



Boundless

Annie Dean, Bonnie Dee, Dionne Galace

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Seven Days

Annie Dean

Dedication

As always, for Andres.

Day One

Teresa knelt in prayer.

While other girls daydreamed over boy bands and what they would wear to the prom, Teresa meditated and volunteered at the city hospice. Now she hovered on the precipice of her sweetest dream. In one week's time, she would take holy vows and join the Sisters of Peace, no longer a novice, but a bride of God.

This time of day, this chapel was quiet. Candles burned on the altar where she knelt, throwing long shadows. The monastery lay an hour from Vancouver, and they lived quietly, leading chants and prayers, tending the lambs and llamas. Eight of the sisters were quite old and wise and Teresa felt honored to have been chosen to train here.

Tonight she needed to make dinner for the others. Finishing her prayers, she straightened and found a man standing shadowed in the nave. She paused. They received visitors rarely. Though neighbors were welcome to attend services, very few did. Thus, the sisters led services for each other and for God's glory.

Teresa didn't know why, but the stranger made her uneasy, as if he carried portents of change. Nevertheless, she tried to smile, moving forward in her plain gray robe. It wouldn't do to turn someone away in need of aid.

"Hello, may I help you?"

He stepped into the light and she nearly gasped. Such beauty should be sinful, and it likely was. She doubted he meant anything good by coming here, and then immediately chided herself for such suspicion.

Still, she'd never seen a man who looked as he did: fine, chiseled features, eyes of summer sky, and hair that shone with the dull gold of ancient coins. Not that Teresa possessed much real knowledge of men. She hadn't seen her father or her brother since she'd left to study at St. Mary's and she'd applied to the Sisters of Peace after graduation.

The stranger still didn't speak, so she tried again. "I'm sorry, are you lost?"

"No," he murmured in a voice sweet and dark as bitter chocolate. "But you soon shall be, I think."

His impossibly blue gaze roamed over her in a manner that made Teresa draw back. Her voice came out shaky. "You have no business here. Go. I'll call one of the other sisters if you don't."

In a languid, graceful gesture, he leaned his shoulder against the ornate stonework that lined the arch leading into the nave. Candles guttered when he smiled, and a chill ran over her skin. Her lungs wouldn't work right, and Teresa's sense of personal threat escalated out of proportion to the danger.

"By all means, do so." He sounded amused.

Teresa narrowed her eyes. If he thought he could intimidate her—

"Reverend Mother!"

Her shout brought the nun hurrying from her studies in the library. Teresa folded her arms, satisfied that the old woman would soon sort matters out. God help this man for wasting the Mother Superior's time.

The other woman peered around the chapel and then focused on Teresa with a frown. "What is it, child? I thought we had burglars by your tone."

The golden man's smile widened. His expression said, *I told you so.*
You don't see him?

Teresa managed not to voice the question. The Sisters of Peace didn't welcome instability in their members, and a novice who suffered from visions and visitations would disrupt their quiet lives. The time when a woman could claim to hear the angels had well and truly passed. Now they would medicate her and call her crazy. Sister Margaret could send her back to Pennsylvania.

She thought fast. "I thought I heard something in the vestry, but I must have been mistaken."

"This place can be a bit spooky at night," Sister Margaret allowed. "Possibly a dove's gotten into the eaves again. I'll have Mr. Jessup look tomorrow morning."

"Thank you, Sister. I'm sorry I disrupted your studies."

The nun waved a hand in dismissal. "No trouble. I needed to stretch my legs anyway. Shouldn't you be in the kitchen, though?"

"Of course. I was just finishing up my evening prayers."

"Ah. Make something light? That beef log Sister Agnes foisted upon us last night shall weigh on me 'til Michaelmas." Margaret's gray eyes twinkled.

Since they'd just begun marking the days of April off the calendar, she smiled. "I'll bear that in mind. Perhaps a nice chicken and rice dish with a touch of lemon?"

"Lovely. I'll see you at supper then." With that, Sister Margaret passed from the chapel into the corridor that led back to the library, where she researched her pet project, a brilliant book called *The Lives of Saints*.

"Satisfied, Teresa?" As he spoke her name, he proved his imaginary status. She didn't know anyone like him. He pushed away from the wall and sauntered toward her.

Her heart thumped wildly. Maybe she did need medication. "You're not real, and I need to cook dinner. I don't have time for hallucinations."

His soft voice carried as she turned her back on him. "I'll let you run for now, but you can't hide. Neither of us can."

While she cooked, she expected the stranger to appear again and taunt her some more. She usually enjoyed preparing a meal in the big, old-fashioned kitchen, but tonight she felt jumpy. The sisters enjoyed her lemon chicken casserole, but then, they always did. It digested easily, an important point when most of the nuns were well advanced in years.

After dinner, she wiped down the antique wood countertops and the old ceramic sink. It needed to be scrubbed daily with baking soda or stains soaked in. Everything about the monastery spoke to Teresa and made her feel at ease. Sometimes she thought she should have been born in the nineteenth century. Certainly this farmhouse, built in the 1700s and donated to the sisters in 1844, felt like home in a way the squat prefab house in Pittsburgh never did.

By the time she'd finished the dishes, she'd convinced herself she'd imagined the whole thing. A man nobody else could see? Ridiculous. Nobody had ever mentioned pre-Bride-of-God jitters, but Teresa supposed it wasn't that much different than traditional pre-wedding nerves. God never forgot to put the toilet seat down or threw his socks on the floor, so there was even less reason to be anxious.

With a sigh she hung up her dishtowel and turned off the lights. Tonight she would spoil herself by reading a few chapters of her favorite author's latest novel before bed.

Maybe the other sisters wouldn't approve of her delight in a series called *Murder Inc.*, but she ate the books up.

First thing, she clicked the lamp on as the small window did nothing to dispel the shadows. Tonight, Teresa didn't want to think about shadows or doubt. Her cell didn't possess much personality, plain white walls, a crucifix hung over the single bed and a bedside table, but her dorm room at St. Mary's hadn't looked much different. Even when she could, she never hung posters, so moving to the monastery had altered her life very little. She enjoyed these peaceful hours after dinner, liked feeling she'd earned her relaxation by virtue of a good day's work.

She changed quickly from her novice robe to a demure white nightgown and made sure not to look too long at her naked body. After rummaging beneath the bed for her stash of murder mysteries, she curled up like a child, ready to sink into the adventures of fearless P.I. Maxine "Max" Donnelly, who could kick a man's behind faster than Teresa could weed the cabbages. Sometimes she wondered what it would be like to live as such a woman, tough and capable, breaking heads in a man's world.

But she'd only turned a few pages before she heard, "Do you think Sister Margaret would approve of your choice in reading material?"

He couldn't be in her room. The door hadn't opened; the window remained closed and locked. Impossible. Teresa covered her eyes and counted to ten.

When she peeked through her fingers, she saw him perched at the foot of her bed. "You ... what *are* you?"

Screaming for help hadn't done any good, so she might as well talk to him. See what she could learn from such a pretty delusion.

"Temptation," he said, and his voice summoned gooseflesh on her skin.

"I don't understand." She wanted to touch him, discover whether he felt as solid as he looked, but she feared he would take that as encouragement.

"Poor baby." His tone held a certain fatal kindness. "Your God likes to gamble now and again, as you doubtless remember from the Book of Job. I felt sorry for the poor bastard, if you want the truth. It's never fun to be a pawn caught between two Powers."

"Why are you telling me this?" But she thought she knew, and it meant she should be locked up somewhere.

"You're the new chessboard," he said softly. "God calls you a pure soul, but my master claims there's no such thing. So I'm here to test the truth of the matter."

"You think I would forsake my faith for a pretty face?" She infused all the scorn she felt into the words. "I have devoted my life to God."

"But you haven't spent seven days and seven nights with him," he countered smoothly. "As you shall with me. Prayer will offer you no respite, girl. I mean to win."

Her throat felt dry as old parchment. "Win? What do you get if I fall?"

He shifted, leaning forward so she could see the blue fire of his eyes. "My freedom. Every millennia or so, my master teases me with the possibility."

"My soul for yours," she said as she realized it. "You intend me to take your place in Hell. Why have you told me this? It only fortifies my resolve."

"Because," he whispered, leaning close, and the movement carried the scent of nutmeg and cloves. "You will not be able to resist regardless, and that makes my victory sweeter. Some of my kind enjoy the pain generated by brutality, but I prefer the anguished pleasure of desperate surrender."

“You must content yourself with memories then. I will offer nothing new.”

She could ignore him for seven days she told herself, and opened her book anew. Teresa wasn't entirely sure she believed, but she didn't want to entertain the thought that she might be crazy either. *Why would I be important enough for this?*

Then again, why was Job?

He let her read for a few moments before he whispered, “You're a pretty thing. Skin like ivory and eyes of darkest night. You're wasted in a convent.”

“It's a monastery.” She broke her vow to take no notice of him.

“Forgive me. I'm not acquainted with the modern distinctions, apparently.”

Despite herself Teresa saw the absurdity of explaining religious shadings to a demon. For one such he must be. And if she accepted it, she could not go back. “Who are you?” She doubted it would reveal its name, but one never knew. Not that she could perform a ritual for banishing a demon.

“My true name would boil the blood in your veins,” he told her gently. “And you would not be able to pronounce it in any case. You can call me Dev.”

Teresa raised her brows. “Are you kidding?”

On the wall behind him the lamp threw his shadow, where it coiled like a dragon. He followed her gaze and gave his wicked smile again. “You see more than most. I enjoyed a few centuries on work furlough here. Legend has it wrong, though. I brought St. George to my lair by ravaging the countryside in Libya, true, but there was no princess, nor did I devour all the maidens aside from the King of Egypt's daughter.” Dev shook his head and sighed. “In those days they sacrificed one virgin a year to placate me, so how does that add up to my eating up all the women but one? Even given the lower population at the time, basic math disproves it.”

She just knew she shouldn't ask. Couldn't resist. “What really happened?”

“The fools got the sacrifice wrong too.” His face darkened as he drew his knees up to his chest. “I'm not that sort of dragon, though I've burned my share of barns. I eat women and enjoy it, but not that way. I wouldn't have minded virgins chained up for my pleasure but I wish they hadn't knifed them first. I prefer them live and writhing, like hearing their screams melt into moans and sighs. The Mesopotamian priestesses knew what they were doing in that regard.”

“Oh.” His words summoned images she hadn't known she could visualize.

Some pretty young thing lies bound and helpless while he presses his face between her thighs. She howls in terror at first, but as his beautiful mouth laps at her soft flesh, heat builds down there. The virgin sacrifice lifts her hips and undulates against his tongue, feeding him with her mounting excitement, nourishing him with her juices. Before the end, she begs him to mount her—

Teresa prayed her expression didn't reveal her thoughts. She couldn't afford to show weakness, not when so much hung in the balance. “Go on, please.”

For the moment, he just seemed to enjoy the opportunity to set the story straight. “Once George entered my lair, he most definitely did not slay me with his mighty sword.” His eyes shone with a roguish light. “In fact, I never saw his sword. I took the form of the maiden Sabra and tempted him for seven days and seven nights.”

“But he resisted you.” Teresa would take strength in that. If St. George could slay this dragon with his steadfast faith, so could she.

“So he did, and by doing so, he banished me from this plane. I suspect I would have

had more luck if I'd chosen my current form. George was no lover of maidens."

"You're saying St. George loved other men." She didn't know whether to be amused or aghast.

"Career soldiers often do," Dev said. "Why else choose a profession where there are so few women?"

"It's not like that now," she informed him. "Women serve in all branches of the military these days." On some level she knew she ought not to chat with him, but it might distract him. Then she asked a question that brought the conversation full circle. "You were a woman for St. George? That was all right for you?"

Put that way, it sounded impossibly naïve, but what did she know of such things? Curiosity had always been her chief fault, and it wasn't likely she'd ever have a demon on the foot of her bed again. When she wondered about something, she asked, which made for some awkward moments over the years.

"Are you asking if I'm bisexual, Teresa?"

Oh no. I didn't mean to get personal. The room felt stifling hot, and she wished she didn't have to wear the nightgown, but she never slept nude, let alone with company. Come to that, she'd never had a man in her room before.

"I don't know what I'm asking."

He took pity on her. "I enjoy pleasure in all its forms. Human arousal generates astonishing energy ... I can be sated for ages, if it reaches a certain crescendo."

Orgasm. He meant an orgasm. Like any modern woman, she knew about them. As a teenager, Teresa explored herself a little before deciding on cold showers as the best remedy for occasional urges she couldn't quell. By and large she didn't suffer from an excess of sexual drive because she channeled such impulses into her work.

She pursued the matter on an intellectual basis, afraid he would demonstrate if she gave him half a chance. "So you possess no gender bias?"

The smile he offered in response curled her toes. "My energy is predominantly male. More yang, if you're familiar with the concept, but one does not exclude the other. Yin and yang are interdependent." His voice became caressing and Teresa's nipples hardened beneath her white gown. "One cannot exist without the other, like stars in the night sky. It all relates to balance."

Seven days of this? I'll go nuts. Studying theology at St. Mary's College had in no way prepared her for a beautiful devil who talked Chinese philosophy and made her think of sex with his every word. It took a moment to process his words.

"So you're more ... yang, but you have enough yin to enjoy a man's pleasure if you..." She sought the right word. "Manifest as a woman?" Perhaps such interest damned her, but she found him fascinating.

Assuming he was really here. Assuming she wasn't crazy. She didn't want to be.

Dev nodded, his head canted as he studied her in the lamplight. "Just so. I prefer women, so soft and smooth. They possess such a luscious scent. For instance, you smell of cucumber, aloe and ginseng, accented by the warmth of your skin. I love long hair like you wear braided so tightly. May I take it down, Teresa? I want to brush it for you."

Waist-length hair comprised her sole vanity, one that would be shorn to more a modest cut when she took her vows in a symbol of casting away worldly things. Under no circumstances could she permit him to touch her, however. With but a few words he instigated wildly heated thoughts.

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not. I sleep in the braids or it's impossible to manage in the morning."

He sighed a little. "I'm sent to work, and my preferences never matter. Why should you be any different?" Before her eyes, he faded, leaving only his voice. "I'll see you tomorrow, pretty one."

Teresa surprised herself with a pang of sympathy, but doubtless he intended her to feel exactly that. Compassion would soften her toward him, and she could not permit herself to view him as anything but a curiosity.

Heaven help her, it would be a long week.

Day Two

Teresa woke cradled in her lover's arms just before first light. His thigh pressed between hers, and his lips trailed down her throat. Her breasts ached. Delightfully warm, she nestled closer and smiled as she breathed him in. He smelled of nutmeg and cloves and his hands drifted over the small of her back, rubbing in sensual circles.

Except she didn't have a lover.

Her eyes snapped open and she recoiled so fast she fell off the bed. From the floor she gaped up at the man—no, demon—lying on his side. His golden skin contrasted deliciously with the snowy linen sheets. *He slept with me? Does that mean I already fell?* Surely she'd remember something so significant.

"I thought I dreamed you." More accurately, she wished she had. "What are you doing here?"

"I was holding you," he said with a smile that illuminated the gray light. "Quite successfully until a moment ago."

Outraged, she came up onto her knees, hands on the thin mattress. "I never said you could do that."

His smile widened. "You never said I couldn't either."

"I was asleep!"

Dev shrugged. "I must abide by your words, not your unspoken wishes."

"So that's how this works, the letter of the law? Very well. I forbid you to touch me without my express spoken permission." *That should cover it.*

She couldn't believe how solid Dev felt. Even now his heat lingered on her skin, and it would take months, possibly years, to forget how it felt to be close to him. Blast him for teaching her something so unwelcome.

"As you wish."

A delightful idea occurred to her. "If I tell you to go away for the rest of the week, must you abide by that too?"

He laughed softly. "I'm afraid not. You must endure my company. How else can I tempt you?"

"You can't. You're a pretty delusion, Dev, but you aren't real. You could never convince me to part with my immortal soul for a few kisses, however sweet, or for some fleeting moments of pleasure."

His lashes shadowed the curve of his cheeks in a particularly slumberous look. "You know nothing of pleasure, pretty one."

"That's what you think." She'd soon take vows, but that didn't mean she was completely ignorant.

He was crazy if he thought she didn't know how it felt to stimulate herself down there until a nice feeling came over her. As a young girl, she'd discovered that tucking her blanket between her thighs produced a lovely sensation. Teresa remembered lying on her tummy, breath coming in tiny gasps while her hips worked. She did that until she understood the sin inherent in such actions.

Dev shook his head as if he could read her mind. "I can do things to you that people no longer even conceive in their most secret fantasies. While you've gained much in the

machine arts, you've lost much in the ways of love. Highly ironic, even the most primitive people knew more about it than you enlightened souls."

Teresa tried to scoff, but in truth his words fired her imagination. "What does one like you know? There is a vast difference between sex and love."

His face closed then as if she'd hurt him, became a thing of golden stone, inset with blue gems for eyes. "I misspoke."

She would *not* apologize.

"I need to get dressed," she muttered. "Will you please make yourself scarce?"

"No."

Belatedly she realized it appeared as if she knelt to him as a suppliant so she scrambled to her feet. "What do you mean no?"

Her shower day came tomorrow. On the off day, she usually performed a quick wash up with her water basin and then got dressed. Things at the Sisters of Peace monastery ran on a schedule—all chores and privileges divvied up. Teresa could take her clothes to the bathroom, she supposed, but if another sister saw her, there would be questions she couldn't readily answer.

"Haven't you ever heard the word before?" He sat up, folding his legs before him. Dev looked too comfortable in her bed. "I'm not going anywhere. Since I can't touch you, one of us may as well get a little pleasure out of our association."

"You're saying you would enjoy seeing me change?" She hated sounding so dull-witted, hated the small thrill that sparked through her at the idea of showing her naked body to him, however briefly.

Even considering such a thing meant his presence chipped away at her resolve. She should gather up her things and retreat to the bathroom immediately. Instead, she stood in the center of the room, watching him.

The silence built. Finally he answered, "Yes." And he sounded reluctant to make the admission.

Teresa didn't understand why she found that softly growled word so compelling. Her fingers went to the button at the neck of her plain white nightgown. Hesitated there.

"Why? You must have seen thousands of naked women."

His long, elegant fingers knotted in the sheet covering his knees. An image flashed of his face tight with pleasure, clenching the fabric just that way for an entirely different reason. Her breath hitched, but she couldn't put the picture away.

"Yes," he admitted. "I can play the voyeur and I've been with women overcome with lust. That's what I do, Teresa. I overwhelm their good judgment."

It took her a moment to make the distinction. "But if I change before you now, I'm choosing to please you of my own free will."

"Don't." Fear tightened his features. "Nobody ever thinks about my pleasure."

Could this be construed as a weakness? Or did he play on her emotions to undermine her determination? She lacked the experience to tell. Her panties felt damp, her flesh soft and hot against the gusset. The fact that he'd changed his mind about watching decided the matter for her.

"If you don't want to see, go now."

One by one she unfastened the pearl buttons and pulled the gown over her head. She hated losing sight of his expression, even for a moment. The naked longing in his face surprised her. One would have thought an incubus inured to the allure of a woman's body,

but Dev ate her with his eyes.

"You're lovely." His voice rasped as she went to the washbasin.

"Thank you."

With his eyes on her, she felt more conscious of the swells and valleys of her body, the shallow curve of her breasts and the flare of her hips. Did she dare go all the way? If she were alone, she would lay out a pair of clean panties, modest white cotton, and spot wash between her thighs and under her arms before getting dressed.

By real world standards, she *was* alone. He couldn't touch without her permission and she might be confronting her own repressed sexual fantasies. Teresa opened the top drawer of her dresser.

Did she have a secret desire to be watched? She'd never thought much about such matters. Slowly she worked the panties down over her hips. He sat quiet as the last barrier between his eyes and her skin pooled at her feet.

Teresa took up the washcloth and set about her sponge bath. Different now because her flesh felt feverish down there, softly swollen. Even when she'd rubbed against her blankets until she gasped, she never dared touch with her fingers.

"More." But it didn't register as a command. Instead it rang like a plea. "Let me see you, Teresa."

She paused, the small swatch of fabric covering her mound. "Would that please you?" Again his pleasure, not hers—the balance between them shifted in ways she couldn't tally.

"Yes," he said hoarsely.

Hardly believing her own daring, she moved toward the bed and propped her foot on the end. Before his avid eyes she washed, letting him see everything.

"Is that what you wanted?" She sounded more composed than she felt.

"I want to see you finish what you've started. I want you to touch yourself for me until your head falls back and you moan my name."

Her fingers stilled, curled in the washcloth. "I won't do that, Dev."

His blue eyes seemed oddly somber in the half-light. "It won't imperil your salvation, contrary to what most religions think. God operates on a grander scale."

"I hardly think I can take your word for that."

"I suppose you can't. But do you think your fellow sisters never masturbate? Two of them cannot fall asleep unless they do. Another enjoys spontaneous orgasms in the night, dreaming of golden angels with fiery lances."

All the sisters seemed so placid, so pious. Teresa didn't want to think of them with their fingers working feverishly, unable to relax until they shuddered and came. How could she believe him? But at the same time, his words carried an unmistakable ring of truth. She hurriedly tugged on her panties and pulled her robe over her head, needing a barrier between them.

"Is that your doing?"

"No," he said, and she felt ridiculously glad. "The glory belongs to others like me. My master finds it amusing to trifle with the brides of Christ. Many have phantom lovers they believe to be angels or great Jesu himself, but you didn't think your namesake received divine ecstasy from the Holy Spirit, did you?" Dev leaned over and plucked her officially sanctioned reading material from her beside table, pointed at the cover. "Look at her face and tell me you don't know what's happening to her."

In cool marble Bernini depicted Teresa of Avila with her head thrown back, face tight, lips parted. Her voice trembled. "It looks like an orgasm. But if you're claiming credit for her visions, then you just admitted such bliss doesn't come from God. If it doesn't, then I must eschew it in trying to walk the higher path."

Dev slammed his fist into the wall. "God doesn't care what you do. I defy you to look at the world you live in and argue that he does. Apart from occasional conversations with my master—and that alone should make you wonder—his phone is off the hook, my girl. Even his own angels haven't been able to raise him in millennia."

Teresa felt as though he'd punched her in the heart. She shook her head slowly, backing toward the door. "No, you're wrong. You're just trying to trick me because it's what you do. I have to cook breakfast, please leave me alone."

She fled for the kitchen, hoping she wouldn't encounter any of the other sisters until she regained some semblance of self-possession. Anything more complicated than scrambled eggs and toast defeated her, but she managed that. By the time she put breakfast on the table, she didn't feel quite so precarious. The other sisters ate quietly, just the odd comment now and then to punctuate the meal.

Sister Margaret shot her questioning looks every now and then. Teresa hadn't realized she could be read so easily. She made herself smile and stop picking at her eggs.

"After you finish in the kitchen, I'll start with the mint jelly. Did you want to help?" Sister Ruth asked. A round, cocoa-skinned woman of middle years, Ruth oversaw the production of various jams and jellies that helped support the monastery. She'd been a cook before taking her vows.

Teresa shook her head. "I'm supposed to dust library shelves today."

As the youngest, Teresa performed most of the heavy household cleaning, both to teach her humility and because she had more endurance for such tasks. Ordinarily she didn't mind, but today she couldn't focus. She didn't want to see Dev again, but how could she avoid him? His vehement repudiation of God suggested he didn't represent some hidden portion of her psyche, unless she suffered from an unconscious lack of faith and didn't want to acknowledge it. Such tangled possibilities made her head hurt.

After she'd finished tidying up the kitchen, she collected her cleaning bucket and reported to the library. Perhaps he'd permit her to work unmolested. The Mother Superior sat at her desk, surrounded by an explosion of old tomes and scrawled notes. Teresa thought a computer would aid this project, but Sister Margaret distrusted technology.

Procrastination didn't accomplish anything but working later in the day, so she began removing the books from the first shelf. Under Sister Margaret's gimlet gaze it wouldn't do to take shortcuts. The older woman watched her work for a little while and then laid down her pen.

"Are you all right, child? You seem terribly unsettled."

She started. Imagined saying, *You see, Reverend Mother, I'm plagued by a demon, who claims God and the Dark One have made a wager over my soul. Yes, you could safely say I'm a trifle unsettled.*

"Do I? Perhaps I've been having strange dreams. Not that I remember them," she added to forestall further questions.

Given half a chance, the Mother Superior would send her to Sister Agnes, who worked as a psychologist before foregoing her secular profession. However, she still practiced on her fellow sisters at the drop of a hat. Teresa dusted the shelf and tried to

look normal; not a novice who stripped for demons.

What madness was that, anyway?

"I thought perhaps you were having doubts. You're very close to becoming a full-fledged member of the order."

"Doubts? No! Why would you think that?" Did she sound a trifle shrill?

"It's natural. You're still quite young. Before coming to us, most women live a little in order to confirm their calling."

"This is what I always wanted." She wished she could revert to her prior unquestioning serenity.

Sister Margaret smiled. "As long as you're certain, but you still have a few days to think things over. We won't think any less of you if you change your mind for now. We're not going anywhere."

"I'm not going to change my mind," she said firmly.

"Famous last words." Dev sauntered into the library and Teresa stole a worried glance at the Mother Superior, now engrossed in her books.

Oh, the ignominy. She couldn't even tell him to go away, for speaking to people who weren't there would get her sent to Sister Agnes, if not immediately shuffled off to Pittsburgh. Contenting herself with a fulminating look, she returned to work, cleaning with more dispatch than her usual wont.

By the time she'd finished her chores, Dev had flipped through most of the historical texts while making profane but entertaining observations about various saints. He'd tapped a picture of St. Jude. "Patron saint of lost causes and body odor, they mean."

More than once she stifled laughter, and it became harder to remember why she'd objected to his company, even given his wrongheaded opinions on God. Considering where he spent most of his time, he couldn't be counted an impartial witness anyway.

But she also realized she couldn't sustain this pretense for a week. Teresa stood before Sister Margaret's desk, bucket in hand, and waited for acknowledgment. At last the old woman raised her head from her research.

"Did you need something? You don't require my leave to quit the room."

She tried not to fidget. "Yes, I know. I need to make a rather unusual request. Maybe I am ... having doubts, Reverend Mother." That was one word for Dev, lounging before the window. "I humbly entreat you to permit me to sequester myself until time for the ceremony. I'd like to pray on this and perhaps things will become clear."

The Mother Superior tapped her pen thoughtfully. "This is not without precedent. Some novitiates spend a few days fasting before making this final commitment. Yes, I will allow it."

Relief almost buckled her knees. "Thank you. I realize this places extra work on the others, and I'll take up the slack after I speak my vows."

"Very good. I still expect to see you at Sunday services, Sister." That registered as a dismissal, so Teresa hurried out of the library.

She put away her supplies and then returned to her room, knowing she'd find him waiting. Since her cell offered nothing else in the way of seating, he lounged on her bed as if he belonged there, and his grin qualified as devilish. "Couldn't wait to get me alone, could you?"

"You're making my life impossible!"

"I'd say I make it interesting. For the first time, I might add. You've been so

detestably good.”

Collapsing on the edge of the bed, she failed to summon the energy to glare at him. “Because of you, I won’t get any dinner. Or breakfast either.”

“I can fix that.”

She raised her brows in suspicion. “How?”

He sighed with what sounded like exasperation. “I’ll just go to the kitchen and get you something. Nobody will notice, though they may wonder who’s pinching food.”

“Can I really trust you to do that for me?” She thought of Eve. “No apples.”

Dev laughed reluctantly. “Noted. Why wouldn’t you trust me to get you a sandwich? I’m not going to poison you. And it’s fairies from whom you aren’t supposed to accept food or drink. Do I look like a fucking fairy?”

Honesty compelled her to say, “No, but you don’t look like a demon either.”

“I could, if you like.”

“No. Please don’t. I’m used to you as you are.” In fact she quite liked looking at him, but she’d never admit it.

“On this plane, I can resemble anything I wish, but I did enjoy my time as a dragon. Sometimes they even delivered live virgins and I sent them back reeling with pleasure and wild stories.”

Oh, those she wanted. That much she could permit. “Tell me?”

His voice dropped low. “My wild stories?”

“Please.” Teresa wanted to move closer, but doubtless he intended that reaction.

“Don’t worry, I shall.”

Day Three

Midnight. They lay facing each other like lovers, but only their voices connected them. Teresa had listened to him for hours, entranced.

“But why a dragon?” she asked.

He smiled like Puck. “The legends already existed, and it seemed like a natural way to get what I wanted. I had such fun in Luxembourg. In human form I wouldn’t have had tribute and treasure delivered to me, which made it far easier to enjoy myself when I *did* go about as a man. They were so lavish in their entertainments. Your puritan soul would be horrified.”

“So people gave you gold and virgins not to destroy their homes and then you went out to spend it? You couldn’t summon demon gold, or steal it or something?”

Dev sighed. “You’re thinking of fairies again. Demons don’t have their own currency, there’s no grand bazaar in Hell. It operates on the barter system, a favor for a favor.” His expression turned brooding. “In fact that’s how I wound up here.”

“Is that so bad?” She didn’t know how to take that, not when he looked so disgruntled. Certainly it was for *her*, but it rankled that a minion of the Dark One might find her company objectionable.

He sat up then. “Yes.”

“Why? I don’t understand.” Ridiculous, she should be glad he hated being around her. That must mean she was on the right track.

In a lithe movement, he slid off the bed and eased to his feet. Tonight he wore black, and it suited him, framed his golden skin in somber elegance. “You’re not like the others,” he said quietly. “My aura doesn’t work as it should. If it did, you would’ve succumbed by now, so I’m simply waiting to fail. That’s not a pretty feeling.”

“You could be lying to get me to lower my guard.” She couldn’t remain prone with him standing over her. That disparity roused a helpless feeling she didn’t like, so Teresa clambered up as well.

After running a hand through his hair, he shrugged. “I could be. Doubtless you’ll say I work for the Prince of Lies and all that. But I’m not him, Teresa, nor even one of the dukes. I quite like humans, actually. You burgeon with ideas, however ridiculous, and you smolder with enthusiasm. Just being on the surface offers a sense of renewal. You can’t imagine what it’s like down there.” His jaw clenched and he braced his feet as if preparing for an attack.

Teresa tried to steel herself. Under no circumstances should this devil be able to rouse her sympathy, even for a moment. She didn’t know what sin he’d committed to wind up down there or whether he was one of the lesser spirits Lucifer raised after the fall. Dev might even be a former angel for all she knew.

“Are you one of the fallen?”

He shook his head. “Just one of the damned. I worked my way out of the throng to merit assignments on Earth.” Dev held up a hand. “No, I won’t tell you. You don’t want to know.”

“How do other women react to you?” Her cheeks pinked at indulging such curiosity, but she didn’t regret the question.

The tension in his stance eased. His blue eyes shone with a hungry light. "They inhale my scent and their pupils dilate. Their nipples harden, and their breathing becomes shallow. If I touch them, they go boneless. Their legs fall open and they beg me to touch them. Take them. By the time I slip my fingers between their thighs, they're wet and writhing. They come if I breathe on their flesh, and they scream when I enter them. I ride them through as many climaxes as they can bear, and when they're spent, I withdraw, strong and sated with their lust."

Perhaps his aura didn't affect her as it should, but his voice did. Teresa trembled, hoping he couldn't sense the heat rising within her skin. She remembered the nice tingle from her blankets, and for the first time, she realized there might be more.

Heaven help her.

"What about you?"

Dev arched a brow in puzzlement. "What about me?"

She found the jargon difficult to speak aloud, much different to shape the word inside her own head. "Don't you have ... climaxes?"

By the way he tilted his head, nobody had ever asked him such a thing before. "No. I crave the energy generated by such union. Need it. That's where my satisfaction lies."

"But it pleased you when I undressed for you."

When he licked his lips in a very human gesture, she *knew*.

"Yes."

"You're untouched," she said in astonished glee. "Even though you've ridden legions of women to their own pleasure, you've never had anyone touch you because she wanted to. I bet you never even held anyone before last night. They would've all been too busy panting and pleading for completion for you to lie quiet like that."

"Why do you interrogate me so? You are a most unnatural woman."

The most beautiful idea occurred to her, full-fledged. "Perhaps I am. Let me see if I understand our situation. I forfeit my immortal soul only if I give myself to you, and you may touch me only with my permission. Is that essentially correct?"

"That is entirely correct," he bit out. "Do you intend to gloat?"

"No. I intend to avail myself of an opportunity that may not come again." Teresa prowled toward him, and her expression appeared to alarm him because he backed toward the window. "You have two choices: submit or flee. Which will it be?"

"You threaten an incubus with pleasure?" He almost managed a convincing laugh.

"Not mine," she whispered. "Yours. Can you bear it?"

"You're a nun!" The poor thing sounded almost outraged.

Who's tempting whom?

She smiled. "Not yet."

His whole body quivered as she set her fingertips on his chest, respectably covered by his black shirt. For a moment, she thought she'd won; he would run and leave her in peace. At best this was a gamble, but then Dev called her bluff.

He stood before her, arms open in the manner of a sacrifice. "I'm yours. Do with me what you will."

While some might call it cowardice, she lacked the nerve to push. Besides, by keeping him off balance, she might make it through the week intact. "I need some fresh air, so let's start with a walk. It's unlikely anyone will check on me, but can you do something about it, just in case?"

"A walk," he repeated.

Her gaze centered on his mouth. Why had she never noticed its beauty before? She'd registered his overall attraction, but not the sculptured line of his lips with the tiny dent in the bottom, or how the top one swelled a trifle fuller.

"Mmhm."

With visible effort he shook off the residual effects of whatever she'd done to him. "I can leave a simulacrum in your place. Illusion is my specialty and people aid me by seeing whatever they expect."

Teresa stared, wide-eyed. "That sounds powerful."

Dev smiled. "Perhaps, but it doesn't last long, so we need to return by dawn."

Pausing, sneaker in hand, she said, "You say that as if you expect us to hike to Calgary and back."

"No. I intend something better. Much better." His excitement shone from his wide smile, a tangible force. "Do you have street clothes, Teresa? Surely you have some left from college?"

Even though she knew better than to cooperate, she found his anticipation infectious. In fact she did have some jeans and T-shirts folded at the bottom of her drawer. She fought for the suspicion she should be feeling, but she *liked* Dev.

Still, she couldn't fall in without a token protest. "Why?"

"Can you trust me half an inch? This will be fun. Other than sex, that's the extent of my expertise. Look, I'll even turn around while you change." He presented his back.

Teresa stared. Though she couldn't permit him to see her admiration, she loved the breadth of his shoulders, so much strength. But then she'd seen the horror such strength could unleash. She used the opportunity to scramble into a pair of jeans. It only made sense, she told herself. If they went into the woods, the robe might get torn and that would be hard to explain.

She stuffed her novice's garb under some nightgowns, tugged a T-shirt over her head and layered it with a big gray hoodie. The grainy white letters on the chest spelled out St. Mary's. Even in college, she never snuck out, never wanted to risk ruining her chances of being chosen for the Sisters of Peace. As a small order, they rarely accepted new postulants.

When he turned, his face creased in a broad smile. "Even in that, you manage to look like a nun, Teresa."

She hunched her shoulders, perceiving it as a criticism. "That's what I always wanted."

It occurred to her she'd said that an awful lot lately.

Who am I trying to convince?

"Oh, I don't doubt that." He sounded remarkably gentle. "Who wouldn't want some peace after what you've suffered?"

Her whole body froze. "What do you know about it?"

"Everything. I know what you're running from. And why. I know you broke your arm when you were eight, you cried because you weren't invited to Missy Shannon's birthday party when you were twelve and at thirteen..."

"Did they give you a demon dossier on me? My life laid out for your delectation? Pick and choose what you use against me?" Anger rendered her words biting.

"Something like that," he said somberly. "And I understand why Pittsburgh feels like

a fate worse than death. But this isn't your only option, you know. If you want to help people as you did in the hospice, you could take up nursing. You could work for a charitable organization. You don't have to hide from the world to survive."

Before she could tell him she didn't want to talk about it, he turned to face her bed. "*Speculum imago.*" To her astonishment, the bed looked as if she slept in it, tucked innocently beneath the covers. Dev strode to the door and beckoned. "Come. The whole world awaits us."

Stepping boldly into the hall went against all of her instincts. She felt as though she passed beyond some imperceptible boundary she'd set upon herself, and it felt less like sin than freedom. Teresa laughed softly.

When he held out his hand, she took it. Then she stopped as their fingers twined together, but no lightning bolts fell from Heaven. The house sat quiet around them, full of sleeping nuns, none the wiser.

As a child, before she discovered the pain of falling, she enjoyed running. So they did. They ran. They ran down silent corridors and out into the dark. Teresa breathed in the night, redolent with cut grass and cherry blossom. The air carried a bite, frisky with remembered winter.

Breathless, she tipped her face toward the stars. She couldn't remember when she'd seen them so bright and clear, a vast swirl of cut crystal glittering on a bed of midnight silk. The clicking of insects broke the silence, and other nocturnal animals lifted their voices to join the song.

"God loves the dark too," she said. "I'd forgotten that."

"You know my stance on that," Dev returned. "And I don't want to ruin this. Let's get some distance from the house."

Before what? Before he eats you? Part of her insisted that she shouldn't trust him, but she silenced it with mockery. *If you could resist him in bed, what greater magic can he produce in the forest? So shut up and let me have a little fun.*

Teresa gave one last look over her shoulder at the rambling old farmhouse, built of weathered timber and stone. A mile past the last pasture the land turned from field to woods, and he led her in that direction. Not content to follow, she set the pace, dashing toward the trees with her free arm extended like she might take flight.

With a smile, Dev caught her mood and he flew with her. They spiraled and drew figure eights across the meadow with their feet. Her heart ached with the joy of it.

By the time they reached the shadow of the pines, she felt drunk, or rather, as she imagined that might feel. "What did you want to show me?"

"This," he said as he began to change. "Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you."

Before her incredulous eyes, the reality of him shifted. Blurred, elongated, and by the time she processed the transformation, something else crouched beside her in the dark. Teresa took in the long line of him, the coiled tail and serpentine grace. His great wings rustled with the wind.

His voice rumbled the ground beneath her feet. "I miss this every moment I spend below, worse than any torment they could devise. I yearn for the wind against my face. When you began to run, wheeling like a gull, I *knew*. Come, Teresa. Fly with me."

A terrible beast with fangs and claws asked her to come away into the inky sky. Instead of screaming, she thought it over. The night no longer felt real.

"Has anyone ever ridden you?" She caught the innuendo after she spoke.

The shape of his face didn't lend itself to human expression, but he flashed a sharp mouthful of teeth. "Never. I want you to be the first." Dev bent his elegant neck, so she could grasp the scales and pull herself up if she so chose.

Why me? Did he hope to impress her? Or drop her?

Still, a girl who grew up guiltily reading Anne McCaffrey couldn't resist for long. It didn't matter why. Even if this was a dream, she wanted to see where it would lead, if he could truly fly.

After a moment she pulled herself up.

"Hold on, pretty one."

As he thundered along the tree line, gathering momentum, she understood why he'd wanted distance from the house. Then he threw himself to the winds with a powerful push from his back legs. His wings caught the updraft and they soared, first over the fields, and then the treetops.

With insane speed they passed the lights of Langley and sped onward. She felt embarrassingly aware of the big body beneath her, even wrapped in hide tougher than lizard skin. She leaned to one side, peered over his shoulder, and then hid her face at the sight of the world skimming by so far below. Teresa huddled against his neck, hands scrabbling for purchase. So far, the ride seemed impossibly vivid and she didn't want to end it by splattering in New Brunswick.

Even so, she still slid in ways that made her heart leap in raw terror cut with exhilaration. Her teeth chattered. Far below, the world seemed tiny and insignificant, nothing to trouble a dragon and his rider.

His voice growled above the wind howling around them. "Where have you always wanted to go? What would you like to see?"

"Oh, I don't..."

"Where?" This time, he roared.

"Paris!"

They wheeled once as he took stock of the stars and altered their course accordingly. He couldn't possibly—they couldn't return by dawn, could they? Teresa shrieked a little as they surged onward into a spring storm. Now she was both wet and cold, but she couldn't bring herself to ask him to turn back. If this was a dream, what a glorious one, and she wanted to finish it.

By the time he descended she'd lost track of their whereabouts. Surely he must have been teasing about Paris, though. He touched down in a garden somewhere and went at a run. Teresa thought they must surely smash into the Greek statues at the opposite end because he couldn't stop in time. Dev shifted, much less weight to slow, and she found herself clinging to his back. As she leaped down, she couldn't stop laughing.

"May I?"

Teresa nodded before she thought, and he swept her into his arms. Spun with her in a dizzying circle. "Welcome to Paris, my girl. This is *Le Jardin du Palais-Royal*."

In either form, his heat sent a sweet shock throughout her body and she surprised herself by wondering how it would feel, skin to skin. Mortified, she averted her eyes as she stepped back, gazed at the brick paths and manicured trees that marched alongside subdued flowerbeds.

"How is it that nobody noticed you?"

He shrugged. "People don't believe in dragons anymore." Teresa didn't hesitate

when he laced their fingers together. “Your hands feel like ice. Come, I know a lovely all-night place on *Rue Coquillière*. They make the best onion soup in the city.”

They walked like lovers along the avenue. “I take it you’ve been here before? And relatively recently.”

He nodded, not seeming to notice the looks he drew from passing women. Something about that troubled her. “Yes. It’s one of my favorite places on earth.”

“What’s the other?”

“Bangkok.”

Before he could elaborate, she figured it out. “Hey, they can see you!”

Dev grinned. “Of course they can. This is the city of lovers, where they expect couples walking together.”

“Convenient,” she grumbled.

“Perception also depends on whether I will it, Teresa. Tonight I want to be seen with you.”

Her heart clenched as she noticed the disparity between them. A thin woman with schoolgirl plaits, faded jeans and an old sweatshirt walking with a golden god in his tailored black trousers and matching pullover. “Do you? Why?”

“Because you know what it’s like,” he said simply. “The longing to fly while you must remain earthbound.”

Teresa chose not to discuss her longings with him. The buildings shone pale as bone with reflected light. She traced the columns with her eyes, and before long, they came upon *Au Pied de Cochon*, its name written in pretty neon over the red awning.

She read the letters printed on the canopy—*Ouvert jour et nuit*—and guessed at the meaning. “Open all night?”

As a waiter led them to a seat on the terrace lined with miniature trees and flower boxes bursting with red blossoms, Dev nodded. “Onion soup and wine? Or coffee?”

“Coffee.” He ordered for them in flawless French. “You speak it beautifully. I could listen to you all night.”

“You nearly have.”

“But not in French. I wouldn’t understand much, but it would be worth it.”

People passed on the narrow brick street, sometimes close enough to touch. “I like it here. I had a place near Provence for a while. Lovely maidens.” His summer-blue eyes sparkled in the candlelight, and she realized—

When he shifts, his eyes don’t change. And if they are the windows of the soul...

Well, Teresa didn’t know what that meant, but it must be significant. She waited for the waiter to pour the coffee and then she curled her hands around the cup. What sweet, blessed warmth.

As she ate, she watched him, but couldn’t tell whether he actually consumed anything. He made a good show of it if he didn’t. When the waiter presented the bill, she panicked, remembering what he’d said about demons lacking currency.

“Are we in trouble?” She’d never run out on a check.

Laughing, Dev shook his head. “I can convince the reader it’s running my card. Don’t feel guilty, we didn’t order much.”

“If you say so.”

She didn’t feel entirely right about that, but she didn’t have any Euros either. Maybe this was how demons wore a person down, getting them first to accept lesser sins and

working their way up. Teresa sighed because she couldn't regret riding the wind to Paris or cadging a free bowl of soup.

With a charming smile, he signed a ticket and pressed it into the waiter's palm. By the man's effusive response, he believed he'd been tipped well. "Ready? We need to be in the air if we're to get home before dawn."

A thrill shivered through her. "Yes. Please."

Much later, she lay beside him in her narrow bed, and when he asked to hold her, she whispered, "Yes." They pressed close to banish the chill. If she shut her eyes, she could still feel the wind on her face.

Her lashes drifted down. "Kurt Vonnegut said, 'Be careful what you pretend to be because you *are* what you pretend to be.' So maybe you're not a demon pretending to be a dragon anymore. Perhaps you're a dragon pretending to be a demon."

He shuddered against her. "Teresa. Why do you say such things?"

"Because they feel true."

"You terrify me." Dev leaned his forehead against hers.

As the first fingers of light stole over the windowsill she had to ask. "Why?"

"Because you may mean the end of me."

Day Four

Teresa slept the day away.

When she stirred she felt a warm body beside her, but it didn't rattle her anymore. She might even miss it. Shadows bathed the plain walls, telling her it was nearly dark again. As she raised her head, she saw Dev propped up on an elbow, gazing down.

"You don't sleep?"

A smile tugged at the corners of his beautiful mouth. "No rest for the wicked."

Despite herself she laughed softly. "Everything all right?"

"Your Mother Superior peeked in a short while ago and saw you praying like a good girl. Who knows what she would've thought to find you still asleep at this hour? Perhaps that you were out carousing all right."

"Shocking, isn't it?"

Her gaze ran over the planes of his face, lean cheekbones curving to a sharp jaw. His brows slashed in fierce gold lines over wide set eyes. In profile his nose jutted like a blade, a little stronger than his chin, which held the most interesting dimple. Not a full cleft, just a tiny divot. A woman wanted to rest her thumbs there while her fingers framed his face for a kiss.

"Let me get you something to eat. No apples, right?"

Teresa wasn't using to anyone waiting on her. She'd been looking after herself since she was thirteen, more or less. She hesitated, and then her stomach growled.

"You can get me an apple." Her eyes said she accepted the symbolism and the risk. "Cheese too if you don't mind, maybe some bread."

He sketched a bow as he headed for the kitchen. "I'm here to serve."

No, you're here to steal my soul. But her heart might be in greater danger.

After finishing the meal, she rubbed her fingers across her lap. "I need a shower."

"There are limits to what I can do," he said. "I can't make a steamy bathroom look empty, but we could travel. Get a room somewhere, a posh place, and you could take a long bath."

That sounded heavenly. "Where would you like to go?"

"I'd love to fly all night with you, but that wouldn't get you into a warm tub. Vancouver is closest."

While she considered, she fretted her lower lip with her teeth, and as she glanced up, she saw Dev fix on that small motion. "Does it bother you?"

"What?"

"Being close to me and not..." How she hoped he wouldn't make her spell it out.

"Oh." He thought about it, and his voice dropped, deepened. "Not in the way you mean, but I *am* hungry, Teresa."

"Then I'd better get moving. Don't want to anger a hungry dragon."

"Before we go, can I ask a boon?"

"You can ask," she said. "But I don't promise to acquiesce."

"May I unbind your hair? I want to brush it for you."

She remembered him asking that on the first day and gave the answer before she thought better of it. "Yes. I need to wash it anyway."

Dev knelt behind her on the bed, working gently at the plaits. Nobody had touched her hair since her mother died, but she would not think of that, no more than she'd permitted him to mention it yesterday. Without asking he found the plain wood brush in the top drawer of her bedside table. The long strokes sent shivers through her, and she sat quiet, eyes half-closed. Despite her best intentions a soft sound escaped her as he ran the brush beneath, skimming the nape of her neck.

He smoothed his palms down the wavy length once he finished. "You have the look of a Medici princess. Long face, hooded eyes and such glorious hair..."

Teresa started to argue and then she realized he might well have met one to validate the comparison. She contented herself with a simple, "Thank you."

"You don't look like Teresa this way." Leaning in, he tilted her face into the waning light. "Tess." From his lips it sounded like an endearment and fell as a kiss.

She regarded him gravely. "Not of the d'Urbervilles, I hope."

"I'm sorry?"

Dragons—demons?—aren't big readers. Noted. She didn't know how she saw him anymore. Things had become tangled in her head, but she'd seen true evil, and she didn't receive that feeling from him, though that instinct ran counter to every religious teaching. Then again, she didn't agree with everything written in His name. If it came from a human hand, it could be wrong.

"Nothing." Teresa shook her head, acutely conscious of his fingers on her face.

"You don't belong here. Don't you want to know what it's like to have a man come home to you as the brightest part of his day and put his face in your hair? Whisper your name?"

She withdrew, determined she would give him no more ammunition. "Let's go."

"In your nightdress?"

"Oh. You want to turn around again?" She didn't hold out much hope he'd act the gentleman for the second night in a row.

Dev flashed a wicked grin. "Not especially."

His amusement faded, as he appeared to realize she could dress underneath her nightgown while flashing minimal bits of skin. Oh, she knew he'd already seen her from head to toe, but that was before. Before she believed in him completely.

This time she knew what to expect as their feet flew over the green field toward the trees. She sensed his yearning, not for her but the wide, open sky. The shift didn't startle her, but her sense of awe increased. Why did she deserve such a gift? This test began to seem like an honor, for she would treasure these memories once he went away. Teresa shied away from naming the place he must return to, even in her own mind. She ached because it seemed wickedly unfair.

He should be free.

When he bent his neck, it resembled an invitation to dance. Teresa grinned and dropped a curtsy before scrambling up. The last scale on his neck crest showed hollow, so she could hold on easier.

"A handle! Thank you."

Dev bared his teeth. "I don't want to lose you. Hang on. Vancouver is just a hop away."

He spoke the truth. It seemed they had no more taken off and soared a moment or two before the city lights appeared beneath them. They set down in a vacant lot in an

industrial area, near some construction sites. Machines threw hulking shadows and skeletons of unfinished buildings made the spot feel like a necropolis. Under other circumstances she would have been frightened, but she doubted they'd meet anything worse than Dev.

Teresa arched a brow. "You don't know a park downtown?"

Looking sheepish he shook his head. "I've never been here. We'll take the bus."

"The bus," she repeated in amusement.

"Yes, so let's look for a stop."

As she fell in step, Teresa said, "Okay, I have to ask. Why?"

"Taxi drivers are a suspicious, cynical lot. It's pretty hard to get them to accept anything but cold, hard cash." His smile flickered in the dark. "I have better luck fudging technology, particularly that which runs on energy. The credit machine from last night, for instance—the bus should have a pass reader and I can trick that pretty easily too. Plus the driver won't be paying attention to my hands."

"If it's a woman she'll probably orgasm on the spot."

Dev ducked his head but he didn't deny it. That was what an incubus did, after all.

When he held out his hand, she clasped it in hers. A small spark lit the dark as they touched. *Static. Not magic.* Each time the contact grew a little easier. She even liked it, and maybe he wanted it that way, but she wouldn't trade away her soul for it.

The air smelled faintly of the sea. To the west lay the Georgia Strait, and past it, Vancouver Island. They walked about six blocks before coming to a Trans Link stop. That didn't improve the area, however. Prostitutes stood in twos and threes, beggars lay wrapped in newspaper, and a man cooked chemicals on a spoon. In her old jeans and baggy sweatshirt, she fit the scene better than Dev; even her wind-tangled hair helped.

"Stay close." After glancing down for permission, which she gave with a nod, he put an arm around her.

On cue someone stepped out of the alley behind them. Teresa sensed more than she saw the movement, but as she turned, the knife in the man's hand rippled with reflected light. She stilled, hardly daring to breathe.

"Wallets, watches, jewelry. Now!"

She raised her arms to unfasten the tiny silver cross from around her throat, but Dev stilled her with a touch, speaking in a warning tone. "We've nothing to interest you."

The mugger scoffed. "Guy like you winds up lost in Gastown and you tell me you got nothing? Fuck you, pal. *I* got nothing. Now hand that shit over before I cut your girlfriend's throat."

Dev's voice dropped to a growl, gained dual sub-harmonic notes. "Walk away or you'll never touch a woman again. Remember the problem you had on January 12th? That could become permanent. Your pride and joy will shrivel into a miserable little worm that rots away by inches until you die, screaming in agony. I repeat. Walk away."

"Dude, you are *nuts*." Their would-be assailant didn't walk, he ran.

Letting out a slow breath, she asked, "Could you really do that?"

He didn't seem proud as he nodded. "I have power over human sexuality, Tess. I can drive lovers together and keep them apart. I can give them endless orgasms or render them unable to perform. I can inflict hideous incurable venereal plague..."

"Uh, that's good. I don't need to know more." Thankfully the bus arrived.

Just as he'd said, he slid his fingers over the reader, which beamed as if he'd scanned

a pass. The lady driver kept gazing at him in the rearview mirror until Teresa worried they might crash. She watched the lights passing in a colored blur through the tinted window. The neighborhoods improved, and by the time they got off, she felt quite out of place.

All this trouble for a hot bath. She shook her head in wonder.

“What?”

“Just seems like an incredible amount of effort just so I can soak.”

“You’re worth it,” he said quietly.

Her hand tightened on his. Five minutes later, she stood gazing up at the hotel in all its many-storied glory. Shiny with chrome and glass, it wasn’t a place she would have chosen on her own but that didn’t matter.

“There’s no way they’re letting us in,” she predicted.

Dev grinned. “Have a little faith.”

Following him, Teresa smiled at the unlikelihood of him asking *that* of her. What a luxurious place—she loved the marble floors, the spiral staircase and the huge chandelier. Instead of heading to the front desk, Dev strode toward the elevators as if he knew precisely where he was going. She hurried after him, and they rode up to seven.

She shot him a questioning look. “What, Hell rents an apartment here?”

“Wait and see.” He went along the hall, pausing briefly outside each door, until at last he ran his fingers over the card reader lock. It promptly flashed green. “After you. If they haven’t rented this room by now, they won’t need it tonight. What they don’t know won’t hurt them. But flip the safety catch just in case.”

The room held up better than the ultramodern exterior. First, she’d never seen such a huge bed in her life, a four-poster done in rich cherry wood. The gold damask covers looked incredibly opulent. From the beige and white striped wallpaper to the twenty-seven inch TV, this wasn’t a room; it was a suite.

Delighted, she ran to check out the bathroom: gilded fixtures, marble counters, mosaic tile floor, and a huge sunken tub with spa jets. She’d never been in such a thing, so she tore off her clothes. Though she wouldn’t know a five star hotel from experience, she bounced a little when she saw the selection of bath products and decided on the honey milk bubble bath. The monastery offered nothing more than a narrow shower stall, and university housing wasn’t known for luxury.

Getting the water just right took some doing. Teresa spent an hour in the bathroom, all told, and didn’t spare a thought to how Dev might be entertaining himself. For about thirty seconds she felt guilty about how little praying she’d done over the past three days, but she trusted God knew what he was doing. No matter what the demon said about a wager, He wouldn’t have sent Dev without a good reason.

And then the spa jets kicked in.

By the time she emerged, pink-skinned and smelling of honey, she felt like a new woman. Steam whispered out the bathroom door as she opened it. The white terry robe enveloped her, making her feel cozy and warm. She laughed when she saw him sitting cross-legged on the bed, playing a race game on TV.

“You’re not cheating, are you?”

Dev started. “Uh, no. Certainly not.”

“I just thought with your affinity for queering technology and all...”

“Come here.” His blue gaze seared her as he took in damp, tousled hair and flushed

skin, hinted at by the slight gap in the robe's lapels. He put down the controller, curled his fingers, and she moved toward him as if he tugged unseen puppet strings.

Her breathing unsteady, she sat down beside him. The satin damask felt sinful against her bare palms. "Wh-what?"

"You look ... amazing." In his eyes she read a powerful need to touch but he only sat beside her, hands on his knees.

"Thank you."

She *felt* amazing, and she feared such a heady sensation. Never had she known any good to come from lust. It was best suppressed and restrained, channeled and ignored. A shudder ran through her.

"Kiss me, Tess."

Oh, diabolical. By putting the power in her hands it became entirely her choice how they touched, if they did. Her heart galloped. She wanted his mouth. If she trusted herself to sample that and nothing more—

"I don't know how," she whispered.

"Put your mouth on mine. I'll show you."

Her lashes fluttered shut and she leaned in blind, seeking by heat and instinct until her lips glanced off his chin. He tilted his head, compensated, and his mouth felt like pressed silk beneath hers, warm and smooth. She knew nothing of what to expect but he didn't take her in his arms.

That was proscribed. His mouth plucked at hers, their only point of contact, not ravaging but seducing. The nutmeg and clove scent intensified as he coaxed her lips apart. Light, delicate, Dev nuzzled her top lip until it tingled. When he repeated the tease on her lower lip, heat blossomed in response, flaring to tiny, dazzling currents.

The urge to throw herself on top of him boiled away inside her. She wanted to touch him. Feel him. To prevent yielding to that impulse, she clenched her hands into fists as he licked at her mouth. All too easily she could imagine how his tongue would feel down where she ached.

Tempted beyond bearing, Teresa squeezed her thighs together and pulled back with a muffled moan. "Enough."

"Not nearly. You want me." He licked his lips as if he could still taste her.

"Yes," she admitted, head bowed. "But not enough to pay the price. I'm sorry."

Dev held out a trembling hand. "I'm starving for you."

She felt drugged, unable to think. Impulse surged to the fore, reinforcing yesterday's desire without the accompanying trepidation. The words spilled out before she could censor them. "I want to see you like you've seen me."

"How's that?"

"Naked."

His blue eyes simmered with heat and urgency. "You're going to toy with me? That seems cruel."

"I don't know what I'm going to do. But fair is fair."

"So it is." Dev laid back and his clothes melted away in the motion.

Perhaps he wasn't real but he was *beautiful*. Teresa admired his sculpted thighs and slightly concave stomach rippled with muscles. His chest spoke of lean strength, broadening to well-developed shoulders. To her astonishment he squirmed beneath the intensity of her gaze—doubtless he was unaccustomed to being studied so in any form.

Quiet lightning ran between them as her hand hovered above his abdomen. When her fingers brushed him, butterfly soft, his stomach tightened. Their skin contrasted in a pretty visual, ivory and gold.

“How does it feel?” She wondered whether his form possessed simulated nerve endings. Her curiosity stemmed less from intellectual curiosity however, and more from wanting to affect him as he did her.

“Good.” Confusion kindled his expression as she ran her hands up his chest.

Untouched. The word hummed in a soft refrain. *He doesn't know what will happen anymore than I do.* Somehow, an even footing made it possible for her to continue.

His skin felt smooth beneath her palms, but no pores, hair, or childhood scars marred him. If she hadn't already believed, touching him would have convinced her. At first she caressed him in broad, sweeping movements from his thighs to his shoulders. Then she used her fingertips, dragging down over his chest with more subtle pressure.

“Do you like it?” she asked, low.

He wet his lips with his tongue. “Yes. In this skin I react like a man, though it's never been tested quite like this.”

She found his nipples with her thumbs. Bold. Dev writhed, gazing up at her with hot, haunted eyes. Teresa touched him in slow circles, watching his face tighten. Just as she'd imagined a few days past, his elegant fingers knotted in the covers. A single sound escaped him, broken.

At that she ran her hands lower, hardly believing she would do it, but with dreamy fascination she watched her pale fingers encircle his penis. Found him hard and hot, but sleek. His hips lifted as his knees came up. Gasping, Dev wrapped his hands around hers.

Heat simmered, threatened to boil. Teresa caught her breath at the thrill of touching him. Reciprocation might kill her.

“Do you want me to stop?” Her gaze on his, she tugged.

“Yes. No.” His thighs trembled, tensed and relaxed in time to her rhythm. “Tess, Tess, I need...”

“What?” Her fingers became more certain, working up and down.

She smoothed a thumb over the tip—sweeping strokes with her fingertips—explored the tender curve of his testicles, and he gasped, gazing up at her as if he were the helpless virgin. Eyes locked on his, she read what pleased him. Willed him to feel a fraction of what she did, beneath layers of fear and uncertainty. Willed everything she felt, straight into him.

“To feed.”

I can't ... this isn't how—*ah*.” He arched, eyes wide and incredulous as a series of tremors shook through him. His skin flushed to a radiant hue.

Her body felt flushed, moist, and she wished she could fling away the terrycloth robe. Too much weight on sensitized skin. How she wished she could let him touch her.

Still, Teresa smiled as she lay down beside him in the lavish bed. After a moment's hesitation, she dropped her head onto his bare chest. Nutmeg and cloves saturated the air.

“You fed me,” he murmured. “But it's not supposed to work like that.”

“Apparently it does.”

“With you it does.” In the lamplight his face held an oddly vulnerable cast. “With a real man you'd have no doubt—I mean...”

“I saw your face. And not to rely upon a cliché, but ... you're glowing.”

Why didn't she feel more elated? She could prevail. Tonight she'd resisted incredible temptation, turning the tables back on him. Instead she ached, desperately. Winning suddenly seemed like the biggest loss of her life.

Day Five

For a while, Teresa pretended to sleep.

A knock gave her an excuse to rise. She felt drained. Perhaps the feeling sprang from lack of rest, the energy he'd siphoned the night before, disruption of her routine, or a combination of all those factors. Wordlessly she slipped her novitiate's robe over the top of her nightgown—crazy how she'd become nocturnal so quickly—and padded over to answer the door.

"You have a telephone call." Sister Agnes fluttered her hands like two distressed birds, beckoning Teresa toward the library.

Those simple words formed a core of dread in her stomach. Barefoot, she followed, and the sensation increased when she saw all the sisters standing in a dove-gray line. All wore sad, solemn expressions.

"Go on." The Mother Superior nodded at the heavy, black rotary phone on her desk. "We'll talk afterward."

After lifting the receiver to her ear, she swallowed twice before she could speak. "Hello?"

"Hi Teri. It's been a long time." Awkward pause. For a moment she couldn't place the voice, and then—

"Ben?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry to bother you like this, but I have news."

"What's wrong? Are you okay?" Her brother hadn't called her since she left for the Sisters of Peace, and he'd only visited her once at St. Mary's. They weren't exactly close, never had been.

"It's Dad. A fight broke out in his cell and ... he didn't make it."

She swayed, and one of the sisters shoved a chair under her before she hit the floor. "I ... how did it happen?"

"I don't know much yet, Teri. I'm going to Graterford tomorrow to sign some papers and make funeral arrangements. Do you think you'll come back for it? It'll probably be on Monday, cheaper than Sunday. Viewing is Saturday night."

Rubbing a hand over her face, she thought about it, trying to work out what day it was. Lately they all blurred together. *Friday*.

"I don't know. You still living in Clairton?"

"Yeah. This house won't sell."

Teresa supposed it wouldn't. "Then I know where to find you. You think you'll use Finney again?"

Home of the Affordable Funeral and Cremation. Ask about our cremation packages! Memories bombarded her. She didn't want to see smears of blood on black and white tile, didn't want to see her mother's twitching fingertips or her ruined face. Closing her eyes didn't help.

"Probably. I'm not exactly rolling in it."

She hung onto her composure by a thread. "I'll try to come."

"I'm sorry I had to tell you over the phone."

"It's all right. Bye, Ben."

Sister Ruth took the phone from her nerveless hands, replaced it in the cradle. "I'm so sorry, child. I'll put you on the train myself."

The rest of the sisters gathered around her, hugging her as she bowed her head, not in prayer but in an attempt to stem the tide of mental images. Dark things, pictures she kept walled up.

Lo, though I walk through the shadow of the valley of death, I will fear no evil...

"No, I need to fly."

She needed to ride the winds on the back of a dragon. Needed Dev's arms around her, not these. Though they meant well, their hands entrapped her. Teresa suffered the group embrace for a moment longer before she pushed to her feet. Gazing into each face, one by one, she wondered whether this tainted her in their eyes. They hadn't known about her father, sentenced to life in Graterford. The order preached forgiveness, but perhaps it didn't extend to one whose line was so steeped in blood and darkness.

"Of course your vows can wait until you return," the Mother Superior said kindly. "We're truly sorry for your loss. Let's pray a little."

She followed to the chapel and she knelt. Teresa whispered her responses through the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but she did not feel the usual sense of peace. Instead she felt as though she were unraveling, any moment to fly apart at the seams.

"Thank you," she said when they finished. "I need to pack a bag. Excuse me."

Back in her room, she stuffed the remainder of her street clothes into the battered backpack she'd used at St. Mary's. Today things came full circle, though she'd only ever wanted to escape Clairton and find some measure of peace. The weight of it hit her anew and she slid along the wall to the floor. Teresa wrapped her arms around her legs, her chin dropping onto her knees. Twilight bathed the room in strange shadows.

Suddenly he was beside her. "Tess? Can I hold you?"

"Please." She shook with the effort of keeping herself locked down. Just a moment or two and she'd be all right. Then they could fly.

His arms came around her. Dev leaned his head against hers, whispering in muffled French. He possessed no heartbeat above which she could rest her head and listen to its comforting rhythm, but his fierce heat offered its own consolation.

Long moments later, he murmured, "We should go. If they find you huddled on the floor, they may insist on sending someone with you. Unless that's what you want?"

"No. Let's go."

At the threshold she paused, took one last glance at the plain room where she'd spent the last year and half. *I always felt so safe here.* She led the way to the front doors. At first she thought they wouldn't encounter anyone, then Sister Ruth came down the hall with Agnes close behind. "You need a ride to the bus station?"

"It's not far," Teresa said, not expecting to go without a fight. "I can walk. I know you don't like driving at night."

The other woman's dark eyes searched hers. "You're sure about this?"

Oddly, she felt as though the question encompassed a much grander scale, but she didn't hesitate. "Yes, I'm positive."

Sister Ruth sighed. "Sure enough, the Lord works in mysterious ways. Go on then before it gets any later."

Turning, Teresa heard Agnes protest, "You can't let her go out alone into the dark, recently bereaved! Why, anything could happen."

Ruth's quiet response as she stepped out the door astonished her. "She's not alone, Sister, and it's out of our hands now."

Pulling her hood up against the spring chill, Teresa glanced at Dev. "She saw you?"

He seemed astonished. "I think so."

"And she still let me go," she said softly.

The gloaming sky showed charcoal and plum over the tree line. They angled their steps in that direction. As they ran, she cast one last look over shoulder at the monastery. It sat still and quiet, golden light spilling from the kitchen windows.

"Ready?" When she nodded, he began to change. She could see the beauty in him like this now, such savage grace.

She clung to the animal strength of him as he thundered into motion. The trees blurred to a dim green mosaic as the land receded beneath her. Up high the air felt wet and cold; she needed his heat. If she wept up here, the tears would freeze.

Instead she held on until her knuckles gleamed white. Countless cities twinkled and faded beneath them along with the smoky lines of rivers and the sparkle of the Great Lakes. She wished she could grieve because that would be an honest emotion, but reality came in an ugly snarl, because beneath the numbness lurked a smile.

To her surprise he took them to the park, just blocks from the house on Halcomb where she grew up. That raised a sense of unease, though he'd said she had no secrets from him. She supposed this proved it.

Nothing about the old neighborhood had changed. Same rusty cars, same broken chain link fences, same tired houses with peeling paint or weathered siding. Teresa didn't know why it mattered, but she hated for him to see where she came from.

She tried to cover it with small talk. "When the mill closed, it hit people pretty hard. The area just hasn't been the same since."

A lot of things would never be the same. He didn't offer his hand or words of comfort. If she wanted tenderness, she'd need to ask. Unless she presented him with overt cues, reading such things wouldn't come easily to Dev. When would he have practiced?

As they walked, she counted broken streetlamps. Dogs rummaged in nearby alleys. Beneath the heavy web of ugly electrical wires, quiet despair ruled these streets.

The house looked exactly as she remembered it too: a dilapidated ranch with a detached garage done in bile-green siding. Two overgrown hedges nearly obscured the driveway and the half fence her dad had erected to keep out the neighbor's dogs stood at a drunken angle in the front yard.

He seemed to read her expression. "Some flowers can thrive anywhere, Tess."

Ben still kept the spare key beneath the mat on the front stoop, so she let them in. "He's probably still at Graterford."

Stepping over the threshold sent a cold chill through her. When she left here at eighteen, she'd hoped never to return. At twenty-four, the house seemed smaller than she recalled, tiny rooms, dingy walls and low ceilings. She flicked on the overhead light, noted the dirt caked inside the cheap plastic fixture. Her dad's tweed recliner still sat before the TV. The stain where she'd spilled her grape Kool-Aid too. The place smelled faintly musty, a touch of mildew in the walls.

From the living room she could either turn left down the hall toward the bedrooms or pass straight into the kitchen. Black and white linoleum. Teresa drew up short, her whole body taut. Seeing that floor hit much harder than remembering it. For a moment she

thought she might be sick.

Dev spoke her nightmare aloud. "She died there." Not a question. "You found her."

"Yeah." It took all her self-control to get the word out.

"Your father murdered her." His voice sounded cool and remote. Except for the intense glitter of his eyes, she might even believe he felt nothing.

"Shut up."

"He promised to love and cherish her. Instead he beat her to death with his fists."

"Shut up!"

In two strides he crossed the living room and stood with her in the doorway to the kitchen. Side by side, but not touching.

"That's why I don't affect you," he said, as if in realization. "You're almost completely armored by fear. He's why you ran all the way to British Columbia, why you worked so hard to find somewhere you'd be safe."

"You don't know anything about it." The words felt wrenched from her. She wanted to hurt him as he was hurting her, digging deep into the ragged edges of a wound she'd believed to be healed. "He caught her with another man, Dev. She came home with his sweat on her skin, his..."

"So she deserved to die? Did your God bestow the right of judgment on your father, Tess? And because your mother was a whore, *you* must be a Madonna? Because you were so afraid you'd turn out like her, afraid your father would find a reason to come for you next?"

She went for him with a shriek, hands curled into claws, but he stood and took it. Though she dug deep into his flesh, though she pounded with all her might, it didn't seem to matter. Ridiculous for her to think, even for a moment, that she could wound him. At last she bowed her head, tears flowing like acid from her eyes. They seared her cheeks.

"He's gone," Dev whispered. "You're free."

Her breath went. "You ... you weren't with me today. You did this somehow. Did you kill him?" He hesitated long enough for her to recoil, backing toward the front door. "What have you done?"

"Merely planted a seed."

Clenching her hands into fists, she bit out, "Tell me."

"Lust is a powerful force," he said. "Perhaps his cellmate discovered the uncontrollable need to sheathe himself in the nearest warm body. The resulting argument may have ended in a shiv to the kidney."

"My father would have died before he let another man touch him!"

Untouched by remorse, his smile grew. "So he did. Isn't it moving when people die true their principles?"

"You monster! Get thee behind me."

His smile became ugly. "That only works in the movies. He beat the woman he loved to *death*, Teresa. He stole all the good memories of your mother and by his mindless violence abandoned you to an older brother who then left you to raise yourself. She was human and lonely, so she strayed, but that doesn't mean she deserved to die. You refuse to remember how much you loved her, how much joy she brought the people in her life. In truth, you hate and fear him so much you rewrote your life in his shadow."

"You had no right," she said, livid. "You may as well have stabbed him yourself."

"I'm not allowed to do that, I'm afraid." His cold blue eyes said he'd wanted to. "Lie

to yourself if you wish, but you're *glad* he's gone. You feel free for the first time in years. No longer do you need to fear him as the divine hand of retribution if you don't live just right."

"I believe in God and I want to take vows," she shouted. "It isn't because of him!"

He held her gaze with his, fierce and determined. "Yes, you have faith, but you don't have a calling, Tess. Not like Sister Ruth. If you did, you wouldn't delight in flying with me quite so much. You wouldn't be starving for the smallest taste of joy. You just wanted somewhere to hide ... but now you have no reason to return."

"Do you count it a win if you get me to renounce the order?" she lashed back. "Do you get extra points; perks in Hell?"

His eyes closed. "There are no perks in Hell, Teresa. I've resigned myself to failure here, which means I'll never be sent above again. I gain nothing by this, except your freedom. I read your heart in its most secret place, and I saw you wanted him dead."

Truth.

In some ways Dev was like a child, and she'd unknowingly handed him a loaded gun. He probably didn't understand why she took refuge in anger. Hearing it stated plainly deflated the illusion however. She dropped onto the sagging orange and brown flowered couch and buried her face in her hands.

"God forgive me. *I am the monster.*"

"No," he told her, gentle now. "You're simply human. I don't blame you for thinking prison wasn't justice for what he did. You lived in terror he would be paroled, but today John Wolff faces the true judgment. His sins rest beyond both of us now."

"Ben did the best he could." She looked up at last. "He was just nineteen and it might've been worse if I'd been taken into foster care."

Dev didn't argue the point as he sat beside her on the couch. "Now you have no reason not to live."

She sighed. "So that's why. You think if you cut the cord that binds me to the Sisters of Peace, I'll forget myself enough to succumb. Well, time is running out, Dev, and I won't toss my soul away on a whim."

"Accursed hell, *no!*" He continued more quietly, "I just want the rest of the world to see the woman who flies with me."

He stole all the good memories of your mother...

Maybe it was time to take them back.

"My mom's name was Sharon, and she liked pistachio ice cream." Her voice quavered. "She liked pink fuzzy sweaters and she wanted to learn to knit." Gazing upward, Teresa blinked back more tears. "And she l-loved knock-knock jokes..."

"May I?" His hand hovered near her cheek. When she nodded, his fingertips traced through the damp trails down her face, his eyes vivid and intent. Her tears appeared to fascinate him. *Do demons weep?* "I will never be sorry for setting you free."

The moment built, layered intensity, gaze to gaze. Her focus narrowed to his mouth. Before she could respond, her brother came through the front door. Ben pulled up short seeing her sitting on the sofa. "Wow, did you charter a private jet?"

She managed a smile, not knowing whether to hug him. "Something like that."

Ben looked old, though he'd just turned thirty. They had the same color hair and eyes, though his features were rougher, heavier and much more worn. Maybe part of that came from dealing with their father's death. Guilt swirled through her, as she'd certainly

played a role in that. He worked too hard, stuck under cars all day. Teresa checked his hands for oil stains and found them, just as she remembered.

“You look good.” Ben hesitated.

Dev stood and offered his hand. She didn’t know what to make of him choosing to take a visible role in her life as he hadn’t at the monastery. At least not voluntarily. “I made sure Tess got here safely. I’m Dev.”

“Then I owe you my thanks.” The two men shook, assessed each other with a glance, and then Ben directed a look her way that said he’d made an interesting leap. “You’re not still doing the nun thing?”

Nervous laughter gusted out of her. “I don’t have a clue what I’m doing.”

Her brother smiled as he lowered himself into the tweed recliner. “That makes two of us. You guys hungry? I think I have some mac and cheese, maybe some tuna in the cupboard somewhere.”

“I could make a casserole,” she said automatically.

This felt just like old times, except without the smothering weight. Maybe she should be furious, but Dev had granted her heart’s desire. If there would be a penalty in the afterlife, so be it.

For the first time Teresa entered the kitchen here without seeing blood on the black and white linoleum. If she felt strong enough, she’d sift through old pictures tomorrow. As she got out a pan, she thought she heard an echo of her mother’s laughter.

Day Six

Whenever a life ended at Finney's, it meant things had gone drastically wrong.

Her father's wake was no exception, cut-rate and poorly done. The last time she was here, Teresa had buried her mother. Then, deep down, she'd resented the paltry display. The cream block building had seen better days and only a few cars sat in the broken parking lot. If Teresa cared, she might have found the low turnout embarrassing.

At first, approaching the casket required all her courage. Once she saw him, pale and inert, the truth sank in. He was really gone.

She'd sat quiet while Ben finalized the arrangements for the service on Monday. Only once did she interject: "Don't bury him next to Mom."

Now they stood around on maroon threadbare carpet, breathing stale air and the scent of dying flowers. A few former neighbors showed up, more out of respect for Ben and Teresa than any desire to say farewell to John Wolff. At four, Dev appeared with a bag of sandwiches and soda. Teresa decided she probably didn't want to know how he'd acquired it.

They ate on the dingy folding table in the lounge. Someone had put a coffee maker at one end along with some Styrofoam cups and called it refreshments.

Ben polished his food off quickly. "You think we need to stay until 8:30?"

She shrugged. "I was thinking of heading out now. I doubt anyone else will come, and if they do, the assistant director can handle them."

Her brother smiled a little. "I guess you're finally working this out, huh? No joke, Teri, I used to be scared shitless of you."

That made her pause on the way to the trashcan, aware of Dev listening silently. "What are you talking about?"

"I thought you were possessed or something, you went all Wednesday Addams for God on me. You never laughed, never talked back, never got in trouble. You just didn't seem ... right, y'know?"

Teresa laughed at such irresistible irony. "But you think maybe I'm okay now?"

Ben ducked his head, seeming sheepish. "Well. Yeah. You got past the religious jones and found a guy. That's cool, right?"

"I'm a good influence," Dev said with evident sincerity.

She tossed her garbage into the bin. "Is that why you stayed away from me so much back then, Ben? You thought I was creepy?"

"Well." Her brother hesitated. "It doesn't matter. Maybe we can start over?"

Then she did hug him. "Maybe. Maybe we can." Over the top of Ben's head, she gazed straight at Dev. "Do you believe in second chances?"

"Sure," Ben said, obviously not following the undertones. "Why not?"

But Dev slowly shook his head. Yesterday she'd taunted him about time running now, but today she sensed it like a pendulum swinging a blade above his neck. *I've resigned myself to failure here, which means I'll never be sent above again.*

No more flight, no more freedom. Just endless night.

She had no reason to believe him, yet she did. More and more, she knew Dev wasn't evil, no matter what he'd once done. Maybe there came a point when it didn't matter

anymore.

Wasn't that the root of God's love? Forgiveness? Redemption? Maybe she couldn't reason well on the matter because she didn't want to lose him. Perhaps he'd tricked her, well and truly, and she couldn't see his true face.

"Let's get out of here." Some habits died hard, so she straightened all the chairs before turning off the light. "This place is depressing."

The guys followed her out to Ben's car, a shiny black '73 Impala. Her brother had been working on it almost as long as Teresa could remember. She crawled in back, despite the black dress and heels.

Back at the house, she changed from funeral clothes to jeans in her old room. She wandered, touching all the religious plaques she'd hung, probably to ward off an evil that had occurred only steps from her bedroom door. Footprints, Serenity, and others ... she read the familiar words, knowing her life was about to change forever.

Dev came in behind her, adjusting the Strawberry Shortcake bedspread. His gaze lit on the Precious Moments figurines and the puppy calendar on the wall from 1999. "He didn't change a thing."

"I guess he knew I'd be back."

"Hoped," Ben said from the hall. "Not necessarily like this."

"No." Teresa shook her head. "It's ... good. Before we take off, I'd like to look at the old albums. Would that be okay?"

"Take off?" Dev repeated the words, one brow arched.

She'd finally surprised him. Judging by her brother's expression, he wanted to ask too. "There's something I need to do. Don't worry, I'll be back in time for services Monday morning. Promise."

This would work. It had to.

"I'm holding you to that," Ben answered after a moment. He slugged Dev in the arm. "You take care of her or I'll kick your ass. Bring her back safe."

Teresa noted that Dev promised nothing. He truly didn't expect to be around on Monday morning.

"Do we still have the sleeping bags?"

Before their lives exploded, they used to pile into the station wagon and take camping trips. Ben nodded, probably believing he'd figured things out. He must think she intended to go where they'd spent their last happy night as a family.

"I think they're out in the garage. Should I pack up the camping stuff for you?"

She smiled. "Please. I'll get the pictures."

When Ben came back into the living room, carrying an olive army duffel, she was sitting on the couch with Dev, slowly turning the pages. Letting the memories come. Teresa patted the space beside her and made room.

Now and then she pointed. The years marched on, and not all of them were ugly. Tiny Teresa wore a yellow ruffled dress, young Ben strutted in cowboy boots, and they relived the year the cat tore down the Christmas tree—

"Remember this one?"

Several hours passed that way. At last she stood and stretched. She offered her hand freely to Dev, who regarded it as if he expected a trick. Finally he curled his fingers through hers. He'd been quiet since their argument yesterday. Perhaps he thought she nursed some secret animosity, or perhaps he felt out of place playing a role before her

brother. She couldn't guess at his thoughts; she could only hope.

"Time to get moving," she said.

"Sure you don't want to start in the morning?" Her brother shut the photo album.

Teresa shook her head gravely. "Things never get easier by hiding from them."

"Isn't that the truth?" At the door, Ben hugged her, a real hug, one that threatened to crack her ribs. "We're gonna be okay, T."

"I know."

Turning, Ben snagged his jacket from the coat rack. "Here, take this. I noticed you don't have one."

Ridiculously, her eyes misted up. "Thanks."

She tugged Dev out the door before she could start bawling. He followed in silence for a block and then asked in evident puzzlement, "What are we doing? Did you want to say good-bye to the sisters in person? I can take you for one last flight."

The yearning in his voice told her everything she needed to know. Teresa smiled faintly. "No, Dev. I believe in you. I want to go looking for dragon gold."

"What? Why?" He stared down at her in the moonlight, inhumanly beautiful.

"Find the gold and I'll explain."

She asked a leap of faith of him. Dev, who had no experience with such things. Eyes on his, she willed him to trust her.

"It's been such a long time," he said slowly. "Most of the caverns will have been looted by now. There's one high in the Pyrenees that they may not have found though. Shall we try?"

"Please." The word contained all her intensity and desperation.

"To have any hope of success I'll need a kiss for luck." Dev delivered the line as if he didn't care.

Teresa read deeper. Yesterday she'd called him a monster, and he'd spent the night on her brother's couch. He'd probably never been in argument with anyone before. Stretching up on tiptoes, she framed his face in her hands, resting her thumbs in the tiny divot on his chin.

"Dev," she whispered. "This is not a kiss for luck. This is a kiss for everything."

She took his mouth, and he made a soft sound against her lips. "Let me touch you, Tess. Please."

Another leap of faith—unconditional permission.

"Yes."

He pulled her to him and kissed her as if he were starving. *But he fed last night.* Tonight he did again, nibbling at her mouth. His tongue met hers lightly, teased and retreated. His whole body shuddered as she ran her hands down his back.

"You touch me." Dev dropped his head to her shoulder, turning his face against her throat. "You see me." She felt his lips on her throat as he spoke, the faintest thread of sound. "I wish I was real, Tess. I wish..." His head came up, as if he recognized the futility of such talk. "To the park then."

Two kids saw them. She imagined them running home in excited glee, telling their parents about the handsome man, who turned into a dragon. How a lady climbed on his back and they flew away together, right up into the sky.

"Nobody ever listens to kids," Dev growled as they soared.

The wind stole her reply.

The speed and roaring air didn't make for easy conversation. By the time they reached the mountains, Teresa's hands felt frozen. After they touched down in a narrow valley, she needed his help to release her death grip on his shoulders. He gently peeled her fingers up and eased her down.

"Come here," he whispered, and she nestled against him. Long moments later some of his heat seeped into her. "It's a bit of a climb. I don't remember exactly where the entrance is, and I could feel you fading. I thought it'd be better if we went the rest of the way on foot."

"Yeah," she admitted. "My hands are pretty sore."

With some effort and a little backtracking, Dev found the path, which led to three different caves. "We want the one at the top though. I doubt anyone will have found it, and that's where I hid the tribute I received from *El León*. Because of his marvelous generosity, I even made an appearance at his daughter's wedding, and pretended to let him slay me. His people were amazed."

"You're serious," she said wonderingly. "All your marvelous stories are true."

Dev paused on the mountainside. "I have never lied to you."

They still had a ways to go, but she needed to know. "Why?"

He hesitated. "I received certain of your memories, as if I'd been there with you. Meant to aid me in manipulating you, of course. But ... how could I deceive a woman who read *The Velveteen Rabbit* to a dying child? I may be a demon, but I am not a fiend."

She remembered. Miranda loved that story, especially the part that went: *Real isn't how you are made. It's a thing that happens to you.* And she imagined him sitting there unseen in the hospital, listening along with the little girl. After Mandy died, she stopped volunteering at the hospice. It hurt too much when she lost the young ones.

Her heart broke wide open. "Oh, Dev. That's what you meant by real."

He ducked his head, unable to meet her eyes. "Yes. But you need someone to love you for a long, long time, not just to play with, before that happens."

Her head fell back and she gazed up at the stars. "We don't have a long time."

She would not weep.

Dev brushed his lips across her brow. "I know. Let's keep moving, Tess. It's nearly midnight."

To her fierce gratitude, her brother had packed everything they might need, including a box of crackers, some cans of iced tea, an air mattress, and two flashlights. The latter helped when they finally reached the summit and ventured into the yawning mouth of the cave where, in another life, Dev kept his dragon lair.

"Is this right?" she asked as they stepped deeper into the dark.

He nodded, shining the golden beam toward the far wall. "This is it. See where I scored the rock? If your paleontologists found that, they'd blame a dinosaur. Anyway, if there's anything left, it will be deep down."

Excitement thrummed through her as she hurried after him. The cavern led steadily downward. Once Teresa might have imagined he led her into the bowels of Hell itself. Not now. She trusted him.

That belief bore fruit when the flashlight caught a shimmer. Hands trembling, she managed to light the portable Coleman lantern and shine it around the treasure room. Dev gazed around, looking melancholy. Piles of coins, goblets of hammered gold, pearl necklaces, all possessed a patina of age, and would be worth a fortune. More than she

could imagine.

“We won’t be able to carry it all,” she said softly. “But I can empty the backpack. That will be more than enough to put my plan into motion, and we can always come back if we need more.”

Dev arched a brow as he brushed the wind-tangled hair away from her face. “Greed? That isn’t what I expected of you, Teresa. Isn’t money the root of all evil?”

She shook her head. “You set me free, so I’m returning the favor. We’ll make love here.” Pausing, she tried to muster the words. “I believe in a god of love. After all ... he sent you to me.

“Tess...”

She raced to finish before he could frame an argument. “I’ll convert to Methodism, they believe in the work of hands. How I live *has* to matter more than a single moment, more than the outward trappings of religious dogma, because if it doesn’t, then I’ve given my faith to a god of capriciousness and lies. So we’ll found that charity you mentioned, and I’ll spend my life helping others. That will be enough, I’m sure of it.”

“You’re sure? You want to wager your soul on it?” With desperate hands, Dev tilted her face up.

Teresa tried to smile. “It’s mine to gamble, isn’t it? I only ask one thing if we do this, Dev. Don’t leave me. If I’m wrong, if I have nothing but this life to look forward to, then I want to enjoy it. I want to *live*.”

“Leave you?” he repeated. “If you bid me stay, only the forces of Hell or God himself could pull me from your side.”

By the light of the lantern she pulled out the two twin sleeping bags and zipped them together. Even now, beyond the heavy stone, the sky might be lightening. “I don’t mean to rush you, but I’d feel better if we got it over with.”

“Tess,” he said gently. “It’s not nasty medicine, best done quickly. You’ll enjoy it, I promise.”

Thank goodness the shadows hid her hot cheeks. “No, I want it done so they can’t take you away from me.”

“As you wish,” he murmured and took her in his arms.

Day Seven

His skin felt incredibly hot and smooth against hers.

Teresa tried to calm her jittering nerves. They lay snuggled together inside the joined sleeping bags, the lamp throwing a weak pool of light. She rested in the curve of his right arm. Despite what she'd said, Dev didn't rush. Instead he ran his hands up and down her spine with expert delicacy. His fingers found the indentations above each vertebra, gently stroking away her tension.

She didn't know how to do this, barely knew how to kiss yet heat trailed in the wake of his touch. Each brush of his fingertips added another spark, and deep within she melted. Dev cupped her hips in his hands as he lowered his mouth to her throat, tasting her skin with lips and tongue. The rasp of his teeth on her shoulder summoned a tiny sound out of her.

"This isn't..." She struggled to find the right words. "You're not..."

As always, he understood and shook his head. "No, Tess. This is just you and me. No tricks, no augmentation. I'm ... trying to make love to you." Dev skimmed his palm up her bare belly, cupped the tender swell of her breast.

Her breath hitched. "You're doing beautifully."

"Will you like it if I kiss them?" Staring at her taut nipples, he appeared to ask with all solemnity. It was strangely endearing to find such innocence—in some ways, he knew less than she. In his other life he didn't require foreplay; women went mad for him, and he rode them until they collapsed. He might be able to do the same thing to her now; turn on the pheromones and leave her panting like a bitch in heat.

She loved that he didn't. "I suspect so. Will you?"

"Will I like it, or will I kiss them?"

"Both."

"Yes." He lowered his head to nuzzle her, open-mouthed.

Teresa slid her hands up to his head. "Yes, oh yes, that's ... good."

"What about this?" Dev licked a path around her nipple, each turn tighter than the last until his lips focused on the bud. Sucked.

His hair felt like cool silk against her fingers and she tangled them, needing to hold on. "Y-yes. I like it."

"Oh, Tess," he whispered into her skin, sounding almost humbled. "It's working. You want me. *Me*."

Safe bet. She felt soft, slick and incomplete, full of an ache she'd never known quite this way. "You. Only you."

With a muffled sound, he raised his head from her breast and kissed her, a ravenous demon lover who thrust past her lips and stroked with his tongue, long drugging moments where her mouth clung to his. The still cavern air grew heavy with nutmeg and cloves, the scent of his excitement. His intensity washed over her in waves, eons of desire for which he had no outlet. Until now.

He ran his fingers down over her ribs and she giggled a little. That impulse faded when he cupped her mound, pressing down gently with the heel of his hand. "And here, Tess? Can I touch you? Will you like it?"

“You don’t ... need to ask permission anymore.”

“I know. I want to hear you say it.”

“Then yes. Y-yes, I want it. Touch me ... down there.”

A cry broke from her as his fingers slipped between her labia. She heard the soft sounds her body made. Intense. Almost unbearable. Teresa lifted her hips, not knowing whether she wanted more or to get away. This was nothing like rubbing against a blanket.

Her pelvis felt as if she needed to bear down, and she recognized the need to take her man inside her. Clasp him close and tight. Dev didn’t stop stroking her, but surely she was ready—

He rolled half atop her, wedging his thigh between hers. “Move. Show me how you like it.”

As if she had no control over her own body, she rubbed against his leg, gasping as the pressure opened her up against his skin. With an odd, anguished expression, he watched her face, holding himself above her on his arms. Teresa rocked her hips faster.

The sensation spun outward until she moaned and shuddered, lost to everything but him. She sang his name.

“Your bliss is the nearest thing to Heaven that I shall ever see.” But when she reached for his erection, he pushed her hand away. “Don’t.”

He slid out of the sleeping bag, clothing himself in the same motion. Tess sat up, dizzy and bewildered. “Dev?”

“Get dressed. We’re done here.”

“I don’t understand. We didn’t...” Without regard for her nakedness, she stood and reached for him again.

His desolate expression stopped her cold. “As you love me, I beg you not to touch me. Only the fact that I’ve fed recently saves you now. Please don’t test my good intentions.” He gave a haunted laugh. “As you know the road to Hell is paved with them.”

Something was very wrong, but she thought she understood. “It’s all right, I promise. I’m willing to take the chance.”

“I’m not. Get *dressed*. I won’t ask again.” He swiped a hand across his brow as if she possessed the power to make a demon sweat. “I never thought I’d have this problem with you.”

Her hands had too many thumbs, but she managed to put her clothes back on somehow. It didn’t seem real as she watched him packing up their things. He left the air mattress out in order to fill the duffel with the most portable treasure, as she’d asked.

“Dev,” she tried again. “We’ll have a lifetime together...”

And he whirled on her with a look so bleak it broke her heart. “We’d have a lifetime for *you*. It would pass in a wink for me, and then you’d be gone. I’ll be alone, not knowing whether I’ve sent you to burn forever in my place. There’s no afterlife for one such as me, just an eternity on Earth without you. I cannot do this. I won’t.”

Tess bit her lip until she tasted copper, trying to control her rising desperation. Time itself ran against them. She had to persuade him. Somehow.

“But you’ll be free.” Tears thickened her throat. “You’ll have the wind on your skin. If you go back, you’ll never see the sky again. And no matter where I am, it will be enough if when you fly, you think of me.”

A dragon’s tortured wrath rang in his words, echoed off the walls. “What is freedom

without you? What good are wings? I would never be able to fly fast enough or far enough to escape the loss. You taught me everything good and beautiful that I know. I'm sorry, Tess."

And she had her answer.

The demon wept.

Demon tears. Dragon tears. Either way, they were rare and precious. Wanting so desperately to touch him, she lifted a hand and then let it flutter to her side again. She no longer had his permission.

Dev turned away, bowed his head as if in prayer. When he faced her again he had himself under control. "Come." He sounded hard and cold as iron. "It's time to leave this place. I can walk you as far as the valley. I should have that much time left."

"We could fly, one last time."

In the reflected light from the Coleman lantern, she saw the truth in his eyes. He would never fly again.

Dev went on as if she hadn't spoken. "At the base of the mountain, there's a village ... or there used to be. I'm afraid you'll have to rely on your own ingenuity to find a buyer, my pretty one. But ... I believe in you. I expect great things."

"Thank you."

Because it was heavy, he shouldered the pack. Her eyes burned as she followed him back up through the twisting labyrinth. Atop the mountain, the sun rose high in a clear blue sky. Nearly noon. If she remembered right, Dev had come to her at sundown.

So he would leave her then as well.

To her wonderment, as they walked, he offered more stories to distract her from what would happen at twilight. "Yes, I was Melusine. I married Count Siegfried of the Ardennes, but contrary to popular legend, I bore him no children. For obvious reasons." He smiled with such wistful longing that she had to close her eyes and follow blind.

All too soon, they reached the bottom of the trail, opening to a plush green valley. "The village should lay due south of here. Perhaps you can appeal to the church for help." With a tilt of his head Dev acknowledged the irony of that.

The sun sat lower in the sky, a disc of molten gold. Dev tipped his face up, as if capturing the feel of the wind on his skin one last time. She watched him in turn, memorizing the way his hair curled against his neck and the sharpness of his nose.

Would he vanish as he'd done in the chapel? Be called away in a whirl of boiling black smoke? How could she bear it?

Curiosity had always been her chief fault. So in their final moments, she asked, "Do you love me?"

Perhaps that would be obvious to anyone else, but even so she wanted the words. To her surprise he appeared to consider and then shrugged. "I don't know. What is love?"

Shadows crept along the ground. Soon they would take him.

Her reply caught on a sob. "Love is what makes you real."

The last ray of sunlight angled down like Jacob's ladder. Her mother had always said that was how angels reached Earth. As the beam slanted across their bodies, he screamed, and his face flushed the scarlet of a squalling newborn. Teresa smelled sulfur and the awful stench of burning skin. He fell, leaden.

With a cry of pure horror, she knelt. She hadn't known she would have to watch him die. Taking his hand in hers, she smoothed his palm with her fingers. *What can I do?*

She prayed while he writhed. He didn't seem to be dissipating. Instead his pain became more pronounced, more ... real. His flesh lost its unnatural sheen so slowly that she thought she must be imagining it.

I must be delusional. So Teresa double-checked the thready pulse in his wrist. Awed, she watched his chest rise and fall, counted his shallow breaths.

Real.

Just to be sure, she tugged at his clothing. A black pullover—he'd need to take it off just like anyone else. It couldn't be willed away. Same with his pants, she tested those as well. And found something in the pocket.

Drunk with wonder, she lifted the wallet and opened it. Read the ID cards contained therein. *Let him wake now. Not me.*

As if he heard her silent call, his lashes fluttered up. Eyes of summer sky gazed up at her in sweet bewilderment.

"I was right," she told him, softly exultant. "They were never testing *me*, Dev. This was about you. Redemption. Second-chances."

"So I am judged worthy of you?" Pure reverence laced his tone. "I'm ... real?"

Dev tilted his head, gave his arm a little pinch, and then his mouth fell open in astonishment. "It hurts!"

"Sometimes," Teresa said and then paraphrased the quote. "But when you're real you don't mind being hurt." She wondered whether he would remember this part of *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

Pushing to his knees, he reached for her and buried his face in her hair. His words came in a shaky rush. "Will I age? Can we make babies? Will you read to them about the velveteen rabbit?"

"I don't know, love. We'll work it out as we go along."

"I expect I shall do all the man things now, like go bald, watch sports, and leave hair in the drain. I'll get all wrinkly and knobby-kneed, won't I? I won't always be beautiful." Pausing, he drew back and regarded her with a half-frown, as if he thought that might prove a sticking point for her.

Tess made a sound, half-laugh, half-sob. "Nor will I."

"Yes, you will," he said, solemn as a vow.

She touched his cheek. "There's no end to the miracles today. Your name is Marcus Devlin and apparently you're a master carpenter."

"Am I?" He blinked, as one awakening from a dream and then smiled, covering her fingers with his. "Well, I've been told I'm good with my hands."

Teresa squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. "You are. You write your own ticket from now on, my love. Your soul is your own. But, Dev ... you can't fly anymore." Part of her feared he would resent the change.

"I have the memory of it. And you. I don't need to."

She could breathe again. "Then there's just one question."

"What's that?"

"How are we getting out of the Pyrenees?"

At that he shook his head, grinning with pure devilry. "No, right now, the pressing question is, where's the best spot for us to finish what we started?"

"You still want to?" She didn't mean to sound coquettish.

As he pushed to his feet, his smile widened. "Are you kidding? I have to warn you,

though, I don't think I've got any..." He paused as if seeking the word. "Preliminaries left in me."

"Foreplay, you mean."

"Yeah. That. I feel like I might die if I don't have you." His voice dropped low.

"And since I'm just getting started here, I don't think we should take that chance."

She agreed with a solemn nod. "Best not to risk it."

"So you're not going to insist on a bed of rose petals?"

For a moment she pretended to consider while he squirmed. Tess pointed. "No. That bed of grass looks just fine."

With a flourish he carried her there, the pack dangling from his other hand. Dev cursed the dragon gold as he sought a sleeping bag. While she undressed, he tore his shirt over his head. Then she enjoyed watching him struggle with his pants.

"Accursed hell," he spat, eyes blazing. "How does this..."

"Here." She unzipped him, slid her fingers inside the placket. He felt nearly the same, hard and hot and sleek, but this time he pulsed with life too. "Let me."

For a moment, he stood still while she stroked him, his face tight with pleasure.

"Please, Tess. Not with your hand. Not this time. I need to be part of you."

"You are."

They lay down together, their skin spangled with Spanish moonlight. Dev eased between her thighs. No virgin sacrifice, she wrapped her arms about his back. Fine gold hair dusted his chest now, his arms and legs. His eyes widened as he pushed into her body. It hurt a little, but she trusted him and remembered the pleasure.

"Oh," he gasped, trembling. "Oh Tess, this is..."

Heaven.

She lifted her hips as she pulled him down for a kiss. Dev worshiped her lips with his as he began to move, awkward at first. He pulled back to brace on his arms and watch her face on each luscious push-pull. The slow, luxurious friction roused a higher urgency, so she answered it, moving beneath him.

Tess glorified in the rasp of his breathing and his heart thundering against hers. "You can go a ... little faster. I like this too."

"Yes." His head fell back. "Faster. I don't know what I'm doing. All those things I said about teaching you ... but this is n-nothing like what I did ... before."

"Good." Fiercely she wrapped her legs around his hips, drawing him deeper. "I don't want it to be."

Dev hunched into her, sinking into some rhythm that clenched his buttocks against her calves. "It's all new. Oh Tess. *Tess.*"

He shook in her arms, arched into her, and she felt the throb of his heartbeat as he peaked. The pleasure of giving her lover an orgasm sent a vicarious thrill through her body. And then she realized the feeling came from his wicked fingers.

"I know I didn't do it quite right," he whispered into her ear. "But I'll get better if we practice." He pressed atop her mound. "Promise."

Her turn to twist and quake—Tess tipped her head back and saw his face.

Later, after they'd eaten the crackers and downed the iced tea, she lay in his arms. Basked in his warmth, cozy within the thermal sleeping bag.

They talked softly of possible plans for getting back to Pittsburgh, resolved none. They spoke of the charity they would start with his secret hoard. Once the foundation

functioned independently they would search out the rest of his dragon gold. At the moment she didn't care if they built a hut in this valley and caught fish from a mountain stream. Perhaps that would change.

He made a contented sound, nuzzling her throat. "So your brother will murder me if I don't marry you. Want to save me again?"

"Not without a proper proposal and a ring, I don't. Ask me when you've put some thought into it."

Tess realized she had a calling to be a carpenter's wife after all.

The End

About the Author:

In her life, Annie has been a clown, a clerk, a savior of stray kittens, voice actress, and the mistress of a Lebanese nobleman, not necessarily in that order. She grew up in a yellow house across from a cornfield, but now she lives in sunny Mexico with her husband and two adorable children who sometimes do as they are told.

The Straw Man

Bonnie Dee

“Happy Halloween! Beware of bats tonight, children. They might scoop you up and carry you away.” Marie cackled like a crone and squinted her eyes frighteningly as she grinned at the Weiderman twins. She wiggled her toes in her tight shoes, glancing down at the black leather points that clamped them into unnatural positions. Her feet were killing her and her long, black witch’s dress was broiling hot on this sunny afternoon.

“Thank Granny Goodwitch for the pumpkins, kids.” Don Weiderman nudged his awestruck six-year-olds.

Kevin’s mouth snapped shut and he ducked behind his dad, while his braver sister, Lydia, dutifully whispered, “Thank you, Granny Goodwitch.”

Marie smiled and laughed again. “Thank you. See you next year.”

The twins clambered into the pickup truck and their father shut the door behind them. They peered out through the rear window at her, their pale, round faces like twin moons.

“Thanks again. It always makes it real special for the kids, coming here to buy their pumpkins,” Weiderman said as he loaded a tawny oval pumpkin and a plump round one as bright as copper into the bed of the pickup.

“It’s a pleasure. I love seeing how excited they are about something as simple as choosing a pumpkin. Halloween’s such a special time for kids. It was always my favorite holiday. Looks like it’ll be good weather for trick-or-treating tonight.”

“Shouldn’t be too cold either.”

They both looked up at the clear, blue sky overhead and the flock of Canada geese winging in a perfect V-pattern high above. Their loud honking and the breeze rustling through the dried cornstalks were the only sounds to disturb the quiet country air.

Marie ran a finger under the tight collar of her uncomfortable, long-sleeved dress and wished it was at least a little cooler. The weather was unseasonably hot for the end of October. “Be sure and bring the kids out tonight,” she said. “I look forward to seeing them in their costumes.”

She waved as the Weidermans drove off, two curves of orange pumpkins visible above the tailgate of their pickup.

It was bittersweet living in a small town where she knew everyone and they knew her. The years slipped by but the patterns remained the same. The children grew into gawky adolescence and new wide-eyed little ones took their place, but everything else remained the same. Exactly the same. Or so it felt to Marie today. One season bled into the next and before she knew it another year was gone.

Sighing, she sank down on her metal folding chair at the edge of the field next to Sam the Friendly Scarecrow. The dummy, which hung on a T-frame, wore an ancient black fedora cocked at a jaunty angle and a shabby, black topcoat. Beneath the coat was a blue, cotton shirt and navy pants stuffed full of straw and tied at the cuffs. Old, brown work boots were attached at the bottom of the pants.

She looked up at the primitive face she'd scrawled with magic marker on white muslin and thought Sam didn't look very friendly this year. His eyebrows were thick and fierce, his eyes up-tilted at the corners, his nose a straight slash and his mouth a grim line. He definitely appeared more severe than jolly. Maybe the face she'd drawn was a reflection of her own bitter mood, which had descended on her a few months ago like a storm cloud that refused to move on. Maybe the scarecrow was her alter ego, the dark side she kept hidden from the world.

Snorting at her cynical self-analysis, she kicked off her confining shoes and leaned back in the hard chair. Taking off her peaked witch hat, Marie fanned herself with the wide brim then brushed her hand through her snarled blonde hair, lifting it to let the breeze swirl over the sweaty back of her neck. It was a ridiculously sultry day.

Marie remembered years when poor shivering tykes in Spiderman bodysuits or shiny pink princess gowns begged for candy with their teeth chattering. She was glad the kids would have good weather. There was nothing more magical than roaming the streets at night dressed as someone else, some magical, mysterious being with the power to control the night. When she was a kid, Marie thought Halloween was far more exciting than Christmas.

She gazed across the pumpkin patch toward the dry stalks of field corn, rattling and whispering their secrets to one another. There were many pumpkins left among the twisting vines and she wished she'd taken more to market. The number of direct-sell customers visiting the farm was down this year and pumpkins were practically unmarketable after Halloween was past.

Her gaze shifted to her scarecrow. "Well, another summer over. We may have actually made enough from the corn and soybeans and the stupid pumpkins to pay the taxes and heat the house this winter. Maybe even buy groceries, woo-hoo!"

Sam frowned down at her.

"Yes, I know, you were hoping for a Cancun holiday. Me too. Sometimes I'd like to sell this place, move to the city and never see anything except asphalt and tall buildings again."

Again she looked across the fields at the stand of woods that marked her property line. Gold, orange and an occasional scarlet maple flamed in contrast to trees with dark green leaves that hadn't yet changed. One of the neighbors was burning leaves and a smudge of smoke blossomed against the sky. Marie could smell it from a quarter mile away, sharp and tangy. It smelled like fall and made her crave a cup of cider and a doughnut. No, she wouldn't really give up her land, but lately a need for change took hold of her and shook her like a north wind rattling the eaves on a blustery day.

The need for something new was so strong inside her today that it almost felt as if she was poised on the cusp of a great void, about to take a plunge. It was an odd feeling, and silly, because nothing was going to happen. Nothing ever did. Tomorrow she'd wake up to the same life as today.

"I should put in sunflowers next year. They're a big seller." She pointed out to Sam, picturing a sea of yellow faces turned to the sun, moving in unison to track the passing of yet another day. The image depressed the hell out of her. "Next year. Will anything be different? Or will I still be sitting here talking to *you*?" She glared at the scarecrow.

He gazed impassively back at her.

"Stupid, useless thing. You can't even keep the crows out of the corn. What good are

you?” She rested her chin on her hand, elbows on knees and stared glumly ahead. She had to get out more. Holding conversations with inanimate dummies was a little too Anthony Perkins in *Psycho*.

At only thirty-two Marie already felt old and worn out, too exhausted to face the dating game. She’d tried all the unattached, local men she knew and no one was *the* one. Lately, she rarely went out with anyone except her female friends. Meeting a guy at a club in the city was even worse. You set yourself up for a one-night stand, not a relationship, and at this stage in her life Marie was more than ready for the real deal, someone who wanted to share a life and not just a night with her.

She examined the straw-padded body and stern face of the scarecrow. “If you were a real man, you’d know that I just insulted you. You wouldn’t stand for being called useless and you’d come down from there and show me just how *useful* you could be.”

If you were a real man.

Marie pictured her ideal lover. He should be physically strong and solidly built, but not muscle-bound. Dark hair and deep brown eyes were a must. She glanced at her stuffed man again. Those tilting, almost Asian eyes were extremely appealing, but the mouth she’d gotten wrong. What she’d drawn was a mere slash. What she wanted was a pair of full, soft lips, perfect for kissing. In fact...

Marie rose and walked to the sales stand where she found a permanent black marker, then returned to climb up on her chair beside the scarecrow and work on his face. Making the lips fuller softened the cold, disapproving line of his mouth. She drew longer lashes around the eyes and blackened the irises, leaving only a single white spot to make a sardonic twinkle. A faint dash on either cheek delineated the cheekbones. When she stood back to regard her artistry she was pleased. He was hot for a scarecrow. And, oh my God, how pathetic was that?

But in the privacy of her mind, she could fantasize all she wished. It was no one’s business but her own. What other qualities would her perfect lover possess? It wasn’t enough that he look a certain way. He had to have the right personality; good-natured but not bland, perhaps a little dangerous streak to leaven out the good nature. He should be quirky but not weird, serious yet with a great sense of humor, possess a masculine toughness tempered with sweet vulnerability. She wasn’t asking for much, just a little bit of everything, her very own male potpourri containing all the best elements of man.

Sitting in her chair with her black dress absorbing the sun’s rays made her hot, sleepy ... and horny. She closed her eyes and drifted into an erotic fantasy starring her perfect, dark-haired, dark-eyed stranger.

He found her lying in the field with a twisted ankle, scooped her up and carried her toward the house, like that scene in Sense and Sensibility. She was embarrassed to be a damsel in distress, but also extremely aroused when he lifted her in his strong arms and held her against his rock-hard chest. She slipped her hand around the back of his neck, feeling the sinew and the pulsing life beneath his skin, the soft hair brushing the back of her hand. He looked at her with eyes the color of midnight. The intensity of his gaze made her feel like prey being carried off by a predator—but in a good way. Her heart raced and her breathing was shallow, almost panting.

Inside the house, he laid her on her bed, removing her shoes and stockings—yes, stockings not sports sox. It was a period piece. Maybe he even unfastened garters first. His gentle hands slid down her calves to cradle her ankle, turning it slowly from side to

side, as he asked if it hurt.

Lower lip trembling, she bravely told him she would be fine and “thank you, kind sir, for coming to my aid.”

Her hero carefully placed a pillow under her leg and asked if there was “anything else” he could do to make her feel better. She could almost hear the snare drum roll at the double entendre.

“Well, if you’d really like to soothe my pain, handsome stranger...”

His eyes were hungry, devouring each uncovered inch of flesh as he worked his way down the long row of buttons on her shining, satin gown. He peeled away layers of delicate undergarments; petticoats, bloomers, a chemise or maybe a corset, to reveal her lush curves. Yes, in her daydream she could have lush curves and bigger breasts. His hands caressed her naked skin, trailing over her shoulders, her chest and the plump mounds of her breasts, down her rib cage and stomach. His erotic touch sent her stomach leaping, her skin twitching. He stopped when he reached the triangle of dark hair marking her sex and framed it with his splayed hands as though framing a work of art, while she waited breathlessly, for him to continue.

He seductively stroked her inner thighs, tickling her with his fingertips until she moaned. Then he gently parted the folds of her sex to reveal the pink bud of her clitoris. His exotic, slanted eyes feasted on the sight of her spread open before him then he slowly leaned to place his mouth on her pearl of desire.

Gasping, she rose to his touch, lifting her hips off the bed and toward his hot mouth. Just one kiss, he pressed there, then pulled away to watch her reaction to his touch. The light pressure of his lips wasn’t nearly enough. She wanted, needed more. She wanted his lapping tongue and delving fingers stimulating her in ways a lady shouldn’t know anything about. Desperate for more of his touch, she arched upward again and whimpered.

He smiled, a wolfish baring of white teeth that lit his dark face and made his almond eyes glow like fiery coals. Once more he bent to her sex and kissed it, then his tongue darted out and flicked over the erect nub of her clit, the wellspring of her delight. She twisted and moaned beneath his exquisite torture...

A car horn honked and Marie almost fell off her chair. Her eyes flew open and her hand dropped away from her crotch, which she’d been massaging idly through the fabric of her skirt. Thank God, she hadn’t hitched up her skirt yet and really gone to work on herself! Cramming her feet back into her shoes and the witch hat on her head, she stood to greet her customers.

“Welcome to Granny Goodwitch’s pumpkin patch...” She went into her spiel, her voice aged and cracking. The family wasn’t one she knew. The children were young and scampered through the pumpkins choosing and rejecting one after another, looking for the “perfect” shape and size. It was like picking a Christmas tree ... or a man.

After the family had made their choices and left, Marie turned the sign on the stand to “Closed.” She returned to the garden to fold up her chair for the day, thinking about her erotic fantasies. They were getting out of control. She lived too much inside her head and found satisfaction in her own hand or her trusty vibrator far too often. Sighing, she stared up at her stuffed man. “It’s all your fault. If you were real, I wouldn’t have to make up this stuff.”

The gangly figure regarded her with a cool expression.

A wave of intense yearning swept through her. The emotion seized and shook her like a fall wind shakes the trees, loosening showers of dead leaves. She was tired of fantasies and daydreams and longed with all her heart for a real man to hold her, his scent, his touch, his heavy body covering hers. She craved the intimacy of sex followed by cuddling, whispering and laughing together. She simply wanted a man, the perfect man for her, wanted it with all the strength of her soul.

“I wish you *were* real,” she muttered at the scarecrow. “I wish I could have someone—just for a night.”

The moment the words left her mouth the balmy breeze blew into a sudden, strong gale that whipped grit and dirt hard against her face and swirled her long skirt around her legs. The air shimmered strangely although the sky was as sunny and clear as it had been all afternoon. She shielded her eyes, looking for the source of the sudden gust, the odd light, but just as quickly as it had risen, it died and the shine in the air evaporated.

Turning in a circle, she looked across the sun-baked fields and up at the bright, blue sky. “What the hell?” A flock of birds flew overhead, but no other movement disturbed the stillness.

A shudder went through her at the strangeness of the moment. It had been like one of those Weather Channel stories about frogs raining from the sky; an anomaly she wished she’d captured on video for proof she hadn’t dreamt it. For a moment, she imagined the weird wind was a portent of something, then scoffed at her own fancy.

Unsettled, she grabbed her chair and headed toward the house, but even indoors she couldn’t shake the odd mood that shrouded her. *Something’s coming*, her mind whispered. She closed the windows and even locked them, but the sense of impending change still haunted her.

* * * *

The feeling of something coming stuck with her the rest of the afternoon, but she kept it at bay by staying busy. Long before sunset the first rush of trick-or-treaters arrived to distract her from her anxious thoughts. They were the little ones, petite ballerinas and pint-sized superheroes. Marie gave each an enthusiastic compliment about his or her costume and a handful of candy. She always bought chocolate bars. She remembered from her childhood that they were like diamonds among the rocks of Bit-o-Honeys or Bazooka Joe bubblegum in your trick-or-treat bag.

Most people living out in the country didn’t get many kids visiting. It was easier for the parents to go to subdivisions where the kids could race from house to house on their own with the parents following leisurely after. But Marie was Granny Goodwitch. She had lots of little fans who came especially to see her. Dressed in her costume, she entertained them with silly jokes and puns told in her age-cracked witch voice. Kids knew her as Granny Goodwitch all year long when they caught sight of her in town. Her fame extended far beyond the Halloween season.

As it grew later, the kids grew older. Many teenagers wore Goth black with thick eyeliner, crazy hair and studded dog collars. Some girls dressed in the slutty pop singer uniform of a cleavage-baring crop top and tiny skirt. Hulking boys in baggy jeans often wore cheap, plastic masks on top of their heads and pulled them into place only at the last minute as quick proof of intent. “I’m here for candy, not to mug you.”

The awkward, gangly teens weren’t adorable like the sweet little ones but Marie

found them touching in their own way. They were super-sized kids reveling in the last hurrah of being a child, gluttonously collecting shopping bags full of candy. Maybe later in the evening they got someone to buy beer then partied in the cemetery, but for the moment, they were just children.

At last her candy stash ran dry and her patience wore thin from answering the doorbell all evening. She flipped off her porch light and changed from her witch's dress into a stretched-out tank top and sweats. She washed off her age makeup to reveal her own smooth, oval face and brushed the snarls out of her shoulder-length, honey blonde hair. She had just stretched out on the couch to watch the black-and-white, classic version of *The Fly*, when there was another knock on the door.

"Christ. Get a clue," she muttered. "No light mean no candy, stoopid."

But the knocking went on and on. Steady and even, in perfectly spaced intervals. Knock... Knock... Knock. It was kind of creepy. The hair on her arms prickled. She sat up straight, trying to remember if she'd locked the door. The knocking grew louder, more insistent.

Marie stood up with a sigh. This had better not be some stupid teenage practical joke like a flaming bag of poo. On the other hand, flaming poo would be preferable to being raped or murdered, she thought as a tingle of unease tickled her spine. Flipping on the porch light, she opened the door a cautious few inches, ready to say, "I'm closed for the night. No more candy."

Standing on her doorstep was a tall, lanky man in a long dark coat. His face was angular and broad across his high, prominent cheekbones. His glossy black hair was straight and ended shaggily at his collar. A lock of long bangs fell across his forehead and over his straight, dark eyebrows. Slanted, almond eyes gazed at her intently as if he knew her.

For a split second she felt she knew him too, but she couldn't place the face. "Yes? Can I help you?" She closed the door a half-inch, ready to slam it shut if he did anything weird.

"May I come in?" His voice was low and husky and sent an unexpected shiver of lust through her body. It vibrated from her belly to her crotch like tickling fingers.

"Um, no, you can't. Do you need something? Is your car broken down? Lost a trick-or-treater or something?" She scanned his body.

He was wearing an old-fashioned, long coat at odds with his threadbare navy pants and the scuffed work boots on his feet. "No."

"Look, I can call a wrecker, a friend or family member ... the police."

"No, thank you." He shifted from one foot to the other as if uncertain of his balance and continued to gaze at her with an expectant look in his eyes. Was he waiting for her to ask him in?

Marie felt a creeping sense of déjà vu as she met his gaze then scanned his body once more. It wasn't until her eyes focused on the fedora hat clutched in his hand by his side that the light flashed on. Her eyes widened. He was wearing her scarecrow's clothes. Why was he wearing her scarecrow's clothes? Maybe he was a wandering vagrant, a bum who had exchanged one set of rags for another.

"Well, what *do* you want then?" She closed the door even farther, talking to him through a scant few inches of open space.

A puzzled frown knit his straight, dark brows, as if the answer was obvious. "I'm

here for you,” he said simply.

As if on cue, the wind rose, sweeping through the door and blowing through Marie’s thin top, raising gooseflesh on her arms and bringing her nipples to two sharp peaks. Her crotch clenched and released in a hard spasm that wet her underwear. “You’re ... here for me,” she repeated. “Oo-kay. Bu’bye now.” She shut the door quickly, blocking out the stranger and the errant wind. She turned the lock.

For a moment, she stood with her hands pressed against the solid wood, listening to the ominous silence on the other side, then she turned and dashed across the house to the window overlooking the fields. The moon’s pale glow, glimmering through scudding clouds, lit the round curves of the pumpkins on the ground and the ragged corn stalks waving in the breeze. She focused on the ‘T’ made from two boards nailed together. It was empty of the straw mannequin she’d made. Her heart pounded. This guy was a loony. Who took scarecrow clothes and wore them?

Marie jumped as the steady, insistent knocking started up again—Knock. Knock. Knock—in evenly spaced intervals that seemed like they might go on all night.

“Stop it!” she yelled. “I’m calling the police. They’ll be here in, like, two minutes, so you’d better run!” She went to the phone and lifted it to dial 911, but paused with only two of the digits dialed. Her finger hovered over the one as she thought about what had happened earlier that day. Her earlier portentous feeling was back full force. The something that was coming was now here for her.

Standing in the field, she’d wished for a lover like the one in her imagination. She had looked up at the scarecrow and voiced her desire, “I wish you were alive,” then that weird wind blew up from nowhere. If her life was a movie, it would add up to magic.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she muttered, but set down the phone. Walking slowly back to the door, she stood on her side of it and listened to the repetitive thumps for a moment. “Stop! Stop it!” she yelled again, and the knocking instantly ceased. “What do you want?”

The muffled voice on the other side of the door replied, “You.”

“Do you know how fucking creepy that sounds?” Her voice was shrill and hysterical in her ears. “Go away!”

“I can’t,” came the calm reply. “Not yet.”

“What do you mean, you can’t? Turn around and walk away. Now, or I swear I’ll call the police!”

“I’m supposed to be here. You asked for me.”

Marie was stunned. Horror and an awful excitement coursed through her. She thought about the classic story, *The Monkey’s Paw* with its “be careful what you wish for” motif. She pictured the man’s angular, vaguely oriental face and realized who ... or what he looked like. After all, she’d drawn the primitive image herself.

“That’s crazy,” she murmured then raised her voice and said haltingly, “What am I, uh, supposed to do with you?”

There was a long pause then that delicious, warm, rough voice answered, “Whatever you want. I am made to please you.”

Marie felt a hot blade of lust stab through her at the suggestive words. All reason and logic fled and only erotic images tumbled through her mind. Her crotch tightened and released wetly. She laughed aloud. “No, no, no, no, no. This isn’t happening. Nuh-uh.”

“Please let me in. It’s already getting late.” He sounded urgent.

“What does that mean?”

“There’s not much time.”

Marie frowned. She opened the door and peered through the crack. “Not much time?”

He stood on her porch, broad-shouldered and rawboned, looking at her with those exotic, soulful eyes. “You only asked for one night.”

She felt her resistance melting. It was his dark chocolate eyes that did it. Between one breath and the next she suddenly and completely believed he was what she thought he was. The magic must be working on her too, breaking down her logic and allowing her to believe. There was no other rational explanation for what she did next. As he moved a tentative foot toward the door, she swung it open and stepped back to let him inside. A rain-scented wind blew in with him, bringing a scattering of dried leaves into the front hall. Moving slowly, as if in a dream, she closed the door behind him.

The man looked around the room, examining everything in sight, a slight cock to his head, reminiscent of a dog sniffing out unfamiliar territory. Then he turned his gaze on her and smiled.

Marie’s already racing heart leaped, flipped and twirled before settling again to a steady thumping. His smile was warm, welcoming and familiar. It lit his face with the comfortable glow of a fire burning on a hearth. It was like a homecoming. She felt she’d known him her whole life, and he was a treasured friend. Her fears and doubts blew away like so many scattering fall leaves. She didn’t stop to consider or second-guess as she allowed this stranger to step toward her and take her in his arms. Maybe her capitulation was part of the spell. Her will became as weak and liquid as melted caramel.

She certainly felt unable to resist when he bent his head and covered her mouth with his. The lips that touched hers were warm and soft, the mouth wide and generous—just the way she’d imagined it. *Just the way she’d drawn it.* The thought made the hair at the nape of her neck rise, but his continued kissing put it to rest again. His tongue flicked out to trace her lips as lightly as a butterfly landing.

Her mouth opened automatically beneath the touch, wanting more, deeper, harder. She put her arms around his neck and pulled his mouth even tighter against hers. She felt like she’d been fasting for years and had been suddenly served a five-course meal. His body was solid and real in her arms, the big frame towering over her so she had to rise up on her toes to kiss him. But his size wasn’t intimidating. Instead, she felt safe and secure, wrapped in his embrace, yielding to the increasing depth and passion of his kisses. His tongue ranged over the interior of her mouth, tasting her and teasing her tongue to response. The heat and wetness of his mouth invaded hers as their tongues twined together in a sinuous dance.

She breathed in the slight moldy odor of the clothes and the dry, dusty scent of straw, and beneath them, the male musk of his pheromones calling to her. Oh yes, he was definitely real. The throbbing in her breasts and pussy verified it. This was no hyper-real fantasy induced by too many mini-Hershey bars. She was sure of it when his hands grasped her rear and pulled her tight against him. She felt the bulge of an erection through his loose-fitting pants. It pressed against her crotch and stomach, massaging her clit and sending a lick of fire burning through her synapses. Marie’s heart pounded like a runner’s and it wasn’t from fear. She moaned softly and rubbed herself against him.

There were far too many clothes in between them. She stepped back and pushed the

heavy coat off his shoulders. He shrugged his arms out of the sleeves and it dropped to the floor in a black pool around his feet.

She unfastened the buttons of his long-sleeved, blue work shirt one by one, revealing the hard, flat plane of his chest, his swelling pectorals with their tight, brown nipples and his taut stomach. His smooth skin was tawny and seemed to gleam slightly in the dim light of her front hall. A sprinkling of hair led from his navel down to the waistband of his pants. She shivered at the thought of where it led, and at the sight of the bulge filling the front of the old, black pants he wore.

When she'd unbuttoned his shirt, she peeled it off his arms, stripping it from him like a wrapper from a piece of trick-or-treat candy. Her tongue flicked over her lips hungrily as she tossed the shirt aside. Beneath it the bulging muscles of his shoulders and arms sent a thrill through her. She ran her hands over his torso, feeling the skin like silk and the underlying muscle like hewn granite. The ache in her crotch intensified and her panties grew damp as she stroked him everywhere.

He stood for a moment, eyes drifting half-closed and a soft groan coming from his lips. Another surge of lust liquefied her insides at the deeply male sound. So, he could not only give pleasure but feel it too. The knowledge brought an even stronger sense of reality to this bizarre situation. Whatever he'd been before, he was a flesh and blood lover for tonight.

Cupping her face in his warm palms, he inclined his head to kiss her again, a soft, gentle exploration. She opened her mouth to his, pressing her hands flat against his warm chest and feeling his steadily beating heart.

"So soft," he whispered. "Just as I imagined they would be." He nibbled her lips with little kisses.

So hard, Marie thought, smoothing her hands over his chest. *Just like I dreamed about.* "I can't believe this. It can't be happening."

"Why not? It's what you wanted. I'm what you asked for." His hands left her face to slide around her back, pulling her close. Their heat burned her skin through the thin fabric of her old, gray tank top. His deep voice was so intimate and the gleam in his eyes so hungry that Marie felt as limp as a scarecrow herself. Only his strong arms held her upright.

She gripped his shoulders and looked into his eyes, frowning. "What's your name? I mean, what should I call you?"

"You know." He smiled. "You named me."

"Sam?"

He nodded.

A wave of disorientation swept through her as she was reminded again of the insubstantial nature of her guest. "This is just so crazy. I can't believe..."

He covered her mouth with his, halting her words and suspending her disbelief once more with his hot, wet kiss. His hands stroked up and down her back and stopped to rest above the curve of her buttocks.

Threading her fingers through his thick, dark hair, she relished the feel of his hard skull and strong neck and the soft warmth of his tongue possessing her mouth.

He slid his hands up her back to her shoulders and pushed the loose straps of her tank top off. His fingertips caressed her skin, sending shivers through her. He kissed a path from her mouth down her throat, stopping at the hollow where her pulse pounded. He

sucked on the flesh there a moment then, humming a satisfied little “Mmm,” pulled away and lifted the hem of her shirt up over her head.

Marie raised her arms and let him take it off then instinctively crossed her arms over her bare breasts. Her cheeks burned and her skin prickled at the sudden nudity. Although the house wasn't chilly, another shiver ran through her.

Sam tossed the shirt aside and gently moved her arms away so he could gaze at the small, pale globes with their dusky, pointed nipples. He reached out and covered them easily with his large hands, lightly squeezing and weighing them. Then he released them and toyed with her nipples, his thumbs brushing over each point until they were fully erect and hard. When he rolled each bud between his thumb and forefinger, the stimulation was too intense. Marie hissed at the erotic contact and thrust her chest toward his torturing fingers.

She glanced at his face. His gaze was riveted on her chest, watching with obvious fascination her body's response to his touch. His lips were slightly parted and his eyes glazed with desire. Leaning down, he kissed the swell of each breast then nuzzled her left nipple like a seeking infant before sucking it into his mouth with hungry authority.

Marie's eyes drifted part closed and she moaned her delight at the strong sucking sensation that shot a bolt of lust straight to her crotch. She pushed her chest toward him encouragingly, relishing the sight of his generous mouth wrapped around her breast, his closed eyes with their long, dark lashes resting in twin arcs on his cheekbones. When he released it from his mouth with a pop, the nipple and areola were glistening wet and as red as raspberries. He turned his attention to her other breast.

While she enjoyed Sam's ministrations, she ran her hands over his strong shoulders and upper back, enthralled by the living flesh. Her logical mind reared its annoying head once more asking how this was possible. But she pushed the frantic, questioning voice out of her mind and tried to concentrate only on the delectable sensations in her breasts, and in her throbbing pussy. Her sex ached and she thrust her hips forward slightly, needing some contact there.

As though reading her mind, or maybe her not so subtle signal, his hand moved down between her legs to rub lightly through her cotton sweats. The delicious friction made her even wetter. Her panties were soaked at the crotch. She ground against his hand, letting out a long, low moan.

She wanted to see the rest of him now, wanted him nude before her. She pushed him back from her, breaking his contact with her breasts and sex, then she leaned to unfasten his pants. With the fly opened, the loose-fitting trousers dropped easily over his narrow hips and down to the floor. Her throat went dry at the sight before her. Whatever Sam had been before, he was all man now. His cock thrust out, thick and long, from a dark tangle of pubic hair. Beneath the rigid shaft swayed a heavy pair of balls. It was the kind of equipment that filled Marie's fantasies. And why not? If this was an erotic fantasy brought on by too much time alone and too many mini-Mars bars, why shouldn't it be perfect?

She reached down and grasped him. His organ was ridged with veins, pulsing with life. It twitched eagerly at her touch. The head was smooth and purplish-red, already dripping in its eagerness for her. She wanted it in her mouth. Now!

Dropping to her knees, she encircled Sam's shaft with her hand and guided the tip to her lips. With her other hand she cradled the hot, heaviness of his sac, hefting it and

toying with the egg-shapes inside the soft, loose skin. Her lips closed around him and her tongue sampled the salty, smoothness of his head. She sucked him in deeper and deeper, engulfing more of his length as he gasped his pleasure.

Glancing down, she realized his trousers were still pooled around his scuffed work boots. She withdrew her mouth from his cock. Sam cried out in protest. Marie unlaced his boots. There was no doubt they were her father's, salvaged from the basement and used to give her mannequin a pair of feet. But now they were tied over a real man's feet. She felt vaguely submissive, kneeling before him and removing them like this. The position gave her a stab of déjà vu. She thought of how often she'd sat on her metal folding chair near the feet of the scarecrow, waiting for customers, daydreaming and gazing out across the pumpkins and cornfields.

When she glanced up, he was staring down at her, eyes glittering with lust. She quickly pulled off his boots while he shifted his balance from one foot to the other. He kicked his discarded trousers aside, then stood before her completely naked. He was tan, long, lean and muscular, the perfect man of her dreams.

Returning her attention to his cock, she grasped it firmly and moved her hand up and down while sucking the satiny head into her mouth. She hadn't given a blowjob since her brief relationship with Nathan a couple of years ago. It seemed her body remembered sex—the movements and feelings associated with it—much better than she could remember Nathan's face at this point. It was kind of sad that he'd left so little impression on her.

Sam's hands entwined in her hair, holding her head steady as he thrust into her mouth. "That feels so good," he whispered. "I didn't know how good it would be."

She was touched by his awed tone and at the realization that he was, to all intents, a virgin. The knowledge gave her a sense of power. She wanted to make this experience powerful enough to make him shout when he came. Slipping her mouth from his cock, she moved lower and licked his balls, tasting the salt of sweat, smelling the animal scent of a man. Grazing her finger over the sensitive strip between balls and anus made Sam suck in his breath sharply. She scratched him there lightly then circled her finger around the puckered hole, making it contract. He breathed out raggedly and his fingers tightened on her scalp. She sucked his balls into her mouth gently, first one then the other.

He gave a guttural groan and thrust toward her mouth then back onto her finger that lightly probed his body now.

After several moments of tonguing his balls and fucking his anus with just the tip of her finger, she pulled away and looked up. "You like that?"

"Oh, yes," he moaned, stroking her hair back from her face. "Wonderful!"

Marie smiled and took his dick in her hand again. She drew it back into her mouth and resumed sucking, harder now, grasping his shaft with a tight grip and moving her fist briskly to bring him to climax.

Helpless against the force of her will, he thrust his hips, filling her mouth deeply with each push. The pace increased and his control slipped as he held her head between his hands and fucked her mouth. His unbridled desire as he plunged into her again and again was exciting. Marie used her teeth to keep him from going too deep and making her gag. He hissed when they scraped his cock. The pain added the extra push he needed to take him over the edge. He came with a hoarse cry, throwing back his head and pumping into her mouth.

She felt more than tasted the burst of warmth at the back of her throat and swallowed it down. Her jaw ached and her knees were sore from kneeling on the hard floor, but she felt a thrill of exultation at the results of her work. Sam was so overwhelmed his thighs trembled and his knees threatened to buckle. She released his penis and put her hands at his hips to steady him.

He breathed raggedly as he recovered from his powerful orgasm. "Thank you," he gasped, breathlessly. His eyes opened and he gazed at her with an expression of profound gratitude bordering on adoration, combing his fingers through her hair then caressing her upturned face. Sinking down to his knees in front of her, he gathered her into his arms and held her close.

"My pleasure." Marie smiled and pressed her mouth to his shoulder, reveling in being enfolded in a lover's embrace for the first time in a very long time. She buried her nose into his warm skin and breathed him in.

They clung together for several long moments then Sam rose, took her by the hand and pulled her to her feet. He scooped her into his arms, one arm around her back, the other behind her knees, lifting her as if she didn't weigh anything. "I'm the one who should be doing things to you. This is *your* night. Where shall I take you?"

She rested her head against his shoulder, wrapped her arms around his neck, and clung tight. "Upstairs. My bedroom is on the right." With her bare feet dangling over his arm, Marie felt like a little girl. It was sweet and comforting to be carried like this. She was intimately aware of the side of her bare breast sliding against his chest. Each delicate touch sent waves of desire coursing through her. She was still wearing her sweatpants and panties, and couldn't wait to shed them and be completely naked.

Sam carried her up the steps, his weight making the third from the top creak loudly as it always did. She needed to fix that one of these days, which she'd been telling herself for five years. As he carried her through the doorway into her bedroom, she reached out to the wall and flipped the light switch. The orange glow of her bedside lamp bathed the room, which she'd decorated in shades of dull red and earthy brown. The warm colors made the room seem cozier on this suddenly blustery night. Wind rattled the windowpanes and a spatter of rain drove against the glass.

"So this is where you sleep." He laid her down on the antique coverlet. "I've thought of you at night, wondered what you were doing when you weren't with me."

Marie's curiosity was piqued. "You thought of me? You were aware—before tonight?"

"Aware?" He looked thoughtful. "Yes. I recognized you. There was a ... consciousness of the world around me, but now there's so much more. Here. Inside me." He rested a hand on his chest and he frowned as though trying to understand it himself.

She tried to picture the rudimentary feelings he might have had and what it would be like to have those budding thoughts burst into full bloom, complex and colorful. "Why did it take so long, I mean, between my making the wish and you showing up at my door?"

"You asked for a night. That's what we have." Sitting beside her, his weight dragging the mattress down, he brushed the hair back from her forehead. Stroking her face, he gazed into her eyes and brought her hand up to his lips. He kissed it then pressed it over his thumping heart. "Feel my heart? It's bursting for you." The sappy words spoken with complete sincerity, sounded utterly earnest and true coming from him.

Marie smiled.

He put her hand down and reached for the waistband of her sweats, tugging them down her hips along with her panties.

She lifted her ass so he could slide them off her. Lying before him naked, she resisted the urge to cover her sex and hide it from him.

His eyes feasted on her body, exploring every inch of it, the expression in them making her feel beautiful. He touched her all over, stroking her hair, cupping her face in his palms then touching her eyelids, nose, cheekbones and lips with his fingers. He smoothed his hands down her neck to her chest and breasts, fondling her tits lightly before moving on down her belly. It twitched as his fingers skated over it, and Marie anticipated his touch on her eagerly waiting pussy.

His hands lingered, dipping into her navel then toying with the dark triangle of curls at the apex of her thighs. His fingers skated around the edge of her pubis and fluffed through the hair, coming close to the sensitive bud of her clit but not touching it.

She shivered in anticipation. His delay tactic heightened her senses until she wanted to scream at him to touch her already.

He ran his hands down her smooth legs all the way to her feet, scooting back on the bed so he could reach them. Picking one up, he wiggled each toe then ran his fingernail up her arch, firing her nerve endings and making her squirm and shriek with laughter. “Stop!”

“They’re so perfect and small.” He kissed her foot and sucked on each toe, slowly, thoughtfully, and excruciatingly.

She forgot to breathe as his mouth tenderly made love to her foot. She’d never really thought of her foot as an erogenous zone, but the fire radiating from his heated mouth, through her toes and up her leg directly to her loins, convinced her otherwise.

By the time he’d kissed, licked and sucked every square inch of one foot, her body was bathed in sweat and shaking. Then he turned his attention to the other one, giving it the same erotic treatment.

Marie moaned and writhed, her pussy flushed with desire and leaking cream onto her sheets. “Oh, my God. You have to stop! I’m going to come like this if you don’t.”

He smiled and kissed her instep once more before setting her foot back on the bed. She collapsed against the mattress, quivering with need. At long last, he nudged her legs wide apart and knelt between them. Gazing at her pussy spread open before him, he appeared as entranced as a child presented with an amazing toy.

Marie wondered how Sam knew what to do with her body. How had he known how to bring her to the edge of orgasm merely by stimulating her feet? What other kinds of knowledge had been poured into his newly created brain—only erotic information or other things as well? She pushed from her mind the more salient question of exactly how he had become a sentient being.

After gazing at her pink folds and dark crevasse for several long moments, Sam leaned down between her legs, separated her labia and kissed her pussy. He dipped his tongue inside her yawning opening, sampling her juices, then swept it achingly slowly up to her clitoris.

She gasped. Her stomach muscles twitched and her thighs tensed as his tongue swirled around the sensitive nerve bundle. It felt so much better than what she did with her finger or the tip of her vibrator. A soft, needy sound purred in her throat.

Stopping to look up at her with those dark, almond eyes, he grinned smugly. He might be a freshly minted man but he had a typical male's ego about his ability to light her fire. He licked all around her clit without touching it, refusing to give what she so desperately desired. He moved farther down instead, bathing her labia and slipping his tongue deep inside her again.

She writhed beneath him and finally begged, "Please!"

Then he moved his mouth up to her erect bud, teasing and tickling it delicately then lapping over it hard. His tongue was so wet and hot. After he'd licked her clit for several strokes, he nipped it sharply with his teeth.

Marie cried out and jerked, a powerful jolt of electricity shooting through her body from the point of contact. She thrust against his nuzzling mouth. Energy sparks shot through her nerve endings, awakening every inch of her body, as he licked her over and over with broad, flat strokes of his tongue. She tingled with escalating desire that slowly coiled inside her until it filled her whole being.

Finally she could contain it no longer and the rising force detonated like a bomb. She came with a primal wail that made her glad she had no neighbors to hear her. Glorious light flashed behind her closed eyelids. Her torso arched off the bed and she felt she was flying, weightless and free—flying then free-falling back to the bed with a bump.

She gasped a wordless exhale and her body twitched through shimmering waves of aftershocks. She was dimly aware of Sam kissing her thighs, her stomach and gently petting her like she was a shivering horse that needed calming. When she finally opened her eyes and looked down at him, his chin rested on her belly and he gazed up at her with a satisfied smile.

"Still think I'm useless?" he asked.

Her mind was blank for a moment then recalled her comment earlier in the day spoken to an inanimate scarecrow. She smiled at him sheepishly. "No. Not useless at all."

Crawling up her body, he lay beside her, head propped on one hand. He bent to kiss her mouth, and she tasted herself on his tongue. After several deep kisses, he drew back to look into her face once more, examining every feature as though memorizing her. Down below she could feel his cock stiffening again, pressing into her thigh, hard and eager.

Sam traced a hand over her forehead, her upturned nose and firm chin. He touched the sharp line of her cheekbone and the soft curve of her cheek. Then he ran his thumb over her lips. "So beautiful," he murmured under his breath, "and softer than I ever imagined."

Her mouth opened automatically under his touch and her tongue tasted the salt of his skin. His hand was real. His caressing thumb was real. He was so *real*.

She had another of those moments where her logical mind slammed into place telling her this was impossible. There had to be a reasonable explanation for this man. Magical, fantasy lovers did not exist. Her first assumption had been right and he was some vagrant who had simply borrowed the clothes hanging in her field ... and she had taken him into her bed!

"Are you really..."

"Sh!" Sam laid his finger over her lips. "Don't." He shook his head and bent to kiss her. "I'm here now. That's all that matters." He covered her mouth with his then moved his lips along the line of her jaw and nibbled her ear lobe. He licked the soft skin just

beneath it.

Laughing, she clamped her cheek to her shoulder to stop him. "It tickles."

He growled and tried to burrow past her defenses to attack her vulnerable neck.

She shrieked and wiggled, pushing him away. "Stop!"

Abandoning her neck, he kissed his way down to her chest and her breasts again. After sucking at each nipple for several moments, he pulled back to gaze at them and fondle them. "I love these."

She smiled at his reverent tone. "They love you back." She put her hands on his shoulders and tugged. "Come here now."

He moved back up her body, lying on top of her this time. His penis nudged insistently at her pussy seeking entrance, nestling in the groove of her crotch and brushing against her over-stimulated clitoris. She wiggled and gasped at the contact. Reaching down between them, she grasped his thick shaft and guided it to her opening.

"Ohhh." Sam gave a protracted sigh of fulfillment as he entered her with one strong thrust and was enveloped in her heat.

Marie moaned at the sensation as the lips of her vagina stretched to accommodate his girth. The warmth and vitality of a pulsing, living cock entering her body was wonderful after a long drought without a real man. It had been over a year since she'd had anything except her vibrator inside her. "Oh yes," she breathed, arching her hips to meet his deep thrust.

He pulled out very slowly, hissing at the friction on his sensitive skin. Then, staring down into her eyes, he pushed into her once more, gliding on the lubrication of her soaking wet channel.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and drew him in at a new, better angle. She stroked his wonderfully hard, smooth back, cupped the swell of his ass and pulled him tight into her.

For a few seconds, he simply stayed inside her while her muscles clenched around him, holding him fast. He moved slightly from side to side, stimulating the lips of her pussy surrounding his shaft. Finally he withdrew almost his entire length before repeating the long, aching slide back into her depths.

Marie lost track of time as he continued the languorous pace of his lovemaking. With controlled thrusts he filled her again and again, slow, sure and steady, hitting a spot deep inside that started a glow of fire pulsing in her very core. She was dimly aware of the howling wind outside and the rain dashing against her windowpane. Sometimes the glass rattled in the frame from the gusts, but in the soft nest of her bed, in the warm glow of the lamplight, she and her lover were safe and complete in their circle of two.

Arching to meet every stroke, she gazed into Sam's angular face. His black eyes glittered beneath half-closed lids. His mouth was slightly open and his chest rose and fell as he breathed heavily in time with his thrusting hips. *Breathing. He's actually breathing*, she marveled.

Gradually, his motion increased and the lazy rhythm became more urgent. He drove into her with an intensity that made him grunt and was almost painful for her as it struck that sensitive spot deep inside. She gasped and clenched around him, then relaxed and gave in to the new, harder sensation.

The sound of his manly grunts thrilled her on a primitive level. She groaned in response, eyes closing as she gave herself completely into his control. Again she felt the

slow unfurling incited by the pressure of his cock deep inside her. He hit the right spot over and over and her excitement mounted.

"Oh, God!" She clutched his sweaty shoulders, digging in her nails. Arching into him, she came once more, the roller coaster seizing and plunging her on a dizzying ride. She gasped and cried out as ecstasy burst through her. At almost the same moment, Sam came, his harsh cry a deep, reverberating counterpoint to her high wail. His cock pulsed and released.

Her body clutched and held it fast and her arms and legs grappled him to her as if she would hold onto him forever. For a fleeting moment they were as one being, joined in more than a physical communion.

He collapsed on top of her, breathing heavily, his weight pinning her to the mattress.

She continued to hold him until their breathing had slowed and steadied. Then he rolled off to lie beside her and they rested together in contented silence, gazing at shadows on the ceiling, listening to the wind.

Marie turned toward him, an arm flung over him and her head pressed to his sweat-slicked chest. She listened to his steady heartbeat, an echo of the drumming rain on the roof. She idly traced her finger in concentric circles around his areola.

He shivered at her tickling touch.

"I've been so lonely for such a long time," she confided. "I've met men, gone out on dates, but there's just no one who..." She trailed off, uncertain how to finish the sentence. *Interests me, excites me, touches me, completes me?* "Is perfect. Tonight has been just what I dreamed about. You're exactly who I wanted."

"Real men aren't perfect. You mustn't expect them to be," he warned her.

"I know that. Perfection would be boring. I want someone to challenge me, even fight with me sometimes. But I also want someone who understands me, who really knows me." Although she'd spent so little time with him, she felt she'd found the connection she'd been searching for. It didn't make sense. They'd barely spoken, but she already knew *who* Sam was. There was something between them that transcended words or physical attraction.

"I know you, everything about you," he whispered, touching his lips to her hair.

"And I understand what you want and need. But this can't last."

"Why?" She sighed. It already felt like a dream even as he held her close in his arms. "How long..."

"Sometime before sunrise."

"What if I stay awake?" She rolled onto her stomach and regarded him, folded arms resting on top of his chest. "What if we make love right through 'til morning? Maybe then you could stay."

He smiled but it didn't touch his mournful eyes. He stroked her cheek and avoided her questions. "We still have time. Is there any special fantasy or desire you want fulfilled?"

Suddenly all the wild, erotic daydreams Marie had spun and embroidered with lusty detail seemed superfluous. "No, nothing special. Just talk to me and then make love to me again."

"All right." He lifted his head from the pillow and kissed her. "Tell me, have you considered planting flowers in the southwest field? You can earn more selling flowers than produce these days."

Marie laughed at the unexpected, random comment. “We’re talking farming? That’s not exactly what I had in mind. Besides, how do you know what sells? What do you know of the world? Your experience is kind of limited.”

“I know everything, you know.” A cocky smile curved his lips and his eyes sparkled. “And a hell of a lot more.”

“Oh, really?” She raised an eyebrow. “What’s the capital of, uh, South Dakota?”

“Pierre.” He answered promptly, surprising her since she didn’t know the answer. “What’s my favorite color?”

“Blue.” She named her own favorite, thinking it was a safe bet.

“Wrong. It’s green. I have opinions, you know. I’m not a reflection of you.”

Where had his knowledge come from? What force had created and given him elements all his own, beyond the qualities she’d imagined for him?

“All right.” Marie sat up cross-legged and pulled the sheet around her naked shoulders against the slight chill in the room. “So, you think you know everything I know; what was the name of my favorite doll when I was little?”

“Patty. She had long brown hair until you cut it. By the time you retired her to the memory box in the attic there were only patches and tufts of hair left and one of her eyes was stuck open.” He grinned smugly. “She’s still packed away up there now.”

Her eyes widened. “Now that’s just scary.” Actually it was kind of sweet that he knew that kind of personal detail about her, even if some magical force had fed him the information.

One of his hands stole under the sheet and up the inside of her bare leg. “I have another question for you. How do I prefer sex, top or bottom?” His eyes closed partway in a seductive glance.

She laughed at the unexpected question. He’d seemed content with her taking the lead at first so she thought maybe he liked her astride him. Then she remembered how confident he’d been moving on top of her only a few moments before. “On top. You like to be in control.”

He shook his head. “Wrong. The answer is either. Both. From behind. Kneeling. Sitting. Standing. Up against the wall. On a table. In a tree.” He lowered his voice to a velvety growl. “Anyway at all, as long as it’s with you.”

Considering he was only created to please her it didn’t mean a lot and yet the compliment sent a thrill through her. “A tree, huh? I’d like to try that.”

“We can go outside right now if you want. But it’s a little wet.” He smiled at the understatement. Rain was still lashing against the windowpanes.

“How about on the dining room table then,” she said huskily. “I can make us something to eat first and then you can sweep the dishes off the table and have your way with me.”

“Sounds like a plan, as long as you do the cleaning up afterward. Or...” His fingers slid all the way up her thigh underneath the sheet and tickled her still throbbing pussy, bringing on a new wave of lust. “We could stay right here. I like being in your bed.”

“I like having you in my bed.” In fact, she wished they could stay here forever, in this precious moment of this particular night with the pouring rain making their cocoon seem all the more cozy.

Then Sam’s stomach rumbled loudly, breaking the silence. “The kitchen it is,” she said. “I’ll make us an omelet and we’ll see what happens after our strength is built up

again.”

He rested a hand on his flat stomach as though pressing back the growling beast inside. He gazed down at it. “What an odd feeling. Empty and wanting... Kind of like the way I feel when I look at you. How strange a human body is.”

“What was it like ... before?” Marie asked as she got an oversized T-shirt from her dresser and slipped it on. “What did you feel when you were in the field?”

He rose and stood by the bed, hugely naked and gorgeous, filling her small room with his larger than life presence. “Sun. Wind. Rain. Daylight. Nighttime. The sky. The fields around me. The blackbirds that landed on the corn. The field mouse that lived in my boot. And you, sitting nearby sometimes or moving through the field picking pumpkins. That was what my life was.”

She paused with one arm in her sleeve, awestruck by his brief recitation. “How did it feel? I mean, did you feel emotions, desires, what?”

He crossed the room toward her, shaking his head. “No. Not in the way you’re thinking. I was an observer, but with no reaction to the world around me. I felt ... very little.” His eyes narrowed as he gazed at her, as though trying to fathom the mystery of his own being. “Except when I saw you. Then sometimes I would feel vague stirrings, curiosity about what you did when you weren’t in the field, an unfocused, yearning that was beyond my comprehension.”

Her heart sped at the knowledge that what she’d seen as a bundle of rags and straw had possessed the rudimentary elements of a sentient being. It was disconcerting, creepy, and also strangely sexy—that even in that state he’d had a primitive lust for her. “And after?” she asked. “After I made the wish?”

His broad smile turned the harsh, seriousness of his angular face to an expression of boyish delight. “The difference between a faded black and white movie and Technicolor. Life pulsed through me, waking every body part then unfurling in my mind. With every minute that passed, I understood more and felt amazing things. Emotions!” He shook his head and pressed a hand to his chest. “The depth of passion a human being is capable of is a more powerful force than anything in this world. It hurts, it’s so strong.”

Marie exhaled the breath she’d been holding and nodded. “I’d never felt it before tonight. Not ever. Not really.” She thought of the pale imitation of emotion she’d felt toward the men she’d dated throughout her life. “Now I feel like I’ve gone from black and white to color, too.”

It was impossible to imagine resuming her previous bland life. And relegating Sam back to a primitive figure on a pole stuck in a field was criminal. “What do I have to do to keep you here?” she asked him. “Anything. I’ll do it.”

Shaking his head, he grasped her hand and pulled her into his arms, bending his head to kiss her. Afterward, he pressed his forehead to hers and gazed into her eyes up close. “For now ... make me an omelet.”

Laughter bubbled through her, momentarily dispelling the heaviness in the air. She led the way downstairs to the kitchen and got the ingredients they needed from the fridge. After setting Sam to work dicing onions, tomatoes and peppers, she got out the skillet and greased it, then whisked a bowl full of eggs.

He looked up at her, eyes streaming from the onion, as he passed her the plateful of diced vegetables. “Some parts of being human are not so fun,” he commented, wiping the tears away.

“Ooh, poor baby. I should’ve let you beat the eggs.” She stood on her toes and kissed his wet cheek. “My bad.”

With a growl, he tucked an arm around her and pulled her against him. Although Marie wore a T-shirt, he’d chosen to cook naked and his erect cock pressed insistently against her belly. He took possession of her mouth once more, kissing her deeply, his hands roaming her back then gripping her naked buttocks under the hem of her shirt, pressing her harder against his length. When he released her mouth, he muttered gruffly, “Fuck the omelet. Let’s fuck.”

A quiver of lust stabbed through her at the rough words, but she smelled the smoking grease on the griddle and pushed him firmly from her. “Cook first. Sex after.” Although she knew their time together was limited, part of her fantasy included domestic companionship. Her desire wasn’t just for a nightlong fuck-fest.

She sautéed the vegetables, and Sam added the egg and grated cheese. Soon the fragrant meal was ready and on a pair of plates along with buttered toast. It was the perfect simple yet filling meal for a blustery night. As they sat at the kitchen table, Marie thought she could get used to eating her meals across from a powerfully built, bare-chested man, who looked at her like he’d rather eat her than his food. She’d read about eyes “glittering” but hadn’t seen it until tonight. It was as if there were shards of diamonds in those black depths twinkling at her. For a moment, she could hardly swallow her mouthful of food past the tightness in her throat.

Then his attention left her as he took his first bite of the omelet. His eyes closed and an expression of bliss suffused his features. “This is amazing! So good!” He groaned, the same ecstatic sound he’d made during sex.

Marie smiled and tasted the omelet as if eating for the first time ever. Food really was a profoundly moving experience. Just wait until she fed him chocolate—maybe drizzled over her body.

He stopped talking then, diving into the gourmet feast they’d created and demolishing it, only pausing to give a grunt of approval when he sipped the glass of orange juice she’d poured for him. When he was finished, he set his fork across his plate, suppressed a contented burp and leaned back in his chair with a sigh. “Wonderful!”

“Glad you liked it.” Her own plate was only half empty, but she wasn’t hungry. The press of time weighed heavily on her. She could feel the minutes slipping away. Rising, she picked up her plate and reached for his to carry them to the kitchen.

He grabbed her wrist, stopping her. “Wait a minute. I believe you mentioned a fantasy involving sweeping the table clear and shagging like minks on top of it.” Before she could protest or save her dishes. He rose to his feet, towering over her and wresting her plate from her hand. Taking her fantasy quite literally, he pushed the plates and glasses, the salt and pepper shakers and the napkin holder onto the floor. They fell with a clatter. Luckily the glasses were plastic rather than actual glass and were empty. The napkins showered across the floor in a white drift.

Marie’s stomach leaped at the brutish display as he grabbed her waist and hoisted her naked bottom up onto the table. He yanked her T-shirt over her head in one swift move and tossed it aside then stepped between her legs, grabbing her thighs and pulling her into a fierce embrace.

“Oh!” was all she had time to gasp before he covered her mouth with his, kissing her as hungrily as if he hadn’t just eaten. His tongue plunged into her mouth, colliding with

hers. He tasted salty and sweet, savory from the omelet and tangy from the orange juice. She slipped her hands up his hard chest and hooked them around his neck. Tilting her head back, she allowed him to ravage her mouth with his hard, demanding kisses.

She was breathless and disoriented as his body pressed her backward onto the table, his hand supporting the back of her neck until he had her laid out flat. He climbed on top of the table and on her, pinning her to the hard surface with his hulking body. The table creaked and Marie spared a thought for the ancient legs which might not have been built to support two bodies screwing on the tabletop. Then Sam reached between their bodies to touch her clit and delve his fingers into her pussy, and she stopped worrying about the table collapsing. He remained awkwardly supported on one arm while his fingers did amazing things to her crotch, tickling, stroking, rubbing and pinching.

She moaned, writhing beneath him as he brought her to the edge of coming. Soon her body was slippery wet and wide open for him. Her sex throbbed with her heartbeats, clenching and releasing rhythmically. He guided the head of his cock to her entrance and drove inside. The force of his thrust rocked her, pushing her across the tabletop an inch or two and rumpling the cloth beneath her.

He pulled out and thrust again with a grunt.

Marie pulled her legs up, bracing her heels on the table and holding onto his bulky shoulders as he plowed into her a third time. The old, wooden table shrieked at the onslaught. Marie thought she might scream too, it felt so good. His cock was long and thick, perfectly proportioned with his big body, and filled her so well and so deeply it was like finding a missing part of herself. She imagined a satisfying click as two jigsaw pieces fit together.

In. Out. Sam thrust over and over, not slowly and carefully as he'd done earlier, but with a callous roughness that raised an answering excitement in her. She whined and lifted her hips to meet him. As he pummeled into her with abandon, the gathering clouds inside her piled one on top of another like a thunderhead building. Lightning flashed, thunder rolled through her, then... Boom! The storm broke and rain washed down from her inner sky in sheets.

Marie groaned and bucked up, her eyes rolling back in her head at the force of her coming. Incited by her orgasmic rapture, Sam thrust once more, driving her backward so that her head slipped over the edge of the table, then he froze, caught in his own thunderstorm. A low throaty growl that sounded like thunder tore from his chest as he released into her.

Marie panted for breath and clung to his sweating shoulders. She let her head fall back and it drooped over the edge of the table. Eyelids flickering open, she noted what her kitchen looked like upside down. "Whew!" she gasped, drawing in a breath while his heavy body lying on her chest tried to force all the air out of her lungs.

"Grr." He grunted, climbing off her and the table, which gave a last groan of protest. He offered his hand and helped her to her feet, then hugged her to him. For a moment, the pair of them stood, swaying slightly, as they regained their equilibrium.

Sam cast a glance at the floor where the scattered remains of dinner was strewn among a snowfall of napkins. "Remember the part where you promised to clean up afterward if I took you on the table?"

She laughed and turned her face to his chest to nip his pectoral—such a massive muscle, such a hard, beaded nipple. "Help me clean up or I'll deny you access to my

body for the rest of the night.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Together they tidied the kitchen, stacking the dishes in the sink. Then Marie grabbed a bottle of wine and two glasses and led him upstairs to her bedroom again. They climbed under the covers with pillows plumped behind their backs, and sat side by side, drinking wine and talking about every subject that crossed their minds. Sam seemed to know a bit about a wide variety of topics. For example, although he’d never tasted wine, he had the implanted knowledge of a connoisseur. He savored a sip from his glass and pronounced it full-bodied and rich, an earthy, elemental bouquet.

“What else would you like to do?” he asked after a while, setting his empty glass on the nightstand. “I could give you a full body massage, temples to toenails. I could bathe you and wash your hair. Tie you to the bed and tease you ’til you beg for mercy. Smear you with honey and lap it up. Whatever desire your mind can conjure up, I’d be happy to fulfill.”

His offer alone, spoken in a matter-of-fact rather than submissive tone, was enough to set Marie’s flesh prickling again. The idea of having a six-foot-something mountain of muscles at her command was thrilling, and all of his suggestions sounded wonderful. But, as she glanced at the clock and saw they’d talked until nearly two-thirty in the morning, Marie realized she’d rather simply be held in his strong arms.

“Can we just cuddle and talk some more?”

“Of course.” He moved down under the covers, laying his pillow flat and resting his head on it. He stretched luxuriously and yawned until his jaw cracked. “This bed is so soft and comfortable. It’s a wonder you can ever get out of it in the morning.”

Morning. The word struck like a bell tolling doom. A few more hours and the sun would rise. It was impossible to imagine Sam diminishing from vibrant life to an inert mannequin again. She lay down too, and reached out a hand to touch his hard chest. His heart thumped faithfully, steadily behind his breastbone, as if it would never slow or stop.

Marie blinked stinging tears from her eyes and rolled over on her side. His big arm came around her and pulled her back against him. His hot breath blew against her neck. “Comfortable?”

She nodded, too upset to speak.

“Are you all right?” He pushed up on one arm and leaned over her shoulder to see her face. He wiped a trickling tear from her cheek with his finger. “Crying? What’s the matter? Is there something I didn’t do to please you? Whatever you want, whatever you need to make you happy, please, tell me. That’s what I’m here for.” His voice was low and anxious.

She shook her head and, to her annoyance, began crying harder. “No.” The word came out choked and thick. She cleared her throat and fought her voice under control. “There’s nothing you can do—unless you can figure out a way to stay.”

“Shh. Shh,” he crooned, rubbing his hand up and down her arm. “Don’t think about it. Sunrise is hours away. Just rest, relax, sleep a little and I’ll hold you.” He pressed his lips to her shoulder.

“Don’t want to sleep,” she snuffled. “Then it will be over even sooner.”

He pulled her hair aside and kissed her cheek, her temple, the corner of her mouth. He nuzzled her jaw and the soft spot behind her ear, all the while crooning comforting words. “It will be all right. Don’t cry. I love you.”

His hand caressed her tit then cupped it in his warm hand. He held her close against the solid wall of his chest and stomach, his legs wrapped around hers, and nestled between her buttocks—the heavy, solid weight of his cock. It stirred and he rubbed it along her groove, tickling over her anus, setting her pussy lips quivering again.

Marie smiled through her tears and shook her head. “You’re insatiable! How can you possibly get it up again? You’re not human.” The moment the words were out of her mouth she remembered their truth.

“Human enough for this,” he murmured, nipping her earlobe. He reached between her legs to test her readiness and she was already creaming for him. Grasping his cock, he slipped it inside her once more. “Don’t think now. Just feel. Enjoy this moment.”

“I won’t let you go,” Marie said fiercely. “Keep making love to me and it won’t end.”

He pulled out slowly and pressed into her just as slowly, over and over, filling her then pulling back like a tide rising and receding from the shore. Reaching over her hip, he rubbed her clit with a soft, circular motion, applying just enough pressure to keep her on edge—not enough to push her over. When he finally gave her that last little nudge, she came with a soft, whimpering moan and let go of her tension with a sigh. He drove into her once more, deeply, and shuddered against her with a contented sigh.

“Love you,” he whispered near her ear, and it sounded like the breeze rustling through dry corn stalks.

They lay in drowsy comfort afterward, wrapped in a cocoon of blankets, enfolded in one another’s arms. Lulled by the warmth of his body and his beating heart, Marie relinquished consciousness and drifted into deep, dreamless sleep.

* * * *

When she woke, she was alone in the bed. Pale gray, pre-dawn light shone in the window. She sat bolt upright. Her hand swept over the depression in the bed next to her, feeling for residual body heat, but there was none. She jumped out of bed, tugged on a T-shirt and jeans and raced downstairs and out the front door.

The storm had stopped and the ground was muddy, the grass wet and cold on her bare feet. She ran around the side of the house and her gaze went straight to the scarecrow post in the pumpkin field. Her stuffed mannequin was back in place. It hung exactly as she had left it yesterday afternoon. The clothes were sodden and sagging from last night’s downpour, the brim of the fedora dripping raindrops. The sleeves of the coat flapped slightly and the whole mannequin shifted slightly on its pole in the stiff breeze, creating the illusion of residual life.

Marie ran to the scarecrow and clutched the soggy coat. She thumped her hand against the figure’s straw-filled chest. “No!” Throwing her arms around its legs, she pressed her face into the pants. They smelled like musty, wet straw. The rough material scraped her cheek. The front of her T-shirt quickly soaked through. Hoarse sobs wracked her body. “No.” She cried out her anger and frustration, then, still clutching the fabric of its pants, stepped back to stare up at the cloth mannequin.

The scarecrow’s crude face stared impassively down at her.

Her heart broke and anger was replaced by hopeless despair. “Please. Please bring him back.” She prayed to the nameless power that had brought her lover to life. “Please, please...” As she sank down on her knees in the mud at the base of the pole, her mind

dissolved into wordless begging. She remained there for a long time in a near trance, crying and pleading, her forehead bowed to her knees.

When she finally came back to herself, her hands and feet were freezing. She raised her face to the morning sun and its rays blinded her. Rising stiffly to her feet, she rubbed a hand over her eyes. She gazed around the pastoral landscape and back to the stuffed mannequin. It was still, not even the breeze stirring its lifeless form.

The events of the previous night seemed preposterous. She was awake now and in control of her fevered emotions. Whatever had transpired, or she had dreamed, was past. Her one perfect night was over.

She turned her back on the scarecrow and walked toward the house.

* * * *

The bright leaves of October changed to brown then cold winds stripped the trees bare, leaving black branches like jagged bones against the sky. Like a faded photograph, all color was leached out of Marie's world and she sleepwalked through her days. She harvested the last of her crops, stripping the earth then plowing it under to lie dormant until spring. Soon the land would be lifeless, blanketed in white. But eventually a new season would come and fresh green would spread across the fields in the yearly affirmation of life. Too bad her heart couldn't recover so easily. It was a lump of ice and she didn't think it could ever thaw.

Almost a month passed during which she did nothing but work, eat and sleep. During the day she could almost convince herself that the whole encounter with Sam had been some kind of hyper-real fantasy brought on by too much time alone and a way too active an imagination, but in her bed at night she knew that wasn't true. She could feel the impression of his body on her skin. Closing her eyes she could smell and taste him and remember how his muscles felt beneath her hands. Most nights ended with her hand between her thighs giving herself comfort, tears wetting her cheeks afterward as she cried herself to sleep.

She went out to the field one day to take down the scarecrow for winter as she normally would this time of year, but she couldn't bring herself to touch it. She stared dry-eyed into the marker-scrawled face for a full fifteen minutes before turning away.

One afternoon in late November, the phone rang. "Marie, I know you're there. Pick up! I haven't spoken to you in over a month. This is getting ridiculous... All right. Fine. Don't answer, but I'm coming out there this evening. Bob's old college friend, Marcus is visiting and you're going out with him. That's right, it's the dreaded blind, double date. Don't argue, just get dressed and we'll pick you up at 7:00 for dinner. Don't panic. You're not signing your life away. It's just a date. Remember those?"

Marie sighed. She couldn't put Linda off forever and it sounded like her friend wasn't going to give her much choice. Besides, she couldn't hole up in her house like a hermit the rest of her life. It was time to go out with friends again, to try to date again, to move forward instead of treading water. She needed to make herself some kind of a life, even if it wasn't with the man of her dreams.

She picked up the phone and called back to say she'd be expecting them.

* * * *

The evening was everything Marie had expected from a blind date. It was awkward, strained and more long than fun. She asked Marcus about his life and his career, but while he explained the details of his marketing job and told several work-related stories, she zoned out, mentally giggling at the idea of “Marcus from Marketing.” The guy seemed nice. She was sure if she bothered to get to know him, he would be, but he wasn’t what she wanted. She knew what she wanted and could never have again.

Marie smiled, nodded and commented at all the right places in the conversation, but when she and Linda went to the restroom, her friend smacked her in the arm and said, “What’s up with you? You look like somebody ran over your dog.”

“I’ve just been a little ... depressed lately.”

“Well, get a prescription and snap out of it. You’re scaring me a little.”

“I’m trying. Give me a break.” Marie faced the mirror and applied fresh lipstick so she wouldn’t have to look at Linda.

But her friend was like a hound on a scent. “There’s something going on here. I know the usual brand of melancholy Marie and this isn’t it. What happened?”

Marie shrugged. She was a horrible liar and knew it. Better to keep her mouth closed.

Linda’s eyes widened. “A guy! You met somebody and didn’t tell me? Where? When? What happened? Did he break your heart?”

It was an impossible story. Marie distilled it down to the essence. “It was a one-night stand. I hoped it could be more but ... it couldn’t.”

“Wow, he must have been really good to get *you* so worked up. In all the years I’ve known you I’ve never seen you really crush on a guy. Why didn’t it work out?”

Marie shook her head and checked her eyeliner.

“Did he turn out to be a real prick?” Linda leaned back against the sink, arms folded, watching Marie. “Why couldn’t something come of that one-nighter?”

“No, he wasn’t a prick. He was wonderful, but it wasn’t meant to be.”

“‘Meant to be?’ Fuck that. It’s such a cliché. If, at long last, you’ve finally found someone you want, you have to do something about it. That’s always been your problem, Marie. You sit around and wait for things to happen to you. Stop living in limbo. For God’s sake, *make* something happen for a change!”

“How?” Marie couldn’t explain the impossibility of her situation.

“There’s always a way. Now that’s one cliché I believe in. That and ‘a bird in the hand...’ You’ve got to prove that lightning does strike twice. Contact the guy. Make it happen again. *Carpe diem* and all that.”

“For someone who doesn’t believe in clichés, you sure like to spout them.” Marie snapped her purse closed.

“Look, we’ll cut this evening short,” Linda said, pushing off from the sink. “I can tell you’re having a miserable time. We’ll get you home and on the phone to this guy, pronto. Okay? Make it happen!”

Marie smiled, overwhelmed by her friend’s enthusiasm. “Okay.”

At the very least, she was getting early parole from an unwanted blind date.

* * * *

Marie thanked Marcus for the nice evening, apologized for bailing early and got out of the car. She stood on her front porch watching until the red taillights disappeared. She

repeated Linda's advice aloud. "Make it happen."

She went into the house, tossed her purse on the hall table and kicked off her shoes. *Make it happen.* She'd tried to convince herself for over a month that the whole experience had been a dream. It was ridiculous. The imprint of Sam's body on hers was too fresh, too real. It had happened and she'd be damned if she let such bliss slip away without protest.

She relived every moment of that magical night and for the thousandth time tried to figure out how Sam had been brought to life. What entity or elemental force had given her that gift? How and why had it happened? More importantly, how could she make it happen again?

"What do you need, huh? What do I have to do to win him back? Make a blood sacrifice?" she said aloud.

Seized with the thought of a sacrifice, she went to her computer. She searched online for All Hallows Eve and read everything she could about the ancient Celtic festival of *Samhain* when the souls of the dead mingled with the living.

On that day all manner of beings are abroad: ghosts, fairies, and demons—all part of the dark and dread.

She learned about the harvest spirits, also known as fairies, which had extra power on that night. There was folklore concerning witches transmogrifying people into animals and stories about deals with the devil but nowhere did she find anything that told how one could force a transformation. But she knew the druids were big on blood sacrifice and it seemed a likely offering.

Marie wasn't about to sacrifice an animal, let alone a human being, but she figured her own blood was hers to do with as she wished. She read up on druidic rituals, found an American Indian prayer to the spirits of earth for good measure then took a sharp paring knife from the kitchen and some dish towels to staunch the wounds afterward and went out to the field.

Kneeling in front of the scarecrow on the muddy earth and feeling like a complete asshole, she closed her eyes and fabricated a prayer. "Great Spirit, Faerie Queen, Pan, Earth Mother, whoever the hell granted my wish, I beseech thee. Please." She took the knife and made a careful cut across her palm. It hurt like hell and blood welled along the slice. She held her trembling hand toward the navy pants and smeared them with her blood. "Please, whatever higher power or elemental magic brought this being to life—do so again. Fix this!" She transferred the knife to her injured hand. It slipped in her blood-slicked palm. She grasped the handle tightly and cut into the flesh of her right palm, repeating the anointing of the scarecrow.

"I offer this blood sacrifice to earn my, uh ... boon. Please grant me this request. We only had one night. It wasn't enough. Please, please, please, give him back to me. I want a new life. I want to change."

She wrapped her stinging hands around the dummy's squishy legs, letting the blood seep into the fabric of its trousers, and continued to pray, plead and cry. She pressed her forehead against the scarecrow, squeezed her eyes tight shut and concentrated on believing in what she was asking for, believing anything was possible.

Whistling wind filled her ears. At first she didn't know if it was real or blood rushing from her head as she started to lose consciousness. "I believe. Come to me. I believe. Come to me," she repeated the phrases over and over like a mantra. There was a crash of

thunder and a lightning flash that glimmered even through her closed eyelids.

Marie opened her eyes, lifted her head and looked up at the bedraggled clothes hanging on the wooden frame. They moved and shifted in the unnatural wind, but underneath her gripping hands, the pants were still only stuffed with moldy straw.

"Please!" she yelled, her cry rising to the midnight sky. She called it aloud and then mentally repeated that single word until she passed into an exhausted trance.

Eventually she slipped into unconsciousness at the inanimate feet of the scarecrow and crumpled in a heap on the muddy ground.

* * * *

When the first rays of the sun touched her stiff, cold body, she shifted and woke. *Please* was her first waking thought and she realized she'd never stopped repeating it even in sleep. *Please, I don't want to search for a companion, a partner, my other half. I've already found him. Please.*

A muffled groan made her sit bolt upright and snap her head around. Lying on the ground near her was a man's naked body. She did a mental inventory; long and lean, tan skin, dark hair. He lay on his side with his back turned toward her in the same fetal position from which she had just uncurled.

Marie scrambled on all fours to him. She put a hand on his shoulder, rolling him onto his back in the dirt, leaving a bloody handprint on his arm. "Sam?"

He groaned and his eyelids flickered once before opening. He stared up at her blankly, blinking, struggling to focus.

"It's me. Marie. Something happened. You're alive! See!" She lifted his hand and brought it to his chest so he could feel the thumping of his heart.

His dark gaze wandered from her face to the rose and lavender sky arcing overhead. The sun breached the horizon and gold limned every frosted blade of grass around them. It was going to be a crisp, clear autumn day.

"I'm here," he rasped. He looked at the post. The old clothes still hung there but with no straw stuffing inside them.

"You're real again." She clung to his hands as though he might slip away. "Do you remember what happened?"

"No. I don't remember much of anything." His gaze traveled back to her and a warm smile curled his mouth. "Except last night in your bed. I remember every minute of that."

She didn't bother to correct his assumption that no time had passed. She scanned his naked body, drinking in the long, lean muscles from shoulders to feet, then returning to the exotic yet familiar features of his handsome face. "You must be freezing. Come on. I'll help you up. We need to get you inside."

She tugged on his hands, helping him to sit. When she winced slightly at the pain in her hands, his attention focused on them. He turned one of her hands palm upward and touched the crust of congealed blood along the cut.

Marie realized she'd never wrapped it as she'd intended.

"What happened?"

"I gave blood," she joked. "But I didn't get juice and a cookie. Instead I got you." She threw her arms around him and hugged him to her.

He buried his face in her neck, kissing it.

They clung together for several moments and she breathed in his scent, hot male with

a hint of straw.

"I remember now," he mumbled against her skin. "You were calling for me over and over. I heard you ... and then I woke up."

"Yes."

He pulled away from her and took her hand, once more tracing the line in her palm. "You gave part of yourself for me. A sacrifice."

"It wasn't much, only a little blood."

"But it binds us forever," he said quietly. "Like a vow."

Forever. She liked the sound of that.

He leaned in and kissed her. His mouth was soft and warm compared to his chilled skin.

Her eyes closed and she reveled in a kiss that seemed to go on forever. She clung to him and smoothed her aching hand up and down his back. She wanted to feel all of him, all at once, to touch him everywhere and verify his reality. She wanted to get him into her bed and warm his cold body with her own.

Marie broke free of the embrace, stood and helped Sam to his feet.

He seemed stiff and uncertain on his legs, and shifted from foot to foot, looking down at them as though unable to believe they were his.

She put an arm around his waist, resting a hand against his naked hip and together they staggered toward the house. Pausing on the front porch, she asked, "Are you ready for this? For life?"

"Definitely." He glanced sideways at her and grinned. He entered the doorway of her house.

Marie took one last look at the empty clothes hanging on the pole out in the dead pumpkin patch and at the brown, stubble field just beyond it. The land looked desolate now, but it would be green again in spring.

Things changed. Her life stretched out before her brimming with possibility—her land, her home, her man. Through her willpower, she had changed the pattern of her life and anything could happen next.

The End

About the Author:

Whether you're a fan of contemporary, paranormal or historical romance, you will find something to enjoy among my books. My style is down to earth and my characters feel like well-known friends by the time you've finished reading. If you're used to a strong alpha male in romances, don't expect it here. While my heroes are manly, they're not aggressively male. I'm interested in flawed, often damaged people who find the fulfillment they seek in one another. I live a quiet life with my family completely the opposite of my characters' adventurous lives. For more information go to <http://bonniedee.com>. You can contact me at bondav40@yahoo.com

Waking Kitty

Dionne Galace

Chapter One

“A sunken ship just appeared in the middle of a bar on 4th and B. Go!”

Jack Ridley hung up on his boss and crawled out from under the mountain of blankets and dirty clothes piled on top of him. Scratching his bare chest and yawning wide enough to crack his jaw, he slid down to the carpet. There was a crunching sound beneath him as he sat down and he pulled out the partially crushed beer can that was digging into his ass. He looked down at the cell phone on his hand and the display told him it was eight o'clock in the evening. He ran a hand down his face.

“Good going, Ridley. You slept right through Wednesday.” He braced a hand on the corner of his bedside table and pulled himself up, groaning as his bones creaked and popped with the exertion.

He stumbled into the bathroom, tripping on the empty pizza box and the hard plastic controller of his videogame console on the way. Ignoring the throbbing in his toe, he fumbled for the light switch on the bathroom wall and blinked at his reflection in the mirror above the sink as his eyes adjusted to the harsh glow of the fluorescent light. His red-rimmed, deep-seated eyes stared back blearily at him. There was a yellowing bruise under his left eye courtesy of a psycho who thought Jack had stared a little too long at his skank girlfriend. A beer bottle to the back of the head had disabused the fucker of the notion. Jack got his ass hauled to the drunk tank overnight for it, but damn, it had been worth it.

His face, his grandmother told him, was that of an angel. An ex-girlfriend who was an Art History major in college told him he possessed features Michelangelo would have killed to sculpt. He laughed bitterly at the memory. It was the reason he'd learned how to fight at an early age. The bump on the bridge of his nose, the pencil-thin scar on his upper lip, and the ragged two-inch slash on his left temple all had stories of their own.

Combined with the two-day-old beard, the faded dragon tattoo that wrapped around one bicep, and the hatchet job he performed on his hair twice a month with a rusty pair of scissors, he looked like a junkie who'd kill his own mother for a fix. He ran a hand over the inch-long black spikes on top of his head. It was getting a little long. He'd have to do something about it soon.

He turned on the faucet, cupped his hands underneath, and splashed his face a couple of times before applying soap to it. He rubbed vigorously for a minute, then rinsed thoroughly, slicking back his hair with the water in his hands as he straightened up.

While he swished a mouthful of Listerine, he flung open the medicine cabinet and reached for the bottle of Vicodin. The label told him it belonged to Mary Ann Smith. He frowned when he didn't recognize the name. A moment later, a smirk twisted his upper lip. The long-legged blonde with the mouth like a DirtDevil and a bathroom that looked like a pharmacy. While she'd slept, he'd swiped some Prozac, some Percocet, and his drug of choice, Vicodin, before sneaking out of her apartment.

He spat out the Listerine and tossed back three Vicodin tabs, crunching them between his teeth and washing them down with a handful of sink water. A quick sniff told him he should probably take a shower soon, but he had no time for that now. He scrubbed under his arms with a wet face towel, then gave them each two swipes of deodorant to cover up the funk. He slipped on the first pair of jeans he found on the floor of his room and a blue T-shirt from the pile on his bed that looked passably clean. There

was a tiny spot of blood on the chest from the little bar scuffle he'd gotten into the other night, but the shirt was dark enough that it was hardly noticeable. Besides, that was what a jacket was for.

On his way out, the phone in the pocket of his jeans began to vibrate. Probably his boss again, wondering where the hell he was. But as the pleasant hazy feeling from the Vicodin began to sweep over him, he decided to ignore it.

* * * *

Jack parked his motorcycle a few blocks from the Red Dragon Bar because he couldn't find a spot any closer. He'd been to the bar a few times, but it had never been packed on a weeknight. The college kids, punks, slumming yuppies, and hoodrats looking for hook-ups were nowhere to be seen tonight. Instead, the place was swarming with cops, their police mobiles parked in the middle of the street like they couldn't give a rat's ass about blocking traffic. There was also an ambulance, a fire truck, and a couple of news vans. Gary Stevens, a correspondent he used to work with, spotted him and gave him a nod of acknowledgment.

Bemused, Jack found himself nodding back. What the hell was NBC doing here? Shit, maybe he shouldn't have hung up so quickly on Harry. He tried to remember what it was that his boss had barked in his ear and the words that echoed back to him were "sunken" and "ship." At the time he'd been a little fuzzy with sleep—not to mention hung over—so he didn't really think to ask Harry to clarify. Harry was always sending him on bullshit jobs. That was what he and his team specifically covered: bullshit. Each week, they produced a segment featuring crackpots and charlatans living in the Chicago area for a local news station and gleefully busted each and every one of them on live TV. Last week, it was a psychic dog. The week before that, it was a woman who could read your future from the cellulite on your butt.

It was gutter-work for a guy who sported a Peabody award on his mantel, but shit, it paid the rent. And the booze.

"Yo, Jack!"

His head automatically pivoted toward the direction of the voice calling him and he found his cameraman and production assistant across the street, standing to the side of the bar and distinctly out of the way. Kenny Hardaway lowered his camera from his shoulder and waved him over. Jack sighed. Reaching into the inside pocket of his bomber jacket, he pulled his pack of cigarettes, stuck one between his lips, and crossed the street, squeezing his lean body between the gridlocked cars.

"What the hell's going on, man?"

"Bout time you got here, bossman." Kenny produced a lighter out of his pocket and touched the flame to the end of Jack's cigarette. "Fucking pandemonium breaking loose all over the place." He jerked his head toward the bar. "Crowded as hell in there. A goddamn mouse wouldn't be able to squeeze in. Good thing the talent's stuck in traffic or she'd be whining about not being able to get in."

Kenny was barely out of college, but was the most brilliant A/V guy Jack had ever worked with. At five-five, he barely came up to Jack's shoulders, but carried himself with the confidence of a much bigger guy. He was dressed in the urban style favored by white kids who grew up watching MTV: baggy jeans, oversized yellow windbreaker, hundred dollar sneakers, and neon-blue goggles resting atop his heavily-gelled, spiky red hair. As

ridiculous as he looked, Jack knew he could throw down if necessary. He once had to spring the kid out of jail for beating the shit out of a guy twice his size.

Jack drew heavily on his cigarette and nodded toward the uniforms interviewing the bystanders and the people being attended to by the EMTs. "Harry babbled something about a sunken ship appearing out of nowhere like a David Copperfield trick. Did anybody get squished?" Even as he heard himself say the words, Jack couldn't quite believe he said them. The whole thing was so surreal.

"No, but that would have made good copy." Standing next to Kenny, Jack's PA blew on her hands and a puff of air plumed out of her mouth. "All the injuries were idiots running out of the bar in a stampede and stepping on each other."

Tiff Olsen was a black-haired, heavysset girl with a giant chip on her shoulder and a view of the world that was even more cynical than Jack's. Tonight she was wearing a burgundy sweater, a knee-length black skirt, black fishnet stockings, and black combat boots. Over the outfit was a black trench coat that swallowed even her chubby frame. Kohl eyeliner and artificially long and thick eyelashes that reminded Jack of spiders framed her deep green eyes. Her lush mouth, which was set in a perpetual frown, was a deep purple. Completing the look was a tiny silver barbell that bisected one pencil-thin eyebrow and a silver hoop that hung from her left nostril. Kenny once told her she would be prettier if she didn't have all that junk on her face and received a slap for his trouble.

Jack gave the twosome a measuring look and took another drag of his cigarette. "Guys, level with me here. How the hell did it happen? Could this be a publicity stunt and they built the thing inside? How big is it?"

"Overheard a uniform saying it's a twenty-foot fishing boat or something." His cameraman pulled out a notebook from the pocket of his windbreaker and flipped it open. "It has a name, too. *SS Kiyō*. Shit, if it's got a name, it's gotta be registered somewhere, right?"

Jack shrugged. At this point, he really didn't know what to think. It had to be a hoax of some kind. It was just a matter of figuring out how it was done. He had never come across a "miracle" that he couldn't expose for the scam that it was. "We'll have to look it up, see if it's an actual boat that sank somewhere. If it's for real, it will have a history. We'll talk to the owner of the bar, see what we can shake loose." He flashed his teeth at his crew. "We'll solve this one, kids, don't worry."

Tiff made a sound of exasperation. "Jack, Kenny and I canvassed the crowd while we were waiting for you. You know what they told us? The fucking thing really did just pop out of nowhere. There's even seaweed and shit hanging from it. This punk we talked to thinks it was puked up by the Bermuda Triangle." An odd look crossed her face as though she couldn't quite believe what she was saying either. "That lady over there said it was, like, *beamed down*. Like Scotty and Star Trek, you know?"

Jack swallowed the rude comment that prodded at his lips. Tiff had a good head on her shoulders—a heavily decorated one, maybe—and he'd never doubted that the girl was smart. Right now she just looked freaked out. He lifted his head and looked at the woman she pointed out.

The first thing he noticed was the *pink* hair. It was cherry-flavored cotton-candy pink. It was screaming, yelling, kicking pink. There was a lot of it and it was piled in a bun on top of the owner's head. The tiny, elfin woman would have been overwhelmed by the spectacle that was her hair if she weren't built like a brick house. Perky, generous

breasts strained against the white short-sleeved, almost see-through blouse she wore. The cop interviewing her was valiantly trying to keep his eyes on her face, but was obviously losing the battle, and the woman's tits were practically begging to be ogled. The black skirt she wore stopped several inches above her knees and her long, slender legs were covered in black fishnet stockings. On her feet were pink knee-high boots that were the same shade as her hair and sported four-inch stiletto heels. The red apron tied around her waist had a drawing of a white dragon on it and the nametag pinned to her left tit told him she was a waitress.

"Nice, huh?" Kenny murmured next to him. "Hottest piece of ass I've ever seen outside of a lingerie ad. I've always had a thing for Asian chicks. Too bad she's nuts."

Tiff smacked Kenny's chest with the back of her hand. "God, you're such a pig. Like you'd even have a chance with her." She crossed her arms across her chest and glared at the woman. "She started babbling about aliens, so I figured she didn't know shit. That cop's probably just talking to her 'cause he thinks he can get lucky."

Jack listened with half an ear to his bickering crew, but found that his feet were already walking toward the pink-haired woman. He just had to talk to her, never mind that she was a kook. And it wasn't just her tits and ass—all right, *maybe* it was, a little—but something else pushed him. His reporter's instincts, the one that once netted him a Peabody and a slew of smaller awards, told him this woman was ... well, *special*. Worth talking to, at least. He stubbed his cigarette against a lamppost and flicked it toward a trashcan. The cop was just saying goodbye to her as Jack walked up.

The woman looked up at him with interest and Jack felt as though he had been punched in the gut. She had the look of an old-school Hollywood bombshell mixed with a Japanese anime character. She was a sex kitten, an innocent schoolgirl, and two fingers of straight-up, single-match scotch rolled into one. Jack felt like dragging her into a dark alley for a quick fuck, then asking her out to a nice steak dinner afterward. He couldn't recall ever feeling quite like this in his entire life.

Her heavily lashed, almond-shaped eyes were shockingly violet and something told Jack they weren't contact lenses. Damn, a man could fall into those eyes and never want to crawl back out. He cleared his throat and stuck out his hand. "Jack Ridley, KTCI News. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

She ignored his hand and pursed her lips, raking her eyes from his scruffy boots to the top of his head. No doubt she was wondering if she should talk to him or mace him in the face and run away screaming. Her violet gaze settled for a moment on the scar on his forehead before moving on to meet his eyes. "Why aren't you all suited up and wearing a tie like those other guys?" She tilted her head toward the other reporters talking to the crowd.

There was sexual appreciation in her eyes and Jack's jeans became uncomfortably tight. He had to resist the urge to reach down and adjust himself. "I do the pre-interviews. I make sure that what you have to say deserves to be on the eleven o'clock news before I have you talk to our correspondent."

She sucked her lower lip between her small, white teeth as she looked at him as though trying to decide if he was legit or not. "Hmm..."

Jack swallowed hard as the tip of her tongue peeked out to touch the corner of her full mouth. She was wearing a light pink lipstick and a generous amount of lip-gloss. "Can you tell me what happened..." His gaze dropped to her nametag. "Kitty?"

"Like I told your crew, *Jack*..." She nodded at something behind him and took a step toward him to place her small, pale hand on the sleeve of his brown bomber jacket. "I was only a few feet away when it happened. One minute I had a pounding headache and wishing I could go home already and the next, I was flying across the bar. When I came to, the boat was there. There was, like ... a flash of light before it happened."

"Yeah, I heard. Like *Star Trek*." He didn't have to look behind him to know his crew was at his back. Tiff made a joke he couldn't hear and Kenny snickered in response. He ignored the both of them. "If this boat just popped up right there in the middle of the bar, what happened to the people sitting there? They weren't injured?"

"No." She reached up to snag a lock of hair that had slipped out of her bun and tucked it behind her ear. "They were ... um ... just kind of pushed to the side. Some people were flung out of the way like me, but all I got was a scratch." She pointed to the white bandage taped to her elbow. "Some people think it's..." She hesitated and stopped.

"What?" Jack prodded patiently.

She bit her lip again and touched her neck with long, graceful fingers. Her nails were painted black. "It's silly, but some people think it's aliens returning a ship they took out of the Bermuda Triangle." She took another step closer and leaned her head toward him as though to sniff him. "Could you spare a smoke? I quit an eternity ago, but after the night I've had, I think I deserve one."

Jack reached for his pack and pulled out a stick. He meant to hand it to her, but she tilted her head toward him and parted her lips. He groaned inwardly. Was she playing with him? She had to know what she was doing to him. A bead of sweat trickled from his temple down the side of his face, but somehow he managed to bring the cigarette to her mouth. Her lips formed a smile around the filter, her violet eyes sparkling. He took out his lighter to light it for her, but before he could get it to work, the tip of the cigarette flared to life. Her eyes widened in shock. With a shaking hand, she took the cigarette out of her mouth and stared at it in wonder. "That's some trick. How did you do it?"

"That wasn't me. This thing's probably defective," Jack muttered, snatching it out of her hand and tossing it on the ground to squash under his boot.

"What the hell kind of defect is spontaneous combustion?" Kenny demanded. He hoisted the camera back up on his shoulder. "Damn, I can't believe I didn't get it on tape. Give her another one, see if the same thing happens."

The waitress shook her head. "Nuh-uh, no way. It's probably a sign I shouldn't be smoking." She backed away when Jack held out the pack to her. "No thanks."

Jack stuck the pack back into his pocket, making a mental note to open a new pack when he got home. No way was he smoking the rest of it. A college buddy of his was a chemist and could check out the cigarettes for him. "Okay, Kitty, sorry about that. Now back to your story. Did anything ... *weird* happen before the boat appeared?" The waitress gave him a droll look and Jack paused. "I meant, was there a signal? Like ... um ... a warning of any kind?"

A gust of cold air blew strands of hair away from her face and she shivered, rubbing the goosebumps from her arms with her hands. "Honestly, I don't know. I had a really bad migraine and wasn't really paying attention. One of my tables was occupied by a bunch of nerdy boys just sitting around not ordering anything. Like, hello? They could have gotten more than a pitcher of light beer and a basket of curly fries." She rolled her eyes. "Anyway, they were babbling about Aquaman and the Bermuda Triangle when all

of a sudden..."

For a brief moment, Jack was entranced by the way her nipples had pebbled underneath her bra and top and couldn't form a coherent thought in his head to save his life. He couldn't look away from them. They were so full, so round. Her voice blended into background noise as he continued to stare at her tits. He caught himself just as he was about to reach out and grab one. *Get a grip, Jack. Focus.* He slipped off his jacket and wrapped it around her slender form, mostly so he didn't have to look at her nipples anymore. "Are you saying you had customers discussing the Bermuda Triangle before the boat showed up?"

Tiff tugged at the sleeve of Jack's T-shirt to get his attention. "Uh ... hate to play the Devil's advocate here, but if it were really zapped from the Bermuda Triangle, why the hell would it show up in a bar in Chicago of all places? We're quite a ways from the Atlantic Ocean, you know."

Kenny snorted. "I don't even know why you're trying to make sense of this, Tiff. There's obviously some serious Twilight Zone shit happening here."

Kitty looked at the two of them with bemusement, but didn't say a word. Instead, she pulled Jack's jacket tighter around her and offered a small smile to Jack when she noticed him staring at her. Jack couldn't help but smile back. She looked so tiny and adorable inside his jacket, pink hair and all.

"Listen, Kitty, do you think you can get us inside? I want to get a closer look at this boat. My cameraman here doesn't even have footage of it yet."

She shook her head. "No, I'm sorry. As soon as the forensics guys came in, they kicked everyone out and won't let anyone in." She flipped his jacket off her shoulders and handed it back to him. "Party's over as far as everyone's concerned. Me, I'm gonna go home."

Jack took his jacket back and slipped it on. "Oh. Do you want to wait until traffic dies down a bit? You're probably not going to get anywhere at this point." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the bumper-to-bumper confusion on the street behind him.

"It's a good thing I don't drive, then." She smiled again and nodded at both Tiff and Kenny. "See you around." She briefly touched Jack's chest and walked away, slipping into the crowd of confused bar patrons, bystanders, cops, and paramedics. Jack followed her with his eyes until he could no longer see a trace of her pink hair.

Kenny began to pump his hips, spanking the butt of an imaginary woman. "You gonna hit that, Jack?" He wiggled his eyebrows. "That bitch was like *buttah*."

Jack was used to Kenny referring to women in less than flattering terms, but this time, he felt like smacking him on the back of the head with his shoe. "You're full of shit. Shut the hell up, all right? I'm not in the mood." He slipped a cigarette between his lips, remembered they were defective, and reached up to take it out of his mouth. After a moment's pause, he shrugged and lit it up anyway.

Kenny punched him in the arm. "Dude, you were so digging that waitress!"

"Yeah, Jack, you couldn't take your eyes off her," Tiff said with a snort of disgust. "Talk about obvious. Why do men go for big-titted bimbos like that? And ugh, that hair! Who did she think she was, Rocker Barbie?"

Kenny shrugged. "I'm sorry, but you totally lost me after 'big-titted bimbos.'"

Jack flung his arm out to stop Tiff from launching herself at his cameraman. Behind him, the Goth girl snarled and tried to get at Kenny. "All right, never mind the waitress."

We need to get into the bar somehow and look at the boat..." He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned around to find his former co-worker Greg Stevens behind him.

"Forget the bar, Ridley. You're not getting in." The blond and usually polished NBC correspondent had already loosened his tie and unbuttoned his suit jacket. "They've got that place on lockdown. There's some serious shit going down and nobody's talking. I hear they're calling in the Feds, too. People are starting to get scared, man."

Jack narrowed his eyes at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Combined with the ducks in Sheffield Park turning pink, the apple trees bearing oranges, and cats giving birth to puppies, folks are talking end-of-the-world stuff."

Jack removed the cig from his mouth and stared at Stevens. His boss Harry had dismissed the recent rash of weirdness that had been happening all over Chicago as tabloid garbage and didn't bother sending Jack and his team to investigate. For once, Jack was happy to agree with him. Was there something to all of it, after all? The hard-bitten cynic in him refused to believe it. "What have you been smoking, man?"

A smirk curled Stevens' lips. "If you hadn't been so busy covering psychic dogs, Ridley, you would have known about this. What happened, man? You used to be on top of this stuff. Was that Peabody award a fluke, after all?"

Jack's fingers curled into fists and he took a deep breath to keep himself from rearranging Stevens' pretty boy face with a few well-placed punches. When he got his temper under control, he bared his teeth in a parody of a smile. "It was nice seeing you again, Stevens. Let me know how this ghost-ship thing turns out." Without looking at his crew, Jack snapped his fingers and jerked his head. "Let's go, kids."

Kenny and Tiff jogged to catch up to him. When they were about a block away from the bar, Tiff grabbed his arm to stop him. "JR, what's going on? Are we really going to let that assmunch Stevens scoop us on this?"

Jack placed his hands on the girl's shoulders. "Hey, there's nothing to be done here tonight. You heard Stevens. No one's talking and everyone's a little freaked out right now. We'll come back when it's not so crazy and give it our good old-fashioned myth-busting treatment, all right? We'll blow those guys out of the water."

Tiff gave him a reluctant smile. "I wish you'd punched him, Jack."

Jack sighed and tugged at the hem of his jacket. "Stevens is an asshole, but the fucker's well-connected. If I had punched him, it would have gotten back to Harry and he would have fired my ass faster than you can blink."

Kenny looked at the two of them and shook his head. "Man, you guys are really depressing me." He kicked a flattened can of soda on the street, then looked up, a grin slowly creeping across his face. "You know what would make this night passable? *Waffles*. Who's with me?"

Jack thought of his dark, empty apartment where a bottle of Jose Cuervo waited for him and realized he wasn't quite ready to go home. He supposed he could sit in the shadows and jack off thinking about the pink-haired waitress. He sighed and dragged a hand over his hair. Forcing himself to smile, he slapped the kid on the shoulder. "All right, but you're buying."

Chapter Two

Kitty Jones adjusted the strap of her messenger bag on her shoulder and hugged it to her chest as she trudged toward her apartment six blocks away. Goosebumps had broken out all over her skin and her teeth were chattering, but she forced herself to keep going. Under her armpits, she flexed her fingers open and closed in an effort to get some blood into them. During the mayhem, she somehow lost her coat and was stupid enough to give the reporter his jacket back. Now she was going to freeze to death. Hell, she'd been lucky her co-worker Jan thought to grab Kitty's bag along with hers as everyone was running out of the bar. At least she'd have her pepper spray on hand if one of the neighborhood punks decided to get fresh.

Now that she was relatively alone—a homeless man sitting on the front stoop of a brownstone saluted her with his brown paper bag as she passed—and could actually hear herself think, she replayed the night's events in her mind. Could she really have caused the boat to appear in the middle of the bar like that? She'd refused to consider it at first, but even she had to admit that the timing was uncanny. One moment she was wishing the nerds would shut the hell up about the Bermuda Triangle already and order more drinks and the next a twenty-foot schooner appeared exactly where the nerds had been sitting.

No, she couldn't have done it. No way. Not her. Not Kitty Jones. It had to be alien forces or the wrath of God or some cosmic hiccup. No way it was her. *Not Kitty Jones.*

She just wasn't the kind of woman to whom magical things happened. She had reached the ripe old age of twenty-five without anything remarkable or remotely special happening to her. She grew up in the suburbs outside of Chicago with a dentist for a father and a schoolteacher for a mother. Or was it the other way around? Was it her mother who was the dentist and her father—She paused in the middle of the sidewalk and clutched her head between her hands. Jesus, why did it feel like her brain was about to explode?

Just last week, she visited her doctor to tell her about the skull-crushing headaches and the lapses in her memory. Instead of sending her to the hospital for a CT scan, the doctor told her she had nothing to worry about and wrote her a prescription for migraine and sleep-aid medicine. She saw another doctor for a second opinion, but after a battery of tests, he wasn't able to find anything, either. That afternoon, Kitty found herself wandering around in Sheffield Park without knowing when or how she got there.

When Kitty attempted to call her mother, she realized she couldn't remember her number. Confused, she called Information and found she couldn't remember her mother's name, either. Kitty stood in her living room, staring at the phone in her hand in abject horror until the computerized operator told her to please hang up and try her call again.

A car full of teenage boys whizzed past her, honking and yelling suggestive comments. Kitty shoved her hands into her hair, wrecking the bun that had been keeping her mane in place. God, she was losing it. *Keep it together, Kitty. You do not want to be outfitted in a straitjacket and locked in a rubber room for the rest of your natural life.*

When she raised her head, a large, old black man at the mouth of a dark alley was gesturing at her, beckoning her to come to him. He had a black knitted beanie on his head and was wearing a navy-blue peacoat that looked comfortable and warm. Covering his

hands were burgundy gloves which he was holding over a red drum that contained a roaring fire. The flames danced beneath his hands as though he were a maestro directing their movements.

Kitty hesitated only for a moment and walked up to him, telling herself she was just going to warm her hands for a little bit before continuing her walk home. As soon as she was close enough to get a good look at him, she realized he was a lot younger than she originally thought. His harsh face, which appeared to be carved out of granite, was smooth and unlined, yet his eyebrows, beard, and the hair peeking out from under his beanie were shockingly white. His eyes, which sparkled like black diamonds, were fully dilated and stared at her as though he could see right through the marrow of her bones. And he was huge; at least six-six and maybe three hundred pounds of big bulky muscle. His arms were easily as thick as her thighs. The amber glow of the fire only served to make him look more sinister, more imposing.

Kitty shivered and it wasn't because of the cold. Gingerly, she held her hands over the fire and as quick as a rattlesnake, his hand had seized her wrist in a grip that was tight enough to let her know of his strength, but not enough to hurt. "Hey, let me go."

"You should not be walking around alone on a night like this, young miss," he said in a rumbling bass that held a foreign accent Kitty couldn't quite place. "You should be at home, safe and sound in your bed."

Kitty laughed nervously and tried to pull her wrist away. It didn't budge. "That's my plan. If you would just let me go, sir, I'd be on my way."

The man's black eyes glittered in the darkness. He tilted his head to the side as though he were studying her. "I mean your true home, young miss. Not the hovel you've been living in these past few months."

"You mean Evanston? I don't think my parents would be very receptive to their fully-grown daughter asking them if she could move back in." She tested the grip around her wrist again. The man's fingers were like steel manacles. "No, I'm fine where I am. Just let me go, please. I'm cold and hungry and tired and I really want to go home."

"I'm not arguing with that, young miss." The accent was crisp and cultivated with a trace of New England, maybe even British. "You really must go home."

Kitty frowned at the man. "Exactly. Home. Where the heart is. If you let me go, I'd be on my merry way." Oddly enough, she was more annoyed than afraid now. She'd had a long, strange night and wanted nothing more than to sink into her couch in front of the TV with a glass of Merlot. She had no patience for Cryptic Message Guy who, for a homeless man, was better dressed than she was. "Mister, my throat hurts like hell and I don't really feel like yelling right now. Please don't make me scream. There's a shitload of police cars just a couple of blocks from here and I have no doubt they would be able to hear me."

"And you seem to have trouble comprehending me. Perhaps your extended stay on this world has dulled your wits." He tightened his hold on her wrist for a moment and leaned over the drum so his face was only inches from hers. "You need to go home. *Home*, young miss." He spoke gently and slowly as though speaking to a child. He also seemed to expect she knew what the hell he was talking about.

His breath smelled like evergreen trees and dirt. Kitty frowned. "Right. And where do you think home is?" Even though the man was obviously nuts, she couldn't help but hold her breath in anticipation of the man's answer. Which didn't make sense because the

man was nuts. Loco in the *cabeza*.

A quick flash of blindingly white teeth was his interpretation of a smile. Without another word, he raised a fist and pointed his index finger toward the inky black sky.

The laughter that burst out of Kitty's mouth was more of an expression of relief than anything. "It's the hair, right? People think I'm an alien and shit because of the hair." Instead of looking offended at Kitty laughing at him, the man shrugged and smiled. "Which planet do you think I'm from? Venus or something?"

"I didn't say you were an alien to this planet, young miss. You are, however, an alien to this world. There is a difference." He released her so abruptly that Kitty staggered and almost fell on her ass. "And now you need to go home."

"Right. That's what I'm going to do." Kitty backed away slowly from the fire, keeping her gaze on the dark stranger. When he didn't move from the spot where he stood, Kitty opened her bag and rummaged for the stack of dollar bills that Jan had told her was her tips for the night. "Listen, it's too cold for you to be standing out here. You should get yourself a cup of coffee and a slice of pie in a diner somewhere. On me." She pulled out a few bills and looked up.

Naturally, he was gone.

Kitty sighed, hugged her bare arms to herself, and continued her trek back to her apartment.

* * * *

When she woke up the next morning, a giant lizard thing was sitting at the foot of her bed with its arms folded across its impossibly wide chest and its green serpentine eyes watching her. It was covered in red and gold scales, sported a snout that reminded her of an alligator, and was looking at her like it wanted to swallow her whole. Though it wore a cloth of some kind around its middle and Kitty couldn't see if it had genitals, she decided it was a male. There was something about it that just *screamed* male.

Kitty did what any sane person would have done in her situation: she shrieked and ducked under her covers, squeezing her eyes shut. For good measure, she tucked the edge of the blanket under her head and clapped her hands over her ears. *This is not happening. I'm dreaming. This isn't real.*

"You're acting like a child, Kiyo," growled the creature from the foot of her bed. "Will you get out from under there and talk to me like a grown woman?"

Though Kitty had her ears covered, she could hear him clearly as though he was speaking right into her ear. No, not in her ear, in her head. He was speaking to her inside her head. She whimpered and held on to the blanket tighter just in case he decided to yank it off her.

"Kiyo, I'm not going to hurt you. Come on out of there, please." The unnaturally deep growl was replaced by a silky-smooth bass that seemed to caress her skin like a touch of velvet. "Let's not play this game, darling. Come on out."

"This is a dream, this is a dream, this is a dream," she muttered to herself. "Wake up, Kitty ... wake up!" She took a chunk of the flesh on her arm between two fingers and squeezed hard. She yelped with pain.

"You are not dreaming, Kiyo. This is all real. Come out and talk to me, please."

"Stop calling me that! My name is not Kiyo! You've got the wrong person." The spot on the bed next to her sank with his weight, which told her he was now lying next to her.

Her suspicion was proven correctly when a strong, hard force wrapped itself around her torso and yanked her until her back was leaning against something hard and very, very male. And warm ... dear God, he was warm.

"Your real name is Kiyo, beloved." He tightened his arm and nuzzled the back of her neck through the blanket. "Now come on out of there and talk to me."

Kitty found herself involuntarily pressing her backside against him. He was so warm ... felt so good ... and she could feel his hand reaching over to her front to cup her breasts. When she realized what she was doing, she scrambled out of bed with the blanket wrapped tightly around her.

From the floor of her bedroom, she grabbed a strappy sandal with a four-inch stiletto heel, held it over her head like a weapon, and turned around to face the creature on her bed. In place of the giant lizard thing was the most beautiful man she had ever seen in her entire life. High cheekbones. Chin that could crush walnuts. Silky blond hair that shone in the sunlight. The same green eyes now sparkled with intent to possess her. He was lying on his side with his head propped up by his fist, a flirtatious smile on his ridiculously handsome face. And his body ... dear God, so lean and muscular and hairless all over. He was just so big ... and golden. Kitty raked her gaze over him and gulped. His cock was hard, thick, pinkish in color, and went past his belly button. It was the biggest penis she had ever seen.

"Come here, Kiyo." He patted a spot on the bed next to him. "Lay down next to me. It's been too long. Let me make love to you."

Kitty shook her head, backing away from the bed until she smacked into the wall behind her. Suddenly, she became very aware of her own nudity under the blanket and hugged it tighter around her body. Why oh why didn't she at least leave on a tank top before crashing last night? But that was the least of her worries. What scared her more than waking up naked next to stranger was how much she wanted to jump the stranger's bones. Never mind that he appeared out of nowhere and was a lizard-man thing just a few moments ago.

"Don't you miss my touch, beloved? I certainly missed yours ... especially the little sounds you made in my ear as I made you come over and over again." He wiggled his long, slender fingers suggestively at her. "Don't you want me to touch you again?"

Kitty gripped the blanket in her fist. "I don't know what you're talking about. I've never seen you before in my life."

"Your entire life as a human, perhaps." His lips quirked up in a smile. "But you've known me forever. You belong to me." One long finger drew lazy circles on the bed next to his body while his eyes surveyed her appreciatively from head to toe. "Come here, Kiyo."

Kiyo. Kitty froze. Why did the name sound so familiar? She buried a hand in her hair as she racked her useless memory. Where had she seen it before? She pressed her back tighter against the wall. *Kiyo.* She knew the name. She had seen it before. But the more she thought about it, the more her head hurt.

"Perhaps you are not pleased with this form?" he asked softly. "How about this?"

Kitty raised her head in time to see him transform. The golden blond god was now a long, lean, chocolate-skinned man with whiskey-colored eyes and curly black hair. The smirk and the attitude remained however. Kitty took a deep breath and released it in a long, shaky exhale.

“No?” A pink tongue flickered to lick the corner of his beautiful mouth. “How about this, then?”

An olive-skinned man appeared on the bed with long, silky ebony hair and dark, fathomless eyes that had an exotic slant to them. He reminded Kitty of a jaguar: slender, lean, and oozing with deadly grace. He knelt on the bed before her and stroked a hand down his body, brushing his muscled stomach with his fingers, before capturing his erect penis in his fist and giving it a pump.

“Um.” Before she realized what she was doing, she was standing next to the bed and within the creature's reach. Her hand, as though it had a mind of its own, lifted away from her body and caressed his chest. Lord, his skin felt like silk. His eyes drifted closed and he moaned in pleasure. Her fingers felt the vibration from deep within him. She yanked her hand back and cradled it against her breasts. “No. I don't know what you are or what the hell you're doing here, but you have to leave, please.”

His eyes snapped open and this time, they were the same shade of violet as hers. “Well, I'm here to take you home, beloved. As for *what* I am, you know the answer to that ... you just forgot.” His lips curled into half a smile. “You like this form, don't you? And yet you won't allow yourself pleasure.”

“Yes, yes, it's a very nice form ... but I don't want you here. Will you please just leave?” Kitty could hear the desperate pleading in her voice and hated it.

“Do you really want me to leave? I think not. Even now I can smell your arousal, your feminine essence.” He captured a lock of her pink hair and used it to tug her closer. “It's been too long since we were together, my love. I've missed kissing you, touching you...” He captured her neck in one hand and caressed her jugular with his thumb. “If you won't allow me to make love to you in this form, perhaps you prefer ... this one?”

Kitty gasped as he transformed himself to the reporter from last night. *Jack*. It was the same exact face she had admired, from the ragged scar on his forehead to the bump on the bridge of a nose that must have been broken at least once in the past. The high cheekbones, the square jaw, the cleft on his chin ... down to the two-day-old beard. Kitty swallowed hard as she hungrily drank in the sight of him with her eyes. He was lean, almost painfully so, without an ounce of fat on him. All muscle and grit.

She could feel her face heating up, her nipples hardening into points. She felt light-headed and breathless. She didn't know how much longer she could resist.

“Is this the reason why you haven't come home? You've fallen in love with a mortal?” he whispered against the skin of her throat.

“I'm not in love with him. I just met him last night,” she breathed as he captured her earlobe between his teeth and gently bit down.

“I watched you as you slept, Kiyo. I saw your lips form his name.” He cupped her face between his large hands and brushed the tip of his tongue over her lower lip. “You may not be in love with him, but you certainly want him very badly.” His free arm snaked around her waist and he dragged her back to the bed.

Kitty gasped as she landed on her back on the mattress. “Stop. I don't want this.”

“Don't lie to me, my little dragon. You want this very much.” He dropped his body next to hers and placed his palm on the inside of her bare thigh, sweeping up toward her crotch with agonizing slowness. He stopped just inches from the juncture of her thighs and squeezed gently. “Tell me you want me, Kiyo.”

“Not you. I don't want you,” she said through gritted teeth even as her traitorous

body shivered underneath his touch.

"Lying again." He lowered his head and licked her nipple before sucking it into his mouth and biting gently. He did the same for the other one as the hand on her thigh continued its ascent. Raising his head, he grinned wickedly at her and pressed his palm firmly against her. "You are so wet, beloved, and so ready for me."

"Get off me." But she couldn't help the moan that escaped her mouth when he reached the moist heat between her thighs. "I don't want you, you ... demon!"

He chuckled and flicked his thumb over her bud. "No, beloved, not a demon. Far from it. But I can be, if you want. Unless you prefer an angel ... your choice."

You're stronger than this, Kitty. You can resist him. With a deep breath, she reached down and wrapped her fingers around his wrist so she could pull his hand away from her crotch. Even as her body wept in protest, she managed to push him off her body and grab her robe from the foot of her bed. He quickly placed his hand on her shoulder to stop her, but she ducked before he could get a firmer hold and jumped off the bed, slipping on her robe and belting it tightly.

"Stay away from me," she said shakily. "I don't want you to touch me. I don't even want to hear you anymore. Just get the hell out of here or I swear to God, I'll call the police."

"Ah, if you were going to call them, you would have called them when I first popped up. Besides, you're still not totally convinced that you aren't dreaming all of this." He unfolded himself from the bed and stalked toward her in long, graceful strides. "And what would you tell them, pray tell? *Help, Mr. Police Officer, there's a dragon in my bedroom?* No, that would be crazy."

Kitty swallowed hard, suddenly finding it very hard to breathe. Was she going crazy, after all? Maybe there were one or two crazy aunts in the family tree and the insanity was passed down to her. She read somewhere that paranoid schizophrenia didn't manifest in some people until later in life. "Did ... did you just say you're a dragon?"

"Of course." He paused just a few feet from her and shifted into the lizard-man thing that woke her up this morning.

Kitty looked up at him and gulped. Standing, he had to be at least seven feet tall and built like a Roman gladiator. His shoulders were maybe a couple of feet wide and his neck was as thick as one of her thighs. In the sunlight coming through the sliding glass door that led to her balcony, his red and gold scales sparkled like jewels.

She looked over her shoulder. If she had to, she could jump over the railing of her balcony. It was only a thirty-foot drop. The worse that could happen to her ... well, *okay*, she could die. She'd rather die than be ravished by ... a dragon, for God's sake.

"Don't be afraid, Kiyo. I hate that you're afraid of me." He shifted again, this time to the blond god. He snapped his fingers and suddenly, the lower portion of his anatomy was covered in blue jeans. "Would you really rather die than have me touch you?"

"Stop reading my thoughts!" She shoved her hands in her hair and covered her ears with her wrists. When she looked up at him, she saw that he looked genuinely hurt and distressed. She felt an answering twinge in her chest. Slowly, she lowered her hands to her sides and raised her chin. "What do you want from me?"

His golden brows furrowed and a tiny knot appeared on his forehead. "I just want you to come home."

Kitty froze. She'd heard that before. From the crazy black guy who accosted her last

night. "What did you say?"

He put his hand on her shoulder. "You need to come home. You've stayed too long in this world. You've forgotten all about us."

Kitty pinched the panels of her robe shut as she felt his stare drift down her body. Did he have to look at her like he was starving and she was a big steak dinner? She'd be lying, of course, if she told herself it didn't feel good. "I'm sorry, but this is crazy. I really don't know what you're talking about. Please, I'm begging you, just leave me alone."

His hunter-green eyes flashed dangerously and he tightened his grip on her shoulder. "You will come home, Kiyo, make no mistake about that. You don't belong in this world."

Kitty placed her hand on her neck and shook her head. "I'm not an alien. I have a family. I have memories of my childhood."

"Do you?" He stared intently at her and cocked his head to the side. "Then tell me, where did you grow up? What are the names of your parents? What was the name of your first pet?"

Kitty racked her brain for the answers and whimpered when she couldn't produce a single one. Blank. There was nothing there. She gripped the handle of the sliding glass door to keep herself from collapsing to the ground. "You keep calling me Kiyo. That's not my name. I don't know what's going on here, but I think you have the wrong person."

"No." He put his hands on her waist and yanked her toward him. "Kiyo is your true name. Kitty Jones is an identity you created for yourself. Your memories, your feelings, all of it you manufactured for yourself so you could have, as you called it, a 'true human experience.'"

"You're lying," she whispered harshly. "I'm a human being, damn it. I'm not like you. I don't have powers or anything like that."

"Oh?" He twisted her around in his arms so that her back was to him and slipped one muscular arm around her throat. "Then what do you call that?"

Outside her apartment was a giant stone structure. If she went out to her balcony, she could probably touch it. She flung the dragon's arm away from her, shoved open the sliding glass door, and ran out to the balcony to check out what it was. It was only when she was close enough to it that she realized what she was looking at. A fifty-foot statue of a naked man standing smack dab in the middle of Madison Street blocking traffic with its penis pointing straight at her.

On the ground below her, a woman started screaming.

The dragon's arm snaked around her waist and she felt him drag his open mouth against the side of her throat. "Told you so," he whispered in her ear before everything in her world turned black.

Chapter Three

“Giant man statue on Madison and 4th. Go!”

Jack looked up from his Minesweeper game and peeked over the wall of his cubicle in time to see Harry walk into his office and slam the door behind him. He glanced over his shoulder at Tiff who was already wrapping up her leftover pastrami and rye sandwich and slipping on the strap of her purse over her head.

Kenny, who was about to bite into his grilled cheese sandwich, sent Jack a droll look. “I’m sorry, did he just say ‘giant man statue?’”

Jack leaned back in his chair and dragged a hand over his face.

“Madison and 4th?” Tiff paused in the act of slipping on her coat and frowned.

“That’s only six blocks away from the Red Dragon Bar, isn’t it? What are the chances of two bizarre things happening not too far away from each other and in such a short amount of time?”

“Maybe Stevens is right and the world, as we know it, is coming to an end.” Jack had never been one to believe in coincidences and had to admit that this one bothered him more than it should. He’d spent half the morning going through registries and looking up information on any ship that had sunk in the last fifty years, but couldn’t find anything on an *SS Kiyo*. Out of desperation, he called an ex-girlfriend who worked at the Tampa Port Authority, but she had nothing to tell him, either.

“Giant man statue?” Kenny repeated.

Tiff crossed her arms over her chest. “I refuse to believe that assmunch could ever be right about anything.”

Jack pulled open his desk drawer and grabbed his bottle of Vicodin. Shaking a couple of tablets onto his palm, he tossed them into his mouth, and crunched them like peanuts. He washed the bitter taste with a lukewarm bottle of water.

Tiff propped her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes at him. “I swear to God, Jack, you treat that shit like candy.”

Jack smiled grimly at her. “Nobody likes a killjoy, Tiff. I’ll thank you to shut the hell up.”

“Whatever, it’s not like I give a shit about you or anything.” She shook her head and tossed an empty can of diet soda in the trash. “Kenny, get your gear and let’s go.”

Jack closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. After a few minutes, he grabbed his jacket and followed his crew to the elevator.

* * * *

“Wow ... that’s a giant man statue, all right.”

Tiff was the only person he knew who could say such a thing with a straight face while staring up at the testicles of a fifty-foot statue of a naked man. Kenny, on the other hand, had been catatonic ever since they arrived at the scene. The talent had taken one look at the statue and fell in a dead faint. Even Jack himself couldn’t think of a thing to say.

After all, what did one say about fifty-foot statue of a naked man that sported a ten-

foot erection that it didn't already say for itself?

Tourists, reporters, cops, and gloom-doom naysayers carrying signs about the end of the world surrounded them. There were tears, hysterical screaming, and some laughter. A few feet from the statue, a group of old women clad in black had lit up some candles and were on their knees on the ground, holding hands and chanting. Traffic was once again backed up for miles. The cops were having a hell of a time with crowd control.

But somehow Jack was able to spot *her*. Not that he could avoid seeing her with her hot pink hair pulled into a ponytail on top of her head. He could spot her in a crowd of thousands. She stood apart from the crowd wearing a quilted robe that was a lighter pink than her hair, looking uncertain and uncomfortable. She too was staring up at the statue with a strange expression on her face that Jack didn't immediately recognize.

Guilt. Jack narrowed his eyes at the pink-haired waitress. Was she behind this? Was it a harmless prank gone wrong? If so, how the hell could she have transported this thing? It was taller than the apartment building next to it and had to weigh a few hundred tons.

"Oh, look, it's Rainbow Brite," Tiff said dryly. "What's *she* doing here?"

"I don't know," Jack murmured absently, watching the waitress hug her arms to herself. She looked to be a few seconds away from a nervous breakdown. "I'm gonna go talk to her."

Tiff folded her arms under her breasts and stared at him in disbelief. "Jack..."

As he was walking away, he heard Kenny say, "Hey, if you have to kiss when you're standing under mistletoe, what do you have to do if you stand under balls?"

When Jack reached her, she was looking up at the statue, worry and guilt—definitely guilt—etched on her pretty face. She didn't even see him approach. He touched her on the shoulder and she jumped. She whirled around to face him, her hands clutching the top of her robe. Her eyes widened as soon as she saw him and almost tripped on her own feet trying to get away from him.

"Hi," Jack said, reaching out to steady her. "It's cool, it's okay. I'm Jack Ridley, remember? We met last night? I work for KTCI?"

Her violet eyes studied him with what looked like worry. "Are you ... *you*?"

What the hell does that mean? She seemed to be afraid of him and Jack realized he didn't like it one bit. Her face was deathly pale and she looked like she was about to throw up. "Well, I know I'm me." Unable to help himself, he brushed her cheek with the back of his hand to see if her skin was as soft as it looked and discovered she was cold to the touch. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here." She flicked her index finger upward. "You see that balcony the ... um ... penis is pointing at? That's my apartment."

"Oh. That's ... that's gotta be awkward." What was it about her that inspired such protective instincts within him? All he wanted to do was whisk her back to his apartment, stick her in his bed, and cover her with his body. For the second time since he met the woman, he found himself removing his jacket and wrapping it around her.

"Yeah. Imagine how I felt this morning when I woke up this morning and found a giant dick pointed at me." She giggled, but it was more of the hysterical variety. She slipped her arms through armholes of his jacket and hugged it tight around her body, burying her face on the collar and inhaling deeply. "It smells like you. I like it." She smiled shyly up at him. "I'm glad you're here, Jack."

Jack felt his face growing warm and prayed he wasn't blushing like a tomato.

Clearing his throat, he stuck his hands in the pockets of his jeans and smiled back at her. "I'm glad I'm here, too. Kitty, right?"

Her smile widened, her violet eyes sparkling. "Hey, you remembered!"

Maybe it was the Vicodin kicking in, but suddenly, Jack no longer gave a shit about the fifty-foot statue that was standing behind him or where it came from. He couldn't care less about the pissed off and scared people that surrounded them either. It was as though the rest of the world had ceased to exist around him and everything that mattered stood in front of him in a five-foot-flat, one hundred and ten pound package. "Do you want to get out of here? Maybe walk somewhere and get a cup of coffee or something?"

"Jack, I'm not wearing anything under my robe and my feet are bare! Maybe we could run up to my apartment real quick and..." Her face dimmed and a frown of worry touched her lips. "I mean..."

Jack couldn't help it. His eyes immediately focused on the front of her robe as though he had X-ray vision and could see right through it. He felt primitive, felt like dragging her to a cave somewhere and inspecting every inch of her under that robe. At the same time, he wanted to cover her up so that no one else could look at her the way *he* was looking at her. "Sweetheart, there's a fifty-foot statue sporting a ten-foot erection in the middle of downtown Chicago. I don't think anyone's going to care if you're naked under your robe."

She seemed to hesitate for a moment, biting her lower lip. "Oh, Jack, I..."

She's naked under her robe. Naked. Nude. Au naturel. He wondered if the rest of her was as silky-smooth as her face. "Come on, it'll be fun. I know this great place where they serve the best waffles in the Midwest."

"I don't think we can get anywhere in this traffic. Look at it, it's bumper to bumper gridlock. And all because of this stupid statue." She looked down at her bare feet, the guilty expression back on her face.

Jack wondered at the cause of it. What could she possibly be feeling guilty about? He cupped her cheek in his palm and she raised her chin, her disconcerted gaze meeting his eyes. "Hey, we don't have to drive to get to this place. We can just walk there. It'll be more fun that way, anyway."

"Yeah, it'll be fun." She reached for his hand and threaded her fingers through his. "You're a nice guy, Jack."

Jack stared at their linked hands. He couldn't remember the last time he felt such joy at merely holding a woman's hand. Her hand was so tiny that his hand appeared to have completely swallowed hers. He looked back at her and beamed. "No, not really. I'm just having a good day."

She took a step toward him and tucked her free hand into his arm. "Let's go, then. Buy me some waffles."

Kenny and Tiff called out to him as the two of them walked away, but Jack didn't even really hear them. When his cell phone vibrated a few seconds later, Jack reached into his pocket and turned it off.

* * * *

On their way to the waffle place, they found themselves walking past the Red Dragon Bar. The place appeared to be deserted, but there was a police caution tape at the door and two uniforms standing around looking bored. They gave Jack and Kitty a once-over when they paused in front of the place, but quickly lost interest and looked away.

"I wish I could go inside," Jack said. "I really want to take a look at that boat."

Kitty flashed him a flirtatious smile. "Maybe I could lure the cops away and you could sneak in."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "And how are you supposed to 'lure' them away?"

"I could flash them." She laughed when Jack glared at her. "Or I could tell them I work there and forgot my purse inside."

Jack shrugged. "Couldn't hurt. Give it a shot." He couldn't believe it would work, though. She was a pixie-looking woman with hot pink hair wearing only a bathrobe and a man's leather jacket over it. If he were one of the cops, he'd think she was nuts.

Kitty raised herself on the tips of her toes, pressed her lips against his chin, then turned around to face the cops. She smiled at them and giggled, her dulcet voice floating back to him, and he found himself as mesmerized as the cops who were staring at her like she was the cutest thing they had ever seen. He couldn't hear what she was saying, but she pointed at him once, and the cops looked suspiciously at him. As soon as she placed a hand on their arms, the suspicion disappeared from their faces. Lifting the yellow caution tape, they stepped aside to let them in.

"Well done," Jack murmured as soon as they were inside. "What did you say to them?"

"Just that I worked here, left my purse inside during the chaos last night, and my boyfriend came with me to pick it up." She wasn't looking at him as she said this. Instead her eyes were trained on something in front of them. She hugged his jacket tighter around her slender body. "There it is."

The strong fishy smell immediately assaulted Jack's nostrils. As soon as he saw it, his jaw dropped to his chest and he found himself unable to speak. In his eight years as a reporter, nothing could have prepared him for the sight that loomed before them. In the dimness of the bar, the thing looked more like a ghost ship than a fishing boat and he had images of bloodthirsty zombie pirates jumping out to greet them and feast on their flesh.

On the floor, he spotted a chair turned over on its side. He picked it up, righted it, and sat down to stare at the ship. As a pragmatic kind of guy, he could always find a way to explain the "weirder" things in life. He shoved a hand into his hair and racked his mind for a reason why a twenty-foot fishing boat would be sitting smack-dab in the middle of a local watering hole. For the first time in his life, he felt uncertain about something. He did not like it.

The boat was probably once white, but being underwater for God knows how long had chipped off the paint in some places and rotted the wood. It was tall enough that the top of it almost, but not quite, touched the ceiling and long enough that it almost, but not quite, touched the back of the bar. There were no broken windows, no damage to the bar itself. It was very carefully not touching any part of the bar except the floor. The placing of the boat itself seemed deliberate. It was not meant to hurt anyone or damage anything.

Clumps of seaweed hung along the bow like decoration. It reminded him of tinsel artfully placed on a Christmas tree. On the side of the boat, painted in red and cursive lettering, was the name *S.S. Kiyo*. Unlike the rest of the boat, it looked shiny and new. The vein behind Jack's right eye began to throb. He felt as though the answer to all this was scratching at the back of his skull, but wouldn't quite come to him. The more he thought about it, the more he dismissed the idea that this was some cosmic accident. Someone had placed this boat here on purpose.

“Are we almost done here?” Kitty asked from somewhere behind him.

Jack turned his head and found her leaning against the door, hunched over with her head lowered and her arms wrapped tightly around her middle. Jack recognized the pose from the years he spent in foster care, protecting himself from the blows of the people who were supposed to care for him. She was looking at her bare feet, her toes curled into the dirty floor.

Jack pushed off from the chair and gingerly approached her. “Kitty, sweetheart, are you all right?” He touched her lightly on the shoulder and she flinched. “It’s okay. We’re done here. We can leave now.”

“Did you get everything you needed?” Her voice sounded strained as though she were in pain.

He wanted to look at the boat some more, but right now, nothing else seemed to matter but getting Kitty as far away from the place as possible. “I’d like to get Kenny in here, so he could film it, but...” There was a flash of light behind him and Jack turned around to find the boat gone. The tables and chairs were back where they were supposed to be and it was as though the boat had never been there. Even the fishy smell was gone.

Kitty raised her head and gasped. “Oh, wow. What just happened?”

“I have no idea,” Jack said numbly, staring at the spot where the boat had been just seconds ago. He rubbed the back of his neck. Had it really been nothing more than mass hallucination? “But let’s get the hell out of here before the cops get suspicious.”

He placed an arm around Kitty and she turned her face toward him, clutching his shirt in her tiny fists. A rush of tenderness flowed through Jack and he slipped his other arm around her to cradle her against his body, burying his face in her pink hair and breathing her clean, floral scent.

“I’m afraid, Jack,” she whispered.

Jack tightened his arms around her. “Don’t worry, baby. I won’t let anything happen to you.” And he found himself meaning it more than he had ever meant anything in his life. “Do you want me to take you home? We can get waffles some other time.”

“I don’t want to go back there, Jack.” She slid her hands to his waist and kept them there, nuzzling his chest with her nose. Raising her head, she gave him a shaky smile. “And you promised me waffles.”

Jack dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “So I did.” He framed her elfin face between his hands and lowered his head to brush his lips against her cheek, her chin, before pressing a kiss on the corner of her mouth. “Let’s go then.”

Chapter Four

After stopping by at a drugstore to pick up a pair of pink gardening clogs and white cotton panties that Jack had insisted on buying for her, the two of them finally managed to make it to the waffle house. It was a 50s style diner complete with checkered plastic tablecloths and a jukebox playing Connie Francis. A busty, blonde-haired waitress dressed in a burgundy and white polyester uniform gave Kitty a quick once-over, raised an overly plucked eyebrow, and led them to a booth near the back of the restaurant, plunking down laminated menus in front of them.

Kitty ordered the banana walnut waffle with extra whipped cream on top, four strips of bacon, and a glass of grapefruit juice. Jack asked for the strawberry shortcake waffle, scrambled eggs and bacon, and black coffee. The waitress wrote down their orders while staring openly at Kitty's hair.

"Why d'ya do it?"

Kitty frowned at the waitress. She was used to people gawking at her hair—after all, a woman did not have pink hair without expecting some attention—but no one had ever asked her the reason behind it. What bothered her was not that she couldn't remember the why of it, but the how and when of it. "I don't know." She shrugged. "Just felt like doing it at the time."

The waitress nodded as though Kitty's answer made perfect sense to her. "You look like a girl from the crazy Japanese comics my fourteen-year-old is nuts about. And I'm not just saying that 'cause you're Japanese." She beamed at her and Jack. "I'll go put in your orders. Be right back with your drinks."

Japanese? Kitty leaned against the hard plastic backing of the booth and looked at Jack who was watching her intently. Kitty shivered under the scrutiny of his silver eyes. Even covered by his robe and his jacket, she felt ... naked. She was suddenly grateful for the underpants Jack had bought for her. Bracing her hands on the cold table, she leaned toward him. "Jack, do I look Japanese to you?"

His sensual mouth curled into a frown of concern. "You certainly have Asian features. Your eyes and skin tone indicate you must have had ancestors that hailed from that part of the world." He placed his folded arms on the table and leaned toward her. "Do you know your ethnic background?"

She had never pegged herself into a specific ethnicity. She had never thought about it. When she tried to remember what her parents looked like, she found ... nothing. Dragging a hand down her face, she sank back against her chair and hugged Jack's jacket tighter around herself. What the hell was going on with her that she couldn't even remember what her parents looked like? On top of that, there were imaginary dragons popping out of nowhere to talk to her and ghost ships and giant naked man statues. She clutched her head in her hands. Was she going crazy? Maybe none of this was real and she was actually locked up in a padded wall somewhere, desperately needing her next lithium dose. She almost jumped when a hand grabbed her wrist and gave it a squeeze.

She slowly straightened in her seat and looked around for a moment, unable to remember where she was or what she had been doing. Blind panic clawed at her insides and her blood became ice-cold. *Where the hell am I?*

Her glance landed on the man sitting across the table from her. He had short black hair that stood up in spikes on his head and a face that was beautiful in its cruel angles and sharp planes. There was a white pencil-thin scar above his upper lip and a ragged, puckered one just below his hairline. He was dressed in a black long-sleeved T-shirt that looked almost gray from multiple washings. Even under his shirt, she could see the lean, hard lines of his body. He reminded her of an alley cat, feral and hungry. Intense silver eyes stared at her with curiosity ... and concern. Did she know him? What did he want from her?

"Whoa." The grip around her wrist eased a fraction and he snapped his fingers in front of her face. "Sweetheart, come back to me." He went around the table and slid into the booth next to her, summoning a server with a complicated hand signal. When the girl came around, he said, "Bring me a glass of Coke, lots of ice. Hurry."

Kitty pressed herself against the wall as the dark-haired stranger reached for her. When he pressed his warm palm against her face, the panic and fear she had been feeling slowly drained out of her body and she allowed herself to relax against his hand.

When the server came back with a glass of dark liquid, he pushed it toward Kitty, pointing the straw at her lips. "Drink it. All of it. Now."

Kitty instinctively bristled at the stranger's commanding tone, but the look in that steely gaze told her he was contemplating pouring the drink over her head if she didn't drink it right away. She took a wary sip and gasped. It was so cold. And sweet. Her taste buds shrieked for more. Suddenly, she couldn't get enough of it in her mouth. She sucked strongly on the straw, gulping and swallowing the sweet ambrosia, but blinding pain struck the middle of her forehead, immediately shooting through the rest of her skull. She groaned. The straw popped out of her mouth and she sat back against her seat, pressing the butt of her palm against the spot above her eye.

"Brain freeze," the man next to her murmured, his velvety voice laced with laughter. "Damn, Kitty, I said drink it, not inhale it."

Kitty. She froze. She removed her palm from her face and slowly turned her head to look at the dark-haired stranger. "Jack?" The corners of his mouth quirked up in a smile and warmth spread throughout her body. "Hi."

A rough, callused finger brushed a lock of her hair off of her temple. "Where did you go just then? You scared the hell out of me."

"I..." She dropped her head against the back of her seat and encountered his arm. Taking a deep breath, she pressed herself against his side, exhaling slowly through her nose. "I don't know. My head ... it gets screwed up sometimes. I think I'm going nuts."

He shook his head. "No. That was just shock finally catching up to you. You've had a rough couple of days, haven't you?" With his finger, he traced the side of her face, softly stroking her cheekbone and jaw line. "Christ, Kitty, you scared me." He crushed her against him, burying his face in her neck.

Kitty allowed him to hold her, slipping her arms around his neck and embracing him. She couldn't believe she'd only known this man for a day, yet seemed to need him as much as her next gulp of air. She inhaled his strong masculine scent. He smelled like smoke, body soap, and lemons. She opened her mouth against his throat. His jugular vein pulsed against her tongue. She licked experimentally at it and he shivered in her arms.

He pulled back from her and his silver eyes were clouded with something she recognized as lust. Wrapping one hand around the nape of her neck, he scraped her jaw

with his thumb. "Kitty," he muttered thickly. "You're so goddamn sexy."

"Jack," she said against his lips. "So are you."

"Damn." He eased his hard body away from her and drew a deep breath, running a hand through his short black hair. "We ought to stop this or we'd end up giving everyone in this restaurant a fucking show." He paused, chuckled at his own words, and slipped his arm off her shoulders. "Unless you want to get out of here and..."

Kitty laughed nervously. This man wanted her very much and she wanted him back with an intensity that scared her. She couldn't afford to be running off to make love to him when she had no idea what the hell was going on with her. Little by little, she was losing her mind and didn't want to drag him down with her. Though she knew she should let him go for his own good, she was selfish enough keep him around for a while yet. In the deepest corner of her soul, a yawning abyss was waiting to swallow her whole and she was afraid what would happen if he left.

"Waffles, remember?"

Jack grinned and winked at her. "A woman after my own heart." He slid out of the booth and returned to his seat, straightening his shirt.

As if on cue, their waitress arrived bearing plates of food. She placed their respective orders in front of them, patted Kitty's hair with fascination, and bustled away with a saucy shake to her hips. Kitty looked down at her banana and walnut waffles and inhaled deeply. Her stomach growled in response. Jack smiled, shook his head, and dug into the plate in front of him. An answering smile tugged at the corners of Kitty's lips and she relieved her cutlery of its paper napkin restraints.

Kitty watched as Jack sliced a healthy piece of his waffle, shoved it into his mouth, and chewed with gusto. He was obviously a man who enjoyed his food, but based on the almost painful leanness of his face, it wasn't something he did often. It was kind of fun to watch him eat. "So tell me about you, Jack Ridley. Anything in your past I should know about?"

He stopped chewing and washed the contents of his mouth with a gulp of coffee. Wiping his lips with his napkin, he folded his arms across his chest and shrugged. "Not really."

"Oh." She'd never had any trouble getting a man to talk before. Working at a bar, she learned that all she had to do was ask a leading question and the man took over from there. Kitty forced her lips into a smile. "Did you grow up here in Chicago?"

Jack folded a slice of bacon in half and shoved it into his mouth. "Yeah."

The smile on Kitty's face wavered. "Oh. Do your parents live in the area?" Not that he *looked* like he had parents. There was a hardness to him that told her he didn't exactly grow up in a nurturing home.

"My folks died when I was seven. My grandmother raised me until she died when I was ten. It was the foster care system after that." He finished the bacon on his plate and nodded at hers. "Are you going to eat those?"

Kitty looked down at her plate and realized she wasn't as hungry as she was a few minutes ago. She pushed her plate toward him. When she reached across the table for his hand, he pulled it out of the way. It stung a little, but she was more concerned with the pain she could feel radiating from him. "Oh. Well, you turned out okay, right? You're a reporter and everything. You must have gone to college."

He shrugged like it was no big deal. "My grandmother left me some money in a trust

that I received when I turned eighteen. I used it to put myself through school.” He glanced down at her uneaten food. “Lost your appetite, huh?”

“What? Oh, heck no.” Kitty snatched a piece of bacon from her plate and shoved it into her mouth, forcing herself to chew. She managed to swallow it with a mouthful of grapefruit juice. *Pity is the last thing this guy needs.* “You thought you could pull me in with a sob story? I heard a dozen like yours just this week from guys trying to score with me.” She rolled her eyes. “I work in a bar, for God's sake. I hear so many stories like yours every night I could give Dr. Phil a run for his money.”

When he only stared at her, Kitty was afraid she may have gone too far, but a grin slowly stole across his face and a chuckle burst out of his mouth. “You are one funny girl, sweetheart.” He placed his hand over hers, gave it a brief squeeze, and returned to his plate of food. Shoveling another forkful of waffles and strawberries into his mouth, he nodded at her plate. “Eat up, funny girl. And while you do, you can tell me about *your* sob story. You just may hook me with it. I'm pretty easy.”

The bacon Kitty had swallowed sat heavily in her stomach. “Well, um ... I was raised here in Illinois.” She paused, praying her faulty memory didn't fail her this time. “Evanston.” *Yeah, that sounds about right.* “Umm ... boring suburban childhood. I think I may have played the flute in high school, but I can't remember.” She shrugged, hoping to convey an air of apathy.

A smirk curled his lips. “Let me guess. Upper middle class upbringing with parents who are both white-collar. You wanted to do something creative, but they wanted you to grow up to be one of them. You dyed your hair pink, got yourself a liberal arts degree, and ran away to the big city. Saddled with a Masters in Art...” He narrowed his eyes at her. “No, Literature—you couldn't exactly find a job, so you decided you were going to bide your time as a waitress at the Red Dragon Bar until you make it big. How on point am I?”

Kitty summoned a smile to her face. She liked the idea of being a frustrated artist or writer toiling away at a dead-end job while waiting for the big time. It was deliciously melodramatic. “Yeah, that sounds about right. You're wrong about the degree, though. It's Art History.” *Lies, all lies.* Weren't they? Oh, hell, like she knew any better.

His silver eyes sparkled. “Either way, you sound like the kind of woman who wouldn't mind sitting through an eight-hour Bruce Lee marathon at the Landmark.”

“Bruce Lee?” She liked his films, didn't she? She seemed to recall watching a Bruce Lee film once and enjoying herself immensely. Her mind conjured an image of a big black bed that she lounged in while watching the film ... lying next to a man. She froze. Did she have a boyfriend or husband she had forgotten about? The big red dragon had mentioned she belonged to him. She frowned. What the hell was she even thinking? He was a big, red talking dragon, probably a by-product of her deteriorating mind, and Jack Ridley was real. Concrete. Solid. *And the owner of a very hard body.* “Yeah, I like Bruce Lee. Are you asking me out?”

“Oh, like you have anything better to do? You have a giant naked statue of a man standing in front of your apartment.” He chuckled and raked his gaze over her body. “We'll have to get you something else to wear, of course. Not that I don't find your outfit charming, but I'd like to see you in a dress. What do you say we hit a mall after this?”

The mention of the naked statue had Kitty chewing on her lower lip. She was being stalked by forces she couldn't even begin to understand and should be trying to contact a

priest or a witchdoctor. The last thing she should be doing was gallivanting around town with a handsome man clad only in her robe and underwear. She looked up at Jack, a refusal hovering on her lips, and changed her mind. Though he was trying to appear like he didn't care if she said yes or no, there was an expectant look on his face. She grasped his hand on the table. "I could stand to have another slinky dress in my closet. I may even sleep with you afterward to make up for it."

He choked on his coffee. "Jesus, Kitty, that's not what I meant."

She chuckled at the outraged look on his face and it felt good. "Jack, I'm kidding. A dress will get you a blowjob. A pair of Jimmy Choo shoes, on the other hand..."

Chapter Five

Even after they finished buying a dress and a pair of shoes for Kitty—she insisted on going to a discount shoe store—they still had a bit of time to kill before they had to be at the theater. Kitty was dying for a shower, but didn't want to go back to her place. Jack suggested they go to his apartment, but immediately regretted making the offer when he remembered what a shithole his place was. What would she think of him when she saw that his place was more suited to an eighteen-year-old frat boy than a grown man of thirty?

Unfortunately, they were already standing at the door and Jack's key was already in the lock. His hand froze, unable to turn the key.

She put a hand on his sleeve. "Jack, what's wrong?"

"Um." He turned to face her and propped his shoulder against the door, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. "My ... uh ... apartment is a little messy."

"Oh, Jack, like I care. I'm not a neat freak, either." She grinned and raised one black eyebrow. "How messy?"

"There may be some pizza boxes and beer cans on the floor." He sighed. He'd wanted to impress her. He was kind of hoping he'd be able to scrub his apartment from top to bottom before she came over for a visit. Ah, what the hell, he'd already told her the worst about him and she was still hanging around. "All right, it looks like a tornado has torn through a frat house."

"Big deal. I bet it's not that bad." She pushed past him and turned the doorknob herself, opening the door for the both of them. "Oh, good God." She looked over her shoulder at him, her violet eyes wide with shock. To her credit, she recovered quickly enough and flashed him one of those heart-stopping smiles. "Nothing a couple of bottles of Lysol, a few trashbags, and a really good vacuum cleaner couldn't fix."

Jack felt himself redden. "Well, why don't you go take a shower and I'll ... uh ... try to get rid of some of the trash." He handed her the shopping bags. "There should be an extra toothbrush in the drawer under the sink."

"You're a sweetheart." She stood on the tips of her toes and planted a kiss on his chin. "I'll be done in two shakes." She took two steps into his apartment and tripped on a tennis shoe. "I'm okay!"

She was sprawled gracelessly on the carpet, showing a good amount of olive skin through the opening of her robe. Jack pictured her long, slender legs wrapped around his hips and swallowed hard. He shut his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. He could be a gentleman about this. He wasn't about to take advantage of a woman in a vulnerable position. Mmm ... *position*. He could imagine himself standing behind her while she was crouched on his bed on all fours waiting for him to take her. He shook the image from his mind and rushed forward to give her a hand up.

She grasped his hand and allowed him to pull her up. With a smile, she removed his jacket and handed it to him. He wordlessly accepted it from her. She placed her hands on his shoulders and nuzzled his chest. He groaned, dropped his jacket on the floor, and put both hands on the cheeks of her ass to drag her against him. He held her for a moment before letting her go. She looked up at him with bemusement in her eyes.

“Go take a shower,” he muttered thickly. “I’ll take one after you.”

The tip of her pink tongue peeked out to touch the corner of her mouth. “Why don’t we take one together?”

Jack felt all the blood rush down from his head to plump up other portions of his anatomy. Taking a deep breath, he forced a forbidding look on his face. He could do this. He could be the good guy for once. While stoically standing by as she’d tried on different dresses in front of him, he’d made the decision not to touch her until the two of them got to the bottom of all the weird shit that had been happening. He could do this.

“Kitty...” he said through gritted teeth. “Just go.”

She responded with a saucy wink before turning on her heel to head for his bathroom. Halfway there, she paused, peeked over her shoulder at him, and slowly peeled off her robe, dropping it on the floor. She smiled wickedly at him, then walked on, having ensured that his attention was riveted on her naked back.

Jack did not budge from his spot until he heard the shower running. It wasn’t like he was in any condition to move, anyway, as his erection was pressing painfully against his thigh. He sighed and dragged a hand through his hair. Being a good guy was a pain in the ass.

Fetching a garbage bag from the kitchen, he began to pick up the trash in his immediate vicinity. By the time he was finished, he had filled up three giant garbage bags and the apartment smelled a little better. The next thing he tackled was the dirty dishes piled mountain-high by the sink. He couldn’t even remember the last time he did the dishes, but since he had resorted to eating on paper towels or straight out of a can about two months ago, it was probably about that long. It would explain the funky rotten food smell that attacked his nostrils each time he walked into his apartment. Somehow he managed to fit everything in the dishwasher, though he couldn’t quite figure out how he did it. He shrugged and began to wipe up the unrecognizable goop on the counter with some Lysol wipes he found under the sink.

He had just finished gathering up all his dirty clothes when Kitty walked out of the bathroom looking like a million and one dollars. The dress she had chosen was a wrap-around number cinched at her slender waist and sported a plunging neckline. It was black, stopped a few inches above her knees, and made of some kind of slinky, glossy material that clung hungrily to her breasts and hips. She had brushed her pink hair until it shone and gathered it in an up-do that was made to look like a crown. The strappy black sandals on her feet made her bare legs look longer and slimmer. Jack thought she looked like a Faerie Queen ... or the death of him, he couldn’t decide which.

“Do you like?” She pirouetted gracefully in front of him. “I used your razor to shave my legs, I hope you don’t mind.”

It took Jack a few seconds to form an actual coherent thought. Hell, she could have used his toothbrush to scrub her feet, if she wished. “You ... you look beautiful.” He cleared his throat and clutched the hamper of dirty clothes in front of his crotch, so she couldn’t see the effect she had on him. “Uh ... I found the TV remote for you.” He nodded at the coffee table. “I found the couch for you, too. You could watch TV while I take a shower and get dressed.”

She smiled briefly at him before her gaze slid over to the bags of garbage by the door. “I could get rid of those while you’re washing up. Where’s the trash chute?”

“Not with you looking so clean and pretty, you’re not.” He was appalled. How could

she even think he'd let her do that? "You stay here. Watch a *Sex in the City* rerun or something. I'll take care of those." He set down the hamper and grabbed two of the bags. It was perfect. He needed to get away from her, anyway. She was driving him nuts with her scent and nearness.

When he returned for the last bag of trash, he discovered that she had somehow found the in-unit washer and was feeding his dirty laundry into it. He groaned inwardly. Great, they hadn't even had their first date yet and already she had seen his grotty clothes. It was a wonder she hadn't run out of his apartment, shrieking in horror.

"Oh, shit, Kitty, you didn't have to do that." He rushed to her side and yanked a skanky-looking wifebeater from her clutches. He placed his hands on her shoulders and steered her toward the couch, brushing what suspiciously looked like potato chip crumbs from the cushions before sitting her down. "Watch TV. Take a load off." He grabbed the remote control from the coffee table and pressed it into her hand. "Stay put, Kitty. I mean it. Let me worry about the mess."

She gave him a droll look. "Jack, it's obvious you need help."

"I mean it, Kitty." He left her in the living room to finish loading his dirty clothes into the washer. When he returned, she was walking into the front door from the hallway and the last bag of trash was gone. He looked down at her four-inch heels and tried not to picture her tripping and breaking her neck on the way to the trash chute. "Damn it, Kitty. What did I say?"

She crossed her arms across her ample chest and narrowed her eyes at him. "Oh, I know you didn't just use that tone with me, Jack."

Jack gritted his teeth and buried both hands in his hair. *Goddamn disobedient maddeningly sexy female*. "Kitty, I'm trying very, very hard to be a gentleman to you here, okay? You've had a rough day and I didn't want to add to it by attacking you like a ravening wolf. But you're making it very, very hard for me to be nice to you."

The corners of her lips quirked up in a saucy smile. "Is it very, very hard, Jack?"

He growled and threw her a dirty look. "I'm going to take a shower, then we're going out for a nice steak dinner and a movie. *Stay. Here. Kitty.*" He stalked away from her and headed for the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

* * * *

What the hell was she doing? She wasn't a seductress and yet here she was, flaunting herself in front of Jack like she was just begging to be taken. She remembered the way he had looked at her and shivered. She might as well have slathered herself in steak sauce and thrown herself at a starving lion.

Rubbing her bare arms, she rose from the couch and walked over to the window, gingerly stepping over a thirty-pound dumbbell on the floor. The city lights twinkled at her and she felt a rush of melancholia surge through her body. Pressing her fist against her mouth to stifle a sob, she wondered at the cause of it and why it felt like her heart was being torn into pieces inside her chest.

It had to be Jack, of course. Her world was falling apart and he was making her feel like she shouldn't give a shit. With him, she could forget all the craziness that had been happening to her the last month or so. If she were smarter, she wouldn't wait until he was out of the shower but walk out of the door now. The man was definitely trouble. She had no business flirting with a mortal—*whoa, where did that come from?* The word was so

foreign in her mind that it left her shaking.

"You look beautiful, beloved."

Kitty whirled away from the window and found Jack standing before her wearing only an arrogant smile on his darkly handsome face. She raked her gaze hungrily over his naked frame, lingering a little too long on the long, thick cock that hung between his lean, muscular thighs. She forced herself to look away from his cock back to his face and gasped. It *wasn't* Jack.

"Shit, what are you doing here? Go away." She glanced nervously at the closed bathroom door behind him. "If he catches you here, I swear I'll kill you." Jack's grin spread across his lips. "You'll kill me? For that insignificant mortal?" He propped his hands on his naked hips and shook his head. "Silly girl, I can't be killed."

"I don't frickin' care what you are as long as you get the hell out of here." She spoke in a harsh whisper just in case Jack had the ears of a bat and could hear them through the shower. "Why don't you go back to my apartment and wait for me there."

"I don't have to do anything." He raised one eyebrow and examined her from head to toe with Jack's silver eyes. "You've never dressed this way for me." He approached her like a panther stalking a gazelle, morphing out of Jack's somber good looks and into his more obvious blond beauty, taking care to put on an obviously expensive all-white suit. He stroked his finger across her shoulder. "What makes him so special, I wonder?"

Kitty clenched her fists against her sides and had to restrain herself from tackling him to the floor and raking her claws down his pretty face. Behind him, the pathetic little plant sitting on Jack's kitchen counter burst into flames.

"Outstanding work!" He began to clap slowly, a mocking smile playing on his lips. "Let's see more of that."

With a screech, Kitty flew across the room, grabbed a plastic tumbler, filled it with water, and dumped it over the plant. Fury like she'd never felt before coursed through her veins and she slowly raised her head, glaring at the dragon masquerading as Jack. "You bastard, why did you do that?" She hurled the empty tumbler at him, hitting him square on the head. "What the hell did this man ever do to you that you'd want to set his apartment on fire?"

The dragon's mouth opened and closed as though he wanted to say something, but couldn't quite come up with the words. The welt on his forehead where the tumbler had hit him instantly disappeared. "That wasn't me, you stupid girl! That was all you!"

"Oh you are not going to blame this on me, motherfucker." She picked up a tennis shoe on the floor and threw it at him, but he easily dodged it. Even angrier that she had missed her target, she grabbed an umbrella, walked up to him, and thwacked him on the shoulder. "Get. The. Hell. Out. Of. Here. Or I swear to God, I will kill you where you stand."

She raised the umbrella to hit him again, but he caught it before it hit him on the head. Snatching the umbrella from her grasp, he straightened to his full height—which was about a foot taller than her—and gave her a considering look. "When on earth did you turn into a termagant? I do not like this development, Kiyo. I don't like it at all. You better get this ... viciousness out of your system before you come home."

With a wrathful shriek, she shoved him away from her. "*Get bent, pretty boy!*"

"Kitty? Kitty, are you all right?" Jack called from the bathroom.

She smacked the white-suited dragon on the chest. "Get out, he's coming. Get..."

“Whoa, who are you talking to?”

Kitty turned around and there stood Jack, soaking wet from his shower with a towel wrapped around his slim hips. She raised a sheepish hand to her face and tucked an errant lock of hair behind her ear. She didn't have to look behind her to know that the dragon had disappeared. “I was uh—talking to the TV. Um ... really bad horror movie. Killer standing behind the girl. She wouldn't ... uh ... get out of the house.”

He gave her a measuring look as though he didn't quite believe her. His glance slid to the TV, which was obviously off. “Was the movie happening in your head?”

Kitty felt a full-on blush blooming in her face and wondered if she was as red as a tomato. Great, now Jack probably thought she was crazy. “No ... um ... I turned off the TV right before you came running out of the bathroom. The movie was too scary.”

“Huh.” A knot appeared between his black brows. Narrowing his eyes, he began to sniff the air. “What's that smell? Was something burning?”

Kitty squirmed before his scrutiny and prayed he didn't turn around and see the demolished plant. She had to distract him somehow. Summoning a sexy smile to her lips, she put her finger in her mouth, sucked it for a moment, then dragged it down her chin, her neck, down to the deep V of her wrap dress. Jack's heated gaze followed the descent of her finger and a distinct bulge began to form underneath his towel.

She couldn't help but get turned on herself. Her nipples stiffened beneath the thin fabric of her dress and her skin tingled in anticipation of his touch. “You want to give me a kiss, Jack?” she whispered.

Jack's silver eyes became so dark they were almost black. He took a step toward her and placed his hand on her shoulder, stroking his fingers up the side of her neck. He cupped her jaw and scraped his thumb across her chin.

Kitty's mouth became so dry she found it hard to swallow. The look in his eyes made her feel like a small animal trapped by a very large, very dangerous predator. Oddly enough, she felt like giggling. “You don't want to kiss me?”

“Maybe later. I'm gonna finish my shower.” With one last glance at her breasts, he strode back to the bathroom and slammed the door behind him.

Kitty propped her hands on her hips and stared at the closed door, breathing hard. Suddenly feeling cold, she picked up Jack's jacket and slipped it on, pulling it tight around her body. At that moment, she decided his scent on her skin was probably one of her most favorite things in the world. Now if only she could remember the rest of them. With a sigh, she dropped her weight on the couch and waited for him to finish showering.

Chapter Six

After a quick dinner at Jack's favorite Italian restaurant, the two of them finally made it to the Bruce Lee festival at the Landmark. The pimply kid at the box office couldn't keep his eyes off Kitty's tits. Jack had been tempted to reach into the little glass cubicle and choke him, but Kitty put a restraining hand on his arm. Jack snatched the tickets of the kid's shaking hands and led Kitty inside with his hand pressed firmly against the small of her back.

He didn't like that he felt so possessive of her when he only met her ... the night before. There was a lot he really didn't know about her. There was also a possibility that she was batshit crazy. He *had* heard her arguing heatedly with someone in the living room, which was why he had rushed out of the shower butt-naked and dripping. When he saw there was no one there but her out there, he'd felt distinctly uneasy. Maybe she was like Sally Field in *Sybil* and one of her masculine personalities had come out to argue with her for some reason.

Crazy or not, Jack was still willing to seriously hurt anyone who dared hurt a pink hair on her head. Sleeping soundly with her head propped on his shoulder, Kitty let out a tiny, delicate snore, and Jack felt a fist squeeze his heart. He had never felt such all-consuming passion for anyone before and frankly, it scared the shit out of him. He was almost sure he could love her and he couldn't remember ever loving anyone in his entire life. It was pretty sad, but before he had met her, he had already come to accept that he just wasn't capable of loving anyone more than he loved himself.

He dropped a kiss on her forehead and tightened his arm around her shoulders. She had stayed awake through *Fist of Fury*, began to nod off during *Way of the Dragon*, and woke up halfway through *Enter the Dragon* only to fall asleep again. *Game of Death* had just started and he almost wished she would wake up because it was his favorite movie and he really wanted to share it with her.

"Kitty," he whispered in her ear. She stirred and raised her head to look at him. Even in the dark, he could see that her violet eyes were bleary with exhaustion. The tenderness he felt for her threatened to choke him and he forced himself to swallow past the lump in his throat. "Maybe we should go home, huh? You've had a long day. Don't you want to lie in your own bed?"

"No," she murmured, covering her yawn with her palm. "I want to go home with you. I want to sleep in your bed."

Jack thought it'd be kind of nice to just lie in bed with her and cuddle her while she slept. He squeezed her against him and buried his face in her hair, breathing in her floral scent. "Okay." He dropped a kiss on her nose. "Let's go."

"But Jack..." She looked at the screen where Bruce Lee had just appeared wearing his infamous yellow jumpsuit. "*Game of Death* is your favorite movie."

He froze. "How did you know that?"

"Um..." She shrugged. "Didn't you tell me over dinner?"

"I must have." He stood up, stretching his arms over his head. His body felt a little stiff from sitting in the same position for six and a half hours. He glanced down at Kitty and held out his hand to her. "Let's go, baby."

“Okay.” She slipped her tiny hand into his and yanked herself up, straightening her dress with her free hand as she stood.

The bike was parked only a block from the theater. Jack released Kitty's hand long enough to put his helmet on her head and secure it under her chin. He chuckled when he saw her smile even through the dark visor. He got on first and Kitty jumped on after him, sliding her arms around his hips and cradling him between her thighs. Jack tried his best to concentrate on guiding the bike lest he crashed and killed them both.

They reached his apartment building within minutes. Jack parked the bike in the apartment garage and chained it up, while Kitty removed the helmet from her head and gingerly unseated herself. When Jack looked up, Kitty had the helmet cradled against her side and was staring outside, at the neighborhood park across the street.

He put his hand on her shoulder and she jumped. He apologized with a kiss on her hair. “What's wrong, Kitty? What are you looking at?”

“The park,” she answered, her voice sounding strangely hollow. “Let's go for a walk, Jack. I want to go for a walk.”

“In the park?” Jack raised his eyebrows. Donnelly Park was a local hangout for the winos, punks, and crackheads of the neighborhood. He looked at his watch. It was almost two o'clock in the morning. “Sweetheart, I don't think it'd be safe.”

“I want to go for a walk, Jack.”

She sounded dazed, though her voice carried an oddly musical lilt. If he didn't know any better, he would almost say she was hypnotized. He placed his hands on her shoulders and forced her to face him. Her violet eyes were pleasantly blank.

“Christ.” He touched his forehead to hers. She was cold to the touch. “Okay, Kitty, okay. Let's go.”

She slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow and leaned against him as they crossed the street. The sweet smell of marijuana assaulted Jack's nose the second they stepped into the park and he held Kitty tighter against him. The punks smoking weed on a bench nearby looked up curiously at them, but ignored them for the most part. Behind some bushes, he heard a rustle and a slurping sound. It didn't take much imagination to guess what it was. When a bum tugged on his jacket to ask for spare change, Jack gave him whatever was in his pocket just so he'd go away.

A few more steps and Kitty seemed to wake up against him. She pulled away from him and looked around wildly as though she wasn't quite sure where she was. A frisson of fear crept up Jack's spine. When her violet eyes met his, there wasn't a flash of recognition. She had no idea who he was. He reached a hand toward her and she almost tripped on her own feet trying to get away from him.

“There you are, young miss,” boomed an impossibly deep voice from somewhere behind the trees. “I've been waiting for you.”

Jack grabbed Kitty's wrist and pulled her toward him. She screamed and batted at his arm, fighting to escape him like a wild animal. One of her sharp fingernails caught him just under the chin and a sharp pain like a paper cut told him she had drawn blood. But she didn't even notice. She began to beat against his chest with her little fists and Jack had to force her hands to her sides to keep her from hurting him and herself.

“Young miss,” the voice said and the surrounding air crackled with energy that reminded Jack of lightning.

He didn't understand what was going on with Kitty, but he did know he had to get

them as far away from the park before the owner of the voice decided to step away from its hiding place. In his arms, Kitty continued to fight him and he hoped to God he didn't have to knock her out just to get her to calm down. He would rather cut off his own arm than hurt her, but he knew if it came to punching her lights out to save their lives, he would do it.

"Young miss."

The owner of the voice was someone who was used to giving orders and even Jack was forced to stop and take notice. All of his instincts, everything that had ever kept him alive for the past thirty years screamed at him to run and leave Kitty to the booming voice, but he resolutely kept his grip on her. If he died tonight defending Kitty from whatever the hell was chasing her—well, shit, it would definitely suck, but it would be a noble death and it would be worth it.

"I have to get out of here," she muttered, pulling at his jacket. "He's going to catch me and kill me. I have to get out of here."

Jack cupped her face between his hands. "Who, Kitty? Who's going to kill you?"

"Nobody," replied a deep voice behind him. "I'm not here to hurt her."

Jack reflexively blocked Kitty's body with his and whirled around to face the Darth Vader-sounding motherfucker. Jack had never considered himself a coward, but he would be a liar if he didn't admit that the big black dude in front of him didn't scare him a little. The guy had to be at least seven feet tall and maybe about four hundred pounds. Jack himself was only six-three and two hundred pounds soaking wet, but years of bar brawls and Bruce Lee movies ensured he would at least last five minutes with this guy. Kitty squeaked and dug her fingers into his back.

Jack reached behind him and gave her a reassuring pat. "It's okay, baby. S'okay." He raised his head to look at the giant. "What do you want from her?"

The man, dressed in a tailored suit as dark as the night that surrounded them, flicked an imaginary speck of lint from his sleeve and looked back at him with boredom. "Do not concern yourself with our affairs, mortal. Best you leave Kiyo to me and go on your merry way." He jerked his giant head toward Jack's apartment building. "Get out of here before I lose my temper and decide to yank your spine out of your mouth."

Mortal? What the hell kind of role-playing shit did he stumble into? Did this guy believe he was some kind of supernatural being and Kitty—*Kiyo?*—was his slave-girl? Jack tightened his grip on the woman shivering behind him. There was no way he was giving up Kitty to this creepy fucker. He reached inside his pocket to check, if by chance, he had brought his Swiss Army knife with him. His fingers gripped only his cell phone. Ah hell, he supposed he could always dial 911 and summon the cops to rescue them.

The giant extended his long arm toward him. "Give her to me, mortal. She won't be harmed, I swear to you. All I want is to take her home."

Jack stepped away from the huge black hand. "She's not going anywhere with you, buddy. She belongs with me."

The man threw back his head and laughed out loud, scaring even the previously apathetic potheads sitting nearby. They looked at the giant, whispered frantically to each other, and ran out of the park. The bum Jack had given money to sidled up to the bench they had vacated, shrugged, and lay down to sleep.

"Do you think I won't hurt you, mortal? I can snap you over my knee like kindling if I so choose."

Jack took a deep breath and stared at the giant with steely determination. "Maybe so, but I'm still not giving her to you. You'll have to pry her from my cold, dead hands."

The giant flashed him a set of blindingly white teeth. "So be it." He grabbed the front of Jack's shirt and used it to lift him over his head like he weighed no more than an ounce. "Goodbye, mortal."

Jack closed his eyes as he sailed through the air before landing on the ground several feet away. The impact almost knocked him out, but he held on and refused to pass out. *Kitty needs me.* He weakly lifted his head, spitting out grass and dirt. When he tried to get up, he almost fainted again from the pain. He didn't need an X-ray to tell him he had a couple of broken ribs and was probably bleeding internally.

In front of him, Kitty faced the giant with her fists clenched at her sides and her spine ramrod straight. Instead of being afraid, she looked up at the black man with fury, her long pink hair whipping in the wind behind her. Jack tried to yell at her to run, but it only came out as a croak. He dropped his head in defeat. The giant was going to crush her with his bare hands and Jack couldn't even do anything to help her.

"I am not going anywhere with you! Just leave me alone."

Her voice carried in the wind, comforting Jack in his despair. His Kitty wasn't going to go down without a fight. He coughed and spat out something thicker than spit.

Bracing his hands on the ground, he attempted to lift himself again, but his arms quickly collapsed under him and he landed face down on the grass.

"You must leave this world, Kiyo," the giant said. "Your presence alone is disrupting the fabric of its reality. It's unnatural that you should be here. If you stay any longer, you will destroy it and everyone living in it. Including your beloved human!"

"You're fucking crazy," Kitty screamed. "If you hurt him again, I swear I will tear you apart limb from limb. Just get the hell away from us!"

There was a bright explosion above Jack's head and it took him a few seconds to realize that all the trees were on fire. He chanced a glance upward and was momentarily mesmerized by the umbrella of fire above him, only looking away when the blaze began to hurt his eyes. He coughed again, this time from the smoke burning his lungs. Ignoring the pain in his side, he reached for a clump of grass in front of him and used it to drag himself forward. He repeated the motion, gritting his teeth. He had to get to Kitty. He had to make sure she was safe.

Suddenly, she was kneeling next to him and putting his arm around her neck. With a grunt, she lifted him to his knees, but he was too heavy for her. They toppled to the grass together with her landing on top of him.

"Come on, Jack," she begged. "Get up."

He raised his head. In the amber glow of the fire above them, she had never looked more beautiful. Maybe it was hallucination brought on by smoke inhalation, but he thought she looked like an angel. "Go. Leave me here."

"Fuck you," she said fiercely. "I'm not leaving you. If you don't fucking get up, I'm going to sit down next to you and we can burn together."

"Shit. You're a little brat, you know that?" With the strength he didn't know he had, he hauled himself up to his feet with Kitty at his side guiding him. Because of the smoke, he couldn't see very well and hoped he didn't accidentally lead them deeper into the park.

"Come on, Jack, hurry. It's getting a little too hot in here."

As if on cue, the skies opened up and poured without warning, effectively putting out

the fire above their heads. Jack wrapped his arms around Kitty, luxuriating in her heat and softness. The rain was freezing cold, but he didn't care. Kitty was holding him and they were alive. She felt so good pressed against his body. He could almost ignore the stabbing pain in his side.

He looked heavenward and allowed the rain to wash the blood from his face. In the mist that formed from the smoke and moisture, the sputtering flames looked like drunken fireflies. He couldn't help but admire the absurd beauty of it. Within moments, the fire was extinguished and the rain suddenly stopped as though a divine hand had reached out and turned it off.

"Nature's own emergency sprinklers," he murmured to himself.

"What?" Kitty asked, still valiantly trying to hold him up.

"Nothing. Never mind." From a distance, he could hear the sirens of the fire trucks headed toward them. Even though it felt like a knife in the ribs, he couldn't help but laugh out loud.

* * * *

"Well, shit, this has to be the weirdest date I've ever been on," Jack said as Kitty eased him down on his couch. "And oddly enough, the most fun."

"Nice save." Kitty chuckled as she pulled off his shoes. She leaned over him and began to unbuckle his belt, her long hair brushing against his belly. "Are you sure you don't want the paramedics to check you out, Jack? They're just downstairs."

"I'm fine. Bruised ribs, that's all. It doesn't even hurt that much anymore." As soon as he said the words, he realized how true they were. He had been near death until Kitty had touched him with her hands. He knew it sounded crazy, but he had felt it for himself. Kitty, merely by touching him, had ... *fixed* him.

"God, Jack, you scared the crap out of me. I thought you were going to die." She efficiently unbuttoned and unzipped his pants, then pulled them down his legs. "I mean, you were just lying there and you wouldn't get up. I was..." She dropped the sodden pants on the coffee table and sat down next to him, covering her mouth with her palm.

"Hey." He sat up and cradled her against him as she began to sob. Gut-wrenching sobs that racked her small frame and broke his heart. "It's okay, Kitty. I'm fine now."

She raised her head, her violet eyes swimming with tears, and smacked him on the arm with the back of her hand. "Thanks to me, you big goober. If I hadn't made you get up, you'd still be lying there, probably burned to a crisp by now."

"Hey, the rain would have put out the fire before it got me." He started to chuckle, but thought better of it. Instead he ran his hand through his damp hair and sighed. "Kitty, what happened tonight? Even before that big guy popped up, you totally flipped out on me. At one point, I don't think you even recognized me."

"Oh God," she whispered more to herself than to him. "It happened again."

Jack squeezed her hand. "What happened again, sweetheart?"

She pulled herself out of his embrace and rose from the couch. Turning away from him, she tugged at the tie on the side of her wrap dress and pushed the garment off her shoulders, letting it drop to the floor. She picked up the robe she had worn that morning, slipped it on, then turned around to face him again. "Jack, I..."

The pain in her eyes was almost his undoing. He wanted to get up and gather her in his arms, but she held out a hand to stop him. "What, baby?"

“I think I'm broken.”

Chapter Seven

“What are you talking about?”

Jack was lying against the cushions, his long legs propped up on the coffee table in front of him. She thought his color looked a lot better, especially since he was as pale as a corpse just moments earlier. The black button-down shirt he wore was soaking wet and clung to his lean, muscled chest. She wanted to take it off him, so she could see for herself that he was as fine as he proclaimed, but couldn't trust herself not to break down in front of him some more and soak him with her tears.

“My memory ... it's totally shot. I can't remember anything past the last month or so. I don't remember what my parents look like ... I can't even remember their names.” She folded her arms tightly across her chest and leaned against the kitchen counter. The spot on the couch next to Jack beckoned, but she resisted. She could never think straight when he was near and she needed her faculties now more than ever. “Lately I've been blacking out and when I come to, I'd have no idea where I am or how I got there. It happened this morning at the waffle house.” She smiled sheepishly at him. “I couldn't remember who you were.”

The grin he gave her was crooked. “That's all right, sweetheart. Most mornings, I don't remember who I am, either.”

Kitty knew he was only kidding, but she felt like screaming at him. Could he even understand what it felt like to wake up and find a gaping hole where a brain is supposed to be? “That's not what I mean, Jack. I really *didn't* remember you. Like I had never met you. That place in my brain where I store my memories of you ... it was just ... not there.” She threw her arms in the air, unable to explain. “God, I don't know.” She clutched her head for a moment, then looked up, compelling him to understand with her eyes. “Does ... that even make sense?”

Jack laughed, but there was no humor in it. “If I could only tell you how many times I've woken up without knowing where I am or how I got there.” He rubbed the scar on his forehead. “Kitty, that doesn't make you crazy. It just means you need help. Have you been to a doctor?”

It was Kitty's turn to laugh. It was that or break down into gut-wrenching sobs. She knew once she started, she would never be able to stop. “Waste of time and money. I've been to two specialists and they couldn't tell me anything. I could have an inoperable tumor or something and wouldn't even know about it.” She tented her fingers over her nose and shut her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, Jack was staring at her, but his own eyes conveyed nothing. “God, I'm babbling. Forget I said anything. I'm probably in shock over what happened tonight. Delayed reaction or something.” She nodded at him. “You should probably take off your shirt. It's soaked. You'll get a cold.”

Jack looked down at himself as though he hadn't noticed his wet shirt. “Oh.” He unbuttoned his shirt half of the way, then pulled it over his head, his muscles rippling with the easy grace of his movements. He placed the shirt on top of the pants, then raised his gaze to her. “Is this better?”

“Uh-huh.” Kitty could have swallowed her tongue. She'd seen Jack shirtless earlier when he stepped out of the shower, but was too distracted with her dragon problem to

really pay attention. Simply put, Jack was solidly built. His chest muscles looked firm and his stomach didn't appear to have an ounce of fat in it. Whipcord-lean and strong, he reminded her of a prized racehorse. She took a deep breath and blinked. He had a tattoo of some kind that wrapped around his bicep. "What is that?"

He extended his arm straight out and rolled it at the shoulder so he could take a look at it. "Oh. It's a good-luck dragon. I got it in college. A couple of friends and I got really drunk one night and one of the geniuses suggested we..."

Kitty felt as though someone had taken a bat to her gut. White noise, the crinkling sound that took over TV stations at three in the morning, blared in her ears. When she looked at Jack on the sofa, there were two of him, one hovering above the other. Feeling a little dizzy, she grabbed the back of a chair to keep herself on her feet. "A dragon?"

"Yeah... Kitty, are you okay?" He leapt to his feet and rushed to her side, slipping his arm around her shoulders. "Let's take a seat on the couch, okay? I will..."

"No! Don't touch me!" She slid out of his hold and pushed him away, tripping on her own feet in her hurry to get away from him. "You're behind all of this, aren't you? That stupid boat and the statue and my shitty memory and the dragon that comes and talks to me... You're in cahoots with him or something. I don't know why you're doing this or if you're trying to drive me crazy—just fucking stay away from me!"

Jack stood before her in his boxer shorts, his arms akimbo. "There's a dragon that comes and talks to you?"

"Oh, don't play innocent, Jack. You know exactly what I'm talking about." Kitty scrambled to her feet, batting away at Jack's hands. There was a deep burning feeling in her chest that was making it difficult for her to breathe. She had to get out of here, find a dark corner somewhere and pull herself tightly into a ball.

"Kitty, wait." He placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her around to face him. He looked confused, but obviously worried about her. "Whatever it is that's going on, I can assure you I have nothing to do with it. I'm just an average guy. The shit that went down tonight, the trees going up in flames ... *baby*, I can't do any of that."

Kitty lost the battle trying to rein in her tears and allowed them to spill down her cheeks. She pried off Jack's grip on her shoulders and pushed him away, taking a step back from him. Her eyes were drawn to the faded dragon tattoo on his arm. It looked more like a snake than anything, but it had a big head, big eyes, and a forked tongue. Unlike the red dragon stalking her, it didn't look scary. In fact, it was almost ... cute. She raised her gaze to Jack's silver one and found only concern ... and a deeper emotion that she wasn't ready to analyze. He *wanted* to understand her. For some reason, Jack cared about her. He would never hurt her.

She shoved her hands through her hair and whirled away from him, too ashamed to even look at him. Hell, he was the only thing that made sense in her life anymore. She didn't know what she would do if he decided she was nuts and turned her away. "Jack... I feel like I'm losing my mind. These blackouts I've been having... I can't tell what's real or imaginary anymore. The worst part is..." She looked back at him. He had not moved from his spot, his hands still propped on his lean hips. "I'm afraid I'll do something to hurt you." She watched him take a step toward her and froze when he slid his arms around her from behind.

"Shh, it's all right, baby," he murmured against her hair. He tightened his arms around her. "Kitty, I have to tell you something." His voice sounded strained, as though

he was struggling to keep his emotions in check.

Kitty held her breath, pressing her back against Jack's warm flesh for a moment, before turning in his arms to face him. "What?"

He cupped her face between his hands and brushed his lips against her forehead. "I've been thinking about this ... really thinking about it. The thing is ... all the weird stuff that's been happening..." He reached up to scratch the back of his neck and took a deep breath. "Baby, don't hate me for saying this ... but I think it's all you."

Kitty placed her hands on his bare chest. "You mean it's all in my head or I'm the one causing all of it?"

"No, it's definitely not all in your head." A grim smile slashed across his face. "I don't know why I didn't piece it all together before. I'm a reporter, for God's sake. I'm always looking to connect things. But this ... I don't know, maybe I was too close to the subject..." he pressed his palm against her lower back and pulled her tighter against him, "...that I couldn't stand back and view it objectively."

Kitty couldn't help the shudder that ran through her body. "Jack, spit it out."

"The ducks in Sheffield Park turning pink, the sunken boat turning up at the Red Dragon Bar, the giant naked statue appearing in front of your apartment, the fire in the park tonight ... baby, they all happened when you were around." His hands went back to her shoulders. "Somehow ... you're causing all of this. I remember something the black guy said earlier, that your presence in this world is disrupting this reality. I haven't quite figured out how you're doing it, but Kitty ... you're the common denominator."

Kitty felt the blood drain out of her face. A bolt of fear, which felt like a frozen finger, dragged its way down her spine. "No, no it can't be." *But it could.* She had been wandering around in Sheffield Park when the ducks turned pink.

Kitty felt her stomach tighten. A coldness unfurled from her gut, sprouting metal talons and clawing at her insides. Beads of sweat sprouted on her forehead and upper lip. Suddenly, she couldn't get enough air in her lungs and it felt as though there was a plastic bag over her head. Kitty attempted to slow down her breathing, but it was no use. Air sawed in and out of her mouth until she became light-headed. Little black dots appeared in her vision and she realized that if she didn't get her breathing in control, she was going to pass out very soon.

"Oh, hell. Kitty, look at me."

She could hear Jack but his voice sounded garbled and far away, as though she was underwater and he was on the surface. Kitty tried to tell him she was okay, that she just needed a minute, but the burning in her lungs wouldn't let her do it. Jack touched her face with the tips of his fingers, his voice sounding increasingly alarmed. Finally, he steered her toward the sofa and pushed her down. He pressed her legs open, grabbed her head, and forcibly lowered it until her face was resting between her knees.

"Okay, baby, I'm right here." Jack wrapped Kitty's fingers around his warm hand and used his other hand to keep them there. "We're going to breathe together, okay? Just follow my voice. One ... two ... three ... four... Inhale. One ... two ... three ... four ... exhale. That's good, baby, you're doing great. One ... two ... three ... four... Inhale."

Kitty automatically obeyed Jack's commands, inhaling and exhaling as he ordered it. As though she were drowning, she grasped at the sound of Jack's voice like a lifeline, letting it flow over her body like water. As she continued to stare at the dirty beige carpet, her breathing slowed down and the humming in her ears died down to a soft white noise.

After what seemed like an eternity, Kitty slowly raised her head and found Jack smiling gently at her.

He pushed Kitty's sweat-drenched hair out of her face. "You okay now?"

Kitty nodded weakly. Jack handed her a cup and she snatched it out of his hands, pouring its contents down her parched throat. *Water*. She wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her robe. When she opened her mouth to thank him, all that came out was a burp.

"That's my girl." He sat down on the coffee table and took her hand in his, pressing his lips against her palm. "Do you have any idea why any of this is happening? Did you exhibit special ... um ... abilities as a child?" He looked embarrassed as he said this, but managed to keep his eyes on hers. "Maybe ... that talking dragon knows what's going on? That scary fucker in the park seemed to know what he was talking about."

Kitty bit her lower lip. "You believe me?" She chuckled and to her ears, it sounded eerily like a sob. "God, Jack, I'm not even sure I believe myself."

"Sweetheart, I'm the biggest cynic in the world—hell, that's what I do for a living. I expose frauds." He chuckled wryly and ran a hand over his hair. "But the things I've seen in the last twenty-four hours ... I don't know." He shook his head. "I'm *prepared* to believe in everything you say."

Kitty enveloped Jack's hands between hers and bent her head to kiss his knuckles, savoring the feel of his warm, masculine skin against her lips. "Oh, Jack." She felt like a sweater slowly unraveling with him pulling at a loose thread. "Lately I've been feeling like ... my whole world was made up. That none of this is real."

"Kitty, I can assure you I'm real." He took her hand and placed it over his heart. It throbbed steadily and strongly under her palm. "Flesh and blood."

Kitty Jones is an identity you created for yourself. Your memories, your feelings, all of it you manufactured for yourself so you could have, as you called it, a 'true human experience.' She could still hear the dragon in her head, but this time, his words actually made sense to her. It could be why she couldn't clearly remember a life that preceded the last month. It never existed. "This guy—this dragon thing, he told me I have to go home 'cause I don't belong here. But I..." She looked imploringly into his silver eyes. "I mean, this is all so ... surreal to me. I feel like I'm stuck in a Tim Burton movie or something."

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath as though he were trying to compose himself. "There ... really is a talking dragon?"

"Uh-huh."

Jack's silver eyes sharpened and he sat up a little straighter. "That's wild ... what does he look like? Does he ... uh ... breathe fire?"

Kitty remembered waking up with the dragon lying next to her in bed and shivered. "Umm ... a little more than seven feet tall. And big. I mean gladiator-big. And he's got red and gold scales all over his body and a snout like an alligator's. And I don't know if he breathes fire."

Jack began to absently pat his chest and sides as though looking for something until he realized he was wearing only boxer shorts. He scanned the small living room until his glance landed on the pencil and notepad on the kitchen counter. His face brightened and he rose from the coffee table.

Kitty narrowed her eyes at him. "Jack, this isn't an interview. This is my life we're talking about."

Jack stared at her for a moment before sitting back down. "Sorry. Old habits." He cleared his throat. "So ... this dragon ... he's a biped? He doesn't have short, little arms like a T-rex or something?"

"No, he's actually pretty brawny. And Jack ... he can shift forms. I mean, he could look like you, if he wanted. He usually goes for a blond guy who looks like a GQ model."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying you're attracted to him?"

"Well, that's the thing..." The question was posed with deceptive casualness. Kitty swallowed hard. She could feel Jack's heated stare on her skin. "He says I belong to him." She didn't need to add that the dragon had stated it in a matter-of-fact manner. "I think that might mean I'm ... uh ... his mate or something."

There was no emotion on Jack's face. But his jaw shifted and the sound of his teeth grinding together was as loud as a Mac truck downshifting. "How did you figure that?"

Kitty slid her fingers over her throat. Her skin was hot to the touch. She had never been frightened of Jack, but right now ... *well*, he was making her a little nervous. "He seemed to know a lot about ... well, the *other* me. He calls me ... um ... beloved."

Jack studied her from beneath the hood of his eyelids. "Well, I call you baby and am finding out all sorts of things about you. Does that mean I have a claim on you too?"

"Jack..." Kitty crossed her arms over her chest. "We don't even know who or what *I* am. Don't you think we should try to figure out what's going on before you start getting all jealous? Would you still want me if I turned out to be some giant dragon thing?"

"Kitty, I would want you even if you turned out to be a beam of light. Sex would be a challenge, but I'm sure we could figure out a way." He gripped her upper arms and raked his gaze over her body. "Not that I don't enjoy this body, mind you."

Kitty was torn between wanting to throw her arms around him or shoving him away. A heavy pressure that felt like a sob began to build in her chest. "Jack, I'm not even supposed to be here. Remember what that guy in the park said? If I stay here any longer, I could destroy everyone. What if I snapped and turned into Godzilla or something?"

Jack moved from the coffee table to sit next to her on the couch, wrapping his arms around her. "I don't think you're going to turn in Godzilla, baby." He nuzzled her hair. "He's a gigantic mutant dinosaur. We may not know what's going on with you, but I'm almost positive you're not a gigantic mutant dinosaur."

Kitty slipped her arms around his waist and buried her face in his neck, inhaling his clean, masculine scent. "That's just it, Jack, we *don't* know that." Her voice came out as a squeak.

"Actually, beloved," said a deep voice that was mortifyingly familiar. "You do."

Kitty raised her head. At least she was no longer alone in her delusions. From the way Jack had gone stiff in her arms, she could tell he could see the dragon too.

Chapter Eight

Jack stared at the creature standing in the corner of his living room, unable to believe what he was seeing. He looked just as Kitty described: seven feet tall, built like a gladiator, and covered in red scales. His large head was more reptilian than humanoid, but there was definitely intelligence in those snake-like green eyes. For some reason, he had a big motherfucking sword strapped to his back.

But he wasn't alone. Next to him was a taller, bulkier dragon wearing some kind of brass armor plate and black leather breeches. His scales were dark enough that they looked black, but in the light, Jack realized they had a blue-greenish tint to them. His eyes were the color of aged whiskey and burned with fury as he stared at Jack and Kitty. Jack noticed he didn't have a sword, but a glimpse at the creature's long, rapier-sharp talons told Jack he didn't need one. While there was a hint of amusement glinting in the red dragon's eyes, this other dragon just looked ... pissed. And ready to swallow them whole.

Jack thought of the .357 Magnum he kept in his bedside drawer and wondered if he could go for it before the dragons tackled him to the ground and ripped his head off. Not that he was willing to leave Kitty alone with either of them. He looked down at himself. Great, he was about to get ripped in half by two giant dragon things and he was practically naked. Keeping his eyes on them, he reached for his pants on the table and slowly slipped them on. The red dragon looked at him with interest, but didn't pull out his sword and cut his head off. Jack stood up and fastened his pants. Beside him, Kitty had gone curiously still. She wasn't saying anything, just staring calmly at the two dragons. Jack held out his hand to her.

She ignored it and stood up on her own. With the confidence she had exhibited earlier in the park, she nodded at the red dragon. "Trystan." She turned her head toward the dark dragon. "Gruffydd."

"Kiyo," the dragon called Trystan said amiably.

Jack couldn't help but gape at the red dragon. The smooth, velvet voice sounded completely unreal coming from him. Did the guy have a British accent, for fuck's sake? Jack buried his hands in his hair. "What the hell is going on here? Should I bust out my grandma's tea set now?"

Kitty looked up at him, a thoughtful expression on her elfin face. She lifted a hand and stroked his cheek with her fingers. "I'm sorry for this, Jack. I truly am."

Jack froze. "What are you talking..."

The air surrounding Kitty shimmered. Before Jack could call out a protest, Kitty shifted into a slender version of the two male dragons. She was as tall as the red one, but delicately formed and shaped like a female. Her scales were a deep violet color with flashes of magenta in the light and her snout was a lot smaller than the males'. A white silky toga thing was draped gracefully over her form, so Jack couldn't see for himself if she retained her feminine parts, but the twin mounds on her chest told him what he needed to know. She was almost a foot taller than him now, but there was still something intrinsically ... womanly about her.

She turned to face him, her hands propped on her slim waist and a challenging look

in her violet eyes. “Well, looks like I'm a giant dragon thing after all, Jack.” She traced the ridge of his nose with one sharp talon. “Do you still want me?”

Her voice had the same breathy, musical lilt to it. It seemed to fit the creature somehow. Jack discovered it still had the power to arouse him.

An unnervingly deep chuckle disrupted the developing tension in the room and Jack realized without looking that it came from the dark dragon. He kept his gaze on Kitty ... no, *Kiyo*. The expression in her violet eyes dared him to find her repulsive. But he couldn't. He reached up and cupped her angular jaw in his palm. “Yes.”

She tilted her head to the side. “I could tear you in half.”

“Yes.” He slid his hand to her throat, caressing the vein he found there with his thumb. *Kitty*. She would always be Kitty to him. “But you wouldn't.”

She slipped her hands around his neck, pulling him toward her. She rubbed her snout against his temple, her forked tongue flickering out to touch his lips. Jack looked up at the beautiful serpentine face, feeling absolutely no fear that she would hurt him. He stroked his hand up her bare arm. Her scales felt surprisingly slick under his palm.

“For the love of all that is holy, Kiyo, either finish him or leave him alone. It is cruel to torture him like this!” said the dragon called Gruffydd.

Without letting go of Jack, Kitty glanced over her shoulder at the dark dragon. “Don't tell me you've developed sympathy for this mortal, Gruff. Weren't you the one threatening to yank his spine out of his mouth just a few hours ago?”

Gruffydd issued a growl so deep that the walls of Jack's apartment shook slightly. “I tire of this world, that's all. I don't know why you're so fond of it. These creatures are small and petty—look how he trembles in disgust beneath your touch—and the horrible stench of their human misery... I vow, I cannot stand it another second.”

“Why does he sound like a bad Shakespearean actor from Cambridge?” Jack whispered in an obvious aside to Kitty.

Her violet eyes flashed with amusement and she eased her hold around his throat. With a sigh, she released his neck and set him away from her. “Do I disgust you, lover?”

Jack put his hands on her waist and slowly slid them up to her sides until his palms were cupping her breasts. “No.” He struggled to swallow past the well of emotion threatening to choke him. Standing on the tips of his toes, he brushed his lips against the side of her face.

“Ugh. I may throw up.” The red dragon crossed his arms over his impossibly wide chest and propped his shoulder against the wall. “Don't you see that she's already made her decision, Gruffydd? She would never have shown him her true form if she didn't love him. She was testing him, you see.” He shifted out of his dragon form to that of a blond pretty boy wearing an expensive-looking gray suit. “And he passed with flying colors. Because he was able to see past her disgusting scaly façade, he gets to keep the girl.”

Jack rounded on the dragon, eyes blazing. “She is not disgust...”

“Oh, shut up, mortal.” The corners of the blond man's mouth quirked up in a crooked smile. “You've won. I'm gracefully bowing out. Don't make me have to cut you up. I know Kiyo is rather fond of your ugly flesh-puppet face.”

“Trystan...” Kitty began.

There was a flicker of something akin to pain on the dragon's face, but it was gone before Jack could analyze it.

“Don't, Kiyo,” the dragon whispered. “Just ... don't.”

Jack's gaze volleyed between Kitty and the blond man. The tension between the two of them was so thick that even the dark dragon in the corner looked uncomfortable. Jack touched Kitty's shoulder. "What's going on?"

Kitty shook her head and looked away from him.

"Well, mortal, let me put you out of your misery and explain it to you in a way that your inferior human brain can comprehend," the dark dragon said dryly despite a warning growl from the other dragon. In a flash, he morphed into a skinny teenaged girl wearing tight jeans and a halter-top, complete with pigtails and braces. "Trystan loved Kiyo, Kiyo loved Trystan. But Kiyo was not happy. She wanted something else. She needed a break." The lower lip of the ridiculous cupid's bow mouth pooched out in a pout. "So Kiyo decided to put a spell..."

The growl came from Kitty this time. "Stop it, Gruffydd."

The dark dragon shifted out of his teenaged girl shell and transformed into the giant black guy who had assaulted them in the park, this time dressed in black jeans, a black tank top, and a black leather duster. Seemingly for effect, he also added a pair of dark aviator sunglasses. He turned to look at the other male dragon. "I'm getting rather bored of all this, Trystan. I'm ready to go home. Either we zap the mortal's brains so he forgets all of this and drag Kiyo home with us. Or..." he looked pointedly at Jack, "...we kill the mortal and drag Kiyo home with us."

"You are not dragging *Kitty* anywhere," Jack said firmly, grabbing Kitty's arm and stashing her behind him. "She doesn't have to go with you if she doesn't want to."

Gruffydd looked at him as though he were a particularly interesting insect. "And who are you to stop us, mortal? We can squash you with a thought."

"Like I said earlier, Gruff, you touch him again and I will kill you. I know that's a tall order because you're an immortal, but trust me when I say that I'll find a way to do it." Next to Jack, Kitty shifted to her pink-haired form and slipped her hand into his. "I'm not going anywhere with you." She raised her head to look at Jack. "I'm staying with Jack."

Jack shut his eyes for a moment and exhaled a sigh of relief. He wrapped his arm around Kitty's shoulders and yanked her to his side, lowering his head to kiss her hair. In response, Kitty slid her arms around his waist and embraced him, pressing her cool cheek against his bare chest. They stayed that way for a moment, holding each other tightly and feeling each other breathe.

"Kiyo, you know you can't stay with him. You're an immortal, an immensely powerful being, and he's ... a dung-beetle," Gruffydd said with disgust.

Kitty lifted her head from Jack's chest and turned around so that she was facing the two dragons, but kept Jack's arm anchored around her shoulders. "I am staying with Jack, Gruff. I have made my decision."

"I'm really glad to hear you say that, baby, but..." Kitty looked at him and Jack dragged a hand down his face, "—what about all that end of the world stuff he was talking about earlier? The 'disrupting the fabric of reality' part, I mean."

"Pfft." Kitty waved a dismissive hand. "That's just Gruff being a drama queen."

"Now that she's back to her old self, she'll be able to control her powers," Trystan said quietly. "In an effort to get away from us, she placed a cloaking spell on herself. She wanted to know what it was like to be truly human. She erased her life as a dragon from her mind and created false human memories. After a month, the spell began to fail and her powers seeped through." His green gaze settled on Kitty. "It was a stupid thing to do,

Kiyo. You could have just talked to me instead of running away.”

“Trystan, I want you to understand something here. I did *not* run away. I left. I fucking left, period.” Kitty stabbed the air with her finger “Let me reiterate it just in case you two stubborn males missed the point. *Again*. Me, Kitty Jones, *I* made the conscious decision to leave. I. Left. Period.”

Jack stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants and looked at Kitty who seemed to be in the middle of a staring contest with her former lover. A bolt of jealousy surged through Jack. “You gave yourself amnesia?”

Kitty looked away from the dragon to return Jack's scrutinizing gaze. “Frankly, I just got tired of ... who I was. Where I lived, I was treated like a porcelain doll to be taken out of my box and played with once in a while. I wanted something more. I wanted to be treated like a woman.” She shrugged. “One day, I just took a look around and decided I couldn't live there anymore. I wanted...” A defiant look entered her violet eyes. “I wanted *something else*.”

“And almost tore a cosmic hole through the fabric of reality,” Gruffydd muttered.

“Okay, you're not allowed to say 'fabric of reality' anymore.” Kitty propped her hands on her hips and gave the dark dragon a droll look. “You're not Mr. Perfect, Gruff. Remember that blackout you gave New York back in '77?”

The dragon glared at her, but didn't say a word.

Suddenly feeling a little overwhelmed himself, Jack removed his arm from Kitty's shoulder and dropped himself onto the couch, rubbing his face vigorously with his hand. He stared at Kitty who looked pretty much like she did when he saw her that morning, wearing her bathrobe and her hot pink hair pulled back from her face. How could he have thought her delicate when she had the power to destroy the world?

As much as he would love to wake up next to her every morning for the rest of his life, what kind of life could the two of them possibly have together? Even now as she stood in front of two guys who looked big enough to be linebackers, all five-foot-nothing of her, she looked strong and competent. She didn't need him.

Basically, if she were Superman, he would be ... Lois Lane.

She gave him a quick smile meant to comfort before facing the two dragons again. “Okay, seriously, this is why I left. I could never get away from you guys. The two of you were always hovering over me, treating me like a brain-dead idiot when the truth is ... no power in this entire universe could stop me.” She sighed and shook her head. “I need you to leave now. Go away. Don't show up again unless I call you. Just ... leave.”

Gruffydd didn't need to be told twice. He gave Jack one last glare and poofed away. The other dragon, on the other hand, just *had to* touch Kitty on the face one last time before disappearing. Jack had to restrain himself from shoving him to the ground and punching him.

When they were finally alone, Kitty sat down next to him and took his hand. With a sad smile, she lifted it to her lips. “Is it still the most fun date you've ever been on?”

Jack closed his eyes as she kissed his palm. She was so beautiful that it actually hurt to look at her. He felt her raise his arm, so she could cuddle against his side, setting his arm around her shoulders. Jack looked down at his chest where her pale hand lay against his skin.

“What do we do now, Jack?”

He hugged her to him, kissing the tip of her nose. “We go to bed, Kitty.”

Chapter Nine

Kitty allowed Jack to sweep her into his arms and carry her into his bedroom. At the door, he stopped and muttered a curse. Though he had worked hard to make his living room presentable for her, he had forgotten to clean his room. There was no place for him to put her. On his bed was an impressive mountain of clothes both clean and dirty as well as assorted books and magazines.

"Well, so much for my grand romantic gesture." He set her down on her feet and rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe we can get a room at the Drake."

Kitty covered her mouth to stifle a sob. God, after the horrible night they'd had, he was still concerned with trying to impress her. He was so wonderful. "Jack, I know I'm supposed to be an omnipotent being and all that, but even I can't get us a room there at this hour." She raised herself on the tips of her toes, slipped her arms around his neck, and snapped her fingers behind him. "There."

Jack turned around, his mouth dropping open in surprise. His bed was made, the books were returned to the bookcase, the dirty clothes were piled in a hamper, and the clean clothes hung in the closet. On the nightstand was a neat pile of the magazines and newspapers he had scattered all over the bed and his shoes were lined up against the wall. He placed his hands on his head and whirled around to face Kitty.

"I feel like Darren on *Bewitched*." He sat on the bed, staring at her in wonder. "Babe, I don't know if I'll ever get used to you doing that. In fact, I'm not sure if I'll ever get used..." he waved his arm around, "...to any of this."

A heaviness settled in Kitty's stomach. Now that she had all of her memories back, she could honestly say she still felt the same about Jack, but how did he feel? He was the one who woke up this morning probably thinking he was going to have a pretty ordinary day, only to wind up with a girlfriend—was that what she was to him?—who once accidentally created an island in the middle of the Pacific with a sneeze. She wanted to be with him, she knew that much. She barely knew him, and yet somehow, he had managed to become more important to her than anything in the entire universe.

"Jack." She sat next to him on the bed and placed her hand on his thigh.

He laughed bitterly "God, Kitty, I want very badly to kiss you, but it's almost weird now. Gruffydd is right. You're a goddess and I'm ... it'd be like a frog asking the pink-haired princess to kiss him."

Kitty wondered how he would react if she just shoved him to the bed and kissed him. "If I remember my fairy tales correctly, the princess did kiss the frog and he turned into a prince."

His face seemed to darken even more at that. "I'm no prince, sweetheart. I'm a former junkie has-been reporter with nothing to offer you." He looked at her and a crooked smile twisted his lips. "There's only me, Kitty ... and that's not very much."

"No, Jack, you're everything." She wrapped his fingers around his wrist. "Come lie down with me. Will you hold me? That's all I want right now."

He nodded and rose from the bed, taking her with him. They stood chest to face. In Kitty's human form, the top of her head didn't even reach his shoulders and she found that she liked looking up at him. She stroked her hand from his collarbone down to the ridges

of his muscled stomach. He shivered under her touch.

"Kitty," he murmured huskily, tugging at the cord that kept her robe closed. "Do you realize we've barely shared a decent kiss?"

She smiled as her fingers unbuttoned and unzipped his pants. "I don't kiss on the first date, Jack. I'm not that kind of girl."

He laughed and briefly hugged her to him, nuzzling her neck. "Well, technically, we are on the second day of our first date." He slowly opened her robe and pushed it off her shoulders.

"But it's still the first date." It felt good to laugh with him. The ring of ice that had formed around Kitty's middle began to thaw. If they could laugh together, they had a chance.

"I suppose it is." He lowered his head to kiss the tops of her breasts, then straightened to help her push his pants down his legs. Stepping out of his pants, he kicked them to the side and stood before her in his boxers. "Maybe you could make an exception just this once. On account of what we've been through tonight together and all."

"I'll think about it." She watched as he pulled down the covers on the bed and was positively charmed when he stood aside to let her in first. They smiled at each other. "You may get that kiss after all, Jack."

"Oh, good, that's what I've been angling for all night." He slipped under the covers after her and immediately gathered her into his arms. "You're a horrible movie date, by the way. You only watched one movie out of an eight-hour marathon and were zonked out through the rest. I may never take you to another Bruce Lee film fest again."

"Oh no, how can I go on living now?" She chuckled and snuggled closer to him, enjoying the feeling of her bare breasts brushing the soft hairs on his chest. He felt so good against her, so warm and ... *so hard*. And he smelled so good ... so male. So alive.

"I probably sound like a broken record by now, but have I told you today how beautiful I think you are?" Jack combed his fingers through her hair, spilling its mass all over his chest. "Even your ... um ... other form. I was ... pretty surprised by how sexy it was. I couldn't wait to get your toga off so I could look at your boobs."

"You're so bad." She planted her hands on his chest and dropped her chin on them. "Do you really think my dragon form is sexy?"

He cupped her face in his palm, stroking her cheek with his thumb. The look in his eyes told her everything she needed to know. "I think you'd be sexy no matter what form you take. Especially if you morph right now and turn into Monica Belluci."

He sounded so serious that Kitty gasped and narrowed her eyes at him. His lips slowly curled into a smile. "Oh, you rat!" She sat up, took the pillow she was lying on, and smacked him in the face with it. "Don't tease me like that."

A dangerous glint entered his eyes. "Oh, I think you liked to be teased."

Kitty only had a second to think about what he meant before Jack tackled her to the bed, pinning her wrists over her head with one hand, while his other hand tickled her until she was breathless with laughter. They stayed that way for a while with Jack on top of her, holding himself up on his elbows so he wouldn't crush her and running her hair through his fingers like it was the finest silk. Kitty looked up at him, wondering how it was possible that a mortal could make her feel so cherished and loved. Her throat tightened with the force of her emotions and tears sprang to her eyes.

"Hey," said Jack gently, stroking a finger down her cheek. "What's this? Why are

you getting teary on me now? We don't have two dragons threatening to eat us anymore.”

Kitty sniffed and slapped his chest. “Dragons don't eat people.” A small laugh escaped from her lips and she slipped her arms around his neck. “I'm just ... really happy you're here, Jack.”

His silver eyes darkened until they were almost black. For a moment, he didn't say anything and Kitty began to get nervous. And then he smiled. “I'm happy I'm here too, Kitty.” He framed her face between his large hands and lowered his head. “I'm going to kiss you now.”

The first touch of Jack's firm lips on hers had Kitty gasping. She had existed since the beginning of time, before kissing was even invented, but Kitty knew she had never felt knock-you-off-your-feet and set-your-hair-on-fire passion over a little kiss. *Oh, Kitty, it's a lot more than a little kiss*, said a voice in her head and she wasn't sure if it was her thought or Jack's, but discovered she didn't care. She tightened her arms around him and lifted her legs so she could wrap them around his lean hips. As he devoured her mouth, she clung to him as if he were the last gulp of oxygen in her lungs, as if he were the only thing that stood between her and a deep, gaping black hole of oblivion, and gave as good as she's got. In the end, he was more than a little breathless too.

When Jack finally raised his head, his silver eyes were sparkling and his lower lip was a little swollen. “Okay, this is officially the most fun date I've ever had.”

Kitty chuckled and drew his head back down to hers, moaning into his mouth as his fingers traced a path down the side of her body and tugged at the waistband of her panties. She lifted her hips as Jack pulled the flimsy scrap of cloth over them and down the length of her legs, his knuckles brushing softly against her skin. Within seconds, Jack had stripped her of her robe and himself of his boxers. For a moment the two of them merely lay together, with Jack fully nude on top of her, his chin propped up on his fist while his free hand traced tiny circles on her collarbone. Kitty reached up to tug on his earlobe. He smiled.

“Let's make love, Jack.”

Jack didn't say a word. Instead he covered her mouth with his own and Kitty opened her legs so he could lay his lower body in between them. Wrapping her arms around him, Kitty surrendered herself to the sheer pleasure of Jack's wicked, clever ministrations. His tongue, his fingers, worked their magic moving in and out of her ... licking, caressing, savoring her. Jack was relentless in his pursuit to make her body sing. He seemed to be everywhere ... under her, next to her, inside of her ... until the only thing that existed in Kitty's universe was Jack and his severely addicting kisses. Kitty found herself dizzy with the sensations assaulting her flesh, breathless with anticipation of what Jack would do next.

Kitty could only stare at him in wonder as he paused to reach over for something in the drawer next to the bed. When she raised her eyebrows askance, he triumphantly shook a silver square foil in front of her. Kitty laughed, raised herself on her elbows, and watched as he carefully slipped on the rubber sheath over himself. As soon as he was finished, Jack looked up and they smiled at each other with giddy happiness. Kitty bit her lip. Jack chuckled. Kitty guided him into her body and slipped her arms and legs around him, burying her face into his neck and inhaling the pure masculine scent of him.

They rose and sank together in sweaty, tangled limbs and mingled breaths. Kitty luxuriated in the feel of Jack pumping in and out of her body, reveled in the painful

pleasure of his sweet invasion. Beneath her hands, she could feel the powerful rippling of the muscles of his lower back as he thrust harder and deeper into her, his breathing becoming harsher and shallower in her ear. As Jack poured himself into her, Kitty embraced him tighter against her body as though she meant to absorb him into herself. He whispered her name into her ear and that was all it took. It was an explosion she felt from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. It left her boneless and gasping for air.

And in that moment, she felt ... satisfied.

An eternity later, Jack lifted his head and rubbed his nose against hers. "Best. Date. Ever. We're really going to have to do this again."

Kitty started to respond when she felt Jack freeze against her. He looked closely at her, then sniffed her hair. A frown twisted his mouth. He ducked his head and sniffed her neck.

Kitty cupped his face between her hands. "What are you sniffing?"

"Flowers." He eased himself off her and looked around, his silver eyes widening in shock. "Holy shit." On his nightstand, his cell phone began to vibrate. He snatched it up and put it to his ear. "Yeah, Harry, I know. Flowers fucking everywhere. I'm already on the scene. I've got it covered. No, don't send Kenny and Tiff." He hung up and tossed the phone back on the nightstand, looking more than a little dazed.

Kitty placed her palms on the bed to push herself up and encountered only ... flowers. She jack-knifed into a sitting position and scanned Jack's room. There were indeed flowers all over the place, growing on the walls, the floor of his bedroom, and slowly spreading toward the window. They sprang up and bloomed until they covered every surface of Jack's bedroom, growing on his bed, his bookcases, his desk, his TV, his sneakers, the clothes hamper, the door to his bedroom. Roses, daisies, gladiolas, orchids, sunflowers, daffodils, forget-me-nots, and bluebells. There were no leaves, no thorns, no stems ... just the flowers themselves.

"Oh no," Kitty murmured, grabbing a blanket from the foot of Jack's bed and wrapping it around herself. Petals and blooms clung to every square-inch of the blanket, making it look like she was wearing a dress made of flowers. She stopped to admire herself for a moment before running to the window to see if the outside world was affected as well.

Jack beat her to the window, bracing his arms on the flower-covered ledge and sticking out his upper body as far as it could go. When he pulled himself back in to look at her, there was a bemused expression on his face. "Damn, baby, it really *is* all over the place."

Kitty pushed him aside so she could look for herself. With growing horror, she surveyed the streets of Chicago, lifting her hand to her mouth. The cars, trees, the street signs, the walls of buildings, park benches, the cardboard boxes where the homeless people slept, and billboards were covered with flowers. People on the streets were gazing around in wonder and oddly enough, no one seemed to mind. In fact, they all seemed ... happy. As the sun rose up on the horizon, little kids spilled out of their houses with their mothers and fathers, twirling around and dancing on the blossoms, drivers left their cars to pick at the blooms and bring them to their noses, joggers laughed freely with dog-walkers exclaiming about how beautiful everything looked, lovers wrapped their arms around each other and kissed.

Across the street leaning against a lamppost covered with roses, Trystan stood in his

white suit, looking up at her. He waved at her, a sad smile on his angelic face. Kitty smiled back and blew him a kiss. He gave her a courtly bow, then turned away to sweep an elderly woman in a purple tracksuit into a waltz.

“Look how happy they all are,” Jack said with amazement in his voice, wrapping his arms around her from behind. “How often do you see that in Chicago?” He chuckled. “Just wait till the city gets the cleaning bill.”

Kitty grasped his hand and lifted it to her mouth to kiss it. “Clean-up should be easy enough. For some people...” she looked over her shoulder to smile at him, “...it'd be a snap.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “You can be so corny.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “But don't get rid of the flowers just yet.”

Kitty turned in his embrace and slipped her arms around his waist. “And why is that?”

A wicked grin spread across his lips. “I've always wanted to do it on a bed of roses.”

* * * *

Sometime later, Jack eased a sleeping Kitty off his shoulder and rolled her back gently on the mattress, spilling her pink hair all over his pillow. He stroked his finger down her satin-smooth cheek, unable to believe such a beautiful woman—such a goddess—could find something in him to love. *Love*. It wasn't something either of them had said out loud, but it hung in the air and Jack felt it for Kitty. He'd never been so sure of anything in his entire life.

He carefully made his way to the bathroom. He thought he could make it there without squashing the daisies and roses on the carpet, but it was impossible. Instead he allowed his feet to sink into the blossoms, luxuriating in the feeling of the silky petals kissing his toes. He had to laugh when he finally reached the bathroom because even the toilet was covered with flowers.

He lifted the lid and looked down. Thankfully, the floral invasion hadn't managed to get down there too. After relieving himself, he turned toward the sink to wash his hands and looked up the mirror. He couldn't see himself because the surface of the mirror had flowers growing on it, but he didn't need one to tell him the shadows were finally gone from his eyes. It was Kitty ... she healed everything she touched and made it all better.

It felt ... good just breathing the same air she breathed.

He opened the medicine cabinet and took an inventory of the prescription bottles he found there. Some of them were his, most of them stolen from other people's medicine cabinets. One by one, he opened them up and dumped their contents into the toilet, tossing each bottle into the trash until they were all gone. He pressed the flusher and watched as a rainbow of pills swirled down the hole.

“There are going to be some fucked up alligators in the sewers tonight.” He chuckled at his own joke.

“Jack?” Kitty's musical, breathy voice called from the bedroom.

“I'll be right there.” He closed the now empty medicine cabinet and padded back to the bedroom.

On the bed, Kitty waited for him wearing only a welcoming smile. Jack slid under the covers, drew her into his arms, and said, “Let's turn these flowers pink, baby.”

The End

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