

Changeling Press

DRIVEN TO JUSTICE



ALICE GAMES

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Alice Gaines

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Charley Thomas is in danger of losing the job she loves as a motorcycle cop. The stress of having suffered a brutal assault makes her a risk to herself and her fellow officers. If only she could remember more details of the assault, she could round up the creeps and make them pay.

When the sexy German motorcycle mysteriously shows up in her driveway, she can't resist a ride. Little does she suspect that the bike is also a man who will help her to track down the rapists and feel whole again.

Chapter One

"It's Klaus! I've found him."

Claire looked up from her spreadsheet and over to Will where he sat at the dining room table, typing furiously into his laptop. Jake stood right behind him and stared at the screen.

"Klaus Mannhof?" Claire asked.

"I'm sure of it," Will said.

"*Gott sei dank*," Jake added.

Lauren appeared at the entrance to the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. "What's all the shouting about?"

"Will says he's found Klaus," Claire said.

"Not Klaus himself," Will corrected. "But I have his e-mail address."

Claire had to chuckle at that. Immortals with e-mail addresses? Efficient. As a CEO, she valued efficiency. But, somehow it didn't fit with her image of an old man who made motorcycles with his own hands. Motorcycles that could shift into gorgeous men, like the two at the table.

"How do you know it's Klaus?" Lauren asked.

"He told me to look in the last place you'd find a Mannhof," Will said. "I couldn't figure out what that meant, but today I decided to use a search engine and go to the final link."

"Yes," Jake said. "That's the code."

Claire rose, walked to the table, and looked at the screen. It was blank except for three words. "Friends, Romans, countrymen," she read. "Shakespeare?"

Will looked up at her, a grin of triumph on his beautiful face. "Klaus loves the classics."

Lauren joined them. "Holy shit. You really found him?"

"We'll see soon." Will clicked on the words, and an e-mail window appeared. He typed "*Freude schöner Götterfunken*" into the body of the post and hit send.

"Beethoven," Lauren said.

"Actually, Schiller," Jake said. "The Ode to Joy."

"Why all the cloak and dagger stuff?" Lauren asked.

"We need to keep Klaus a secret," Claire answered. "Imagine what the authorities would do with a motorcycle shapeshifter if they found out about him."

"Okay," Lauren said. "How long will we have to wait to hear from him?"

Jake straightened and crossed his arms over his chest. "Who knows? It depends on when he finds our message."

The you-have-mail tone went off. Will smiled. "That didn't take long."

After going to the e-mail software, he clicked on new messages. Sure enough, there was a reply with no subject line. Will opened the message and looked at the German there.

"Come on, come on," Lauren said. "What does it say?"

"It says there's another Mannhof on his way," Will answered.

Lauren's eyes went wide. "Another shifter?"

"Niklas," Jake said. "And he'll bring his woman with him."

* * *

Charley held the phone to her ear, her fingers curled around it in a death grip. "Sarge, I'm ready to come back to work. Give me another chance."

"Have you seen the shrink, Thomas?" Henderson's voice asked.

"I don't need a shrink." No one in her family had ever seen one of those quacks, and she sure as hell wasn't going to be the first. Her dad didn't raise any sissies, and she wouldn't give her brothers the satisfaction of razzing her at family gatherings. They'd all become firefighters. A dangerous job, but she'd outmacho-ed them by getting a job as a motorcycle cop. Just like Dad.

Only, now the department had put her on suspension and wouldn't let her go back to work.

"One stupid incident shouldn't keep me off the streets," she said. "You know you need good officers."

"It's only because you are a good officer that we haven't fired you," Henderson answered.

"What the fuck? Fire me? For going off on a low-life punk?"

"He was seventeen. He wasn't armed. And, his uncle is on the city council."

Well, shit. "You told me the kid's going to be okay."

"After a day in the hospital. What the hell did you do to him?"

No more than the asshole deserved. He'd smacked his girlfriend a couple of times, and she didn't have to stand by and twiddle her thumbs when she witnessed that kind of bullshit. It figured the little airhead would turn on Charley instead of thanking her. She should have kicked the crap out of both of them.

"Because of you, I'm up to my ass in Internal Affairs and the media," Henderson said. "You're not coming back to work until your head's screwed on straight."

"What if I kiss up to the councilman and promise to be a good girl?"

There was a long silence at the other end. Finally, the sarge sighed. "Charley, you haven't been right since the assault. You have to deal with it, or you won't get right."

Acid churned in her gut. "I am dealing with it."

"What you're doing isn't working. Let me get a few detectives working on the case. We can catch the perps, and you can put it behind you."

"I appreciate your help, Sarge." If it hadn't been for Henderson, she would never have considered doing the right thing -- having samples taken at the hospital that would nail the creeps' asses when she caught them. The doctors had to report a rape to the police. Sarge qualified, and after a desperate phone call, he'd agreed to take the report and keep it quiet. If only he'd let her go back to work now.

"You'd better appreciate it," Sarge said. "I'm sitting on a major crime that you won't let me do anything about."

"I know that." Damn, but it hurt that she'd had to ask her boss for help with something like this. His sympathy made things worse. She didn't need pity. She needed to be knocking bad guys' heads. "Keep it quiet a little while longer."

A pause followed that. "How long?"

"Until I can catch them and bring them in." After she'd kicked the shit out of them.

"All alone?" Sarge said. "Face it, Thomas, you're slipping."

Her heart sank. She'd never had anything but the best performance reviews. "What does that mean?"

"Steele said you froze on him the other night."

"He told you about that?"

"He had to," Henderson said. "Damn it, I need to know this stuff."

"That only lasted a second."

"That's long enough to get one of you killed. You got lucky this time."

Shit, didn't Henderson think she knew that? Any kind of hesitation gave the bad guys an advantage. But, any officer must have that problem at least once in her career.

"This all started after the assault," Henderson said. "You need to see the shrink."

Her vision dimmed, the darkness closing around the edges. Shit, not now. She needed to convince Henderson she was fine. She couldn't have him hear her flip out.

She fought it, shutting her eyes tightly and opening them again. She did her best to take even breaths, but her heart hammered in her chest, and she couldn't get enough air into her lungs. Suddenly, she found herself staring at dust floating in the light from filthy windows. Hands on her body. The sounds of a man's grunts just before he came.

Damn it. Damn it all to hell. This could not be happening.

"Thomas?" The sarge's voice. "What the hell's going on?"

She crashed back to reality. Her living room. Her bare feet on the bricks by the fireplace. Home. Not that other place.

"Charley?" Henderson's voice at the other end of the line. "Are you okay?"

She dug her fingers into her hair. "I'm fine."

"You didn't sound fine. You sounded as if you couldn't breathe."

"I'm getting a cold."

"That didn't sound like any cold I ever heard," Henderson said. "Maybe if you tell me what's going on in your head, I can help you."

"It's personal."

"All right, have it your way." He humphed. If he got any more frustrated, she'd be able to hear his teeth grinding over the phone. "But, you're not going back on duty until you see the shrink."

"Thanks for nothing," she said.

"Yeah, I love you too."

The line went dead. He'd hung up on her. She turned off her cell phone and hurled it at the couch. Shit, piss, fuck.

She got up and moved around the living room, her hands clenching and unclenching as she did. That didn't help any more than it had the last twenty times she'd tried it. She ought to put her fist through something, but bloody knuckles would only prove the sergeant right. She could control herself, and by God, she'd do it even if it killed her. There had to be some way to blow off steam besides getting stinking drunk.

If only she could remember more about where those mother fuckers had taken her, she could track them down and make them pay. Instead, all she got when she tried to bring up the details was images like the ones in the darkness. Hands all over her. Things being forced up her pussy and down her throat. *That* didn't help.

Everything before leaving the emergency room came back in a blur. She'd gotten to the hospital in plenty of time to save evidence of the rape. Correction, rapes. If she found those bastards, their DNA would nail the lid on some serious convictions. They'd get prison and, with any luck, massive doses of their own medicine. She was a police officer. Why couldn't she go about this methodically?

Damn, she was hyperventilating again. Even staring out the window didn't keep the walls from closing in on her. She'd go for a ride. Her own bike wasn't as powerful

as the BMW she rode at work, but a good run on the freeway ought to lighten her up. At least, for a few hours. She headed into the bedroom to find her leathers.

* * *

After locking the front door, Charley took the steps two at a time and headed toward the driveway. She immediately met an obstacle. A flatbed truck had blocked her in, and a team of men was unloading a large, wooden crate.

"Hey," she called. "You want to get your truck out of my way?"

Their foreman -- a guy with a paunch and a pen behind his ear and clipboard in his hand -- looked up at the street sign and then down at his paperwork. "Is this one-forty-six Arrowhead?"

"Yeah, and you're blocking my driveway."

"Charlene Thomas?"

"Charley. What is this, twenty questions?"

He walked toward her and held out the clipboard. "Delivery."

"I didn't order anything." She wouldn't have forgotten buying something that came in a box that huge.

"I'm not customer service. I only deliver." He held out the clipboard again.

She put her helmet on the lawn, took the clipboard, and checked the name and address. The man was right.

He held out the pen. "Sign."

"I'm not signing for something I didn't order."

"Look, lady, I was told to deliver this here. Until you sign, my truck stays across your driveway."

She took the pen and watched as the other men used a forklift to bring the box to within a few feet of where she stood.

"If it's a mistake, call the company," the foreman said.

She looked down at the paperwork. "But, there's no contact information." In fact, the sheet held nothing at all besides her name and address. "How am I supposed to call them with no phone number?"

“If they want you to pay for it, they’ll get in touch with you, won’t they?” he said. “Just sign.”

Well, hell. The guy was as stubborn as she was, only he was blocking her driveway, not the other way around. She signed his paper and handed the clipboard and pen back to him.

He turned to the others. “Unpack it, guys.”

One of the men removed the top of the crate with a crowbar and then did the same to one of the ends. The second man climbed inside, removed some restraining straps and pushed something out onto the pavement.

Holy shit, a motorcycle. Not just any motorcycle, but the most beautiful piece of machinery she’d ever seen.

It appeared antique by design, but the chrome sparkled as if brand new. Low and sleek, the thing reeked of power even with the engine off. It had no markings -- nothing that would identify the make or model. In fact, the only image on it was a golden star painted on the gas tank that resembled a badge. As if the person who’d sent it knew it was going to a police officer.

By the time she looked up again, the men had loaded the forklift and the disassembled crate back onto the bed of the truck and now only had to make everything secure before they could leave. Leave her with this glorious machine that had to be someone’s mistake. No one she knew had enough money to buy something so expensive as a surprise present.

The two workers turned and headed back to the vehicle. Charley caught the eye of the foreman again. “You can’t just take off.”

“You know some reason I shouldn’t?”

She pointed toward the cycle. “That isn’t mine.”

“It had your name on the manifest. It’s yours.”

How could she make him see reason? He couldn’t deliver expensive things to people they didn’t belong to every day.

“Look, lady, someone’s sent you a really nice motorcycle,” he said. “Why don’t you just take it and quit complaining?”

Hopeless. He was really going to leave this treasure with her.

“Here you go.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out some keys on a small ring, and handed them to her. “Knock yourself out.” He turned and joined the other men, in the truck and drove off.

Well, if that didn’t beat all. She’d swear she imagined the whole thing except for the fact that the bike still stood in her driveway, looking sexy as sin. Someone had sent it to her and given her no clue how to return it. She might as well enjoy it before the sender came to his senses.

The mere thought of taking all that power between her legs sent a shiver of excitement through her. The first stirrings of sexual awareness since those awful days months ago. The bike wouldn’t rape her, couldn’t control her. She’d decide when to accelerate and when to turn. How fast to go. Right now, fast sounded really good.

She retrieved her helmet and put it on, fastening the strap under her chin. Then, keys in hand, she walked to the bike and ran her hand over the leather seat. It felt warm, probably from the sun. She shared the heat, deep inside her and at the juncture of her legs. This would be a sweet ride.

Smiling, she inserted the keys in the lock and turned them to on and then put on the gloves she always kept in the pockets of her jacket. Finally ready, she swung her leg over the bike and sat. Before she started the engine, it roared to life with a deep sound that vibrated through her bones.

The minute she’d settled onto the seat, the bike put itself in gear and blasted down the driveway onto the road. Immediately, the darkness closed in around her.

* * *

Some time later, Charley fought her way out of the darkness again. Shit. She’d had another flashback sitting on a speeding motorcycle. She hadn’t passed out, thank God, and she still clutched the handlebars with sweaty palms. But, how did the fucking bike drive here on its own? She ought to be dead, but the bike flew down a country

road upright. She'd wanted excitement, but not this. She'd expected to control the machine, not the other way around.

She tried to ease up on the throttle, downshift, hit the brakes. Anything. She might as well hit her head against a brick wall. Nothing worked. She turned the key, even pulled it out and tossed it to the side of the road as if she could break a magical connection.

Damn it. If one more fucking thing overpowered her, she'd lose it for good.

Vineyards and rolling hills raced by. Wine country. Nice scenery, but the bike had fucking kidnapped her. She had to get her mind together and figure out how all this could have happened. Breathe. Breathe.

Could the bike be programmed to bring her here? Not possible. It had to have maneuvered through traffic. Intersections and stop lights. Despite the obstacles, it had managed to avoid collisions. Could someone be controlling it remotely? No, that made no sense either.

However this ride had come about, she'd find out who'd directed it, kick him in the balls, and haul him off to jail. And, if her captor turned out to be a whole crew of captors, she'd either kill them all or die trying. If they tried getting her Glock away from her, she'd kill herself first. No way she was going through *that* shit again.

The bike turned off the road and headed up a driveway, going slower now. She might be able to jump off. Even with her leathers, though, she'd get pretty banged up when she hit the pavement. And, the clay soil on either side didn't look a lot softer either. Besides, if the darkness closed in again, whatever creep or creeps waited at the end of the journey could disarm her and tie her up. No, she'd just hang on and tear him or them apart once the bike delivered her at her destination.

As she continued between rows and rows of grapevines, a house came into view. A sprawling hacienda with rolling lawns and gardens all around it. A swimming pool and tennis court lay off to one side. The spread was a palace. Four people -- two women and two men -- left the terrace that ran the length of the front of the main building and approached the circle of pavement where the driveway ended.

Her hosts. Good luck, assholes. She reached into her jacket and pulled out her weapon.

The bike came within a few yards of them and stopped. Instantly, Charley jumped off, letting the machine fall on its side, took the Glock in both hands, and pointed it at them. "Face down, on the ground," she ordered. "Hands on your heads."

One of the men -- a striking blond with crystal blue eyes -- took a step toward her, his hands outstretched. "We're not going to hurt you."

She pointed the gun at his head. "Do it, mother fucker, or your friends can watch me blow your brains out!"

"All right." He got on his stomach on the pavement and put his hands at the back of his head. The others wised up real fast and did the same.

"Okay, what do you want from me?" Charley asked.

"We don't want anything," one of the women said.

"We want to help you," the other woman added.

"Very funny. What is this, some kind of cult?" You heard about that sometimes. People getting sucked in and moving to the country to follow some sick guru. They didn't normally live in mansions, though.

"Why don't you put down that gun?" the blond guy said.

"Let's talk. We can explain everything," the other guy said. Another blond, but more sandy-haired.

"Explain one thing," she demanded. "How did you bring me here?"

"We didn't," the second man said. "The bike did."

"His name is Niklas," the first blond added.

"Cute, bozo."

"Look at him," the dark-haired woman said.

She glanced at the bike, and -- holy shit -- something really weird happened. It turned kind of fluid, wavy at the edges. A light surrounded it, and inside the glare, things started to change. The tires melted and took on the color of pale skin. The whole machine appeared to be turning into flesh.

Her heart pounded, and breathing became difficult. Shit. A minute ago, she'd controlled the situation. This went way beyond her training. Even beyond her guts. Darkness tried to close in around her brain again, leaving nothing but the light and whatever the hell was going on inside it.

The image in there solidified, and the light dimmed. She stood, unable to do anything but struggle for breath while the transformation ended. Now, where a motorcycle had lain on its side, a man's body appeared. Completely naked.

A hand touched hers. The dark-haired woman stood beside her, the gun in her hand. Somewhere in there, she'd dropped it. She'd frozen again. Hell, she still couldn't make her limbs move.

The woman put her arm over Charley's shoulder. "Let's go inside. I think I can find a bottle of wine."

"Something stronger." Charley's voice came out a croak.

The woman chuckled. "I think I can manage that too."

The woman guided Charley to the house. Halfway there, she turned around to make sure she'd really seen what she'd seen. Sure enough, the two men had gone to the one that used to be a motorcycle and were helping him up, speaking German as they did. Had the whole world gone nuts?

* * *

Nick's heart ached to see how he'd frightened the woman. Charlene -- Charley, as she called herself -- perched on the edge of the couch, clutching a tumbler in shaking fingers. She trembled so hard she could barely sip the brandy. What could turn such a strong woman into a tightly wound cluster of nerves?

Klaus should have warned him she was this vulnerable. He would have gone more slowly, earned her trust before he shifted. He never would have taken her on the wild ride here.

And yet, would she ever have trusted him? She'd gone frantic the moment he'd left her driveway. Kicking at him and working the controls like a mad woman. She'd

even screamed at him to stop. He'd had to resist her efforts with every bit of strength he had, or she would have killed them both in her frenzy.

Then, when four reasonable and loving people greeted her, she'd pulled out a gun and threatened to kill them. That went way beyond normal fear. She was obviously trying to fight something that terrified her, and she was losing badly. No, she wouldn't have trusted him.

Sitting next to Charley, Lauren reached over and stroked her back. "Don't be so hard on yourself. The shifting takes some getting used to."

Charley looked into Lauren's face. "Have you ever watched anything like it?"

Claire laughed. "Both of us have. Will and Jake are Mannhofs too."

Charley's eyes widened as she looked from one of the men to the other. "You mean..."

"Jake and I both shift," Will said.

Charley swallowed the rest of the brandy, set the tumbler on the coffee table, and put her face into her hands.

"It's wonderful, really," Lauren said, still rubbing Charley's back. "You can ride like the wind with your Mannhof and snuggle up at night with one of the world's greatest lovers."

"During the daytime too," Claire added.

Charley's head shot up, and her eyes got wide. Sex frightened her too? Klaus had taught Nick that lovemaking was the finest of gifts two people could share. He'd waited for the day he could join with her. He ached for it now, his cock still hard in the pants Jake had given him. She did *not* appear receptive.

Charley looked skeptical, to say the least. Although clearly still shaken -- pale and wide-eyed -- she looked from one woman to the other. "So, you're telling me these guys are your rides *and* your lovers."

"Improbable, but true," Claire said.

"It's impossible."

"Maybe Jake can explain it," Lauren said.

The Mannhof with the platinum hair sat forward in his chair. "The goddess, Anima, gave Klaus Mannhof eternal life in honor of his service to women. She also gave him the ability to make us. Each of us is designed for only one woman."

"I'm Claire's, and Jake belongs to Lauren," Will added.

"You're telling me I *own* him?" Charley said, pointing to Nick.

"You can speak to me directly," he said. "I have ears and a brain."

She glared across the room at him. "I'm supposed to believe you're some kind of human-machine hybrid created by an imaginary character named Klaus."

"He's not imaginary."

She snorted. "Immortal? Service to women?"

"You've seen me shift. *You* explain it."

"I'm hallucinating. I've lost my mind. I don't know," she said. "You scared the shit out of me."

His skin grew warm. He had done that, much to his shame. "I'm sorry."

"You brought me here against my will. I don't even know what you are."

Ach, that hurt. "It's what I was built to do."

"You drove like a bat out of hell. Why didn't we crash?"

"I know how to drive. I'd never hurt you."

"That may be hard to believe now," Claire said. "But, it's true."

Charley jumped to her feet and began pacing the room. "This whole thing is nuts. I don't know who you people are, but I don't belong here."

Nick walked to her and took her hands in his. "Wrong, *Liebling*. Something's hurt you. This is where you heal."

She looked up at him from her emerald eyes and stiffened. She'd pull away entirely -- he could sense that -- but doing so would admit her fear. She'd rather endure his closeness than show she was afraid.

"There's nothing wrong with me that I can't take care of myself," she said.

"You sound exactly like I did before Will found me," Claire said. "He showed me how bull-headed and ignorant I was."

"Klaus Mannhof made me for you," Nick said.

"The crazy wizard-guru?" She snorted. "You expect me to believe that bullshit?"

"Did bullshit let me bring you here?"

She didn't answer him but turned her head away.

He grasped her chin and turned her right back. "Did bullshit let me change into a man?"

"It wasn't a miracle," she answered.

"It was Klaus' engineering and the life he created for me. And it was chemistry in the bond between us."

"I'm not bound to you."

Curse her. Why did she have to fight him? He'd been made specifically for her, but she resisted what he offered. One way or another, she *would* come to see that they belonged together. If she didn't, they both faced a long and lonely life apart.

Lauren joined them. "Go easy, Nick. It takes a while for a woman to get used to the fact that she's fallen in love with a machine."

"Who said anything about love?" Charley demanded. "I only met him fifteen minutes ago."

"Give it time," Claire said.

"Time." Charley huffed. "So, what won me this honor?"

Lauren laughed. "It's not so much an honor as a service."

Charley looked at him then. Really looked at him as if measuring his size. "You mean he's going to service me?"

Claire's gaze traveled from Charley to Nick and back. Clearly, she'd read the tension between the two of them. "In a manner of speaking," she said.

"I don't need it," Charley answered.

She was lying with that -- either to him or to herself. Her shoulders had gone rigid, and her jaw tightened. She looked more like someone facing execution than a woman about to be loved. Klaus had given him quite a challenge. Perhaps more than the other Mannhofs had faced.

None of the others missed her body language either. Lauren leaned closer to Charley and rubbed her back again. "Stay with us for a while."

"And if I don't want to?"

Claire sighed. "I'll give you a ride back in the SUV, or Nick can take you home."

Charley looked at him warily. "You'd do that?"

"Of course. I'd even let you drive."

That melted her just a bit. Her shoulders relaxed. Not all the way to normal shoulders, but enough to suggest she'd relented.

"Come on," Lauren said. "Do you have anything better waiting for you at home?"

"Probably not." She looked at Lauren. "You really want me to stay?"

"We all do," Lauren answered.

"At least here you can avoid the press," Claire said.

Charley's head snapped around. "You know about that?"

"We've seen the coverage on the TV," Lauren said. "You're the officer who assaulted that kid."

Assault? Nick glanced over at Will, who answered back with a look that said, *I'll tell you later.*

"He had it coming," Charley answered.

"You're still on suspension, right?" Lauren asked.

Charley nodded.

"You have cats to take care of at home?" Lauren asked. "Plants to water?"

"Nothing."

"Then stay here. We're nice people. We can take some bitchin' rides," Lauren said.

Charley looked around the room at all of them, and then her gaze settled back on him. "You promise not to touch me?"

Lieber Gott, how would he manage that? He wanted her so much his hair hurt. "I won't do anything you don't want me to do."

"All right," she said finally. "Yeah, sure. Why not?"

* * *

That night, Nick lay curled up in a blanket on the floor next to Charley's bed. He could have slept in another room, but there, he wouldn't have been able to detect her scent on the warm breeze coming in the window. He couldn't listen to the sound of her breathing as she slept.

He also wouldn't have been rock hard and throbbing for her. Oh, hell yes, he would. Just the thought of her nearby primed his human body to join with hers. Here, close enough to her that her every turn in bed woke him up, the hunger raced through his veins. Deep inside of him, an engine thrummed. It would until he'd buried his cock inside her and they'd ridden together into bliss.

What an amazing thing, this body. Supple and strong and equipped with powerful sensations. Each one of them now fueled his need for her. Even the cotton of the pajama bottoms against his swollen member seemed almost unbearable.

Sounds came from outside. Hushed voices and giggling, followed by splashing in the pool. A man and a woman were out there, playing in the water. "Quiet," the woman said, probably Lauren. "You'll wake them."

"I want you, *Schatzie*." Jake.

"Okay, just don't make any noise."

They fell silent except for the sounds of water lapping against the sides of the pool. The two Mannhofs worshiped their mates, and the women obviously returned their love. They hardly spent a moment apart, and when together, they touched constantly. If only Charley could allow herself to feel the same about him.

More sounds came to him -- perhaps because the nearness of his woman had heightened all his senses. Soft moans of pleasure from outside. Even though he hadn't experienced the ultimate act himself, the meaning in their noises came through clearly. Lauren and Jake had merged into one creature. Lust and love. Communion.

On the bed, Charley sighed. No sound of sleep, that. She'd awakened and was listening to the coupling outside.

“Liebling?” he whispered.

“Why are you still here?”

“I need to be close to you.”

“Your loss.”

He sat up and glanced at her. *“Why do you say things like that?”*

She didn’t answer but rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

“Let me hold you,” he said. *“Just hold you.”*

Still, she said nothing. Fine. He’d take that for permission. He rose, lifted the covers, and slid into the bed next to her.

She rolled onto her side and scooted to the other edge of the bed, as far away from him as she could get. She hadn’t rejected him completely, though. That was a start.

“I told you not to touch me.”

“I only want to comfort you,” he said. *“Let me do that, at least.”*

When she didn’t forbid it, he reached out and pulled her against him, her back to his front. That brought her ass against his cock. Even through both pairs of pajamas, the pressure nearly snapped what little control he had. He could have screamed with frustration, but instead he held himself still.

The noises from outside got louder, the water moving harder and the voices rising. Charley stiffened in his arms, tension making her shoulders tremble.

“Shhh,” he whispered. *“It’s all right, my love.”*

“I can’t...” she murmured. *“Never again.”*

“What happened to you?” Whatever terrible thing life had done to her, it involved sex. She’d blanched at the idea of him servicing her, as she put it. Now, the mere sounds of lovemaking terrified her.

“It’s closing in. The darkness.” She stifled a sob.

“Darkness?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

He pulled her harder against him. *“I’m here. No one can hurt you.”*

“Why do you care?”

"I'm yours," he said. "I was made for you."

She laughed, but it was more like a whimper. "Being you must suck."

He kissed her ear. She flinched but didn't try to pull away. Progress.

Lauren's cry of completion sounded outside. Muffled, but unambiguous. With a loud moan, Jake finished right after. Everything went still out there, but the woman in his arms shook. Nick ran his fingers over her cheek and found tears.

Chapter Two

Last night shouldn't have happened. Charley sat on the back deck and took a swig of her coffee. Cold. She'd been sitting here so long remembering lying in Nick's arms listening to the sounds of fucking. She used to enjoy sex. Now, the mere thought turned her stomach. If she hadn't needed... something... she would have told him to get the hell out of her bed and her room.

Liar. If she was going to order him away from her, she would have done it the minute he waltzed in and announced he'd be staying with her. He had a hold over her somehow. Just as surely as he'd brought her here, he drew her to him in other ways. Maybe it was the deep brown eyes. So innocent, almost like a child's. That cock wasn't innocent, though. Thick and rigid, it would have given her so much pleasure once.

Even now, he drew a response from her, just as he had the night before. Despite everything that had happened, she'd grown wet imagining him sliding his prick deep inside her. Then the darkness had closed in around her, punctuated by the noises from the couple in the pool. Nick had served as her anchor. Her tie to reality. No one could hurt her as long as he held her, he'd said. She could almost make herself believe that.

"You're wearing a dress," Nick's voice said from the doorway behind her.

She turned and spotted him where he stood with a coffee mug in his hand. "Something Lauren loaned me," she said.

"I like it. May I join you?"

"Suit yourself." She turned back and stared past the garden to the grapevines in the distance.

Nick sat in the lawn chair beside hers. "Lauren must be smaller breasted than you are."

Her cheeks grew warm. "The top is kind of tight."

"I like that even better."

"Men." She lifted her coffee to her mouth. Another cold sip was enough. She set the mug on the table beside her.

"Your nipples are hard," he said.

She ought to tell him to go ogle someone else's boobs, but he didn't make the comment sound like a smart-assed crack. More a statement of fact, along with approval.

"You're very beautiful, you know," he said.

"I've been known to cold-cock men for saying that."

His eyebrow went up. "For telling you you're beautiful?"

"Tough's more useful than beautiful."

"You weren't very tough last night, I think."

She clutched her hands together in her lap and stared at them.

"You were crying," he said softly.

"You're not going to tell the rest of them that, are you?"

He lifted her chin and turned her to face him. "I won't do anything you don't want me to do." He looked deeply into her eyes, the expression there telling her clearly that he meant a lot more than just repeating a secret. He wanted her. If she'd had any doubt of that, his huge woody the night before would have cleared it up. He planned to have her too, but only if she'd let him.

"I want to know who hurt you," he said. "I have a good idea of how."

No point trying to deny it. The way she freaked listening to Lauren and Jake get it on had told the whole story. "Some people get their jollies in twisted ways."

"I'll kill him." He meant that as a statement of fact too.

"I thought Mannhofs were lovers, not fighters."

"Anyone who treats a woman like that deserves to die."

"You'll have to find them first."

His eyes got wide. "Them?"

"Three. Maybe four. I don't know."

"Why don't you know, *Liebling*?"

“Because I blotted it out.” She rose, walked to the edge of the deck, and gripped the railing in both hands. “I’m a cop, trained to pay attention to details, and I can’t remember a fucking thing.”

What she did remember made her blood run cold. She needed detachment. She managed every day at work. Horrible things people did to each other hardly touched her.

Nick’s hand came down to cover hers. “It’s natural for your mind to want to shut it out.”

“It isn’t professional.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. This happens to many women.”

She looked up at him. “Not to me, it doesn’t.”

“My brave warrior.”

He put his arms around her and held her close. There was that erection again. The poor guy needed some relief, and he’d hooked himself up with a basket case.

“Klaus designed me so that I could make things right for you,” he said.

“Good luck with that.”

“I don’t need luck. I have love.”

Love. This whole deal was crazy. He’d been delivered as a motorcycle to her house only the day before. He’d brought her here after an insane ride across a couple of counties. She’d watched him change from a bike into a man. Now, he was talking about love. Maybe she ought to see the shrink, after all.

“Will and Jake have told me about their struggles to win over stubborn women. You can’t be any more difficult.”

“Don’t count on it, pal.” She rested against his chest and let his hands wander over her back. She’d never have guessed the day before she’d be doing *that*.

“I need to make love with you.” The words rumbled under her ear. “I’m made to do that.”

“I want to, honest. I can’t.”

“We’ll fix that. I promise.”

She looked back up at him. He stared back at her, and a fire entered his eyes. Pure lust. Hunger like nothing she'd seen before. The expression took her breath away. If he hadn't held her so gently the night before, she would have pushed him away and run. Still, he held her as if afraid that she'd break.

An irresistible combination -- raw need and tenderness. She lost herself in his eyes, and the real world became no more solid than a mist. Her breasts tingled, the nipples rubbing against the firm wall of his chest. Suddenly heavy, her eyelids drooped, and her lips parted so that she could breathe.

He groaned, and his eyes closed as his face neared hers slowly. He was going to kiss her, and she'd let him.

When his lips touched hers, they were as soft as flower petals and as powerful as his engine. Hardly any pressure, and yet the touch claimed her. Curling her fingers in the cotton of his shirt, she leaned into him and tipped her head back to welcome him.

While his mouth played over hers, he molded her body against him. Muscle everywhere. Strong, firm, gentle. His erection pressed into her belly, its heat almost burning through their clothes. All the while, his lips led hers in a dance of rising need. When he took the top one between his teeth, she sucked in a breath. Something deep inside her came to life.

He pulled back and laid tiny kisses all over her face. "Oh, my love, I want you so much."

"Nick..."

"Let me show you how much." He kissed her again, more forcefully this time. Tangling his fingers in her hair, he tipped her head back and captured her mouth with his own. Too much. Too much.

When his tongue entered her mouth, she pushed against him. Images threatened at the back of her mind. Darkness. Objects. Things she didn't want. She struggled harder, finally shoving him off her. "Stop. For Christ's sake, stop."

He released her immediately, rested his hands on the railing, and took huge, gulping breaths. "I'm sorry."

"Don't do that. Not my mouth. I mean it."

"*Liebling*." He touched her arm, but she jerked it back. "I won't hurt you," he said. "Only, I need you so badly."

Her heart raced, and her throat constricted. "It won't work, Nick. Just forget it."

He tipped his face up, muscles contorted, his jaw clenched. His chest rose raggedly as he fought for air. The sign of a man crazed with unspent lust.

He wasn't the only one. Deep inside her, her hunger fought her fear. The need for more of him battled terror until they coiled into a knot in her stomach. Tears threatened again, but she would *not* give in to them. Strength. Control. She *would* keep herself together. No one would get the best of her ever again.

He lowered his face and took another deep breath. "I thought you were ready."

She had no words for that. She had invited his kiss. So, she stood in silence, hugging herself.

"Hey, you two, let's go for a spin," Claire called from the doorway.

Charley turned and did her best to compose herself. It didn't fool the other woman because her face fell. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Charley answered.

"Just great," Nick said. "Let's ride." He walked past Claire into the house. She followed him with her gaze and then turned back to Charley for an explanation.

"I'll change into my leathers," Charley said. She pushed by Claire and went into the house too.

* * *

When Charley went outside, helmet in hand, and looked over at the circular driveway, she found the two women standing next to their own bikes. Right next to them stood Nick -- without a stitch of clothing on him. She hadn't had much chance to check him out the day before because Claire had taken her into the house right after he'd changed from motorcycle to human. She could inspect every inch of him now, and damned if she could do anything else.

She'd already noticed his square jaw and the thick, brown hair that fell nearly to his chin. She didn't have a view of his tight buns now, but she could appreciate the width of his shoulders and chest, the muscles underneath appearing to have been sculpted with a loving hand. A slender waist and long legs hinted at the power his bike-self could unleash.

The other women seemed right at home with the fact that a naked man they'd only met the day before was standing in their driveway. They hardly seemed to notice that the most beautiful cock in the world stood at attention. How in hell could they look at anything else? Charley sure couldn't.

"Ready to ride?" Lauren asked.

Claire chuckled. "I think she has other things on her mind."

"Can it," Charley said, but that only made both of them laugh.

"Are you going to tell me those two bikes are your men?" Charley asked.

Claire rested a palm on the seat of her Mannhof. Sure enough, the gas tank had a painting of a man on it, and the guy looked just like Will.

"That's Jake." Lauren pointed to her ride. "He's still teaching me how to drive."

"Yeah, right." Still, she'd watched Nick change the day before. How could she contradict the two of them?

She looked at Nick. "Are you going to turn into a bike?"

His brow lifted, and the heat of a challenge entered his eyes. "Are you ready for me?"

More laughter from the other women, so she strode off the terrace and got right up in his face. "I'm in control this time, got it?"

"You drive." He backed away from her, and the whole wavy light thing happened again. It happened faster this time as he reversed the process -- flesh differentiating to become chrome and leather. Finally, the Mannhof stood there, just as it had in her driveway. Just as sleek. Just as beautiful. Just as tempting.

She put on her helmet, walked to it, and climbed on. This time, it didn't start up on its own and blast off. It behaved like a regular bike, although more erotic than any ordinary bike. Even sitting silent, it oozed coiled-up energy.

Afraid to start me, Liebling?

She looked around. "Huh? Who said that?"

"Nick's talking to you," Claire said.

"He can do that?"

"Jake talks to me all the time," Lauren answered. "He never shuts up."

The bike Lauren sat on started up on its own.

"Okay, smart ass," Lauren said.

Claire laughed and started her Mannhof. Now, two powerful engines roared, but neither could match the sound of Nick's motor as it brought her here. Today, she'd listen to that again, only today, she'd be in control. She kicked down on the starter, and the bike came to life beneath her. After releasing the kickstand, she sat there a moment. Vibrations ran through her, starting at her pussy and coursing up to her heart. The thrumming brought a heat with it, a sensual awareness that stole her breath. In this form, with a machine she could control, she could revel in the feelings. She could ride Nick this way, even if she couldn't ride his huge cock. Her sex grew hot and wet, and the seat vibrated against her clit. For the first time since the assault, she could surrender to a sexual connection, even if only with a machine.

Claire pulled up alongside her, Will's motor idling in a deep purr. "There's nothing like it, is there?"

"You understand about control."

"Power," Claire answered. "You get addicted to it as a CEO."

Charley couldn't help but smile. "And as a cop."

Claire smiled too. "You and I are going to be good friends."

Something else glowed inside Charley. Friends. She only hung out with other cops, and none of them were really friends. She'd take a bullet for any one of them, and

they'd do the same for her. That was devotion, but not friendship. Friendship could interfere with work relationships.

Just then, Lauren flew by on Jake, giggling like a kid on an amusement park ride.

"We're going to have to work on that one," Claire said.

Charley laughed. "She's getting away from us."

Claire revved Will's engine and took after the other bike. Charley put Nick into gear and did the same.

* * *

What a ride! The best of Charley's life. As soon as she got used to Nick, he responded so completely to her every direction, he might have been reading her mind. The slightest lean, the slightest pressure of her thigh against him, had him banking smoothly into each turn. Just teasing the throttle, stroking it like a lover's cock, got her all the acceleration she could take and more. They quickly took the lead, flying by the scenery in a dance more elegant than any waltz. She opened her mouth to let out a loud whoop, but the wind tore the sounds of her voice away.

Happy? Nick's voice in her head.

"Hell, yes. Shit, yes."

Then I'm happy.

She'd have bugs in her teeth by the end of the day, but who gave a fuck? She'd taken a powerful beast between her legs and had complete control over it. This was living.

Claire pulled up alongside and pointed to a side road, signaling to go that way. Leaning, Charley guided Nick into the turn, and soon the two women sped down a smooth but narrow country road that ran between golden fields punctuated by live oaks. Lauren and Jake hadn't made the turn with them.

A dry creek bed ran along the side of the pavement, and the grasses stood waving in the breeze. People from wetter climates might find the landscape barren, but in reality, it hummed with life, all of it baking in the warm sunlight.

After a bit, Nick slowed and let Claire and Will take the lead. She should have fought him. He'd said she could drive, after all. But everything was so lovely, and every bit of tension had left her body a few miles back. Why not give in this once and see where things went without her guidance?

They crossed a wooden bridge over the creek bed and followed a dirt road away from the pavement. Claire seemed to know exactly where she was headed, as she didn't look around but kept driving until they arrived at the base of a huge oak. After circling around behind it, she shut off Will's engine, set the kickstand, and dismounted. Then, she walked to the tree and motioned to Charley to follow her lead.

Charley immediately missed the feel of Nick between her legs. The excitement of riding him had been the closest thing to sex she'd had in a while. Now her body begged for more -- her nipples stiff against the lace of her bra, and her clit feeling the rub of every movement of her legs.

Shit, what a time to get horny. Out here in the middle of nowhere with a bunch of strangers. At least her juices wouldn't soak through the leather of her pants. She'd keep herself under control until they got back to the house and sneak to her room to take care of things with her fingers.

Claire removed her helmet and unzipped her backpack. After unfolding a blanket, she spread it out at the base of the oak. "Let's sit for a while."

Charley took off her own helmet. "What about the bikes?"

"The guys won't mind if we talk for a minute."

"Won't they hear what we say?" Motorcycles eavesdropping on human conversation. Oh well, she might as well get used to it.

Claire sat on the blanket and patted the spot beside her. "Mannhofs don't tell secrets."

Which avoided the question of whether they'd listen, but hell, she wasn't going to spill her guts to Claire either, so it didn't matter either way. She walked to the blanket and sat down.

They sat without talking for a while, the leaves of the oak filtering the sun between them. Finally, Claire cleared her throat. "What were you and Nick doing when I found you on the deck?"

"Nothing."

"All right, if you want to be literal about it, what *had* you been doing before I found you?" Claire asked. "Nick was pretty upset."

"I thought we were going to ride, not have an interrogation."

Claire put a hand on Charley's arm. "Don't bullshit a bullshitter. I'm way better than you are at it."

"He kissed me, and I told him to stop." Charley did her best impression of a casual shrug. "No biggie."

"That's where you're wrong. It's a very big deal for a Mannhof. Klaus builds their whole existence around us."

"I didn't ask him to do it for me."

"None of us asked. I fought just as hard as you're fighting. Will had to pretend to be a dream to seduce me."

Good thing Nick hadn't tried that. He would have ended up caught up in her real dreams, and they sucked these days.

"When a Mannhof comes into your life, he's primed for two things," Claire went on. "To shift, and to fuck, but only with you."

"I noticed he always has a hard-on."

"Do you know how much it's hurting him to stay away from you?"

Charley glanced over at the bike. It didn't look like it was hurting. It looked like a hunk of metal, leather, and rubber. Bullcrap. The machine she'd ridden here amounted to a hell of a lot more than that. So did the man who'd held her last night while she cried.

"If Nick's like Will, he had some senses before he shifted," Claire said. "The moment he saw you through human eyes, all his senses went into hyperdrive. You think you've been horny? You don't understand half of what he's going through."

"I'm sorry, okay?" Shit, she shouldn't holler like that. They'd all been pushing at her since she'd arrived. None of this had been any of her idea. She hadn't asked for a fucking magical motorcycle, and she didn't deserve any of this shit.

She took a breath. "I'm sorry. I have other things going on now. I don't need something else to worry about."

Claire's fingers moved over Charley's arm up to her shoulder. "Let me help you."

Charley looked from the hand to Claire's face. "What do you mean?"

"You were upset by Nick's kiss. You looked like one big, raw nerve."

"What if I was?"

"Why do kisses scare you?" Claire asked.

"Who said 'scared'? I just didn't like it."

"So, it wouldn't scare you if I kissed you?"

Charley nearly choked. "Hey, I like men, if you know what I mean."

"So do I. I've never kissed a woman." Claire actually blushed. "I don't know if I can even do it well."

"But you want to try?"

"Very much." Claire's lips parted, and her face approached Charley's. If this wasn't the damndest thing. Kissing another woman. Why in hell not?

Charley met her halfway, and their mouths touched with a sweetness that stole her breath. She gasped and pulled back.

Claire looked equally shocked, her eyes wide. Then, she smiled and kissed Charley again. This time, their lips lingered, feathering over each other. Not as uncertain this time, but still innocent. The scent of Claire's cologne registered at the back of her brain. Something musky. Very expensive, no doubt. She touched Claire's face and felt skin so like her own beneath her fingertips. Claire was soft and gentle, not pushing or forcing. Just... well... there. For whatever Charley wanted. No more.

Very much as Nick had been until he'd tried to take them deeper into lust. Maybe she should have let him. Maybe she could have trusted him.

She pulled back and opened her eyes. Flushed with excitement, Claire smiled back at her. "You taste sweet," Claire said.

"Me?" Charley said. "You're kidding, right?"

"Not at all. I see why Nick adores you."

"I thought he didn't have any choice."

Claire's eyes widened. "Why do you fight anyone who wants to touch you?"

"Because softness makes you weak."

"Exactly what I thought," Claire said. "I was wrong."

"I have to be tough for my job," Charley said.

"So do I," Claire answered. "I leave that at the office."

"Won't work. Nice try, but no thanks."

Claire gave her an evil grin. "I'm not through with you yet."

Claire removed her boots and socks and then rose. She wore a spandex unitard, so she only had to pull down one zipper to get undressed. When she did, she showed nothing but naked skin underneath. No bra, no panties, just flesh.

"You always ride like that?" Charley asked.

"Today's special."

Claire stood there as if she got nude under a tree with another woman all the time. She stood taller than Charley by a couple of inches and had a more slender, less muscular build. Still, her body was firm, her breasts smaller than Charley's. Curling, brown hairs covered her sex.

A few feet away, the bikes stood there exactly how they'd left them. Even as machines they had some senses. Were they just going to sit there and watch?

"Your turn," Claire said.

"Hey, I don't know."

"Yes, you do." Claire bent and reached into the backpack. When she straightened again, she held a battery-powered gizmo in her hand. A turn of the dial at the base set it to humming. A vibrator.

"Let me pleasure you," Claire said. "Just put it against your clit."

Okay now, this was getting seriously weird. And yet, the bike's seat had thrummed against her pussy all the way here. The sweetness of their kiss proved she could accept Claire's touch without freaking. It had been so damned long since the idea of sex felt good. What could she lose by trying?

She took off her own boots and socks then started in on her jacket and the T-shirt underneath. By the time she had her bra undone, Claire had crouched and unzipped her pants. In a moment, her clothes sat in a pile beside her, and she didn't have a stitch on.

Claire palmed one of her breasts. "These are beautiful."

"They're too big. They crowd my uniform."

Claire guided her back onto the blanket and propped herself onto an elbow beside her. "Your breasts are perfect, and you really are a redhead."

"You thought I dyed my hair?"

"I hate to tell you this, Charley, but you're too cute for words."

"Keep that up, and I'll bust you one."

Claire laughed. Before Charley could tell her exactly how hard she'd hit her and where, Claire's hand closed over her breast again, and this time her fingers toyed with the nipple. Too nice for fighting. She'd have to bust the wise-ass later. For now, she lay back and closed her eyes.

Moisture closed around the other nipple as Claire took it into her mouth and sucked. The caress had just the right amount of pressure and gentleness, soft and rough to set her heart to hammering. Deep in her belly, her sex clenched. Grasping for more. Aching for release.

Then the images in her mind shifted. No longer another woman lavishing her breasts with mouth and fingers, but Nick. He'd never touched her there, and yet her mind knew how his fingers would feel. Strong and gentle all at once. Drawing every bit of sexual power her body had. Focusing it first at her breasts and then at the tip of her clit. A machine -- a man -- so perfectly tuned to her he could string the pleasure out to unbearable levels before finally letting her come.

The hum of the vibrator sounded again, and in a moment the smooth plastic rubbed against her inner thigh and then settled on her clit.

Damn, it was good, and that was Nick too. All the power of his engine rubbing between her legs. The heat of his lips on hers. If only she could surrender to all of him. Take that hard cock inside her and let it drive her past the brink.

Just as she reached the tipping point -- the moment when her body would begin the climb to orgasm -- the vibrator stopped. She whimpered with need and opened her eyes. Claire no longer lay there. Instead, Nick's head dipped between her thighs as he pressed his face against her pussy. His tongue swept the outer lips and then dipped into the entrance. A shock of pleasure raced through her, so strong it coiled inside her, stealing her breath.

She ought to feel frightened. She ought to push him away, but oh!, how she needed this. Her body burned, scorched by the fire of his mouth against her sex. Then, he sucked her clit into his mouth, and she snapped.

All the need she'd denied herself hit her, full on. The wildness of the ride, the aching deep inside, the wanting to be filled burst over her and she shattered in climax. She cried out as her body surrendered, first tensing and then sending spasms along the depths of her cunt. He didn't stop, but kept sucking until every bit of energy drained from her body, leaving her weak and gasping for breath. Finally finished, she lay limp and let him slide up behind her and pull her back against his front. Exactly the way he'd done the night before and entirely different.

She rested there, regaining her breath and a scrap of sanity. Several seconds went by before new sounds intruded. Again, like the night before and different too. Another couple was screwing nearby, the sighs and moans as clear as spoken language.

She rested her head on her forearm and opened her eyes. Not far from them, Claire was up on all fours. Will knelt between her legs as he guided his cock in and out of her depths. She'd closed her eyes in ecstasy and rocked back against him as he thrust. Each movement showed that she'd slicked his cock with her juices. His eyes half-closed with arousal, he watched his member slide into his woman and then pull nearly out

again. She ought to have felt embarrassed to watch them fuck like that, but honestly, who could look away?

Nick's fingers snaked down to her pussy and spread her own wetness over the lips. Would he try to enter her the way Will was doing Claire? His cock pressed into her back. Hard and perfectly huge. Her mind froze, the darkness threatening.

"Nick?" she whispered.

"Shhh. I won't," he said. "Let me touch you."

She willed her body to relax, and soon, his fingers had her close to orgasm again. Rubbing her clit and making circular motions over it, he played her as if she'd told him the exact pressure she needed. She let him take her back to the pinnacle and hold her there while she watched Will and Claire approach their own orgasms.

Will bent and moved a hand between Claire's thighs. He had to be stroking her clit too. "Oh, God!" Claire cried. "Please. Don't stop."

Don't... stop! her mind echoed.

"I won't," Nick whispered. "Come for me, *Liebling*."

Yes! A second climax took her and hurled her into madness. Just as all hell broke in her pussy, Claire threw back her head and howled, as she came too. Will slammed into her a few more times, and his body went rigid as he emptied himself inside his mate.

Behind Charley, Nick clutched at her hips and pulled her hard against him. His cock slid along her back, thrusting wildly. Unable to hold back any longer, he'd surrendered to his own beast. After what he'd given her, could she blame him?

Finally, with a muted roar, he stiffened, and hot moisture spurted onto the small of her back. He'd come. Please God, let it be good for him.

Chapter Three

At least she'd let him touch her. He'd had an orgasm too. His first. Klaus had tried to explain that it would feel like all the power of his engine had gathered in his balls only to shoot the length of his cock and spray hot semen out of the tip. It would feel even better inside her, and his body still craved that. The climax this morning had only primed him for more. Now that he had some idea of the sensations true coupling would give him, his mind wouldn't budge from the wetness between her legs and how it would feel to thrust his aching cock deep into it.

Now, as they sat together on a concrete bench near the edge of the vineyard, his erection throbbed in his pants. Night would fall soon, and he'd have to decide between the misery of sleeping near her again or the emptiness of tossing in a bed in another room.

Unless he could finally, finally convince her to let him know her fully. To do that, he'd need to know... exactly... what had happened to her and how to fix it.

"The others leave us alone a lot," she said.

"They want us to get to know each other."

She stared ahead to where rows of vines followed the contours of the hills. "They want us to fuck."

"Would that be so terrible?"

She clenched her jaw for a moment and then relaxed it again. "It would be wonderful... if I could do it."

"You let me touch you today."

She looked at him from the corner of her eye. "You and Claire tricked me."

"You could have pulled away." He reached up and stroked her cheek. "You didn't."

She smiled. Just the tiniest curve of her lips. "It felt too good to resist."

Success. Not only had she responded to his touch, she'd finally admitted it. "I could make you feel good in other ways."

She sighed and said nothing.

"It's time for you to tell me what happened to you," he said. "You owe me that, I think."

"I was assaulted. I don't remember the details."

"That's not quite true, is it?"

"Okay." She closed her eyes as if that helped her memory. "I was in a bad part of town. Off duty, outside a bar. I should have known better."

"Why were you there?"

"Pizza was my excuse. I think I wanted to prove to myself that I *could* be there if I wanted to."

"You put yourself in danger to challenge yourself?"

"Stupid, huh?" she said. "Any other woman I caught down there would get a lecture from yours truly."

"I don't think you're stupid." He ran his fingers along her jaw. "So, what happened?"

"That's the problem. I don't remember." She twisted her hands together in her lap, clearly troubled. Her inner struggle played clearly across her face. "One minute, I was confronting a couple of punks, and the next thing I knew I found myself sitting beside the road in torn clothing."

Ach, Gott. How could someone hurt such a precious woman? Any woman, for that matter. He only reacted to her pain so strongly because they were connected, whether she wanted to admit it or not.

"I was bruised everywhere." She looked into his face. "All of my orifices. Do you understand?"

"*Beschissene* bastards."

"I hope that's as ugly as it sounds."

"I swear to God I'll kill them." He'd told her that before, and he'd meant it then. Only now, the details of what they'd done to her slammed into his gut.

"They'll pay," she said. "I have all the evidence I need to put them away for a long time."

"What evidence?"

"A woman driving by stopped to help me. I had her take me to the nearest ER. They got semen samples from everywhere. Their own damned DNA."

"Good. Then, we'll find them."

"Whoa. Who said anything about you?"

He stared into her face. She'd reject his help? "Klaus sent me to help you."

"This is my fight, Nick." She set her jaw in a grim line. "I didn't even tell the other cops what happened."

His mouth dropped open. "You didn't report the crime?"

"My boss took the report so the rest of the squad wouldn't find out."

"But your colleagues can help you."

"I don't want their help. I don't want them to know that..." Her voice trailed off, but her meaning came through clearly. She didn't want them to know that she'd been raped, that she was vulnerable. "I'll get my memory back. Then I'll handle this my own way."

"All the trauma, the multiple men. You can't handle this alone."

"I came out of my mother's womb kicking butt," she said. "At least, that's what Dad says. He says she tried to make a girl out of me, but I wasn't having it."

"Your mother's not still with you?"

"She died when I was little. I hardly remember her."

He rubbed her back. "I'm sorry."

She set her chin, still staring straight ahead of her. "It made me strong."

Perhaps it did, but she sounded proud of it. "Strength is everything to you, isn't it?"

"If you're strong enough, you can do anything."

"You haven't been doing very well so far," he said.

She glared at him, fire in the emerald depths of her eyes. "What in hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You can't remember the details that'll lead you back to those men," he said. "They're lurking inside you, but you can't make yourself face them."

"I can face anything."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Oh, really?"

"Watch it, pal. I can kick the shit out of you."

"Perhaps," he said. "But can you make love to me?"

That stopped her. Her eyes widened in surprise. She clearly hadn't anticipated that little bit of logic. Neither had he, to be honest, but he'd recognized his opportunity and taken it. She either had to allow him to know her or admit weakness. Which would win?

The stubborn tilt to her chin gave him his answer. "Okay, bring it on."

Battle. She'd only accept intimacy as part of a struggle. That might disappoint him if he weren't so damned happy.

* * *

He followed her into the house through the back door. Quietly. This would be awkward enough for Charley -- despite her pretended bravery. Realizing that the others knew what was about to happen would only put more pressure on her. She seemed to welcome the privacy and almost tiptoed down the hallway to her room. Nick only paused long enough as they passed the portal to the dining room to see that the others still sat there, enjoying an after dinner conversation. Only Jake spotted him and smiled.

By the time he made it to Charley's room, she'd sat on the end of the bed to remove her shoes. When she reached to the zipper at the back of her dress, he sat beside her and stopped her.

Gently, he pulled her hands from behind her and looked into her eyes. "Let me undress you."

She shrugged. "Okay. Sure."

"Are you determined not to enjoy this?" If she was, he wouldn't enjoy it either. As much as he needed her, as desperate as his cock needed to be inside her, he wouldn't take her until he'd aroused her so fully that she begged to have him.

"You enjoyed my kiss this morning." Until he'd pushed too fast. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

"Yeah, I guess." She took a deep breath. "So, let's just do it."

"You make this sound like a visit to the dentist."

She lowered her eyes. "Sorry."

"I'm going to go slowly," he said. "If you don't like something, tell me to stop."

She bit her lip and nodded her head.

"Once you can face sex again, maybe the other memories will come back to you."

A real possibility, and a terrifying one. They must have done awful things to her, and she'd have to relive them. He'd be with her when she did. She might claim she didn't need help, but they both knew otherwise.

"We're in this together, *Liebling*. I won't let anything hurt you."

She gazed up at him, and her eyes glistened. She'd deny it, but she was frightened enough to be near tears. He really would kill those bastards. Eventually. Now he had better things to do.

He bent and pressed his lips to hers. She stiffened for a moment but held herself still, not retreating. She tasted so lush, like honey and sunshine. If only he could surrender to the need inside him. She'd made him wait so long. The fire raced in his blood. Any wrong move, and his control would snap. For her sake, he couldn't let that happen, so he held back -- not pushing -- until she came to him.

She did, finally, with a soft sigh into his mouth. Her lips molded themselves to his, and she leaned toward him, placing her hand on his chest. He urged her on gently, careful not to use his tongue. No unwanted intrusions this time.

He pulled her against him, rubbing his hands down her back. He'd wanted to reassure her, but also to savor the feel of her under his palms. With only the small straps above the bodice, her dress exposed the skin over her shoulder blades. Smooth,

warm silk stretched over firm flesh everywhere. Only the woman he loved combined softness and strength in a powerful sensual combination. Her muscles would grip him when he entered her. She'd stroke him while he slid in and out of her body, and he'd feel the explosions of her pussy when he came.

Gott! Control. He needed control. He pulled back from the kiss and rested his forehead against hers, squeezing his eyes shut and working for breath. Only a kiss, and he'd reached an impossible level of arousal. What would he do when he had them both naked?

Charley's breath came hard, too, in hot puffs against his cheek. "Why did you stop?"

"Need to go slowly," he answered. "You make me so hot."

"I get to you, huh?" No one could mistake the note of triumph in her voice.

He groaned. "May I undress you now?"

"Please."

He opened his eyes and straightened. Instead of turning her around, he reached behind her, found the zipper pull, and slowly slid it downward. When he had the back of the dress opened, he pushed aside one strap, following its progress with kisses along her shoulder. He repeated with the other side and guided them both down her arms.

Now, her breasts stood exposed, rounded and full, the rosy nipples puckered. He'd seen them earlier. He'd watched as Claire had touched them and then kissed them. Even as a machine, he'd felt the contact against his own fingers and tongue. He'd shifted then, needing to watch as a man. Will had done the same -- both of them fully aroused males watching their women touch. Will had joined with his lover then. He hadn't, and the restraint still cost him.

Now, he could cover her breast with his palm and feel the flesh respond. He did so and gently squeezed. She watched his hand as he stroked her, and her nipple stiffened further.

"Does that feel good, *Liebling*?"

"Your mouth, please," she whispered.

A flush of excitement glowed on her chest and up her throat all the way to her cheeks. She wanted him.

Still cupping the first breast, he bent and ran his tongue around the other nipple. She moaned, a wordless plea for more, so he took the tight peak into his mouth and sucked. A gasp of surprise and pleasure escaped from her chest, and her fingers dug into his hair, holding his face against her breast.

Heaven. Until this moment, he hadn't known for sure he could get past her fears. She wanted him, yes. How could she not? He'd been designed for her. But, those horrid men had damaged her. Now, he could fix all that, and his heart swelled at the knowledge.

He bunched the skirt of her dress up in his hands. Helping him, she raised herself off the bed and allowed him to pull the garment up, past her waist, and then over her head. She wore nothing but the same lacy panties Claire had taken off her before. The fabric was so wet it was almost transparent and showed the red curls he'd already buried his nose in. The scent had driven him wild then, as it did now. He touched the panties where they rested against her clit. She shuddered with pleasure.

"You're remembering what my tongue feels like there, aren't you?" he murmured.

She blushed. "It was amazing."

"Better than the vibrator?"

"Better than anything else I've ever felt."

His chest would split with pride. He'd done one thing well, at least. "Will you let me use my cock there to satisfy you?"

She tensed, not with pleasure this time.

"I won't hurt you, I promise."

She nodded. "I know."

"Then, you'll let me?"

She nodded again, and Nick went back to breathing. Until this exact moment, he hadn't realized how much he'd feared he couldn't get through to her. He only existed

for one thing -- to love her and make the two of them complete by joining with her. He might fail tonight, and God only knew how he'd manage the frustration if he did. But, at least he'd know he could try again.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"Hmm?" What a time to be daydreaming. "I'm thinking how beautiful you are."

She rolled her eyes. "You're nuts, pal."

He tapped the end of her nose. "We'll see who's nuts."

He knelt at the end of the bed and reached for her panties. Tugging gently, he pulled the lace downward, and she wriggled to help him get them past her hips. Finally, she was completely naked.

As he had that morning he had to stop and admire her. So strong and lithe and soft as well. Her skin looked like ivory dusted with rose. Her sweetly rounded breasts with their tight nipples, the lushness of her hips, and tight curls that covered her mound -- all of them shouted woman. The scent of her shouted woman in heat. His mate. His life.

He pushed her legs apart and bent to cover her sex with his mouth. So hot and wet. Made for his cock. The erection was almost painful, it was that hard and throbbing. His earlier climax had only tempted him and driven his arousal almost past what he could bear.

He found her clit and touched it with his tongue. Sighing with pleasure, she let her whole body relax, her legs falling farther apart. He continued worshipping her, stroking her hot button and then her lips, even probing her opening. She moaned with each caress, signaling her rising excitement. He'd push her to the brink. Drive her so wild, she'd beg him to put his cock inside her.

As a test, he touched her with a finger, sliding it around her swollen lips and then pushing just the tip into her entrance. She stiffened, but didn't try to pull away. So, he left it there while he used his tongue on her clit. She dug her fingers into his hair, holding his face against her sex. Granting him permission to continue. When she relaxed again, he pushed deeper into her core, all the while keeping up the pressure on

her most sensitive spot. This time, she gave him no resistance, so he slid his finger fully into her wetness.

She gasped in -- dare he hope? -- pleasure. Her muscles gripped at him, not pushing him out but welcoming him inside. He raised his head and looked at her. She lay with her head at the center of the bed. Eyes closed with bliss, and her chest rising and falling with each breath. That lovely flush of arousal warmed her skin. The signs of a woman near orgasm.

He pumped his finger into her, rubbing his thumb over her clit as he did.

"Good," she whispered in a voice deep with hunger. "Oh, Nick..."

He slipped a second finger inside her and stretched her. She'd better be ready for his bulk, because he'd neared the end of his control. Once he was finally inside her, he might not be able to go slowly.

Her juices moistened his hand as he worked her. With each flick against her clit, each slide of his fingers inside her, she released more until her inner thighs were slick and his movement made wet, hungry sounds.

He could make her climax now. He'd learned her responses earlier, and she was ready. Not giving her what she needed might seem cruel, but not satisfying her just yet was his best hope that she'd ask to have him inside her pussy.

He withdrew his hand, stood up, and kicked out of his shoes. Then, he started in on his clothes, almost tearing buttons off his shirt in his eagerness.

Her eyes opened but didn't focus completely. "You stopped."

"Only for a moment."

She reached between her thighs and cupped her mound, squeezing, then fingered her clit. As erotic as the image of her touching herself was, he had to stop her.

He reached to her hand and pulled it away from her mons. "Not yet. Wait for me."

"Hurry."

Just what he wanted to hear. He stripped out of his pants and shorts and stood there, allowing her to study him. He was rock-hard now and bigger than he'd thought

possible. The crimson of his member would let her know how close to the breaking point he'd become. She needed to know what she was facing.

Her eyes widened briefly in what looked like alarm, but after a moment, her expression softened, and she lifted her arms to him. An invitation.

He joined her on the bed and took her into his arms. Her softness pressed against him everywhere, especially against his member. He bit his lip, struggling for control. Only a little while longer. A few minutes, and he'd have his reward. He could last. He had to.

He stroked her face. "Are you ready to join with me?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"You always have choices, *Liebling*."

"But you won't let me come unless I fuck you."

"Only if we try," he answered. "If we try and fail, I'll finish you."

She held very still for a few seconds. Just long enough for him to hold his breath while his heart hammered in his chest. "Let's ride," she said finally.

Gott sei dank! He rolled onto his back and took his cock into his hand, guiding the swollen flesh upright. "You on top. Take what you can and only that."

She rose to her knees and swung a leg over him. Then, she pushed his hand away and closed her fingers around his cock. The top of his head almost came off at the contact, and he released a loud groan. The whole world swam in a haze of lust. Hang on. He had to hang... on.

Lowering herself slowly, she took the tip of him inside her wetness. His whole body shook, but he managed not to thrust up into her. She slid a bit lower on him and her eyes squeezed shut. Biting her lip, she began to tremble. She was forcing herself, not enjoying it.

"Don't push, Charley. Let it come."

She nodded, and he reached to the magical spot between her thighs. Her clit was still distended, and he rubbed his thumb over it. Now smiling, she rewarded him with a coo of pleasure.

He kept up the pressure while she stretched to accept his bulk. As wet as she was, she'd slide easily onto him if she could relax and allow herself to enjoy the possession. She neared climax again, and her head fell backward as she let it claim her. Then, with an easy glide, she went lower until her sex met his pelvis. She'd taken every inch of him.

"Ach, Gott!" he cried. *"Ah, Liebling."*

"It's good, Nick. It's so good!"

Now, he could move. Now, he could bury himself in her wet heat. He plunged upward, sliding in and out of her pussy easily. All the while, he kept stroking her clit. He needed to come. Could feel it tightening already in his balls. He had to take her with him.

She moved too, now, riding his member. Her muscles clutched at him, driving him past what any man should have to endure. He bit his lip until it stung and kept working her clit as fast and as hard as he could.

Come, lover. Come. Come.

As if his hunger connected with hers, she let loose the low keened that signaled her release. She tightened all around him and then convulsed as the orgasm flooded over her. Now gasping and crying out, she continued for several heartbeats.

Her climax hit him with the force of hard pavement rising up to meet him. Beyond control now, he could only grasp her hips and pound up into her. One more massive thrust, and he spilled hot semen into her. Now, now, and now!

A sound filled the room. His engine roaring. He'd opened his mouth, and a thunder of victory came out.

Now spent, he fell back against the bed and held Charley's limp body against his chest.

"Amazing," she whispered.

He stroked her hair. *"I wouldn't have believed it possible."*

"They all heard that."

"Do you care?"

She chuckled. "Nope."

"You did it, *Liebling*."

"We did." She slapped playfully at his chest. "You're so fucking big."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Thank God none of the bastards who assaulted me were that huge."

He held absolutely still, his hand still resting on her hair. "Puny?"

"One of them was pathetic. I remember thinking..." Her voice trailed off, and she pushed up and looked into his face.

"You're remembering."

She looked into a corner of the room, her brows crinkling. "I remember thinking it was kind of funny he was so small, even while he..."

"Does it frighten you?"

"It scares the shit out of me." She thought for a moment and then looked down into his face. "But, I can face it now."

"Yes, love." He stroked her cheek. "My brave, little warrior."

"Maybe I can remember more."

"Enough for now." He couldn't help but yawn. "We need to sleep."

"Yeah." She touched his lips. "Thank you, Nick. I love you."

He rolled them onto their sides and held her as her breath got soft and even, her words echoing in his brain.

* * *

The darkness was all around her, pulsing like a living thing. She could almost hear it breathe as it sucked her down.

"Hurry up, asshole." Ray Griles, the leader's voice. "I want some of that."

"Shit, I'm gonna come." Ted shoved his tiny dick farther into her mouth. "Suck it, bitch."

Behind her, Little Fool thrust into her. Somehow, the guy named Little had the biggest prick of the bunch. Thank God, she hadn't had to take it in the ass this time.

That was Mad's specialty. Where was he, anyway? Waiting his turn? Masturbating while he watched his buddies fuck her?

This was a dream. Vivid enough, as it had really happened to her. The pain. The violation. She'd wake up this time, and it would end. *Wake up. God, please let me wake up!*

"Oh, yeah, here it comes." Ted grunted as his body went stiff. "Swallow it. Swallow it all."

Hot liquid spurted into her mouth. Salty against her tongue. Then more, as he held her head so tightly she couldn't move. It slid down the back of her throat, gagging her. She couldn't even choke without biting down, and after the last time, she wouldn't try *that*. She tried to swallow it, to take the vile stuff down her gullet, but her stomach wouldn't have it. In another minute she'd retch, and she didn't want to do that again, either.

Just when she thought she'd never breathe again, he pulled out. She lowered her head and coughed, spitting out what was left in her mouth, and then took huge breaths. Behind her, Little Fool slapped her butt, hard, and kept pumping into her.

A fist grabbed her hair and pulled her head up so hard she couldn't help but scream with the pain. She looked into Griles' gunmetal eyes. As hard and cold as steel.

He jerked her head up again, until her neck felt like it would snap. Holding his erect cock in his hand, he ran the tip along the underside of her jaw. "I'm going to fuck your mouth now, and don't be spitting any of my come out. You hear me?"

When she didn't answer, he gave her head a vicious twist. "You hear me?"

"Yes."

"Shit, I liked her better when she fought back," Ted said.

"You gotta teach a woman how to behave, fuckwit," Griles said. Without another word, he lowered her head, thrust his dick into her mouth, and started pumping his hips.

She had to wake up. It would be over if she could wake up. She wasn't in the upstairs room of the filthy warehouse. She was in bed with Nick. Safe with Nick.

Nick, wake me up. Please!

“Charley?” Strong arms shook her. “Shhh. You’re all right. I’m here.”

Her eyes flew open, and she looked around. The room at the hacienda. She and Nick were alone in the room, their bodies tangled together under the covers.

“A dream,” she whispered.

“About the rape?”

She breathed deeply. Mentally checked her mouth for the taste of semen and didn’t find any. “I remembered more. Their names. Even what one of them looked like.”

“I’m sorry you have to go through this.”

“It’s okay. The more I remember, the sooner I can make them pay. Just don’t get too far away from me.”

“Not much chance of that.” He pulled her against him and tucked her head under his chin. “You fell asleep before I could tell you how much I love you.”

Love. Imagine that. Even before the assault, she’d never let a man get to her feelings. She’d liked to fuck, but she kept her lovers at arm’s length. Married to her job, just like her dad after Mom had died. Now, here she was, sharing everything with a man she’d just met. She’d think that was wrong, but it felt so right.

She’d show him how right. She reached between them, found his cock, and wrapped her fingers around it so that she could stroke him. Instantly, he began to harden.

He moaned. “Are you sure you want to do that?”

“Do I want this big, bad boy inside me? What do you think?”

He moved his hips, responding to her touch. “Your dream...”

“Making love helped me last time.”

“Then, by all means, let me help you again.”

He rolled her onto her back and rose on his elbows over her. The dim light from outside revealed the fire in his dark eyes. Love, hunger, ferocity that took her breath away. Male beauty so perfect it hurt to look at him. Then, he lowered his head and kissed her.

His mouth claimed her own while the heat of his body wrapped all around her. His lips moved over hers from the corners to the center. Sampling, tasting, urging her to respond. She parted her own lips, offering the invitation she'd been unable to give before. *Enter me.*

His tongue slid into her mouth, retreated, and then pressed forward again. She met his with her own tongue and brushed it with the tip.

A growl rumbled through his chest as he took the kiss deeper. Frantic now, he claimed every inch of her mouth as if he needed to devour her. Her own need took her, and she clutched at his shoulders and raised herself upward to press against him everywhere. No kiss had ever moved her this way. No touch of bodies had sent hot currents of need through her. From her lips where they tangled with his, to her breasts with the nipples tight against the wall of his chest, to her sex that clenched as if he'd already entered her.

She could never give this to another man. Never surrender such control. But, this was Nick -- the man who'd put aside his own needs until she could come to him. She could trust him with her life. With her heart.

When he'd finished with her mouth -- leaving her lips feeling swollen and sensitive -- he dipped his head beneath her chin and continued along her throat. Kissing, sucking, even nipping, he brought that flesh to life too.

"*Ach, you make me wild,*" he murmured. "I want to go slowly, but I feel I'll explode."

"Take me, Nick. I'm ready."

"Not so easy. You made me wait. I think I'll make you beg."

"Bastard."

He chuckled and continued, now past her collarbone and over her chest. Her breasts felt heavy and hot, aching for the feel of his mouth tugging at the tips. Instead of sucking them into his mouth, he trailed his tongue over one breast and then along the underside. She ran her fingers over the nipple and gasped at the jolt of pleasure. The

damned man caught her wrist, though, and pushed her hand away while his mouth went to the other breast.

He kept up the torment, lapping at her flesh but not touching the nipple.

"Damn it," she whispered. "You know what I want."

He laughed again, a wicked sound that vibrated against her skin. "Say 'please'."

"Go fuck yourself."

"I thought you wanted me to fuck you."

"Then, do it," she said.

"Say 'please'."

She gritted her teeth. "Please."

He took her nipple finally, drawing it deep into his mouth to suck. Sucking in a breath, she arched her back. He used the right amount of pressure to set her flesh to throbbing. So hard and hot. Too much and yet not enough.

When he released the nipple, she groaned with disappointment, but he soon worked the same magic on the second one.

He *had* been built just for her. He knew how to work her body, drawing out the maximum response. Her pussy grew wet in anticipation of taking him inside her. The hot liquid seeped out along her inner thighs. Already near to orgasm, she pressed her legs closer together to get some friction against her throbbing clit. Not enough. Nothing could satisfy her but his mouth and his cock.

Still too slowly, his lips left her breast and traveled over her ribs. His palms slid along her sides, lifting her and bringing her to his mouth. None of her other lovers had ever taken the time to caress every inch of her as Nick did now. Although the knowledge made her heart sing, the need building in her belly and below couldn't put up with much more tenderness.

She needed him inside her, now. Thrusting, plunging deep inside her, giving her weeping cunt the fucking it craved.

"Nick, please," she said. "Just take me."

"In a bit."

"Now." She pounded on his shoulder. "I can't wait."

"You can." He went lower, the tip of his tongue dipping into her navel and then moving to her pelvis. Still, not what she craved.

Struggling for breath now, she lay helpless, her legs pinned beneath his body. He wouldn't leave her like this -- burning and incomplete. Not Nick. Not the man who loved her.

Then he parted her legs, put his face between them, and closed his mouth over her pussy, flicking at her clit with his tongue.

"Oh, God!" she cried, as her hips jerked off the bed.

He grasped her hips and held her against his face as he continued the torment. He'd made her so hot, pushed her so close, she'd come soon. But now that she'd had his cock inside her, knew how it stretched her as he thrust, nothing else could satisfy her. She'd climax this way, but she needed so much more.

He showed her no mercy, though. He pressed his tongue against the entrance to her pussy and then worked her clit until she'd neared climax.

She fought to keep control. To fight the orgasm until he'd give in and fuck her. Too much, though. She couldn't last.

Just before she snapped, he stopped. For a heartbeat, she hung in agony, grasping at anything that would finish her. How could he do this?

Then, he quickly shifted, moving upward and guiding himself between her legs. With one savage movement, he impaled her on his hardness, driving in so deep he filled her completely.

She came with a force that rocked her whole body. One wave of insanity crashed over another until nothing existed but the cock inside her and the spasms that gripped it.

She held onto him as her whole body threatened to break into pieces. Un-fucking-believable.

He continued to move inside her, powerful strokes against her inner muscles. She rode with him, rising up to drive him into her depths. Faster, now, and harder. The

power of his pistons as he went full-throttle to his own orgasm. When it claimed him, it took her, too. She came again as he did. Both of them burning with their own fires and united in something greater.

When it finally ended, they lay together. His weight pressed her into the mattress, and she wouldn't have moved him if she could.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" she asked when she got her voice back.

"I thought I'd show you what you put me through."

"Don't do it again."

He lifted himself onto his elbows, looked down into her face, and smiled. "I won't have to."

"And don't be so damned proud of yourself."

"I made you forget your dream, didn't I?"

Dream? Oh yeah, the dream. She waved a finger under his nose. "Okay, this one time."

"You can go back to sleep now, *Liebling*. The bad men are gone." He rolled off her and then pulled her back against his front. After tugging the blankets over them, he cradled her body and promptly dozed off.

He'd been right about one thing. She could go back to sleep. He'd been wrong about the other. The bad men weren't gone. They were still out there, but now, she knew how to find them.

Chapter Four

Before dawn, Charley found the keys to Claire's SUV and snuck out so the others wouldn't find out what she was up to and try to tag along. They didn't know police work, and she'd be damned if she'd let a bunch of amateurs gum things up. She also didn't need any witnesses for what would happen when she found those mother fuckers.

She actually hadn't planned exactly what she'd do to them, but it wasn't going to be pretty, and it wasn't going to be legal. She'd had visions of her baton up Mad's ass, but she didn't plan to stop at home to get it.

The SUV covered the miles quickly and soon she'd merged onto the freeway that would take her into the city. She turned on the hands-free phone and dialed Steele at home. "Yeah," he answered, his speech thick with sleep.

"You remember a creep named Ray Griles?"

"Who is this?"

"It's the tooth fairy," she answered.

"Thomas, is that you? What the fuck is wrong with you, calling at this hour?"

It was past five. What was the guy complaining about? "You missing your beauty sleep?"

"Call me back later. I'm hanging up now."

"Don't do it, Steele, or I'll come over there and drag your sorry ass out of your bed."

"What do you want?"

"Griles. What do you know about him?"

A long sigh sounded at the other end of the line. "I questioned him for assault. Couldn't make it stick."

"Where does he hang out?"

"He has a crib on Foothill."

He wouldn't hide out there. Too easy for her to track him down. After the other details that had come to her during the night, she could find the warehouse now, but they would have split from that place the minute they'd found she escaped. "Anywhere else?"

"His girlfriend's place. On 106th... no 96th, just West of MacArthur. Pink stucco house."

"Thanks."

"What's this about?" he asked.

"You don't want to know."

He groaned. "You're determined to lose your job, aren't you?"

Hell, by the end of today, she'd be lucky if she didn't face a long prison term.

"Good-bye, Steele." She clicked off the phone and headed down the freeway toward the closest exit to 96th Avenue.

* * *

With Steele's description, she found the place, no sweat. For such a gawd-awful part of town, the house itself looked nice. It could have used some paint, but the porch was clean, and someone kept a nice garden. She parked the SUV in front and turned off the engine, then sat, planning her strategy.

If Griles was in there, she'd have to take care that no one else got hurt. If the girlfriend had children, she couldn't even let them see anything threatening. Lowlife scum like Griles would use anyone around him to save his hide.

She unzipped her jacket and pulled the Glock from its holster. All in working order, she put it back and pulled the jacket closed enough to hide the gun but give her easy access to it. Showtime.

She climbed out of the SUV, shut the door behind her, and walked up the path to the house. This early, he'd probably be asleep and wouldn't be expecting a visit from the woman he'd raped and planned to kill. Good.

She knocked on the door loudly enough to wake anyone in the house. No answer. She waited a minute and knocked again, louder.

Her heart beat like mad in her chest. Excitement. Anticipation of kicking the crap out of him at the least. Fear of battle. Wasn't anyone going to open the fucking door?

Footsteps sounded from inside now. Soft, like bare feet on hardwood floors. The lock clicked, and the door opened a crack. The bastard took one look at her and went pale.

When he tried to shut the door again, she blocked it with her foot. "We need to talk."

"Fuck off."

She reached inside her jacket in the universal sign that told him she'd come prepared. He got even whiter. "Let me get dressed."

"Pajamas are fine."

"Who is it, Ray?" a woman's voice said from behind him.

"No one," he said. "Go back to bed."

"It's not no one, Ray. What's going on?"

"Shut up, bitch. I'm going out."

"Good move." Charley grabbed his arm and dragged him outside, pulling the Glock out with her other hand as she did. Once she had the muzzle pressed up against his ribs, she led him off the porch and down the path to the SUV.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, almost whining.

"I haven't decided."

They reached the SUV and she slammed him up against the side, his hands resting at shoulder width. After kicking his feet wide apart, she frisked him, from his shoulders, to his waist, and then down his legs. She kept the Glock pointed at him the whole time. On the way back up, she reached in front just for the hell of it and groped until she found his little, limp dick. "Not so scary now, are you?"

"You're nuts."

"You'd better hope I'm not too crazy, asshole."

A roar came from the top of the street -- Mannhof engines. The muzzle of the gun firm against her perp's head, she looked over to see them approaching. Claire rode Will, and Nick's human form drove Jake while Lauren sat behind, clinging to his ribs. They pulled up in front of the SUV, and Claire and Nick turned off the engines. Then, all three riders approached.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Charley demanded.

Nick walked up to her and glared down at her. She'd never seen him angry, but fury flashed out of his eyes now. If she didn't know him and didn't have a gun in her hand, the look would have scared her shitless.

"What the hell did you mean by leaving like that?" he shouted.

"I had to take care of business, and I didn't want any of you getting hurt."

"Hurt?" A vein throbbed at his temple. "You left me. How do you think that felt?"

Claire walked to him and put a hand on his arm. "Easy."

"I didn't know where she was, Claire."

"I was going to come back." Damn, that sounded lame. It was lame. She probably had hurt him when she left without even a note. She had to remember that she had a bond now. She owed him.

"And what are you going to do now?" Nick crossed his arms over his chest, but he still looked as if he'd like to break her neck with his bare hands. "Are you going to arrest him and take him in?"

"I'm going to make this one take me to the rest, and then, I'm going to tear them new assholes."

"Not without me, you're not," Nick said.

"I don't want you hurt," she said. "Go home."

Claire raised her arm to show a holster of her own, complete with Beretta. "We won't get hurt."

Whoa. "You know how to use that?"

"I've been trained. Personal security measures for the boss. My company had a GPS tracking system put in the SUV. That's how we found you."

"The other Mannhofs are along for muscle if we need it," Nick added.

"Mannhofs?" Griles said.

Charley jabbed the Glock into his neck. "Shut up."

She looked over at Lauren. "You, at least, have the good sense to stay out of it, right?"

Lauren raised her hands. "I'm logistical support only."

"I don't know," she said.

"We're a team, Charley," Claire said.

"For the love of God, there are three more of them," Nick said, pointing at Griles. "Don't try to take them all yourself."

"Okay. You drive. I'll sit in the back with Mr. Chuckles here."

Claire smiled. "Let's ride."

* * *

Griles directed them to an abandoned house not far away. He tried bargaining the whole way, ratting out his pals if only she'd spare him. With friends like that...

Nick gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white. Every time Charley looked at him in the rearview mirror, she caught the image of a man about to explode with rage. She didn't *ever* want to be riding him in one of those moods. He'd probably break the sound barrier.

They pulled up in front of a house that looked as if a strong wind would blow it over. Fire damage, boarded windows. Exactly the sort of place that could send the whole neighborhood into a death spiral. The Mannhofs parked behind them. As Claire climbed off Will and approached, Charley opened the SUV door. Nick turned in his seat, and Claire looked inside.

"What's the plan?" she asked.

"We'll have to go in through the back," Charley said. "It looks as if they won't be able to see us approach the house."

"How do we get in?" Nick asked.

"Griles will talk us in. Won't you, old buddy, old pal?"

When he didn't answer, she stuck the muzzle of the Glock into his belly.

"Yeah, sure," he grumbled.

"We show them our guns, they surrender," Charley said.

Claire raised an eyebrow. "That simple?"

"They may have weapons too. If you see one, hit the floor. I'll take care of things."

Claire looked to Nick and then back at Charley. "Okay."

Charley pushed Griles out the door before her, and the five of them made their way up the driveway toward the back of the house. The windows were boarded here too, except for one on the second floor. The others could have watched them approach from there, but they didn't make any response if they did. Finally, they crept onto the back porch, and Claire and Nick leaned against the wall, hiding themselves.

"Tell them to let you in," she ordered Griles.

He hesitated for a moment and then knocked. "Hey, you guys, it's Ray."

No answer.

"You'd better not have lied to me," she said.

He knocked harder. "Come on, open up."

The door opened a crack. "That you, Ray?"

"Yeah."

The door swung open, and Charley shoved Griles into Little Fool hard enough they both fell over. She charged into the room, Nick and Claire right behind. Dropping to a crouch, she lifted her gun. "Freeze."

Claire had crouched too, her Beretta pointed right at Mad's head. That only left Ted, who sat at a table in the middle of the room. A sawed-off shotgun rested on the top, and he grabbed it.

Before he could even aim, Charley dropped and got off a shot. It hit him in the thigh, and he fell to the floor, clutching his leg.

"Watch those two," Charley called to Claire and Will. She walked to Ted, picked up the shotgun, and tossed it outside.

Mad looked at her and grinned. "You come back for more of my special loving?"

She ought to blow his fucking head off right now. She could claim self-defense, and no one in their right mind would believe the testimony of the other creeps if they contradicted her. Will and Claire would back her up. She could commit murder and get away with it. If anyone deserved killing, it was this bastard who'd forced his prick up her ass against her will. So, why didn't she do it?

"I knew you'd want more," Mad said, and that heated look of perverted pleasure entered his eyes. "They always do."

"Shut up," Nick said. His voice was the low snarl of a dog about to strike.

"You her boyfriend? You must love her tight, little ass."

"Shut up, or I'll kill you."

Nick wasn't kidding. His whole body was one knot of barely contained violence. His hands clenched into fists, his eyes narrowed.

Mad seemed to enjoy that even more. He curled his fingers in front of his pelvis and stroked an imaginary hard-on. "Felt real good around my prick."

Nick howled and charged. He grabbed Mad and threw him against the wall with enough force to crack the plaster. When the other man slumped and hit the floor, Nick picked him up by the throat and lifted him until his feet left the floor. Mad clutched at Nick's fingers but couldn't move them, while Nick squeezed until choking sounds came out of Mad's throat.

"Stop it, Nick," Charley called. "Let him down."

Nick ignored her and let out a string of German she couldn't follow. Mad's feet danced on nothing as his face turned red. How strong *was* Nick? Could he snap the other man's spine?

Charley went to him and clutched at his arm. "Drop him, Nick. You're killing him."

Mad's eyes bugged, and he started to turn blue.

"I want him dead," Nick said. "Don't you?"

"Well, yeah. Maybe." She'd thought she did. She'd thought she'd enjoy watching him die. She didn't need that anymore. She could feel whole without it. Nick and his loving had done that for her.

"Let him go, *Liebling*," she said. "For my sake."

Nick stared at her. "You want him to live?"

"He won't have much of a life. He already doesn't."

Sanity returned to his eyes and then horror. He dropped Mad to the floor, where he lay clutching his throat and gasping for breath.

Charley put her hand on Nick's cheek and looked deeply into his eyes. Into his soul. *I love you.*

As if he'd heard her thoughts, he nodded.

"Let's get them outside," Charley said, indicating Mad, Little Fool, and Ray. "We'll send in the EMTs for the other one."

It took Nick another second to come around, but finally, he grabbed Mad's arm, hoisted him up, and pushed him toward the doorway. Claire kept her gun trained on Little Fool and Ray and headed outside. Charley followed and scooped up the sawed-off shotgun.

Back on the sidewalk, Lauren and the two other men waited for them. Will and Jake hadn't bothered with clothes but stood naked by the SUV. Oh well, the neighbors here had probably seen stranger things.

"You got them," Lauren said.

"There's one more inside with a bullet in his leg," Charley said.

"When I heard gunfire, I called the police." Lauren looked over at the other men. "You'd better shift back before they get here."

Sirens sounded just then, and three patrol cars came screaming down the street, lights flashing. They stopped by the SUV just seconds after Will and Jake had turned back into bikes.

Doors opened, and three cops climbed out, one holding the leash of his canine officer. After them, the sarge hefted himself out of one of the cars and walked up to Charley. "What in blue blazes do you think you're doing?"

"I caught you some bad guys."

"You're on suspension."

She tried smiling at him. "I had a lead I couldn't turn down."

The smile didn't work, and his eyes narrowed. "What is it you'd have if it was a proper bust?"

"Four of them. One inside wounded. Multiple counts of kidnap, sexual assault, rape. The one inside aimed this at me." She handed him the shotgun. "It's a good bust, Sarge, honest."

He bent toward her, his blue eyes cold. "You're not supposed to be making busts."

"These are the creeps who raped me, Sarge."

That took the starch out of him. He backed off some, and his face looked as if she'd kicked him in the gut. "Holy shit."

"She's telling the truth, officer," Nick said.

"And, you would be?"

"He's a friend." Charley gestured toward the others. "They're all friends."

"You should have called me," Sarge said.

"And, you would have done what?"

Sarge blew out a huge breath of frustration. "I don't know. Something."

"I'm sorry I didn't." She hesitated for a moment. "I'm ready to see the shrink now."

Sarge smiled. "Good. I need you back."

An ambulance pulled up. Charley looked around to see that the other cops had charge of her tormentors now.

"Can they take over?" she asked.

"Yeah. You have a lot of paperwork waiting for you."

"Thanks. I'll be right there."

Sarge turned to go back to his car and stopped, staring at the Mannhofs. "Your friends have some nice bikes."

Charley looked up at Nick and couldn't help but grin. "I have one too."

Sarge's eyebrows flew up. "You can't afford one on what we pay you."

She kept right on grinning. "A friend gave it to me."

Sarge whistled between his teeth. "How do I get on his Christmas list?"

"The designer only makes them for women."

Sarge shook his head and went back to his car.

* * *

Nick stood next to the picture window in Charley's living room and stuffed his fists into the pockets of his pants. Outside, a car went by as the shadows lengthened. Such a long, tiring day. A day he'd almost killed someone with his bare hands. *Gott im Himmel*, he'd almost murdered someone.

She came up beside him and put a hand on his shoulder. "You're mighty quiet."

He sighed. He'd made her face her demons. He couldn't hide his own.

"I would have done it," he said. "If you hadn't stopped me, I would have broken his neck."

"I never imagined you're that strong. I hope you never get that mad at me."

"Don't even joke about that." He glared at her. "I'd never hurt you."

"Hey." She raised her hands. "I was kidding."

"I know." He rubbed his palms over his face. He'd frightened her when he'd first taken her for a ride. Today, he'd flown into a murderous rage. Now, he was yelling at her. What was wrong with him?

She pulled his hands down and looked up at him, her green eyes worried. "You're seriously bugged."

"That was brutality, not strength. You're the strong one."

She was too. If he'd ever doubted that, the "paperwork," as she called it, at the police department would have convinced him. She'd sat and detailed everything she'd

endured. Interviewing herself as she would another victim and recording it all. She was still remembering more details. How they'd overpowered her by stealth outside the bar. Taken her to that horrible place where they'd abused her over and over. They'd planned to kill her when they were done. Instead, she'd managed to slip her ties and escape when the one who was supposed to be guarding her passed out from drink.

"You're not having second thoughts about me, are you?" she asked.

"About *you*?"

She lowered her gaze. "Some guys can't deal with their woman going through that kind of shit."

He lifted her chin until she looked into his eyes. "You're a miracle, Charley. Nothing could make me stop loving you."

"Then, what's all this about?"

"I would have killed that man."

"Yeah." She shrugged. "That's pretty much what I'd planned to do."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because of you."

Because of him? How could that be? He hadn't done anything to dissuade her from taking revenge. He would have held the bastard down while she cut his heart out if she wanted.

"I'd like to take credit for that," he said.

"Then, do."

He must have looked completely baffled, because she studied him for a moment and then smiled. "You fixed me, Nick. I was twisted into knots. So afraid of facing what was inside myself I'd wiped out whole days of my memory. I thought I could cope that way, but I was losing it."

"I only brought out your passion."

"You did a lot more than that," she said. "You healed me. You made me confront my fears and overcome them."

"I don't understand."

"You made me see that strength is much more than force. It's working through what you fear and hate the most and doing what's right. That was the one thing I didn't have as a cop -- as a person -- and you gave it to me."

"I did all that?" he said. "I thought I only made love to you."

"You did that too." She ran her arms around his ribs and tipped her head up for a kiss. So open, so trusting. So precious.

He bent and held her against him while he pressed his mouth to hers. She opened to him, parting her lips so that their breath mingled. Every time they kissed was new. She could own him with a simple caress, make his eager human body hot and aching in seconds. She did that now, as her tongue slipped between his lips and grazed his own. His cock went rigid and pressed into her hip. He groaned and pulled her hard against him.

She pulled back, chuckling. "Well, well. What do we have here?"

"You know, I think."

"I'd better check to make sure." She stepped back just enough to make room for her hand between their bodies. Flattening her palm against the front of his pants, she stroked his cock until the pressure drove him wild with lust. She touched him everywhere, from the head of his cock down to his balls.

He rested the side of his face against hers and struggled for breath. "Ach, how I want you."

"You healed me with your love," she said. "Let's go heal you."

Alice Gaines

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