that. She'd seen Erica and Michaelson. Called Finn. Then...

The throb up the side of her head made every push to concentrate unbearable. She'd been outside the Dade house, waiting. And then—

A new pain crept across her awareness and she had to work hard to tug her shirt up and felt her side. She needed to get up, needed to move. Her mind echoed the mental SOS to get her ass up, but everything moved so slowly. Even her thoughts felt muddled and she could hear herself repeating her thoughts in her head.

Drugged?

When? How?

She couldn't remember. Couldn't remember anything other than calling Finn. Where was Finn? Had he gotten her messages? Was he close by?

On a deep breath, she rolled to her side and pushed up. Another wave of nausea slammed into her gut and she pressed a hand to her mouth. She couldn't be sick. Not now.

She breathed in through her nose. Nice and slow until she was sitting upright completely.

Still no other sounds emerged. Nothing but cherry finish kitchen cupboards. Lemons and bluebirds on the horizontal strip of wallpaper that cut the kitchen wall into blurry shades of blue and yellow.

Bree fished around in her pocket. *Shit*. Angel's phone was gone.

She needed to get out of here. Getting to her feet was easier said than done. She stumbled twice before she managed to use the edge of the counter to haul herself to her feet.

The world tilted and faded in and out at the edges. Bree curled her fingers around the lip of the counter top. She couldn't pass out. Not now.

A hallway.

One foot in front of the other, and Bree inched around, leaning into the counter to keep herself on her feet. A shadow crossed her line of vision.

A trick of the light?

"You're up, are you?"

The words felt distorted in her head, like she was hearing them underwater.

Bree turned and came face to face with the one who'd done this to her.

"You really shouldn't be awake yet. I gave you enough to keep you out for another couple of hours. This changes my plans unfortunately."

Bree shook her head, needing to think, to focus.

She saw the flash of the knife. A burst of adrenaline that had nothing to do with magic and everything to do with survival plowed through the foggy in her mind.

But it wasn't enough to avoid the coming blow.

Chapter Fourteen

Where the hell was she? Finn slammed the heel of his hand down on the steering wheel. He'd looked everywhere for her. No one could get her to answer the phone. He'd even gone so far as to call the airlines to make sure she hadn't decided Europe was better than dealing with all this.

He would have been relieved if she had run, then he wouldn't be sitting here with worry eating through his stomach.

He stared at the lights still on in Erica's house. She hadn't gone to bed after all. With nowhere else to go he'd returned here. This was where Bree had been headed. Had she just never arrived, or had she and this was where things went wrong?

And something was wrong. He pressed the phone to his forehead willing it to ring. Needing to hear Bree's voice on the other end. Every second that ticked off burned like acid through his chest.

Why did Erica still have her lights on? Hours after he'd seemed to pull her from her bed and the whole house was lit up. As he watched, the ones in the garage flicked on too, lasting a few minutes before they were switched off.

Was she planning on going somewhere?

The phone rang, making his heart jolt in his chest. His hopes died the second he looked and saw it was only Reece calling.

"Didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"Walter Michaelson is dead."

"What?"

"He killed himself. Or that's how it looks. Got drunk, took a shitload of pills and then wrapped his car around a telephone pole. The man had more than a few prescription drugs."

Finn closed his eyes, knocked his head against the rest behind it. "Fuck."

"He left a note claiming responsibility for killing Dade. The neighbor says that Michaelson's wife has been staying with her mother. I'm still trying to track her down, but looking at their medicine cabinet, both of them had issues."

If Michaelson was the killer then what had happened to Bree? She and Angel had seen him and Erica less than four hours ago downtown. Now Michaelson was dead, Erica was still up, and Bree nowhere to be found.

Finn rubbed his eyes, trying to pull all the pieces together. "Michaelson was on prescription drugs?"

"Well this is where things get interesting. Most of these prescriptions were just filled earlier this week. Sloane's checking into that and tracking down the guy's doctor. But Michaelson has open bottles of...Xanax, Valium, Restoril just to name a few.

"Restoril?" Why did that sound familiar?

"Its generic term is Temazepam."

He knew that drug name from somewhere. Drugs...overdose...all of it sent of alarms in his head.

Finn glanced at the house on the corner.

Son of a bitch.

"I'll call you back." Finn got out of the car, but instead of starting up Erica Dade's walkway, he crossed the street.

He couldn't be right. And yet if Bree was inside...

Like Erica's, the downstairs lights were still on when Finn knocked on the front door.

The door swung open, the woman opposite him looking taken aback at finding Finn on the front door step.

"Hi, Carey."

Bree whimpered, long ripping fingers of pain tearing at her abdomen. She pressed her hand to her side, grinding her jaw. Her fingers felt wet and sticky.

Blood.

How much had she lost?

She worked herself to her knees, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip against the sharp pain that snatched her next breath.

The drugs were still heavy in her system, and she fought through the heavy haze weighing her down. Her fingers, coated now in her blood, slipped off the edge of the counter when she tried to pull herself up.

In the back of her mind she heard the knock at the front door. Heard the footsteps that headed farther away from Bree to answer it.

She didn't have long, and she was already so weak. Had to stay aware. Her equilibrium skidded sideways, her side on fire as she climbed to her feet.

Voices.

She moved closer, leaning into the wall now. Forcing her eyes to stay open. If she went down again, she might not get back up.

She heard a man's voice and frowned, her heart picking up speed.

Finn?

Bree inched closer, nothing moving as fast as she needed it to. Not her brain, not her mouth, not the legs that trembled, ready to give out at any second.

The woman who had drugged and stabbed her stood with her back to Bree a few feet back from the now open doorway. She knew her from Finn's office.

All this time...

Bree stared at the knife clutched behind Carey's back.

Her hand slipped down the wall as Bree tried to straighten up, anger boiling up from within her.

And as "*Validus ventus*" broke past her lips, magic burned straight through her gut, more potent than ever before.

Erica's sister was thrown into the wall, the knife landing only a foot from her prone body.

“Telum manus.”

She felt the warm handle of the very knife that had been driven into her side in her palm, and let it fall to the floor.

Her knees buckled, her eyes sliding shut as it all started to fall away.

Then she felt strong arms catch her before she hit the ground, her face against Finn’s shoulder. She cried out at the pressure against her stomach.

“Bree?”

She felt him moving her shirt to the side to get a look at the wound and pried her eyes open.

The concern etched in his handsome face was far from reassuring. “It’s deep.”

“It hurts like hell.”

He dug out his cell phone and she watched through blurry eyes as he punched in 9-1-1.

She knew she was starting to fade out and wanted like hell to hang on.

Finn cupped her cheek, both the tenderness on his face and in his voice willing her to keep awake. “Stay with me, Bree.”

“Is she still out?”

“Carey won’t be bothering anyone again.”

The feel of his shirt under her face, the weight of his arms around her, the scent of him made everything feel like it was going to be okay.

“She stabbed me,” Bree murmured, her tongue still so thick in her mouth. “Drugged me, too.”

“I know.”

“She killed Dade, didn’t she?”

Finn smoothed her hair back, the hand he kept pressed to her wound making her grimace. “Yeah, along with her husband a couple years ago.”

“I hope she looks horrible in correctional-orange.”

He started to smile, but a fierce rush of pain in her abdomen made the gorgeous sight of it go blurry.

“The ambulance is on its way.”

"I can't keep my eyes open." She curled her fingers into his shirt as though holding on would keep her awake. She didn't want to lose consciousness.

Didn't want to lose him.

"Yes, you can."

She shook her head. "Hurts too much. I really hate knives," she mumbled.

She felt him gathering her close, the continuous wave of pain making it so hard...

"Don't close your eyes. I want to see them," he ordered, his voice raw and sounding so far away.

Bree tried for a smile and knew it fell pitifully short.

"They're almost here."

She rested her face in the curve of his neck, inhaled sharply. "Whatever you do, don't let go."

She didn't get to hear his response before she felt herself slipping under.

* * *

Finn stared at Bree's ashen face, the pale shade much too close to the color of the sheets near her skin. She'd come through surgery with no complications but not until he saw her for himself had he been able to believe she was going to be okay.

Perched on the edge of the chair he'd dragged next to her bed, he held her soft hand in his, knowing that any moment he'd have a fight on his hands when her family arrived. Reece had let Angel know what happened since Finn had been too useless to do anything but pace the damn waiting room for the surgeon.

Her family was on the way, and he didn't want to think about how much they were going to freak out when they saw him here with her.

"Drink?"

A smile burst to his lips. Bree's eyes were open, but she was so drowsy. His heart tugged in his chest.

"All the nurse has here is ice chips."

She screwed up her beautiful face. "They got me fixed up?"

"Don't worry, I think your corset might still cover most of the scar."

A wobbly smile stretched her mouth. "Good to see that you're still obsessed with the stripper routine."

"Trust me, that'll never get old."

She grimaced. "No making me laugh right now."

He threaded his fingers through hers. "Sorry."

Her eyes drifted shut momentarily. "Still tired," she whispered.

"Go back to sleep. I'll be here when you wake up."

She shook her head. "Tell me."

"Later."

Bree rolled her eyes. "Tell me what Reece has told you, then I'll sleep. Promise," she added with a teasing smile.

His chest ached at how close he'd come to losing her.

"Finn, you're crushing my hand."

He instantly loosened the rigid grip, smoothing his thumb over her fingers. "The woman you tossed around—a pretty good trick that you're going to have to teach me—was Erica's sister."

"I remember her from your office."

"Turns out she and Dade were having an affair. She was the other woman Erica wanted me to find."

"Didn't Carey send Erica to you in the first place?"

"Yeah, just to deflect suspicion and keep an ear to the ground. Exactly the way she did when she killed her own husband a couple years ago. Just like then, she wanted to be sure the evidence that would implicate someone else was discovered on her timetable, her way and by me."

"She shot Dade?"

"Yeah and got enough drugs in Michaelson's system it probably caused his death."

"Michaelson is dead?"

Finn nodded. "Turns out he was our mystery cross-dresser. And Dade wasn't the one blackmailing him. Carey was. Dade was gambling away all the money that he promised to use to give them a new life, so she decided to take matters into her own hands."

Bree licked her lips and he wished she would go to sleep already. "So why did she kill him?"

"Turns out he was into the mob for a lot of money and Carey found out."

"So she had plans to make Michaelson look like the guilty party all along?"

"Yeah," Finn answered, pushing her hair behind her ear. When Bree's eyes drifted shut, he continued playing with her hair.

"She didn't count on Dade coming to see you personally, I'm guessing."

Finn smiled, having thought the stubborn woman had finally drifted off. "She had no problem taking advantage of that situation, then spreading it around that I was sleeping with Erica."

"Bitch," Bree mumbled.

"I almost let her fool me twice. It had been my investigation before that pointed to a police informant who later killed himself as the one who killed her husband."

"And she just confessed all this to the police?"

Finn shook his head, wishing she had. "No. My cousin can both teleport and make a regular witch's gift of persuasion more effective than truth serum."

"A future destiny with the Tribunal sounds like."

"Don't tell her that, she's still not on board with the idea yet." He brought her hands to his mouth, planted a kiss there, wishing he could haul her into his arms. "Now go to sleep."

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Finn's spine snapped straight and he reluctantly released his hold on Bree's hand. When he turned he found Bree's dad in the doorway, flanked by his two sons.

"Get away from my daughter."

"No," Bree said, loud enough to make herself cringe.

"I will not have him around you."

“It’s not your decision.”

“He’s leaving.”

Finn recognized Bryce more so than the younger, dark-haired man. Despite the apologetic look in Bryce’s eyes, Finn knew he wouldn’t be backing down from his father’s side.

Finn turned and kissed Bree’s forehead. “I’ll be back later.”

“No, you won’t.”

Finn ignored the bastard, nodding when Bree shook her head. “You need to sleep.”

Her fingers clutched his until she finally relented. “Okay.”

Though it tore at his chest, he stepped into the hall, not surprised when Mr. Lancaster followed him.

“Stay away from Sabrina.”

“I think she goes by Bree now.”

The older man scowled. “No Calder is good enough for my girl.”

“Good thing she’s the one who gets to make that call.”

The man’s cold smile left Finn unsettled. “We’ll see.” He went into Bree’s room and shut the door.

Finn sighed. That went well.

* * *

Finn slammed the door shut on his car and stalked up the driveway to the Lancasters’ home. Given the way he’d ignored the security guy and opened the gate himself at the edge of their property, he was sure they knew to expect him.

The door was thrown open and Angel stepped out onto the porch. She glanced back over her shoulder. “Just remember that they’re still Bree’s family.”

That was all the warning she got out before an unexpected gust of air knocked into him and fired him backwards.

“You weren’t invited here, Calder.”

"Where is she?" Finn demanded, pushing to his feet.

The man's lips twitched. "Who?"

Only the sight of Angel and knowing who this man was, kept him for launching himself straight at the bastard. "She's not at the hospital. Where did you take her?"

Angel glared at her father. "You never told me Bree wasn't in the hospital."

The man ignored her, staring at Finn. "If Bree has chosen not to tell you where she is, then what does that tell you?"

Angel stalked past Mr. Lancaster into the house. "Mom?"

"Get off my property." The man slammed the door in his face.

His side aching from where he'd been tossed, Finn slid back into his car. If that man thought he could keep Bree away from him, he obviously didn't know his daughter very well.

Bree heard the door close, but didn't get up. She snuggled down deeper in the blankets, the smell of Finn surrounding her.

A cupboard door was opened, the fridge. Then footsteps.

He walked right into the room, stripping off his shirt.

"Hi."

He jerked around, and the pleasure that shone on his face proved that coming here had been the right decision after all.

"The door was locked, but I had no problem with that." She pushed herself higher on the pillows, but couldn't hide the twinge of pain.

"You should still be in the hospital. Twenty-four hours is not enough time to recover."

"It was get out of there where my dad could keep you away or go crazy, and I'm not all that partial to straitjackets."

He approached the bed slowly, as though any second she might up and change her mind about coming here. When the bed dipped as he sat next to her, she reached out and pulled him closer.

He used his elbows to keep his weight off her, but she wouldn't have cared. She wanted to be closer.

Closer to the man she loved.

He hadn't shaved in a couple days, and the roughness against the palm she pressed to his cheek felt better than the smoothest silk.

Finn turned, his lips seeking her hand. "I'm glad you're here."

She felt the smile that split her lips echo within her. Then he caught her mouth, cradling her jaw as his lips slanted across hers. The staggering tenderness in the kiss would have knocked her feet out from under her if she wasn't already lying down.

Bree wrapped her arms around his neck, the first promise of passion skirting the soft mouth that rocked her world completely off balance.

"I love you." Finn drew back long enough to get the breathy confession out, then hauled her soul deep into another kiss.

She slowly edged back. "I love you too, but I just need to be sure that who I am doesn't matter."

"Well, it will certainly make Thanksgiving a bit of a pain in the ass, but I think you're worth it."

Bree grinned. "*Think?*"

"It may require some intensive one-on-one before I'm absolutely certain."

She trailed her hand down his back. "I hear you cave under torture."

"You've been misinformed."

Bree shook her head. "I have a very trustworthy source and the second I'm fit for the undertaking, I intend to prove you wrong."

"Well," he nuzzled her neck, "when you're ready, just let me know and I'll check my schedule."

"Have a few lap-dancing auditions booked?"

His playful smile stole her breath. "I might be able to fit you onto my standby list if you're interested."

“That much in demand are you?” She pushed her hands into his hair, pulling his mouth back to hers.

“Don’t worry—” his lips slid over hers, “—it’s a very, *very* short list.”

About the Author

To learn more about Sydney Somers, please visit her website, www.sydney somers.com or her blog <http://sydney somers.blogspot.com>. You can also reach her by e-mail sydney@sydney somers.com or join her monthly newsletter to keep up to date on Sydney's upcoming releases, contest info and sneak peeks at what she's working on now. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/flirtingwithpassionnewsletter>

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Stripped Away

On the run from an intergalactic mob boss, she kidnaps the earthling security expert who helped her. Her plan? Make him forget about tomorrow.

Forget About Tomorrow

© 2007 Liz Kreger

Larissalyia Ashanti, is hiding out on Earth, a barbarian planet unsanctified by the FOW—Federation of Worlds—and on the run from an intergalactic mob boss who plans to use her as leverage to force her magistrate father to clear his criminal record.

Mac, an earthman, witnesses the evidence of aliens when the mob catches up with Lacey. After he helps her fight them off, she does the only thing she can think of—she kidnaps him and takes him with her as she flees Earth. Mac learns the answer to that age old question of whether there's life out there...in spades. But not only does he have to convince Lacey that his numerous skills are indispensable, he has to find a way into her heart.

The chase is just beginning...and so are the romance, adventure and danger as they cross the universe in search of safety and answers.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Forget About Tomorrow*:

“So, now what?”

Her attention snapped back to Mac. He hadn't turned from his contemplation of the stars outside the ship, yet something in his manner told her he was aware of everything she did.

“Now we go to Cyber Five where we regroup and make plans.”

“We?”

“You are along for the ride, Victor.”

The use of his name gained her a look of irritation. For a moment she thought he was going to protest her use of his name, but then he shrugged.

“Do you plan to wipe my memory there?” he asked.

Larissalyia hesitated. It would be a good place to do it. She had everything she needed for the procedure. There was really no reason to wait. Other than the fact that she couldn't return Mac to Earth yet. Not while it was likely that one of the Kyrions might be lying in wait. It didn't make sense to wipe his memory quite yet.

Finally she shook her head. “No, as I said, I cannot return you to your world until the danger is past,” she replied as she justified her decision in her own mind. “I have no doubt my father will succeed within another one of Earth's moon's cycles. I'd only have to wipe it again after that time.”

“That's reassuring.”

She pretended not to notice his dry tone. “Cyber Five is just a stop off for supplies and somewhere I can figure out where to go to create a new identity for you.”

“Is that necessary?”

“Very. I am not quite sure what the F.O.W. would do with you if it is discovered you are from an unsanctioned planet, but I do know I would be in big trouble.”

“So it's in your best interest that I keep my mouth shut.”

She slid him a quick glance. This conversation was entering dangerous space. “It is in *both* of our best interest.”

“I'd say you're the one who's ass deep in alligators, honey. After all, you kidnapped me. It isn't like I had much of a choice.”

Larissalyia twisted in her seat to focus on the look of satisfaction in his face. *He thought he had a hold over her.* Her anger threatened to erupt.

“Look, barbarian. It would be just as easy for me to jettison you from this ship.”

“I doubt you'd do that.” There was no mistaking the smugness in his tone. He too swiveled his chair until he faced her. “Seems to me you went through a lot of trouble on Earth to make sure I took no harm from that *Sinion* blade thing. You could have just as easily let me die from that wound. You're not the type to commit cold-blooded murder.”

“And how would you know that? I am an alien to you. You have no idea what I may be capable of.”

“Let’s just say I’m a great judge of character.”

Larissalyia could think of nothing to counter his self-assurance. He was right. She could not ruthlessly dispose of him in such a manner. Damn, he did have the upper hand.

She’d be a fool to let him know that. Giving him a cool glance, she said nothing and turned back to the console. Checking their coordinates, she made a few more unnecessary adjustments.

Once again she was aware of his gaze on her. It slid over her like a warm hand gliding down her body. She could almost feel the brush of it and a response sprang to life deep within her. It uncurled deep in the pit of her stomach and spread outward in ever-widening circles. It was not an uncomfortable feeling, just unfamiliar.

Frowning, she glanced over at him once more. He hadn’t moved. He merely continued to watch her with that fathomless expression. A slight smile quirked his lips and drew her gaze to that portion of his face. He had a beautiful mouth. Firm, the lower lip slightly fuller than the upper. It was a mouth made for kissing. Made for pleasure.

“Look, I’ll make you a deal.” He waited until her gaze returned to his. There was a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. “I promise to cooperate with you in keeping this F.O.W. ignorant of my presence in the hallowed halls of the known universe, and...”

“And?”

“And in return, you don’t wipe my memory of all of this.”

Larissalyia stared at him, stupefied. “Impossible!”

“Why?”

She blinked. Why, indeed? Standard procedure dictated alien species not sanctioned by the F.O.W. be kept ignorant of the existence of the federation. Harsh penalties ensured this rule was followed. To her knowledge, no one had ever violated the dictum of the Council. Who would know?

But if she agreed with the Earthman, who would know? And was it a gamble she was willing to take?

Although she'd known him a short time, something about Victor MacNaught told her she could believe him. She sensed an honorableness about him that instinctively made her trust him from the moment he held out his hand to her in that bar. In her business she had honed a highly refined instinct when it came to sizing up people. She had never entertained any doubt he was trustworthy.

Still, to take such a chance...?

"This is an adventure of a lifetime, Lacey," he went on when she didn't answer. "I want to experience everything I can. Savor it. I don't want to have all of this wiped from my memory. I don't want to forget what it looks like to stare out that screen." He nodded toward the panoramic view, for a moment recapturing the awe of the experience. When he brought his attention back to her, there was something different in his expression. His gaze slowly slid over her face, lingering on her lips with an intensity that made her breath catch and brought a responsive rush of heat. "I don't want to forget you, Lacey."

He reached out and took one of her hands, holding it between both of his. He smoothed her fingers open before he slowly raised her hand to his lips to press a tender kiss to the very center of her palm. Larissalyia felt that gentle caress all the way down to her toes. He looked up at her.

"Do we have a partnership?"

"Partnership?" she repeated in a faint voice, completely undone. He was manipulating her. She knew he was, but was powerless to stop him. Didn't want to stop him.

"I will do whatever you say, behave in any manner you deem appropriate. In return, you don't remove any of this. I give you my word of honor I will never repeat anything I've ever seen or done while I'm with you. Even after I return to Earth."

"Are you willing to take a blood oath on that?" Larissalyia felt rather than saw Tutsi stir in protest, yet the *Mandujano* warrior said nothing. Her cheeks heated as she realized she had forgotten all about the presence of the third person on the bridge. Somehow with a few words and a tender gesture, Mac had completely scattered her wits.

"Yes."

For a moment longer she stared into his eyes, searching for some sign of subterfuge. He gazed back at her, his steadiness convincing her of his sincerity.

Well, she was the gambler here. How could she blame him? In his place, she would do anything possible to hold onto this experience.

Sacred, worshiped...hunted.

Goddess of the Grove

© 2007 Mandy M. Roth

Book two from the *Sacred Places* series.

All Korey O'Caha wants in his immortal life is to keep evil at bay, protect the witches he was destined to teach and to bed as many women as possible. He doesn't want love but he didn't plan on Gigi. Her very presence calls all he vowed sacred in life into question. She quickly becomes his reason for existing but can she ever fully accept him and who he is—a seven hundred year old immortal druid sorcerer? Will the secrets she's hiding be his undoing?

Gigi, the daughter of a great god, could not stand idly by and allow innocent druid children to be slaughtered. She intervened, placing them under her protection. In the end she was imprisoned in a place where time moved differently than here on earth. That was almost seven hundred years ago. Once freed, she ran as far from the old country as she could. Never did she expect to find ties to the land, let alone a man who stirs her blood the way Korey does.

As shadows from the past resurface, bringing news of an uprising, truth and passion ignite, leaving Gigi at the mercy of Korey.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Goddess of the Grove*:

Korey rubbed his jawline as tension threatened to make it lock. "I willnae calm down."

Coyle made another attempt to come towards him and Korey's power prickled, warning he wasn't safe to be near. "Dammit, cousin, do you wish to bring the gods to Gigi's doorstep?"

"No." What he wanted to do was toss Gigi over his shoulder and run for the hills with her, never allowing anyone to harm her. The moment

her *precious* Parth dropped his spell, Gigi went about her business as if nothing had happened. Korey was impressed with how easily she'd learned to hide who she truly was from everyone but was hurt she chose to do so with him.

You hide from her.

He balked at his inner voice for daring to point out the irony in the situation. He'd spent years pining after a woman he thought wouldn't understand who and what he was only to find she more than knew of their kind.

"If you do nae calm yerself, cousin, I will be forced to knock you out with my power. I do nae think you wish to be unconscious if the dark sorcerer returns." Coyle went to his office door and peeked out. "Gigi still acts as if nothing occurred. Can you believe she's the woman who saved our village? How did we nae recognize her?"

"What?" He gawked at his cousin in disbelief.

Coyle centered an amused look on him. "You do nae remember?" A sly grin spread over Coyle's face. "Och, Korey, how can you forget the first woman you ever gave flowers to?"

He opened his mouth to protest but stopped the minute he thought back to his childhood. Seven hundred plus years ago there had been a woman—a beautiful one at that—who stormed into his village, blanketing them in her power. He had weak memories of exactly what she looked like but knew enough to know she was breathtaking.

Korey's mind drifted to Parth's behavior when asking Gigi what was so special about the little boy who had given her the flowers.

Had I known giving you flowers would win yer hand in marriage, I would have done so myself.

Suddenly, it felt as if he'd been struck in the midriff. Korey went forward, putting his hands on his knees and breathing hard. Coyle clapped him on the back of the neck, chuckling slightly. "'Tis a bitch when the love bug nae only bites you in the arse, but does so without you knowing the lil' bastard was there to begin with."

Korey rubbed his stomach and shook his head. "Gigi cannae be the...Coyle, she...it would mean she's my..."

Coyle drew upon his power and in a split second was holding a bucket before Korey's face. "Here, cousin. I've no wish to see you throw up on my office floor."

Pushing the bucket away, Korey narrowed his gaze on Coyle. "How can you joke at a time like this? I just found out the love of my immortally long life was tortured on account of us and is in danger still. Nae only that but she isnae in any hurry to fess up to—"

Coyle tapped Korey's head. "Nae to interrupt your tangent but you do realize you admitted to loving her, right?"

"I did no such..." He paused and then pulled the bucket back towards his face. "Och. 'Tis a horrible bug indeed."

His cousin's laughter grated on his nerves but Korey held his tongue, too worried about the goddess who graced their presence.

"Breathe." Coyle rubbed Korey's shoulder. "That's it. In and out. Are you better now? You know, I felt the verra same way when I realized Deri was my mate. I felt as though someone had run me down and then backed over me for good measure. 'Tis common, I expect, for us to fall hard when we finally do get around to falling."

The door to the office opened and Gigi entered. She took one look at Korey and arched a brow. "Drink too much again?"

He couldn't help but smile. "Aye, something like that."

*She's getting a second chance with the right man.
Again. And again. And again...*

Call Me Cupid

© 2007 Sydney Somers

On the day before her wedding, the last thing AJ needs is the ex she never truly got over showing up to complicate things. But when fate throws a curve ball and she wakes to relive the same day over and over, the only person who may know what's going on is the one man she can never trust her heart to.

Cooper thought he wanted closure. Seeing AJ again proves he's anything but ready to let go. With a Greek god in his corner he's got all the time in the world to convince AJ that she still loves him—if such a bold move doesn't push her straight out of his arms forever.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Call Me Cupid*:

"You're so not over her." Cooper McLain scrubbed a hand over his face, staring bleary eyed at his reflection. He looked like crap.

A night of drinking yourself into a stupor did that oddly enough. His mouth tasted like he'd downed a few shots of sawdust before he'd damn near crawled back to the hotel and crashed on the chair for the first couple hours. At some point, he'd roused enough to at least kick off his shoes before dropping into bed.

Cooper glanced at the clock. Shit. He'd slept all day. Not that he was in any hurry. He didn't even know what the hell he was doing here. The fact that his brother was visiting with his girlfriend wasn't any reason to check himself into a hotel for the night. But then, it wasn't about getting away from his brother as much as it was getting closer to AJ.

Cooper cursed under his breath and turned away from his reflection, annoyed with himself. He turned the shower on, stepping under the purposely cold water to both wake up and get a grip on himself. He planned on going to the wedding only to make himself realize it was

really over and to wish AJ the best with the lucky bastard. God knows he'd given her more than enough reasons to be miserable that she deserved this.

Then what the hell are you doing here the day before?

He'd asked himself the same question a hundred times since he checked in last night. Then a few more times between every drink he chugged back wanting to forget that he'd pushed the best thing in his life right out of his arms. And two and a half years ago to boot.

Now AJ was marrying someone else.

His gut clenched, and he almost laughed. He'd been convinced that ugly feeling was nothing more than an ulcer left from his days as a cop too caught up in his work and an inch shy of burning out. Now he recognized it for what it was.

The thought of AJ spending the rest of her life with anyone but him left him sick to his stomach.

He finished showering and dried off, really regretting that last beer. Or was it three?

"Too little, too late," he grumbled under his breath. She was moving on. It was time he did too. His cop career was over. He and AJ were over. He needed to start fresh.

Feeling slightly more alert, Cooper strode back into the bedroom. He spotted the blond-haired man stretched out on the bed, surfing through the channels on the TV.

Cooper clutched the towel he'd been about to pitch back into the bathroom around his waist. *Great.*

"To what do I owe your unexpected visit?"

Eros, Greek god of love and desire, didn't take his eyes off the small screen. He cocked his head, trying to follow the movements of the naked couple on the low-budget film. He cringed.

Cooper arched a brow. "You ordered porn?"

Eros snorted, then pushed up, turning off the television with a wave of his hand. "I came to see my favorite descendant."

“Right,” Cooper drawled. “It’s Valentines Day. I’m sure there are about a hundred million people that need your company more than I do right now. Go play with your bow and arrow.”

“Is it just me, or am I detecting a smidge of hostility today?” Eros frowned. “Hangover, huh?”

“Yeah, and unless you’re going to,” Cooper snapped his fingers, “will it away or however you do that shit, let’s not talk about it.” He turned around, realizing the curtains were open. Cooper stalked across the carpet, his aching eyes and head thanking him the second he yanked the drapes shut.

“Why don’t you just tell her already?”

Cooper glared at him. “We’re not going there today, you got me?” It had only taken him a few visits—after Cooper figured out he really wasn’t crazy—to realize Eros didn’t tolerate wimps or ass kissers. The god came knocking when he was bored, not because he was looking to reward descendants he never expected with a better life.

Eros grinned. “Easy there, *Zeus*, and cool it with the castrating looks, or I’ll be willing away more than your hangover.”

Cooper snorted. The one thing he’d learned about his great-great-great-into-infinity grandfather since the ageless god had poofed into Cooper’s perfectly normal world a couple years ago, was the guy wouldn’t raise a hand to hurt his “descendants” as he liked to call them. Not unless they badmouthed Psyche. Then they were toast.

“I don’t know why you just don’t—”

“No,” Cooper growled. They’d been over this. Eros was not going to screw with AJ’s head or heart on this. No way. He’d done enough of that all on his own in the past.

Eros shrugged. “Suit yourself. But you’re fucking up here, you know that right?”

“Go bug my brother.”

Eros sighed. “He’s not nearly as much fun. Although I have to say, since you got shot, you’ve been a bit of a bore.”

Cooper let the reminder roll right off him, ignoring the stiffness that seemed to grip the muscles in his leg, following Eros's comment. "I wasn't such a bore last night."

"Before or after you puked your guts out in the men's bathroom that, by the way, didn't even look fit enough to take a piss in. And I'll piss just about anywhere."

"How do you know about that?"

Eros crossed his arms. "Who do you think made sure you got back here in one piece?"

Cooper frowned, combing his memory, but coming up with nothing. He remembered the drinking. Lots and lots of drinking. And then the cab? And sleeping.

"You were a mess. And that scary dude, who you claimed had a third nipple, was ready to mop the floor with you."

Ignoring the troublesome god, who derived far too much pleasure in the chaotic state of Cooper's life, he headed for the closet. He paused, turned back. "I was in a fight?" Considering he hadn't woke up with anything broken or aching aside from his head, that must have meant he won.

Cooper grinned.

With a sound of disgust Eros followed him to the closet. "You couldn't even stand up by that point. I think you even threatened the guy with a swizzle stick."

He would have groaned *if* he actually believed a word the god was saying. His weapon of choice would never have been a swizzle stick.

Eros pushed away from the closet. "I can see when I'm not being appreciated."

"Like that's meant anything to you before."

"You're a stubborn ass, you know that."

"I think they call it genetics."

Despite the fact that Cooper had been a total asshole for the duration of his visit, Eros grinned. "Sure you don't want me to help you out with AJ?"

"No."

Eros's lips twitched.

"Don't interfere," Cooper warned, not trusting the mischievous glimmer in the god's eyes.

"Or what?" In true Eros fashion, he vanished into thin air without waiting for a response.

"Eros?" Cooper snapped. "I mean it."

The god didn't answer.

Perfect.

His ex was getting married, and he had a bored Greek god on his hands looking to stir up trouble. If he had a lick of sense, he'd go the hell home.

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